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PRISONERS OF OUR OWN CONSCIOUSNESS?

The Autonomy of the Subject

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

This thesis explores questions which have vexed both philosophers and sociologists. These are questions which, to varying degrees remain unanswered, but which, nonetheless, are basic questions pertaining to our existence. Just what is the nature of the 'subject'? Can we even say that the 'subject' exists? What is consciousness? What role does language play in defining the subject? What is 'truth'? Is there a 'truth'? How much autonomy does the subject have? The main question, though, posed in this thesis relates to whether we are: Prisoners of our own Consciousness?

It is from a reading of the writings of certain late twentieth century French thinkers that the above questions are considered. The four writers: Jean Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu, offer their views. Whilst Jean Paul Sartre advocates atheistic existentialism, the remaining three French theorists have been labelled post-structuralists, a term given, rather than claimed.

Whilst Sartre, Foucault, Derrida and Bourdieu have differing views on the above questions, there are points of congruence. The elusiveness of the subject is one such point of agreement. There is also agreement amongst the four (less overtly expressed by Derrida) that freedom of the subject is a possibility. For Sartre, freedom is the very essence of humankind. The thinkers differ on the matter of 'truth'. Sartre believes in an absolute truth, Foucault deals with 'regimes of truth'. Derrida remains somewhat silent, except that he contends there is a justice, which does not exist but which is an ideal and is infinitely irreducible. Bourdieu unashamedly believes all scientists are seeking the truth, and he proposes a method which he believes will assist in the pursuit of that goal. Each of the four theorists contends, to some degree, that language and discourse are constructed by the social world and influence our perception of reality.

Regarding the notion of being ‘prisoners of our own consciousness?’, the theorists under scrutiny, with the exception of Sartre, believe we are seriously constrained by language and discourse. Foucault and Bourdieu are of the opinion that knowledge may free us from this predicament.

I suggest that humankind is neither free, nor non-free. Rather, that the ‘subject’ merely *Is*. I suggest that we are not prisoners because to endorse such a view, would be to accept that we are being detained from a realm which would be our ‘normal’ realm. Given that there is no realm other than the present, and given that constraints are consistent with the nature of humankind, we cannot be said to be prisoners. Further, it is argued that not only our consciousness defines us but also our unconsciousness. And both consciousness and unconsciousness, in turn, are defined by the social world in which we live.

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Introduction

The question pertaining to whether we are 'prisoners of our own consciousness', is explored in this thesis. In order to examine the intricacies of this question, answers to several other questions need to be found: To what degree does the subject have autonomy? What is the subject? Can I ever define myself as subject? Or, is it that at the very moment that I become conscious of the 'I', it has changed its essence into the 'subjectum', a product of consciousness? What is consciousness? If I am a prisoner of my own consciousness, does that mean consciousness is an agent, an entity in itself? Or, at the moment when I am aware of consciousness, does not consciousness become the object, a matter which is reflected upon? Can reflected-upon consciousness, in turn, become reflecting consciousness? Is there nothing beyond consciousness? What about my unconsciousness? Are we incarcerated by language and language signs? Is there any possibility for the subject to choose or alter its state of affairs? What degree of freedom does the subject have? Does the subject yearn for something outside of itself? Is that something, absolute truth? What is truth?

The ramifications of participation in cyberspace throw new light on the subject as a 'shifting subject'. Some say the subject will no longer have a 'real life' identity but will be fluid and de-centred, perhaps reduced to a mere floating sign (Chia-yi Lee, 1996). The critics of cyberspace point to the inherent inequality in gender and class in the distribution of the social resources of cyberspace. The fans of cyberspace celebrate the liberating possibilities of the deconstruction of the subject and the construction of a new heterogeneous, 'playful' subject.

Whatever position one holds on what is termed 'cyber-subjectivity', the age-old questions are still asked: What is the subject? What is consciousness? Is there a 'truth'? What is the relationship between the subject and knowledge? What degree of freedom does the subject have? Is there anything beyond language?

The area I will draw on for this debate is late twentieth century French thought. The main theorists engaged in this particular debate are: Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Jacques Derrida (b.1930) and Pierre Bourdieu (b.1930). Amongst this group of thinkers there are similarities and important differences.

The mood and social circumstances in Germany and Central Europe between the two World Wars have been suggested as the fertile ground which offered the opportunity for serious questioning in regard to the search for a more secure basis to life. In those times of severe unrest and disruption there was an eagerness to question the authority of held beliefs and institutions, a willingness to seek a better 'truth' in the subjective and psychological spheres.

The works of Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) became widely influential, especially in Germany, in the period between the two World Wars. His emphasis was on the importance of the 'existing individual' and on concepts such as 'faith', 'choice' and 'despair'. Kierkegaard had a major influence on many Protestant theologians and existentialists. His work was associated with post-Nietzschean thought. However, it was from the totally secular philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) that French existentialism took its source. In Germany Martin Heidegger, Rector at Freiburg University, was the intellectual who stood out for his insights into all the philosophies of the shell-shocked Europe of the time. He seemed to appreciate people's anxieties and their need to confer meaning on life. Although the fate of humankind is to perish, meaning can be bestowed on life through 'purposes' and 'projects'. While all the individual receives from this is knowledge of existence, that is precisely 'the transcendent need and desire' of the individual (Mairet, 1948:15).

The outbreak of the Second World War also meant that French sociologists with a philosophic leaning, had been cut off from adequate funding for empirical research and were unable to reconcile any empirical research with theory. After the War the intellectual field became dominated by philosophy and, more

particularly, by existentialism. This seemed to be the beginning of a break with traditional European sociology.

Twenty years later, in the 1960's, specific events occurred (*les evenements*) which further positioned young French revolutionaries and French thinkers. This period represents 'a watershed moment in the history of French thought' (Starr, 1995: 4). In 1960 Jean-Paul Sartre published, *Critique of Dialectic Reason*, which was essentially an attempt to develop Marxism through existentialism, defining the latter as 'a subordinate ideology' (Sartre, 1963:viii). In 1963 Sartre published, *The Problem of Method*, in which he criticizes Marxists of the day for trying to maintain a 'dialectic without men' (Sartre, 1963: xiii). Sartre is reacting against the notion of any external law being imposed on the subject. It is only through the subject's materiality that the subject relates to the world, but this relationship could not occur without 'free consciousness' which allows the subject to take a point of view. Is it coincidental that the following works were published in the same year: Althusser's *For Marx* in September 1965, Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* in December 1965, Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* in April 1966, Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits* in November 1966 and Julia Kristeva's *Word, Dialogue and Novel* in 1966?

Two years later, 1965, saw the bombing of North Vietnam. This catalyzed the Left into a revolutionary mood and into a common goal of looking towards liberation struggles in the Third World for new models of revolutionism. 1965 also saw the dissolution of the student organization of the French communist party. That group disbanded into two further groups: the *Trotskyist jeunesse communiste revolutionnaire* and the *Maoist Union des jeunes marxistes-leninistes de France*.

Evidence that the idea of revolution was alive and well could be seen on May 3 1968 from the gathering of militants in the courtyard of the Sorbonne. Their presence was as a protest against 'fascist terror and police repression' (Starr, 1995:2). There was a not too subtle implication of violence in the Gaullist order. Over the next two to three weeks there were several demonstrations, protests and sit-ins. On 10-11 May there were barricades in the *Quartier Latin*. On May 13

there was a General Strike. Events gathered momentum. Trade unionists joined with factory workers and lycees. There was a triumphant procession through the Left Bank and slowly daily life came to a halt. On May 29 General de Gaulle took refuge at Baden-Baden French military outpost, a refuge from which he saw current events as a communist inspired paralysis of the country. On the following day some sense of normality had returned and on the evening of May 30, after de Gaulle had promised a referendum on his presidency, half a million people marched up the Champs Elysees in his support. These were the 'May Events' of 1968.

The 'May Events' brought together Christian leftists, anarchists, Maoists, Trotskyists, situationists, Marxist-Leninists and any number of groups calling for the overthrow of bureaucratic structures, the overthrow of the capitalist order. Some groups were calling for sexual liberation, self-management and overcoming the disalienation of the subject. Environmental groups were calling for more effective use of urban space and protection from over-use of technology. "'Difference'" was the password and the right to difference the fundamental stake in political struggles ... the celebration of difference stood athwart the political...' (Starr, 1995:7).

'L'après-Mai' is the expression often used to explain the works of French thinkers after *les evenements* of May 1968. What characterized this thought was, as already mentioned, the celebration of difference. Along with difference as a focal point there was also a commonality in play upon discontinuity and continuity, a recognition of the importance of fragments and fissures, and an elaboration of the *explication de texte*. Language is of central concern to 'post-structuralist' writers such as Foucault, Bourdieu and Derrida who show that discourse '...obscures and mystifies the constructed character of subjects and truths' (Allen and Young, 1989:5).

There are arguments about the role or influence of history on philosophy. Some movements pride themselves for being anti-historical. However, it is generally accepted that there are perhaps 'accidents' of history which may not be significant national events, but developments occurring in one field or other of human

endeavour which attract the minds and following of others. A particular line, or particular lines, of philosophic thought become the norm, often replacing known 'language'. Bernstein (1992:27) contends that: 'After a while, because of some other historical accidents – like the appearance of a new genius or just plain boredom or sterility – another cluster of metaphors, distinctions and problems usurps the place of what is now a dying tradition'. To accept that history has a critical function in philosophical thought is not to accept that historians are capable of autonomous thought, nor is it to deny that any thinking has its own set of conventions and metaphors. Accepting the critical function of history in philosophical thought is admitting to the sharing of an intent '...to expose prejudgments, prejudices, and illusions' (Bernstein, 1992:27).

'Existential phenomenology' and 'post-structuralism' are the two late twentieth century French philosophical currents of thought which are used in this thesis as the backdrop to the discussion of conceptions of the subject. Writings of Jean Paul Sartre on existential phenomenology are employed to expound the existentialists' position. The works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu are those used to put forward the 'post-structuralist' view.

Jean Paul Sartre was the main proponent of existential phenomenology in France from the mid to the late twentieth century. He was strongly influenced by the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Sartre himself described existentialism as a 'revolt against oversystematization' in philosophy (1948:5). Existentialism is often described as anti-historical. If, as described above, the purpose of a philosophy is to expose illusions and prejudgments and to find new ways of looking at the world, the reference to history (or past patterns of thought, for example, 'revolt against oversystematization') is, then, both essential and inevitable.

In addition to the anti-historical label, it has been suggested that there is an 'anti-philosophical tendency' in existential phenomenology. This understanding arises from the existentialist's emphasis on the subject's generation of meanings, as opposed to priority being given to 'reason'.

In response to the criticisms from the Marxists that the 'solidarity of mankind' is ignored in existentialism where the subject is seen in isolation, and the criticisms from Christian groups who maintain that ignoring eternal values ('since we ignore the commandments of God' (Sartre, 1948:23) is denying reality and failing to take cognizance of the seriousness of human affairs, Sartre responds:

In any case we can begin by saying that existentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and human subjectivity. (Sartre, 1948:24)

Perhaps the two main tenets of existential phenomenology which should be outlined here, however, are that: existence precedes essence, that is, the subject first of all exists and it is not until later that the subject defines itself and, secondly, that the human subject is free. No social or natural laws can determine the subject; the subject 'realizes' itself. Jean Paul Sartre's view of human freedom has been described as 'the most radical view of human freedom' since the Epicureans (Barnes, 1963:vii).

'Post-structuralism', as mentioned above, is the label most often used to describe the works of *'l'après-Mai'* French thinkers (Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu). The term, 'post-structuralism', refers to the current of philosophy which develops the importance placed on language by the structuralists but which sees the use of language as oversimplified by them (McLennan, 1989:170). For the post-structuralists, meaning not only resides in the utterance (which can no longer be seen as an entity) but the origin of meaning can no longer be pin-pointed. Language is of central concern to the post-structuralists but in the way that post-structuralists encourage de-construction of discourse to at least the point of recognition that language (especially Western metaphysics) 'obscures and mystifies the constructed character of subjects and truths' (Allen and Young, 1989:5). The post-structuralists' emphasis on deconstruction of texts is often termed 'literary criticism'.

Although Foucault did not accept any labelling in terms of belonging to one particular school of thought, he is generally categorized by commentators as

belonging to the French philosophical current, 'post-structuralism'. Like Sartre, Michel Foucault held a position of 'moral authority' in France. Like Sartre, he involved himself with many generous public causes, but while he was compared to Sartre, '*il nuovo Sartre*' by the Italian press (*L'Europeo*, 18 February 1977), I would suggest that the differences are far greater than J.G. Merquior suggests in his book, *Foucault* (1985). The differences are in the degree of autonomy afforded to the subject and, subsequently, the degree of freedom which the subject can exercise.

In regard to the concept of discourse, Foucault's emphasis on the context rather than the text includes a far broader context than those of his contemporaries (sometimes described as 'literary theorists'). For the structuralists, 'death of the subject' was a slogan, for the post-structuralists language, or more specifically the deconstruction of language, is a central concern. Derrida points to his continual reference to *l'autre* in his discussions of language: 'It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the "other" of language' (quoted in Brannigan et al., 1996:154).

It is important here to take a brief look at the 'labelling' used in this thesis. I have already used terms that would be unacceptable to some of the theorists engaged in this debate. Foucault would not have accepted the label, 'post-structuralist', or any other label for that matter. Bourdieu suggests that 'sociology' rather than 'philosophy' offers a 'far truer vision of the world' (quoted in Murray, 1992:136). Bourdieu scorns 'philosophy' for engaging in 'prophetic and metaphysical posturing' (1992:136). On the other hand, he describes sociology as an 'esoteric science'.

Bernstein in *The New Constellation* is careful to use 'scare quotes' around such labels as 'modernity', 'post-modernism' and 'post-structuralism'. He warns that the labels are:

...slippery, vague and ambiguous. They have wildly different meanings with different cultural disciplines and even within the same discipline. There is no consensus or agreement about the multiple meanings of these treacherous terms. (1992:11)

For some the very labelling process assumes that the 'school' has a 'truth' compared to which all other bodies of belief are less 'true'. Vincent Descombes, in *Modern French Philosophy* (1979:1), states that contemporary philosophy cannot be aligned to a particular philosophical period or school: '...(French philosophy) is coincident with the sum of the discourses elaborated in France and considered by the public today to be philosophical'.

Finally, a comment from Jacques Derrida: '*Il y a peut-etre des pensee plus pensantes que cette pensee qu'on appelle philosophie.*' *There are perhaps thoughts more thoughtful than thinking that goes by the name of philosophy.* (quoted in Didier Cahen, *Diagraphe*, 1987:11-27).

Notwithstanding the above comments, I choose to employ 'a common language', providing extra explanations and definitions where required. Suffice to say, I heed the warnings of Bernstein, above, in regard to the lack of consensus in the use of terms.

The first four chapters in this thesis examine how each of the four selected late twentieth century French thinkers, Sartre, Foucault, Derrida and Bourdieu, deals with the following specific questions: What is the subject? What is consciousness? The autonomy of the subject? The role of language? The matter of truth? Chapter One deals with selected readings of Jean Paul Sartre, Chapter Two focuses on the writings of Jacques Derrida, Chapter Three concentrates on selected works of Michel Foucault, and Chapter Four is concerned with the writings of Pierre Bourdieu. At the conclusion of each Chapter is a *Discussion* section. This section, firstly, discusses any apparent conflicts or unresolved issues found in the writings of the particular thinker and, then, concludes with a comment on how the author would answer the question relating to whether we are prisoners of our own consciousness.

In Chapter Five I outline the similarities and differences, along with the perceived ambiguities and conflicts, found in the writings of the four twentieth century French thinkers. Further, I elaborate on problems which remain unanswered and

which need future debate. Finally, I draw together the conclusions from the previous chapters, specifically in regard to each of the major thinkers on the question, 'prisoners of our own consciousness?'

After examining French thought of the late twentieth century do we agree with Sartre that the subject is 'condemned to be free', or with Bourdieu, who espouses that the subject has the possibility of freedom when it becomes conscious of the laws governing the situation? Derrida offers a range of 'futures for deconstruction'. Is that where the freedom of the subject lies, or is it in the work of *diakrisis* (discrimination) which Foucault tells us is 'a guarantee of freedom'? That is, in the discrimination of visible representations, not to look for hidden meanings but to 'accept in the relation to the self only that which can depend on the subject's free and rational choice' (Foucault, 1984:64).

1 Jean Paul Sartre

1.1 Introduction

Jean Paul Sartre (1905–1980) had a major influence on French intellectual life for a period of twenty years. He was also an immensely popular figure and it is reported that 50,000 people followed his funeral cortège. Although he was not the first existentialist, nor was his form of existentialism the only type of existentialism, he is credited with putting existentialism on the philosophical map.

‘Being’ comes before knowledge, ‘existence comes before essence’ (Sartre, 1948:26), this is the basic tenet of existentialism. Both Christian existentialism and atheistic existentialism share this position. Being is subjective and cannot be made a topic of objective inquiry. Sartre espoused atheistic existentialism declaring that ‘...if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality’ (1948:28). On atheistic existentialism Sartre comments:

Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. (Sartre, 1948:56)

Sartre criticizes the social sciences for formulating categories of ‘hidden realities’ such as collective consciousness, social forces, human nature and the like. His position is that such categories ‘betray the concrete experience of human life since such notions lend the illusion of objectivity to existence which is essentially a false objectivity’ (Hayim,1996:136). These so-called hidden realities have the tendency to objectify the subject and view the subject from a God-like position. Rather, it is Sartre’s contention that social struggles are best understood from the position of ‘concrete’ human behaviour in actual historical circumstances.

The above view will be developed throughout this Chapter. And a fundamental question asked will be: How do Sartre's preferred categories, 'a human universality of condition' and 'human kingdom', really differ from the concept of 'human nature' which he says betrays 'the concrete experience of human life'? (Hayim,1996:136).

The term, 'regression – progression', is often used to describe the method which Sartre is advocating. That is, what is perceived as objectivity should be reconceived by the subject. What results from this method is that so-called objective phenomena are seen to be objectifications of choices of the subject from which the subject is now removed and comes to view as objectivity.

Sartre is recognized as having a radical view on human freedom. However, just how closely is human freedom linked to human happiness? For Sartre, there is no universe except for the human universe and the individual subject is 'condemned to be free' within that universe. This is a total freedom since there is no legislator other than the individual subject. According to Sartre, is it therefore impossible to be a prisoner of our own consciousness?

1.2 What is the 'subject'?

Sartre describes the subject as 'no other than a series of undertakings ... the sum, the organization, the set of relations that constitute these undertakings' (Sartre, 1948:42). While he believes that there is no apparent 'universal essence', he does confer on the subject a 'human universality of condition' (1948:46) in order to be able to describe the subject as having a human 'nature'.

For Sartre, the subject is a product of the reflexivity of consciousness. The subject cannot be described as the essential core of the individual, for it is fleeting, riven and has no foundation:

The 'I' who was writing or busy ... has in fact disappeared by the time I try to examine it. The 'I' is now engaged in a new

activity; the attempt to capture its essence (itself), and all it will be able to find therefore is its own (frustrated) attempt. I can never capture myself as subject, only as object. (Howells, 1997:29)

In Sartre's own words: 'The Ego only ever appears when one is not looking for it ... By *nature* the Ego is fleeting' (1957:70, emphasis added). The subject exists prior to essence and defines itself later:

Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. And this is what people call its [existentialism's] 'subjectivity'. (Sartre, 1948:28)

While the subject cannot be described as the central foundation or core of the individual, we must begin from the subjective. The individual subject *is* free but cannot go beyond human subjectivity.

Sartre's radical understanding of human freedom will be explored later, but when first expounded it received criticism from several quarters for giving little heed to both heredity and the influences of the social environment on the subject. In *Being and Nothingness* which was published in 1943, subjects created their own world which was unencumbered by 'nothingness' (*neant* – non-thing). Subjects had the capacity to negate and rebel against anything they chose. Personal responsibility and creativity were the values of the individual and must be called upon for action, rather than relying on moral and political authority. In 1963, the publication of Sartre's *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* outlined a very careful critique of the subject as it relates to the physical universe, to the group, to history and to political/social existence. There is a shift in Sartre's thinking on the subject by the time he writes this *Critique*. He is now more aligned to Marxist determinism. He bemoans the condition whereby individuals are so influenced by social structures that 'serialization' results, that is, a loss of self-identity.

This is not to say that the *Critique* found favour amongst all of Sartre's peers. On the *Critique* Foucault commented: 'The *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* is a nineteenth century man's magnificent and pathetic attempt to think the twentieth

century. In that sense, Sartre is the last Hegelian, and I would even say the last Marxist' (quoted in Macey, 1993:171). Be that as it may, at the time, Sartre firmly believed that existentialism was a subordinate ideology to Marxism, attempting to develop the future of Marxism. He termed existentialism a 'parasitical system living on the margin of knowledge, which at first it opposed but into which today it seeks to be integrated' (Sartre,1963: viii). Later Sartre was to again change his view criticizing Marxism for maintaining a 'dialectic without men' (Sartre,1963:xiii).

At this stage some questions pertaining to Sartre's conceptions of the subject are already marked for further discussion. Sartre holds that notions of collective structures such as those found in the social sciences 'betray the concrete experience of human life', leading to an illusion of objectivity. Could not the criticism of giving phenomena the illusion of objectivity which he lays at the door of the social sciences not also be laid at the door of existentialism? That is, is there any essential difference between the objectification of social science concepts such as class, collective consciousness, capitalism, social structure and the inevitable, inescapable objectification of phenomena such as human condition, consciousness and human freedom?

Sartre despairs of the alleged 'hidden realities' in the social sciences. These are the collective structures referred to above. What Sartre proposes is that the subject be understood from the position of concrete human behaviour in actual historical circumstances. What possibility is there of this occurring? Sartre does not see a 'universal essence' in the subject which would allow him to be able to define the subject as having a 'human nature'. However, he is comfortable with the notion that the subject has a 'human universality of condition'. Is there an essential difference in meaning between the two concepts?

1.3 Consciousness

Being And Nothingness (1956) is assessed by many as Sartre's most important philosophical work. It is in this work that Sartre outlines his theory relating to consciousness. Postwar Europe was a ripe climate to engage in an exposition of the important differences between objective things and human consciousness. Sartre described consciousness as a non-thing (*neant*) which has no causal involvements. This, Sartre proposed, is the very foundation of human freedom.

Detmer (1986:25) outlines Sartre's consciousness as:

Consciousness is what it is not, because consciousness is characterised by its negative activities. It is only through such 'nihilating' behaviours as imagining, doubting, abstracting, questioning, denying, that non-being emerges in the world.

And Sartre himself asserts that since consciousness is:

...the being by which Nothingness comes to the world, it must be its own Nothingness ... It must arise in the world as a No.
(Sartre, 1956:47)

He defines three types of consciousness: firstly, he defines 'being-for-itself' (conscious human experience). This is a consciousness 'which entertains itself as a possibility rather than as a terminal fact' (Palmer, 1995:147). Secondly, Sartre refers to 'unreflected consciousness'. This is a consciousness which has as its object something other than itself, for example, thoughts about a house or supermarket shopping. Unreflected consciousness is what Sartre terms our every day mode of practical consciousness. Thirdly, Sartre refers to 'reflected consciousness'. Reflected consciousness is thoughts about thoughts, thinking about thinking. All reflecting consciousness, then, is unreflected and a new act ('an act of the third degree') is required in order for it to be reflected upon. Consciousness (reflecting) which reflects upon reflected consciousness mistakenly, according to Sartre, comes to see itself as 'the reified ego (object or reflected consciousness)', but by the very act of reflection it has ceased to be that. It has now become by the same act a reflecting subject (1987:30).

Sartre has defined consciousness as ‘a transcendental field without a subject’ (1956:291). Consciousness is always somewhere else; it is ‘*diasporique*’, always escaping identity. In self-reflection the reflecting consciousness and the reflected consciousness are one and the same.

Some clarification of Sartre’s positioning of the ego, the subject and consciousness may be of benefit here. For Sartre, the ego is a product of consciousness; it is not in consciousness. Similarly, the ego is a product of the subject. It is the self I make, not the self which makes me who I am. Although grammar indicates that the ‘me’ is an object, and when I talk about ‘me’ it is as if I have the viewpoint of another, the ego is both the ‘I’ and the ‘me’.

The ‘I’ is a transcendent ‘I’. That is, the ‘I’ is ‘usually transcended towards an external activity or focus: I am running, writing, talking’ (Howells, 1997:29). It is the subject of the conversation, the ‘talking’ or the ‘writing’ which is the focus, not the ‘I’ who is the subject. The subject cannot be identified with consciousness, for the subject, too, is a product of the reflexivity of consciousness.

We may be conscious of something but not explicitly so. For instance, we may not be conscious of a clock until it stops ticking. There must have been prior consciousness of the ticking without necessarily having been ‘reflectively or thetically conscious’ of it (Sartre, 1987:xvi). Unconsciousness, then, as with consciousness, is not a reified entity. It merely has the capacity to recall past experiences of which we have not been explicitly aware. Every ‘unreflected consciousness, being non-thetic conscious of itself bears a non-thetic memory that one can consult’ (1987:xvi).

While Sartre, at least at one stage preferred to see existentialism as a contributing ideology to Marxism, there would appear to be some important differences in the attributes the two positions give to consciousness. In the same way that products of their own activities could become alienating forces for the very people who produced them, it was Marx’s and Engels’ contention in *The German Ideology* (1846) that consciousness could also have the same fate; consciousness being, after all, but a product of individuals’ activity which could come to exert an alien

force and be mistakenly perceived as a material thing. For Marx and Engels, consciousness is integrally bound up with social practice and expectations: ‘...life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life’ (Marx and Engels, 1965:47).

The difference here seems to have come about as a result of different conceptions of consciousness. Marx and Engels appear to define consciousness as an object or product. They do not afford consciousness the *diasporique* state which Sartre gives it, that is, a consciousness which cannot be situated, for when it reflects it ceases to be reflected consciousness and fails to recognize itself as a reflecting subject which it becomes in such an action.

Marx and Engels do not see consciousness as *neant* (non-thing or nothingness). For these two thinkers, consciousness is a product of individuals’ activity closely bound up with social practice and expectations. It is somewhat difficult to gain Sartre’s meaning on unreflected consciousness but this appears to be the area of consciousness which most clearly highlights the differences in thought between Marxism and existentialism. Remembering Sartre’s overall definition of consciousness as having no causal involvement, his definition of unreflected consciousness as everyday consciousness of the subject thinking about things other than itself, points to an area where he has overlooked (or at the least appears to have very much understated) the influences of socialization in defining our world.

The question remains as to the *nature* of the causal involvements in the act of defining, but for Sartre to say that consciousness has no causal involvement, on the face of it, seems somewhat naïve. We recall unreflected consciousness has as its object, according to Sartre, something other than itself, for example, thoughts about a bird or a car. The question is: am I not employing a consciousness with causal involvement when I am thinking of these objects? Am I not, in the process of thinking about a bird or a car, somehow at the same time designating those objects with socially influenced definitions? Am I not, in the process of defining those objects, categorizing them into fields influenced by social expectations? While the relationship between the thinking and the production of the bird or the

car may not be a direct relationship, that is, the thinking may not cause the bird or the car to materialize, surely the thinking about the bird or the car, nonetheless, has some kind of causal involvement in terms of definition and expectation?

Notwithstanding the criticism, or at the best the obscurity of Sartre's definition of consciousness as having no causal involvement, his clarity on the requirement for an 'act of the third degree' being necessary to reflect upon unreflected consciousness, stresses the potential for continuity of reflection. In Sartre's words:

It must be remembered that all writers who have described the Cognito have dealt with it as a reflective operation, that is to say, as an operation of the second degree. Such a Cognito is performed by the consciousness directed upon consciousness, a consciousness which takes consciousness as an object ... We are in the presence of two consciousnesses (a reflecting and a reflected consciousness) one of which is conscious of the other ... Now my reflecting consciousness does not take itself for an object when I effect the Cognito. What it affirms concerns the reflected consciousness ... All reflecting consciousness is, indeed, in itself unreflected, and *a new act of the third degree* is necessary in order to posit it. (Sartre, 1957:44-45; emphasis added)

The potential for continuity of reflection, and thus the potential for ever new insights into consciousness, is perhaps the most liberating aspect of Sartre's exposition on consciousness. That is not to say, the notion of the subject having total freedom as a result of this consciousness which he describes as *neant* or nothingness, is without difficulty. However, that is the topic of the next section of this Chapter.

1.4 The autonomy of the subject

It is in the area of freedom of the subject that Sartre is recognized as having a radical view. When *Being and Nothingness* was published in 1943 Sartre was

regarded as having the most radical notion of human freedom since the Epicureans.

Sartre was not interested in, and rejected any attempts to answer the question: Why is there something, rather than nothing? Anderson claims:

A primary reason for this rejection was that he [Sartre] saw that absolute human freedom and autonomy were incompatible with a fundamental ontological dependency on a Creator. The later Sartre, however, since he insists that the human being's essential dependency on other persons and on their love is not inimical to its freedom but, in fact, absolutely necessary for its flourishing, has, therefore less reason to be suspicious of attempts to account for reality of radically contingent beings by means of a loving Creator-person. (Anderson, 1993:166)

Sartre's contention was that because existence precedes essence, the subject has responsibility for what it does and becomes: 'Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his shoulders' (Sartre, 1948:29). So, while Sartre is saying there is total freedom on the part of the subject, he is also making it quite clear that the subject cannot go beyond human subjectivity. In addition to this, Sartre is stating that the free commitments which the subject makes, also, in some way have an influence on the commitments that humans make as a whole. The example Sartre gives is the choice of monogamy: 'If I decide to marry and have children, even though this decision proceeds simply from my situation, from my passion or my desire, I am thereby committing not only myself, but humanity as a whole, to the practice of monogamy ... In fashioning myself I fashion man' (1948:30).

For Sartre, the subject is free; the subject *is* freedom:

We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does'. (1948:34)

In Chapter Six we will look more closely at Sartre's description of freedom given here. For the moment, though, Sartre has alerted us to some puzzling activities regarding 'condemnation' and being 'thrown into this world'. Does this not appear to denote a being outside of humanity who is taking these actions? Sartre denies anything outside of human subjectivity. There is no universe beyond the human universe. Also, Sartre is saying the subject is condemned to be free 'because [the subject] did not create itself'. This raises an important question: If the subject did not create itself, who created the subject?

Sartre himself asserts that at the heart and centre of existentialism is the 'absolute character of the free commitment' (1948:47). The subject, first of all, exists, encounters itself and, later through free choices, defines and fashions itself. There is no presence of determinism. The subject, according to Sartre, through pursuing transcendent means is always projecting itself outside of itself and it is only in its self-surpassing that it can 'grasp objects', thus, the subject 'is the heart and centre of its transcendence' (1948:55). Sartre criticized Marxism in regard to its rendition of human freedom being largely determined by social factors or external law. For Sartre, the subject is the only legislator. He believed that the problem with modern Marxism was that the latter tried to maintain a 'dialectic without man' and this is what hindered Marxism from further development (Sartre, 1963:xiii).

The Sartrean subject's way of 'being' is by relating to the world. The only way that that relationship is possible is through:

...free consciousness which allows man to assume a point of view of the world. But man would equally be unable to have any connection with matter if he did not himself possess materiality. (Barnes, 1963:xiv)

This connection with matter is what Sartre terms 'historical materialism'. The individual is not determined by social laws. There is always the possibility for altered states and change. The future remains open for fashioning.

Anderson (1993:73) draws our attention to what he perceives to be inconsistencies in Sartre's exposition on the autonomy of the subject. In *Existentialism and*

Humanism (1948), Sartre asserts that the subject cannot find any truth about itself save through the ‘mediation of another’. Anderson contends that Sartre also believed the subject to be ‘always lucidly aware, pre-reflectively, of myself and my freedom, and it is bad faith to pretend otherwise’ (Anderson, 1993:73). On the other hand, Detmer (1986:39) contends that ‘Sartre has always recognized the existence of constraints upon, and limitations to freedom’. There are obvious questions raised here, especially in regard to *the degree* of autonomy which the subject has.

For Sartre, while every human life is unique and the individual determines the quality of its life, every action of the individual has some kind of influence on humanity as a whole. In other words, for the existentialist, freedom is always situated. The subject is always in a relationship with others, social groups and historical events.

The two areas of human freedom where Sartre is seen as being a proponent of a ‘most radical view of human freedom since the Epicureans’ (Barnes, 1963:xiv) concern perhaps, firstly, the aspect of a break with the traditional rendering of the duality of will and the emotions and, secondly, the belief that every action is an intentional action. Sartre rejects the traditional rendering of human freedom as a battle of the will over the emotions since such a view assumes a division between the reflecting consciousness and the reflected consciousness. It is a view which is inadmissible for Sartre, given that what has occurred for those who hold this idea, is the mistaken belief that reflecting consciousness is a reified ego or reflected consciousness. The fact that in the act of reflection it becomes a reflecting subject has been lost. The point that Sartre is making here is that there is no division between the will and the emotions. Reflecting consciousness is not a pure entity. It does not have a separate will upon which to act upon its emotions.

The second radical aspect of Sartre’s conception of human freedom bears on every action being intentional. This idea is linked to the above in that passions and emotions are described as actions and, according to Sartre, are intentional. An example which Sartre gives is a soldier at war. The soldier fears battle. The reason he fears battle is because he wants (intends) to live. The emotion of fear is

a fear of *something* and thus the emotion only has meaning in the wider context of the soldier's life, that is, what the soldier wills (Catalano, 1974:197).

Human freedom is being exercised even when the resulting actions are being motivated by passions such as fear or anger. If a subject motivated by fear, a sense of rejection or protection of self withdraws into itself, it is still exercising a choice of human freedom. All human action is intentional and human freedom is present in every action:

Thus since freedom is identical with my existence, it is the foundation of ends which I shall attempt to attain either by the will or by passionate efforts. Therefore it cannot be limited to voluntary acts ... In relation to freedom there is no privileged psychic phenomenon. All my 'modes of being' manifest freedom equally since they are all ways of being my own nothingness ... The will is not a privileged manifestation of freedom. (Sartre, 1943: 444-452)

Sartre's belief that the subject is 'condemned to be free' has been variously interpreted. Some commentators believe Sartre saw human freedom as a 'burden', 'onerous' and anxiety provoking (Fay, 1987:201). Others contend that Sartre's concept of freedom is a 'depreciated concept'. For even though Sartre gives great importance to the topic, if we *are* freedom, how can we discuss it as an attribute? (Smith, 1964:41).

It is clear that Sartre did not present freedom as a panacea for happiness. He recognizes that the majority of individuals do not authenticate their existence. What he means is that very little thought is given to death and individuals are prone to reassure themselves through the worship of idols, be it science, humanity or some 'objective divinity'. He describes individuals who try to escape freedom as having 'bad faith', as seeking a comfortable illusion by deeming others to be responsible for their lot.

My own discontent with Sartre's notion of human freedom has not so much to do with whether human freedom is associated with happiness or whether it is a burden, but with Sartre's description of the subject being 'thrown into this world',

being ‘condemned to be free’, due to not creating itself. If there is no existence outside human subjectivity, how can the subject be ‘condemned’? Is there a similarity in concept here between ‘condemned to be free’ and ‘prisoners of our own consciousness’? Surely, both notions imply that there is an outside agent who is involved in taking an action of condemnation and imprisoning. If there is no outside agent beyond human subjectivity, why are the pejorative terms used? If the action is an action of self-condemnation, does this not indicate that the subject yearns for a ‘truth’ beyond itself? Is there such a truth?

1.5 The role of language

Sartre speaks of a dependency relationship between intellectual productions such as knowledge and language, and the social conditions of the particular time in which they were produced (McBride, 1991:103). He makes explicit his belief that language is formulated to promote and further the ideas of society (Sartre, 1963). In this regard, Sartre’s concepts are very similar to Marxism which he claimed was the dominant philosophy of our epoch.

In addition to viewing language as an intellectual product, Sartre asserts that language, along with traditions and mores, in fact, camouflage our view on reality. The being-in-itself rarely confronts itself directly, but only through the medium of institutions such as language which have the effect of obscuring reality (McBride, 1991:48). This is to say that, ‘Materialism which leads us to believe that material conditions determine belief, causes us to forget that belief – the belief in the primacy of materialism – is also the basis of materialism’ (Montefiore, 1983:2). In Sartre’s words:

In the reciprocity of conditionings, it can be seen that the surrounding produces the material content and that the surrounding organism gives *unity* to the forces conditioning it... (Sartre, 1991:364; emphasis in original)

Language, on Sartre's reading, signals generations of labour carried out on it (Sartre, 1991:364).

Put another way, Sartre describes the 'word' as 'perpetually serializing and institutional' (1991:426). It is 'the others in the series' which give the word its meaning which in the process 'escapes from me'. The word is 'institutional' as a result of it tending to create reciprocity. Sartre describes the word as acting in the manner of a third party. That is, communication is not effected through the word, but as reference to the word.

Sartre's concept of 'series' is that they have an historical life. For example, he contends that linguistics:

...acts serially upon the totality in interiority. But it is itself, in its life, provoked to its serial action by the action of groups or series. So the ensemble of the system, manifesting itself as an action on the series, results in a serial response which deforms it (even if it is *confirming*: there is always a deviation). (Sartre, 1991:432; emphasis in original)

Concepts, for Sartre, necessarily expressed by language, always introduce '...the time of their object into the thought of that object' (Hendley, 1991:116). Sartre made a distinction between the terms, 'concept' and 'notion':

A concept is a way of defining things from the outside, and it is atemporal. A notion, as I see it, is a way of defining things from the inside, and it includes not only the time of the object about which we have a notion, but also its own time of knowledge. In other words, it is a thought which carries time within itself. (Sartre, 1977:113)

I find Sartre's differentiation of 'notion' from 'concept' unconvincing. Whilst I accept that 'notion' consists of an historical reference in addition to a present time reference, I contend that the same exists for any 'concept' we may have. That is, a concept obviously has referral to past ideas, times and traditions, but cannot escape present time 'contamination' as well. And I want to suggest that a concept cannot be defined solely 'from the outside'.

In *Search for a Method*, Sartre insisted that ‘Our historical task ... is to bring closer the moment when History will have only one meaning...’ (1963:52). For Sartre, this task was possible and should also be the motivation for others. Unfortunately, he did not outline how it would be possible for history to have a single meaning, nor why it is so important.

1.6 The matter of ‘truth’

In response to criticisms that existentialism is a philosophy of quietism, Sartre replies that this cannot be so because existentialism defines the subject by the *action* of the subject. He also suggests that this is the very point of difference between the Christian and atheist versions of existentialism. That is, the emphasis which atheistic existentialism gives to the subjectivity of the individual:

...we seek to base our findings on the truth, and not upon a collection of fine theories, full of hope but lacking real foundations. And at the point of departure there cannot be any other truth than this, I think, therefore I am, which is the absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself ... Before there can be any truth whatever, then, there must be an absolute truth, and there is such a truth which is simple ... It consists of one’s immediate *sense* of one’s self. (Sartre, 1948:44)

For the subject, to know that it exists, is to know the truth. Sartre, together with Heidegger and Kierkegaard before him, believed that the subject’s central and most basic anxiety is to feel and know that it exists. The subject has a ‘transcendent need and desire’ to know this. Hope for the subject lies in the realization of this truth.

However, Hendley (1991:21) reminds us that for Sartre:

There can be ... no knowledge of a situation independent of the historical praxis that is productively engaged to it. With such an

intimate link to praxis, how could knowledge ever hope to aspire to a truth that would transcend its historical specificity?

Hendley seems to be saying that Sartre is suggesting the possibility of transcendence over 'historical specificity'. This is not the case. Sartre makes it quite clear in *Search for a Method* (1963) that the 'experimenter' and the 'experimental system' are inextricably linked:

The only theory of knowledge which can be valid today is the one which is founded on that truth of microphysics: the experimenter is part of the experimental system ... the *revelation* of a situation is effected in and through the praxis which changes it. (Sartre, 1963:33; emphasis in original)

It is Sartre's contention that atheistic existentialism finds it 'extremely embarrassing' that there is no God. Atheistic existentialism recognizes that it is attractive to believe in a 'perfect consciousness', an infinite and a priori 'good'. But because God does not exist, no longer can the subject yearn for an 'intelligible heaven'.

This theory of existentialism, according to Sartre, is the only theory which affords dignity to the individual, for it is the only theory which does not treat the subject as an object. Sartre accuses all kinds of materialism of doing just that, relegating the status of subject to that of object. In place of the 'material world' Sartre claims the aim of existentialism is to establish the 'human kingdom' (1948:45).

Sartre is not claiming that subjectivity is solely an individual subjectivity: 'The subjectivity which we postulate as the standard of truth is no narrowly individual subjectivism ... It is not only one's own self that one discovers in the cognito, but those of others too' (1948:45). Every 'truth' (the subject sensing itself) and every action imply both subjectivity and the environment.

Even though Sartre speaks of an 'absolute truth' which he defines as one's sense of oneself, he does claim that that truth is a truth which emerges, which 'becomes' (Sartre, 1963:x). Secondly, Sartre contends that truth must become totalization: 'I have taken it for granted that such a totalization is perpetually in progress as

History and as historical Truth' (1963:x). For Sartre, then, history changes through a continuous, repeating process of a dialectical relationship between contradictions and synthesis. A synthesis is the temporary resolution of contradictions until new contradictions arise and are temporarily resolved by a new synthesis.

So the relationship between 'historical totalization and totalizing Truth' is a relationship in perpetual motion. It is the relationship between being (*etre*) and knowing (*savoir*), and is called reason (*raison*). It is important to acknowledge, therefore, that reason, or perceived reality, is about the connection between apparent objectivity *and* the method of knowing to which we have referred above in this Chapter.

Sartre's understanding of 'truth' is most clear in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1991, Volume 2): '...historians cannot look at things *from the standpoint of the inhuman* in order to know and comprehend historical reality' (1991:302, emphasis in original). Sartre proposes that there are two means by which we attempt to 'de-situate' ourselves with respect to the object. One way is to turn ourselves into 'Nature' and see ourselves as producing history and, the second way, is to 'reject the situation of reciprocity'. This means to view the research and the research topic as being separate from any historical influences. Sartre asserts that both of these methods of de-situation result in 'positing objectivity'. By this he means that in both cases it is the 'absolute object disclosing itself as an *absolute reality*' (Sartre, 1991:302; emphasis in original). If the researcher is de-situated from the object, the object loses '...part of its qualification, its *human* meaning, but wins (illusorily, of course) the absolute autonomy of its being' (1991:302, emphasis in original):

The dialectic [can] not be the object of a critical investigation outside the practical milieu of which it is simultaneously the action (inasmuch as it gives itself its own laws), the knowledge (as dialectical control of action by itself) and the cognitive law (inasmuch as knowledge of the dialectic requires a dialectical temporalization of knowledge). (Sartre, 1991:203)

Arlette Elkaim-Sartre in the Preface to *Critique of Dialectical Reason* posits that it was Sartre's intention, by the end of the second volume of the above, to find an answer to the question: Does history have a meaning? The second volume was drafted in 1958, but was never finished (Elkaim-Sartre, 1991:ix).

1.7 Discussion

In this section we will look at the apparent contradictions and unanswered questions in the work of Jean Paul Sartre, and we will also ask how Sartre would respond to the question: Prisoners of our own Consciousness?

Obviously, this Chapter does not pretend to faithfully portray the complete works of Jean Paul Sartre. In some instances where I have identified apparent anomalies in his work, it may well be that particular concepts under investigation have been more fully explained elsewhere. Further, some of the apparent contradictions in Sartre's thought may merely be the development of ideas from one period to another. Such a change in Sartre's thought is surely both expected and a healthy indication of further development. However, what are set out below for further discussion are specific claims which appear to be contradictory or which lack clarification, and which are particularly pertinent to the question: Prisoners of our own Consciousness?

In his argument regarding existentialism versus the social sciences it does seem as though Sartre has fallen into a fallacy similar to the one to which he says the social sciences have succumbed. That is, Sartre holds that notions of collective structures such as found in the social sciences (collective consciousness, social forces, class structure) 'betray the concrete experience of human life', leading to an illusion of objectivity (Hayim, 1996:136). Could not the criticism of giving phenomena the illusion of objectivity which he lays at the door of social sciences not also be laid at the door of existentialism? The notion that the phenomena may 'belong' to different sciences is, I would suggest, irrelevant. In other words, the first grouping may belong to the social sciences, but does not the second grouping

(human condition, consciousness, human freedom) ‘belong’ to psychology or existentialism? It is ‘objectification’ which is Sartre’s main concern here. But is not objectification inescapable, even when using the regression–progression model which Sartre promulgates? Indeed, had not Sartre already alerted us to the inescapable illusion of objectivity when the reflecting consciousness reflects upon reflected consciousness? Sartre took pains to explain how in the very act of reflection, consciousness becomes a reflecting subject (1987:xi).

Sartre despairs of the alleged ‘hidden realities’ in the social sciences. These are the collective structures referred to above. What Sartre proposes is that the subject be understood from the position of concrete human behaviour in actual historical circumstances. What possibility is there of this occurring? In my view, the possibility seems remote. Firstly, in practical terms it appears impossible, but even if it were possible, there would be an inability to generalize as each event must be examined in its own context. While that might be ideal, in order to converse about human subjects’ needs we must generalize and categorize, but not necessarily universalize. Sartre would criticize this action as objectification, but I see no escape.

On the question of the definition of the subject, Sartre does not see a ‘universal essence’ in the subject which would allow him to define the subject as having a ‘human nature’. However, he is comfortable with the notion that the subject has a ‘human universality of condition’ (1948:46). Is there an essential difference in meaning between the two concepts? It is difficult to distinguish the difference in meaning here, at least when using common sense language. Further, does not Sartre contradict himself by saying: ‘By *nature* the Ego is fleeting’? (1957:70, emphasis added).

It is in Sartre’s definition of consciousness that I find most problematic. On the one hand, in saying that the subject’s free choice not only commits the subject but makes a commitment for the whole of humanity, Sartre does seem to be giving recognition to the dialectical relationship between the subject and social function. But he does not elaborate on this relationship, on how the relationship works, and just what is the influence of one on the other. In fact, in earlier writings, Sartre

(1956, 1957 and 1973) is somewhat silent regarding any reciprocal relationship at all. That is, the individual commits the whole of humanity by its action, but what influence does the ‘whole of humanity’ have on the subject?

To be fair, in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1991), Sartre does refer to the dialectical relationship between ‘objective realities’ and the method of knowing. However, he does not ever appear to abandon his claim that consciousness has no causal involvement, that it is nothingness (*neant*). If he argues that there is a dialectical relationship between the perceived object and the method of knowing, surely there is some sort of causal relationship here? This lack of clarity overflows into Sartre’s discussion on the autonomy of the subject and his claims about truth.

Concerning Sartre’s notion of free commitments fashioning not only the subject but also humanity as a whole, two points arise: one pertaining to the nature of autonomy, and the other, again, pertaining to Sartre’s notion of consciousness having no causal influence. Taking Sartre’s contention that the subject is free within human subjectivity, is he not underestimating the influences on that subject (for I am not sure that he claims that the sum total of all that exists is human subjectivity)? In underestimating the influences on the subject, is Sartre not overestimating the degree of autonomy that the subject has? Again, we need to return to our difficulty with Sartre’s notion that consciousness has no causal involvements. In believing that in making a commitment of choice, that choice not only fashions the subject but also fashions humanity, is that not also saying that there is some relationship which looks very much like ‘causal involvement’ in the consciousness of the individual and, in turn, in humanity as a whole? As we have seen, Sartre was adamant that no causal involvement existed.

On the autonomy of the subject, Sartre’s notions of the subject being ‘condemned to be free’, of not creating itself, of being ‘thrown into the world’, are somewhat puzzling. There is a strong suggestion that someone else must be doing the condemning, the creating and the throwing. And yet, this is not the message Sartre is intending to give, that there is someone or anything outside human subjectivity. The subject, he has told us, is merely a sum of relations of

undertakings. Why has Sartre used terminology which gives the impression of an ‘outsider’ taking action on the subject? Why is the terminology used in a pejorative sense – ‘condemned’, ‘thrown’? These terms give rise to a suspicion that Sartre is referring to an absolute ‘truth’ from which the subject is being detained. However, while Sartre does argue that there is an absolute truth, as we have seen, he defines that truth as continuously emerging and being nothing other than ‘one’s immediate *sense* of oneself’ (1948:44; emphasis in original).

So what is Sartre’s response to our question: ‘Prisoners of our own Consciousness?’ It is clear that Sartre’s intended message is: the subject is free, the subject has no legislator other than itself. There is no determinism. The subject is responsible for all actions it takes. It is clear that the intended message is also: consciousness escapes identity. The moment the reflecting consciousness (the subject) reflects on reflected consciousness (the object), it becomes unreflected consciousness and a new action. Taking our own question: Prisoners of our own Consciousness?, Sartre, on the one hand, would have to disagree with the prospect because his argument is that consciousness has no causal involvements. Therefore, it is impossible for our consciousness to imprison us in any way. All consciousness involves choice. But it is the contradictory nature of Sartre’s comments which gets us into trouble here. We recall that Sartre claims the subject is ‘condemned to be free’ from the moment the subject is ‘thrown into this world’ (1948:34). The ‘agent’ doing the condemning remains a mystery.

We have also seen that while Sartre argued that the subject is free and is its own legislator, he also, at least by 1960 in *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*, commented on social structures having such an influence that the subject could suffer from loss of self-identity. What we may be facing here is a Sartrean argument for the ideal, that is, total freedom of the subject, but he does seem to recognize, albeit less vociferously and somewhat against his will, that social forces have a major influence.

I suggest there is a similarity between the two concepts – ‘prisoners of our own consciousness’ and ‘condemned to be free’. Sartre’s intended messages relating to the subjects’ freedom are somewhat weakened by the haunting realization of

the strength and influence of social forces. Perhaps the agent responsible for the imprisoning and the condemning is none other than 'social forces'?