

Sartre and Weber: Individual Thought in Philosophy and Science

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Table of contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	3
1.1: France	4
1.2: Germany	6
1.3: United States of America	8
Chapter 2: Sartre	9
2.1 Influences on Sartre	9
2.2 ‘Being-in-itself’ and ‘being-for-itself’	10
2.3 Freedom	11
2.4 Sartre’s individualism and connection to individualistic traditions	15
Chapter 3: Weber	18
3.1 Influences on Weber	18
3.2: Sociological explanations and methodological individualism	19
3.3 Social action	20
3.4 Weber’s individualism and connection to individualistic traditions	23
Chapter 4: Comparison and conclusion	25
Bibliography	28

Chapter 1: Introduction

Individualism is ubiquitous in modern day capitalist society. It is often discussed in various fields such as social settings, politics, philosophy, and the sciences. What somebody exactly means when using the term 'individualism' is, however, often unclear. The connotation of the term can differ enormously depending on the context and the subject interpreting the term. For example, for some people the term individualism might be associated with liberty, independence, and personal development. On the contrary, others might associate the term individualism with egoism, detachment from community, and loneliness.

Perhaps the most famous influence of individualism in the sciences and politics comes from economics. In his enormously influential book *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith propagates individualism (although restrained) and self-interest (Coker, 1990, p.139) as it would promote the accumulation of wealth, economic growth, and the welfare of societies. According to Smith, this economic growth is mainly supported by population growth, capital growth, the division of labour, and an institutional framework of the economy (Ucak, 2015, p. 665). This institutional framework is needed for the 'invisible hand' of the market to function. Herewith, he also stresses the importance of an open trading system.

Smith's individualistically based promotion of a capitalist industrial economic system has had an immense influence on political decision-making and the way economic sciences are approached. His views of allocating resources through the free market, efficiency through self-interest, and regulation through competition are still taught in schools and universities around the world and are often portrayed as the main paradigm of modern capitalist economics (Samuels, 1973, p. 123).

In this thesis, two authors that have had an enormous impact on individualism and the way we look at individualism as a concept will be explored and compared. Firstly, we will explore the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre on individualism. Sartre's individualism focuses on the consciousness of the individual itself and explains why the individual is in possession of extreme freedom and responsibility. Secondly, the work on individualism of Max Weber will be explored. Weber's individualism focuses on how individual action is relevant for science and how the social action of individuals constructs society. Subsequently, the teachings of Sartre and

Weber will be compared. This thesis will thus try to explain how the philosophical individualism described by Sartre and the scientific individualism of Weber are connected, and how they differ.

Before we get to the teachings of Sartre and Weber on individualism, we need to paint a broader picture of individualism. We do so to be able to place the views of both Sartre and Weber in the broader context of individualism. In this chapter, the three main historical traditions of individualism, as described by Lukes (1971) will be explored. Firstly, the French tradition of individualism will be explored, which brings forward a clear negative connotation of individualism. Hereafter, the German tradition of individualism, which is rooted in romanticism, will be explained. Lastly, we will look at the more recent American tradition in individualism, which opposes individualism to socialism or communism.

1.1: France

The term individualism was first coined in Europe as a reaction to the French revolution of the late 18th century (Lukes, 1971, p. 45-46). The ubiquitous conservative line of thought used the term individualism to describe the harmful ideology which infected the public and led them to overthrow the state. Such views on individualistic thought as vermin to society were first formulated among catholic French authors. These theological authors saw individualism as a great threat to civil obedience and thus the well-being of the state. They feared that individualism would corrupt the people, crumble the foundations of society, and ultimately lead to utter anarchy. This fatalistic view by these early catholic writers on individualism might be best captured in the following quote by de Lamennais (Lukes, 1971, p. 47): “Individualism which destroys the very idea of obedience and of duty, thereby destroying both power and law; and what then remains but a terrifying confusion of interests, passions, and diverse opinions”

Perhaps the most interesting view on individualism in this French era came, however, from the Saint-Simonians. Although they shared the rather negative view on individualism as a social phenomenon in the 19th century, they viewed it as an inevitable, necessary evil (Lukes, 1971, p. 47-48). This view on individualism stemmed from their beliefs that history was a cycle of ‘critical’ and ‘organic’ periods. The alleged individualistic era of the 19th century was, according to the Saint-Simonians, an example of a critical period. Such critical periods are characterized by disorder, the destruction of social relations and egoism, whereas the organic periods are characterized by unification, organization, and stability. The 19th century individualistic era was,

however, not just ‘a’ critical period, it was the last, according to the Saint-Simonians. Although they thus had a terribly negative view on enlightenment and the individualism that allegedly followed from it, it was necessary to lead humanity into their final stage, an everlasting and universal organic era.

Because the influence of the Saint-Simonians and other early theological authors reached so far and wide, the term individualism came to carry a largely negative connotation in French culture and society throughout the 19th and 20th century and was only sparsely challenged in French literature by, for example, laissez-faire economists (Lukes, 1971, p. 49). This influence, for example, shows how French socialists and communists adopted the term individualism to describe everything that withheld humanity from their ideal society of unity, social order, and equality. By using individualism in this way, they connected it to the workings and effects of industrial capitalism, which created a world in which the rich were greatly benefited, and the poor were left with scraps.

Blanqui, a renowned communist author, wrote the following on individualism (Mason, 1929, p. 505): “In every time and in every country, individualism formed the first cradle of society. Its reign was that of ignorance, of savagery and bestiality. (...) All social progress is the consequence of its defeat, the encroachment of communism upon its domain.” This influence of the Saint-Simonians obviously shows itself in the quote from Blanqui. It is clear that the Saint-Simonian view of progressive history has flowed over into the communist worldview of Blanqui, where humanity must step out of their primitive individualism and embrace communism to be able to lay the foundations of a just and cooperative society or state. This opposition between individualism and communism will also be looked upon further in this chapter when we look at the American traditions of individualism.

However, not all French socialist writers of 19th century France had such a purely negative view of individualism as an independent concept. For example, Louis Blanc credited individualism with providing the people with an historically necessary freedom over the ruling authorities. However, this freedom was yet to be completed. Socialist writers, like Blanc, thus argued that socialism was the way to complete the freedom that individualism had won by forming a cooperative and rationally organized social order (Lukes, 1971, p. 50-51). Socialism was necessary to complete that freedom, according to these French socialists, because without

socialism, individualism had taken the form of anarchy and oppression. By linking individualism with socialism, the individualistic values of autonomy and freedom can unleash themselves from anarchy and oppression. These socialists thus, had a fairly negative view on individualism in their era, but did not see individualism as inherently evil. It just manifested in an evil way because it was not restrained by socialism.

It was, however, not just socialists that criticised individualism in France. French liberals had their problems with individualism too. Most famously, Alexis de Tocqueville described individualism as the natural product of democracy, which led to the withdrawal from public life and the destruction of social bonds. His critique on individualism was mainly a critique of democracy itself as opposed to aristocracy. In democracy, according to de Tocqueville, individualism led humankind to abandoning society, and pure egoism. This is in opposition to aristocracy in which men are “linked closely to something beyond them and are often disposed to forget themselves” (Lukes, 1971, p. 52). According to de Tocqueville, in aristocracy the structures of society are clear because they always stand in relation to a monarch, creating solidarity through similarity. When these structures are broken by democracy, they fail to see themselves as part of a larger structure and become isolated.

Although there is great variation in the French tradition of defining and interpreting individualism, it is clear that the connotation of the word is almost constantly negative. By various authors, individualism is linked to anarchy, egoism, and isolation. In the second chapter of this thesis, we reflect on how Sartre relates to the positions of his compatriots.

1.2: Germany

The German tradition on individualism vastly differs from the previously described French tradition, although the earliest adaptations of the term seem to be greatly influenced by the early French on individualism. For example, Friedrich List accused classical economists who propagandised laissez-faire and the free market of sacrificing the welfare of the national community to the individual acquisition of wealth (Lukes, 1971, p.54).

However, the German tradition on individualism was vastly influenced by another factor than the French revolution and its consequences, romanticism. Romantic authors considered subjectivity, individuality, multiformity, and diversity not only inevitable but even desirable (Swart, 1962, p.

82-83). They even advocated solitude as it would shield 'sensitive souls' from vulgarity. The romantics themselves did not use the term individualism, but later authors were clearly influenced by the romantic views on the subject and individuality.

That the romantics influenced the German views on individualism is suggested by the way Karl Brüggenmann, opposed the French understanding of individualism by describing individualism as something to be pursued, something that is desirable. He did so by defining individualism as "the infinite self-confidence of the individual aiming to be personally free in morals and in truth" (Lukes, 1971, p. 54).

The distinction between the dreary French tradition, and the completely different and far more positive German tradition on what individualism means and entails, further developed when Simmel, coined the term 'new individualism'. This new, German individualism seems to lay its focus on what individualism means for the individual itself, rather than on what individualism means for society or humankind. Simmel described this individualism as follows (Lukes, 1971, p. 55): "The individualism of difference, with the deepening of individuality to the point of the individual's incomparability, to which he is 'called' in his nature and in his achievement."

In this quote, once again, is shown how the individuality, revered by romanticists, influenced the German tradition on individualism. This 'new individualism' thus gave individuals the opportunity to realize their own self, according to their interests and personality. This again suggests that the German tradition aims to embrace individualism rather than rejecting it. This embrace is perhaps most strikingly shown by Max Stirner who viewed society as merely to be utilised by the individual, without caring for the welfare of society itself.

However, contrary to Stirner, most German authors on individualism in the 19th century, saw the foundation of a well-functioning society in the 'new' German individualism. In their view individualized individuals build the state itself from their own personal interests. The state, in this view, becomes a mere organic product of individuals, rather than a rational necessity. In this German individualistic formation of the state, individualism does not annihilate solidarity. It is the solidarity for each subject's individuality and uniqueness which constructs the state. This solidarity is a solidarity of difference, not of comparability (Lukes, 1971, p. 55-58).

As we have seen, the German individualistic tradition gives individualism a positive connotation which focusses on self-development and society as a product of individuals standing in solidarity of the uniqueness of other individuals.

1.3: United States of America

As showed, in the French tradition individualism was used by socialists to criticise capitalism. In the United States, however, individualism was a treat of capitalism that was to be revered. Whereas The Saint-Simonians saw the era of individualism and industrial capitalism as a dark penultimate stage of human development which humanity had to go through, the American tradition saw the same era as the magnificent final stage of human development. According to the tradition in the United States, individualism, combined with capitalism, produced a society of individual rights, unlimited opportunities, limited government, freedom, and morality. Instead of arguing that individualism should be paired with socialism, like Blanc had done in France, the Americans argued that individualism was in fact incommensurable with socialism (Lukes, 1971, p. 59).

In the United States, individualism became more than a set of characteristics of current day society or a method of arranging your life as an individual. It became a significant part of the national ideology and identity. They embraced the ‘each man for himself’ aspect of individualism in an almost Darwinian sense. The capitalist framework of laissez-faire, free market, and freedom would ensure that the best and strongest people would benefit and drive humanity to higher standards (Lukes, 1971, p.60). By doing so, the Americans seem to have enabled themselves to use individualism as a tool for nationalism, opposing their national identity to the socialists and communists of Europe.

Chapter 2: Sartre

2.1 Influences on Sartre

Sartre's views on the individual were evidently influenced by the Cartesian idea of dualism. In Cartesian dualism, the building bricks of the individual are the body and the mind. According to Descartes, the body and mind are distinct from one another (Chapell, 2005, p.2). The body or 'res extensa' is part of the external, material world. The essence of a human person, however, resides in the mind or 'res cogitans.' This non-physical, immaterial part of the individual accommodates the consciousness or soul of the individual. This idea, coined by Descartes, is often called 'property dualism'. In property dualism all properties that things can have fall in two classes: the material and the mental (Bennett, 1994, p.1)

In Descartes, the body is inferior to the mind as the body and its sensory perceptions are not to be trusted. The mind, with its clear and distinct ideas, however, is to be trusted and is self-reflective. This mind is the 'true self' which can "doubt, understand, conceive, affirm, deny, will, reject, imagine, and perceive" (Onwuegbuchulam, 2014, p.3). It is these attributes of the mind that provide the individual with freedom. Sartre clearly takes this notion of freedom residing in consciousness from Descartes. This is perhaps best illustrated by the following quote from *Literary and Philosophical Essays*: "We shall admire him (Descartes) for having understood that the sole foundation of being is freedom" (Sartre, 1955, p. 197)

Another famously acclaimed philosopher that seems to have had an important influence on Sartre's views on the individual, is Hegel. This influence seems to largely consist of the relation between the individual and the 'Others'. Hegel's famous Master/Slave dialectics postulates that self-consciousness is achieved through the relationship with the other. In Hegel's Master/Slave dialectics there is a constant struggle between the master and the slave to overcome each other. In this 'fight to the death', the master and slave fight for the coming of self-consciousness by seeking the others' recognition of one's subjectivity and desire, while putting yourself at risk. In this struggle the subjects try to overcome each other dialectically. This means that the subjects try to overcome each other not by eliminating one another, but by remaining in a relationship of inequality and interdependency (Cole, 2005, p.5). This hostile view of the relationship between subjects is also heavily present in Sartre's view of the individual.

2.2 'Being-in-itself' and 'being-for-itself'

Like with Descartes, Sartre's view of the individual comprises two separate types of being. These two types of being are 'being-in-itself' and 'being-for-itself'. Like the 'res extensa' the being-in-itself is placed in the material world. This type of being is completely unfree and determined by the processes of the material world. It is, however, not a concept as simple as just objects in the material world. These objects are, to us, structured on a basic level and comprehensible. This structure and comprehension are, however, not a trait of the object itself but of our conscious perceptions. On the fundamental level, 'being-in-itself', is a given that is merely existing without meaning or structure whatsoever. On this fundamental level it is impossible to speak of 'things' or 'objects' as there is no structure which would be needed to differentiate (Gutting, 2002, p. 861). Being-in-itself is thus only meaningful as the object of consciousness. Consciousness is the source of the meaning of the being-in-itself.

The freedom of the self is, like with Descartes, found in consciousness. Sartre proposes two major claims about consciousness. Consciousness is always of 'something', but it is not 'something' itself. Consciousness is 'of something' in the sense that for an individual to be conscious, there must be an object to be conscious of. This consciousness, in Sartre's view, is however not something mystic such as a soul or a spirit. Consciousness is neither material, nor immaterial. It is not a 'thing,' because consciousness does not have a content or structure, nor does it create its own structure or content by incorporating objects (Gutting, 2002, p. 860).

Consciousness is a completely transparent portrait of its objects, which is exactly why Sartre claims that consciousness in itself is 'nothing'. It only exists in relation to the objects it interacts with. However, that transparency of consciousness also exists in relation to itself. It namely is constantly conscious of itself as consciousness. To be conscious is to be self-conscious. Sartre, like Descartes, deems this self-reflexiveness of consciousness as the most relevant characteristic as is shown by the following quote: "The law of being of the being-for-itself, as the ontological foundation of consciousness, is to be itself in the form of presence to itself." (Sartre, 1956, p. 77)

This is exactly the reason Sartre calls consciousness 'being-for-itself' as opposed to 'being-in-itself'. The existence of consciousness revolves around a relation to itself. Contrary to the material, completely determined being-in-itself, being-for-itself does not have a complete essence. In other words, without the being-in-itself, there would not be a being-for-itself, but it is

not the being-in-itself. The being-for-itself creates distinctions in the undifferentiated being-in-itself. This means that human consciousness is responsible for shaping the world as-it-is with meaning. This thus gives human consciousness the great responsibility for all things that happen in the world, as there would be no world without human consciousness. (Jones, 1980, p.1-2)

The absence of an essence means, for Sartre, that human consciousness is lacking, as it lacks a certain consistency with itself (Onwuegbuchulam, 2014). Because of this lacking, the consciousness, or the individual, is constantly attempting to construct its own essence. According to Sartre, individuals attempt to construct this essence by practicing their freedom.

2.3 Freedom

The relationship between being-in-itself and being-for-itself in Sartre is expressed in ‘nothingness’ or ‘negation’. This negation is hard to interpret. Sartre based his concept of negation on Gestalt theory. In Gestalt theory, objects are individuated by humans by grouping them off against a so-called ground. This behaviour is said to be part of human nature, and not learned in life. This figure which is grouped off is then more differentiated than the background in which it appears (Mirvish, 2010, p. 68-69). In the same situation, different objects can be used as individuated figures or as background. In figure 1 for example, one can use the white area as a background to the differentiated black, which will reveal a vase as the differentiated figure. Likewise, one can use the black area as the designated background, and two faces appear as differentiated figures. Furthermore, it is only possible to experience one of the two possibilities at once. It is like flipping a switch. Determining what the background is in certain situations or events is remarkably similar to what Sartre calls ‘negation’.

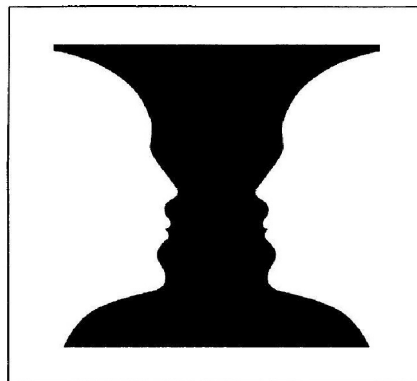


Figure 1. Vase/face illustration

To illustrate negation, Sartre uses a famous thought experiment in *Being and Nothingness*. Consider that you are late for your appointment in a café with your friend Pierre, who is always punctual. When you enter the café, which is full of people, you experience a certain fullness as there is conversation, objects, and activity all around you. However, because you have entered the café in search of Pierre, all these realities fall into the background. You experience them all as not-Pierre. In this example, the figure is Pierre's absence, a void. This void stands out against the background of the cafe. Herewith, Sartre shows that individuals have an 'intuition of nothingness' while at the same time maintaining the idea that consciousness is always conscious of something (Husserl's principle) because the something to which consciousness relates in this example is the absence of Pierre (Richmond, 2007, p. 83-85).

This ability of the individual to withdraw from the 'being-in-itself' is where Sartre finds the freedom of the individual. While the specifics of an event or situation are out of the control of the individual, it is the individual that decides where to lay the focus on. In other words, the individual decides what becomes the figure and what becomes the background (Detmer, 2005, p.80).

As said in the previous subchapter, being-for-itself does not have an essence. Because it lacks this essence, it can constantly reinvent and redefine itself and can thus negate what it is in the present. Because the individual is able to endlessly constitute a new meaning of what the self is, it is free. In other words, we can become what we are not, or stop being what we currently are (Stevenson, 1983, p. 255). As we have seen, Sartre postulates that this giving of meaning does not stop with the self, it is the source of all meaning because we decide the figure and the background. As we have control over what we are as individuals and what the events that we encounter mean, Sartre's freedom is a radical one.

Sartre explains, however, that it is quite common for individuals to hide themselves from this 'truth' that one is free. He states that despite being aware of one's freedom, individuals tend to pretend that they are not implicitly free. He calls this behaviour 'bad faith'. Of course, the antithesis of bad faith is 'good faith', or 'authenticity'. Being in good faith is acting in accordance with what we are underneath, the 'being-for-itself'. To act authentically, one is required to accept full responsibility for the decisions they make. An authentic person does thus

not see itself as a victim of circumstances but accepts that its state in the world depends on the free choices they have made (Yue & Mills, 2008, p.73).

The possibility of 'bad faith' stems from the duality between being-for-itself and being-in-itself, as the being-for-itself is characterised as separated from the being-in-itself but also as identified with the being-in-itself. The duality does, however, only provide the possibility for 'bad faith', it does not directly cause it (Gutting, 2002, p.862). Sartre argues that this behaviour is caused by the enormous responsibility that absolute freedom implies. The individual becomes responsible and accountable for its actions and the life it shapes for itself. This responsibility is so great that individuals start hiding from it, resulting in 'bad faith'. Sartre does not say that this 'bad faith' is inevitable, but it is a threat to one's freedom. In order to evade that threat, one must reject the evil lies and morals of modern materialism.

Sartre does not see freedom as a means to an end. Instead of freedom 'for' something, Sartre, once again, uses negation. He interprets freedom as freedom 'from' something. Examples he uses include freedom from religion and freedom from the values of materialistic culture. But as Sartre's radical freedom denies using this freedom for an ultimate goal such as happiness or freedom, it seems that meaning, or purpose is lost with his philosophy of freedom. However, while denying that freedom serves certain higher purposes in life Sartre coins that the freedom itself is the ultimate goal (Gutting, 2002, p.863).

To fulfil this ultimate end, individuals must aspire to be authentic, as authenticity provides the individual with freedom because it gives the individual the possibility to separate oneself from all that is external to it. By doing so, it gives the individual the opportunity to free itself from whatever systems trap or enslave it and prevent itself from being determined by the external world. To get a grasp on what this authenticity means in Sartre's terms, it is best to look at what it is not. In fact, Sartre himself wrote more about what authenticity is not, than about what authenticity is. Inauthenticity is shown when a person finds security in the set rules and values of the world and society without questioning these rules and values explicitly. Authenticity is thus raging war upon these systems. Authentic individuals keep distance from these rules and values, bring them into question and make attempts at changing them (Charmé, 1991, p. 253).

This radical freedom of the individual is, however, not entirely unlimited in Sartre's view, as it has obstacles to overcome. The most important obstacle to the freedom of the individual he

describes is 'The Other'. This 'Other' has to do with other being-for-itself, or other conscious individuals. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre explores the relationships that exist between being-for-itself. He characterises these relationships as conflicts over freedom. Sartre claims that the reflective nature of self-consciousness necessarily classifies other being-for-itself as separate and distinct consciousnesses. In the perspective of the individual, they are consciousness, while through the eyes of 'the Other' the individual becomes an external object of experience (Webber, 2010, p. 18-19). This happens because The Other diminishes the being-for-itself to an object, to a being-in-itself. In Sartre's own words: "By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other" (Sartre, 1956, p. 222)

This process is called "The Look" or "The Stare" by Sartre. By observing the individual, The Other destroys the individual as it is in its own self-reflective reality and replaces it with being the object of The Other's Look. This happens because the individual lives in and through their 'consciousness of self', through emotions like jealousy or anger. There are some emotions, like guilt, fear, and shame that reveal 'The Other' as not an object in the world of the individual, but as lived by the individual (Greene, 1971, p.25). This is illustrated by an example of such a situation in *Being and Nothingness*. In this example, Pierre is looking through a keyhole to see if his wife is cheating on him, making him jealous. But then, someone else arrives that looks at Pierre looking through the keyhole. When Pierre notices that he is being watched, he is instantly filled with shame and degraded to an object by 'The Other', to a mistrusting husband. This shame is a shame in relation to the person that gazes at the individual. The individual is ashamed because 'The Other' exists. This shame removes the individual from its own world and places it in the world of 'The Other' as an object, while robbing it of its freedom (Greene, 1971, p. 26). This is where Sartre's (in)famous and often misinterpreted catchphrase "Hell is other people" stems from.

The antagonistic relationship between the individual and The Other that diminishes being-for-itself to being-in-itself is thus formulated by Sartre as hell. Furthermore, truly engaging in interpersonal relationships is impossible according to Sartre. This is also where the hostile relationship between subjects differs from Hegel. In Hegel, as shown earlier, the subjects remain in a struggle for recognition where possibilities for building self-consciousness arise,

while in Sartre the individual's self-consciousness is completely destroyed when The Other gazes at them and replaces that self-consciousness. In fact, he sees these relationships as a great obstacle to achieving the ultimate purpose: Freedom.

2.4 Sartre's individualism and connection to individualistic traditions

The first implication, which is relevant in the scope of this thesis, that follows from Sartre's radical freedom, is self-determination. If the essence of a being is its freedom and The Other is merely an obstacle to achieving its potential, then the individual does not seem to need others to become its authentic self through radical freedom. It seems impossible for such individuals to live in a society and would automatically end isolated and solitary. It thus seems that Sartre's ideas of what a human should strive to be, are incompatible with society in general. The antagonistic nature of the relationships between the individual and The Others prevents it from building the conventional structures of a society in which resources are accumulated and allocated to help each other towards self-realisation (Onwuegbuchulam, 2014, p.36). While the idea of all people living isolated and by their own rules might be far-fetched, it seems to not look favourably at socialist or collectivist societies with collective rules and morals. As we have seen in the previous subchapter, individuals that question and challenge those sets of rules are to be praised in Sartre's views. In that sense, Sartre's views are anti-moralistic, which is another reason Sartre's views seem incompatible with society in general, and with collectivist societies in particular.

The argument stated above, shows that Sartre's individualism is incompatible with societies in general. However, there are some that argue that Sartre's individualism favours a certain type of society. For example, Irwin (2015) argues in his book that the 'each man for himself' ideology in the capitalist free market society of the United States aligns with the creation of authentic human beings that Sartre advocated for. He argues that apart from a Hobbesian 'State of Nature' environment, an individualised capitalist society seems like the ideal environment for the individual to develop itself and become an authentic human being. Irwin uses the following quote to substantiate this claim. "I was the 'solitary man', an individual who opposes society through the independence of his thinking but who owes nothing to society and whom society cannot affect, because he is free." (Eshleman, 2018, p. 88)

Irwin argues that the quote above indicates that Sartre would be in favour of free-market capitalism. However, in critical paper about Irwin's book, Eshleman (2018) sharply denies this claim as he believes that Irwin's political interpretations of Sartre's work are both incomplete and misleading. First, Eshleman states that the quote above only describes the views of Sartre before World War II. This is relevant because Sartre himself claimed that the war had radically changed his views on the individual. In 1975 he stated the following: "(...)The war revealed to me certain aspect so myself and the world...You might say that in it I passed from the individualism, the pure individual, of before the war to the social and to socialism."

This certainly shows that the later Sartre was not in favour of a highly individualised society like US free-market capitalism. Apart from that, Eshleman (2018, p. 88-89) points out that the early Sartre also had numerous ideas that are incompatible with free-market capitalism. For example, in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre states that he would be someone who would perfectly adapt to the collectivisation of property and even suggests that this collectivisation could strengthen freedom and individuality. However, the main takeaway one should take from Sartre's individualism in *Being and Nothingness* as opposed to the American tradition of individualism is that Sartre's individualism is ontological, while the American tradition is mainly political. It seems unfounded to link Sartre's individualism to any type of political design, as authentic Sartrean individuals are supposed to question and attack systems that offer collective 'truths' and morality.

In relation to France, Sartre seems to stray from his own country's tradition concerning individualism. As we have seen in chapter 1, individualism was massively criticised in the French tradition. It would lead the people to corruption and produce the state to collapse. This would inevitably lead to total anarchy. It is obvious that Sartre's beliefs about individualism do not correspond with those negative French beliefs of individualism. The 'objective' moral and religious values so revered by the Smith-Simonians and many other French authors are to be challenged in Sartre's philosophy. In fact, Sartre believes that a human life would not be complete or authentic if one does not question and challenge such beliefs. Individual thought and action are necessary for a 'full life'. Perhaps, the individualism of Sartre is most aligned with the writings of Louis Blanc, who stated that individual thought provided the people with freedom over the ruling authorities. This seems reasonably similar to the critical attitude Sartrean

authentic individuals must have towards authority and tenacious collective systems. However, Louis Blanc, like Irwin, links individualism to a political system – socialism in his case. Once again, Sartrean individualism is incompatible with all designs for society.

There are some parallels visible between Sartrean individualism and the German tradition, as they too had a mostly positive view on individualism and the effect it has on personal development. Much like the German romantics, Sartre acknowledges the value of solitude. Furthermore, like Karl Brüggenmann, Sartre saw individualism as something to be desired and pursued. Both Brüggenmann and Sartre agree that individualism leads to personal freedom. Another interesting resemblance with the German tradition is found in the territory both the German tradition and Sartre ascribe to individualism. As we have found in chapter one, the German ‘new individualism’ is mainly concerned with what individualism means for the self, rather than society or the state. The individualism described by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* also seems to focus on individualisation of the self rather than society, as Eshleman (2018) shows us that there are clear signs in and beyond *Being and Nothingness* that Sartre was not in favour of a highly individualised society like we see today in much of the western world. In short, Sartre and the ‘new individualism’ do not seem to recognise a contradiction in the existence of both an individualisation of the self and a society built on solidarity.

Chapter 3: Weber

3.1 Influences on Weber

Auguste Comte is often seen as the father of sociology, as he was the one to invent the term 'sociology'. In this scientific field, the object of discussion and investigation is society (Prosch, 2018, p. 31). Comte divided the evolution of human society in three stages: the theological stage, the metaphysical stage, and the positivistic stage (Pasternak, 1981, p. 223). During the first stage, the theological, societies explain phenomena by ascribing them to supernatural forces like angels, demons, and gods. Secondly, in the metaphysical stage, phenomena were explained through naturalistic explanations. This stage was to be viewed as a transitional stage (Pasternak, 1981, p. 224). Finally, society arrives in the positivistic stage. In this stage, the phenomena are explained by scientific facts. These facts are, however, not static. The positivistic stage revolves around the continuous modification of knowledge through the scientific method. This means that during the positivistic era all sciences, including sociology, should obtain and adjust knowledge through observation, comparison, and experimentation (Pasternak, 1981, p. 226). Weber agreed with Comte that sociology is a science of social facts, but strongly pressed the importance of referring to individual action to properly interpret social facts. In order to understand and explain social facts, this reference to individual action is required (Prosch, 2018, p. 31). The importance of individual action led Weber to the following definition of sociology: "A science that seeks to understand social action in an interpretative manner and thereby explain its causes and effects" (Weber, 1976, p.1)

In opposition to Weber's views on sociology, stood Émile Durkheim. According to Durkheim, society itself was a class of its own and was thus a *sui generis* phenomenon. So, while Weber argues that the focus should be on individual action, Durkheim believed that sociologists should focus on emergent phenomena in society. Durkheim analyses society as a structural-functional system of forces forming an equilibrium, a view that Weber warned for (Pope et al., 1975, p 418). The causes and explanations of the outcomes in society are oppositely approached by Durkheim and Weber. While Weber, thus, looked at individual choice and responsibility, Durkheim looked for the social causes of events. Durkheim rejected the use of individual states because he thought that they were a direct product of social causes (Pope et al., 1975, p. 418-

419). He thus believed that looking at individual states to explain social states would be reversed causality.

While Durkheim and Weber, thus, worked in the same field, they preached for entirely different directions for the future of sociology. In the next subchapter, Weber's individualistic approach to sociologic research will be explored. Furthermore, it will explain why Weber strongly disagreed with the objections of Durkheim in relation to individuality.

3.2: Sociological explanations and methodological individualism

According to Weber, to gain knowledge of society, we must gain access to the elementary units of that society. These elementary units are the aims of all the relations that exist within that society. The task of sociology here is reducing the categories of human interactions to 'understandable action'. This way, sociology can create an interpretative 'understanding' of social action and thus come to causal explanations of the directions and consequences of social actions (Tucker, 1965, p. 157).

Understanding (*verstehen*) can mean two different things for Weber. Firstly, understanding can be the direct comprehension of actions. For example, when we see a football player kick a ball away, we understand the direct meaning of such an action. Understanding can, however, also mean explanatory understanding (*erklärendes verstehen*). In explanatory understanding, we comprehend the motives behind the action (Bulle, 2024, p. 83). Motives are a set of subjective meanings that seem a meaningful 'reason for the actor or the observer' (Bulle, 2024, p. 85). So, for the football player, we can understand that they are kicking the ball in a certain direction to score and thereby support their career in football, or they might be kicking the ball to clear their minds from other things going on in their life.

To reduce human interaction to 'understandable action', it is thus necessary to look at the individual. Weber claims that the individual is the only unit which can possibly perform meaningful conduct. The acts of larger units like organisations, states, and businesses are always reducible to 'understandable actions', which are thus the actions of individuals (Tucker, 1965, p. 159). However, these individual acts can only be analysed and interpreted if one considers the 'nature of the situation' in which it occurs. For example, if you would observe a human being jumping, screaming, and making hand gestures, one might expect this person to be furious and

upset. When one considers that this individual is standing around a field of grass with hundreds of other individuals that act similarly surrounding them, one might conclude that the observed individual is simply cheering on his favourite sports team.

Furthermore, Weber argues that the social sciences should not just be concerned with explanations through natural processes. Contrary to the natural sciences, the social sciences had the unique opportunity to unravel and understand intentions of the actions of individuals. We cannot ask the stars why they behave the way they do, but we can ask humans. The natural sciences, which are based upon empirical laws, lack in their ability of causal interpretation. Through the understanding of individual action, the social sciences have the opportunity to flourish in causal interpretation. However, this ‘methodological individualism’ lacks in empirical validity (Bulle, 2024, p. 17-18). Therefore, Weber argues that methodological individualism, while being highly relevant, is not sufficient for the entire practices of the social sciences.

This is thus a major disagreement with Durkheim, who saw such units as a major threat to the social sciences. Durkheim believed that scientific research could not be based upon the intents of individuals because the goals of the individual can vary for the same behaviour. The goal of the individual cannot be observed by witnessing the action. Even if one would ask the individual for the motives behind their action, one cannot be sure whether they speak the truth. Weber, disagreeing with Durkheim, claimed the opposite. He argues that behaviours meaningfully and understandably change when intentions change (Pope et al., 1975, p. 419). These behaviours, in its turn, determine the outcomes in society. The struggle for dominance of the ideals and material interests of the autonomous individuals that make up society, determines the state of society.

3.3 Social action

As seen in the previous section, the individual is the only unit capable of performing meaningful action. These actions are defined as behaviour to which the acting individual attaches subjective meaning (Cohen et al., 1975, p. 231). Subjective rationality is a trait that is found naturally in all individuals and is a quality of subjective mental processes in two contexts. Firstly, the capacity to understand the world that appears to them, and secondly the ability to use their rationality as a source for the actions the desire to perform (Levine, 1981, p. 11). By using this rationality and setting themselves in relation to others in different social and cultural contexts, the individual gives content and meaning to reality (Ekström, 1992, p.110.)

As a sociologist, Weber mainly focused on a specific type of meaningful action, social action. Social action is behaviour that is directed by the past, present or future behaviour of others. However, not all interactions between individuals are social actions. The action must be performed meaningfully towards another in order to qualify as a social action (Bulle, 2024, p. 94). For example, if two individuals bump into one another accidentally on the pavement, there is no meaningful action involved and is therefore merely an event.

Weber regarded social action as an inherent trait of human action. Although they depend on historical and cultural factors, they are inherently present in all human beings. Even primitive humans could exhibit all four types of action during their everyday life (Kalberg, 1980, p. 1148). Weber divides social action into four distinct categories. These four categories are affectual, traditional, value-rational, and instrumentally-rational action. In the next paragraphs, the four types of social action will be briefly explained.

Affectual actions are generally of a reactive nature in response to external stimuli. They also often come close to what would be considered non-meaningful action (Bulle, 2024, p. 96). Affectual action is a response triggered by current events and circumstances. It is often an emotional outing that is put into motion by the current events and emotional states that an individual experiences. It can be ambiguous whether the action is 'meaningful' in the Weberian sense. The action becomes meaningful if meaning is given to the action by the individual. For example, an individual can wink their eye because there is some debris in it, or they can be winking because they are signalling their lover. It is thus the individual that determines whether the action is meaningful.

Traditional actions are similar to affectual actions in the sense that they are also of a reactive nature. Like affectual actions, traditional actions are a response to the world around the individual. Furthermore, traditional actions can also come close to being considered non-meaningful (Bulle, 2024, p. 96). This is because the action is often meaningless for the individual itself but are meaningful in a social sense. These actions are generally put into motion by customs and traditions of the society in which the individual operates. Traditional actions are guided by habitual stimuli that bring about behaviour that has been practised many times before (Cohen et al., 1975, p. 232)

In value-rational actions the meaning the subject gives to the action lies within the action itself rather than in the outcome of the action. In this respect it is similar to affectional actions. However, while affectional actions are an emotional reaction, value-rational actions are made from a place of duty, morality, discipline, and self-obligations. They are actions where the individual believes it is bounded by their system of beliefs to act in a certain way (Bulle, 2024, p. 96). An example of value-rational behaviour is giving soup to homeless people because one's religion or morality tells them to help the poor.

Lastly, Weber distinguishes instrumentally-rational action. In instrumentally-rational action the individual weighs means, ends, and secondary consequences to make a decision (Bulle, 2024, p. 97). The expectations of the behaviour of objects and other people are evaluated in all the possible outcomes of the decision. The individual then decides which outcome is preferred the most and bases their decision on that preferred outcome. An example of instrumentally-rational action is choosing the subject of your study while considering all the probable outcomes of that choice. Outcomes like future salary, enjoyment of the study itself, and the distance one must travel to come to class.

It must be said that most actions people make in their daily lives are not a pure form of either of the categories listed above. Most actions are a mixture of two or more categories. For example, while making an instrumentally-rational decision, value-rational or affectual ends or consequences can play a role. In the example of the study choice, the correspondence that the values that the university exhibits have with your own values can play a role in that decision. Furthermore, these categories are not a full set of all possible types of action but represent a set of pure types of action that are useful for sociological analysis (Bulle, 2024, p. 97).

An important part of the life of a Weberian individual consists in its social relations. A social relationship is, in the Weberian sense, mutually adjusted and meaningful behaviour of two or more individuals. The actions of each of the actors have a mutual orientation to the actions of the others. This mutual orientation can be a lot of things: friendship, conflict, love, or economic exchanges are some of the many examples possible. The subjective meaning of the relationship does not have to be the same to all actors. Social relationships are thus not necessarily reciprocal. Without reciprocity, it remains a social relationship because one actor assumes or expects certain behaviour of the other and bases their actions on those expectations (Mucha, 2007, p. 123-124).

In all types of social action and relationships, power plays a significant role. According to Weber, individuals struggle for the satisfaction of their personal interests. These struggles give rise to structures of domination. Weber believed that all social spheres are greatly influenced by these structures of domination (Cohen et al., 1975, p. 237). Weber argues that individuals with power do not act based on the interest of the collective it has power over, but out of their own personal interests. Although sometimes individuals with power might act in accordance with the interests of the collective, Weber views this as a mere coincidence of the interests of the collective corresponding with the interests of the individual which holds power (Cohen et al., 1975, p. 238).

3.4 Weber's individualism and connection to individualistic traditions

Weber thus claims that the individual is the only unit that is capable of performing meaningful action. All large structures that exist in society are an aggregation of exactly that: individual action. The (social) actions that those individuals perform are often based on their subjective rationality. For Weber, it is thus the individuals, their actions and relationships that shape our society.

At first glance, one might think that the focus on the importance of the individual in the formation of society fits neatly into the individualistic tradition of the United States of America. In fact, some have even called Weber "the last great liberal of modern times" (Levine, 1981, p. 15). As we have seen in the first chapter, the USA tradition praises the freedom and the rationality of the individual to construct the best society possible. It believes that the capitalist free market framework nurtures individual ability and lays foundations for society to bloom.

However, it would be wrong to assume that Weber's individualism supports a design of government and society like in the USA because Weber's individualism is methodological. Even if one would link Weber's ideas to societal designs, there are signs that Weber himself feared increasing the individual rationality in modern societies would rather hinder than help society and its individuals to prosper. Weber argued that western societies had changed its course from progress through self-liberation to enslavement through rationalisation (Levine, 1981, p. 9). Regarding industrialised capitalist societies he stated the following: "The technical and economic conditions of machine production (...) today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism (...) with irresistible force" (Weber, 1930, p. 181).

Weber thus did not believe that modern capitalist societies would lead to more freedom, quite the opposite. He believed that the process of rationalization in the modern bureaucratic state restricts the possibility of differentiated individual behaviour (Levine, 1981, p. 15-16)

In that sense, there are clearly parallels between Weber's views of the effects individuality and rationalisation have on society, and the French tradition on individualism. As we have seen in the first chapter, many French writers on individualisation of society feared that it would cause the crumbling of society and the corruption of the people. For Weber, it seems however, that it is not individuality that is a threat to civilization, but the type of rationalisation that modern society offers to individuals. Individual thought and action are part of human nature for Weber. However, instead of differentiation of individual action, modern "individualised" capitalist society lead to convergence of individual action as individuals are trapped in a system of a single rationality. It seems ironic that the characteristics of being trapped in such a system (obedience, order, unity) are similar to the societal characteristics the writers in the French tradition wanted to shield from individualism.

Chapter 4: Comparison and conclusion

We have now explained two distinct views on individualism. Furthermore, we have analysed them in the scope of broader individualism and three different traditions of individualism. Both Sartre and Weber have had an important contribution to individualism as a whole. We have seen that Sartre mainly focuses on what individuality of one's consciousness and the radical freedom that it produces means for individuals and the responsibility they carry. Weber, on the other hand, focuses his individualism on methodology and what one can learn from individuality. He teaches how the actions of individuals construct society and how social action is the most important part of that construction process.

A similarity that immediately comes up when comparing Sartre and Weber is the importance of the consciousness in Sartre and the subjective rationality in Weber. Both authors give great importance to the conscious dimension of individual behaviour in the fabrication of reality. As we have seen in chapter two, Sartre argues that human consciousness is responsible for shaping the world as-it-is with meaning, and that without human consciousness there would be no meaning. Through negation the Sartrean individual constantly gives meaning to both the self and the external world around the self. This is where the individual finds their freedom and their responsibility.

When it comes to shaping the world around the self, Weber seems to have a similar view to Sartre. Like Sartre, Weber argues that it is the individuals that give meaning to the world. In fact, he argues that individuals are the only unit that can perform meaningful action. The Weberian individual rationally understands the world and then acts in correspondence with their preferences. By doing so, the individual gives meaning and content to reality. Furthermore, both Sartre and Weber recognise that giving meaning to the world around the individual, through rationality and understanding, is an inherent trait of humans.

As Weber's individualism is methodological, it is less interested in how subjective rationality shapes the self. However, one could argue that a Weberian individual can overcome determination by biology, culture, and tradition through meaningful action. Acting in 'bad faith' has similarities to affectual and traditional action. In 'bad faith' the individual acts without reference to the underlying consciousness. Similarly, in affectual and traditional action the

individual can act without reference to their consciousness and rationality. However, Sartre argues that the individual should refrain from acting without reference to the underlying consciousness. For Weber acting in 'bad faith' is not a possibility as the individual acts instrumentally to satisfy their preferences. So, the individualism of Weber does thus not focus on good and bad, or authentic and inauthentic. It has more to do with how the action itself has come into existence than it has with the choice the individual has to act in a certain way.

Furthermore, there is an obvious difference between Sartre and Weber when it comes to how the individual relates to others while shaping reality. In Sartre, the other is an obstacle that the individual must overcome. The other is a threat to their very consciousness as they reduce the self to merely an object and robs the individual of their freedom. The very nature of the relationship between the self and the other is antagonistic in Sartre's individualism. This antagonistic prevents creating a society in which resources are accumulated and allocated towards self-realisation.

Weber's view on the relationship between different individuals is very different. The nature of the relationship between individuals seems to be one of coexistence rather than antagonism, although Weber does not seem to give a value judgment to this relationship. He claims that actions directed towards the behaviour of others are 'meaningful'. In fact, social actions are very much highlighted in Weber's individualism and are an extremely important part of human action. In this social action, individuals make decisions based on their preferences. Although the subjective meaning of the relationship does not have to be equal to all actors, the actions of all actors in the social relationship are mutually adjusted. For the Weberian individual, acting is constantly connected to social relationships. So contrary to the Sartrean individual, others can be a stepping stone towards self-realisation and creating a world around them which they desire, rather than an obstacle.

This thesis has attempted to analyse and compare the individualism of both Sartre and Weber. While Sartre's individualism teaches us mostly about what individuality means for the individual itself and Weber's individualism mostly teaches us about how individuality is important for scientific knowledge and understanding society, we have found some interesting similarities and differences between the two. Firstly, we have seen that both Sartre and Weber give significant importance to the consciousness of the individual in giving meaning to and shaping reality.

Secondly, we have seen how the relation to the self in Sartre and Weber is both similar and different. The authors recognise that individuals can act both with and without reference to the consciousness. However, while Sartre advises against acting without reference to consciousness in order to act authentically, Weber only explains that such actions are possible and how they shape society. Another major difference we have found in this thesis lays in the relationship between the individual and others. The other has a constant negative connotation and prevents the other from self-determination in the work of Sartre, while Weber refrains for such value judgment and describes how social interaction between individuals give meaning and content to society.

Furthermore, this thesis has attempted to show how the individualism of both Sartre and Weber compares to different western traditions on individualism. We have seen that it is problematic to link both Sartre's and Weber's individualism to the political individualistic tradition of the United States of America. For Sartre, we have seen that he breaks the French tradition of negative connotation on individualism, and that there are some parallels with the German tradition as they both find value in solitude and the freedom that individualism provides. For Weber, we have seen that there are some parallels with the French tradition, as both recognise that individuality can lead to problems for a stable society. The difference is, however, that in the French tradition it is individuality itself that poses a threat to society. For Weber, it is the type of rationalisation that is offered to individuals by modern society. Modern 'individualised' capitalism leads to the convergence of individual action leading to a single system of rationality which obstructs differentiation of individual action.

To further understand the parallels between Sartre and Weber in the future, research could compare both views on freedom. This thesis has barely touched on Weber's views on freedom because Weber himself never made a precise exposition of his conception of freedom. However, as Palonen (1999, p. 523) shows, it is possible to conceptualise Weber's ideas of freedom through Weber's different mentions of freedom and connecting them. Secondly, further research might shed light upon how the views of Sartre and Weber compare to non-western traditions of individualism. Both Weber and Sartre were greatly influenced by the traditions in which they operated. It would be interesting to discover whether there are similarities between their ideas on individualism and the individualism found in cultures vastly different from their own.

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