

## An Existential Ethical Imperative

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Morality is not simply the ability to judge something as being “good” or “bad”. Indeed, far more fundamental for moral activity is the ability to recognize responsibility for one’s choices. Whether that responsibility is there implicitly or not, morality requires that it be recognizable to the individual (else morality is meaningless). In other words, the individual must be able to apprehend and authentically affirm some value that provides him or her with a recognition of his or her responsibility in making choices. It is the intent of this paper to illustrate that this fundamental moral activity is possible in Sartre’s ontological structure through the existence of an existential imperative, that is, a truth revealed by our existence which necessitates us to choose some value if we are to authentically understand and relate to our own humanity.

An appropriate place to begin any discussion of human morality is with the issue of what it means to be human. For Sartre, to be a human being, i.e., to be a for-itself - is to be an ambiguity, a Heraclitean tension between opposites. Sartre suggests that we can conceive of this ambiguity, or what he refers to as an internal negation, by nothing that the human individual “is not what it is, and is what it is not.” To see what Sartre is trying to say here, consider the same phrase in terms of temporality: “as present, it is not what it is (past) and is what it is not (future).” The individual is no longer what it was (it was its past) and it is what is shall be - the individual is its future possibilities. The past is always possible only for a specific present. It has meaning only in relation to the present. The past exists as a substance, part of the individual’s situation or circumstance in the concrete world. We can say, then, that one is not one’s past exactly to the extent that one was one’s past.

The present derives its significance not only from the past but also from the future. It is human reality that temporalizes itself, and to the extent that it does so, it always does so from this moment, not some past or future moment. The present exists strictly as a sort of ground zero. Hence, we may say of the present that it is a sort of nullity, a geometrical point in time with no diameter or space, connecting what has been temporalized as the past with what has yet to become - i.e. the individual’s possibilities or future. Future, to the extent that it

defines the present, acts as a lack, denying that in the next moment I necessarily will be what my past suggests I will be.

The human being, however, is not just a consciousness, is not an abstract or spiritual conscious entity, but rather, is an embodied for-itself. I can temporalize myself, i.e. I can make decisions, exactly and only to the extent that I exist in a concrete situation. Therefore, both physical and mental factors are required to generate a choice - you cannot choose when there is nothing to choose from, whether or not there is something to choose with.

Now we are in a position to come to terms with Sartre's understanding of freedom. As human beings, we certainly do have an acute notion of temporality, and further, we also have an awareness of existing in a situation. Noting this, Sartre suggests that human beings are unable not to temporalize, and temporalization, in turn, requires that human beings act as choice makers within a specific situation. If I am a temporalizer, then my future and past must be distinguishable, which in turn implies that my future not be determined by my past - i.e. that I am free to make decisions that are wholly independent of my past decisions. Further, however, it means that I must choose constantly if I am to exist as a conscious for-itself. As long as I am alive, because I exist in a situation and have an awareness of it and myself, I must choose myself with reference to the situation. The human being, to the extent that it temporalizes, is apprehensible only as a choice-in-the-making. It is this notion that Sartre equates with human freedom. Freedom is choosing. The success of a choice is unimportant. It is important only that as a human being we must choose, or else we cannot exist as anything but meaningless temporalized (versus temporalizing) stuff, i.e. as objects (as beings that are what they are, wherein our past, present, and future are all perfectly synonymous and hence meaningless). We may fail, we may be wrong, we may be constrained to the basest of choices, but we must nonetheless choose or else cease to exist as human beings, as conscious beings.

Another way to understand the freedom of the human being is to say that as a for-itself, the human individual's existence must precede its essence. If I, as a human being, am a temporalizer, then it must be me who introduces past and future, it must be me that makes legitimate choices - i.e. there can be no "God", etc., which has at some original moment determined me as what I am, creating a synonymy between my past, present and future. My identity, as it can be expressed, is identifiable only with my past and will therefore never fully

capture the significance of my present and future. Instead of viewing myself (and being viewed) as a fixed identity, the individual is forced to acknowledge that he or she is exactly what he or she does.

I must (to make the above point differently) determine myself. It is true that this means I am from the outset undetermined, but my indeterminacy does not relieve me from action. Indeed, as we have just seen, it condemns me to action. However, it is not enough for me to simply act, to naively engage my indeterminism with the world. If I act without recognizing in the world my own essential, farthest reaching possibilities and goals, if I allow each act's immediate directionality or inertia to pull me along without an awareness of its meaning relative to my own essential possibilities and values, I am effectively denying my own freedom. Any and every situation, and hence any and every meaning I envision within the world, exists only in reference to all the possibilities present to me. I must decide, and by deciding (whether I actively or willingly choose to recognize it or not) I posit meaning and values, and this valuation is based upon my freedom. Indeed, I am the only means for realizing the meaning of the world and of my essence, and this, finally, can be meaningful only to the extent that it derives from my freedom. We are "free", yet we must nonetheless make ourselves free, we must recognize and accept our freedom as the creator of all existential possibility, or it will appear to us simply as another determined part of our situation.

In other words, if I am not to deny what is necessarily the case, I must recognize my freedom as the source of all values, and, in so doing, I must will my freedom. I must, in order to avoid denying what is constantly revealed to me as true, refuse to polarize my existence with any end beyond itself. My existence as a choice-in-the-making must grasp itself as its own value and end or I am consciously deceiving myself.

How is it that I am able to deceive myself consciously? To grasp the point one is probably better off trying to explain the validity of its antithesis - can I unconsciously deceive myself? Any effort to flee my reality as the sole author of meaning in the world only serves to show that I am aware of it - I must think of my freedom constantly in order to not think about it. I may deny my own freedom, but as I do so, I do so with an awareness of it since I must choose to do so, that is, I must exercise my freedom to do so by making that decision. I can flee my freedom, but I cannot then ignore my flight!

If I recognize my freedom as human existence, that is as something that

must constantly be accomplished (constantly because I am set at a distance from my values by my freedom to affirm or reject the choices and projects of my past), I am living an authentic life. The inauthentic life can then be thought of as a type of bad faith wherein the individual denies his or her ambiguity as a for-itself, which, as noted earlier, consists in the fact that one is not what one is and is what one is not. Bad faith is manifested by playing these two truths of human existence off one another, so that I may hide from my responsibilities by defining myself in terms of my past, or similarly, may deny the significance of my past by denying that I am anything but a disembodied free “choice-in-the-making”. Hence, the rapist, ashamed of his identity as such, may deny that his past actions affect his present being by identifying himself exclusively as a transcending of his past; however, in order to grasp this transcendence so as to deny his past, he must understand it as a substantive identity of “not being a rapist”. To be authentic is to coordinate the two aspects of my ambiguous identity, not just embracing one by denying the significance of the other. The rapist is confronted by the actions of his past as a substantive aspect of his situation and how he chooses in that situation determines the meaning of his present and future acts.

We are without appeal to anything but ourselves when we make a decision, and hence we are completely responsible for our decisions. To act authentically is merely to act in accordance with the nature which ontology defines. In this case, it means not to surrender ourselves to some role, giving objective significance to the meanings which only we, in our freedom, and hence with complete responsibility, can create. Nonetheless, it also means not imagining that I can exist beyond or without the situation, nor does it entail denying the significance of my past. I do have a past that exists as a substantive part of my situation and which must be acknowledged. However, acknowledgement of my past in no way eliminates my need to choose - i.e. have a future. Hence, any time that I attempt to be for myself what I am, I am in bad faith - that is, I am living inauthentically, for such an effort denies my reality as temporalizer, denies my existence as a choice-in-the-making.

The challenge for the authentic individual is to become conscious of one's self as the author of meaning and values. It means disallowing and challenging any significance ascribed to values on their own. It means recognizing and accepting one's responsibility. And it means doing all this without positing such an awareness as an ideal, as possessing value for itself.

While this seems almost contradictory, there is a solution: by positing the ontological truth of our condition as a value, recognizing therein its authorship of all other values, we can accomplish authenticity. Here I no longer naively play out a role, but neither do I objectively transcend all roles by identifying myself as beyond mere roles. I do not objectify values and yet I posit my ontological identity as the source of values. However, as we have noted, we exist in situation, as an embodied consciousness, and must act out our authenticity in a concrete fashion.

The for-itself must act. Action, as distinct from mere movement, etc., requires one to have a goal or project. That is to say, action presupposes freedom - I must express an intentionality towards the future. I am free, and hence I must create myself. My freedom exists at the heart of my being as a void, as a nothingness which demands that I make myself, not simply will myself. I must act on my freedom, not merely contemplate it. There are no motives or passions innate within me, so that only through making a choice, only through action (which presupposes, in turn, a situation) are my intentions established; indeed, only here are they ever revealed to me. Freedom exists only as a negative reality (as a undetermined existence). To become a positive reality, freedom must be realized by us through action. We are free, but we must nevertheless free ourselves - our voluntary reflexiveness must be brought to an active realization of our spontaneous constitution as thought/choosing.

As has been already noted, we are an embodied consciousness. We exist physically in situations. Further, our situation includes the presence of others. We do not somehow constitute others, we merely encounter them. Yet in encountering another, I am not encountering a mere object. The other is for-itself, or consciousness, and this is a fact which I recognize when I feel ashamed or self-conscious around another. What I am for the other, what field of possibilities the other ascribes to me, is beyond my control. The other makes me become, suddenly, an object, but not for myself - only for the other. This view of myself as existing for the other (as what I was) is a result of my own existence as an ambiguity - I do have a being for others, and it is no more revealing of my subjectivity than the others being for me is in my encounter with her. My being for others is my objective side, revealed to me by the presence of others, real or imagined, when I am suddenly aware of myself as appearing to others as an inert, passive object-in-the-world which is exactly what it is. To be authentic, I must recognize that my actions are not effected

only by me. The objective identity I take before the other is as much a part of who or what I am as the being I have for myself. If I try to utilize one or the other in order to escape my responsibility as author of meaning in the world by asserting one while denying the other I am guilty of bad faith. I am exposed to the other by my physical presence before him, and am aware of this exposure, indeed I am wholly responsible for how the other perceives me - I possess as part of what I am the identity given me by the other, and to deny this is to deny that I am ambiguous, that I am neither purely an object in the world nor purely subjectivity.

The substance of my past is the primary fact of an objective history, yet it is nonetheless inaccessible to the individual as such - it is revealed only through one's encounter with another. My intentions are revealed only through the act itself, and the act can be revealed only through the objective reality it attains in the situation, and this objective reality which helps to constitute the substance of my past is revealed to me only by the objectivity conferred upon me by others. From my own perspective I am only subjective. The objective side of my existence is revealed to me only by the other (the "Peeping Tom" revealed to me as myself by another's footsteps as I peek through a key hole). This objective side is hidden from me without the other, yet it is part of me because of my own ambiguous identity. My action implicates others, for it is not enough that I will freedom - I must act for freedom. But this action exposes me to the demands of the situation and to the demands of others. Therefore, I am forced to give meaning and value to the situation through my action, and I am forced to do it for all humanity.

The approach of consciousness to authenticity would itself be inauthentic if it ignores that consciousness exists only in situation. The situation cannot be abandoned, but rather must be penetrated to its deepest recesses by freedom. Thus, choosing my freedom requires choosing free relationships with others. My own freedom needs the freedom of the other in order not to deny itself. I must recognize myself, as a free being, as essential to the other's attempt at authentic self knowledge. The other must not be desired, neither as a freedom to be possessed nor as a freedom to be negated. Rather, the other must appear before me, in an authentic recognition of my own ambiguity and of the other's role in revealing myself to myself as well as the others own ambiguity as something I must achieve a consonance with. I must authentically realize the coincidence of ambiguity between myself and the other. To the other

I appear as an object, as an instrument to fulfill the others ends. Only when I may discover in this relationship the other's freedom as neither denying my freedom nor limiting it, but in fact as instrumental to its realization, can I be authentic. As I perform my own goal oriented activity, revealed as an object before the other, I am acted upon by the other (as I act upon him), both of us engaged in goal oriented activity. If in the process of accomplishing these activities we recognize that each of our own ends entailed in their realization the free choice of the activity of the other to be realized, each person's freedom was a free movement towards achieving the freely chosen end of the other, we achieve an active, real authenticity. The only possible crossroads for such an occurrence is freedom itself, the sole efficient cause for every value and end. Just as it would be pointless to engage in an argument, or to write a book, etc., without intending or assuming the freedom of other people, my freedom must intend the freedom of the other, else, to the extent that I am a being-for-others, my "intention" will fail to be realized through my actions! Further, to the extent that I require others to pursue their freedom, I must will them the opportunity to do so - I must emancipate others! Freedom, to be conceived authentically - with a view to our nature as ambiguous beings - cannot be conceived of either as an object that is all at once determined for everyone, nor a personal, inviolate project of each - it is neither a common transcendent truth nor an individual role. We cannot will freedom without grasping, on an interhuman level, the ambiguous existence of each other. We must make ourselves free, make ourselves human, both for ourselves and in conjunction with other people. Sartre exemplifies this by pointing out the similarity between an aesthetic imperative and an ethical imperative. He suggests that an artist can create meaningful art only by recognizing or positing the freedom of the viewer of his or her art, else his or her project would involve little more than a meaningless collection of stuff. Similarly, the viewer must recognize in an a priori manner the freedom of the artist when he or she examines the work of art. The act of creating an art work is an act which asserts a priori the freedom of both the artist and viewer by both parties if the art work is to be a true or meaningful (authentic) art work. Just as in a moral imperative, a value is recognized: freedom is asserted as a value, is recognized and appealed to, for if the ability to choose were not asserted and recognized by both parties, why would either engage in the activity?

The conclusion we can draw from this is that an existential imperative

is possible. It is possible exactly to the extent that we can engage in activities which posit humanity's ambiguous existence on an interhuman level. As we have seen before, authenticity is not possible if I am play-acting, and further it is not possible if I imagine that I do not, nonetheless, act in a situation with the result of creating a substantive past, a being-for-others. I cannot, therefore, imagine freedom to subsist on its own with a transcendent value - it is to be valued exactly because to do so is to act in accordance with the nature ontology defines for me. I am an ambiguous being, without appeal, and hence condemned to complete responsibility. I am, in other words, free, and to live my life authentically, to avoid denying what is necessarily true, I must realize my freedom, that is, act in a concrete manner in recognition of myself as freedom. Or, expressed another way, I must value my freedom.

Let us turn, now, to a real world example to illustrate how it is possible to act authentically. Imagine that I am confronted by a singular elderly gentleman by the name of Dostoevski. After approaching me mumbling something about how if God is dead everything is permitted, he tells me that he wishes, as a free for-itself, to become my slave. I realize that I must refuse this request, and endeavor to explain myself to Mr. Dostoevski.

The first thing we must consider, I suggest, is that freedom exists only as a negative reality until we determine it as our own freedom, making it a positive value. Given what I know about the ontological structure of the individual, I must will freedom for others as well as myself, else I am acting inauthentically, adopting freedom as my goal merely as it is urged upon me by my role as an "authentic person". Dostoevski, peering over his spectacles, suggests that, if it is his choices which define value, without which there could be no value at all, then whatever he decides must necessarily be right since it is his choices which define what is right. In retort, I suggest to Dostoevski that if I were to allow him to be my slave, it would deny my own authenticity, for not only is freedom not just an object with a transcendent value for all, it is also not a personal role I can play isolated from all others. By enslaving him, I would be denying my own ambiguous nature. The authentic life I seek is possible only if my intention to value my own freedom is revealed not just in the meanings I initiate in the world, but in the embodied I revealed to me by the other. In other words, I must be authentic with regard to both dimensions of my existence, both as a being-for-myself and as a being-for-others. I must act in such a way that, just like the artist and art connoisseur, my own actions presuppose the freedom



of not only me but of the other as well. In other words, I must grasp freedom on an interhuman level if I am to avoid being regulated to either positing freedom as an ideal, objectively valuable in itself, or as a mere role which I play, serving as a flight from my responsibility instead of a conscious recognition of it.

To return, then, to our initial discussion, it is possible to have an imperative ethic in Sartre's ontological system. The key to this imperative is our being-for-others. We are an ambiguous being, and that ambiguity is continually revealed to us by others. If we recognize the subjective existence of others, we must at the same time recognize that freedom, while not a transcendent value for all, is also, nonetheless, not merely an isolated role to be realized by the individual on his or her own. Freedom, if we are to live our lives authentically, must be apprehended and valued on an interhuman level, and this requires the recognition of responsibility for our choices on an interhuman level as well.