

1-1-2013

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Published version. "Sartre's Second or Dialectical Ethics," in *Jean-Paul Sartre: Key Concepts*. Eds. Steven Churchill and Jack Reynolds. Durham: Taylor & Francis (Routledge), 2013: 195-205.
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When Jean-Paul Sartre died in 1980, some in the French press called him the moral conscience of post-war France. In fact, in an interview he gave towards the end of his life, Sartre himself stated that he had always been a “moral philosopher” and also that he had attempted to write three different ethics in his lifetime. Of course, ethics was just one of his many interests. His exceptional talent led him to write plays, novels and short stories, works on psychology and political theory, ontology, philosophy of history, philosophy of art and philosophical biographies. Nevertheless, I believe that his interests in moral philosophy and moral values were at the centre of his life and constituted the underlying sub-structure (to use a Marxian term) of his life and works. One reason I say this is because almost from the beginning his ethics was humanistic in that he identified the goal of morality and the goal of human existence.

This chapter is primarily devoted to what Sartre himself designated as his second “realistic” ethics, thereby contrasting it with his first “idealistic” ethics. The latter was the one he promised at the end of *Being and Nothingness* and worked on for well over a decade. He eventually came to believe that this ethics, based on the ontological categories set forth in that early phenomenological ontology, was too far removed from the real world in which human beings existed. Although this chapter focuses on his second ethics, the fact is that in the writings of Sartre relatively few pages are devoted to it. Almost the only source we have is 165 pages of handwritten notes that were a lecture he gave in Rome in 1964. But even if we had more, it would still be very important that we understand a number of the basic concepts and ontological foundations of the first ethics in order to appreciate why he became so

dissatisfied with it that he set it aside and attempted the second. As we shall see, there are significant and radical differences between these two moralities and they are rooted in the fundamentally different ontologies on which they are based.

Ontological foundations

From his earliest philosophical writings, Sartre sharply divided all reality into just two realms. This culminated in his distinction between being-for-itself and being-in-itself, set forth in detail in his major work of phenomenological ontology *Being and Nothingness* in 1943. Being-for-itself, human consciousness, is described as non-substantial and contentless ("total emptiness"; BN1: xxxii; BN2: 12). It is nothing but a web of all kinds of intentional conscious acts in relation to objects. It is "all activity, all spontaneity" (BN1: xxxv; BN2: 15), "self-determining", "self-activated", "cause of itself" and, therefore, free (BN1/BN2: introduction). Being-in-itself, on the other hand, is described as passive and inert. It is thoroughly identical with itself and filled with being. It is nothing but a full positivity of being, which contains no nonbeing and so "does not enter into any connection with what is not itself". It simply "is itself", "glued to itself" and so "isolated in its being". Thus being-for-itself and being-in-itself are "absolutely separated regions of being", Sartre asserts (BN1: xxxix; BN2: 19). One consequence of their separation is that being-for-itself is totally free from any influence of being-in-itself. Human consciousness is not affected by the being it is aware of; its relation to being is totally negative.

Sartre implies that his definitions of the characteristics of these two regions of being are the result of a phenomenological analysis, that is, are conclusions of careful reflection on and descriptions of the phenomena of consciousness and of its objects. I must confess that I consider that very implausible. But what is even more problematic in his analysis is that throughout *Being and Nothingness* he often without explanation simply equates being-for-itself, human consciousness, with human reality itself or "man" and freedom. Accordingly, when we turn to his most extensive treatment of freedom and its relation to other things (part 4), we find Sartre insisting not only on the total freedom of consciousness but also of human reality! He argues that consciousness/human reality is free because it can always transcend what is and grasp what is not, for example, non-existent goals or ideals. Every conscious act, he says, "is a projection of the for-itself towards what is not, and what is can in no way determine by itself what is not" (BN1: 435–6; BN2: 457). And he

proceeds to identify this freedom with the freedom of human reality: my freedom "is very exactly the stuff of my being ... freedom is not a being; it is the *being* of man" (BN1: 439). He minimizes to the point of denial any limitations of human freedom referring to it as "absolute", "total", "infinite", and "without limits" (BN1: 435–41, 530–31, 549). "Man can not be sometimes slave and sometimes free", he asserts, "he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all" (BN1: 441; BN2: 463).

Such a view of human reality and human freedom is for the later Sartre, the author of *Critique of Dialectical Reason* volume 1 (1960b, 1976a), far too "abstract" and "irreal" (his words). It is not the real freedom of concrete human beings who are thoroughly immersed in and conditioned by the natural and social worlds, which worlds inevitably restrict them to "a strictly limited field of possibilities". A major reason Sartre labels his second ethics "realistic" is because it accurately recognizes the dialectical character of human relations to the world. That is, there is mutual interaction and causation between humans and the world. This occurs because in the *Critique* and later works, human reality is described not simply as a free consciousness (or being-for-itself) separate from nature or the things of the world but as a completely material organism. Sartre characterizes his position in the *Critique* as a "monism of materiality" and a "realistic materialism" (Sartre 1976a: 29, 181). What distinguishes the human organism from all others, he says, is its consciousness, which, however, he no longer describes as non-substantial or pure spontaneous self-determining activity. Rather man is "wholly matter", he insists (*ibid.*: 180). We are made up of the very same physical atoms and molecules as any other material thing. Like any organism the human is a synthesis of parts that is threatened by all the things in the world which can dissolve or destroy it. Furthermore, the organism's maintenance and growth is thoroughly dependent on and dialectically conditioned by the material world and other material organisms to satisfy its many needs. Indeed, it is the organism's urge to satisfy its needs that initiates all of its actions on its environment.

Yet human consciousness is still considered by Sartre to be free because of its ability to go beyond or transcend every situation. It can in his words "negate", "deny", "wrench itself from" what is present in any given situation towards what is not – such as a not now existing goal or imaginary ideal (*ibid.*: 70–71, 83–8, 97, 422, 549). As we noted, however, human freedom is restricted by the natural and social milieu in which it exists, sometimes severely.

To conclude this section, let us note that since Sartre's early and his later ontologies have such fundamentally different conceptions of the nature of human reality and its relations to the world, it will not be

surprising that Sartre's first and second moralities which are based on these respective ontologies will themselves differ significantly. As a first step toward grasping these differences, I turn next to consider what each ethics takes to be the ultimate foundation of human values and goals. After all every ethics, whatever its ontological base, is concerned with values (BN1: 626; BN2: 646).

The nature and source of values

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre states unequivocally that the human being "is the being by whom values exist" and more precisely that "his freedom [is] ... the unique source of values" (BN1: 627; BN2: 647). He is equally clear on the devastating impact this position has on ethics. If human freedom makes values exist, then this "paralyses" and "relatives" ethics, for it means that no values exist objectively or apart from human freedom. Rather, whatever one freely chooses to value, whether love or hate, freedom or slavery, torture or kindness, will be of value. "My freedom is the sole foundation of values", he writes, and so "nothing, absolutely nothing justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values" (BN1: 38; BN2: 62). I cannot appeal to any objective values to justify my actions for there are none and any morality which tries to set forth objective norms of human conduct is doomed from the start.

Sartre's argument for this position is as follows. Values are experienced as imperatives or norms. As such they are not being but are "beyond being"; they are not something that is but something which should be brought into being. As imperatives and norms, values are experienced not as something real but as requirements and demands to be made real. Since values are beyond what is, their reality can be due only to a being that is able to transcend what is and posit what is not. Such a being is, of course, human reality and values are precisely that towards which every human being surpasses what is.

As in the first ethics, Sartre in his second or dialectical ethics considers values to be imperatives or norms or obligations that we experience as requiring our adherence. They are not descriptions of facts but prescriptions for conduct (Sartre 1964b: 41, 65, 69, 72). In contrast to his first ethics, however, in his dialectical ethics Sartre insists that there is a "given", "assigned", even "imposed" (his words: *ibid.*: 67, 98, 145) character to moral values and goals. That is because he now believes that "the root of morality is in need" (*ibid.*: 100; see also 87–98). Needs, he explains, are not just a lack of something, they are felt exigencies, felt

(at least obscurely) demands to be satisfied. Because we have various needs which demand their satisfaction, we experience certain objects (for example, food, health, knowledge and love) to be valuable and thus to be things we feel we should obtain. In other words, because we are specific kinds of organisms with specific needs, certain kinds of objects are necessary to satisfy these needs. Since we do not freely choose the needs we have, we cannot freely choose the kind of things that fulfil those needs. It is not up to an individual's free choice, for example, whether oxygen or knowledge or love fulfil his or her needs and are thereby of value for them. Thus, by making human needs rather than human freedom the source of moral values, Sartre's second dialectical ethics grants them a certain objectivity, that is, an independence from human freedom – for it can neither create nor remove their value. Oxygen and love have value for me whether I choose them to have it or not. And, again, because they are of value I experience them as something that should be attained.

The goal of ethics

The foregoing considerations naturally lead to a consideration of the primary value or ultimate goal Sartre posits for each of his two moralities. In this section we will also discuss the reasons (in other words, the justification) he offers in each ethics for proposing the respective goal he does.

The goal of Sartre's first ethics is freedom. He speaks of it as "the reign of human freedom" (Sartre 1988: 198), which is also the city of ends where each person treats the other as an end. This city is identified with a socialist, classless society "where freedom is valued as such and willed as such" (Sartre 1992: 418; 1988: 192). In one sense this is perfectly straightforward because, as we have seen, at this time Sartre often identified human reality with freedom. To propose freedom as our highest value is simply to propose human existence as our highest value. There is a serious problem with doing so, however, namely, Sartre's total subjectivism when it comes to values. If all values are human creations why not propose that humans value power or pleasure or, for that matter, world domination or destruction as their supreme goal/value? Why single out freedom?

Sartre's cryptic argument in his lecture *Existentialism and Humanism* involves an appeal to "strict consistency" (Sartre 1973: 51), both logical consistency and consistency with reality. Since human freedom is the only source of value in Sartre's universe, it is logical and consistent

with the way things are that it be chosen as one's primary value. Once I realize that any value I confer on anything (such as my and others' lives, socialism, pleasure) comes from my freedom, the rational thing to do is to first and foremost value that freedom. It would be both logically inconsistent and inconsistent with the way things are not to do so. I must say that I believe Sartre's argument is a good one – but only if one first chooses to confer value on logical consistency and consistency with reality. Since in his early ontology, nothing possesses any intrinsic or objective value, there can be no logical or moral requirement for one to choose to value consistency. That choice simply cannot be justified without begging the question.

Even if one overlooks that problem, it remains very unclear what exactly it means to choose freedom as one's highest value and goal. Removing obstacles and limitations to freedom is one thing but what is liberated freedom for – for more freedom – for who or what? Surely not for just anyone and anything. Sartre clearly supports the oppressed and wretched of the earth, not their oppressors. But his justification for that preference remains unclear. Actually, this criticism is Sartre's own complaint that his first ethics was too abstract and unreal (idealistic).

The goal of the second, dialectical ethics is significantly more real and richer in content. Recall that in this ethics Sartre maintains that all values arise not from human freedom but from human needs. Given this connection it is not surprising that the ultimate value and goal of this ethics is not a vague freedom but human fulfilment, that is, the satisfaction of human needs, also called "human plenitude ... the fully alive organism" and "integral man" (Sartre 1964b: 55, 95). Of course, human fulfilment does demand the attainment of freedom, our need for freedom is certainly one of our most fundamental needs, but a human organism has many other important needs. Sartre mentions our basic needs for protein, for vitamins, for life itself. He especially emphasizes our needs for knowledge, for culture, and for the love and valuation of others, as well as for a meaningful life (*ibid.*: 63, 66, 77, 81, 97–101, 132–5, 164). Because the goal of his dialectical ethics has far more content than the abstract freedom of his first ethics, it is, he suggests, able to be more specific about the type of acts or policies that are morally desirable – namely, those which promote the fulfilment of the varied needs of the human organism. Accordingly, in the second ethics Sartre states that he is attempting to set forth not an abstract morality but one that is also a praxis in the world, that is, a moral theory that can put forward both the ultimate value which human beings should seek (namely, human fulfilment) and also suggest, at least in general, what should be done to our particular capitalistic social, economic and political structures to

achieve that end. Morality is something lived, he asserts, and at bottom it may be that morality and politics are one and the same.

In works after the Rome lecture, especially those after the French student and worker uprisings of 1968, Sartre argues for a society without hierarchies or classes, that is, one without power concentrated in an elite few. Instead of a ruling class, or state, he wants complete equality, a government by the people in the fullest sense. This will require the abolition of the division of labour, which, he believes, gives rise to narrow specialization and class distinctions. All people should have the right to participate in the economic, social and political governance of their country through "organs of decentralized power in work and in the entire social domain" (Sartre 1974c: 108). In the economic sphere these organs would involve collective ownership and management of the means of production, such as, the factories, mines, media, banks and other social-economic institutions. In the political sphere, Sartre advocates direct democracy, a society where the masses unite to express their wishes effectively. Even if a direct democracy takes a representative form, he wants a new system in which, for example, a representative elected by 5,000 people would be "nothing other than 5,000 persons; he must find the means for himself to be these 5,000 people" (*ibid.*: 307). Direct democracy would involve "popular" courts, that is, a judiciary chosen by the people, similar to those that arose in France in the late 1960s. At that time workers in factories and mines set up people's courts and publicly staged trials of their bosses and owners (Sartre participated in some of those courts).

Even in a direct democracy the implementation of policies may be the task of a smaller number of experts. But those experts must always be guided by the masses and return to them to make certain of their support. Even though he continues to refer to his ideal as socialism during this period, it is clearly a decentralized, debureaucratized and democratized version. And, the major advice Sartre offers to achieve this socialism is that one must join with the oppressed masses in their moral fight for liberation.

Finally, let me point out that what Sartre wants for his dialectical ethics, an ethics that is also a politics, would require detailed study of the socio-economic-political structures of the society in which we live – a gigantic task that would take the collaboration of many disciplines. That is the kind of thing he himself attempted to some degree in his analyses of French colonialism in Algiers, the Soviet Union and Stalinism in the twentieth century, French history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the French Indochina and Vietnam wars, and the Czechoslovakian spring to mention just a few.

We still need to address the justification Sartre offers for proposing the fulfilment of human needs or integral man as the ultimate value and goal of his second ethics. The answer lies in the ontological structure, the needs, of the human organism: "Need posits man as his own end" (Sartre 1964b: 100), he writes. In the Rome lecture Sartre cryptically cites Marx who, he says, states that "need does not necessitate any justification" (*ibid.*: 98). The very fact that our needs demand to be satisfied makes their satisfaction our primary value and goal. We do not need to come up with reasons to justify seeking that goal which is required by our needs. Indeed, we are not free to decide what our ultimate end and primary value is. We are organisms with needs and so our ultimate end/value, human fulfilment, is "given", "assigned", even "imposed" on us, Sartre states (*ibid.*: 97–8). We do not need, nor can we find, any reason for valuing this goal other than the fact our needs require it. I believe this is what Sartre means when he cites another statement of Marx, "need is its own reason for its satisfaction" (*ibid.*: 97). It simply does not make sense to ask for reasons why we should choose human fulfilment as our ultimate value/goal. To demand such reasons is to seek what cannot be given, since there is no value/goal more fundamental than human fulfilment to which one could appeal to justify choosing it.

Human relations

One of the most important human needs that Sartre cites – especially in his last major work, *The Family Idiot* (Sartre 1971–2) – is for the affection and approval of other people. His early view of human relationships, he complained, was far too negative and too individualistic. In *Being and Nothingness* he minimized the power of human beings to affect each other and stressed instead the complete responsibility of each individual for his or her life. He also looked upon other people primarily as dangers to one's individual freedom and in conflict or potentially in conflict with me. "The essence of the relations between consciousnesses", he wrote, "is conflict". He also insisted that one can relate to another only as a free subject to an alienated object or vice versa: "one must either transcend [objectify] the other or allow oneself to be transcended [objectified] by him" (BN1: 429; BN2: 451).

I must hasten to add, however, that his early, posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics* (Sartre 1983b, 1992) shows clearly that Sartre moved very quickly beyond this negative position even in his first ethics. In *Notebooks*, which were written in the late 1940s, he stresses the importance of intersubjective relations of "authentic" love, friendship and generosity and makes it clear that the conflictual relations presented

in *Being and Nothingness* were never meant to be taken as the only possible human relationships. In an explicit reference to that early work he asserts that one is able to transform the "hell" of human relations described there (Sartre 1992: 9, 20, 499) and that human beings can relate to each other primarily as subject to subject (*ibid.*: 418, 500). Furthermore, as we have already pointed out, Sartre's later work, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (and even the somewhat earlier *Saint Genet*) provide ample testimony to his recognition of the dialectic in history, in this case the tremendous impact human beings and their social structures have on each other. In fact, he admits that others through the social structures they build may limit the concrete freedom of many humans to almost zero – as in colonialization or slavery. Accordingly, Sartre repeatedly urges human beings to join together in groups in order to most effectively control the socio-economic-political systems they create so that they can be directed to the fulfilment of all, that is, the satisfaction of the needs of all.

Sartre's emphasis on human interdependency is used in another work of his first ethics, *Existentialism and Humanism*, to advance an argument that the freedom we should choose as our primary value is not just our own individual freedom but the freedom of all. "I am obliged to will the freedom of others at the same time as mine", he states. This is because, "In willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others and that the freedom of others depends on our own" (Sartre 1973: 51–2). In the practical order, it is obvious that both the range of options available to our free choice as well as our freedom to attain the goals we choose are heavily dependent on the choices and actions of others. Sartre focuses especially on the psychological interdependency of human beings. Only humans can confer value on my life. For me to obtain the fullest possible meaning and value for my life, then, I need other free subjects to freely confer positive value on me. Of course, each person can choose to value his/her life and that is important. Still that is value from only one freedom and, Sartre suggests, I both desire and can attain far more meaning if others also positively value me (Sartre 1992: 282–4, 499–500). Now if I positively value their freedom, instead of ignoring or oppressing it, it is more likely that they will reciprocate with a favourable evaluation of mine. Another suggestion (and it is only that) that Sartre offers is that I particularly want meaning and value given to me by those who *freely* choose to affirm me. Recognition from a vassal or slave is not worth nearly as much as authentic love freely bestowed. Thus I should will others' freedoms so that the value and meaning they freely give to me and my life will be favourable and will be from a source that I myself consider valuable.

I personally think these are solid arguments but I must point out that once again they require that one value logical consistency and consistency with reality, the reality that all value and meaning come from human freedoms. Simply put, Sartre's argument, even though he doesn't say so explicitly, appears to be that it is "inconsistent" for me to desire a fully meaningful life and at the same time not value the many freedoms which are the only sources of meaning and value for my life. But, to repeat my earlier objection, consistency itself possesses no intrinsic or objective value in the early Sartre's ontology. Furthermore, it still remains vague just what it means in the practical order to value the freedom of others. Surely I am not to value the freedom of everyone (including Hitler and Stalin) and support whatever goals they freely choose.

As for the second ethics, although neither in the Rome lecture nor any other later work does Sartre explicitly construct an argument to demonstrate that we should seek the fulfilment of others, not just of ourselves, the notion of human interdependency remains central to his thought. In his last major work, *The Family Idiot*, which he says contains "concrete morality", he emphasizes the needs human beings have for each other, in particular their needs for love.

If an infant is loved by his mother, Sartre generalizes from his study of Gustave Flaubert, he experiences himself to be of value and becomes valuable to himself. "The first interest he [the infant] attaches to his person is derived from the care whose object he is", Sartre writes; "If the mother loves him, in other words, he gradually discovers his being-an-object as his being-loved ... [and] he becomes a *value* in his own eyes" (Sartre 1987: 129, n. 2).

Even a human being's awareness that he or she is a free agent capable of acting on the world to fulfil his or her needs is totally dependent on others, Sartre says. We also need the love of others to assure us that we have something worth doing, a mission in life, a reason for being: "Briefly, the love of the Other is the foundation and guarantee of the objectivity of the individual's value and his mission" (*ibid.*: 135). More than any other work of his, *The Family Idiot* describes in great detail the overwhelming need human beings have to be valued and loved by others and thus their complete dependence on each other to achieve human fulfilment. And in no other work did Sartre push human dependency and conditioning so deep, into infancy. In its own way his last major work demonstrates the need to liberate human beings from human relationships and structures that prevent them from becoming fully human – beginning in infancy. Towards the end of his study of Flaubert, Sartre refers to what he calls "true humanism" which he says involves

human beings working together to “institute a new order that is proper to man”. “True humanism”, which is apparently the morality of the second ethics, “*should take these [needs] as its starting point and never deviate from them*” (Sartre 1991a: 263–4). Such humanism, he states, can only be built upon our mutual recognition of our common human needs and our common “right” to their satisfaction (Sartre 1987: 413).

Conclusion

I have tried to set forth the characteristics of Sartre's second (dialectical) ethics by contrasting it with his first attempt at ethics. I have argued that Sartre is correct in believing that the second ethics makes significant improvements over the first. Its goal – humans with needs fulfilled – contains far more content than the freedom of all of the first. Also, by rooting human values in human needs it provides them with a more objective character and so overcomes the radically subjective nature that values have in the first. The second ethics also provides a much more solid justification for making human fulfilment its primary value and goal by rooting all values in human needs. The first ethics cannot ultimately justify making the freedom of all (or anything else) its primary value. Finally by its deep account of the human need for love, the second ethics offers a greater understanding of the thorough dependence of human beings on each other and, consequently, their need to seek the fulfilment of the needs of all.

In one of his last interviews, he expressed himself especially forcefully on this point. We must create a society, he states, “in which we can live for others and for ourselves”, which requires that we “try to learn that one can only seek his being, his life, in living for others” (Anderson 1993: 172). “In that lies the truth”, he adds, “there is no other” (*ibid.*).

Further reading

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