Being and Emptiness: Sartre meets Śāntideva

Nich Krause

ABSTRACT

Jean-Paul Sartre was a mid-twentieth century French intellectual known for his radical politics and prolific (often opaque) philosophical musings on the human condition. At first blush, this Parisian existentialist might not seem to have a lot in common with a recondite eighth-century Mādhyamaka monk named Śāntideva. My essay encourages a second or third blush. In it, I bridge the work of Sartre with the Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva by looking at their respective conceptions of freedom and moral responsibility. I provide a brief characterization of each thinker's ideas while going over some basic terrain of the modern free will debate, which includes essential definitions for terms such as "free will," "determinism," "libertarianism," and "compatibilism." I argue that Sartre and Śāntideva have a unique approach to freedom and moral responsibility that, on the one hand, fails to conform to the standard categories of the current academic free will debate and, on the other hand, moves the conversation forward in important ways.

> I feel no anger towards bile and the like, even though
> they cause intense suffering. Why am I angry with
> the sentient? They too have causes for their anger.
> – Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

> I am condemned to exist forever beyond my
> essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act.
> I am condemned to be free.
> – Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

Introduction

I remember sitting down and making the conscious choice to write an essay exploring existentialist and Buddhist conceptions of freedom. Or, at least it very much *felt* as though I made this choice. There are various schools of thought that would say I did not make anything worth calling a choice at all. Indeed, I may have never made a legitimate free choice (as in a choice that I can be held fully responsible for making) in my entire existence. This is exactly what *hard determinists* would argue. This is a major position in the modern free will debate, and, unsurprisingly, it comes with its fair share of critics. There is, for instance, the worry that this type of hard determinism would render meaningless any sort of philosophical school of thought that aims at significant psychological change or social emancipation. One example of this kind of emancipatory philosophy would be Buddhism, since it is written into the very bones of Buddhism to strive for human awakening, i.e., the altering of consciousness to be in touch with the present moment and ultimately release oneself from the cycle of rebirth. What happens, then, when Buddhism meets hard determinism? How can we square a philosophy that advocates for change but at the same time says that we are not able to make any sort of free choice? This is exactly what I intend to explore here, using the ancient thinker Śāntideva as my representative Buddhist determinist and Jean-Paul Sartre as my representative existentialist who can help lead us out of this metaphysical morass. I will, in short, argue that Sartre's phenomenological conception of freedom can aid us in understanding how a philosophical school of thought (and specifically Śāntideva's path to awakening) can be both hard determinist *and* emancipatory.

Determining Śāntideva's Determinism

Reading ancient texts and trying to frame them in the terms of modern discourse is no easy task. How does one justify arguing that, e.g., Socrates was a deontologist rather than a consequentialist? How do we pull off a Hegelian reading of Heraclitus or a Marxist reading of Sun Tzu? These are inherently problematic goals since these ancient thinkers were simply not familiar or equipped with the same conceptual tools. This has not, of course, prevented scholars from attempting to throw ancient

thought and thinkers into the ring of modern debate. Nonetheless, there are better and worse ways of going about this. It is important, for instance, to keep in mind that these thinkers will not fit neatly into the categories constructed by the modern discourse. One can reinforce arguments as to why one thinker or school of thought is well-suited for another, or why they are not, but, ultimately, these distinctions are blurry. To be clear, I am not arguing that such readings and interpretations should be avoided. Rather, I am stating what should be obvious: we must take these interpretations with a margarita's worth of salt. With that in mind, it can be an illuminating and important project to interpret ancient thought in the light of modernity, so long as the appropriate caveats are employed.

Śāntideva was a Buddhist monk who lived in India sometime between 685 and 763 CE.[1] He was a practitioner of a form of Buddhism called Mahāyāna and is best known for writing a meditation manual known as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, translated "An Introduction to the Conduct which leads to Enlightenment."[2] In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra,* Śāntideva provides guidance for awakening, which includes various stances on ethics, identity, ontology, and many other philosophical mainstays. Accordingly, there is much to mine in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* regarding the modern free will debate. Indeed, many scholars have attempted to do exactly this, and the whole gamut of interpretations has been applied to Buddhist thought.

Take hard determinism for example, which is the stance that (1) all events are the direct result of past circumstances combined with the laws of nature and (2) this fact renders robust moral responsibility irrational and indefensible. Note that this is the rejection of *robust* moral responsibility, i.e., praising, blaming, or punishing someone exclusively because they deserve it. Hard determinism has been applied to Buddhism by thinkers such as Charles Goodman and Galen Strawson.[3] According to these types of hard determinist readings, Buddhist ontology and ethics leaves little room for free will (or consequent blame, praise, or punishment). Galen Strawson, for instance, argues that "at least certain schools of Buddhist thought" are committed to the non-existence of free will and the incoherence of moral responsibility.[4] Goodman defends a similar stance, arguing that a variety of Buddhist philosophers not only reject free will and moral responsibility, but that doing so "will actually help people to achieve the compassion, generosity, and

1. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), viii.

2. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, viii.

3. Charles Goodman, "Resentment and Reality: Buddhism on Moral Responsibility," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2002): 359; Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

4. Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*, 117.

forbearance needed to make themselves, and others, happy."[5] Goodman argues that Buddhist philosophers can be read as defenders of a position that simultaneously rejects moral responsibility and at the same time embraces the human capacity for moral progress. "This view of free will," argues Goodman, "receives support from a variety of different Buddhist texts, and therefore has some claim to represent the tradition generally."[6]

On the other hand, philosophers such as Mark Siderits have argued that Buddhism, with its focus on awakening and moral progress, ought to be read in more compatibilist terms.[7] Compatibilism is the stance that there is room for both determinism and some conception of free will that allows for robust moral responsibility. Paul Griffiths, conversely, argues that Buddhism's focus on change and progress toward awakening means that libertarianism, i.e., the belief in both unencumbered free choice and full moral responsibility, is only appropriate.[8] There are many schools of Buddhist thought, and there is not a concrete answer as to which of these interpretations is the correct one. For this paper, however, I will be aligning myself with the likes of Goodman and Strawson in arguing for a hard determinist reading of Śāntideva.

In pursuing such a reading, it is important to appeal to the original text for justification. As mentioned above, determinism can be defined as the view that every event, including all human actions, is the necessary result of the past combined with the laws of nature and that this entails a rejection of robust moral responsibility; or, as Strawson puts it, "everything that happens in the universe is necessitated by what has already gone before, in such a way that nothing can happen otherwise than it does."[9] If determinism were true, it would seem that a variety of emotional reactions, even ones that are extremely commonplace, would fail to be morally or rationally justified. If, for instance, a murderer did not have choice but to be a murderer, then what sense would it make to punish them for punishment's sake?[10] Or on the flip side, what sense would it make for us to feel intense pride over our achievements? Aren't these matters of pure

5. Goodman, "Resentment and Reality," 369.

6. Ibid.

7. Mark Siderits, "Beyond Compatibilism: A Buddhist Approach to Freedom and Determinism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1987): 149–59.

8. Paul J. Griffiths, "Notes Towards a Critique of Buddhist Karmic Theory," *Religious Studies* 18, no. 3 (1982): 277–91.

9. Galen Strawson, "Luck Swallows Everything," *Naturalism*. Accessed December 6, 2021.

10. "For punishment's sake" is an important qualification because a hard determinist could appeal to reasons for punishment that are beyond its own sake. On this account, punishment could be justified, for instance, because it deters crime or because it is the only route to reformed behaviors. Notice, though, that these are not appeals to punishment *simply because someone deserves it*.

luck? As comedian George Carlin once said, "Pride should be reserved for something you achieve or obtain on your own, not something that happens by accident of birth. Being Irish isn't a skill, it's a genetic accident. You wouldn't say I'm proud to be 5'11", I'm proud to have a predisposition for colon cancer."[11] But in a hard determinist universe, *everything* is unearned, no more achieved "on our own" than our height or eye color.

A glance at the primary texts reveals that Santideva would seem to be in agreement with Carlin on this matter. Śāntideva writes in his chapter on perfecting patience in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*:

> (vi.25) Whatever transgressions and evil deeds of various kinds there are, all arise through the power of conditioning factors, while there is nothing that arises independently.[12]

There are two key phrases here: one, that all deeds arise through "conditioning factors" and two, that *nothing* arises independently. In one short sentence, Śāntideva establishes rather concretely that he is arguing for a universe in which *everything* is causally contingent—that the world, including humans and their inner lives, exists only through factors over which they utterly lack control. In the next verse, Śāntideva writes,

> (vi.26) Neither does the assemblage of conditioning factors have the thought, "I shall produce"; nor does what is produced have the thought, "I am produced".[13]

And later:

> (vi.31) In this way everything is dependent upon something else. Even that thing upon which each is dependent is not independent. Since, like a magical display, phenomena do not initiate activity, at what does one get angry like this?[14]

Śāntideva explicitly takes care to establish that he is advocating for a purely deterministic universe where nothing has the choice to exist free from environmental and historical constraints. It seems that a pure libertarian reading of Śāntideva would be off the table at this point. Śāntideva makes it quite explicit that human choices are contingent and constrained. But even if that is true, it is still not clear that Śāntideva is arguing that humans have *no* capacity for choice and thus lack moral responsibility. There is still a case to be made that Śāntideva is arguing for a type of compatibilism, since compatibilists do not necessarily take issue with determinism. As briefly mentioned earlier, a compatibilist may accept a deterministic ontology; however, they would argue that this alone is not enough to justify the rejection of robust moral responsibility. A compatibilist could

11. George Carlin, "George Carlin – Pride," *YouTube*, February 2, 2010, video, 4:29.
12. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 52.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

argue that a deterministic universe is beside the point; there remain compelling reasons to hold people *fully* responsible for their actions. It may indeed be the case that a person's moral character is the result of conditions out of their control, but only "literal compulsion, panic, or uncontrollable impulse" really removes their freedom to choose.[15] So long as other factors are at play (for instance, the metacognitive ability to endorse one's own decisions, the ability to have done otherwise, or the ability to be responsive to reasoning),[16] then one can still be fully justified in blaming and punishing someone solely for the sake of blame or punishment.

Is there reason to believe that Śāntideva could be an advocate of this type of compatibilism? Is there textual evidence that he thinks one should still be held fully responsible for their actions regardless of being determined by factors outside their control? The answers to these questions are not as clear-cut as the above question of Śāntideva's determinism, as there appears to be more room for interpretation. Nevertheless, there are some verses that strongly indicate that Śāntideva is arguing against the type of robust moral responsibility that justifies praising or blaming someone as if they were the sole authors of their actions. Take the following verse:

> (vi.22) I feel no anger towards bile and the like, even
> though they cause intense suffering. Why am I angry with
> the sentient? They too have causes for their anger.[17]

These lines are of particular interest, as it seems as though Śāntideva is drawing a direct analogue between bodily irritants and sentient beings. If it makes no sense to feel anger toward zits and snot and boogers and bile, says Śāntideva, then it makes no sense to be angry at people. This is a pretty radical claim. But what makes bile and humans analogous for Śāntideva is not just that they are both causally determined. Śāntideva goes one step further by extending the analogy to justify certain moral and emotional responses. He is, in other words, not simply drawing a deterministic or causal analogy between humans and bile—he is making an argument for what types of psychological and moral attitudes we ought to have in response to their negative effects. Śāntideva is making a direct appeal to mitigate the emotional weight of expectations of justice or vengeance or moral responsibility. We should get no angrier at humans than bile, as neither asked to be what they are and do what they do. Indeed, in the verse I quoted at the end of the last paragraph, Śāntideva states that "Since, like a magical display, phenomena do not initiate activity, at what does one get angry like this?"[18] This is more of the same: anger does not

15. Strawson, "Luck Swallows Everything."

16. Michael McKenna and D. Justin Coates, "Compatibilism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last updated November 26, 2019.

17. Śāntideva, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 52; vi.22.

18. Ibid.

seem like a rational or appropriate reaction to people (or possibly things in general) since nothing *chose* to cause that anger, nothing *chose* to be or to exist in the first place. In what seems to be Śāntideva's most explicit statement of this sort, he writes,

> (vi.33) Therefore, even if one sees a friend or an enemy behaving badly, one can reflect that there are specific conditioning factors that determine this, and thereby remain happy.[19]

These verses appear rather incompatible with compatibilism since Śāntideva demonstrates time and time again not only that people are determined beings, but also that their emotional responses (including their attitudes about moral responsibility) should respond to this determinism. There is little room for robust responsibility here.

In sum, I have argued for a hard determinist reading of Śāntideva. This means that Śāntideva is stating not only that humans live in a deterministic universe where all actions are the consequence of factors outside of their control, but, further, that it makes little sense to hold anyone fully responsible for their actions. Thus, many emotional reactions, such as anger, hatred, a desire for vengeance, punishment, and ultimate moral responsibility, are all rationally and morally unjustified. With this reading in mind, though, it might be natural to wonder how this can be harmonious with Śāntideva's overall project of helping sentient beings reach enlightenment. It might seem as though the ability to choose and the ability to hold others responsible for their choices would be requisite for creatures fully to awaken and release themselves from the cycle of suffering. The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* does not explicitly address how to make sense of this tension. Śāntideva makes a case for what kinds of moral attitudes are justified in a deterministic cosmos. At the same time, he does not argue for *how* one is justified in embracing an emancipatory philosophy in the face of an ontology that rejects holding anyone fully responsible for their actions. This does not appear to be a major worry for many hard determinist Buddhists, since, as Goodman points out, "The confidence that Buddhists have in the power of their meditative practices leads them to be very optimistic about the practical possibility of such a transformation, despite the obvious difficulty of the task."[20] Despite some potential incompatibility, Śāntideva (and many other Buddhist thinkers) take for granted that one, all human behaviors are causally determined; two, this justifies a rejection of robust moral responsibility; and three, the transformative goals of Buddhism are still possible and worth pursuing. It is this tension to which I think Sartre's existentialism may be able to offer some relief. And it is to this I turn now.

19. Ibid., 53
20. Goodman, "Resentment and Reality," 370.

The Inescapability of Freedom

Jean-Paul Sartre was a prolific and renowned thinker in the mid-twentieth century, known for his political activism, his fictional works, and, most notably, being the father of modern existentialism. Existentialism is a school of thought that is notoriously difficult to characterize. Some trace its roots back to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, although nuggets of its core ideas can be found in antiquity as well. I do not intend to provide a sweeping characterization of existentialism, as it might be impossible to do so (although there have been many attempts),[21] and it is not entirely relevant to the topic at hand. What is important for now is that Sartre's existentialism was largely and explicitly concerned with *freedom*. In his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre sets out to explain exactly what he means when he speaks of freedom. In this tome, he dedicates roughly 700 pages to the project of defining freedom (a reviewer once described it as "a first draft for a good book of 300 pages").[22] In it, Sartre uses such provocative phrases as "I am condemned to be free" and "to be is to *choose oneself*."[23] So what is Sartre claiming about the nature of freedom with these statements? And where does he fall in the free will debate? In light of these phrases, it would certainly appear as though he was a type of libertarian. Sartre, however, refused to engage with the metaphysical/ontological debate of free will. To him, it was obvious, indeed *necessary*, that everything in the universe was causally determined, for if this were not the case then humans would be incapable of making anything recognizable as a meaningful choice. For Sartre, "a human being is not

21. Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Cafe* (New York: Other Press, 2016), 34. Bakewell provides the following helpful, tentative multi-part definition of existentialism: "Existentialists concern themselves with *individual, concrete human existence*; They consider human existence different from the kind of being other things have. Other entities are what they are, but as a human I am whatever I choose to make of myself at every moment. I am *free*—; and therefore I'm *responsible* for everything I do, a dizzying fact which causes; an *anxiety* inseparable from human existence itself; On the other hand, I am only free within *situations*, which can include factors in my own biology and psychology as well as physical, historical and social variables of the world into which I have been thrown; Despite the limitations, I always want more: I am passionately involved in personal *projects* of all kinds; Human existence is thus *ambiguous*: at once boxed in by borders and yet transcendent and exhilarating; an existentialist who is also *phenomenological* provides no easy rules for dealing with this condition, but instead concentrates on *describing* lived experience as it presents itself; by describing experience well, he or she hopes to understand this existence and awaken us to ways of living more *authentic* lives."

22. Bakewell, *Existentialist Cafe*, 152.

23. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1943/1956), 129.

separable from the human condition. A person divorced from the totality of their situations is an intellectual abstraction that can only be partly achieved. I am what I am only in relation to my situations."[24] But Sartre argued that determinists were getting ahead of themselves as well. In *Being and Nothingness*, he wrote the following:

> [A]t the outset we can see what is lacking in those tedious discussions between determinists and the proponents of free will. The latter are concerned to find cases of decision for which there exists no prior cause . . . To which the determinists may easily reply that there is no action without a *cause* and that the most insignificant gesture (raising the right hand rather than the left hand, etc.) refers to causes and motives which confer its meaning upon it . . . To speak of an act without a cause is to speak of an act which would Jack the intentional structure of every act; and the proponents of free will by searching for it on the level of the act which is in the process of being performed can only end up by rendering the act absurd. But the determinists in turn are weighting the scale by stopping their investigation with the mere designation of the cause and motive.[25]

It is clear that Sartre rejected metaphysical free will or pure libertarianism. It is also clear that Sartre did not think that hard determinists were seeing the whole picture. Both the determinists and the libertarians were looking in all the wrong places for finding anything worth calling freedom. Sartre therefore argued that true freedom, *radical freedom*, would not come from metaphysics or science. Freedom was, rather, a phenomenological experience, a way of *being in the world.* To understand what this means, it is important to explore two important distinctions for Sartre. The first is the *pour-soi* (for-itself) and the *en-soi* (in-itself); the second is power and freedom.[26]

For Sartre, the in-itself describes all things that lack consciousness: atoms, rocks, forks, toilet paper. The for-itself is that which is conscious—it is us. Sartre argued that the for-itself is the negation of the in-itself.[27] Everything in the universe has a being, a way of existing, that just *happens* to it; the in-itself simply is and continues to be. The picture changes when the in-itself becomes the for-itself. It appears there is something categorically different from conscious beings and non-conscious beings. For Sartre, there

24. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest (New York: Routledge, 2001), 177.

25. Sartre, *Basic Writings*, 177.

26. These concepts are addressed throughout *Part 2: Being-for-Itself* in *Being and Nothingness* (1956) and specifically his section on "Immediate Structures of the For-Itself" (73-105).

27. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 97.

is indeed a categorical difference—viz., *freedom*. The emergence of the for-itself from the in-itself results in a total annihilation of something merely existing;[28] the for-itself is what arises from this annihilation—it is now a lack, a nothingness, faced with unavoidable options of ways to exist in any given moment.[29] Our consciousness is nothing but a tendency to reach out and point to things in the world, and thus must navigate and traverse existence. "If I look into myself and seem to see a mass of solidified qualities, of personality traits, tendencies, limitations, relics of past hurts and so on," writes Bakewell, "all pinning me down to an identity, I am forgetting that none of these things can define me at all. In a reversal of Descartes's 'I think, therefore I am,' Sartre argues, in effect, 'I am nothing, therefore I am free.'"[30] The unconscious in-itself, on the other hand, is not intentional in the sense of reaching into the world: it just *is*.

But, again, if we *are* freedom by merit of how consciousness exists in the world, then how is Sartre's view distinct from libertarianism? How is it, in other words, that Sartre is not simply advocating for a pure freedom independent of the chains of causation? It is here that Sartre's division between freedom and power comes into play. As mentioned above, Sartre takes it as a given that everything we are and everything we do is causally contingent on past circumstances. Sartre identifies the unique contingencies that have resulted in who we are today as our "situation."[31] We are all situated in the world based on things outside our control, and it is our situations that determine how much *power* we have in any given moment.[32] This is an important distinction for Sartre because it seems rather obvious that people can be more or less restricted given their circumstances.[33] To say that there is no difference between an overprivileged white male in an upper-class U.S. suburb compared to a prisoner of war would strike most as an absurdity. Indeed, it would have for Sartre as well. He would argue that the former has much more power over his situation than does the latter. Interestingly though, for Sartre, *neither person is limited in their freedom.*[34] Indeed, sometimes people who are most constrained are those who are able most clearly to recognize their freedom. Sentience or

28. Ibid., 16-21.

29. In *Existentialist Café*, 154, Bakewell writes about an old joke regarding the something-ness of nothingness in Sartre's philosophy: "Sartre walks into a café, and the waiter asks what he'd like to order. Sartre replies, 'I'd like a cup of coffee with sugar, but no cream.' The waiter goes off, but comes back apologizing. 'I'm sorry, Monsieur Sartre, we are all out of cream. How about with no milk?'"

30. Ibid.

31. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 79.

32. Ibid., 97-98.

33. Sartre, *Basic Writings*, 177.

34. Ibid.

consciousness *is* freedom, and so long as a being is conscious, it is free, regardless of any external constraints. Because of this, "only death brings an end to freedom."[35] This might seem paradoxical on the face of it, as many people's intuitions would say that a prisoner of war does not have any type of freedom, or at least not any type of freedom worth having. Not so for Sartre. Existentialist freedom is not meant to be comforting; it is not the freedom magically to choose different situations or to cure ourselves of our ailments. Rather, freedom is a dizzyingly, nauseatingly, overwhelming responsibility that requires us to acknowledge how many potential options we have in any given moment—even when those options are awful or painful or deadly. The prisoner of war is free to choose a bullet to the head, for instance. Just because his power is constrained does not mean that he is not free; freedom cannot be escaped.[36]

It is the gravity of this responsibility, according to Sartre, that drives each of us to deny the totality of our freedom. We are all psychologically predisposed to reject how free we actually are. Our chains give us comfort. The world is a much more soothing place if we are each born with a purpose, with an essence, that is chosen for us. I can sleep at night knowing that my decisions will amount to something important or that nothing *that* bad can occur because of what I do. Sartre says that our tendency to take refuge in such delusions results in "bad faith."[37] To live in bad faith is to live as though we are not free; it is to shirk our responsibility and hoist it onto the shoulders of others. Sartre sees it as a matter of fact that most of us, most of the time, live in a state of bad faith, and this is not necessarily a bad thing.[38] Our brains are not equipped always to handle the intensity of our freedom. Nevertheless, it is our responsibility, when we can handle it, to acknowledge all the potential things we could do. By doing this, we are able to increase our power, to enrich our lives with a more authentic purpose.

We, humans *qua* humans, consciousness *qua* consciousness, are, through our nothingness, our elimination of *en-soi*, rendered radically, inescapably free; we do not possess freedom, we *are* freedom. We are not metaphysically free because we are never able to make choices free of our necessary situation. But we do not lack any sort of freedom either, as we are categorically different from inert, unconscious middle-sized dry goods, even in light of the fact that both are causally determined. Compatibilism does not quite work here either, as compatibilists would argue that people are free to choose so long as they are meet certain conditions of freedom, such as not being unreasonably

35. Ibid., 181

36. As Stephen Priest puts it in *Basic Writings*, 177, "Freedom, for Sartre, is not comfortable. It is a capacity to choose that never leaves us so long as we exist."

37. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 47-48.

38. Ibid., 49.

constrained or being able to respond to reason. Sartre would say that unreasonable constraints do not lessen our freedom at all, and it may in fact make our freedom all the more palpable.[39] Thus, Sartre does not fit neatly into the language of the modern free will debate. Sartre is concerned with how we exist in the world, how we experience freedom, and what that means for each individual person. In recognizing both our constraints and our freedom, we should, it is hoped, own up to the responsibility of defining ourselves for ourselves, thus increasing our power.

An Existentialist Path to Awakening

With a basic analysis of each model of freedom in hand, we are now in a position to look at how Sartre's existentialism can aid Śāntideva's project of leading people to awakening, despite his arguments for a deterministic universe. The question of how people can motivate others and strive for progress and change if determinism is true has been well-explored. Some thinkers think that determinism provides a substantial obstruction to motivating change, maybe even rendering it hopeless or absurd, while others have argued that the truth of determinism makes no difference on this matter. Some have attempted to take on this challenge in a specifically Buddhist context. Riccardo Repetti, for instance, argues that Buddhists such as Śāntideva can strive toward awakening, and motivate others to do the same, because humans possess "metavolitions," or "volitions about volitions." This is a type of compatibilism that allows for Śāntideva to work toward enlightenment while maintaining his deterministic views. "[V]olitional actions are free if the agent approves of them," argues Repetti. "For Buddhists . . . one has mental freedom if one is able to control one's mental states, and to the extent one has mental freedom when choosing, one has free will."[40] Repetti's goal of discovering how Buddhists can choose to go on a path toward awakening is aligned with my argument. However, for reasons explored at the outset, compatibilism will not work for Śāntideva because he rejects full moral responsibility. I want to look, therefore, at how Sartre might be able to handle this quandary.

Śāntideva provides many passages that appear to reinforce his belief that all human actions, just like all of nature, are sculpted by circumstance and thus fully determined. He argues that, consequently, certain reactions are morally and rationally unjustified. Śāntideva is not only making claims about how the universe is, but also about how best to internalize and utilize these facts to make us live better lives, i.e., lives that

39. In *Basic Writings*, 177, Stephen Priest recalls a notorious example of this: "After the war [World War II] Sartre caused outrage by saying that the French people had never been so free as during the Nazi occupation."

40. Ricardo Repetti, "Meditation and Mental Freedom: A Buddhist Theory of Free Will," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 17 (2010): 166.

put us on a path toward awakening. It is this focus on lacking moral responsibility that makes Śāntideva incompatible with compatibilism. But Sartre's existentialism seems to require each of us to take full responsibility for who we are and what we do. Does this not make existentialism incompatible with Śāntideva in the same fashion as compatibilism? This seems unlikely to be the case because, for one, Sartre's conception of responsibility is different from the moral responsibility that Śāntideva rejects. Sartre is not in line with the compatibilists and libertarians regarding their flavor of moral responsibility. Their type of moral responsibility seems to hinge on people making unconstrained choices, meaning that someone is fully responsible for their circumstance, including the situation in which they reside.

Sartre, on the other hand, recognizes the fact that we do not, in any way, choose our situations. Rather, we are thrown into the world, and it is within our situations that we find ourselves. This means that we are at any given moment responsible for *seizing* our responsibility, for recognizing our situation and owning it. That does not mean that we are subject to the type of buck-stopping moral responsibility demanded by the libertarian. What it means is that if our situation allows for it, we may be lucky enough to be able to recognize our "thrownness," and thus our all-encompassing freedom.[41]

Our ability to recognize our situation and thus challenge our inertial states of bad faith is, too, a matter of luck. But there are nevertheless individuals who will never recognize that they exist in perpetual bad faith. They are still free, *utterly free*, but they do not have the power to recognize their freedom and thus have not taken on the weight of responsibility. An implication of this is that we should be sympathetic to and concerned with the well-being of those less lucky than ourselves. Sartre was a big advocate of this type of thinking, as much of his philosophy was targeted at helping the oppressed. Sartre's existentialism was thus dialectical in the sense that we must face the responsibility of choosing who we are to become, acknowledge that most people will not recognize and realize this responsibility, and therefore extend understanding and compassion. Only a small number of people can ever live authentically, i.e., with a full recognition of freedom, and it is the job of those authentically living to stand up for the oppressed. Because of this, Sartre and Śāntideva would be aligned both in their admittance of determinism, and of the potential practical benefits of understanding others' denial of responsibility.

Śāntideva and Sartre are both, nevertheless, striving intently to better themselves and to hold themselves responsible for what they do, not because they chose to be who and where they are, but because they *are* who and where they are. The recognition of this

41. Sartre, *Basic Writings*, 191-195

fact, for both men, means that they must work with what they have and own up to that responsibility. Śāntideva uses his hard determinism to be more forgiving and understanding of others and to motivate mindset changes that will aid in his awakening. What he does not do is use his determinism to let himself off the hook, to shrug his shoulders as if he has no power to change, to accept some sort of imagined "fate" over which humans have no influence. Similarly, Sartre's freedom demands those who are able to recognize it, to do exactly that—recognize their freedom—and accept the entailed responsibility.

Sartre's existentialism is also allied with Śāntideva's Buddhism in that both views focus on nothingness or emptiness and the denial of a reified "self." It is commonly accepted in Buddhist thought that there is not a true self or ego, that we are constantly in flux and, ultimately, empty. Śāntideva uses these beliefs to reinforce some of the abovementioned arguments for how to live well. The lack of self and the lack of moral responsibility go hand in hand for Śāntideva. There is a distinction in Buddhism between "ultimate" and "conventional" reality, the latter being pure emptiness (at least in some schools of thought) and the former the realm in which humans perceive and navigate. In regard to sense of self, Buddhists would argue that we may perceive a type of psychological continuity, for instance, which may constitute a sense of self, but this self only exists conventionally; ultimately, there is no self at all, only emptiness. Similarly, Sartre argues that we do not have a static self. The only 'self' worth having is the one we create, and even that one is impermanent. A rallying cry of sorts for existential thought is "existence precedes essence." This is meant not only to illustrate the anti-essentialist attitude of existentialism, but also to show that we must choose who we truly want to be. Further, human awareness is no more than the negation of the in-itself, meaning that there is only nothingness when we look deep inside of ourselves. This is not to say that there are not important differences between the ontologies and / or ethics of existentialists and Buddhists, as there surely are important differences. After all, Buddhism is an ancient and incredibly diverse spiritual systemthat has changed and branched in innumerable ways over a millennium. Existentialism, too, has very diverse and even conflicting branches. For Sartre and Śāntideva, however, it is in their overlap that what is important comes to light.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Śāntideva and Sartre are both determinists, in that they believe that everything that exists is contingent or dependent on other factors. They both deny the existence of a permanent self or essence; they both agree that nothingness or emptiness is what underlies each of us; and they both agree that it is a moral and practical duty to

help those who are suffering.[42] Existentialism offers a way for Śāntideva to maintain his determinism but still adhere to the *Bodhisattva* path and to train others in its pursuit. Existentialism admits that we are determined, but that this doesn't limit our freedom. It does limit a specific type of freedom—viz., metaphysical freedom—but Sartre argues that this is an absurd position in any case. Simply by merit of being a being "for-itself," we are immersed in freedom, confronted with choices at every step of our existence. This freedom is not comforting, but it is there nonetheless, and once we recognize it, we are responsible for choosing what we do and who we become. With this in mind, Śāntideva can maintain his ontological and ethical commitments and then use existential freedom to justify holding himself responsible for his actions and for motivating change in others. It is in this way that existentialism carves pathways toward awakening.

42. *N.B.* There is no necessary connection between the denial of robust moral responsibility and the advocacy of moral duty. One can deny the existence of moral responsibility while at the same time arguing that we still have duties to try to make the world a better place; however, a skeptic of moral responsibility would not be justified in, for instance, claiming that someone *deserves* to be blamed (or punished or praised for that matter) for failing to adhere to a moral duty.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bakewell, Sarah. *At the Existentialist Cafe.* New York: Other Press, 2016.

Carlin, George. "George Carlin – Pride." *YouTube,* February 2, 2010. Video, 4:29. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OnWnwwxNPA.

Griffiths, Paul J. "Notes Towards a Critique of Buddhist Karmic Theory." *Religious Studies* 18, no. 3 (1982): 277–91. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500014128.

Goodman, Charles. "Resentment and Reality: Buddhism on Moral Responsibility." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2002): 359-372. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20010085.

McKenna, Michael and D. Justin Coates. "Compatibilism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), last updated, November 26, 2019. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/compatibilism/.

Repetti, Ricardo. "Meditation and Mental Freedom: A Buddhist Theory of Free Will." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 17 (2010): 166-212. https://philarchive.org/archive/REPMAMv1.

Śāntideva. *Bodhicaryāvatāra.* Translated by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings.* Edited by Stephen Priest. New York: Routledge, 2001.

—. *Being and Nothingness.* Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1943/1956.

Siderits, Mark. "Beyond Compatibilism: A Buddhist Approach to Freedom and Determinism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1987): 149-59. www.jstor.org/stable/20014186.

Strawson, Galen. *Freedom and Belief.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

—. "Luck Swallows Everything." *Naturalism.* Accessed December 5, 2016. http://www.naturalism.org/philosophy/free-will/luck-swallows-everything.