INTERROGATING THE PARAMETERS OF EXISTENTIAL ETHICS- A SELECTED REVIEW OF SARTRE, BEAUVOIR AND CAMUS

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Abstract
This paper interrogates the parameters of atheistic existential ethics. Specifically, it evaluates the ethical implications of the concepts of freedom and subjectivity in the select works of French existential philosophers, namely; Jean Paul Sartre, Simone De Beauvoir and Albert Camus. The paper primarily choose the trio based on their atheistic inclinations with the key objective of examining the justifiability of the foundation of their existential morality. With subjectivity at its core and possibility always on the horizon, these existentialists have sought to explain how we create values. Such values have no absolute meaning but rather emerge from our own subjective projects and concerns and not from God or any ultimate Being. The paper argues that atheistic existentialism has not been able to account for the moral dimension of human life, and thus, have no basis for an ethical theory if they deny that humans are bound God's commands. It suggests that the idea of God's non-existence casts a serious doubt on the possibility of any notion of moral foundationalism. The basic features of existentialism found in their works seem, at least superficially, to undermine the possibility of ethics which they profess. The paper maintains that if God does not exist, we will not be provided with any absolute values or commands that could either approve or disapprove our actions. It concludes that a self created being has no moral foundation and no compelling moral force since his existence cannot be founded on no higher or ultimate Being.

Key words: Ethics, existentialism, freedom, subjectivity, values, foundationalism

Introduction

Existentialist philosophy thrives on the idea of that we live in a totally meaningless world with no objective principles for ordering human life and actions. Human existence precedes human essence, thus, there is no predetermined ideals or essences. We are confronted with our "dreadful freedom" that we have no choice but to accept and utilize in order to create our own essence. These considerations play a key role in our examination of the possibility of an existential ethic. If ethics is about our conduct in a given community, how can a philosophy which elevates the individual above the group have an ethic? If ethics requires consistency and predictability, does existentialism's insistence on the changeability of concrete experience and its rejection of rules preclude an ethical system? Can we be ethical and be absolutely free? How can we speak of "right" and "wrong" action in a world that is fundamentally subjective? How can we prescribe for ourselves, or for others? Finally, it appears that every ethical system presupposes that our actions *mean* something, that is, that they *matter,* not only in terms of the general community but also in terms of who we are. If the world is absurd and, finally, meaningless, does not existentialism deny "the reality and seriousness of human undertakings"? (Sartre *Existentialism*, 12). Indeed, why be ethical at all?

This paper poses these questions, using primarily the works of twentieth-century French atheistic existentialists, namely ; Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus. We have chosen this branch of existentialism for a number of reasons: first, because an examination of the implications of existential theism (for example, that of Kierkegaard, Buber and Marcel) for ethics can be fleshed out from the contents of their works; second, because the thinkers whose writing is our focus (primarily Sarte, de Beauvoir and Camus) have struggled seriously and at great length with the questions of subjectivity, freedom and the moral life; and, finally, because these questions are probably most difficult for one who professes to be both existentialist *and* atheist.

Traditional Normative Ethics

Broadly speaking, ethics is the study of values, of what one ought to do. Normative ethics, specifically, is therefore prescriptive rather than descriptive. That is, any ethical statement recommends that we do or forbear from doing some action. When, for example, one maintains that killing is wrong, he/she is recommending to the members of his/her moral community that they should not kill. Even if such a person stipulate exceptions to this principle — for example, that it is wrong to kill except in self-defense — he/she is nonetheless prescribing that the only sort of permissible killing is that which occurs when one is acting in self-defense. Though we may disagree as to what constitutes an act of self-defense (for example, does this include capital punishment, killing in wartime, and abortion?), we nonetheless have a guideline for human conduct. Even the most sincere assent to an ethical principle does not, however, guarantee that one will behave in the prescribed manner. We may lack a will strong enough to follow through on our moral convictions, particularly when doing so requires some measure of sacrifice. Regardless of our actual conduct, however, values provide ideals by which we judge action — our own and others' — as right or wrong (Raymond 1991: 441).

Traditional ethical theories have sought to define the "good life" and to provide an objective basis for ethical action. Aristotle (384-322 B-c.), for example, maintained that a good action was one which followed the "golden mean." By this he meant that one ought not to act in ways that were extreme, that is, either in excess or defect, So, for example, one ought to be generous but not *stingy* or extravagant, Ethical theorists Jeremy Bentham (1748 -1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) defended a view known as utilitarianism. The basic principle of utilitarianism — termed by Bentham the "greatest happiness" principle urges that we choose those actions which *maximize* utility.

Whatever we desire, Mill argued, is desired because it leads to happiness. If happiness is the end of all human action, then "it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part is included in the whole." (1957: 49). By "happiness" utilitarians are not referring to those states of complete rapture or ecstasy we sometimes encounter. Indeed, a moral system founded on such rare and ephemeral moments would be quite a strange one. Instead, utilitarians urge us to seek those experiences that are likely to provide pleasure and to avoid those likely to lead to *pain.* But the greatest happiness principle is not one of crude egoism. Rather, Mill insists that each of us must determine what course of action will maximize utility and include in that calculation all those whose interests are likely to be affected by the decision. Thus, utilitarian theory is based on the importance of consequences in judging the morality of an action: that is, if X leads to good consequences, then X is a good action.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) rejected such theories for their focus on feelings like pleasure and pain, arguing that the capacity to pursue pleasure is not unique to our species. Rather, he maintained, the basis for human conduct must be that which distinguishes us from other animals: our ability to act on the basis of rationality. His "Categorical Imperative" that one should "act so as to will one's act to be universal law" requires that we view ethics as a rational endeavour**.** To will an act to be universal law is to acknowledge one's nature moral lawmaker and to imagine a world in which everyone does what *is* about to do. If, for example, I wonder whether I may make a promise knowing that I intend not to keep it, I must be willing to allow false promises to be universal law. But such a maxim

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would destroy itself almost as soon as I try to will it**;** or, as Kant puts it: "For by w there would really be no promises at all, since in vain would my willing future actions be professed to other people who would not what I professed, or if they over-hastily did believe, then they pay me back in like coin" (1963:15). For Kant, reason dictates morality. We must do what is right not simply because it is "prudent" do so. Since prudence is contingent and unpredictable, it cannot be basis for morality. Rather, we must do what is right because it is our duty.

This brief introduction hardly does justice to the richness scope of traditional Kantian and utilitarian theory. Nor does it alternative ethical theories or any of the recent modifications of Kantianism and utilitarianism with their attendant strengths and weakness. It does, however, lay a foundation on which to consider some of features of ethical theory in general. As we have seen, some of these theories view certain end results (for example, self-interest, happiness, pleasure) as primary in judging an action. Others maintain that there are central features of actions (for example, motivation, intention, and so on) that make them wrong regardless of the consequences that follow from them. What all of these ethical theories share is the assumption that ethics objective, is that is, that there are certain kinds of actions that are objectively right or wrong. And each theory holds that the faculty of reason is capable of understanding the objective nature of ethics and the conditions one most meet to achieve a good end. For some theories, this determination is based on an externally imposed order, such as, for example, the will of God. For other theories, it is human nature that provides the ground for ethics. But no theory is ambiguous: Each has fairly clear criteria for determining whether actions are right or wrong, and each is capable of those determinations in *advance of the* action, Though these theories may enable us to take into account the particular circumstances of a given situation (a utilitarian, for example, would want to know what particular action will lead to maximum happiness, and that will vary depending on circumstances), virtually all traditional theories in ethics posit that there are right and wrong actions. This means, then, given the law of contradiction, that if X is right, then not-X must be wrong.

Thus, no matter what particular ethical view we hold, we can use the values of that system to judge our actions and the actions of others, and we can use that system as an objective guideline for determining future conduct. Though even members of the same school of ethics may disagree about what is the correct course in a given situation, all must agree that there is *some* right action and all others are wrong. Disagreement, then, would occur over the application of the criteria rather than the criteria themselves.

Existentialism and the Moral Life

Existentialists, in a contradistinction to the nature of traditional ethics, make subjectivity the beginning and the end of human experience. Yet this emphasis on subjectivity makes ethics problematic. We have seen, for example, how Kierkegaard's religious stage, (Ezedike 2010: 85), "suspends the ethical" as one makes a leap of faith in obedience to God. This leap is ultimately unconditioned and leaves the knight of faith completely alone. In contrast, the ethical life is essentially one of community, of rules and norms, of family life, of the universal. One cannot, in Kant's language, will Abraham's act to be universal law. How could one will a world in which fathers kill their sons? Yet, for Kierkegaard, this is precisely what makes Abraham a hero. There are no rules or guidelines for how to be a "knight of faith." If there were, those very rules would undermine themselves. Similarly, Nietzsche calls himself an "immoralist," and his attack on morality is an attack on those traditional values which, he believed, elevate the herd and glorify weakness. His injunction to "self-overcome" is one that provides neither concrete strategies to follow nor substantive criteria to determine whether one has reached that goal.

In the existentialist tradition, the normative ethical viewpoint which rests on the metaphysical assertion that 'existence precedes essence' maintains that moral obligation arises out of the choices we make as absolutely free agents. Individuals possess no intrinsic moral value and their actions have no intrinsic moral value as well. Consequently, the only true virtue for the existentialist is 'authenticity'.

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Here, authenticity is the disposition to acknowledge and embrace the choices we have freely made and accept any obligation that might result from them.

Twentieth Century Existentialism

Twentieth-century existentialists have also been ambivalent about (if not hostile to) ethics. Heidegger, for example, explicitly maintains that ethics is not a concern central to his philosophy, though there is no doubt that much of what he says has key implications for ethical analysis (see, for example, the discussion of authenticity in Stumpf 2003: 454). At the end of *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre promises us a longer work on ethics, but his philosophical interests moved him in other directions and he never delivered on that promise. He did write a long essay, *Existentialism is a Humanism,* in response to his critics: the communists, who saw existentialisrn as bourgeois, individualistic, and a historical; and the Catholics, who claimed that the view led to despair, degraded humanity, and "forgot the smile of a child." But this essay is flawed, and Sartre later repudiated it. Camus wrote extensively on issues (for example, suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus, 1955)* central to ethical theory; but he left no systematic work on the issue. It is Simone de Beauvoir, whose book *The Ethics of Ambiguity (1948),* made the most conscientious attempt to outline a framework for an existential ethic and to respond to critics of that view.

Ethics and Freedom

In the twentieth century, existentialists like Camus, de Beauvoir, and Satire begin with what we have termed "dreadful freedom." Nietzsche proclaimed that "God is dead," but God's absence leaves us with a terrible void (Raymond 1991:174 —75). We cannot allow ourselves to be seduced by those naive atheists "who would like to abolish God with the least possible expense" (Sartre 1947: 25). It is of no use to substitute "human nature" or "progress" or *"a priori* values" for the God we have lost and pretend that no change has occurred. Rather, we must recognize that, without God, we have lost the very ground for our Being. We must see that we are thrown into the world without necessary reason, that we are free and totally responsible. All absolutes — absolute truth, absolute necessity, and absolute moral values - die when God dies.

Traditional ethical systems have run from the ambiguity that results from freedom and subjectivity and replaced it with rigid systems of right and wrong conduct. But such systems, existentialists maintain, overestimate the power of the human intellect and undervalue the richness and complexity of human experience. To say that existence precedes essence is to say that we begin as nothing. There is no human nature, nothing but what we make of ourselves. "First of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself." (Sartre 1947:18) Ethics, then, must be a creative venture, as we organize our own worlds of meaning around our actions.

Sartre characterizes human reality as *pour soi,* as nothingness. Heidegger maintains that Dasein's essential Being is possibility. Whatever we call it, however, human reality is what it is not and not what it is. We are our pasts, which have already occurred; we are our futures, which have not yet occurred. We struggle to become *en soi,* to be complete, to be filled up. Yet this struggle is futile, and, ironically, is ended only when we die and *pour soi* finally becomes *en soi.* We struggle vainly to become God.

We are, then, essentially nothingness, a lack, a possibility. But this only means that there are no external reasons for what we do, that nothing is necessary. We must justify ourselves, for there is no God and no human nature that can provide that ground for us. We must give ourselves our reasons for what we are, recognizing that we can choose anything. There are no unconditioned values, for that would make a thing of values and rob us of our freedom. In a vain attempt to become God, we become human. According to de Beauvoir (Ozumba 2010: 327), "It is not granted him to exist without tending toward this being which he will never be [i.e., God]. But it is possible for him to want this tension even with the failure which it involves." To strive to become God is, then, to court failure, But in the process of failing to be both *en soi* and *pour soi,* we become *possibility.* Accepting this failure, de Beauvoir's "tension," is a

positive affirmation of existence. Looking into the openness that is our future is like staring down into a bottomless chasm. Without a *priori* values, we experience a sense of anguish and a sense of forlornness; we have no basis on which to decide, yet we must decide. "We are alone, with no excuses" (Sartre 1947: 27).

We are, then, the source of our values. And those values spring from what Sartre calls *projects* (Raymond 1991:445); "Value is this lack-in-being of which freedom *makes itself* a lack; and it is because the latter makes itself a lack that value appears. It is desire which creates the desirable, and the project which sets up the end."   Through our desire, we create a project, and in that process our values appear. These values emerge from us, not God or human nature. Since existence precedes essence, we are fully responsible for ourselves and our actions. We cannot wish ourselves other than we are, for we are our acts, our projects. As a result, the persons we are, are the person we have chosen to be. This fact fills us with anguish, forlornness, and despair. If God does not exist, we face our responsibilities alone. There is nothing that legitimizes us. "We have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us" (Sartre 1947: 27). We are responsible even for our passion. And, given that the future is nothingness, possibility, there is always the chance that our plans will not lead to the results for which we had aimed. Of course there are — for every one of us— an infinite number of "I could haves." This is simply obvious, all of us are freedom. But what counts about us is the sum total of all our deeds. For existentialism, "I choose," "I act," and "I am" are virtually interchangeable phrases.

It is impossible to answer precisely why one chooses anything, but for existentialism we create with our own vision of the future mind. Each decision we make is a renewal of the old one or a choke of new goals. And with no excuse behind us (for example, fate or God) nor justification before us (for example, approval from others, absolute values, and so on) we' simply *choose.* The for-itself, because it is essentially nothingness, *is* desire; *pour soi* constantly needs a project by which one creates one's own choices and motives (Raymond 1991:446).

Thus, it is only an existential ethic that endows human conduct with any real significance. Without forgiveness or justification *from* God without compensation in heaven or punishment in hell, we alone give our existence its importance. Our acts are definitive, they create who we are. Indeed, we carry the responsibility for the world on our shoulders. We are, in Camus's words, "without appeal." But this is not, existentialists maintain, a posture of pessimism. To say that one is "without appeal" is not to condemn that life or to complain about it. Rather, as de Beauvoir makes clear (Ozumba 2010: 334), it is to assert that there is nothing outside of existence and that values emerge from that existence.

Existentialism and Moral Values

Is not all this subjective? Indeed. But what else could it be? For existentialists, the basis for all projects is subjective. Unlike Kantian theory with its impersonal "rational individual" who acts as lawmaker, existentialism addresses itself to the actions of concrete individuals in concrete situations in "dreadful freedom." According to Sartre:

> The Kantian ethics says, 'Never treat any person as a means, but as an end.' Very well, if I stay with my mother, I will treat her as an end and not as a means; but by virtue of this fact, I am running the risk of treating the people around me who are *fighting,* as means; and, conversely, if I go to join those who are fighting, I will be treating them as an end, and by doing that, I run the risk of treating my mother as a means. (Existentialism, pp.30-31)

Even a seemingly simpler theory such as egoism — do whatever is in one's own self-interest - seems unenlightening here, precisely because it is not clear what is in our self-interest. We can even disregard value systems entirely and act on the basis of how we feel. But, as Sartre points out, the only way to

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determine the strength of a feeling is by performing whatever particular action confirms that feeling. We can seek out advice, as did Sartre's young student, but we must choose our advisor ("choosing your adviser is involving yourself," according to Sartre), and we must interpret the advice and decide whether to act on it. No matter what, we must make a choice. And yet no choice is objectively right or wrong.

Perhaps all ethical choices are like this one. Perhaps objective theories with their textbook approaches to life and their vague notions of value fail us in real flesh-and-blood situations. Perhaps no a priori code of ethics is truly instructive in the tough cases, which are common enough in human experience. For existentialists**,** it is important to recognize that in choosing we determine our values; it is not an ethical principle that instructs us as to how we should behave, but rather it is our actions that create value.

Sartre believes that this process begins with what he calls the "original project," when one first becomes aware of oneself as a separate entity and projects a desired relationship between oneself and the world. This drama extends throughout one's life, as each individual decision is necessarily either a renewed choice of that original goal or an assertion of new goals. Thus, we choose ourselves constantly. In a sense, it is not enough to say that we have freedom; rather, we *are* freedom. Sartre even insists that we cannot fall back on the cliché that we "did not ask to be born," for the very fact that we are here means that we are choosing to be born (Raymond 1991: 446). We are thrown into the world and are of the world. We have no choice but to involve ourselves in that world through our projects. This may seem harsh, but **"**it prompts people to understand that reality alone is what counts, that dreams, expectations, and hopes warrant no more than to define a man as a disappointed dream, as miscarried hopes, as vain expectations." (Sartre 1947: 39).

Atheistic Existentialist Ethics: A Critical Appraisal

If our projects define value, if desire creates what is desirable, then can there be any limits to what is ethical? It would appear that any project can create meaning out of possibility. If so, then any would create value. But this appears to be circular and provides us with no basis by which we can assess a given project or by which we may choose from among projects. Are all project equally justified? Is any project ever impermissible? Would not any of our actions - by virtue of their being a human action - be ethical? Given our complete freedom, we may choose any project at all. But are all projects of equal value? Was Dostoyevsky right when he warned in *The Brothers Karamazov* that "if God does not exist then all is permitted"? (Kaufman 1975:52).

What, then, keeps us from choosing projects that oppress others? If we are truly "without appeal," must we also be without recourse to condemnation? It seems there are clearly no recipes for being ethical. If life is like a work of art, then the best we can do is "propose methods" (Sartre 1984: 86). Indeed, existentialists maintain that our attitudes and our actions, though there are no a priori values that determine them, involve all humanity. And we cannot avoid this involvement, for it is how we define ourselves. Freedom, they claim, must seek itself as its own end, not in any abstract sense but rather in every given concrete situation. But what does this mean? Is the freedom of the existentialists just an empty formula, or is there any content to it? Any absolute foundation for morality? Sartre claims that we are condemned to be free and that this absolute freedom is inescapable, (and perhaps) a possible foundation for morality. Individuals are expected to subjectively determine the right and wrong and make moral choices. He asserts that we act in bad faith by not doing so. The problem here is that the concepts of 'Freedom' and 'Bad faith' are self-inconsistent given that Sartre denies any pre-determined universal moral order and yet speak of the concepts of as if everyone is bound to abide by them (Scruton 2018: 1).

Contemporary existentialists insist that we need the freedom of others as a recognition of our own subjectivity. "We have to respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom, not when it strays, flees itself, and resigns itself," wrote de Beauvoir (1948: 90—91). Thus, there may be criteria for determining whether an action is right or wrong. According to de Beauvoir, "To want existence, to want to disclose

the world, and to want men to be free are one and the same will" (1948:87). Likewise, Sartre wrote, "I can take freedom as my goal only if I take that of others as a goal as well" (1948: 54). Thus, we need not respect the "freedom" of the slave-owner to own slaves or the "freedom" of a Caligula to murder all those in his disfavor. "A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied" (De Beauvoir 1948: 91). Once we realize that all values come from within, we must always choose freedom as the basis for all such values (see O'Brien and Mbree 2017: 2). But does this reduce existential ethics to another version of objectivism? Are there, that is, objective criteria by which we can then determine an action's rightness or wrongness? Sartre, for example, chose to use his freedom to work for the cause of the French resistance against fascism. Can we assume that he would accept the choice of another to work for fascism? What about the Nazi who claims to be willing to affirm the world that his or her actions create? We all can now agree that Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann's declaration that he was "only following orders" is an obvious example of an actor in bad faith. But we can doubtless imagine another sort of Eichmann who goes to his grave affirming his belief in his life's mission. Can an existential ethic — an ethic that rejects all a priori values — condemn his conduct? What if Eichmann were to accept his freedom and his anguish, to reject all excuses? According to existentialism, an ethical person must act authentically, out of integrity. One is obliged to affirm one's actions as they are relevant to one as a person. Is being a Nazi consistent with such a notion of integrity? Can we imagine a Nazi voicing the following words that Orestes proclaims at the conclusion of *The Flies?* "You see me, men of Argos, you understand that my crime is wholly mine; I claim it as my own, for all to know; it is my glory, my life's work, and you can neither punish me nor pity me. That is why I fill you with fear" (1946:126). And when Electra asks Orestes where they will go, he responds "Towards ourselves" (1946:124). But Electra cannot join him:

> I won't hear any more from you. All you have to offer me is misery and squalor. Help! Zeus, king of gods and men, my king, take me in your arms, carry me from this place, and shelter me. I will obey your law, I will be your creature and your slave, I will embrace your knees. Save me from the flies, from my brother, from myself! Do not leave me lonely and I will give up my whole life to atonement. I repent, Zeus. I bitterly repent. (124).

For contemporary existentialists, we answer to ourselves. Our lives are without absolute meaning, yet we endow them with the only sort of meaning that is possible, namely, contingent, subjective meaning. According to de Beauvoir,

> In order for this world to have any importance, in order for our understanding to have a meaning and to be worthy of sacrifices, we must affirm the concrete and particular thickness of this world and the individual reality of our projects and ourselves. (*Ethics of Ambiguity, 1948:* 106).

In response to critics who maintain that existentialism's logical outcome is pessimism and nihilism, de Beauvoir holds that the opposite is true:

> (I)f the individual is set up as a unique and irreducible value, the word sacrifice regains all its meaning; what a man loses in renouncing his plans, his future, and his life no longer appears as a negligible thing. Even if he decides that in order to justify his life he must consent to limiting its course, even if he accepts dying, there is a wrench at the heart of this acceptance, for freedom demands both that it recover itself as an absolute and that it prolongs its movement indefinitely. (*Ethics of Ambiguity, 1948:* 107).

That we live only once, that we are our deeds, that we have no excuses — all of these, for existentialism, give profound value and importance to our projects (see Scarth 2004: 1). No one can say absolutely that our actions are right or wrong, but no one can say that they do not matter.

Camus's play *The Just Assassins* gives his view of the moral limits to human action. In the preface to the work, Camus tells us that his goal was to show that "action itself had limits." (p. x) The play tells the story of a group of Russian revolutionaries who plot to kill the Grand Duke, in particular the story of Kaliayev, who is assigned to throw the bomb at the Duke's carriage. Camus states that his admiration for Kaliayev and his lover, Dora, is "complete." Like Sartre and de Beauvoir, Camus believes that there must be parameters to what may count as justified, even if done for a just cause. "There is no good and just action but what recognizes those limits and, if it must go beyond them, at least accepts death" (p. x). Kaliayev, for example, states before he is about to be executed: "If I did not die — it's then I'd be a murderer" (1958: 288). He takes full responsibility for his action, as his last words are: "If I have proved equal to the task assigned, of protesting with all the manhood in me against violence, may death consummate my task with the purity of the ideal that inspired it" (p. 294). Is everything permitted? Dora claims that "even in destruction there's a right way and a wrong way" (1958:258).

No project is inherently valuable or valueless. Camus, for example, imagines Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to roll a rock up a hill for all of eternity, to be happy. This futile and endless task is not so different from the tasks of ants or bees programmed to perform the same behaviors over time. But it is different in the sense that the story of Sisyphus is a tragedy because Sisyphus is conscious. Sisyphus is the absurd person in an absurd world. But Camus imagines that Sisyphus is happy. He is happy not because his project has inherent worth (indeed, it was not even chosen by him), but because of his relationship to his project. "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a person's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (*The Myth of Sisyphus, 1955:* 91). Camus has written that "if the world were clear, art would not exist" (73). Perhaps one might change Camus's statement for our context: if the world were clear, ethics would not exist.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of his most well-known work, *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre raises a number of questions relating to freedom, responsibility, and being in the world. But, he tells us, "these questions, which refer us to a pure and not an accessory reflection, can find their reply only on the ethical plane" (798). Though Sartre at that point promised "we shall devote to them a future work," that future work never appeared. Thus, in a bid to establish the subjectivity of values and existence, he failed to establish an objective foundation for his ethics.

In all, we began our examination of existentialism in this paper with a discussion of the characteristic themes of that philosophy. We emphasized existentialism's richness and diversity, its rejection of all sorts of "crystal palaces," and its focus on human experience as it is subjectively lived. Though it is clear that there are many systematic thinkers in this tradition, they all have tended to agree that the meaning of human experience cannot be captured in tidy formulae and all-encompassing systems.

Thus, it is appropriate that we end our investigation with a look at the possibilities for an existentialist ethic. We find that we are faced with similar questions to those we have asked in our introduction. With subjectivity at its core and possibility always on the horizon, existentialists have sought to explain how we create values. Such values have no absolute meaning but rather emerge from our own subjective projects and concerns.

Does this view contradict the very meaning of an ethic? Must we, like Nietzsche, all proclaim ourselves "immoralists"? Do values become nothing more than subjective preferences? Have we lost our ability to criticize? No doubt an atheistic existential ethic must be profoundly different from traditional ethical views for want of an objective foundation.

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