

# Rethinking Existentialism: From Radical Freedom to Project Sedimentation

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## Abstract

In the mid-1940s, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre both argued that a person's preferences and behaviour are ultimately explained by their projects, which they have chosen and can reject. However, they did not agree on the details. Sartre's theory of 'radical freedom' was that projects have no inertia of their own and persist only if they continue to be endorsed. Beauvoir held that projects become gradually sedimented with continued endorsement, increasing in both influence and inertia over time. Sartre's theory resulted from his basic ontology of being and nothingness, itself arrived at through his method of transcendental phenomenology. Beauvoir's theory was grounded directly in the phenomenology of lived experience, particularly as articulated in her fictional writings. By the end of the 1940s, Sartre had replaced his original idea of freedom with Beauvoir's theory of project sedimentation. He was right to do so. Project sedimentation explains what commitment to a project is and how there can be cultural values, neither of which can be explained within the theory of radical freedom. However, the theory of project sedimentation had not been available to Sartre until he revised his philosophical method in response to an anthology of negritude poetry.

In their works of the mid-1940s, which first gave definition to the term 'existentialism', Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre both argued that human freedom is objectively valuable and the foundation of all other value. However, they did not agree about the nature of that freedom. They agreed that an individual's preferences and behaviour are ultimately explained by that person's projects, which they have chosen and can reject, rather than by innate personality traits. Where they disagreed was on how projects operate and therefore how they can be changed. Sartre's view was that projects have no inertia of their own and persist only if they continue to be endorsed. Beauvoir argued that projects become gradually sedimented with continued endorsement, increasing in both influence and inertia over time. Sartre's view entails that projects can be changed instantaneously. Beauvoir's view is that projects can only be changed through a gradual process.

Sartre used the term 'radical freedom' to describe his theory. It results from his systematic philosophical method of transcendental phenomenology. Through this method, he developed a basic ontology of being and nothingness which he thought grounded a richer ontology of being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Within that framework, he thought, projects can have no being of their own and must be supported by our intentions. Beauvoir, by contrast, did not provide her theory with a specific label. I have suggested that 'sedimentation' is an appropriate description (2018: 4-6, 60-2). She grounded this theory of project sedimentation directly in the phenomenology of lived experience, particularly as she articulated and explored it in her fictional writings. Although her theoretical writings occasionally use some of Sartre's ontological terms, she is committed neither to his specific definitions of them nor to the idea that a theory of human existence must be grounded in a basic ontology.

By the end of the 1940s, Sartre had abandoned radical freedom in favour of project sedimentation. In this chapter, we will see that he was right to do so. Project sedimentation is a theory of freedom consistent with the basic existentialist claim that the reasons for our actions depend on our chosen and revisable projects. It provides clear explanations of two things rendered entirely mysterious by Sartre's theory of radical freedom: what commitment to a project consists in; and how there can be cultural values. Project sedimentation is therefore a richer and more plausible theory of both freedom and culture. However, we will also see why Sartre had preferred radical freedom in the first place: the theory of sedimentation was not available through his philosophical method until he revised that method in response to reading an anthology of negritude poetry.

### 1. Sartre's Theory of Radical Freedom

Sartre articulates his theory of radical freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, a treatise that applies a philosophical method that he does not explicitly explain but that he had been carefully developing for ten years. This is a form of transcendental argumentation. The premises are intended to articulate aspects of experience as these can be understood from the perspective of the subject of that experience. The conclusion describes how reality must be, given that experience has the features described in the premises. This relation between premises and conclusion is not *logical* necessity: there is no contradiction in accepting the premises but denying the conclusion. Rather, the relation is *factual* necessity: the conclusion specifies some ontological structure required for the experience described in the premises.

For example, Sartre argues that in perception we experience the world as comprising objects that can resist our intentions, which we can interact with in some ways but not others, and that we must therefore work with to achieve our aims. This feature of perceptual experience, that its objects as they are experienced do not respond directly to my wishes and whims, is absent in imaginative experience. This observation forms the premises of a transcendental argument. Sartre's conclusion is that perceptual experience has this feature because it is the presence of a reality that exists independently of my experience of it. More concisely, he

argues that perception is direct contact with objects that have 'being-in-itself', since otherwise perceptual experience would not have this feature.<sup>1</sup>

However, we experience the world, according to Sartre, not simply as an arrangement of material objects, but as a field of affordances, meanings, and reasons. The park lawn is experienced not simply as a mass of grass, but as a place where people might play football or lay out picnic blankets. The sign that says to keep off the grass is immediately experienced not simply as a white object with black markings on it, but as having the linguistic meaning of a command to keep off the grass, and as having the social meaning that walking across the grass might attract disapproving looks, or perhaps admiring looks from some people, and might even result in being admonished by the park attendant. It might be immediately experienced as a reason to find somewhere else to play football or eat the picnic.

Affordances (which Sartre calls *potentialités*) are features that the mind-independent reality of the lawn and the sign board have in relation to my bodily abilities. They constrain what can be done, structure the ways in which objects can resist my efforts, and are manifest in perceptual experience of those objects. Meanings (*significations*) are features of the social environment overlain on the mind-independent reality of the lawn and its sign board. They too are experienced as structuring what can be done. Reasons (*motifs*), by contrast, are experienced as having directive force, which is dependent on my own values. The sign is experienced as a reason to keep off the grass only because I value conforming to social expectations, not drawing attention to myself, or avoiding conflicts. Were you to value disobeying any authority for the sake of it, you would experience the same sign board as a reason to walk directly onto the grass, perhaps to start a game of football or spread out your picnic blanket (B&N: 78-9, 574, 585-93).

Reasons are experienced not as causes of our behaviour, but as invitations and proscriptions that can be accepted, considered, rejected, or revised (B&N: 67-72). They are thus experienced as dependent on my

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed explanation of this method, its development, and its deployment in *Being and Nothingness*, see: Webber 2018b: 294-8; Webber 2019a: 164-74.

intentions. Whereas potentialities are experienced in a way that can only be explained by their being independent of my experience, reasons are experienced in a way that can only be explained by their dependence on my experience (Webber 2019b: 333-8). Potentialities are part of the being-in-itself of the world, whereas reasons are instances of nothingness or ‘negatities’ (B&N: 56). Reasons reflect the values at the heart of my projects (B&N: 78-9, 574). Since those values are themselves ‘ideal objects’ or ‘non-existents’, they lack the being-in-itself necessary to resist my intentions (B&N: 574). I can act contrary to the reasons that seem to confront me and in so doing reshape my projects and the values they incorporate (B&N: 575).<sup>2</sup>

Sartre’s theory of radical freedom does not hold, however, that revising projects is easy. One source of difficulty is that projects form a hierarchical network (B&N: 574). An alteration at one part of the network will have ramifications elsewhere. Someone who wants to change one part of the network might be unwilling to accept the ramifications of doing so, especially if those are extensive (B&N: 607-8). A second source of difficulty is bad faith. We can pursue projects that we do not wish to acknowledge. Sartre’s central example is the inferiority project, the aim of proving myself inferior to other people. It is essential to this project that I do not explicitly see myself as pursuing it (B&N: 618). In such cases, one might need the help of an existential psychoanalyst to uncover the troublesome project (B&N: 619-20, 737-8). Even so, Sartre holds that projects themselves have no inertia, they cannot resist our genuine intention to change them, even where this means a thorough transformation of my entire network of projects (B&N: 621-2).

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<sup>2</sup> Sartre holds in *Being and Nothingness* that there are two ways of acting contrary to the reasons that seem to confront me. I can do so responding to contrary reasons that are also grounded in my projects. Or I can do so for no reason at all. This second claim, however, is incompatible with the idea of commitment to a project (Webber 2018a: 52-4). This problem is one manifestation of Sartre’s failure in *Being and Nothingness* to explain how one becomes committed to a project and why that commitment influences one’s experience.

## 2. Beauvoir's Theory of Project Sedimentation

'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman' (SS: 293). Beauvoir's most famous sentence opens Part One of Volume Two of *The Second Sex*, titled 'Formation', which comprises four chapters on development from infancy to womanhood. Beauvoir has made clear in the Introduction to Volume One that the entire work is premised on the existentialist conception of the individual as 'a transcendence' that develops 'through projects' as an 'expansion towards an indefinitely open future' (SS: 17). Even so, this process of becoming a woman is not a matter of freely choosing to become a woman; 'her vocation is imperiously breathed into her from the first years of her life' (SS: 289). Girls are encouraged to be pleasing in looks and behaviour, discouraged from vigorous sports and exploratory physical activities like climbing trees, and are told stories, given toys, and taught games that support this developmental direction (SS: 305-7, 311, 316). This 'conditioning', sustained throughout upbringing and socially reinforced in adulthood, defines 'what is called the woman's "character"' (SS: 653).

Project sedimentation is the process of this conditioning. Children freely create their own aims, but some of these are frustrated or even punished by their social environment, whereas others are positively facilitated. There does not need to be any innate project of trying to please one's parents or society to explain why one tends towards those projects that are facilitated. Rather, it is already built in to each project that one values its aim. Where one's environment systematically facilitates some aims and frustrates others, successfully achieving one's aims effectively requires selecting aims that environment facilitates and abandoning aims it frustrates (SS: 60-2). The more one continues to pursue a particular project, on Beauvoir's view, the more that project becomes engrained in one's outlook. A woman who rejects the social expectations of womanhood still has 'a different perspective on the universe' to a man, because 'she does not have the same past as a boy' (SS: 739).

Sedimentation not only engrains the values at the core of one's projects, but also the strategies for achieving those aims. Those strategies need to incorporate the social meanings of one's environment if they are to be successful. Project sedimentation, although driven by the pursuit of values chosen by the individual within

a social context, therefore, brings with it a sedimentation of society's understanding of the world. For example, the formation of childhood incorporates not only the idea that boys and girls are different, but also the further idea that males are superior to females. Boys are encouraged to dominate their situations, girls to navigate theirs (SS: 311-14). They become adults who see the imposition of order as masculine and adapting to the environment as feminine, according to Beauvoir, and they live their lives accordingly (SS: 655-7, 665-70).

Beauvoir presents this theory of gender sedimentation in *The Second Sex* through phenomenological descriptions of the experiences of women and girls, in part supported by social observations that these phenomenological descriptions are intended to explain. An implicit transcendental reasoning animates the text. Project sedimentation is presented as factually necessary for women's experience to have the features described in this phenomenology. Beauvoir does not present such arguments explicitly, however; neither does she develop or deploy a basic ontology to underpin the theory of project sedimentation. She considers abstract philosophical prose unable to capture the historical temporality and individual nuance of human existence (LM: 274-5). 'A metaphysical novel that is honestly read, and honestly written', she argues, 'provides a disclosure of existence in a way unequalled by any other mode of expression' (LM: 276). Beauvoir's occasional uses of Sartre's theoretical terms are intended only to provide rough outline sketches of the metaphysical picture she develops in her literary fiction.

In my book *Rethinking Existentialism*, I argue that the central narrative of Beauvoir's novel *She Came To Stay*, published the same year as *Being and Nothingness*, is driven by her theory of project sedimentation and its contradiction of Sartre's theory of radical freedom (Webber 2018a: 57-67). The same metaphysical vision of human existence is present in Beauvoir's earlier collection of short stories, *When Things of the Spirit Come First*, written in the late 1930s. These interrelated stories focus on a group of young women as they grow into adulthood from strict Roman Catholic backgrounds. Chantal, for example, rejects everything about her upbringing, tries to treat her students as her equals, and wants to help them lead liberated lives (TS: 46, 75, 82). But she is annoyed when a student treats her as an equal (TS: 59) and when one student most needs

her help, in a way that conflicts with the values of her upbringing, she finds the situation appalling and the request morally disgusting (TS: 84).

### 3. Sedimentation and Rational Autonomy

Beauvoir's theory of project sedimentation is essentially that the continual pursuit of a project increases its inertia and influence over our outlook. It therefore contradicts Sartre's theory of radical freedom, which is essentially the claim that projects can have no inertia of their own. Beauvoir's theory entails that projects cannot be abandoned in the way that Sartre describes, but can at best be worn away through the pursuit of contrary projects, the continual endorsement of contrary values. Chantal has endorsed values contrary to those of her upbringing. She has not yet spent much time pursuing projects that regularly reaffirm her new values, so has not yet done much to erode the outlook sedimented through the many formative years of her childhood. The influence of that sedimented outlook remains visible in her irritation at her students not treating her as a superior. Later, at a time of crisis, it entirely overwhelms the set of values that she now professes.

However, this is not a rejection of the existentialist idea that our character consists in the projects that we choose and can change. It is only a rejection of the idea that projects can offer no resistance to our intention to change them. Beauvoir's view is that engrained projects cannot be removed immediately, but can be eroded over time. Engrained projects shape our perceptions of the world and our immediate thoughts and affective inclinations in response to situations, thereby contributing to our decisions. This does not in itself prevent us from reflecting on our values, either independently or in conversation with other people, or from learning more about the world and about other people's perspectives.<sup>3</sup> As a result, project sedimentation

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<sup>3</sup> Some projects do constrain our ability to do these things. Since our projects determine the people we meet, constrain the relationships we form, and influence which media we engage with, they shape our epistemic environment. If we are not careful, our projects can leave us in an 'epistemic bubble', where we only encounter the ideas of like-minded people, though this does not prevent us from reflecting critically on our



does not prevent us from formulating and endorsing values contrary to our engrained projects. This is precisely what Chantal has done. Project sedimentation only means that we must continually endorse those new values in our thought and action if they are to become our engrained outlook.

Jesse Prinz is mistaken, therefore, to describe Beauvoir as holding sedimented values to be so deeply engrained that ‘we cannot imagine having different views’ (2018: 94). The problem Beauvoir describes is rather that we can imagine having different views and can even prefer those views, but that this is not enough to make them our views. The root of Prinz’s error here has been to understand sedimentation as primarily a social and historical phenomenon, the process by which societies encode their outlook in artefacts, culture, and language, making that outlook persist across time. He reads Beauvoir as developing the conceptions of sedimentation articulated by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2018: 88-9, 91-2). However, she does not use the term ‘sedimentation’ herself, she does not refer to Husserl anywhere in *The Second Sex*, and her conception of engrained values is distinct from Merleau-Ponty’s theory of tacit knowledge (Webber 2018: 70-1, 74-5).

Project sedimentation as Beauvoir describes it is primarily an individual process. We could call it a psychological phenomenon grounded in the way minds work. Or we could call it an existential phenomenon grounded in the ontology of human being. There is not much difference between these two descriptions, given the background existentialist theory that talk of the mind or psychology is an abstract characterisation of aspects of a single embodied being. Most importantly, sedimentation is driven, on Beauvoir’s view, by the individual’s pursuit of the projects they have chosen. The projects that have been pursued long enough to become deeply engrained are likely to be ones that fit their social environment. They will include strategies

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projects or on that epistemic bubble. More insidiously, our projects can lead us into an ‘echo chamber’, a community of like-minded people that discredits dissenting voices and discourages critical reflection. (For a careful analysis of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, see Nguyen 2018.) However, on Beauvoir’s theory of freedom, these situations that result from specific projects are not the outcome of project sedimentation itself.

that encode the social meanings present in the environment, along with other information about that environment. In these ways, social pressures influence the result of sedimentation, but the process itself is primarily driven by the individual's choices.

Project sedimentation is therefore compatible with individual freedom. Engrained projects are the result of our choices. We are free to formulate new projects and sediment those over time. This just means that our freedom requires sustained effort, rather than being the instantaneous 'radical freedom' that Sartre described. We are not simply shaped by social forces. Continuing social pressures, however, from mere disapproval through economic structures to outright physical violence, can make it difficult or even impossible to pursue projects that defy social expectations. For this reason, Prinz is right to identify social change as essential to overcoming the constraints of social conditioning that Beauvoir finds objectionable (2018: 103-4). However, this project of social change must be formulated and pursued despite the existing conditioning. It presupposes, therefore, that project sedimentation is consistent with the rational autonomy required to envision and act upon different values (SS: 777-80).<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. Projects as Commitments

Project sedimentation as Beauvoir conceives of it, therefore, is compatible with rational autonomy. It is compatible with the freedom to choose our values through rational consideration. It is compatible with our chosen values determining the reasons that we experience the world as presenting us with, the reasons to

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<sup>4</sup> Prinz describes Frantz Fanon as holding essentially the same conception of project sedimentation as Beauvoir (2018: 92-3) and argues that they both present their theories as exercises in consciousness raising, to confront their readers with the question of what they are doing to perpetuate or to dismantle the oppressive sedimented structures (2018: 103-4). I agree that Beauvoir and Fanon hold the same views about sedimentation and the need for social change, only disagreeing with Prinz on what those views are (Webber 2018a: 145-8).

which we respond in rational action.<sup>5</sup> It is even consistent with experiencing those reasons not as forces pushing us around, but as invitations and proscriptions that can be accepted, considered, rejected, or revised. Chantal can ignore her annoyance at her student treating her as an equal and continue to encourage that behaviour through her own words and actions. Beauvoir's theory of project sedimentation, that is to say, is consistent with Sartre's description of the phenomenology of experience. The difference is that acting contrary to the reasons presented in the experience, reasons that reflect sedimented projects, reshapes those projects and the values they incorporate only if such contrary action is repeated over a sufficient stretch of time.

Beauvoir's theory is not only consistent with the phenomenology that Sartre intends his theory to explain, but also has the advantage of providing a clear account of what is involved in being committed to a project, which Sartre's theory leaves entirely mysterious. Chantal could commit to her new liberal-minded values by continuing to act on them, ignoring the minor irritations that manifest her older values, and persisting in affirming her new values even when she finds it very difficult to do so. Commitment to a project, on Beauvoir's theory, consists in choosing to do the things that will engrain that project. It is an ongoing process, one that can require overcoming an inner resistance. Given the theory of project sedimentation, it is clear how such commitment is related to the project's role in shaping the reasons we experience in the world. The more one has continued to commit to the project, the more deeply engrained it has become, so

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<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, we are concerned only with reasons in the sense of aspects of the world experienced as motivating actions (Sartre's *motifs*). We are not concerned here with the normative question of which reasons we ought to experience and act upon. Beauvoir and Sartre both consider human freedom itself to be objectively intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values. They hold that we ought at least to respect, perhaps even to promote, human freedom. If this is right, then we always have good reason to do so, regardless of whether the demands of that reason are manifest in our experience. To put the point another way: Beauvoir and Sartre hold that we objectively ought to have the project of authenticity, through which we would experience reasons to respect, perhaps even promote, human freedom. For detailed analyses of this ethical theory, see: Webber 2018a: chapters 9 and 10; Webber forthcoming.

the more quickly and strongly it influences one's perception of the world and one's immediate thoughts and feelings in response to the world.

Sartre's theory of radical freedom, by contrast, seems to have no resources to explain either what commitment to a project is or why one's experience is shaped by one's projects. Commitment to a project requires that one has truly oriented oneself towards the value at its core, but it is not clear what this spatial metaphor can really indicate. Sartre gives plausible reasons why it cannot indicate an explicit rational decision. My project of staying alive, with the value of my continued existence at its core, shapes my experience of dangers and opportunities in the environment and explains some of my behaviour, even though I may never have explicitly decided to stay alive (B&N: 574). The gambler's decision to give up gambling will not prevent him from placing a bet the next time an opportunity arises (B&N: 70-2). Explicit decision is therefore neither necessary nor sufficient for commitment to a project. What is it, then, that is present in the case of my staying alive but absent for the gambler's resolution?

One difference between the two cases concerns the individual's network of projects. My project of staying alive seems integrated with my other projects. Although I might occasionally engage in mildly dangerous or unhealthy behaviour, most of my projects are at least consistent with staying alive and many of them positively require staying alive. The gambler's resolution, by contrast, might well be contrary to whatever other projects explain why that person was a regular gambler in the first place. Although this is a difference between the two cases, however, it cannot provide an account of what it is to be committed to a project. For it is essentially the idea that the project of staying alive is related in the appropriate way to other commitments, whereas the gambler's resolution is not. It thus presupposes the idea of commitment. The question of what commitment itself consists in, therefore, is left unanswered.

Without a conception of commitment, Sartre's theory cannot explain the influence of projects over experience. Reasons that reflect my project of staying alive are experienced as stronger than most, perhaps all, other reasons in my experience. Yet the values at the heart of my projects are equally non-existent. The difference in the experienced strengths of reasons must reflect a difference in degree of commitment. More

generally, my experience being influenced by a particular value must refer to my commitment to that value, rather than some other value I could have had instead. Project sedimentation can explain how a value influences experience and why it does so to a greater or lesser degree: the more a project is pursued, the more it becomes integrated into one's cognitive system, so the more influence it has over perception and immediate thoughts and feelings. Sartre has no rival explanation to offer. It is not only the gambler's resolution that seems like a boneless phantom (B&N: 71). Sartre's idea of a project does too.

## 5. Projects and Cultural Values

Beauvoir's theory of project sedimentation, therefore, can explain the influence that chosen projects have over experience and behaviour, but Sartre's theory of radical freedom cannot. This pattern is repeated with respect to the influence of an individual's social context on their projects. We have already seen how project sedimentation explains the cultural inheritance of values and social meanings: the projects most likely to become sedimented are those most fit to survive in their social environment. Sartre's theory of radical freedom, by contrast, precludes any explanation of how members of a social group might generally have projects in common. To see why, we need to consider Sartre's attempt to provide such an explanation within the theory of radical freedom in his 1946 book *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Ultimately, this attempt relies on there already being a widespread project whose prevalence cannot be explained within his theory.

Sartre's basic idea is that where a group of people have generally developed a similar set of values, a common cultural outlook, they have done so as individuals responding to common features of their situations. Jewish people live in a wider society suffused with a negative portrayal of them. Jewish people develop particular projects, argues Sartre, in response to this portrayal. Because the vice of avarice is at the centre of this anti-Semitic picture, for example, Jewish people are more likely to be generous (A&J: 95). Jewish people respond to the anti-Semitic claim that they will not integrate into the wider society by becoming ambitious to succeed within the structures of that wider society. (A&J: 96-100). But because that society sees such ambition as an exception to the rule, all Jewish people remain classified together, ensuring a common interest and solidarity no matter how diverse their careers and achievements become (A&J: 98-103).

There is much that can be said about this theory. For our purposes, what matters is that it cannot function as a theory of the origins of cultural values within Sartre's existentialism. It rests on the idea that a culture develops in response to that group of people's common situation (A&J: 93). There are two ways this could occur. One is that those people are responding to some set of reasons that they all experience in their environment. This would require, within Sartre's theory of radical freedom, some project they already have in common, since the reasons we encounter reflect our projects. We would therefore need an explanation of why they already have that project in common. The other way a culture could be shaped by a common situation is by the social meanings and pressures in that environment facilitating some projects and frustrating others. If a project is systematically frustrated by some features of the social environment, those features will be experienced as reasons to abandon that project.

Sartre's account of Jewish culture rests on the first of these two kinds of explanation. He begins his lengthy description of Jewish culture by stating that it applies 'solely to the *inauthentic* Jew (the term "inauthentic" implying no moral blame, of course)' (A&J: 93). An authentic person understands that the reasons they experience reflect values they endorse and can change, understands their projects and the values they include, and understands the context in which they are operating. Authenticity requires respecting, perhaps even promoting, human freedom. But given the enormous variety of projects that are available within that constraint, authentic people have nothing more in common. They each value human freedom and live out their own freedom in their contexts in their own ways. It is within the project of inauthenticity, which includes denying radical freedom and affirming that one's behaviour is due to a fixed nature, argues Sartre, that the anti-Semitic picture of Jewish people is a reason to behave in ways contrary to it. The aim is to demonstrate that one's innate nature is not as anti-Semitism portrays it to be (A&J: 136-8).

Common cultural values among a group of people, on this theory, result from the widespread project of inauthenticity. What explains that common cultural value? Authenticity and inauthenticity are basic attitudes to human existence, so neither could be motivated by some deeper project. If widespread inauthenticity could be explained at all, therefore, it would be by its fitness to the social environment. This would require

that authenticity entails that either the aims of authenticity or the aims of other projects pursued along with it are systematically frustrated in ways that are experienced as reasons to abandon the project of authenticity. It is difficult to see how this could occur, especially given that any project available to the authentic person other than authenticity itself is also available to the inauthentic person. The frustration of such a project within the context of authenticity, therefore, could not be a reason to prefer inauthenticity. The purportedly widespread project of inauthenticity therefore seems to be a cultural value that Sartre's theory cannot explain.

Sartre could not avoid this problem, moreover, by trying to explain Jewish cultural values directly in terms of fitness to the wider social environment without reference to inauthenticity. For as he points out, anti-Semitism is a climate of hostility to Jewish people no matter what they do; 'the situation of the Jew is that everything he does turns against him' (A&J: 141).

## 6. Sedimentation, Culture and Freedom

Sartre's theory of common cultural values among Jewish people is centred on the responses of individual adults to their wider society. It makes no reference to upbringing. It makes no reference to stories, songs, games, rituals, festivals, literature, humour, or other aspects of the cultural fabric. This rather impoverished picture of cultural phenomena is another result of his theory of radical freedom. If projects have no inertia of their own, if they cannot become engrained in one's outlook, then the encouragement of particular values in upbringing, such as generosity or ambition, could not exert any strong influence on the projects later chosen in adult life. A community's cultural fabric could only express common projects, as these are constrained by current circumstances. Cultural values that persist over generations would need to be explained by a persisting feature of the environment, just as anti-Semitism has been a persisting feature of the wider social context of Jewish culture.

Beauvoir's theory of the origins of gender, by contrast, is built on an account of childhood and adolescence, one that emphasises the role of the cultural fabric in shaping that upbringing. This richer account of cultural

phenomena is made available by the theory of project sedimentation. The values at the heart of the projects pursued through childhood and adolescence become deeply engrained in one's outlook, along with the social meanings those projects need to navigate. These meanings and values continue to shape one's perceptions and immediate thoughts and feelings, unless worn away by sustained pursuit of contrary projects. That same outlook shapes the cultural fabric, which in turn forms the context in which the next generation grow up. Values formed in response to a community's circumstances can themselves become sedimented through this process, long outliving their original purpose. Beauvoir's theory therefore grounds a theory of cultural inheritance, which Sartre's theory of radical freedom precludes.

The theory of project sedimentation is thus preferable to the theory of radical freedom for two reasons. One is that project sedimentation explains the inheritance of cultural values, whereas radical freedom precludes any full explanation of the existence of cultural values at all. The other is that project sedimentation explicates the idea of commitment to a project and explains how such commitment shapes the reasons we find in experience. The theory of radical freedom relies on the idea that commitment to a project shapes the reasons we experience, but has no resources to clarify what commitment is or how it has this effect. Both theories subscribe to the central existentialist claim that the reasons we experience (the *motifs* that motivate our decisions and actions) depend on projects that we have chosen and can change. The theory of radical freedom adds that projects have no inertia of their own. This combination generates the problems of explaining commitment and cultural values. The theory of project sedimentation negates this second claim, thereby solving those problems.

In so doing, the theory of project sedimentation gives substance to the idea of rational autonomy. Individuals are not simply pushed around by the combination of upbringing and current environment. Rather, the environment presents reasons that the individual can accept, consider, reject, or revise. These reasons reflect the individual's values, which may have been shaped by their upbringing. In responding to the reasons they experience, individuals contribute either to sedimenting their existing values or to replacing them with new values. Individuals can consciously shape their own outlooks through a sustained effort. Because this is a process of sedimentation, such an effort will have lasting effects. Therefore, we should not



agree that sedimentation constrains our freedom (Prinz 2018: 94). Rather, project sedimentation *is* freedom. It is the process by which we exercise control over the roots of our behaviour. It is the method by which we shape the reasons our environment presents in our experience.

Project sedimentation is a theory of how individual freedom operates. Sartre's conception of radical freedom fails to provide such a theory. Beauvoir developed her theory of project sedimentation from at least the time of writing *When Things of the Spirit Come First* in the late 1930s, as we have seen, and it is central to her novel *She Came To Stay*, published in the same year as *Being and Nothingness*, which even dramatises its superiority to Sartre's conception of radical freedom in explaining the role of commitment (Webber 2018a: 65-7). Given that Beauvoir and Sartre were continuously discussing their ideas with one another over this time, it seems highly likely that they compared the strengths and weaknesses of their respective ideas of freedom. In which case, why did Sartre expound the theory of radical freedom, given the superiority of the theory of project sedimentation?

## 7. The Transformation of Sartre's Philosophy

Sartre had developed his theory of radical freedom through the philosophical method that he developed for ten years up to the publication of *Being and Nothingness*. This is a form of transcendental phenomenology, which derives conclusions about the nature of reality from descriptions of experience from the perspective of the subject. The conclusions are intended to identify how reality must be for experience to have the character that it has. This method stands in a tradition of thought stemming at least from Descartes through Kant and Husserl. One feature of this tradition is its methodological solipsism: other writers can be used only as a source of inspiration; each philosopher must formulate their own descriptions of their own experience for these to be legitimate grounds for inference about the nature of reality (Husserl 1950: 2, 7). Sartre followed this prescription in the method through which he developed his ontology of values as having no being of their own and therefore offering no resistance to the subject's intentions to change them.

Beauvoir's descriptions of experiences that indicate a contrary ontology, therefore, could not directly provide Sartre with reason to abandon his theory of radical freedom in favour of that ontology. Neither could the explanatory superiority of that theory of project sedimentation. Sartre's philosophical method required his ontology to be derived from his own experience and he found nothing there that could be explained only by project sedimentation. He was aware, of course, that our intentions to change our projects are sometimes unsuccessful. The gambler who resolves never to gamble again might then place a bet at the next opportunity. However, he thought this could be accommodated by the fact that projects form a hierarchical network, so that an intended change to one project might require unwelcome changes to other projects, and the claim that we can conceal projects from ourselves in bad faith. With these points in place, it seems that he found nothing in his own experience that required him to abandon the theory of radical freedom that he had grounded in his ontology of being and nothingness.

Yet two years after publishing *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Sartre published 'Black Orpheus', an essay that embraced the theory of project sedimentation and the idea of cultural inheritance that it affords. This was written as a preface to an anthology of poetry by black francophone authors, which aimed to explore and express the 'negritude' they considered themselves to have in common. Sartre describes this negritude as something each of these poets finds 'at the bottom of his heart' (BO: 323). It is a kind of inherited outlook, a way of experiencing the world that respects natural rhythms and understands through sympathy rather than analysis (BO: 294-307). This inheritance is a 'collective memory' passed down through culture and tradition (BO: 312). It is a project that requires commitment, but which would take a sustained effort to abandon (BO: 298-9, 319, 322-4).

Negritude poetry presented a challenge to Sartre's philosophical method. Reading this anthology made clear to Sartre that his methodological solipsism in fact impeded his ambition of discovering the universal ontology of human existence. The poetry presented a world of experience that he could not experience for himself and which supported an ontology opposed to the one he had derived from his own experience. This experience of negritude, moreover, occurs in the dissonances between the subject's experience and both the world they inhabit and the structures of the French language. These dissonances indicate an

engrained cultural inheritance that does not match either the immediate environment or the French language. An engrained cultural inheritance that did match those would not be manifest in experience at all: one's perspective on the world and descriptions of it would just seem to track the way things are. Negritude poetry thereby indicated that the ontology required to explain the phenomenology of cultural inheritance could not be demonstrated on the basis of Sartre's own experience.

In response to his reading of negritude poetry, Sartre abandoned the methodological solipsism that he had tacitly deployed in all his previous philosophical work. He retained the rest of his philosophical method, but now accepted that crucial aspects of the experiences of people marginalised by the cultures that shaped Europe and its languages could not be expressed literally in those languages. He further accepted two important implications of this linguistic fact: that phenomenology could not be limited to the literal description of experience in prose, but must include poetry capturing experiences that cannot be described literally; and that ontological conclusions drawn by transcendental reasoning from such phenomenology of marginalised people should take priority over any contrary conclusions drawn from his own perspective.<sup>6</sup> It is through this revised form of transcendental phenomenology that he finally accepted the theory of project sedimentation, a theory which Beauvoir had been articulating for at least a decade.

In doing so, Sartre implicitly abandoned the basic ontology of being and nothingness which had grounded his theory of radical freedom. That basic ontology was anyway inadequate to capture his own phenomenology, though he seems not to have noticed this. For between the being-in-itself of potentiality, which structures what I can do with my environment, and the nothingness of reasons, whose directives I can ignore or refuse, the phenomenology articulated in *Being and Nothingness* posits a stratum of social meanings. These are like potentialities in that they do not depend on my commitment to them. But they are not features of the material world, since they do depend on the attitudes of my society in general, or perhaps of particular people within my society. They therefore do not fit Sartre's characterisation of non-existents

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<sup>6</sup> For a full analysis of what negritude poetry taught Sartre about language, phenomenology, and ontology, and of how it did so, see Webber 2023.

encountered in my experience, but neither are they features of being-in-itself. Sartre's philosophy from 'Black Orpheus' to the end of his career is shaped by his renewed method of transcendental phenomenology, which brings with it an enduring philosophical interest in poetry and an enduring commitment to the theory of project sedimentation. Whether it also leads him to a more adequate basic ontology is a question for another time.

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