Self-Consciousness as Freedom

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Self-consciousness is viable as the source of freedom if and only if self-consciousness permits subjects to observe their experience, choose their actions and take responsibility for their life. Previous attempts to locate freedom as a function of self-consciousness have not been accurate because authors have argued for concepts of self-consciousness that only allowed subjects to observe and choose. In these cases, philosophers like Johann Fichte in *The Vocation of Man* and Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* have had to rely on concepts like faith and transcendence to explain how people are capable of making free actions. Neither mechanism is actually an effective tool to prove that freedom exists as a function of self-consciousness because both concepts assume the function of free action without showing how or why self-consciousness gives agents the ability to take responsibility for their existence. An agent must be able to take responsibility for their actions for them to make self-directed choices because their choices would otherwise be out of their control. Rather than simply locating freedom as a function of self-consciousness, philosophers must show how self-consciousness has the quality of allowing the self to affect rational freedom where rational freedom is the ability to observe, choose and be responsible for action.

Rational freedom is important for agents to possess because it allows self-conscious beings take responsibility for their lives by placing agents in a space of real choice. An agent is not only responsible for being present for the experiences of their lives but also they are responsible for interacting with their experiences to create their existence. For example, a father goes to the ballet to see his daughter perform. The ballet is five hours long and his daughter will go on sometime in the five hours. He is bored of being at the ballet. Yet he doesn't want to leave because he wants to see his daughter perform. After the show, the father is held accountable by

his wife and kids for being there or not there. Moreover, the man is held responsible for *how he talks about the ballet*. If his wife and daughter asks him how the ballet was, the father might say that he was very happy to see his daughter perform and that he was proud of her. He might share with his wife, in private, that he hated the ballet and he doesn't want to go see any more ballets. The wife would then hold him accountable for telling his daughter he was "very happy" to see her perform and that, if he wants to respect his daughter's interests, he needs to continue to go or tell her the truth. The father's wife has just held him accountable for both how he talked about the experience with his daughter and how the experience was for him by suggesting that he can change his experience if he wants to. She can do this because he is assumed to have the ability to make a choice - to be at the ballet - and be responsible for the consequences - that he was bored but got to see his daughter perform. Taking responsibility is important here because it says that the experience is explicitly the fathers and he can do something about it. Rational freedom, then, is pivotal to the life of a self-conscious being in that it allows them to take responsibility for their experience and enact change.

Richard Moran's *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* demonstrates how self-consciousness creates the ability to enact rational freedom through its first person relationship to itself. Moran argues this particular type of relationship gives humans the ability to make avowals where agents observe and choose their thoughts, ideas and beliefs as an authority on themselves. Moran's argument is not perfect but when it is examined in light of Fichte and Sartre's arguments, any further argument for self-consciousness as the source of freedom must demonstrate how self-consciousness' particular metaphysical position in the mind grants agents the ability to choose their thoughts and take responsibility for their actions.

Self-consciousness is thought to allow rational freedom because self-consciousness is where subjects have their experiences of the world and, if subjects are going to be able to affect change, they must be able to somehow affect those experiences. The argument in phenomenological discussions often follows a line of thought by Edmund Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre. David Woodruff Smith's article on "Phenomenology" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* argues consciousness is defined by being about something else. (2003) The experience of having consciousness of something else shows a subject that they themselves are not the thing in consciousness. (Gallagher et al. 2005) In not being the thing in consciousness, the thing that is conscious is self-conscious of its consciousness. Self-consciousness is therefore the awareness of a subject of its own awareness. The awareness granted by self-consciousness is what grants a subject the ability to observe. Self-conscious beings can use their abilities to observe in order to affect their experiences by differentiating between objects. The structure of this differentiation is what creates the possibility for choice.

The structure of self-consciousness creates the possibility for choice by outlining the differences between things and demonstrating that, although a subject is separate from an object, there is an immediacy that philosophers Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi argue make it "my experience." (2005) A self-conscious subject then can simultaneously see the difference between subject and object while acknowledging that something about an object is of their experience. In seeing that it is apart of their experience, the subject sees that there is something about the object that is apart of themselves. The experience of seeing the separate object as part of their experience gives a subject the ability to bridge the gap between the two and alter the experience.

Implicit in making the choice to alter an experience is a subject's ability to take responsibility for their actions. The subject saw that there were differences and similarities between themselves and the object. For the subject to make a choice, the subject had to already see the object as part of their experience and recognize the differences were still present. The subject, in being self-consciousness, recognizes that there is an opportunity to act in seeing the difference between themselves and the world. For example, a child watching television for hours might suddenly stop and change the channel. The child does this out of recognition that a) they are currently watching television, b) the television station they are watching is not what they want to watch and c) the child can change the channel. Responsibility comes into play where the the child sees that the experience it is having has a sort of "mineness" about it rather than simply being a separate object. (Gallagher et al. 2005) The child is acting with its rational freedom by seeing how the situation is for themselves, seeing how it could be and that they can affect change by taking responsibility. In other words, the child has exerted rational freedom through their self-consciousness by observing, choosing and taking responsibility for their actions.

The fact the child can affect change through rational freedom is important because it demonstrates that human beings can make meaningful intentional choices to improve their existence. The case of the child seems a bit silly to be considered meaningful; a child changing the channel on the television is not as important as being able to feed oneself or to provide for a family. It is important, however, that the child has been able to recognize and affect a change that changes the experience for a child. The child can alter its state of boredom in watching the other channel to a state of enjoyment in watching the current one. The ability is all more important when it is considered that this same process is the process needed for a gambler to stop gambling

or a woman to leave an uncomfortable situation. Both of these situations will be discussed later in the context of how Sartre's and Moran's concepts succeed and fail to give agents the ability to enact rational freedom.

Locating self-consciousness as the source of rational freedom presents the problem that a self-conscious individual, in thinking or acting, already has to be free to act. Jean-Paul Sartre came up with a way around this problem in *The Transcendence of the Ego* by locating freedom within pre-reflective self-consciousness where a subject is aware of itself and its consciousness. (Sartre 1936, 29 [1957, 45]) (Gallagher et al. 2005) This form of self-consciousness is prior to making judgements but still apart of conscious experience. According to philosophers like Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, pre-reflective consciousness is where subjects begin to have an experience "in an immediate way" that makes it "my experience". (2005) Since this experience is immediate and prior to judgement, a subject's existence pre-reflective self-consciousness is where a subject begins it's awareness without positing its existence nor its freedom. By locating the beginning of a subject's agency in pre-reflective self-consciousness, the pre-reflective self-consciousness allows for a description of freedom as a function of self-consciousness that avoids the problem of the self-conscious subject positing its own rational freedom.

Another way to think about pre-reflective self-consciousness is to think about how the human body breathes without any awareness by an human being. The breathing occurs independent of self-conscious effort as a mechanism for survival. In doing so, the body recognizes itself through its actions without any cognitive awareness of its existence. The body acknowledges its existence. The human does not have to worry about breathing, just as it does

not have to worry about its freedom, because whether the person says something about it or not, they exist in this fashion.

Johann Fichte, Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Moran think of self-consciousness in roughly the form derived from the phenomenological argument, although the form of rational freedom that each one derives from self-consciousness is not the same. The differences between the authors' perspectives on self-consciousness constitute the differences in their conceptions of rational freedom.

Johann Fichte's argument for self-consciousness as the source of rational freedom in *The Vocation of Man* is not phenomenological and fails to demonstrate how it could allow subjects to act with responsibility. Fichte's (1987, 3; 1987, 14) investigation in the *Vocation of Man* is instead investigated from the ideal first person perspective. This perspective makes the investigation self-conscious and so his concept of rational freedom as a consequence of self-consciousness. This self-consciousness is determined by an awareness of the main character of the book and his determinations. (Fichte 1987, 14) The quality of this consciousness is an awareness of what exists in the main character's reality rather than a grasp of the content of reality. In this way, Fichte's concept of consciousness, and subsequently self-consciousness, is only about himself. The main character is in a dilemma at this point in the narrative because they unsure of the existence of the outside world and their ability to affect change because they are completely separate from the world.

Fichte argues that this separation reveals two systems of thought from which human beings must choose. The first is that of the idealist who believes that they can make meaningful choices because they assume themselves the cause of their actions. The latter is the belief of the

determinist who thinks that the world is a series of events, or mathematical points, tied to each other through causality as a chain. No freedom exists in the determined world. Without freedom, human beings cannot make choices through their own abilities. This is both disheartening to the individual, as demonstrated in the final portion of Fichte's *Doubt*, and a confusing belief for the individual to possess. (1987, 21; 2003, 33) If the individual believes they do not have any freedom, then they have already made a choice to believe in something. In addition, since freedom is the ability to make choices, the individual is reaffirming their freedom by denying it. Therefore, Fichte believes that the determinist conception of reality is not tenable. Human beings must believe that they have the ability to be free because it would be nonsense to believe otherwise and would prevent individuals from believing in the possibility of action. Although rational freedom exists as a conception of the self, human beings can and must choose because it is their vocation.

Fichte argues in book three, *Faith*, that despite the determinate nature of the objective world and the fact that freedom exists in the mind, that humans can effectively act freely by faith. Knowledge of the objective world, he argues, cannot support more knowledge of the objective world because any questioning of what he knows must appeal to new knowledge of the world. This spirals into a regress of questioning to find the basis of how he knows that the world is as he believes it is and so experience cannot prove the validity of knowledge. Instead, Fichte argues that faith is required to fulfill the vocation to both know and act in accordance with his freedom. (Fichte 2003, 30) Faith allows the individual to believe that they can act out of the freedom that exists within the mind because it erases the doubt that the knowledge an individual has is false. Fichte's main character realizes that this means he can act independently of his

constraints, as they are no longer a concern for him. In believing that he can act freely, the main character can act with responsibility, dignity and towards ends that he chooses.

Fichte's reliance on faith to let his main character act determines that the main character can make observations but not take responsibility for their actions. The "I" of *Vocation of Man* can observe that there are differences between the character and the world. Fichte's character can also see that it can make choices because the main character's consciousness is defined by the knowledge that the world is a part of his consciousness. He cannot take responsibility for his actions when the consequences are uncertain because the individual does not know anything about the actual world. For example, a man named Steve meets one of his coworkers on the street. Steve thinks he knows that his coworker exists. But Steve has also recently read Johann Fichte's *Vocation of Man* and does not quite grasp how he can just assume that others exist. Even if Steve assumes that he is responsible for his actions because he believes he has freedom, how could he know what other people are like?

Fichte would argue that the conscience tells Steve to act morally towards others and so they are automatically taken into his exercise of freedom. Fichte argues (2003, 36) that Steve is required to "conceive of them as beings like myself" because they are representations of the mind. In order to exercise his own rational freedom, he must honor these people as beings as themselves because Steve has assumed that he have this rational freedom and to deny other similar creatures is to deny himself the same. This argument seems weak until Steve's freedom is understood from the perspective where Steve is a mechanic. In order for him to be the head of his garage, the other mechanics need to recognize him as their boss. They will only do this if he respects them as agents of their own and so Steve must respect their freedom as much as he does

his own. Even if he doubts their freedom and manages to acquire enough power to oppress them, Fichte argues (2003, 36) that his conscience would stop him because the conscience is what grants him the freedom to act. This also seems like a weak rebuttal because the conscience is assumed as part of human nature and un-suppressible if one acts in accordance with their will. Fichte could only deny this argument and look to the idea that everything his main character sees is a part of self-consciousness and so a part of himself. Ill actions towards others would be to act ill towards himself.

Fichte's rebuttal demonstrates how Fichte's character can act with responsibility in a theoretical role playing situation but it also reflects the problem of his main character taking too much responsibility. The world in *The Vocation of Man* is entirely composed in the self-consciousness of the main character. The character of Fichte's narrative, then, has made the entire world about themselves and they may act as if the entire world was a representation of themselves. For example, Steve could walk into his workplace and, since he is the boss, fire every member of the team. When asked why, Steve would say to them, "I really didn't like you guys and, since you are just representations of myself, I decided I would fire you guys. I can always get new representations." Fichte might argue that any new co-workers would just be like the old ones because they are a part of his self-consciousness. The counterargument would be that if Fichte takes this argument, then he is denying the representations abilities to act as other self-conscious subjects by assuming they will act the same as the previous ones. In short, Fichte would argue that their ability to be observant, responsible and capable of choice would come down to making the same choices despite their distinctive identities. Fichte's freedom in this case would be an illusion or tantamount to an illusion because his version of self-consciousness

does not result in choice but the opportunity to make the same choice. Fichte's conception of self-consciousness as rational freedom then is limited because it cannot reliably account for the existence of others.

Fichte's concept of rational freedom becomes even more tenable when it is considered that Fichte's agents cannot choose their own thoughts because the thoughts of an agent, like the representations an agent sees, must be taken on faith that these are their thoughts. An agent, a rational deliberator, in the mindset of Fichte's main character is at the will of their thoughts. The agent can see the differences between themselves and the world as well as themselves and their thoughts. Theoretically, all of the thoughts that make up the agent's consciousness are their thoughts because anything in their consciousness makes up their experience. The representations of the world would be no different than these thoughts because they would be apart of the agent's experience. Without a empirical world setting standards to judge representations against, an agent could just as easily conceive of their thoughts as composing the entirety of their world. The world would be blended with their thoughts and so obtrude an agent from making rational judgement about what is or is not a fact. This is something that people struggle with but, in the case of Fichte's world, agents would not have any way to set a difference without making mistakes. Responsibility for an agent's actions would be mostly unknowable in this context and so Fichte's agents would be at the will of both the world and their thoughts. Fichte's concept of self-consciousness fails to be an effective model for rational freedom because it doesn't let agents act with responsibility.

Jean-Paul Sartre's rational freedom fails to allow actors to act with responsibility for similar reasons as Fichte. The difference is that Sartre's concept of self-consciousness is

grounded in the empirical world but fails to enable actors to take responsibility for their lives because taking responsibility for gambling or alcoholism, in Sartre's eyes, involves divorcing someone from their past. This separation, although initially necessary, actually ensures that the addiction remains in place, negated by the actions of the addicted. Sartre's concept of rational freedom, in these cases, fail because the rationale prevents the addicted from taking responsibility for their actions.

Sartre (2003, 210) believes that self-consciousness is defined by the awareness of the conscious being that its being is empty. A being exists but does not have an essence. Freedom, for Sartre, exists in the ability of conscious beings to see the differences between themselves and other beings but are not confined to their self-perception. A free person recognizes they are, say, a male caucasian construction worker but may, in fact, be a bookish philosophy addict who dreams nothing other than to become a professor. Freedom allows him to recognize his position as a male construction worker and act in more ways than his career permits because of this recognition. A self-conscious being is therefore constrained to strive towards being something; they are condemned to freedom. But this freedom is constrained by the recognition of the ability of others to see their essence. Therefore, for Sartre, freedom is defined by the constraints human beings have in self-consciousness of seeing what they are and are not. Observation and choice, in this way, are built into Sartre's conception of self-consciousness.

Sartre's example of a woman on a date best demonstrates how self-consciousness gives Sartre's agents the ability to act freely. The woman enjoys the man's company but is faced with a dilemma. When he says she is beautiful, she is faced with the fact that this can be interpreted as being "I would like to have sex with you in the future" or that she can take it at face value as a

sincere compliment. (Sartre 2003, 213) She is forced to deal with both meanings at the same time; the fact that she is physically attractive and the fact that this also suggests that he wants to sleep with her. She chooses to believe it is a sincere compliment but remains unsure of what he desires. She is stuck in an ambiguity. The man places his hand on hers and she is forced to decide whether she wants to allow this man to believe she is interested. Unaware of what he wants, and caught between the desire to be desired and the want to be respected, she leaves her hand in his. Her indecision suggests to the man that she is interested. But the inert presence of her hand also demonstrates her indecision as it neither resists or accepts. She exhibits bad faith. This bad faith is a representation of her freedom as Sartre demonstrates that this woman can make the choice to see her role as an object and a subject. This choice not to choose to acknowledge herself as more of one or other results in her body conveying something that is not true. In this way, the freedom that exists between an individual and themselves in Sartre's self-consciousness becomes an expression of her external freedom in the form of indecision. In this way, Sartre's conception of freedom expresses both how individuals have freedom of thought and freedom to make meaningful choices in the form of action.

One criticism of Sartre's conception of self-consciousness does not give rational actors freedom because it does not let actors take responsibility for themselves. Self-consciousness in *Being and Nothingness* doesn't give actors the ability to take responsibility for themselves because their responsibility is limited by the freedom of others and if other people recognize an individual's intentions in acting. In other words, our identities are not chosen but created by the way our actions interact with the perceptions of others. Sartre tackles this issue in his discussion of the woman on a date. When we left the woman, she was on a date and her date had decided he

wanted to hold her hand. He doesn't ask. He just takes her hand and expects her to act in turn. She, unsure of what to do, leaves it in his hand. This action, in the context of a date, could convey that the woman consents to the man's desires to be close to her, if not a consent to be engaged sexually with her. In addition, the man could conceivably make this judgment in the situation because her role as a partner in a date is to assert his or her own desires. As a woman, society has set the standards of her role for him to interpret her actions from. For example, in modern society, it is a woman's right to consent to sex if a man approaches her. If she denies this right and he proceeds to anyway, in a date or any other context, she is considered a rape victim and the man is prosecuted. This societal standard sets the practices and roles of a man and a woman in a sexual situation. Similarly, a woman on a date has the responsibility to give her consent to holding the man's hand. In leaving her hand there, the woman can be interpreted as consenting. This illustrates the unreliability in relying upon choices as expressions of freedom. The choice to be what they choose as a human being chooses is then constrained by society's standards, practices and how members of that society interpret these. In this way, a human being does not choose their being; society chooses their being for them. Sartre's woman, then, cannot take full responsibility for her actions insofar as how she is for other people.

Sartre's agents are also not responsible for themselves because they are not capable of acting the in present without negating the past. Sartre (1956, 56) argues that humans can change because they have the ability to observe divisions in self-conscious experiences and choose to extend or retract themselves from their experiences. In doing so, Sartre argues that human beings transcend the facts of their existence. Human beings, in this model, must negate the facts of their existence, or facticity, to transcend who they are. The difficulty in doing this is that, in cases

where agents want to change, agents inadvertently preserve their current selves and so prevent real change from occurring.

Sartre's akratic gambler is an example of this problem. Sartre discusses a gambler in "Chapter One: The Origin of Negation" of *Being and Nothingness* who wants to quit their addiction but cannot. The gambler has resolved to stop and there seemed to be a "real barrier between gambling and myself" but Sartre (1956, 33-34) argues this barrier is nothing but a "memory of an idea." The problem the gambler has is that "consciousness is empty of all content" according to Sartre (1956, 33) and so any commitments made in the gambler's past must be empty as they exist in consciousness. Sartre (1956, 34) argues consciousness "confronts its past and future self which it is is in the mode of not being" and so the gambler's reasons for not gambling are not accessible because they are not apart of the current self. Even if the gambler could muster all of the reasons he doesn't want to gamble, the gambler would be unsuccessful because it would reinforce gambling as a problem for the gambler by giving a reason not to gamble. The addiction remains there. The addiction would only be negated by the current commitment. And, in doing so, the real change from gambling addict to something like an occasional gambler would not be complete.

Sartre wants to say that the fact the gambler is always free to choose to gamble is what constitutes freedom. But without having the responsibility to take care of himself, Sartre's gambler is condemned to be free without having the ability to construct a meaningful relationship with gambling that prevents himself from gambling again. The gambler always has the opportunity to try to prevent himself from gambling but the gambler does not have any authority over themselves because the divide between who the gambler was, who they are and

who they will be is always constituted by a negative relationship. The gambler is not the man who was not a gambler nor will he necessarily continue to be a gambler. The problem is not so much that the gambler cannot secure that they can take responsibility for the future by setting down a commitment for the future but that this commitment loses its meaning because the gambler is no longer the person that made the commitment in the sense that they are no longer temporally that person. Rational freedom is not a possibility for Sartre's gambler because the agents of Sartre's theory cannot construct meaningful relationships to the past nor the future that give them authority in the present.

Richard Moran thinks that it is possible to give agents the responsibility to make meaningful choices in self-consciousness to its experiences. Moran's argument presumes self-consciousness allows agents to make observations and choices in the same way the phenomenological argument demonstrates how self-conscious beings have the ability to observe and choose. Self-conscious agents in his book *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* have an immediate access to their own beliefs and that this access is what allows agents to be responsible for themselves. Moran (2001, 61; 2001, 63) argues access is given to agents by their first-person perspective on their lives because it is their experience and that, when deliberating on choices, an agent takes up something he calls the transparency condition where they actively make up their mind about a situation. Agents have this unique access because the mental life of an agent is distinctively theirs. (Moran 2001, 32) He argues that other philosophers have argued against this form of access because the agents in their arguments have taken up a theoretical rather than deliberative perspective. The divide between the thinker and his thoughts in a theoretical perspective is that it alienates them from themselves like the gambler who is

alienated from his thoughts to stop gambling. But, Moran argues, the combination of the access in first person awareness and the deliberative stance taken in considering questions gives agents the ability to take responsibility for themselves and act with rational freedom.

Moran would argue that the aforementioned akratic gambler can make a commitment to themselves to act otherwise and mean it because of the authority given by the first personal self-conscious deliberation in making a choice. The gambler, who suffered from a lack of responsibility in Sartre's example, can attain responsibility in Moran's perspective by holding the question of whether to gamble or not as a present question while accepting the past self as part of their current constitution. Moran (2001, 88) argues that a subject would deliberate and deliver a commitment "both to the practical endorsement of the action and to the expectation of a future event." The statement would hold true as a meaningful statement because "his statement of intention expresses his responsibility for both perspectives and the same action" without negating the past. (Moran 2001, 88) This movement of holding the opportunity to act while acknowledging the pasts bearing on the present gives Moran's gambler the ability to say they will leave the casino or go home to his wife instead of gambling because the "avowal," as Moran (2001, 89) calls it, "commits me to facts beyond my psychological state." The commitment binds the gambler because to do otherwise would be to recommit to another choice or to not being responsible for oneself at all.

The power of the avowal, which allows agents to report and choose their a thoughts as an authority on themselves, is the perspective of having an open question in the present to deliberate on and knowing that the decision is being made to act. These factors make the commitment work because the mind is already made up in making up the mind on an issue. Motivation has already

been established prior to deliberating in choosing that the question should be settled. The agent, in this way, is unified in acting rationally. Moran's view, in this way, lets his actors have meaningful authority over their lives and so rational freedom.

Richard Moran's modern take on self-consciousness as the source of rational freedom offers an innovation over previous arguments in that it locates an agent's ability to observe, choose and take responsibility for actions as a part of the first person perspective self-consciousness. Where Fichte struggles to define how agents could make different choices if their rational freedom is the same, Moran demonstrates that agents can and do make meaningful unique choices because of their perspective as deliberators. First person authority, as Moran calls it, also lets Moran's agents avoid the problem that Sartre faces of the division of the personality by placing the agent as a deliberator where the question of whether or not a gambler will gamble is not a theoretical question. The question matters to the life of the deliberator and because it is a present question the deliberator can take the facts of the present and the past to make a commitment to the future. In doing so, Moran's actor demonstrates rational freedom in action. Moran's argument also demonstrates the necessity of allowing actors to take responsibility for themselves by showing how the gambler could potentially get out of his addiction despite the pull of his addiction. Moran (2001, 81) admits this is difficult and that the gambler cannot escape his addiction if the question of whether he will gamble is not open to him. Yet Moran's account of rational freedom shows that the gambler can become free of their addiction if they take it to be an deliberation in their power. The first person perspective of self-conscious deliberators in *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* by Richard Moran demonstrates that

self-consciousness can be the source of rational freedom through its place as immediate self-awareness.

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