Sartre

SEBASTIAN GARDNER

Sartre's claim to have founded a humanistic ethics of freedom has met with considerable opposition.[1] Though viewed sympathetically by a small minority of commentators,[2] the majority verdict has been that Sartre's ethical rhetoric, his assertion of human freedom as a supreme value, deflates on examination and leaves behind a radical subjectivism indistinguishable from moral nihilism. On the standard construal, Sartre allows nothing to figure as a ground of value save the individual's bare consciousness of their own power of self-determination, and in consequence the Sartrean subject is required to make a rationally ungrounded choice in favour of some or other arbitrary value, commitment to which is unconditional yet can be maintained only through sheer force of will.[3] Sartre may then be regarded as exemplary of the predicament of late modern ethics, committed to the infinite value of the individual but without any theological or other supporting context for this

---

[1] I do not follow any strict systematic distinction in my usage of "ethical" and "moral," but generally intend the former to have broader scope and the latter to refer to ethical values that have taken determinate imperatival shape.

[2] Typically these commentators are sensitive to Sartre's continuity with Kant: see esp. Baiasu 2011. For further general discussion of Sartre's ethics, see Anderson 1979 and 1993, Baldwin 1986, Bell 1989, Detmer 1988, Flynn 1984, McBride 1991, chs. 1–2, Poellner 2012, and Simont 1992.

[3] Exemplifying this assessment, in the earliest anglophone literature on Sartre, see Alfred Stern's short and straightforward discussion in Stern 1953, chs. 10–11; Stern's association of Sartre with Nietzsche is characteristic. Alvin Plantinga gives the standard grounds for dissatisfaction with Sartre's ethical claims in Plantinga 1958: 245–50. While analytic philosophers have been prominent in attacking Sartre's ethics, commentators in this camp share a variety of orientations and can be found in Sartre's earliest reception: see, e.g., Marcel 1948 and Lefebvre 2003, both from 1946.

doctrine,[4] or alternatively, as an object-lesson in the impossibility of upholding a broadly Kantian view of the centrality of individual freedom to morality without the accompanying apparatus of Kant's pure practical reason and metaphysics of the intelligible.

If this judgement is correct, then a cruel irony afflicts Sartre's philosophical project as a whole, which aims precisely to steer phenomenology in an ethical direction. From his earliest writings, which broach particular topics in theoretical philosophy on account of their perceived practical implications,[5] Sartre regarded philosophical enquiry as addressing the question of how one should lead one's life, paralleling his treatment in literature of the vicissitudes of human aspiration.

Various circumstantial facts help to explain the predominantly negative reception of Sartre's ethics, above all, the absence of any single published text in which his position receives the kind of detailed exposition and defence with which the phenomenological ontology of *Being and Nothingness* is equipped.[6] The chief obstacle to a correct appreciation of Sartre's contribution to moral thought, however, lies in the failure to recognize the nature of the strategy he employs, which is of a kind not currently favoured or even regarded as viable.

---

[4] See MacIntyre 1981, ch. 3. MacIntyre's approach to Sartre from the standpoint of analytic meta-ethics is representative of much earlier commentary; see, e.g., Danto 1975, ch. 5.

[5] See *The Transcendence of the Ego* (*TE*), Conclusion; *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (Sartre 1971), *passim*, and *The Imaginary* (Sartre 2004a), ch. 4. Abbreviations are explained at the end of the chapter.

[6] The chief writings of Sartre's relevant to his ethical theory are as follows. The key sections in *Being and Nothingness* (*BN*) are the treatment of value in Part 2, Chapter 1, Section III (*BN* 84–95), and Section II of the Conclusion, on "ethical implications" (*BN* 625–8). Sartre's main published statement of his ethics is – *faute de mieux*, since it was intended only as a synoptic reply to critics – the short and widely read *Existentialism is a Humanism* (*EH*), a lecture from 1945. Simone de Beauvoir's *Pyrrhus and Cineas* (2004), ch. 3, pp. 77–150, and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1996) may be regarded, up to a point, as an amplified statement of Sartre's ethical outlook at this period. So too may Jeanson 1980, which has Sartre's own stamp of approval: see Part 3, Chapter 3, "Moral Perspectives." The subsequent development of Sartre's ideas on ethics can be followed in the posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics* (*NE*) from 1947–1948. All of this comprises what has come to be known as Sartre's "first ethics." The "second ethics," in which Sartre affirms ethical consciousness as a force within history, belongs to the period 1962–1965. Concerning the unpublished material which comprises it, see Stone and Bowman 1986 and 1991. A short extract from Sartre's Rome lecture notes is translated as "Determinism and Freedom."

Sartre's ethics are grounded in a theoretical, indeed a metaphysical account, not simply of human beings but of Being as such and in general. These metaphysics are moreover highly revisionary, and fiercely anti-naturalistic.

Even before the virtues of those metaphysics are considered, this will hardly recommend Sartre to contemporary moral philosophers. In response it may be pointed out that Sartre does not stand alone: two other modern thinkers have, like Sartre, supposed that what is essential to ethical thinking is an unobscured perception of the nature of reality and appreciation of its highly uncommonsensical character, namely Spinoza and Schopenhauer.[7] But in any case, and this is the crucial point, if we want to understand what Sartre is attempting to do, then it is necessary that we understand his argument in these terms.

Sartre's ethical theory may be viewed as a drama in three acts. As will be seen, the analogy is appropriate, for narrative structure is integral to the way that Sartre understands moral epistemology. The first act clears the ground, dispelling illusion but leaving the individual in a contradictory situation, subject to both the necessity, and the apparent impossibility, of positing value. The second shows that the affirmation of human freedom provides the unique means of exiting from these contradictory demands. The third, which presented Sartre with the greatest difficulty and occupied the bulk of his attention after 1945, concerns the task of translating the affirmation of freedom into concrete practical terms in our actual social and historical situation.

PURGATION: METAPHYSICAL INSIGHT

The phenomenological ontology of *Being and Nothingness* rules out directly various longstanding and widely endorsed conceptions of morality and moral knowledge. Two metaphysical claims above all are decisive for Sartre's rejection of a swathe of familiar positions, including hedonistic consequentialism, sentimentalist accounts such as Hume's, and all forms of moral realism: first, the impossibility of given reality's containing any ground for value; second, the impossibility of the self's containing any determinate content capable of sustaining value in a way that withstands critical examination.

Sartre holds that consciousness involves, at the most fundamental level and as a condition for its existence, the setting into opposition of two utterly

---

[7] Heidegger is also a contender for inclusion, though uncertainty surrounds his endorsement of the notion of moral value.

heterogeneous forms of being, which he famously calls being-for-itself and being-in-itself, the latter characterized negatively by its indifference to all of the features which are constitutive of the for-itself, including normativity and end-directedness. A phenomenological-style transcendental argument is offered for this thesis, the implication of which is that whatever features of the world figure objectually in consciousness as having an evaluative or normative character must be traced back to the subject. Sartre has thus taken seriously the Kantian lesson that moral theory cannot begin with supposed apprehensions, whether empirical perceptions or rational intuitions, of the Good.[8] It is noteworthy that Sartre, following Max Scheler and going beyond Kant, accepts nonetheless that our phenomenology is axiologically rich, saturated with normativity;[9] the question is what exactly within subjectivity provides its source. And once Sartre's full analysis of the structures of subjectivity – which occupies Part 2 of *Being and Nothingness* – has been completed, we are brought to recognize that the ground of the subject's apprehension of value can only be *choice*, more precisely, the reflexive, self-chosen and self-constituting *project* of the individual for-itself, which stands above all efficient causality, natural or supernatural.

It may be asked what justifies the transition from a *subjective* ground for value, a weak claim that many modern ethical theories would of course accept, to its identification with *choice*, construed in Sartre's transcendental, non-naturalistic manner. Here Sartre's second claim is crucial. Application of Sartre's dualist ontological insight to ourselves yields the radical result that any conceptualization of our minds or personalities which involves a commitment to the existence of abiding and efficacious mental entities, conceived as existing objectively beyond or outside acts of consciousness, is guilty of hypostatization. The mind, Sartre argues, can have no intentional, representational or qualitative "content," and can enjoy no "states" or "dispositions." Sartre does not doubt that we, in our ordinary experience of the world, accord reality to such entities – they are not mere philosophical fictions or inventions of psychological science, nor are they confined to the third-person standpoint. Philosophy and psychology may aggravate our tendency to postulate such entities, but they have their ultimate source in introspection, as ordinarily understood, in the reflective endeavour to grasp how one truly is, to *know* what one truly feels, thinks, desires, etc. There is, therefore, an entire ontological

---

[8] The Good, or value, is not what *has being* but what is *beyond being* and yet *has-to-be*, through *us*: see *BN* 38 and *NE* 555–7.

[9] E.g. *TE* 19, and *BN* 38–9.

stratum affirmed in the common-sense image of the world – "the psychic" or "Psyche," as it is termed in *Being and Nothingness* – which Sartre relegates to a species of fiction.[10] This fiction is not arbitrary but necessitated by the original teleology of the for-itself, its "fundamental project," which is to become in-itself-for-itself or *causa sui*, to exist as a self-grounding entity, in which freedom and nature are one. This unachievable end is served originally by degrading consciousness to the immobile condition of the psychic. Such metaphysically false self-representation is mobilized in the primary forms of bad faith, where the human subject loses itself in images of congealed selfhood, binding itself practically by means of a fictive self-identity, disavowing its freedom and approximating, in its experience and understanding of itself, to being-in-itself.

The implications of Sartre's revisionary metaphysics of mind for ethical theory are plain. If none of the qualities standardly attributed to persons and appealed to in action explanation – states of belief, desire, and emotion; character traits and qualities of personality – can be accorded reality, then the dispositions in terms of which virtue theory understands morality, and the affective cum conative states that provide the foundation for anti-realist and other Humean meta-ethical outlooks, are swept away.[11]

CONVERSION: AFFIRMATION OF FREEDOM

Fundamental though it may be, Sartre believes that it is possible, in a complex and qualified sense, to suspend the original project of seeking assimilation to the in-itself, and that the rational development of the for-itself – as it cycles through the various forms of bad faith and becomes aware of their futility – requires this "radical conversion." In what Sartre calls "pure," "purifying," or "nonaccessory" reflection, the subject repudiates the fictive substratum of the "psychic" and withdraws their commitment to whatever concrete projects sub-serve the fundamental project.[12]

---

[10] *BN* 158–70.   [11] See *EH* 32–3.

[12] Radical conversion involves, as it may be put, recognition of the impossibility of happiness. It is referred to in *BN* 412, 464, 475–6, and throughout the *Notebooks*, e.g., *NE* 49, 102, 281, 406–7, 471–84, 506–7. Sartre describes it succinctly at *NE* 470: "Conversion: nonaccessory reflection. Its motive: the impossibility of recovering oneself. The meaning of conversion: rejection of alienation." Concerning pure reflection, see *BN* 155, 158–60, 199, and *NE* 12, 473–82, 560; the idea is first formulated in *TE* 28, in connection with Husserl's *epochê*. Authenticity figures in *BN* almost exclusively as a category of Heidegger's and is employed only once by Sartre

The initial result of this suspension is not extinction of the drive to attain the condition of being-in-itself-for-itself[13] but merely a dissociation from it sufficient to shake its absolute hold over us. Nor is it simple cessation of will. Sartre gives in *Being and Nothingness* a transcendental account of the possibility of value from which it follows that value is constitutive of both self-consciousness and our very being-in-the-world – it is what precipitates consciousness' transcendence of itself out into the world and gives it an orientation towards the future, allowing the cogito to escape mere instantaneity.[14] Since our essential mode of being is teleological, the resignation recommended by Schopenhauer as the route to salvation is not genuinely thinkable.

The imperative to locate value thus remains in force, and if we now ask what way forward is available for the enlightened Sartrean subject, it is clear that identification with some contingent desire, entity, or ideal – patriotism, the Church, the Party – is not an intelligible option, any more than, for Kant, pure practical reason can resolve itself into inclination. Nothing that merely happens to be in the world, or that I happen to locate in my psyche, can exert authority at the transcendental level.

Because the necessity of valuing does not entail logically the availability of rationally acceptable values, thus far it remains possible that the Sartrean subject will grind to a halt, its practical and theoretical aspects at odds with one another. But as should be evident from the way in which Sartre has structured the development of the for-itself – as an axiological *via negativa* – there is one remaining candidate, namely human freedom itself, and once its candidacy is recognized, affirmation of freedom cannot fail to follow.[15] Here it is crucial to recognize that when freedom advances to occupy the vacant axiological spot, no discursive justification – no conceptual linkage of freedom with the Good – is either offered by Sartre, or needed: affirmation of freedom proceeds directly from grasping correctly one's metaphysical nature

---

himself (at *BN* 70, where it is defined as the self-recovery of corrupted being), but becomes part of Sartre's own philosophical vocabulary in *Existentialism is a Humanism* and the *Notebooks* (see, e.g., *NE* 474–82).

[13] *NE* 37: "The converted man cannot suppress the pursuit of Being through conversion." See also *NE* 473.

[14] See *BN* 84–95.

[15] Recognition of the necessity of *affirming* freedom is barely distinct, if at all, from insight into its *necessity*, i.e. our being "condemned" to be free, a constant refrain in Sartre's writings.

and situation.[16] This reflexive turn gives the for-itself a kind of formal completeness, something akin to the self-coincidence of the in-itself which it has renounced, yet is not undertaken for that reason: the negative motive, of escaping the contradiction of having to value and yet finding everything but freedom ineligible, suffices to force through the affirmation of freedom.[17]

The passages in which Sartre may appear most candidly subjectivist[18] should therefore not be read as meta-ethical analyses, as if Sartre were clumsily attempting to formulate the doctrines of emotivism or prescriptivism, nor as implying that Sartre supposes values to be chosen in the ordinary sense of a choice of furniture coverings. Sartre's concern, when he talks of the "unjustifiability" of commitments, is to correct the *mode* of our consciousness of value in such a way that the sustaining role of our freedom in axiological consciousness becomes phenomenologically manifest: Sartre seeks to modify the *way in which* we hold values, in order that it should display correctly, make visible, their only possible motivation. It is helpful to regard Sartre in Kantian terms as asserting the *transcendental ideality* of value *per se, contra* the tendency of natural consciousness to handle values in reflection as if they had transcendental reality, the "spirit of seriousness,"[19] as Sartre calls it; Sartre considers that this transcendental ideality must be explicit in the phenomenology of valuing.[20]

It may seem that further work needs to be done if Sartre is to arrive at an ethical destination: commitment to the value of *my* freedom must be shown

---

[16] Strictly, in so far as the "grasping" is no mere theoretical cognition, the two are identical. The ontological novelty which is involved in *affirming* freedom, as opposed to simply *being* free and knowing oneself as such in a merely abstract discursive manner, consists in the appearance of a new *demand*, freedom having become the object of reflective thetic consciousness (see *BN* 94–5). In Hegelian terms, freedom has become "conscious of itself." Sartre makes it very clear that this presupposes metaphysical insight at the deepest level: "the original structure of authentic existence [. . .] is indissolvably linked to the consciousness of Being as a fixed explosion" (*NE* 493–4).

[17] Grounding ethics directly on metaphysical facts, without intervening justificatory practical argumentation, is the explicit strategy of Schopenhauer's *On the Basis of Morality*, and implicitly that of Spinoza in Part 4 of the *Ethics*.

[18] E.g., *BN* 464–5.   [19] *BN* 626.

[20] Sartre in one place suggests that the tendency to reify values – to regard them as transcendentally real – derives not originally from the hypostatizing motive of the fundamental project, but from the fact that their origin lies in *pre*-reflective consciousness, which can only posit values out in the world, in objectual form: see *NE* 559. The fundamental project merely ratifies this transcendental illusion of the natural attitude.

to lead to affirmation of the *other*'s freedom. But again it would be a mistake to regard this as a logical gulf which needs to be bridged by argumentative means, for once again we find that the negative work of purgation has covered the distance. The purged for-itself's self-conception is in an important sense non-egoistic. Each (purged) for-itself grasps itself under that universal and grasps its own freedom as indiscriminable from that of every other individual for-itself. While certainly for Sartre being-for-itself is *individuated* – the subject is not a self-less or impersonal consciousness; being-for-itself takes necessarily the reflexive form of an *ipseity*[21] – the subject who has emancipated herself fully from the aim of becoming *causa sui* is left with no purchase on their individuality relevant to the positing of value: "self-interest" has for them, at the transcendental level at which axiological reflection is here proceeding, no special claim to attention.[22] Thus no affirmation of my freedom in *opposition* to that of other for-itselfs makes sense. This explains also Sartre's repeated claim that in choosing for myself I choose for all men.[23]

What it is to pursue this task of affirming freedom in a universal form has yet to be determined, but two points need attention if affirmation of freedom is to be ethically meaningful.

No positive contentful account of freedom, on a par with Kant's identification of freedom with autonomy and hence with morality, is given by Sartre. Sartre's clearly stated view is that no analysis of or even conceptual approximation to freedom is possible: freedom has no inner constitution or essence which philosophical reflection might determine; not even freedom of will provides its correct conceptualization.[24] The blankness of Sartrean freedom fosters the suspicion that affirmation of the other's freedom is incapable of bearing practical implications, and that any claim to that effect will involve a surreptitious exchange of the ontological freedom of the for-itself, which is all that has been in question hitherto, for freedom in some more empirically determinate sense.[25] The point that needs to be made in response is that all

---

[21] *BN* 102–5.

[22] The plane of reflection here is "beyond egoism and altruism" (*BN* 626). See Sartre's repudiation of the theory of *amour propre* in *TE* 17–20.

[23] Whereby freedom is converted directly into responsibility; see *BN* 553–6, *EH* 23–5, 44–5, and *NE* 107, 248, 250, 493. Regarding the universality claim, see "Existentialism: A Clarification" (Sartre 2013), p. 89, *EH* 24, 43–5, *NE* 557, and "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal" (*KSU*), pp. 424–5.

[24] *BN* 24–45, and Part 4, Chapter 1, Section I (*BN* 433–81).

[25] Sartre distinguishes freedom in such a sense, and makes clear that it is not what is at issue, at *BN* 483.

that is required for the ethical project to be launched is that we should know freedom negatively, in terms of its opposition to the mode of being of the in-itself: it is enough that we can recognize cases where it is negated. The contentlessness of Sartrean freedom is not just the source of its privileged status but also integral to its axiological role at this initial level of ethical thinking: the primary expression of the ethical is *resistance* to the temptation of bad faith, which entails resistance to incursions of the fundamental project in one's relation to others. Once this basis has been laid, the material and other factical dimensions of human reality can be brought into view and the concrete demands of freedom extrapolated.[26]

A second point concerns the accessibility of the other's freedom at the level of concrete interaction. Sartre takes a famously pessimistic view of the possibility of interpersonal fulfilment in his discussion of "concrete relations with others" in *Being and Nothingness*, where the dynamics of personal relationships are analyzed in terms of a fixed set of conflictual and self-stultifying strategies. This account of interpersonal desire is grounded in intersubjective awareness, which according to Sartre necessarily *alternates* between consciousness of my freedom and that of the other, and does so in such a way that not only can they not both be co-present to my consciousness, but each can be present only on the basis of a *negation* of the other. This structure intersects with the demands of the fundamental project to yield the projects of love, hate, indifference, and so on. Now, if the other's freedom is something that I must in any concrete context either seek to negate, or that I can affirm only at the expense of my own, then ethical action is no less impossible than the fundamental project. It is consequently vital that Sartre's thesis concerning the mutually repelling character of my freedom and that of the other has only limited scope. Sartre's primary purpose in the section in question is to counter Hegel's "ontological optimism," his claim that the supra-individual logic of interpersonality *necessitates*, independently of choice, accession to relations of mutual recognition. This leaves space, conceptually, for the possibility of mutual recognition of freedom on some other basis, and here Sartre is able to reinvoke his concept of purifying reflection: just as, in the intra-subjective context, in order to resist the temptation of bad faith, I am required, and able, to hold my transcendence

---

[26] This involves reworking critically the familiar categories of ethical theory. Sartre does this in the *Notebooks*: see, e.g., the treatment of rights, justice, and charity in *NE* 137–41.

and my facticity in equilibrium,[27] so similarly, in the intersubjective context, I am able to cognize the other's freedom as coexistent with my own. Interpersonal pathology, the "Hell of passions,"[28] may be the original but it is not the final form of intersubjectivity.[29]

The freedom of the other is thus a possible object of my will. The question then arises whether Sartre wishes also to conceive it in stronger terms, as either the fulfilment (as some sort of extension or deepening) of my freedom, or as in any sense a condition for it. Sartre's texts do affirm a deep interconnection of individuals' freedom,[30] but on the fundamental issue Sartre remains opposed to Hegel: the individual's freedom, like their self-consciousness, is ontologically independent of the other, not created or constituted by it,[31] and the prospective gains of reciprocal freedom, whatever they may be, are not part of the primary motivation for affirming freedom; the other's willing my freedom is not a condition of my *being* free. What is true is that the other's relation to my freedom – whether they too affirm it, or remain caught in the fundamental project – plays an essential role in determining how far I can get with the ethical task of *willing* freedom for its own sake, of *realizing* freedom as a universal value: the imperative of the converted subject is to render human reality transparent to freedom, to inhabit a world irradiated by it, and in that regard the freedom of each is indeed conditional on that of the other.[32] As will be seen shortly, the implications of this point are far-reaching.

What we have just seen is Sartre's core argument for the value of freedom, which he supplements and elaborates in several ways. Two of the most important are Sartre's introduction of the auxiliary motive of solidarity, and his notion of a shared project of unveiling being. The former urges us to as it were unite in light of our common human condition and in face of

---

[27] Facticity and transcendence "are and ought to be capable of a valid coordination" (*BN* 56). The intersubjective analogue of good faith is described at *NE* 468: a "perpetual tension" which takes account of both freedoms.

[28] *NE* 499.

[29] Sartre explains what it is for intersubjectivity to have a mutually recognitive character in *NE* 499–508; here he introduces the concept of authentic love. His later account of reciprocity, in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre 1982), pp. 209–15, involves a change of view: Sartre now regards a mediating third element – roughly: materiality as it relates to some praxis – as a condition of mutual recognition.

[30] See *EH* 48–9, and *What is Literature?* (*WL*), ch. 1, concerning the interaction of writer and reader.

[31] *BN* 239.

[32] Dependence on the freedom of the other is emphasized by de Beauvoir in 2004, Part 2, and 1996: 67–72.

---

our common enemy – the fate we share of being condemned to exist teleologically in a reality indifferent to teleology, as if enduring a cosmic punishment, and to always feel the magnetic pull of the fundamental project, this ineradicable disposition inhabiting us like original sin.[33] The pathos of Sartre's vision is thus complex – tragic, adversarial, Augustinian, Promethean – and forms a vital component of his ethical outlook.[34]

The latter reworks a theme from Heidegger. Sartre affirms, as a subaltern end to that of freedom, that the for-itself must understand itself as committed to the project of "illuminating" – revealing, disclosing – being, and that this is necessarily a shared human endeavour. The project of illuminating being comprises cognition and praxis, is extended through history, and involves intersubjective norms; it presupposes a stance of epistemic generosity and implies a commitment to the value of truthfulness.[35]

DECISION: THE PROBLEM OF REALIZING FREEDOM IN ACTION

To affirm freedom as value – since this is in itself no merely cognitive act, value having the *exigent* character of a demand and not the given character of an object[36] – can have no other meaning than to *act* in ways that express (realize, embody) that value. The difficulty is to determine which acts satisfy this description. It is here that the problems of ethical life begin, and that Sartre diverges most sharply from Kant.

Kant supposes that the conditions for freedom-embodying action are (i) the conformity of its maxim to the formal conditions expressed by the categorical imperative, (ii) the motivational sufficiency of this conformity for the agent. A continuous logical transition from freedom, or pure practical reason, to situationally determinate moral judgements is secured according

---

[33] *NE* 479: "conversion consists in renouncing the category of appropriation, which can govern only those relations of the For-itself with things, in order to introduce into the internal relation of the Person the relation of solidarity, which will subsequently be modified into solidarity with others." Sartre explicates approvingly Kierkegaard's treatment of original sin in *KSU*; on what it encompasses, see *NE* 428.

[34] For a characteristic, purple passage, see the long note in *WL* 23–5.

[35] See in particular *Truth and Existence* (Sartre 1992b), esp. pp. 5–7, 45–8, 64–7. The theme of disclosure of being is emphasized by de Beauvoir in 1996, ch. 1. In the *Notebooks*, the unveiling of being, creation, and generosity or giving comprise a family of inter-related concepts: the for-itself grasps the necessity of reproducing its own gratuitous, quasi-creative relation to being in its relation to others, i.e., in generosity.

[36] *BN* 38.

to Kant by applying the formula(e) of the categorical imperative to whatever empirical content contingently presents itself, i.e., to the facts of inclination and circumstance considered in light of the actual laws of nature.

Sartre stands in line with those, beginning with Hegel, who believe that Kant's procedure is unable to yield determinate practical judgements. In his 1945 lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre recapitulates and endorses Kant's claims concerning the foundational role of freedom, the strictly universal character of moral judgement, the concept of self-legislation, and the ideal of a kingdom of ends,[37] but at the same time argues that the abstract formulae of Kant's categorical imperative fail to provide a sufficient basis for practical decision-making: nothing in them connects adequately with the complexity of a concrete historically conditioned situation.[38]

This is, as just noted, a familiar criticism of Kant. But Sartre also has other (and in his terms deeper) reasons for rejecting Kant's confinement of ethics to formal maxim-determination.

In the first instance, Sartre's attitude to Kant's ethics is critical: abstract moral rules exhibit a fixity and opacity alien to freedom, and in Kantian duty we relate ourselves to an Other, not to ourselves.[39] Again we see that Sartre's objection is not to the *objectivity* of ethics but to the mode in which we take up or "live" the ethical, and specifically to its *objectification* – which has the effect of undercutting the only possible source of its objectivity, viz. freedom. The expulsion of being-in-itself must be carried through with respect to morality itself, that is, morality must present itself and be apprehended in the correct, unmystified form; it must not degenerate into an inert social object, dissociated from the spontaneity of consciousness.[40]

Most importantly, Sartre considers that the good will of the Kantian agent encounters the following difficulty:

---

[37] *EH* 41–53. Sartre also takes over Kant's notion – in his account of the "fact of reason" – that awareness of a categorical imperative indexes the unconditional possibility of action in conformity with it, i.e. of (what Kant would call) transcendental freedom: see "Determinism and Freedom" (*DF*).

[38] *EH* 30–2, 46. Decision-making can therefore only be a matter of judgement, "like constructing a work of art" (*EH* 45–6). The universal validity that our actions lay claim to is, therefore, the Kantian "exemplary necessity" of beautiful objects.

[39] See *DF* 246, 252, and *NE* 469: duty is "a *thing*. Duty is the Other at the heart of my Will. It is the project of my will conceived of as the project of an Other."

[40] In so far as the primary condition of moral agency is an orientation not susceptible to discursive formulation, Sartre comes into contact with the tradition of virtue ethics. Of relevance here is Sartre's focus on generosity: see *NE* 9, 48, 129, 141, 197, 281, 375, 470.

> If the city of ends remains a feeble abstraction, it is because it is not realizable without an objective modification of the historical situation. Kant, I believe, saw this very well, but sometimes he counted on a purely subjective transformation of the moral subject and at other times he despaired of ever meeting a good will on this earth . . . [T]he purely formal intention of treating men as ends . . . reveal[s] itself to be utterly futile in practice since the fundamental structures of our society are still oppressive. Such is the present paradox of ethics; if I am absorbed in treating a few chosen persons as absolute ends, for example, my wife, my son, my friends, the needy person I happen to come across, if I am bent upon fulfilling all my duties toward them, I shall spend my life doing so; I shall be led *to pass over in silence* the injustices of the age, the class struggle, colonialism, Anti-Semitism, etc., and, finally, *to take advantage of oppression in order to do good*. Moreover, the former will be found in person to person relationships and, more subtly, in my very intentions. The good that I try to do will be vitiated at the roots. It will be turned into radical evil.[41]

The Kantian might well retort that Sartre overshoots the mark: if ethics is presently paradoxical, then it is presently impossible, which is an absurdity; the sane conclusion is surely that, however resistant the social world may be to moral endeavour, we can at least strive to possess a good will. This however merely leads to the deeper issue contained in Sartre's remarks on Kant, indicated by Sartre's ominous reference to the presence of oppression "in my very intentions," and developed at great length in the posthumously published manuscripts from 1947–1948, *Notebooks for an Ethics*.

The post-conversion subject faces the task of targeting the freedom of the other across the medium of a world – the world interposes itself between subjects and constitutes the platform of human action; our interaction is not that of intelligible beings in a spirit-world. The problem is that the world of our facticity, which defines our situations and which my good intentions must traverse, is populated by entities which negate freedom. Earlier we said that reflective consciousness posits for itself a fictive mental substratum. In Sartre's full view these posited objects have, notwithstanding the fictiveness which they exhibit when considered transcendentally, *intersubjective reality* (Sartre gives the example: "I do everything possible to '*make Annie love me*', to

---

[41] *WL* 274–5. In *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, Sartre writes: "The ethical 'problem' arises from the fact that Ethics is *for us* inevitable and at the same time impossible. Action must give itself norms in this climate of non-transcendable impossibility" (p. 186n). Adorno picks up the same theme when he asserts that the false life cannot be lived correctly. That this impossibility implies practical contradictions – seeking to treat man as an end, yet being unable to do so – Sartre spells out in *NE* 207.

'endow her with love for me'").[42] These intersubjectively real entities are moreover only the beginning of a social ontology replete with objects antagonistic to freedom, which Sartre in his later writings calls the "practico-inert" and which range from machine tools to language, ritual, and social identities ("the Jew" of anti-Semitism, etc.). What all of these items have in common is an abiding objectivity endowed with normative power that appears to transcend – even though it must have its source in – the consciousness of individuals. The importance for Sartre of the fact that the social world has an aspect of being-in-itself cannot be overstated. Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* represents perhaps the most intensive engagement in the history of philosophy with the transcendental problem of social ontology, that is, the question of how it is possible for a plurality of individuals to give rise to social *things*, trans-personal entities capable of reacting back on individual subjectivity. Whether or not Sartre solves the problem, the *Critique* succeeds at least in displaying the contradictory structure of intersubjective life, its combination of free subjectivity and nature-like objectivity, and in delineating the ways in which alienation is bound up with material scarcity and collective oppression.[43]

With this in view, it can be understood why Sartre considers naive Kant's view that the kingdom of ends can be approximated to, simply to the extent that each person has a good will. The problem is the translation of affirmation of freedom into concrete mundane facticity, and this cannot be secured by the mere existence of individual freedom-affirming wills, when the very

---

[42] *BN* 159.

[43] Though it should be clear from the foregoing why Sartre should have availed himself of certain Marxist concepts – alienation, exploitation, mystification, reification – it is less obvious, from what has been said so far, why any more substantial commitment to Marxism should have been taken out by him. The short answer is that, on the basis that (1) the "lack of being" in the for-itself, considered at the more concrete level of a human being, is in the first instance the material *need* of a living organism (a claim which departs from *Being and Nothingness* and signals a development in Sartre's thinking), and that (2) the fundamental terms in relations of oppression are social classes, Sartre believes that ethics leads into a broadly Marxist politics. The problem of human history and collective existence does not however originate ultimately for Sartre in material forces, any more than it does in the game-theoretic considerations, modelled in rational decision theory, which have driven so much political theory: its roots are once again metaphysical, lying ultimately (as for Schopenhauer) in the fact that being-for-itself is a totality which has been "detotalized," i.e. subjected to individuation. The "antinomic" structure of intersubjectivity, which sets a limit to Hegel's dialectic, is analyzed at *BN* 299–302 and again at *NE* 450–68.

conceptualizations that each must form of the other in order to formulate an intention towards them, and the means that they must adopt in order to execute their intention, are infected with being-in-itself, that is, negate the other's freedom. Since these accretions of being-in-itself are first and foremost the product of man's collective historical existence, ethics must develop to that higher plane:

> [T]he suppression of alienation has to be universal. Impossibility of being ethical *alone*. Whence the problem: History ↔ ethics. History implies ethics (without universal conversion, no sense or meaning to evolution or to revolutions). Ethics implies history (no morality is possible without systematic action in some situation).[44]

The difficulty that Sartre discovers in the task of ethics helps to explain why he did not directly publish an ethical sequel to *Being and Nothingness* – not because, as his critics would have it, he discovered its metaphysics to be ethically fruitless, but because the task of concrete ethical action in his estimation leads directly into a politics and theory of history, which he attempted to provide in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.[45] The metaphysics of *Being and Nothingness*, far from *precluding* ethical engagement with the world, motivate it so strongly and in such demanding terms that nothing less than a resolution of the problem of human history and collective existence will permit realization of man's ethical *telos*. This expansion of the borders of ethics beyond the pre-political individual puts Sartre in a recognizable tradition beginning with Rousseau and stretching up, via Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, and Marx, to Adorno.

ABBREVIATIONS

BN	*Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1995)
DF	"Determinism and Freedom" (Sartre 1974)
EH	*Existentialism is a Humanism* (Sartre 2007)
KSU	"Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal" (Sartre 1983)
NE	*Notebooks for an Ethics* (Sartre 1992a)

[44] *NE* 471. See also *NE* 7, 9, 13, 141.
[45] The first volume of this work appeared in 1960, and the second, composed in 1958–1962, was published posthumously in 1985. It thus precedes Sartre's "second ethics," which may be regarded as an attempt to integrate the *Critique*'s theory of society and history with ethics. The reason for Sartre's non-publication of his second ethics is unclear.

TE   *The Transcendence of the Ego* (Sartre 2004b)
WL   *What is Literature?* (Sartre 1967)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

An asterisk denotes secondary literature especially suitable for further reading.

Anderson, Thomas C. 1979. *The Foundation and Structure of Sartrean Ethics*. Lawrence, KS: Regents Press of Kansas

Anderson, Thomas C. 1993. *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court

Baiasu, Sorin 2011. *Kant and Sartre: Re-discovering Critical Ethics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan*

Baldwin, Thomas 1986. "Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series* 20: 287–307

Beauvoir, Simone de 1996. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Citadel Press [*Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*. Paris: Gallimard, 1947]

Beauvoir, Simone de 2004. *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmermann and Mary Beth Mader. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, ch. 3, pp. 77–150 [*Pyrrhus et Cinéas*. Paris: Gallimard, 1944]

Bell, Linda 1989. *Sartre's Ethics of Authenticity*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press

Danto, Arthur 1975. *Sartre*. London: Fontana

Detmer, David 1988. *Freedom as a Value: A Critique of the Ethical Theory of Jean-Paul Sartre*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court

Flynn, Thomas 1984. *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility*. University of Chicago Press

Jeanson, Francis 1980. *Sartre and the Problem of Morality*, trans. Robert Stone. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press [*Le Problème moral et la pensée de Sartre*. Paris: Éditions du Myrte, 1947]

Lefebvre, Henri 2003. "Retrospections," in *Key Writings*, ed. Stuart Elden and Elizabeth Lebas. London: Athlone, pp. 6–13 [*L'Existentialisme*. Paris: Éditions Sagittaire, 1946, pp. 55–66]

MacIntyre, Alasdair 1981. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth

Marcel, Gabriel 1948. "Existence and Human Freedom," in *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Manya Harari. London: Harvill ["L'Existence et la liberté humaine chez Jean-Paul Sartre," in *Les Grands Appels de l'homme contemporain*. Paris: Éditions du Temps Présent, 1946]

McBride, William 1991. *Sartre's Political Theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press

Plantinga, Alvin 1958. "An Existentialist's Ethics," *Review of Metaphysics* 12: 235–56

Poellner, Peter 2012. "Early Sartre on Freedom and Ethics," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23 (2): 221–47

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1963. *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Braziller [*Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*. Paris: Gallimard, 1952]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1967. *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman. London: Methuen ["Qu'est-ce que la littérature?," in *Situations II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1948]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1971. *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, trans. Philip Mairet. London: Methuen [*Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions*. Paris: Hermann, 1939]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1974. "Determinism and freedom," in *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre,* vol. 2: *Selected Prose*, ed. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, trans. Richard C. McCleary. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, pp. 241–52 [from unpublished lecture notes, 1964]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1982. *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* vol. 1: *Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. Jonathan Rée. London: Verso [*Critique de la raison dialectique. 1: Théorie des ensembles pratiques, précédé de Questions de méthode*. Paris: Gallimard, 1960]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1983. "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," trans. John Matthews, in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. London: Verso, pp. 141–69 ["L'Universel singulier," in *Situations IX*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972, pp. 152–90]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1991. *Critique of Dialectical Reason,* vol. 2: *The Intelligibility of History*, ed. Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre, trans. Quentin Hoare. London: Verso [*Critique de la raison dialectique. 2: L'Intelligibilité de l'histoire*, ed. Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre. Paris: Gallimard, 1985]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1992a. *Notebooks for an Ethics* (composed 1947–1948), trans. David Pellauer. University of Chicago Press [*Cahiers pour une morale*. Paris: Gallimard, 1983]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1992b. *Truth and Existence* (composed 1948), trans. Adrian van den Hoven. University of Chicago Press [*Vérité et existence*, ed. Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre. Paris: Gallimard, 1989]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 1995. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes. London: Routledge [*L'Être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1943]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 2004a. *The Imaginary*, trans. Jonathan Webber. London: Routledge [*L'Imaginaire. Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*. Paris: Gallimard, 1940]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 2004b. *The Transcendence of the Ego: A Sketch for a Phenomenological Description*, trans. Andrew Brown, introduction by Sarah Richmond. London: Routledge ["La Transcendance de l'égo. Esquisse d'une description phénoménologique," *Recherches philosophiques* 6 (1936–1937): 85–123]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 2007. *Existentialism is a Humanism* (lecture 1945), trans. Carol Macomber, ed. John Kulka. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press [*L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*. Paris: Éditions Nagel, 1946]

Sartre, Jean-Paul 2013. "Existentialism: A Clarification," trans. Richard C. McCleary, in Ronald Aronson and Adrian van den Hoven (eds.), *We Have Only This Life to Live: The Selected Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre, 1939–1975*. New York: NYRB, pp. 86–91 ["À Propos de l'existentialisme, mise au point," *Action* 17 (29 December 1944): 11]

Simont, Juliette 1992. "Sartrean Ethics," in Christina Howells (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*. Cambridge University Press, ch. 6, pp. 178–210

Stern, Alfred 1953. *Sartre: His Philosophy and Existential Psychoanalysis*. New York: Liberal Arts Press

Stone, Robert and Bowman, Elizabeth 1986. "Dialectical Ethics: A First Look at Sartre's Unpublished 1964 Rome Lecture Notes," *Social Text* 13–14: 195–215

Stone, Robert and Bowman, Elizabeth 1991. "Sartre's *Morality and History*: A First Look at the Notes for the Unpublished 1965 Cornell Lectures," in Ronald Aronson and Adrian van den Hoven (eds.), *Sartre Alive*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, ch. 2, pp. 53–82