Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics

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I wish to thank the contributors to this collection. Most of them participated in the symposium Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics, which I organized in November 2002. The quality of their papers and presentations was the first incentive behind the edition of this book. The second incentive came from my good friend Jason Holt, who suggested that I edit such a book.

I also want to thank Kym Maclaren, who joined the project at quite a late stage and worked hard to meet my deadlines.

My thanks also go to my research assistant Christinia Landry, who worked on the editing and formatting of the manuscript. Her help was invaluable in the production of this book. Thanks are also due to my other research assistant, Christopher Wood, who helped with the final editing.

Finally, my warmest thanks go to my partner, Eric Gignac, who has always been supportive of my projects, regardless of how busy these projects keep me.
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EXISTENTIALIST THINKERS
AND ETHICS
INTRODUCTION

The Problem of Ethics for Existentialism

CHRISTINE DAIGLE

This collection of essays presents an inquiry into the possibility of existentialist ethics. A variety of existentialist thinkers, both theistic and atheistic, are known to have been highly critical of the philosophical and ethical traditions they inherited. Their views, as diverse as they are, all strive to offer an alternative to the overtly rational and, what they like to coin, an "inhumane" philosophical approach. Their aim is to provide a better account of what it is to be a human being in this world. This phenomenological task necessarily offers some ethical developments regarding our being-in-the-world as acting, encountering, socially living beings. Articulating these fundamental phenomenological relations finds some of these thinkers in the dark; their attempts have been dismissed as unsuccessful. The essays included in this collection demonstrate that the existentialist thinkers considered here successfully elaborate a viable alternative to traditional ethical views.

To begin with, we need to examine the notion of existentialism. This is what I intend to clarify in this introduction. I want to show how existentialism, in all its diverse manifestations,
intends to remedy certain identified failures of traditional philosophizing. Existentialism is a philosophical movement articulated on the basis of fundamental criticisms of philosophical theories and systems. Key figures have identified those failures and thus set the program for further philosophical elaboration.

EXISTENTIALISM

The first thing we may want to note about existentialism is that there is little agreement on who belongs to the existentialist movement. Besides the obvious figures of Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel (who coined the term), there are more ambiguous figures, such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Camus (who refused to be called an existentialist), and Merleau-Ponty (who seemed to be sitting on the fence, leaning more toward phenomenology than existentialism). Many more have been categorized as existentialist thinkers, sometimes to their own surprise. To decide who is an existentialist, it is important to be clear about how we conceive of existentialism.

One thing is clear: if we intend to include thinkers as diverse as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Arendt, Sartre, Camus, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty, we need to define existentialism broadly enough to accommodate the differences between their philosophies, without coming up empty handed. How do we reconcile views as diverse as these and unite them under one banner? How do we place in the same bag a convinced atheist such as Nietzsche or Sartre and a Christian thinker such as Kierkegaard? What could tie them together?

Nathan Oaklander has suggested that the main thing that holds them together, despite diverging ideas on certain specific issues, is their concern with the "individual qua individual." In fact, there is a way to circumscribe certain elements specific to existentialism without providing a strict definition.
We can use either of two approaches to explain what existentialism is: a genealogical-historical approach, which looks at the origins of the movement and the influences behind it; or a thematic approach, which looks more specifically at the themes explored by existentialist thinkers and the ways they deal with them.

Let us look at the first approach, the genealogical-historical one. Most people would agree that Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) is the first existentialist thinker. Other thinkers of the nineteenth century played a very important role in the later developments of existentialism, namely Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900).

If we want to look at the origins of the movement, we should not overlook the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Mary Warnock has suggested that existentialism seems to benefit from a double ancestry: 1) the ethical tradition, whose emphasis is on humanity as the possessor of a will, humanity as a voluntary agent; and 2) the phenomenology of Husserl. Of course, this definition of existentialism excludes anyone who came before the phenomenology of Husserl in his books from 1913 and 1931. This would mean that no one in the nineteenth century could be an existentialist, that is, a member of a philosophical movement with an “ism” as such. Rather, they would be representatives of what is sometimes called Lebensphilosophie or Existenzphilosophie.

Before Gabriel Marcel coined the term “existentialism,” sometime at the beginning of 1943, some thinkers were referred to as philosophers of existence. Though some would think that this is pretty much the equivalent of existentialism, Richard Schacht has challenged this view, saying, “To my way of thinking, it is extremely valuable to be able to distinguish between ‘existentialism’ – as an ‘ism’ – and ‘Existenz-philosophy’ as a branch of philosophical inquiry, concerned with the analysis of human Existenz.” And he further writes,
“An *Existenz*-philosopher ... need make no special claims for *Existenz*, such as attributing to it greater significance than any other dimension of human life, or maintaining that human self-realization is exclusively a matter of its cultivation.” As Schacht concludes, “it would be quite reasonable to view *Existenz*-philosophy as a subdivision of a comprehensive philosophical anthropology.” According to Schacht, then, the difference is that an existentialist takes existence as his or her starting point and makes it the focus of everything else, whereas an “*Existenz*-philosopher” investigates existence without making it the central point of his or her philosophical inquiry. This distinction may be useful in addressing the philosophies of such thinkers as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, or even Heidegger (as some claim that his preoccupation is more with being than with the human being and its existence).

Going back to the genealogical-historical approach, I want to investigate what in the writings of the nineteenth-century thinkers might have served as a source of inspiration for twentieth-century existentialists. What could have had a decisive influence is the way they challenge the philosophical tradition and question or reject the whole ethical tradition. Regarding this rejection, Alasdair MacIntyre makes a very interesting suggestion, saying that we should consider existentialist thinkers as “disappointed rationalists” because we can find a kind of metaphysical rationalism in the background of almost all existentialist philosophies (as with Kierkegaard’s rejection of Hegel). MacIntyre thinks that existentialists criticized the philosophical systems they found before them because they considered these systems to be insufficient and unable to capture and explain the individual’s existence. They would have liked philosophical systems to be able to pronounce “the truth” about human existence from an axiomatic starting point. But since human existence resists such systematization, rationalism is disappointing to the existentialists. MacIntyre
identifies another source of their critical views vis-à-vis reason. He says that the nineteenth century saw the coming to be of numerous oppositions to worldviews presenting an ordered system created by a god or a rational order. The notion of a contingent or absurd world emerged as a reaction to systematic, rational worldviews. From this oppositional standpoint, we get the idea that the use of reason is insufficient to help us lead our lives in such a world. Reason is now a limited tool. If we think the use of reason puts us in command, we are fooling ourselves. If we use our reason alone, we may be overstretching the powers of this limited tool. The sole use of reason is thus considered to be doubtful. Existentialists make it their task to uncover the limitations of reason and as Warnock says, “to free people from the shackles of illusion.”

We can certainly say that the twentieth-century existentialists were reacting to what was going on in philosophy in the nineteenth century. They were reacting to the failure of rationalist philosophical systems, as well as to the wave of relativism that occurred in the nineteenth century. A typical answer to any absolutist ethical system is to turn the opposite way to relativism. This solution is an unsatisfying one to most of the existentialists who would later tackle this problem. They would each use one form or another of phenomenology to try to find some ground for ethics and an understanding of life in the individual’s existence. I say “one form or another” because I think that although Husserl was highly influential on twentieth-century existentialism, nineteenth-century existentialist thinkers were doing a kind of phenomenology of their own, even if it was not as systematically thought out as Husserl’s philosophy.

The thematic approach delineated by MacIntyre shows four main recurrent themes in existentialist writings: 1) intentionality; 2) being and absurdity; 3) freedom and choice; and 4) Angst and death. The first theme – intentionality, a
phenomenological concept – reveals a fundamental difference between knowledge of self and knowledge of the Other. The Other is not seen as he or she really is but as the intentioned object of my perceptions, my beliefs, and my emotions. The same can be said about the perception that the Other has of me. There is a radical "un-unifiability" of individuals. The concept of intentionality also points to introspection as the key to self-knowledge and knowledge of the human. I appear as I really am only to myself.

The second theme – being and absurdity – reveals a radical difference between being-for-itself and being-in-itself. Being-for-itself has a consciousness and is free. This is the human. Being-in-itself is being that corresponds exactly to itself, that is, things in the world. There is a clash between these two kinds of being. "Absurdity" refers to many things, including the presence of that different being that is the human in a world of things, the indifference of the world to the presence of human beings, the contingency of the world, and its lack of meaning.

The third theme – freedom and choice – is probably the most important one for existentialists. They all consider that individuals are radically free and that they have to make conscious authentic choices. The value of choice in making our lives is tremendous. Their investigations focus primarily on this theme. We are free and must choose because there are no objective values; instead of accepting the nihilism that may ensue, most existentialists think that the individual must be responsible and undertake it as a task to create values. This is not only the theme of this book but also, as we will see, the fundamental preoccupation of existentialist thinkers.

Finally, the fourth theme – Angst and death – is of interest to existentialists to various degrees, as they consider that the individual facing extreme, unusual experiences or situations reveals the true and fundamental nature of the human. Anxi-
ety, or *Angst*, as well as the encounter with death or the possibility of our own death, can thus serve ethical purposes.

These themes appear in one form or another in all existentialist thinkers' writings. In addition, all these thinkers grant central importance to the human being, to individual choice, and to concrete situations. Given all this, it is not surprising that their mode of expression is untraditional, to say the least. They often abandon Western philosophy's traditional, argumentative modes of expression, in favour of less rigid and possibly more evocative ones. Literature and theater become as important as philosophical treatises for exploring the themes existentialist thinkers consider fundamental. This has often resulted in denying the existentialist thinkers the status of philosophers. As Linda Patrik says, "Existential literature provides easier access to existentialism than do the non-fictional, philosophical works of existentialists, especially for readers unfamiliar with the jargon and argument style of twentieth-century European philosophy." In fact, most major existentialist thinkers wrote systematic treatises (as with Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*). What is noteworthy, however, is the bulk of their literary contribution. As MacIntyre puts it, "the content of existentialist philosophy makes it clear that dramatic dialogue, whether in plays or in the novel, is probably a form of expression more consistent with the author's intentions than deductive argument would be." The existentialists' use of literature certainly enhanced the popularity of the movement. Linda Patrik says that the existentialists "forged a connection between philosophy and literature that has not since been duplicated."

What, then, is existentialism? We could say, existentialism is a philosophy that focuses on human existence in its concrete occurrence and on the fact that the human is radically free and must make choices and a philosophy that preoccupies itself with themes such as intentionality, being and absurdity, and *Angst* and death. One may wonder how this differs from
the description we might give of the many philosophical systems of the past not labelled existentialist. Maybe a look at Sartre's own definition of existentialism would help us see how existentialism itself differs from traditional philosophizing.

In his now famous lecture of 1946, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre gives us the following definition of existentialism: "by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity." He also says, "There is no other universe other than a human universe, the universe of human subjectivity." He gives us another clue, with the famous formula, "existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer ... subjectivity must be the starting point." If we made up a definition from this list of descriptive statements and combined it with what we earlier discussed, we could say that existentialism is the philosophy that considers the human as the starting point, an empty one, without any definite essence – a starting point that needs to be built up through our free and authentic choices.

To provide a definitive formulation of existentialism seems difficult because this movement encompasses so much. Given this difficulty, some commentators, such as Warnock, would prefer to define the methodology of existentialism. Because existentialism takes as its starting point the existence of the individual, human subjectivity, its method "consists in a perfectly deliberate and intentional use of the concept as a way of approaching the abstract, the particular as a way of approaching the general." This may seem like a peculiar method. Warnock thinks as much, as she further says, "The Existentialists have given us many particular insights, especially in their discussions of persons, and of perception, but, if philosophy is to continue to exist, then it is necessary to reject the subjective anti-scientific dogmatism of their attempt to reveal the ultimate meaning of Existence."
I want to go back to Oaklander's attempt at defining existentialism. The most interesting question he proceeds to address is that of the status of existentialism against the backdrop of traditional philosophy. The question is interesting because if we say that the subject matter of existentialism is human existence, we could say that this is exactly the subject matter of philosophical anthropology, but as Oaklander explains, existentialism is not philosophical anthropology. Even if it attempts to give certain general descriptions of some basic structures of human existence, it does not focus on abstract concepts, like traditional philosophy and traditional philosophical anthropology. Instead, existentialist thinkers are concerned with the life of the particular existing individual. They are not interested in the general but in the particular, not in the abstract but in the concrete. This is how existentialism stands apart from traditional philosophy.

Oaklander also wants to challenge the communicability of the subject matter of existentialism. Because existentialism is about the individual *qua* individual and the only person who can know what it is to be the individual *qua* individual is that individual, it seems impossible for us to communicate anything about the individual. As Oaklander says, for something to be communicated, it must be capable of being thought, and "since the individual as such cannot be thought, it follows that what it is to be an individual cannot be described or directly communicated." It seems impossible to communicate to someone else what it is to be a particular, existing individual, because communication involves the universal. This is an interesting argument. He adds another reason to consider the subject matter of existentialism to be incommunicable, namely, that the human individual, the subjectivity, is in a constant process of becoming. If communication is possible at all, the thing I would communicate at moment $x$ would be falsified the next moment by the constant transformation of the human individual subjectivity.
If Oaklander's line of argument is valid, then why study existentialism at all? Oaklander answers, "What existentialists say about the structure of human existence is existentially relevant only if we choose to see it in relation to our own life, incorporate it into our life, and become involved in an intensely personal act of self-transformation as a consequence of it. Only then can we 'know' the subject matter of existentialism. Such 'knowledge' or self-awareness cannot be directly communicated, but must be lived."\(^7\)

**THE PROBLEM OF ETHICS**

As we have seen, the task of defining existentialism raises a number of questions and problems concerning its dealings with the life of concrete individuals. The most fundamental of these problems is that of ethics.

The chapters that follow will investigate the solutions offered by a number of existentialist thinkers. The collection opens with a chapter on Kierkegaard, the only theist discussed at length in this volume. Given what was earlier said, one may think that ethics is not problematic for a theist; however, as Desroches shows, the ethical is indeed a problem in the Kierkegaardian scheme.

In fact, theist or not, an existentialist thinker would consider or experience ethics as problematic, given his or her own critical stance toward anything absolute and abstract, toward anything that departs from the concrete individual's insertion into the world. We have seen that at the core of the existentialist's position lies the concrete individual's experience of the world. This is also true for the ethical. I experience the ethical for myself as an "I" active in the world in which there are others and in which my course of action may affect others. Nevertheless, it is I who decide, on the basis of the interpretation I give of the world, of my action, of others,
and of myself. My project and my consciousness, my way of being in the world, in turn shape this interpretation. Ethics thus seems to be a highly personal matter, that is a solipsistic adventure. But this view of ethics defeats the ethical project altogether. If we need ethics, it is because we live with other human beings. Who would need ethics, alone on a desert island? We need ethics because we live in groups, and we need rules of conduct for the group to exist and for the individual to insert his or her self into that group the least painfully.

This is the first issue the existentialists face, one of how we come to ethical rules and principles to serve as a code for a group, given that our set of rules and principles has to fit into each of our individual projects. This issue is all the more difficult for existentialist thinkers such as Nietzsche and Sartre, who claim that the individual has to choose his or her own values. How does one reconcile the individual's having a choice of values with the existence of a collectively agreed on (if not an absolute) set of rules and principles? In Sartre's case, it is even more problematic, as at least in his early years, he refused to acknowledge any genuine communication, intersubjectivity, or concern with the Other, apart from the famous conflictual relationship where the Other is a threat to myself. In a less dramatic way, Kierkegaard shows that the ethical is always an individual issue and that we have to go beyond the group's set of rules and principles – beyond the collective morality – and to make of the ethical an individual venture.

The other issue, one facing atheist existentialist thinkers, is that of nihilism. Indeed, for someone such as Kierkegaard (or Jaspers or Marcel), the ethical is individual but ultimately rests on a divine, transcendent foundation. Kierkegaard's critical approach to traditional philosophizing does not imply the rejection of all foundations for values. But atheistic
existentialists come face to face with this consequence. As they deny the existence of any transcendent realm as an absolute reference for ethical thinking, they have to show how ethics can be radically immanent.\textsuperscript{18} Does atheism necessarily lead to ethical nihilism, that is, the negation of a foundation for values? In fact, it is possible to deny the existence of God and still hold to a certain transcendent reality or to the transcendence of values (as Plato did). But, except for Kierkegaard, the existentialist thinkers considered in this collection deny that there is such a thing as a transcendent realm. Therefore, their attempts at grounding an ethics have to remain within the immanent realm.

Consequently, these thinkers have to tackle the potential that their philosophy may have for making each individual the absolute foundation for values. Existentialist thinkers seem to engage in rejecting an ethical absolute grounded in the transcendent but only to replace it with one grounded in the individual. Thus, they reject an absolute morality that is valid for everyone and replace it with one that is absolutely valid for the individual alone. They switch from universalism to relativism. The problem of relativism for ethics is simple enough. If the good is a relative notion, capable of being grounded in many different ways, it makes it difficult to erect norms and principles. Norms and principles are put forward to help attain the good, and if the good is vague, relative, or unfixed, the attempt to determine a means to the good is almost doomed to failure.

The difficulty for moderate ethical nihilism – that is, one that rejects the existence of an absolute and transcendent foundation for values but not the potential existence of values – is the transition to ethical reconstruction, that is, the elaboration of a new ethics. The major difficulty is to find a foundation for values that is not transcendent and absolute. Furthermore, when we think of the relation between the
human and the world as interpretive, we easily fall into the trap of relativism: if the world has its reality and truth in the perception I have of it, the values ruling my actions and choices will be valuable only insofar as I have chosen them as such in my interpretive frame. The challenge would, then, be to escape this extreme of pure relativism.

Existentialist thinkers want to avoid two pitfalls. They want to avoid transcendence and to escape amoralism, a possible result of nihilism and atheism; if we reject the religious worldview and its morality, we may conclude – with Dostoyevsky’s Ivan Karamazov – that everything is allowed. But existentialist thinkers, much like Dostoyevsky himself, see this conclusion as a problem to be solved. The human being cannot live with lawlessness. If existentialist thinkers are atheists, then they are not nihilists in the strict sense of the term. But they are nihilists in a moderate sense, in that they reject a certain worldview and morality but only to replace it with a new one.

Atheism is an absolute threat to ethics if it takes the form of nihilism: if atheism translates into the abandonment of any foundation for values, then ethics is impossible. But this is not how existentialist thinkers address the issue. They recognize this possibility and want to avoid this outcome. Hence, they are looking for an alternative way to ground values, one without the appeal to anything transcendent. As they see it, ethics is a human business and has to be fully justified and established within the realm of human experience, that is, within the immanent realm. This is the constructive aspect of their program.

The existentialist ethical program may be said to comprise two parts. The first part consists in a critique. Existentialists analyse, dissect, criticize, and eventually (for those of the atheist brand) reject the traditional moralities they inherited. In most cases, the Christian morality and worldview are the victims of the existentialists’ attacks. This critical part of the existentialist program is necessary for the elaboration of a
new ethics, which is the constructive part of their program. This second part shows the existentialists struggling to construct an ethics on a different basis from that of traditional ethics. This is a difficult but necessary task.

Nietzsche is probably the one thinker whose writings best illustrate this articulation of the critical and the constructive parts of the ethical program. He, himself, says that he needed to wipe out the ground before erecting a new system of values. You have to be a nihilist to be a builder. The necessity of rejecting previous worldviews is clearly demonstrated in the meeting of Zarathustra and the hermit in the opening sections of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra sets out on his journey, and the first person he meets is a holy man living in the forest. All he does is write songs and sing them, and when he writes them he laughs or cries or sighs, and in so doing he says he praises God. Leaving the hermit to his illusions, Zarathustra wonders, “Is it possible? This old saint man in his forest has heard nothing about the fact that God is dead!” Of course, in the Nietzschean picture, to go on living without acknowledging God's death is to go on living as alienated beings. Human beings should free themselves from alienation.

All atheist existentialists see it as an important task, if not a mission, to free humans of any illusions that might oppress them. They all agree in one way or another with Nietzsche's position vis-à-vis the Christian worldview. They do not all adopt his flamboyant rhetoric, but the essence of their judgment toward this worldview is that it is alienating and needs to be rejected. From there, they all work toward a reconstruction – that is, the second part of their program – because they want to avoid the view that everything is allowed. Their challenge is this: to establish that the proposition, “everything is allowed,” is false, without recourse to the transcendent.

Some readers may object at this point that not all existentialist thinkers tackle the ethical issue. Some existentialist
thinkers, such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, concentrate on other philosophical issues that they seem to consider more fundamental or crucial. I think the ethical is still an important aspect of their philosophies, even if they do not address it as explicitly as other existentialists. Indeed, if the human being is essentially a being that inserts itself into this world through its action, then the human being, or reality, is fundamentally an ethical being. To talk about the human being is thus always to talk about an ethical reality of some sort. Thus, when Heidegger talks about fundamental ontology, he is talking about Dasein. Talking about Dasein necessarily entails saying something about how Dasein acts in this world. Does describing its way of acting translate into ethical prescriptions? After all, we know very well since Hume that we should not confuse our prescriptive and normative claims by deriving an ought from an is. But as Todd Lavin's chapter on Heidegger demonstrates, Heidegger's dealings with Dasein are ethical, and we can derive prescriptions from Heidegger's writings.

With regard to Merleau-Ponty, things are slightly different. In addition to his phenomenological descriptions, we have a political program. This politics is revealing of an ethics or of a concern for the ethical. I would argue that in his writings, the concern for the ethical seems to automatically translate into dealing with the political. His conclusions on the political indicate that he shares (or more exactly, may have influenced) many of the views of people such as Beauvoir and Sartre. Of these two, it was Beauvoir who most successfully articulated her ethical and political ideas. As my chapter on Beauvoir shows, her phenomenological inquiries lie at the root of both her ethical and, ultimately, her political conclusions. It is thus possible to take Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and infer the "missing link" between his phenomenology and the political. After all, if we are going to talk about the life of
the group and its organization— the political—we should certainly have something to say about the individuals within that group and how they insert themselves into the political, and therein, the ethical. However, as Kym Maclaren, in her chapter on Merleau-Ponty, shows, it is unnecessary to take such a detour to arrive at his ethics.

EXISTENTIALIST THINKERS AND ETHICS²°

The chapters comprising this book address eight key existentialist figures and show that they each in some way recognize the problem that ethics poses and the need to solve that problem. These chapters demonstrate how each philosopher arrives at a viable solution, thus showing that existentialist ethics is a genuine possibility.

Dominic Desroches examines the role played by exceptional figures, such as Job and Abraham, in Kierkegaard’s elaboration of an ethics throughout chapter 1. He shows that Kierkegaard’s sphere of the “universal” (det Almene) is in fact governed by language, where the norm is valid for all. The limit of ethics looms over Job and Abraham, who stand in silence. As these figures denote, the ethical norm is reinforced for Kierkegaard by a “suspension of the ethical” (24). Within this framework, as Desroches demonstrates, Kierkegaard “thinks the singular within the plural” (34) and can therefore provide a genuine existential ethics.

Nietzsche’s ethical thought is analysed by David W. Goldberg, in chapter 2. Goldberg refutes the charge of radical perspectivism against Nietzsche. The charge masks Nietzsche’s actual thesis and allows the critics to dismiss his ethical views. Goldberg explains that the charge has no philosophical or biographical basis. What Goldberg finds beneath the mask is not a call for radical perspectivism but an argument for the construction of
values "relative to a genealogy" (50), which allows us to evaluate actions on the basis of an ethically relative, but not a radically perspectival, framework.

We see, in chapter 3, Todd Lavin devoting his attention to Heidegger's implicit ethics through the examination of the Heideggerian notion of authenticity within contemporary society. An increase in the freedom of capital and the corresponding decrease in human control over socioeconomic conditions are said to inhibit Dasein's "ownmost" possibility (58). Lavin believes that the "episodic" fragmentation of time due to these conditions detaches Dasein from its authentic potentiality-of-being. Lavin proposes that only through recognizing this fragmentation via a "politics of authentic existence" can Dasein become an individual over and against the social forces depriving it of its resoluteness. Lavin is thus successful in deciphering an ethics in Heidegger's proposals.

Stephen Schulman contends, in chapter 4, that Hannah Arendt deserves to be called both an existentialist and an ethicist in her own right. He reads Arendt as an ethicist who affirms the importance of both realizing and finding meaning in the human situation as social. Schulman explains that according to Arendt, to achieve this mandate, human beings must do away with dehumanizing political regimes such as totalitarianism and instead act together and agree on principles to elucidate and give meaning to individual lives. According to Schulman's reading of Arendt, it is action that authenticates both individual and collective identity. Arendt's existentialism and essentialism are wed through our ability to make our choices and act upon them; it is only through public action that human beings can be more than mere beings.

Chapter 5 shows Glenn Braddock putting Sartre's atheistic arguments to the test. Braddock examines whether atheism justifies existentialism or is irrelevant to it in Jean-Paul
Sartre's *The Humanism of Existentialism*. As Braddock argues, atheism is irrelevant to Sartre's existentialism, as it plays no significant role in his conclusion regarding freedom and value. Although Sartre's writing is at times contradictory, Braddock points specifically to the gap between moral principles and their implementation, showing that regardless of divine command, we must as free moral agents interpret that gap and carry out our choices. Choice and responsibility are, therefore, unavoidable for the theist and atheist alike. However, as Braddock also states, Sartre ought to have clarified the relationship between atheism and existentialism to avert negative criticism that is focused on the nihilism and amorality of the atheistic worldview. An unambiguous treatment of atheism could, Braddock concludes, open doors to "value and meaning in the world" (104).

In chapter 6, Philip Knee unearths some connections between Camus' ethical thinking and that of the eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Knee pays particular attention to the ethics of rebellion, as expressed in Camus' *Rebel*. In this work, Camus aims to escape post-Nietzschean nihilism, which gives rise to two questions, one of rebellion as a defence of "human nature" and the other of the notion of rebellion as "solidarity," both of which Knee examines. His first inquiry gives insight into, and a foundation for, a mainly negative Camusian ethics, in that it promotes no positive values. Rousseau built his view on a similar skeptical notion of human nature. However, in the second inquiry, this ethics becomes positive, as a result of its promoting a norm to measure our being-with-others. Knee concludes that as much as Rousseau and Camus share on the ethical plane, their views diverge where the ethical enters the political realm.

The views of Simone de Beauvoir are my focus in chapter 7. In this essay, I dissociate Beauvoir's ethical endeavours from those of Sartre and then show how Beauvoir's phenomeno-
logical approach and her recognition of “situation” allow her to devise a fundamentally human ethics. I show how Beauvoir’s complex view of freedom gives her more room to devise a successful existentialist ethics. Through my examination of her essays on ethics, Pyrrhus et Cinéas, and The Ethics of Ambiguity, I show how she articulates an ethics “without recipes,” one that leaves the door open to an ambiguous and free agent. In this context, the individual is able to actualize his or her ontological freedom. Interestingly, Beauvoir’s ethics is also political, as there is a need for the collaboration of all so that this individual actualization can take place.

Finally, in chapter 8, Kym Maclaren presents the ethical thought of Merleau-Ponty as an “embodied” ethics akin to the virtue ethics of Aristotle. She proceeds to demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty’s unique views offer a solution to some criticism of virtue ethics from the standpoint of deontological ethics, that is, that there is no ethical imperative. She shows that Merleau-Ponty’s ethics relies on embodiment. Her explication of this notion reveals that individuals are always tied to others and that an imperative is indeed part of the life of these individuals, namely, the imperative of valuing and promoting the freedom of others. Maclaren thus presents Merleau-Ponty’s implicit ethics as a fundamental rethinking of traditional ethics.

NOTES

1 Oaklander, Existentialist Philosophy, 1–8.
2 Warnock, Existentialism, 3.
6 MacIntyre, “Existentialism,” 147–54.
8 Patrik, *Existential Literature*, xi.
9 MacIntyre, “Existentialism,” 149.
18 In this chapter, I use “transcendence” and “immanence” to refer to what could be called the great Platonic divide. “Transcendent” refers to whatever has to do with the otherworldly, the divine, or an “upper” reality. This use of “transcendence” and “transcendent” is important to specify, as some existentialist thinkers would use “transcendence” to refer to the capacity of individuals to overcome themselves. Thus, it is important to distinguish these two uses.
20 In this section, I have relied heavily on the preparatory work of my research assistant Christinia Landry. She provided succinct summaries of most of the chapters included in this book, and I have borrowed many of her own formulations.
In his existential topology (aesthetic, ethical, and religious), Kierkegaard conceives of ethics as “universal” (det Almene), that is to say, a sphere marked by language, where norms are universally valid. Indeed, in this scheme of the spheres of existence, Kierkegaard always conceives of ethics in its dialectical relationship with the aesthetic and religious spheres. Ethics is a transitory sphere (Gjennemgangssphære), as it is intermediate in the topology. This topology is first expressed in Either/Or, where, in the second part of the volume, Judge William writes two long letters addressed to A, the young defender of the aesthetic of the first part. As we can see, if ethics is the sphere of the universal, the sphere of norms as defended by Judge William, it is possible to study it in the works that follow Either/Or. This is what I do in the pages that follow. The study of exceptional figures offers the best insight and illustration of how, according to Kierkegaard, we are called to something larger than ourselves. The ethical effort exerted to remain silent demonstrates a going beyond ourselves. Is it not the role of the exceptional to keep silent to
mark the qualitative difference of itself and the universal, the social order, the order constituted by language? Furthermore, must existence respond to a series of duties reaching fulfillment in the social order? The analysis of the pseudonymous texts of 1843, Fear and Trembling and Repetition, demonstrates the contrary: duties played out in the social order do not dictate existence. For in silence (Tavshed), there is more. We find a relationship to the Absolute that language cannot express.

The purpose of this chapter is to recall why the figures of Abraham and Job, confronting silence, are, according to Kierkegaard, situated at the limits of ethics. It is shown that the “teleological suspension of ethics” in Fear and Trembling situates these figures at the crossroads of the transgression of ethics, which highlights these cases as exceptional. After this, I will show how Job, through his suffering, is constituted as an exception. Through the “dialectic of repetition” in Repetition, I will show how the exception (Undtagelsen) reinforces the ethical norm. It is here where Kierkegaard’s originality over Hegel appears. Whereas the Hegelian dialectic mediates the singular and the universal, Kierkegaard succeeds in conceiving the singular within the universal while satisfying the requirements of a “qualitative” dialectic, in which the terms remain forever irreconcilable. The silence of the exception plays a key role in Kierkegaard’s ethical thought.

THE SUSPENSION OF ETHICS IN FEAR AND TREMBLING

To begin, consider the case of Abraham as an exception to the universal law, keeping in mind the question of the teleological suspension of ethics. Problema I inquires as to whether there can be a teleological suspension of the ethical order, that is, the norm. This is problematic because without such a norm,
the story of Abraham would be lost. To sacrifice his son is contrary to ethics, although it is based on an unverifiable faith. We find that in the biblical story as chosen and reinterpreted existentially by Kierkegaard, the religious exception problematizes the limits of ethics. Recall the passage in Genesis that launches the Kierkegaardian problem: “After this, God would put Abraham to the test. So he called to him, ‘Abraham, Abraham; and when he said, I am here, at thy command, God told him, take thy only son, thy beloved son Isaac, with thee, to the land of Clear Vision, and there offer him to me in burnt-sacrifice on a mountain which I will show thee’.” After citing this passage, Kierkegaard asks, What should we do, faced by a contradictory order of this kind?

After all, the task is to kill Isaac, his beloved son – to sacrifice him, according to God’s command. Must Abraham sacrifice his son? Can he be certain that the order comes from God? Hence the double question haunting Kierkegaard: What happens if an individual is mistaken? Can he still count on salvation? However, Abraham did indeed follow this new law, and he succeeded: he did in fact retrieve his son (through an act of faith in the future and in the transcendent) by virtue of the absurd (\textit{i kraft af det Absurd}). So what does this suspension of the \textit{telos} of ethics mean for Kierkegaard’s readers?

To obey God’s extraordinary command, Abraham must provisionally suspend the principles of ethics, the obligation to love his son; otherwise, the sacrifice would be impossible. But since ethics categorizes a person who kills his son as a murderer, with respect to the community in general this sacrifice is in radical conflict with the recognized values of ethics. However, if God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, that means that he asks him to transgress a law that Abraham had respected until then, a natural law recognized by all, that of loving one’s son. God proposes a new law to Abraham that
cannot be universal, a new way to interpret the world. This law cannot be explained in the order of language and consequently cannot become a norm. This new law is not for everyone, but for Abraham as an exception. Insofar as this new law is addressed to the exception, the limit of its validity is marked. Hence the radical question addressed to ethics: How is one to conceive of the existence of cases that hinder the accomplishment of duties and in so doing enforce a “suspension” of the ethical by virtue of some superior principle?³

The suspension is required to avoid Abraham’s being judged on ethical grounds. Only the paradox (as ideality) is able to judge. Abraham is exceptional: he bypasses ethics, in virtue of a higher goal. He acts according to a duty expressed by God’s will. It is only possible to respect this absolute duty by suspending the telos of ethics. This suspension allows for a postponement of the fulfillment of human aims in the State. This suspension marks the problem of the exception conceived primarily as the transgression of ethics, but also, dialectically, as a reinforcement of the universality of the norm. Abraham, by faith, must return among his peers and “reassume” his role as ethical subject. This problem is existential not only because it concerns Abraham but also because it concerns each of us in our individuality within the human community.

The suspension makes it possible to mark the linguistic borders of the ethical sphere. In the religious relationship, the individual cannot speak or express the command from God. He is alone before the Absolute, which is beyond language. The religious person discovers that his or her interiority (or Hemmelig) is incompatible with exteriority. There is something that resists the exteriorization effected by language – das Innere is superior to das Äussere (die Entäusserung), though this contradicts Hegel’s affirmation in the Logic.⁴ The teleological suspension of ethics implies another answer to
Hegel. The suspension is in structural opposition to Hegel's teleological thought. It questions Hegel's notion of progressive evolution. Johannes' interpretation demonstrates that the figure of Abraham cannot be understood in the teleological framework of Hegel's dialectic and his Weltgeschichte. So the question arises: How can one go from the aesthetic to the religious while placing the ethical in parentheses?

Kierkegaard's conception not only addresses Hegel's teleological thought but also, with respect to the teleological suspension of ethics, illustrates (according to Johannes) the possibility of a subject's being confronted by a situation in which he or she has no duty except to God, that is, an absolute duty, that of being an exception (Undtagelse). This possibility reinforces the "facticity," or determinacy, of our social nature. Belonging to a community defines the basis of the exception, as well as allowing for the possibility of faith. Ethics provides the potential, wherein the exception provides its justification. Of course, it is not a moral imperative that pushes Abraham to sacrifice his son, as in the case of Agamemnon and Brutus, but a command from God in opposition to morality. Agamemnon and Brutus are exceptions, but exceptions justified by the universal, the State. Abraham is a real exception. He does not sacrifice his son for any external reason, such as a duty to the State. The sacrifice is made in answer to an internal certainty, an internal word or voice. Thus, Abraham proceeds from a privileged relationship of closeness to God — he obeys the Word that speaks to him.

The tragic heroes, Agamemnon and Brutus, soon understand that the struggle they suffer through returns them to the State. These heroes find that the ethical obligation was present in themselves, whereas Abraham's suffering is continuous. Faith is the paradox where interiority — a secret — has greater value than the exteriority of ethical manifestations categorized as general, universal. Kierkegaard is certainly ni fallor the first
thinker, inspired by Greek mythology, to succeed in the teleological suspension of ethics by making explicit the limits of the validity of the ethical order.

THE TEST IN REPETITION

In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard's aim is to show that ethical repetition is impossible, and his pseudonym, Constantin Constantius, demonstrates this ironically. *Repetition* tells the story of the failure of an attempted repetition in the Berlin theatre. On Constantin's return to Berlin, everything had changed! Aesthetically, repetition is impossible. The will to repeat an emotion is impossible because everything that surrounds the will changes. In Kierkegaard's narrative, Constantin remains calm in the storm, and the young man must find a new guide, for if he knows everything, nothing new can happen. Job becomes his guide. Job alone can show what the real movement of repetition consists in. Like Abraham, Job must remain silent for seven days and seven nights. Job is confronted by the obligation to be silent, since his experience goes beyond the limits of language.

This silence concerns the question of sin before God. In the letter dated 11 October, the young man discovers that his situation puts him at the outer limits of language (for us, he is at the limits of ethics), since there is no language in which one can express one's sin. He writes, "Why, then language says that I am guilty, for I ought to have foreseen this." and he adds, "I offer a reasonable douceur to anybody who invents a new word." How can the language of human beings express a sin concerning our relation to an Absolute such as God? Why can language (Sprag) not express what is essential, that is, suffering? Like Abraham, the young man resigns himself to recognizing that words cannot "express" the existential suffering of the inner self. Hence what follows in the letter:
"What is the human speech (Menneskelige Møl) they called language (Sprøg), what is it but a miserable jargon understood only by a clique? Are not the dumb beasts wiser for the fact that they never talk about such things? ... why then is this expressed in human language by saying that she is faithful, and I a deceiver?"9

Those who refuse to express themselves about their suffering are revealed here as wise, since no mode of verbal expression can articulate the paradoxical state of the young man who is guilty–innocent. Despite the possibilities of language, the young man is incapable of speaking of suffering. Incomprehension is a result of the limits of language. But it is precisely here that the figure of Job appears, in the letter dated 15 November:

Then I awake and begin again to read him aloud with all my might and with all my heart. Then suddenly I am struck dumb, I hear nothing more, see nothing, only in obscure outlines have I a presentiment of Job sitting upon his ash heap, and of his friends; but no one says a word, but the silence conceals within itself all that is horrible, as a secret which no one dare mention. Then the silence is broken [brydes Taushenden], and Job's tormented soul bursts out in a mighty shout. Him I understand, these words I make my own. The same instant, I sense the contradiction in this, and then I smile at myself as one smiles at a little child who has put on his father's clothes.10

Silence returns to play its role as an indicator of the possibilities of speech: it is the basis of the secret that defies universal ethics. The relationship between language, silence, and the critique of ethics will be clearer after a discussion of the category of the "test" (Prøvelse).

Essentially, as this category is transcendent, it belongs neither to immanent knowledge nor to language, ergo neither to aesthetics, ethics, nor dogmatic questions. Demonstrating
Job's situation, the test "places the human in a personal oppositional relation to God [sætter Mennesket I et reent personligt Modsætteningsforhold til God]," writes Constantin. Thus, Job affirms his right to constitute an exception through this category. Further, the category of the test (Prøvelse) expresses an effort, that is, an effort against God. It concerns itself with the degree of suffering necessary to accomplish the religious requirement. Here, Job's test defines religious, as opposed to aesthetic, experience. Ethics is put on hold: one passes from aesthetic immediacy to a second immediacy, that of faith, that of a direct relationship with God. In the case of Job, Kierkegaard notes, poetry cannot express religious suffering, which goes beyond ethics and the limits of language.

Avoiding the requirements of ethics, Job performs the test and comes through victorious by faith. However, the Prøvelse is continuous because it is "eo ipso characterized by his relation to time [bestemmet I Forhold til Time]." The test is not the purpose of existence but the spiritual torment of the search for God. It is continuous and requires constant faith. What remains after the test? There is an answer in the letter dated 13 January. Here repetition is accomplished: Job believed in God through terrible suffering and was doubly rewarded for his belief. Repetition was accomplished in the form of "receiving." The repetition accomplished by Job was not aesthetic but religious. This category is impossible to express in human language and speaks from the deepest silence:

When everything has come to a standstill, when thought is brought to a halt, when speech becomes mute [Sproget forstummer], when the explanation in bewilderment seeks the way home – then there must be a thunderstorm. Who can understand this? And yet who can find out any other conclusion? ... So then there is such a thing as a repetition [Gjentagelsen]. When does it come about? Well, that's not so easy to say in any human language [ikke godt at sige i noget menneskeligt
When did it come for Job? When all conceivable human certitude and probability pronounced it impossible.\textsuperscript{13}

From silence comes the most radical form of change and true repetition. From silence (a privileged relationship with God) comes the possibility of a new form of action, a form of positive repetition through faith. This is only possible through the transcendent category of repetition, which replaces the category of mediation based on the synthesis of opposites, which is possible to express in the German language. In the framework of repetition as a transcendent category, silence expresses the exception to ethics.

THE DIALECTIC OF THE UNIVERSAL 
AND THE EXCEPTION IN REPEITION

We will reach a complete understanding of the consequences of the exception, after considering how the exceptional reinforces the ethical norm. This position, \textit{unter uns gesagt}, is opposed to that of J. Sløk, for whom the exception cannot confirm the general rule.\textsuperscript{14} The exception is the decisive category in \textit{Repetition}, where the author develops his position, particularly in the third part, entitled "To Mister N.N., the Real Reader of This Book" (\textit{Til Velbyrdige Hr. N. N. denne Bogs virkelige Læser}). The exception is not defined in opposition to the general, or the universal (\textit{det Almene}), but is only discovered through a process contrary to that characteristic of the period, the Hegelian dialectic. The author warns us clearly: "The ordinary reviewer will find in this book the opportunity he desires to elucidate the fact that it is not a tragedy, a comedy, a romance, an epic, an epigram, or a novel; and will also count it unpardonable that one tries in vain to count 1, 2, 3. He will hardly be able to follow the development of thought, for it is an inverted development [\textit{da det er invers}].\textsuperscript{15}"
The process in fashion (Hegel’s logical trinity) is abolished. At the risk of not being understood, Kierkegaard refuses Hegel’s teleological dialectic from the outset, as shown in the analysis of the figure of Abraham. Constantin says, “This strife is exceedingly dialectical, having infinite nuances; it postulates absolute readiness in handling the dialectic of the universal, it requires swiftness in the imitation of movements, in short, it is as difficult as putting a man to death and leaving him alive [at slaee en Mand ih jel og lade ham leve].” Without a décocodeur, we are left to interpret for ourselves. What has Constantin in mind in this utterance? What can “putting a man to death and leaving him alive” mean? Quid hoc sibi vult! Are these not words from Kierkegaard’s personal experience, perhaps uttered on hearing of the recent engagement of Regina Olsen and Fritz Schlegel? Or could it possibly be a reference to the struggles for recognition Hegel described in the Phenomenology? However, this is unlikely, since the author rejects the method of a three-term exposition. In fact, the “dialectical strife between the exception and the universal” in question is a break where the two terms support one another, as shown in the rest of the passage: “The whole thing is a wrestling match in which the universal breaks with the exception, breaks with it in strife, and strengthens it by this conflict [brydes med den i Strid, og styrker den ved denne Brydning].” How can we explain this reinforcement of the norm?

It must be accepted that the reinforcement of the ethical norm (det Almene) by the exception is incomprehensible unless in the first place we see that there are exceptions. If we cannot explain them as exceptions to the universal, we cannot explain the universal either. Once again, a dialectic without synthesis appears. To understand one term without the other is impossible. In addition, the second term confirms the first. The strength of the universal is found in the affirmation of the exception: “The relation between the exception
and the universal is as follows [Forholdet is dette]: The exception thinks the universal when it thinks itself, it labours also for the universal when it elaborates itself, it explains the universal when it explains itself, and if one would study the universal thoroughly, one has only to look for the justified exception [en berettiget Undtagelsen] which manifests everything more clearly than does the universal itself.\(^{18}\)

The two terms of the dialectic of the exception and the universal reinforce each other through their opposition. The power of the exceptional “coincides”\(^{19}\) with the power of the submission to the universal, the ethical norm. In this form of reconciliation, repetition does not suppress the difference but maintains the opposite, making comprehensible both the exception and the fact that this exception \(qua\) justified exception reinforces the universal, in this way ensuring its own determination. Thus, ethics is existentially the business of the individual in the community and of the private character of thought in relation to the System.\(^{20}\) \textit{Ergo,} in this light, the paradoxical expression of the exception enables us to better understand the universal, even though the two terms resist each other – the terms must “sound” together, to borrow N. Viallaneix’s relevant musical metaphor.\(^{21}\)

**CONCLUSION**

To be understood properly, the teleological suspension of ethics in \textit{Fear and Trembling} must be read with the dialectic of repetition highlighted in the text of \textit{Repetition}, that is, through a cross-reading. Taking different points of view, the two texts deal with two sides of the same philosophical problem: How does one establish ethical validity? With respect to the figures of exception (Abraham and Job), we are left with the task of establishing two essential points.
First, the sacrifice God requires of Abraham does not enter the sphere of language, the space where ethical norms are established. Here, Kierkegaard moves away from the sphere of the universal, in which the norm is valid for all. As an exception, Abraham defied the ethical norm by obeying the Absolute situated beyond language, where the limits of ethics loom over Abraham, who stands in silence. He fulfilled a duty beyond ethics, which would, after the suspension of ethics, confirm his place in the human community. Thus, in contrast to Agamemnon, Abraham did not sacrifice his son in the name of the State but as a hero, reinforcing the ethical law.

Second, *eine Treppe hoch*, Job cannot “say” why he is suffering. Silence goes beyond ethics, toward religion. By a qualitative dialectic, as opposed to the dialectic of Hegel, the reinforcement of ethics must permit a paradoxical movement from the norm to determine the exception. In this paradoxical movement, Kierkegaard thinks the singular within the plural. This paradoxical movement is that of faith, which pushes the exception forward toward the future. The dialectic of repetition corresponds to that of faith expressed by Abraham. Faith ensures retrieval of something previously lost. This confirms, once again, that for Kierkegaard, the movement must not be made backward, as with Hegel, but forward, to precisely where it is possible to retrieve what was freely suspended, that is, ethics. If the *telos* of ethics can be put on hold in the Kierkegaardian reinterpretation of the story of Abraham, it is precisely because it can be taken back, as it is for Job, demonstrating that the silence of Abraham is of the same nature as Job’s suffering. According to Kierkegaard, Job can only be understood through Abraham. They are both figures of exception.
NOTES

1 I would like to thank Charles de Mestral for the translation from French to English and the University of Montréal for financial support. I am also grateful to my friend Christine Daigle and Christinia Landry for the revision of my paper.

2 Genesis 22.1–3.

3 To understand the relationship to the norm, see Clair, "La pensée éthique de Kierkegaard," 66–7.

4 de Silentio, Fear and Trembling, 96–7.

5 To Hegel, religious experience is not the final stage of the journey of subjectivity toward the Absolute. The believer's intimate relationship with God is only a stage we pass through, from cult to determined religion, to revealed religion, which must, in turn, find completion in the Christian community. This constitutes the final stage before philosophy, the science at the summit of dialectic. Only at this point does spirit reach full self-consciousness.

6 Agamemnon's story is well known. In Greek mythology, Agamemnon, son of Atreus and brother of Melenaus, is the mythical king of Mycene and Argos. Leader of the Greeks as they lay siege to Troy, he sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia, on the recommendation of the sage Calchas, to appease Artemis and to halt the winds. On returning to Troy, his wife, Clytemnestra, killed him. As for Brutus (Lucius Junius), this legendary personage is held to have deposed Tarquinius Superbus, the last king of Rome, and to have become one of the two first consuls of the republic, c. 509 BCE.

7 On the pseudonym, Constantin Constantius, see the article by E. Mooney, "Repetition: Getting the World Back," who sees in the name a reference to "constancy" (pp. 285–6).

8 For this part of the paper, I refer to the following translation of the text, Constantius, Repetition, 117–18.

9 Constantius, Repetition, 116.
16 Constantius, *Repetition*, 151 (with my modification of Lowrie’s translation).
17 Constantius, *Repetition*, 151.
19 Starobinski, “Kierkegaard et les masques,” 607. Starobinski is not wrong in insisting on the “coincidence” of terms in the dialectic (one might add Haman’s coincidence of opposites). This dialectic of coincidence is opposed – Constantin says “inverted” – with respect to Hegel. For this issue, see my *Expressions éthiques de l’intériorité*, especially secs. 9.2 and 9.3.
20 Deleuze, who studied Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, saw this clearly in writing, “Oppose repetition to moral law, to the point where it becomes the suspension of ethics, a thought beyond good and evil. Repetition appears as the *logos* of the solitary and the singular, the *logos* of the ‘private thinker’,” (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 6–7).
We live in an age of ethical relativism gone rampant, an age in which adjudication between moral positions has been undermined and thrown into doubt. One of the repercussions of postmodern thinking has been the dissolution of that conceptual certainty that modern philosophy and its philosophic predecessors reveled in: an envisioned certainty that enabled previous generations to condone or condemn moral positions outright and with a certitude that bordered on arrogance. But as our world grows rapidly smaller, our contemporary view (especially within the United States) is one that expects divergence of moral positionings and finds it instanced in actions both political and social. Much of this expectation toward moral diversity surfaced as a result of the postmodern turn in thought, initiated by such individuals as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Foucault, and Derrida, especially those considered “existential thinkers” (however one might define that term). Recently, the relativistic nature of existential philosophy has led to critical commentary disparaging relativistic morality, and politically we have seen a resurgence of dogmatic positioning
predicated on a return to "traditional values," again disparaging existential ethics. A common complaint of those who ridicule existential morality directs itself toward the atheism of specific philosophers, on the assumption that following on the "death of God" is a corresponding death of our ability to adjudicate between moral points of view, leaving nothing but absolute relativism in its wake. Without the metaphysics of the divine, these critics suggest, we cannot arbitrate between moral views, and all that is left is an open-endedness that must arguably allow for any and all axiological positionings.

To respond to this criticism, Jean-Paul Sartre, in the opening passages of *The Humanism of Existentialism*, expounds on the common complaint levied at atheistic existentialists, particularly the critique mounted by those of the "Christian standpoint." Specifically, these Christian denouncers accuse Sartre of proffering a philosophic position denying "the reality and seriousness of human undertaking." Sartre continues by exposing the inferred ground on which this denial grows, the rejection of "God and the eternal verities," a rejection that these Christian critics claim leads to the existential viewpoint that "there no longer remains anything but pure caprice, with everyone permitted to do as he pleases and incapable, from his own point of view, of condemning the points of view and acts of others." Here, in less than a single paragraph, Sartre explicates the core ethical dilemma that faces atheistic existentialism: given the demise of God, how can we objectively adjudicate between viewpoints in ethics, or for that matter, adjudicate on any issue?

Sartre was not the first postmodern to have faced such criticism and will not be the last. A precursor, one whose philosophical acumen brought the crisis most dramatically to the fore, was Friedrich Nietzsche. Critics of Nietzschean perspectivism often suggest that it also allows for a multiplicity of moral stances, predicated on an absolute relativism: a relativism
incapable of adjudicating about the moral worth of human conduct, even the most horrendous, that is, the Holocaust. At the heart of this criticism, like the Christian criticism of which Sartre speaks, is the death of God, a death that brings with it the deobjectification of morality, for it undermines the metaphysical foundation of traditional moral judgments. Hence, a similar criticism is focused on Nietzsche’s perspectivism, suggesting that his philosophy, when logically carried to its derivative consequences, leads to an open-ended relativism of a most troublesome and disturbing kind. Further, suggestion is made that the consequences of morally justifying all positions are absurd because no rational individual would be willing, ready, and able to accept the implications of a moral system lacking adjudicative power.

To the contrary, I contend that the position of these detractors derives from a naïve and limited grounding in Nietzschean philosophy – naïve in the sense that it simplifies his philosophy beyond recognition by masking it within a conceptual framework entirely contrary to Nietzschean philosophy. The mask that these critics encase perspectivism in is analogous to the stance of those early interpreters of the Übermensch, whom Nietzsche attacked as misconstruing the concept via a masking in “those very values whose opposite Zarathustra was meant to represent.” What the critics have accomplished is a “re-presenting” of Nietzsche in a moral mask that distorts the consequences of his thought and presents him as intellectually on par with those contemporary students who confront problems of moral divergence with that infamous line of radical subjectivity, “Oh, that is merely your perspective,” as if this were grounds for refuting a different point of view.

Unfortunately, Nietzsche’s style makes it all too easy to justify any reading of his philosophy by carefully selecting quotations while avoiding those confrontational to the mask. You
can easily develop a *prima facie* case to turn Nietzsche into anything from a radical perspectivist to an anti-Semite, or even a metaphysician – all examples of the masks that commentators have made Nietzsche wear. Many of these externally fabricated masks are constructs concealing and reconstructing Nietzschean thought into a bizarre caricature of itself, with the most horrendous example of such masking accomplished by his sister, Elizabeth, and the Third Reich. Often, the deconstructing of the mask reveals an agenda driven by an intent to falsely colour the philosophy of Nietzsche.

This is the case with the attempt to identify a radical perspectivism as a logical consequence of Nietzsche's philosophy, a masking that intentionally conceals the philosophical positioning that Nietzsche does adopt regarding moral perspectivism. I will suggest that philosophically and biographically – that is, in both word and deed – there is no basis for radical perspectivism in Nietzschean philosophy and that it is central to distance ourselves from any attempt to inflict such a mask upon his thought. Nietzsche was well aware of the possibility of being made to wear such false masks and warned us on numerous occasions against such decontextualizing of his thought. This is in no way to suggest that he does not intentionally wear masks, for he is very fond of concealing, but only that any mask that scholars place on Nietzsche must coincide with the philosophic whole, and Nietzsche clearly admonishes those who do otherwise, in the preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals*: "For this alone is fitting for a philosopher. We have no right to isolated acts of any kind: we may not make isolated errors or hit upon isolated truths. Rather do our ideas, our values, our yeas and nays, our if's and buts, grow out of us with the necessity with which a tree bears fruit – related and each with an affinity to each, and evidence of one will, one health, one soil, one sun." This passage, in very explicit terms, indicates that we are in the presence of a philosopher, and
as such Nietzsche places over himself a demand for an integration of thought. Hence, if radical perspectivism is the Nietzschean position, then we should expect it to "grow out of" and be interconnected with his philosophical corpus "with the necessity with which a tree bears fruit - related and each with an affinity to each." If a textual justification cannot be substantiated, then to attach radical perspectivism to Nietzsche would be erroneous.

Further, for Nietzsche it is not merely an author's textual fruit that is philosophically grounded in this "one soil," but a philosopher's actions are also derivative of the soil, the creative ground for this fruit to develop. Given Nietzsche's predilection for intellectual Redlichkeit (intellectual integrity) and all that it entails, we should not expect a Heideggerian approach to moral problems but a more Socratic one in which logos (word) and ergon (deed) coincide. This could explain why Nietzsche had such a love-hate relationship with Socrates, with the positive aspect derived from Socratic Redlichkeit, the integrity with which Socrates led his life and ultimately sacrificed it on a matter of principle. Since that fateful trial, in 399 BCE, Socrates has represented the philosophic ideal, for he was one whose ergon and logos coincide, and hence his drinking of the hemlock established the "ironic Athenian" as the moral standard for philosophers, exemplifying one who acts on the basis of Redlichkeit.

Given this drive for the integrity of word and deed, our question regarding perspectivism centres on whether Nietzsche's philosophy as a whole leads necessarily to a moral free for all in which every viewpoint is or could be substantiated? Can we find a substantive ground for a radically perspectival morality that is both biographically and textually evident in the life that is Nietzsche? Was Nietzsche as radical as this?

Let me begin with an event in Nietzsche's life that speaks volumes in solidifying our understanding of his negative
stance toward any absolute and radical moral capriciousness and supplies evidence that his moral position is in no sense bankrupt. I want to focus on the mature Nietzsche’s response to his sister’s marriage to Bernhard Förster and her acceptance of his anti-Semitic views. Through both logos and ergon, Nietzsche leaves little doubt as to his view of anti-Semitism: he condemns it outright. Exemplification of his position surfaces in a letter to his sister, from Christmas of 1887:

You have committed one of the greatest stupidities – for yourself and for me! Your association with an anti-Semitic chief expresses a foreignness to my whole way of life which fills me again and again with ire or melancholy ... It is a matter of honor with me to be absolutely clean and unequivocal in relation to anti-Semitism, namely, opposed to it, as I am in my writings ... It arouses mistrust against my character, as if publicly I condemned something which I favored secretly – and that I am unable to do anything against it, that the name of Zarathustra is used in every Anti-Semitic Correspondence Sheet, has almost made me sick several times.

There is no equivocation here, no acceptance of opposing moral positionings on the basis of a capricious radical perspectivism. In fact, the letter indicates that in both action and word, Nietzsche remains opposed to what he termed in a letter to his friend Franz Overbeck, “cursed anti-Semitism,” going on to inform Overbeck that it “is the cause of a radical break between me and my sister.” As an exemplification of his position on open-ended perspectivism, this incident in his life stands as a clear sign of Nietzsche’s antagonism toward radical perspectivism: he acts on the basis of a moral ranking that contradicts and opposes radical perspectivism.

This incident supplies a ground for an understanding of Nietzsche’s antagonism toward radical perspectivism by opening up the question of how anyone who adopted a radically
A Nietzschean Solution to Ethical Relativism

A relativistic point of view could so vehemently condemn anti-Semitism, for is not anti-Semitism a moral assessment of worth and hence, given the deobjectification following on the death of God, one of equal value? Notice that Nietzsche informs us that not only are his actions indicative of someone who abhors the anti-Semitic viewpoint, but also philosophically he leaves no uncertainty about his textual condemnation of the anti-Semite. For an in-depth analysis of the biographical and textual bases of Nietzsche's condemnation of anti-Semitism, I recommend Yirmiyahu Yovel's work *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews*. Yovel supplies evidence that the mature Nietzsche's abhorrence of anti-Semitism is not isolated merely within personal letters, but numerous biographical and textual references confirm the extent of his "anti-anti-Semitic" stance. This leads us to ask, if Nietzsche, as someone who prided himself on possessing intellectual integrity, were an honest radical perspectivist, how could he with a straight face condemn anti-Semitism or for that matter any moral positioning? As indicated in the preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals*, to be intellectually honest traverses both the internal configurations of our philosophical conceptualizations and the external actions reflecting these conceptualizations, and Nietzsche's actions toward his sister thus reflect a moral stance contrary to radical perspectivism.¹⁰

Critics of Nietzschean perspectivism would have us believe that, philosophically, Nietzsche preaches a radical, open-ended ethical theory incapable of axiological decision-making on moral stances, although his actions suggest precisely the opposite. What is at stake here is the extent to which Nietzsche's *logos* and *ergon* coincide: either Nietzsche supplies a ground to arbitrate moral positions or he succumbs to the hypocrisy of one who "talks the talk" but does not "walk the walk." The foregoing biographical example explicitly presents a grounded perspectivism, in which arbitration of axiological worth is indeed
inherent. If we are to take Nietzsche at his word, a word that forbids the philosopher isolated acts, errors, or truths, then we must locate a textual ground to explain how Nietzsche can adjudicate between moral points of view and still allow for perspectivism.

To find this ground, it will help to examine briefly the philosophic basis on which perspectivism flourishes, particularly that of atheistic existentialism, and that philosophical basis is the death of God. Nietzsche’s realization that the Western philosophic tradition self-destructs in the death of the divine supplies a firm foundation for the moral controversy of radical perspectivism to surface. Two textual sources that do much for our understanding of both the influence and the history of this death are aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science* and “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable: The History of an Error,” from *Twilight of the Idols*.

Aphorism 125, “The Madman,” stands as a culmination of the opening sections of Book III of *The Gay Science*, opening with Nietzsche speaking about the influence that “shadows” of God will and do have (section 108) and ends with the madman’s proclamation of the death of God. As is evident within these two sections, Nietzsche is not projecting a future event, for in both passages the demise of the divine is already a concept instantiated, just not recognized or concretely grasped. We see this in section 108 by his use of “shadow,” a depiction of the death that has already occurred, leaving only the silhouette of that which was taken as substantial, and Nietzsche is explicit in aphorism 125. This deed, accomplished conceptually, still requires time for its assimilation and comprehension, but the logical death of God is an act complete.

The completion of the logical act is courtesy of Immanuel Kant and his *Critique of Pure Reason*, as the passage from *Twilight of the Idols* suggests. In “The History of an Error,” Nietzsche
presents a genealogical account of the process that led to the death of God, an account whose brevity is surprising. In six short sections, with each representing a stage in the conceptual development that leads to the death of God and beyond, Nietzsche details the philosophic ground and hermeneutical permutations that resulted in this death of the divine. What is most relevant is that he contextualizes this death within an historical tradition in which an opening salvo by Plato leads to interpreted nuances of the original error. Each subsequent historical stage is an offshoot of the beginning, and Nietzsche can maintain the brevity by referencing only those that were most influential: Platonic, Christian, and Kantian, with the remaining three stages instancing the new position to come. What stands out is the connected relationship "surfacing" between the founding error and all the subsequent stages, including the final stage. Nietzsche views the death of God as a conceptual evolutionary development, following on the Platonic error that opened this history. Waxing biblically, we might say that in the beginning was the Socratic-Platonic bifurcation of reality: a division into Being and becoming, a true and an apparent realm. But what was the error Plato made?

Nietzsche bases his negative evaluation of Plato's metaphysics, as error, on what Nietzsche terms our inability to judge life. In *Twilight of the Idols*, he contends "that the value of life cannot be estimated. Not by the living, for they are an interested party, even a bone of contention, and not judges; and not by the dead for a different reason." We must view with skepticism the attempt of an "interested party" to objectively judge life, and Plato's condemnation of the cave and his corresponding elevation of the realm of the forms is itself an attempt at decontextualizing a conceptual position by suggesting that it transcends the historical reality in which it surfaces. Judgments themselves are not problematic for Nietzsche, as evidenced by his attack on anti-Semitism and his
desire to "revalue all values." No, only those evaluative judgments that promulgate themselves as objective and universal receive Nietzsche's polemical wrath. Plato's error was to seek solution, where by solution he strove for the once and for all.

"The History of an Error" abounds with images and terminology harkening back to Plato's cave, as does the madman aphorism. These allusions are intentional on Nietzsche's part and indicative of the conceptual genealogy in which Nietzsche's thought surfaces. For example, in the madman aphorism, the death of God unchains us from the sun and the gravitational influences of this metaphysical luminescence that has grounded moral proclamations. And having released us from this great star, Nietzsche sets us free from the philosophic voice that has lurked in the background of Western philosophic thought: that of Plato. Nietzsche is well aware that the genealogical ground from which his philosophic thought springs is tied inevitably to Plato's luminescent idea of the good, and hence Nietzsche pays a kind of homage to the one who must be overcome.

There is no need to follow the historical hermeneutic of the error; we only need to recognize that as a result of Plato's bifurcation of reality, the subsequent historical evolution of the error led to mutated stages that are instanced in "The History of an Error." Ultimately, Kant perceived the error logically, and hence the beginning of the road to overcoming Plato's mistake surfaced, but Kant could not accept the consequences of his own argument. Nietzsche's polemic against Kant centres on this lack of intellectual Redlichkeit, for if the 'noumenal' realm is a "beyond" to which we have no access, then in what sense can it be meaningful, and if not meaningful, then how could it obligate? The third stage of this historical genealogy, the Kantian stage, reflects this revelation, but it is the following stages that solidify the Nietzschean position. The result is the death of God, a death to the connotation that metaphysical
terms can have for us, as well as the dissolution of the binary realms: Being and becoming are united once again in the character of Dionysius.\textsuperscript{15}

From this soil springs the possibility of Nietzschean perspectivism, and that is predicated on the death of God and the instantiation of what Nietzsche terms active nihilism: a nihilism of strength that recognizes that \textit{the highest values devaluate themselves}. The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer.\textsuperscript{16} Perspectivism is the recognition that objectivity is meaningless and interpretations are all that there is – no facts, just interpretations of facts. With the death of the dogmatic positioning that metaphysical constructs supplied, there appears to be a corresponding death in the ability to evaluate moral positions, for adjudication loses its traditional criteria on which these decisions are made. Without the objectifying influence of a metaphysical ground, pure subjectivity seems to hold preeminence, and hence the criticism of both Nietzschean perspectivism and atheistic existentialism.

Yet, the preceding quote references only "the highest values," those values that claim transcendency in the light of historical reality, for they self-destruct in the evolutionary process that led to Nietzsche. These "highest values" are precisely those that the title of \textit{Beyond Good and Evil} references, for Nietzsche has no contention with those adjudications he terms good and bad. Nietzsche’s position, derivative as it is from the death of God (metaphysics), is one that will not accept axiological judgments that proclaim the mantle of absoluteness. Hence, both the aim and the why that are in reference to these highest values are rejected, but Nietzsche does not reject those evaluations that are contextualized within the historical milieu, valuations of good and bad. We see a confirmation of this perspective in Nietzsche’s treatment of good/evil versus good/bad, in the first essay of \textit{On the Genealogy of Morals}: his polemic is against those who
adopt a moral position of good/evil that is absolutist in claim.

What is allowed is a relative adjudication, one not absolute but constrained by the genealogical conditions that frame all our actions. Nietzsche's aphorism, "The History of an Error," itself reflects this genealogical framing, as there are indications that the stages are inevitable, not in the sense that destiny demanded a Jesus or a Kant at precisely the time they surfaced but in the sense that the opening Platonic salvo set the ground for the mutations to surface. Without the Platonic error, the course of Western civilization would have followed a different trajectory, not a free for all but a path constrained by the context in which perspectives surface. Nietzsche sees himself as one whose thought is likewise not isolated but necessarily contextualized and hence limited by the frame of conceptual genealogy enclosing him. This limit supplies not only a constraint to what he can think or do but also an order of rank with which Nietzsche can axiologically adjudicate between moral positions. Hence, genealogy becomes the key to his moral point of view, and the importance of genealogy can be surmised from the title of his work on morals, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. What, then, can genealogy do for us in regard to the adjudication of moral positions?

To answer this question, it is central to remember that for Nietzsche's genealogical morality, we cannot decontextualize moral agents or their guiding ethical concepts from the historical reality into which they were born. No, to the contrary, Nietzsche is all too aware of the impact of historical circumstances on the canvas that is a person. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, we see the impact of both *logos* and *ergon* guiding and constraining the established moral conceptual frameworks and find in modern genetics an explanatory system that is predicated on a similar genealogical comprehension of the impact that context has. Genetically, we are
guided and constrained by the coded DNA we obtain from our parents and that they obtained from their parents, etc., etc. This material does not predetermine our physical construct absolutely but, with nurturing influences, closes some and opens other paths. Hence, a doctor can prescribe a certain course of action on the basis of the appearance of certain genetic material in our DNA. Even though the code does not predetermine the projected outcome, the doctor's recommendations are not arbitrary or capricious. What the code does is both open and limit the possibilities.

For Nietzsche, decisions of value are similar to the received genetic code, but they are transferred via a Bildung, a process of inculturation via education, whose purpose is to preserve a moral outlook. The moral "code" supplies the member of a culture with a moral identity predicated on the desire of a tradition to prolong itself. A genealogical line is established, and the material of transmission is not DNA but conceptual frameworks enabling a certain species to survive, that of our selves. Since the value of life cannot be estimated once and for all but only perspectivally, the moral proclamations of any tradition are arbitrary from a highest values stance: in other words, given a decontextualized clean slate, any value holds just as much worth as another. But, and this is the key to arbitrating between moral points of view within a genealogical perspectivism, we do not begin with a clean slate, for we were born into an existing Bildung, whose tradition both opens and limits our choices. The openness surfaces from the ability of the conceptual medium to mutate, just as the genetic medium mutates, and the limits surface from the constraining impact that a tradition has on its members.

In conclusion, then, Nietzsche's perspectivism does allow for the ability to arbitrate between moral positions, an arbitration that is not idealized but rests on the contextualization of morality. This "seeing in context" does not allow
an open-ended perspectivism, leading to an inability to judge; to the contrary, Nietzsche does in fact judge—as exemplified by his response to anti-Semitism—but he predicates his judgments on a genealogical ground that is capable of overcoming the death of God and the indecisiveness that appears to follow on this demise. Hence, morally adjudicative positions are relative to a genealogy, and we can arbitrate moral points of view within a genealogy, leaving Nietzsche with a moral position that is far from bankrupt—it is beyond good and evil, but not beyond good and bad.

NOTES

1 Historical examples of such arrogance abound and are reflected in such incidents as the Crusades, the European invasion of the Americas, and the incursion of the West into Japan. These events reflect the cultures of those who had little question about their axiological choices.

2 In the United States, we have seen the backlash toward postmodern thinking in the emergence of conservatism in both the social and the political arenas, especially with the ascending power of the religious right.

3 Sartre, Essays in Existentialism, 32.

4 Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, 261.

5 For a good analysis of the ease with which Nietzschean thought can be used to substantiate prima facie cases, see Wilcox’s Truth and Value in Nietzsche, 13.

6 Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals, 16.

7 For an in-depth account, I recommend Yovel’s Dark Riddle, particularly ch. 8, “Anti-Anti-Semite.” For a more sympathetic account of Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche and her relation to anti-Semitism, I suggest “The Elisabeth Legend” by Robert C. Holub, in the volume Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism.

9 Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, 126.

10 It is on the lack of intellectual *Redlichkeit* that Nietzsche attacks Kant, his inability to follow the logical consequences of his position. And what Nietzsche most admired in both Socrates and Jesus is precisely the fact that their actions reflected their philosophical positions, regardless of whether Nietzsche concurred with them. Nietzsche expresses this in *The Antichrist*, sec. 35: "This 'bringer of glad tidings' died as he had lived, as he had taught – *not* to 'redeem men' but to show how one must live."


12 What Nietzsche suggests is that with Kant and his recognition that the *noumenal* realm is beyond our abilities to comprehend, the death of God has occurred in thought but has not been followed through in action. See *Gay Science*, sec. 25, especially Walter Kaufmann's note on p. 264; also see the preface to *Daybreak*, 2–3.


14 This is precisely how Nietzsche depicts the stage following Kant. Where Kant is only capable of seeing the Platonic idea through "mist and skepticism," the following stage is the "first yawn of reason." Kant only sees the logical in his argument, and for Nietzsche he becomes an intellectual coward for not allowing the consequences of the logical to impact on the actual: for not allowing his *logos* and *ergon* to coincide.

15 This is central to understanding the closing section of *Ecce Homo*, 335: "Have I been understood? – Dionysus versus the Crucified." Nietzsche understands Christianity as a derivative of Platonism and hence as the construction of a falsely bifurcated reality, whereas he sees Dionysus, a Greek god with ties to both mortality (Semele) and immortality (Zeus), as the god that unifies both realms in a single all-encompassing vision.


17 A good example of the influence that environmental factors have is seen with twins. Even though they are genetically identical, there
are enough differences in the environment to result in distinctions, both behavioural and physical, for parents to differentiate their children with ease.

18 These are precisely the distinctions that Nietzsche makes in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and it is quite evident he sides with good/bad over good/evil.
The main thesis of this chapter is that only in and through collective social action can *Dasein* win its own self. I do not mean to distort or cover over the fundamental *Jemeinigkeit*, or “mineness,” of *Dasein*—that is, its having its being entrusted to it, to win or lose it, to choose or abandon it to the “They,” and I affirm with Heidegger that the being that we ourselves are “is always mine.” Yet, to win itself, to choose itself in its being, *Dasein* must complement its “individuation” with collective action. I propose that the existential project of selfhood may complete itself only through complex social activism. The task of becoming an individual is thoroughly political, and it is only through becoming political that we become sufficiently individual.

In this chapter, by rereading and retrieving the political ramifications of Heidegger’s existential analytic, I seek to contribute to an understanding of the possibility of an existential ethics. I hope to show that authentic existence does not end in isolated individualism lacking all moral guidance but leads to social engagement, with deep moral commit-
ments. However, the social and moral commitments of authentic existence do not present themselves as universal and generalizable. They arise from the concrete insertion of the individual into the specific circumstances of his or her world. The thesis of this chapter – namely, that it is only in and through collective social action that Dasein can win its own self – cannot be arrived at by abstraction but only by concretely working out authentic existence within present society.

There is textual support for my thesis within Heidegger's own writings, albeit implicit and not thought out. For example, Heidegger wrote, "as authentic being a self, resoluteness does not detach Da-sein from its world, nor does it isolate it as free floating ego." Rather, "resoluteness ... pushes [Dasein] toward concerned being-with with the others." Nevertheless, Heidegger is particularly deficient in thinking through the social and political dimensions of his own thought. On Heidegger's behalf, I say it is clear that the primary concern of Being and Time is not with the "ontic" conditions for Dasein's authenticity; even the ontological basis of authenticity is only preliminary to the primary aim of reworking the question of being. That Heidegger all too readily seeks recourse in being, rather than in concrete social practices – even justifying this recourse as an act of concreteness – should and has been questioned, but this issue will not be pursued here; rather, I raise a different criticism – what I refer to as Heidegger's reification of the They in the existential structure of "falling prey."

Under Kierkegaard's influence, Heidegger provided a sensitive critique of human relations, but he understood them as having an ontological, rather than an ontic, basis and therefore made them part and parcel of the human condition. This reification of the They undermines any social activism attempted to transform these social relations into something
more authentic. Thus, in *Being and Time*, the project of selfhood loses any real political or collective dimension and remains private and personal.

The task of this chapter is to compensate for this restricted focus by dethroning the They and finding within *Being and Time* resources rich enough to make a case for concrete political activism on the basis of the existential project of becoming an individual, or of choosing our own being – or more generally, on grounds of authenticity itself. *Angst*, as Heidegger made clear, is part and parcel of the human condition, and it is in *Angst* that we are brought before ourselves through our own being. Only in *Angst* is the authenticity of being-a-self not closed off and repressed in “entanglement.”* Angst* individuates *Dasein*, that is to say, it throws it resolutely back on its own authentic potentiality for being-in-the-world. However, a world that has institutionalized inauthenticity, that has promoted and preserved inauthentic existence, that socially encourages us to choose against our own being and thus to lose ourselves becomes a world that we must “resolutely” choose against, in choosing to become a self. Thus, I argue in this chapter that *Angst*, by individualizing *Dasein* and by throwing it resolutely back on itself, robs *Dasein* of its political apathy and complacency and reveals “the world” in which it dwells precisely as the arena of its own authenticity, a world with which it must now engage for the sake of this authenticity.

At this point in Heidegger’s thought, it is clear that any genuine understanding of authentic existence must be complemented by critical social theory, and for this I turn to Zygmunt Bauman, who has been an important voice in the formation of a critical analysis of our post- or late modern – or in Bauman’s word, “liquid,” modern – world. The liquid aspect of our present age is its rapid change and transformation, the fact that modernity – the project of modernizing and refashioning the socioeconomic structure of society –
has turned back on itself. We have now entered the “modernization of modernity,” where it is not a new order that is being sought out from an old one but the permanent dissolution of all order for the sake of perpetual change. An element of disorganization has now been institutionalized in our socioeconomic system. Globalization, deregulation, and privatization all reflect this shift toward post-, or liquid, modernity. This shift poses new challenges to the human condition and for any existential self-choice. We must trace out some of the consequences of Bauman’s analysis for a “politics of authentic existence.” We will find these consequences most fully articulated in the concept of inauthentic time; our liquid modern world institutionalizes inauthentic time and makes it something Dasein must struggle against if it seeks to win its own self. The struggle against institutionalized inauthenticity, established in the very fabric of social existence, shapes the moral commitments of a resolute Dasein.

INSTANTIATED IN AUTHENTICITY

To understand the institutionalized inauthenticity of our current society, we need to refer to two interrelated factors: 1) capital’s increasing freedom; and 2) the human being’s decreasing control over its own socioeconomic conditions. These factors are interrelated, because increasing freedom of capital may be bought only at the price of the human being’s decreasing control over that capital. All discourse of deregulation, privatization, competition, and economic flexibility reflects this unique character of our age. Bauman refers to the increasing freedom of capital as the “deterриториализация of power,” meaning global economic powers become increasingly free of external controls and restrictions. The representational institutions of government, having rescinded their control over crucial economic forces to
the free play of the market, no longer adequately control or regulate financial transactions. The deterritorialization of power also refers to capital’s “disengagement” from, and “noncommitment” to, labour. This unbridled freedom of capital has enabled it to become increasingly global and thereby enabled it to act independently of any long-term commitments to local labour. Reproduction and growth of capital no longer depend on a lasting relationship with labour in a massive factory at a fixed address. Symbolized by the laptop computer and cellular telephone, global capital is mobile, whereas labour is immobile. Capital now depends on investors, shareholders, and consumers who are as mobile as capital. The deterritorialization of power therefore refers both to the freedom of global capital and to the disengagement of global capital from any commitment to local labour.

The human consequence of such deterritorialization of power is the disempowerment of local communities, the disintegration of their “meaning-generating and meaning-negotiating capacity.” To have less control over the economic forces that shape our lives is to have less control over the formation of the meaning and identity constituting our lives. Local communities and, thus, the individuals making up these communities no longer govern their own identity formation. Advanced computer technology, whether it be the cellular phone, satellite television, or the Internet, has created “a ‘multi-network’ society,” a term Bauman uses under the influence of Manuel Castells. What Herbert Marcuse wrote about the antenna on every house, the transistor radio on every beach, the jukebox in every car or restaurant, may now be said about the cellular phone for every ear and the satellite television or the Internet for every eye, namely, that we are “not to be left alone.” This radical integration of our local communities into the global multinetwork society actually erodes the meaning-generating and meaning-negotiating capacities of these communities, for
it renders the individuals within these communities passive and dependent on global, or “transcendent,” sources of meaning. The mass media, over which Dasein remains passive, increasingly determine and condition the projects of our being through which the world is disclosed. Instead of Dasein becoming decisive in its concern for its own being, the mass media disburden it of its concern and articulate for it the referential totality of significance. Dasein is thus estranged from its own-most potentiality-of-being.

Bauman also builds off of Thomas Mathiesen’s important article, “The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault’s ‘Panopticon’ Revisited,” in which Mathiesen coined the term, “Synopticon” for the power mechanism of mass media. Under the Synopticon, the many are seduced into watching the few, that is, the celebrities of world politics, economics, sports, or entertainment. Here the locals are constituted merely as watchers and thus excluded from the world they watch, which reinforces their own impotence. Furthermore, “the act of watching unties the watchers from their locality,”12 and the focus of their attention is no longer their concrete, local existence but the lives of global celebrities; and it is in their image that the locals now seek to recreate the meaning of their own lives. Bauman writes, “Life on screen dwarfs and strips of its charm the life lived; it is the lived life which seems unreal, and will go on looking and feeling unreal as long as it is not refashioned in its own turn into screenable images.”13

The “screenable” image, in which the locals now seek to recreate the meaning of their lives, is primarily an image of consumption, such that shopping has become the sine qua non of our present society. Indeed, shopping has become the act of existence itself, that by which I become a self. Yet, to become a self now means to select my identity through the use of mass-produced and mass-merchandized commodities.
However, consumer society is further based on the creation of ever-new desires without satisfaction and the temporality of all engagements, attention, and focus. Thus, our consumer-driven economy creates publicly recognizable self-identities only to publicly devalue these identities so that consumers are perpetually driven to abandon and replace them.

That our identity should become a never complete or stable life task may seem to reflect an existential truth. However, Heidegger and Sartre, although they emphasized that ours is the being whose being is always in question, also recognized the need for active self-determination and self-choice, not the object-directed, passive receptivity of the consumer economy. With reference to the liquid modern flexibility of self-identity, Bauman uses the expression “exhilarating lightness of being,” ever ready to fluctuate with the changes of the market. “The hub of postmodern life strategy,” writes Bauman, “is not identity building, but the avoidance of being fixed.” Identity formation, as analysed in Being and Time, is the process of Bildung, through which we appropriate a cultural tradition and make it our own in the process of formulating ourselves. Although this identity is never complete or fixed and we are always in process of becoming more fully ourselves, it is only in this process that we gain any constancy. However, the postmodern life strategy avoids all constancy and self-formulation. Its avoidance of being fixed reflects its radical disposal to market forces, ready to be shaped and reshaped at will. Kenneth Gergen refers to the “pastiche” personality, a “social chameleon,” which is ever receptive to plastic market forces. Jeremy Seabrooks sums up the relation between the individual and consumer society well, when he writes, “it is not so much that capitalism has delivered goods to the people, as that the people have been increasingly delivered to the goods.”
Our “synoptical society of shopping/watching addicts”\textsuperscript{18} recreates the human condition as episodic. It leads to the “fragmentation of time into episodes.”\textsuperscript{19} Time, or rather temporality, is the very condition of \textit{Dasein}, and only through temporality does it achieve its own authenticity. Therefore, the fragmentation of time has a direct impact on the task of authenticity, which we must now explore. Authentic \textit{Dasein} is never a static identity but ever engaged in the temporalization of itself. Authentic \textit{Dasein} is always moving ahead of itself, toward its future potentiality-of-being, and yet in being open to its own future, it must take over and retrieve its past, its “thrownness,” in which it always and already was. As John Caputo writes, “when \textit{Da-sein} comes toward itself in its authentic potentiality for Being, it comes back to itself and retrieves that which it has been all along,”\textsuperscript{20} and Heidegger’s “futurally coming back to itself”\textsuperscript{21} is thus the act by which authentic \textit{Dasein} opens itself to its ownmost potentiality-of-being and responsibly takes over the situation in which it finds itself. The present is now revealed as a moment of decision and self-choice. Or, as Heidegger writes, “resolute, \textit{Da-sein} has brought itself back out of falling prey in order to be all the more authentically ‘there’ for the disclosed situation in the ‘moment’.”\textsuperscript{22} These ecstasies of temporality—future, past, and present—through which \textit{Dasein} exists, are the very act by which it is thrown back on itself and wins itself, the act by which it commits itself to its being and takes responsibility for itself.

The authentic moment, in which \textit{Dasein} is now open and free to live its existence decisively, contrasts radically with the episodic life of the consumer enmeshed in a multinetwork society. Time, and more specifically the primordial time of the authentic individual who temporalizes his or her self in a
moment of self-choice, is precisely what this society displaces. Our economic and social relations fragment life into episodic, rather than existential, moments. Episodes are fundamentally self-enclosed entities that have no relation to, or consequence for, the past or future. Episodes are brief encounters without lasting engagement. Whether in the case of economic relations, which become noncommittal and temporary as a result of the freedom of capital; social relations, which become equally noncommittal and temporary as a result of the transformation of society to one of shopping malls; or our own relation to ourselves, which becomes once more noncommittal and temporary as a result of our pastiche personalities, time is in all cases fragmented into episodes. A life of existential moments is one in which each present moment poses itself as one of self-choice to shape and thus bear responsibility for the situation of our existence, a life that ties both past and future together in the present moment. A life of episodic moments, however, unties both past and future and becomes a life in which each present moment is self-contained, posing itself as a moment of plasticity and pliability to market forces, to be shaped by and to be responsive to forces that continuously decide our situation.

What the episodic nature of the human condition reflects is the fundamental vulnerability of the individual to market forces. No longer is the individual decisive in the constitution of the referential totality of significance in which he or she lives. Rather, it is the market forces that are decisive, whereas the individual's capabilities now lie in his or her flexibility and pliability to these forces. Thus, the fragmentation of time into episodes leads us back to the deterritorialization of global power and the disempowerment of localized individuals, whereby global powers over which local individuals have no control increasingly make our decisions.
With Bauman's critical social theory in mind, we can now develop Heidegger's contribution to an existential ethics. As previously noted, an existential ethics cannot prescribe universal and generalizable moral duties. However, the moment we take up the project of becoming an individual within the context in which we find ourselves, the moment we are thrown absolutely back on ourselves, the task of authenticity imposes its own demands, with their own ethical import. To face the Angst of our existence and thus choose ourselves and become responsible for our own being requires us to choose against this fragmentation of time and the socioeconomic structures that have institutionalized inauthenticity – choose against an economy that frees capital while ensuring the impotence of the individuals in that economy, choose against the power mechanism of mass media that reinforces this impotence, choose against a society that produces the individual only as a consumer, and choose against a life that erodes self-choice and authentic moments of decisiveness. To choose ourselves requires us to choose a society that in its very operation institutionalizes authentic existence. Thus, the project of selfhood implies its own ethical import, namely, 1) that individual authenticity can only be secured and guaranteed by collective work; and 2) that the individuation achieved by Angst leads to the solidarity of social activism.

You may immediately object to the proposal to institutionalize authentic existence. Would this not rob Dasein of its very Jemeinigkeit, of its nontransferable responsibility to itself, and rob it of its ownmost potentiality-of-being, which, as revealed in being-toward-death, bears no relation to others? Heidegger is clear that in being-toward-death – wherein Dasein is thrown back on itself completely and individualized – "all relations to other Da-sein are dissolved."23 Facing the task of
our own being-a-self through a confrontation with our own death, *Dasein* realizes that "being-with the others fails when one's ownmost potentiality-of-being is at stake." In the light of these comments, to the effect that our relation to others dissolves or fails in the face of our ownmost relation to ourselves, it appears that any attempt to institutionalize authentic existence would reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of authentic existence itself.

Kierkegaard, the most individualistic of all existentialists, nevertheless directs us to the resolution of this problem. He writes, "every human being is to live in fear and trembling, and likewise no established order is to be exempted from fear and trembling. Fear and trembling signify that we are in the process of becoming; and every single individual, likewise the generation, is and should be aware of being in the process of becoming." Not only the individual but also the established order and the current generation ought to live in fear and trembling, for the established order no less than the individuals who constitute it exists only through the process of becoming. Likewise, I will argue, although *Jemeinigkeit* and the individuation achieved through being-toward-death are primarily constitutive of the individual as individual, they may also constitute the established order of society as lived authentically, or as thrown back on its own existence. Since being-with is constitutive of *Dasein*, then to choose ourselves and become responsible for our own being involves the choice to institutionalize *Jemeinigkeit* and being-toward-death in society itself. To be committed to our own *Dasein* involves our commitment to concerted social action to guarantee these existential structures within the structures of society.

*Jemeinigkeit*, or mineness, entails two interrelated points; first, that the being I am is always mine to be. I am entrusted to my own being to win or lose it and am thus responsible for my being. Thus, self-responsibility is an ineluctable aspect of
Dasein. Second, as responsible for the being that it is, Dasein is always its possibility. Dasein is not a thing with objectively present attributes; rather, Dasein is "its own capacity to be,"²⁶ for which it bears responsibility. These two aspects—self-responsibility and being its own possibility—may become institutionalized in society when all social institutions are made susceptible to thoroughgoing critique, when society becomes its own site of self-questioning. Under these conditions, the grounds of all values and norms in that society are recognized as nothing more than the decisions and choices of those within society and are thus never absolute or beyond question but temporal, impermanent, and open to debate. Society as a whole ceases to be a thing with fixed, objectively present attributes and becomes its own possibility, a possibility for which we are each responsible.

The institutionalization of self-questioning and self-reformulation as the basis of society itself requires the dethronement of the They. As its unique way of being, "publicness" presents the world and Dasein as always and already interpreted. In articulating the referential context of significance, the They forecloses meaning and restricts the options of choice. Through this foreclosure of meaning, it disburdens Dasein of its own relation to itself. It provides tranquility, self-assurance, and familiarity but robs Dasein of its authenticity. Any institutionalization of self-questioning and self-reformulation requires that the referential context of significance does not take place within a closure of meaning. Zygmunt Bauman writes, "being autonomous für sich means ... refutation of the myth of closure."²⁷ With this refutation, society exists only as being-possible, ever immersed in its own capacity to be and thus open to questioning and reformulating itself. Just as "a constant unfinished quality ... lies in the essence of the constitution of Da-sein,"²⁸ so too must a constant unfinished quality lie in the essence of society. A "not-
yet" must always haunt any "great celebration" of a complacent, conforming society.

The dethronement of the They also entails both the dethronement of the public interpretation of death and the institutionalization of being-toward-death in society. Bauman is very insightful in drawing out the social dimensions of being-toward-death. He writes, "accepting mortality means denying any lasting grounds and immortal/eternal/extemporal foundations to de facto validity of institutions and significations." In being-toward-death, society as a whole, as well as individual Dasein, would take over death as its ownmost possibility. In being-toward-death, a society would be thrown back on its ownmost potentiality-of-being, immanent to itself, recognizing its own finitude and recognizing that it has no foundation for its projects except its own decisions and choices. Thus, only a society with the courage to face its own death may be adequately self-questioning and self-critical. Heidegger wrote that being-toward-death discloses to Dasein that "its extreme inmost possibility lies in giving itself up and thus, shatters all one's clinging to whatever existence one has reached." Likewise, being-toward-death discloses to society as a whole its own mortality and thus shatters any uncritical, unmediated relation to itself. "Resoluteness is certain of itself only in a resolution," a certainty that carries within it its own "existentiell indefiniteness." A society that has shattered any uncritical, unmediated relation to itself bears this same indefiniteness toward its decisions, certain of itself only in its acts of resoluteness but open and indefinite toward future moments of self-choice. Only a self-consciously mortal society that bears responsibility for itself, a society that remains open to its finite future, realizing that its own decisions and choices are the only foundations on which it may seek recourse, is sufficiently authentic.

At this point, I must address a critique of Heidegger's philosophy, namely, the reification of the They as an existential
structure. With the term “reification,” I express my commitment to critical theory, which permeates my reading of Heidegger. In many ways, Heidegger’s existential analytic of Dasein is an attempt to overcome all reification of the human condition. To claim that “the ‘essence’ of Da-sein lies in its existence,”34 that the human condition cannot be understood in terms of objectively present attributes of an objectively present being reflects a most important gesture in “dereification.” Nonetheless, Heidegger succumbs to the very tendency he sought to overcome. When he refers to the They as “an essential existential”35 and to falling prey to the They as “an existential determination of Da-sein itself,”36 he has in effect reified this social relation. He has taken what was immediately given, based on current socioeconomic relations, and frozen it into a permanent aspect of the human condition. Instead of recognizing these inauthentic social relations with a critical self-consciousness and relating them to the greater ontic social context, Heidegger veils their social basis and thus fetishizes and reifies them as an ontological structure. These inauthentic relations that have become “thing like” in Heidegger’s analysis eclipse the being-possible of Dasein. Heidegger is at his most conservative when he writes, “the ontological-existential structure of falling prey would also be misunderstood if we wanted to attribute to it the meaning of a bad and deplorable ontic quality which could perhaps be removed in the advanced stages of human culture.”37 Such fatalism undermines any social activism that would seek to transform the socioeconomic structure of society to overcome the closure of meaning effected by the They. We simply become resigned to its inevitability and work toward authenticity within these limits.

The dethronement of the They entails the demotion of the They, deposing it from power, but does not entail its complete denunciation. Essential to Heidegger’s existential analytic is that we are always thrown into a situation not of our
own choosing and that we come back to ourselves only from an already articulated referential totality. Deposing the They does not entail that we can choose our own situation or create our own referential totality but does entail that this totality is never closed, that it remains open to question and debate, and that it is recognized and treated as inherently temporal, impermanent, and finite. The dethronement of the They entails disempowering its hold over the mode of being of publicness. No longer is publicness shaped by a foreclosure of meaning and the disburdening of Dasein's own relation to itself but by a radical openness of meaning and release of Dasein to its own being.

We find in the latter point the social and moral implications of authentic existence, or more clearly, the "politics of authentic existence." No turn to a transcendent realm of values is either necessary or possible, only those values that are immanent within Dasein's own choice to win itself and take responsibility for itself. Once the individual has become radicalized by Angst and sees the world in which Dasein dwells as the arena for its own project of authenticity, it must resolutely resist those obstacles to this project and seek to insert authenticity into the world. The radicalized individual would not lack a moral compass but would be directed to choose precisely against the autocracy of the They, as well as against any economy or mechanisms of mass media that erode authentic moments of self-choice, and be directed precisely toward the institutionalization of mineness and being-toward-death — that is to say, self-responsibility and fallibility — within society as a whole.

The institutionalization of authentic existence does not entail transferring Dasein's self-responsibility to a state bureaucracy but empowering Dasein over against those very social forces that rob it of its resoluteness. It means demanding authentic potentiality-of-being for all human togetherness
and the justification of all human togetherness by authentic potentiality-of-being. The institutional structure of society would not take Dasein's "care" away from it, disburden it of itself, or displace it from its own relation to itself, thereby making Dasein dependent on and subservient to the very institutions it has itself established. Rather, the institutional structure of society would give care back to Dasein, would enable Dasein to become "transparent to himself in his care and free for it." The institutions of society would encourage Dasein to resist falling entirely prey to the They, would throw Dasein back on its authentic potentiality-of-being, and would disclose to Dasein its own being-possible.

Writing on the "autonomous society," Cornelius Castoriadis says, "we are able to look at ourselves, recognize ourselves and call ourselves back into question in and through our works." Paraphrasing Castoriadis, I propose an "authentic society" in which we can recognize the existential structures of our Dasein in the very institutions of our society and thus be called back to our Dasein in and through these institutions. I have tried to argue in this chapter that precisely this moral ideal is implicit and immanent within the project of authenticity itself.

NOTES

1 Heidegger, Being and Time (trans. Stambaugh), 39.
2 Heidegger, Being and Time, 176.
3 Heidegger, Being and Time, 274.
4 Heidegger, Being and Time, 274.
5 For a critique of Heidegger's existential analytic, see Adorno's Jargon of Authenticity.
6 Heidegger, Being and Time, 173.
7 Bauman, Liquid Modernity, 6.
11 Bauman, *In Search of Politics*, 159.
15 Bauman, *Life in Fragments*, 89.
20 Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 86.
21 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 300.
26 Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 170.
27 Bauman, *In Search of Politics*, 81.
30 Bauman, *In Search of Politics*, 83.
31 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 244.
37 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 165.
39 Castoriadis, "Dilapidation of the West," 108.
Hannah Arendt is almost always considered a political thinker, and she is often considered a phenomenologist; she is rarely considered either an existentialist or an ethicist. This is not a surprise, because in some ways Arendt does not look like either one. Unlike most ethicists, for example, she is not primarily concerned with how human beings should act. Furthermore, unlike most existentialists, she is not concerned with death or anxiety, and she focuses on the "public," as opposed to individuals outside of their relations with others.

Because this book is about existentialist ethics and because it is generally easier to show that a person has an ethics than that he or she is an existentialist, it might make sense in this chapter to begin by focusing on the question: Is Arendt an existentialist? I will not do this, for three reasons: 1) there is no evidence that I know of that Arendt was particularly concerned with this question; 2) I believe there is a more pressing question, namely, whether Arendt is an ethicist; and finally 3) one way of showing her existentialism is by beginning with and paying close attention to her notion of ethics,
particularly her understanding of responsibility. What will emerge from a closer look at Arendt’s ethics is that she is much more in line with existentialism than is commonly thought; this is shown in her concern for the existence of concrete human beings and her focus on human freedom, as well as in her attempt to delineate a notion of responsibility that rejects both traditional (transcendental) and individually relative ethics.

At first glance, Arendt seems to reject ethics. This most famously appears in *The Human Condition*, where she writes that “love of wisdom and love of goodness, if they resolve themselves into the activities of philosophizing and doing good works, have in common that they come to an immediate end, cancel themselves, so to speak, whenever it is assumed that man can be wise or be good.” Furthermore, she ignores the questions we assume an ethicist would place front and centre; for example, in responding to the novelty of totalitarianism, Arendt does not seem to be concerned with questions of normative ethics. Surprisingly, she is not focused on such questions as: How should the Nazis have acted? or How should the Jews have acted? Instead, she tries to show how the existence of a genuine political realm illuminates human beings as such. Arendt thus seems to reject ethics in just the place where it seems most necessary and to advocate a political theory in just the place where it seems least relevant.

The fundamental problem for Arendt is much deeper than, and precedes, normative ethical questions. To show why, I will reveal how Arendt’s work emerges as a response to totalitarianism. Totalitarianism is not, for Arendt, a traditional problem, and thus in its light traditional ethics and traditional ways of answering ethical problems appear inadequate. Against most views, Arendt argues that the unique problem of totalitarianism in both its German and Soviet incarnations is not that it, for example, caused the death of
more people or caused more harm than other oppressive systems; the problem is that it caused an entirely different kind of harm than any previous type of regime. As Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the goal of totalitarian regimes was not to achieve political power by eliminating "freedom in any specific sense." The goal of totalitarian regimes was instead to eliminate "the very source of freedom" and thus destroy the humanness of human beings.²

Arendt argues in *Origins* that totalitarianism’s success in destroying the source of human freedom was only possible because the forces of modernity had already prepared both the perpetrators and victims, that is, making them superfluous and thus dehumanizing them by turning them into masses. For Arendt, modernity’s dehumanization was the “most fertile ground and outcome” of totalitarianism.³ Therefore, the problem with totalitarianism, namely, the way it dehumanizes, was not invented by totalitarianism; rather, this is the state of affairs of modernity, and totalitarian, in contrast to other regimes, merely recognized and furthered it. Totalitarianism was effective because it dealt with the specific problems of modernity most precisely.⁴

Even though totalitarianism as a form of government driven to control the world and all of the people in it probably will not return, because modernity and its dehumanizing effects still exist Arendt argues that the problems that allowed totalitarianism to flourish still encourage totalitarian solutions to modern problems. Arendt’s real goal, therefore, is to show how to counteract the deleterious effects of both totalitarian solutions and modernity on the humanness of human beings. To this end, Arendt recognizes that the problem is, first and foremost, how human beings can exist at all; in other words, the issue is how to preserve the very source of morality, namely, humanness itself.
The question of humanness is primary for all questions of responsibility because ethics does not exist in a world without human beings. Unlike most philosophers, for whom human existence is a given and the moral question is how existing human beings should act, Arendt holds that the goal is to recreate a human world in which genuine human beings exist, and this is required for there to be any normative ethics. Arendt’s answer to totalitarianism, totalitarian solutions, and modernity is not therefore prima facie ethical but is at first glance ontological; she is trying to show what it means to say, “this is a human being,” and trying to figure out how to recreate and sustain a human world. Therefore Arendt’s thinking on responsibility takes place on an entirely different level than that of most ethical doctrines, which, as noted, start from the assumption that there are human beings.

Furthermore, although taking up the seemingly vague and abstract question of humanness does not appear to have concrete consequences, guaranteeing humanness does directly affect human lives. From a close reading, we can see that for Arendt, inhuman motives are the sine qua non of totalitarian behaviour; there are no limits on the behaviour of “human animals,” and to hold that there are such limits is naïve and harmful. Arendt holds there are, however, limits on the actions of beings who are genuinely human and who act out of human motives. Although they may do evil, they will not do the worst, that is, they will not try to eliminate the humanness of other humans. Thus, the concrete ethical outcome of “rehumanization” would be its offering certain limits on action; specifically, it would make totalitarianism and totalitarian solutions to the problems of modernity impossible.

In addition, I will show that for Arendt it is only “public” action – the action of a group of persons who work together on the basis of an agreement – that illuminates human equality
and individuality and thereby gives human lives meaning. Public action alone can distinguish individual human beings from the mass of almost indistinguishable animals – revealing each as a who, instead of a what. In short, it is public action that allows human beings to be, in the strictest sense of the term, human beings.

Setting aside for a moment the technical language Arendt uses, we could say that her key insight is that each and every one of us is brought into this world as a being-with others. We must therefore rise above our animal concerns (which focus on the self as a biological being), put aside the otherworldly concerns of religion or philosophy (which focus on the self as a purely spiritual being), and publicly care for other human beings. We must therefore – and here we find her existentialist side most strongly evident – reject traditional (including Christian) ethics to find humanness and human meaning without relying on the transcendent. At a time when the world is in jeopardy and the humanness of so many is threatened by terror or overwhelmed by biological and economic concerns, Arendt’s work is a call for us to affirm our responsibility for human beings in the world we inhabit together.

**TOTALITARIANISM AS THE BACKGROUND FOR A NEW THEORY OF RESPONSIBILITY**

To understand Arendt’s conception of responsibility, it is important to look at two key aspects of her early work on totalitarianism: 1) Unlike other forms of violent government, totalitarian regimes did not use terror as a means to gain power; rather, for totalitarianism, power was used to impose terror. Specifically, instead of killing its victims, the goal of totalitarianism was to destroy their humanness. In other words, totalitarianism set out to turn human beings into human animals.
Totalitarianism accomplished this, first, by taking human beings out of a common sphere where they could interact with others and by placing them in camps, where it was impossible for anyone outside to know or relate to any of the victims as individuals. The victims were further dehumanized by "eliminating the moral person," in other words, making moral action impossible by placing them in a position where their own survival was predicated on their willingness to assist in expediting and organizing the terror itself. Finally, to dominate totally, Arendt argues, these regimes eliminated the uniqueness of each of the victims, mainly by destroying any differences between them through techniques used against their bodies.

The reason totalitarian regimes set out to destroy the humanness of their victims was that they were based on ideologies - History for the Stalinists, Nature for the Nazis - that claimed perfect understanding of past, present, and future and thus required that humans be entirely controllable. But because human beings are free and thus uncontrollable to the extent they are genuinely human, totalitarian regimes had to eliminate the humanness of their victims. Totalitarian ideology does not stop there: not just the victims needed to be controllable for the ideology to show itself as true; in the name of the ideology, everyone needed to be dehumanized. Totalitarian regimes thus set out to dehumanize the perpetrators in ways analogous to those used to dehumanize their victims: first, by cutting the perpetrators off from the rest of the world; second, by "eliminating the moral person," in this case, by making the perpetrators feel they were not responsible for their actions, because the leader of each regime took responsibility for everything; and, third, by destroying the uniqueness of even the perpetrators by subordinating everyone entirely to the ideology.

From these two aspects of totalitarianism, Arendt drew two interrelated conclusions: first, totalitarianism was a new
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phenomenon because it brought forth a new evil, not merely the acts of criminals on a large scale, but the evil of a regime that set out to destroy humanness itself. In Arendt’s language, the goal of totalitarianism was not to eliminate human existence by killing all individuals but to turn free individuals, in the plural, into a species of undifferentiable animals that, like other animals, cannot act freely but merely behave. Second, totalitarianism was thus not an attack on each human being qua individual but on the plurality of human beings.

THE ESSENTIAL VERSUS THE EXISTENTIAL ARENDT

Instead of advocating either side of the debate about whether human nature is essentially good or evil, therefore, Arendt argues that the most important lesson to be learned from totalitarianism is that humans are denaturable. Arendt’s point here is often misunderstood and seems – because of its implications for responsibility – problematic and very difficult to believe. Thus, before continuing, we need to acknowledge and, to the extent possible, adjudicate a tension in Arendt’s account between two seemingly contradictory views. On one side is her claim – as I have argued – that human beings can be denatured to such an extent that they can no longer act humanly and thus no longer are human but become something different, namely, human animals. This is the side of the “existential Arendt,” who holds that the humanness of human beings is not guaranteed with birth but is contingent.

This is only one side of the story. On the other side is Arendt’s belief that we are just as responsible for human animals as we would be if they were human beings. Thus, even as she wants to claim human animals cannot act freely and thus are not truly human, Arendt still holds that we must act to
guarantee certain rights for all humans, regardless of whether or not they are genuinely human beings. There is, therefore, a tension between the existential Arendt and this "essential Arendt," who holds that we must treat humans in a certain fashion because they were born human.\(^\text{14}\) I will argue, first, that she could not have resolved this tension (i.e., that this is not a mere slip here or there but that both sides are needed in the very core of Arendt's thought) and, second, that though there is no way to remove this tension, there is a way to make sense of it within her framework.

Arendt writes from the existentialist side - focusing on the concrete conditions and abilities of human beings as they actually exist - for the following reasons: rejecting, as the tradition does, the importance of the concrete conditions and abilities of human beings undervalues our ability to promote radical change and minimizes the degradation and dehumanization effected by terror and slavery. To privilege the existentialist side is therefore to face up to the possibilities and effects of both positive and negative radical change.

Arendt's existentialist side is most strongly apparent in her rejection of "inner freedom," which can best be seen in her essay, "What is Freedom?"\(^\text{15}\) What motivates Arendt's rejection of inner freedom is its implication that our concrete conditions are irrelevant to our freedom and the corresponding claim that even a slave can be free. Socrates exemplified the traditional view perfectly when he claimed that "no harm can come to a good man." From Arendt's perspective, to advocate inner freedom is to exonerate the worst people from the worst aspects of the worst evils. Totalitarianism showed beyond any reasonable doubt that harm can, in fact, come to a "good man," not because totalitarianism caused more pain than other regimes - tyrannies, no doubt, can cause more than enough - but because totalitarian regimes showed that people cannot protect themselves from the ultimate harm, as
totalitarian regimes forced, for example, all their victims to participate in the terror. Totalitarian regimes even made suicide impossible by making it clear that if a person committed suicide, the regime would retaliate against other victims. For Arendt, totalitarianism showed more than that harm can come to a good person: it proved that totalitarian regimes could strip anyone of his or her humanness.

But the problem with the existentialist side, and the strength of the essentialist side, is that if anyone must meet some specific condition to be human, those who do meet this condition seem to be excused from responsibility for anyone who does not meet it. How, then, are we to deal with these competing perspectives?

Although Arendt never acknowledges as much, her thinking holds the key to a coherent answer. To formulate this answer, we must notice that the term she places at the center of her discussion, “responsibility,” has two meanings.

**The Two Meanings of Responsibility**

We can find a clue to the first meaning of responsibility and to an Arendtian solution to this paradox in her recognition that “I must be held responsible for something I have not done.” Furthermore, the reason for “my responsibility must be my membership in a group (a collective) which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve, that is, a membership which is utterly unlike a business partnership which I can dissolve at will.”

We could define this first sense of responsibility as “being charged with the care of others,” and because of its similarity to an understanding that Hans Jonas offers, after Jonas, I will call it the “parental” sense of responsibility. As parents are responsible not just for not harming their children but also for ensuring no harm comes to them, Arendt
notes, we are responsible for others, even if we are not the cause of any harm to them.

The problem is that, as Arendt writes, "we usually think of responsibility, especially collective responsibility, as a burden and even as a kind of punishment." Part of Arendt's point is that even if we only see responsibility as a burden, the "price paid for collective non-responsibility is considerably higher." We could argue that this is true in purely individualistic terms. For example, we could say that because any of us could be an outcast, if we do not acknowledge our responsibility for the outcasts of the world, we could not hope for, or expect, that others would care for us. Whereas this argument mirrors one of the outcomes of Kant's categorical imperative, Arendt's view is quite different. The key difference between the Kantian and the Arendtian notions of responsibility comes from Arendt's existentialist side and relies on her viewing responsibility as a collective phenomenon: I am not merely responsible for not harming others; as part of a collective, we are responsible for others.

Even though Arendt does not make the point explicitly, responsibility has a different meaning, which is crucial for her work. As well as meaning "being charged with the care of others," responsibility also means "being able to respond to our responsibility for the care of others." This latter sense of responsibility is one of free action in the strict Arendtian sense. Ideally, of course, we could all act freely and thus respond to and live up to our responsibilities. But, as totalitarianism shows, there are some people who are "truly outcasts," who have no ability to act at all, and thus who cannot be held responsible and thus do not have "responsibility for anything." Arendt's point is that if anything essentially makes us human, it is being responsible in the parental sense, but this requires being responsible in the sense of being able to act. This means that the absolute innocence that would come
from complete impotence is no gift; it is, rather, the ultimate dehumanization.

Putting the two senses of responsibility together, we can say that by being born, we are (or should be) part of a community in the sense that we should be burdened with the care of others, and they likewise should be burdened with our care. The more we run from this responsibility, the more of a burden it seems. The problem, however, is that we feel that our responsibility for others—particularly for those we have not harmed—is not just a burden but the burden. In fact, Arendt's claim, that the entire history of philosophy can be read as avoidance of the public, points to the tradition's attempt to run away specifically from the fact that we are, in the plural sense, and are therefore responsible for each other and can and should act to care for others.

Before examining Arendt's answer to the burdening nature of responsibility, we must review Arendt's critique of traditional ethics in this light, to see the way the tradition actually fosters the belief that responsibility is a burden. It can then be seen how the Arendtian notion of agreements and the public is an attempt to both face up to our responsibility and, by affirming it through collective action, alleviate the burden of responsibility.

**universalism, authority, and protecting the self**

Writing against any otherworldly philosophical or religious ethics—as exemplified in Plato and Augustine, respectively—Arendt claims that this traditional way of conceiving of ethics is deficient because it lessens both senses of responsibility. As I will show, it lessens the parental sense by concerning itself primarily with the self, by viewing the self as an individual, and by considering human goals and human existence in
fundamentally individualistic terms. The tradition also lessens the sense of responsibility as action by trying to settle the questions once and for all and in ways that encourage all but the elite few to be passive and credulous recipients of "the Truth."

The first way traditional ethics lessens our sense of responsibility is by privileging the individual – that is, destroying any sense of being fundamentally part of a plurality – and thereby degrading the notion of collective responsibility. The tradition did this by instilling in each one of us, for example, the fear of punishment in the afterlife. This encourages selfishness and makes even someone who wants to do good deaf to the concrete needs of others because this conception of ethics encourages us to choose what is worse for the world and for others in order to care, first and foremost, for our own souls, based on some otherworldly standard of justice. From this concern for the self came the primary ethical maxim: *Fiat justitia, pereat mundus* ("let justice be done, though the world may perish").

The second way traditional ethics lessens our responsibility – here in the sense of "being able to respond to our responsibility for the care of others" – comes from the traditional way of structuring authority. Because traditional ethics is conceived in terms of authority and follower and bases authority on access to unchanging standards, this way of viewing right conduct fails to speak to a radically changing world and blinds those who are expected to follow the authorities to the failure of traditional ethics to do so. The tradition couches its answers in universal and timeless statements. But because it claims an authority based on an unchanging truth, its ethical codes must assume that the world remains fundamentally the same so that the codes can be applied at different times and in different contexts. But the world changes radically, and Arendt forcefully argues that totalitarianism is a clearcut case
of just this sort of radical change. So, even if these ethical codes begin with a certain relevance, as Plato’s and Augustine’s ethical codes did, they lose their relevance for action the more the world changes. Furthermore, the world changes to such an extent that many of today’s most important ethical questions simply did not exist in the past, and so it is nonsensical, for example, to try to understand how Plato’s work can speak to issues of genetic engineering or of Internet privacy or, more importantly, of the relationship between modern technology and mass society.

The last and possibly the most devastating problem with traditional ethical codes is that the view of traditional ethics encourages “the many,” the believers, to be passive. It encourages them to trust authorities, even as these authorities fail to meet the needs of their followers in a changing world. Were this not the case, we would be more concerned when our leaders fail to do their jobs competently and less concerned with their personal peccadilloes.

AGAINST MODERNITY: THE PROBLEMS WITH PHILOPHILIA AND IDENTIFYING WITH THE SPECIES

The final outcome of traditional ethics is the modern view of the human in individualistic and dualistic terms that privileges the life of the individual and the human species. Within the tradition, Arendt argues in “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Thought,” the merely human was viewed as the worldly, and the worldly was associated with the animal and with the bodily part of the human being. This worldly aspect was contrasted with the otherworldly and hidden aspect of the human, often called the soul. But when our faith in the otherworldly became implausible, as a result of the skepticism of modernity and the labour ethos of the Industrial Revolution,
the existence of a soul became as uncertain as that of God. In this way, traditional ethics gave way to “philophilia,” Arendt’s neologism for the love of life for its own sake, and the human being gave way to animal laborans, the labouring animal.

When it comes to parental responsibility, the philophilia of animal laborans fails in the same way the tradition does, by placing self-interest – here in the form of concern for one’s own life – above concern for those concrete others we live with.

But philophilia fails in an even more nefarious way than traditional ethics, not only by encouraging people to shirk their parental responsibility, but also by eradicating the foundation for this responsibility. As Arendt argues, the foundation for collective responsibility is the collectivity of a “plurality.” Philophilia, however, encourages each being to focus on those aspects of life intended merely to sustain life, namely, the biological and economic aspects. Furthermore, because biological and economic beings are in the most basic sense interchangeable, these beings become interchangeable with each other. Thus, unlike the tradition that destroys plurality by privileging the individual while still allowing for individual difference, philophilia destroys plurality by encouraging individuals to lose themselves in the species and thus erodes all individual difference.

Having seen how traditional ethics and modernity lessen or work to eradicate both the responsibility to care for others and the ability to do something to actually live up to that responsibility, we can now turn to Arendt’s conception of the public.

AGREEMENTS AND PUBLIC FREEDOM

To understand Arendt’s answer to the problem of the dehumanization furthered by modernity and highlighted by the terror imposed by totalitarianism, it helps to notice the way
Arendt conceives of moral truth. In a lecture she gave, published as “Remarks on ‘The Crisis Character of Modern Society’,” she explains the unique crisis we find ourselves in by “the simple fact that there are no general standards to determine our judgments unfailingly, no general rules under which to subsume the particular cases with any degree of certainty.”

Although we want to know what right is once and for all, we cannot merely imagine some new rules “more adequate to the enormously changed and daily changing realities of our world.” Rather, for Arendt, we must try to be responsible without rules.

Are we then left in a world without right and wrong and without responsibility, to helplessly “wander in darkness” for the rest of our days? Arendt thinks not. First, we must affirm our humanness, that is, we must be modest about what we can know. Against the tradition, Arendt argues that objective and conclusive knowledge of, for example, the nature of justice or goodness is unavailable to human beings. We must recognize, rather, that moral truth “resembles more the validity of agreements than the compelling validity of scientific statements.”

Arendt goes further to claim not merely that we cannot know ultimate, objective, or final moral truths but that by trying to come to agreements and by talking about morality in a specific way, we become “better and better.” So we need to examine, first, what this way of talking is; and, second, how working toward agreements within the public realm can accomplish the goals Arendt believes it can.

Whereas we often talk about making agreements, Arendt’s notion of agreement-making is rigorous and in many ways counterintuitive. To come to a genuine agreement, Arendt argues, each of those working on the agreement must be willing to listen to and heed the opinions of others; without this, no genuine discussion is possible. This means that those coming together to make agreements must have different opinions.
and recognize that none is intrinsically more valuable than the others. This coming together is what Arendt means by the public.

Even if those who enter the public achieve no final agreement, by listening and heeding they will have created a community of equals, and this in itself is crucial. It is talking about these issues, rather than coming to a conclusion, that is so important for Arendt. Furthermore, even if the actors do come to a decision, the decision will not hold indefinitely. The agreement may set down a moral truth, but it does so only while it is new. As it ages, it illuminates less and less because the concrete situation and the people who forged this agreement no longer exist; just as it had for Plato and Augustine, the truth any agreement discloses becomes so dimmed that it becomes anachronistic and thus an "untruth." When that occurs, what is needed is a new agreement to take into account the new circumstances of the world. Therefore, what is necessary is not merely a single agreement but a public constantly dedicated to public speech to make agreements, judge when they no longer make sense, and make new agreements. Thus, Arendt's solution avoids two of the problems of a traditional view of moral truth: because truth remains for her unfixed, her conception is pluralistic and responds to novel problems.

Arendt's solution not only corrects the fundamental problems she sees with traditional views but also has one more crucial – though less obvious – outcome: it counters the modern destruction of the public enacted through the loss of individuality and thus encourages collective responsibility. It does this by allowing humans to show themselves as individuals to their peers and thus by illuminating their differences. While illuminating their differences, it shows their fundamental equality and thus heightens, rather than effaces, their feeling of collective responsibility.
To further examine this additional outcome, I now turn to Arendt's discussion of the experiences of René Char. Arendt describes how Char and his cohorts in the French Resistance had thought "that accepting [public] responsibility would 'be a burden'," but when this community evaporated, they recognized the treasure they had lost in the "weightless irrelevance" of day-to-day life.

Following Char, Arendt describes this treasure, first, as the ability to find yourself, that is, to be who you are in the fullest sense, instead of "a what" in the masks or roles you take on. This signifies a crucial change enacted in responsible action: by affirming all of the attributes that humans have by nature of birth, action makes them authentic – this Arendt calls "natality."

Having been given a physical appearance in our biological birth, by natality, Arendt describes the human capacity "with words and deeds ... [to] insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance." Because being born is always literally done by becoming other within a community, natality – as the condition of acting and thereby affirming our having been born – also involves becoming other within a community. In the former case, the community is the family; in the latter case, a community of diverse people who have also, through action, inserted themselves into a public realm. Unlike physical birth, though, natality requires our "own initiative" and is something a person does for the sake of the "disclosure of his own image." In action, that is, in the enacting of natality, a person therefore discloses "his own image" and thereby communicates that he or she is someone, "not merely something."

To insert myself into a community through action, Arendt argues, I must be "among men, among those who are my equals." This is true because "when I insert myself into the
world it [must be] a world where others are already present." For others to recognize me as who I am and to heed what I say, they must see me as their equal. If they do not see me as their equal, they will see me merely as a teacher, a student, a person sitting next to them on the subway, a boss, or an employee. They will hear what I say as the words of a liberal or of a philosopher or of a Jew. Only as an equal can I be seen as who I am, rather than as what I am or what I can achieve. By showing who I am, I enter a "web of human relationships" necessarily made up of different, unique persons.

This community is the plurality of which I have spoken, and it requires not only that there be different human bodies present but also that this community comprise human beings who are and see each other as equals and yet as different, with different opinions, interests, and pasts. Thus, in action, the individual's identity becomes an authentic identity, and plurality becomes an authentic plurality.

The second aspect of the public realm that Char points to is the way the treasure of public action lies in the actors' experience of having "been visited for the first time in their lives by an apparition of freedom ... because they had become 'challengers', had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear."

The fundamental reason for the necessity of agreements and for our having parental responsibility for all human beings is that, contra the dominant Western view, we are neither born as individuals nor capable of being the individuals we are outside of our relations with others. As shown earlier, the fundamental necessity of agreements comes from being born into a human plurality, that is, we are only who we are as a result of being-with others who are different from ourselves. This difference comes not only from our having diverse views
and opinions but also from our being free— insofar as we are human—and therefore capable of creating something new and unexpected in the world.

To understand Arendt's point, we need to notice the difference between her own and the traditional conception of human beings. Within the tradition, persons exist as individuals, and to whatever extent they enter into relations with others, these relations are inessential to who they are. For Arendt, identity requires others, and therefore a human being is essentially a being-with others. This means that when a human lives alone, this aloneness is a privation, a living in private, away from his or her essential way of being as a being with others. So even as responsibility affects the individual, it does so because this being, as a human being, is already part of a collective.

To be responsible in the fullest sense, we must take upon ourselves this primordial responsibility by creating a new authentic community or by reaffirming an existing one and thereby acting to allow individuals to show themselves as human beings. Furthermore, our creating or reaffirming our being in a community is freedom, and it alone has the power to radically transform the experience of responsibility, which any individual human must consider a burden if she is not part of a community.

From this conclusion, we can see how Hannah Arendt both has an ethics and how this ethics is deeply concerned with the same issues other existentialists are concerned with: human freedom and responsibility in a changing and fragile world. Though Arendt does not focus on many of the typical existentialist themes, her primary directive of creating a space for human freedom and thereby allowing humans to be human beings and to care for others is existentialist, and we can therefore rightly consider her both an ethicist and an existentialist.
NOTES

1 Arendt, Human Condition, 75.

2 Emphasis added; Arendt, Origins (new edition with added prefaces), 466. Arendt wrote three editions of what appeared as The Origins of Totalitarianism in the United States, the first sold in the United Kingdom under the name of The Burden of Our Time. The names of both Burden and Origins will be used, the former for Arendt’s first edition, published in 1951; the latter, for the third and final printed edition, first published in 1966.

3 Arendt, Origins, 474. Although Arendt uses this phrase to describe the relationship between isolation and tyranny, it also describes precisely the way she views the relationship between labour and totalitarianism.

4 Arendt, Origins, 460.

5 This is implied in Arendt’s description of the perpetrators as inhuman, specifically as not having human motives and therefore as incomprehensible to those who assume the perpetrators’ humanness; see Arendt, Origins, 459. Commentators rarely make this distinction and therefore miss what I consider the ethical import of Arendt’s advocating worldliness. See, for example, Villa, Politics, Philosophy, and Terror, 16–17.

6 Arendt, Burden, 430.

7 Although we can see here Arendt’s appropriation of Heidegger’s use of “being-with” and hints of her critique of his disparaging of the public realm (in his critique of “the They”), the extent to which Arendt uses, is indebted to, or critiques Heidegger is too broad a question for the current discussion. My views, however, are quite close to and have been influenced by Villa’s outstanding work on this matter; see Villa, Politics, Philosophy, and Terror, particularly 81–6.

8 Arendt, Origins, 438.

9 Arendt, Origins, 452–3.

10 Arendt, Origins, 452 n. 5.
22 Arendt, "Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Philosophical Thought."
28 Arendt, "Remarks on 'The Crisis Character of Modern Society'," 114.
31 Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," 40; here Arendt is quoting Dante.
Sartre on Atheism, Freedom, and Morality in The Humanism of Existentialism

GLENN BRADDOCK

In the space of one paragraph at the end of The Humanism of Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre makes two apparently conflicting claims. He says in one sentence that, “Existentialism is nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position.” Three sentences later, he tells us that existentialism “declares that even if God did exist, that would change nothing. There you’ve got our point of view. Not that we believe that God exists, but that we think that the problem of His existence is not the issue.”

Well, we might ask, which is it? Is atheism the ultimate justification for existentialism or actually irrelevant to it? Atheism seemingly provides the foundation for at least two of Sartre’s main claims in The Humanism of Existentialism: that there is no human nature and that there are no universal moral values. And yet Sartre also claims that existentialism does not depend on atheism, and he acknowledges that there are religious versions of existentialism.

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between Sartre’s atheism and major aspects of his existentialism as these are
presented in *The Humanism of Existentialism*. Despite the fact that Sartre later regretted the publication of this text, based on a public lecture, it is important to understand the positions he develops in this lecture. This is especially true when the issue is the possibility of existentialist ethics, since *The Humanism of Existentialism* is the only complete work on the ethical implications of existentialism published in Sartre’s lifetime. Also, *The Humanism of Existentialism* is influential in both existentialist and atheistic thought. As I argue below, a careful interpretation of this work provides an opportunity to clarify some of the foundations of Sartrean existentialism, as well as the ethical options available within an atheistic framework.

We ought to accept Sartre’s claim that existentialism does not depend on atheism, because his conclusions about freedom and value do not follow from atheism. Sartre does, however, defend them on different grounds. For Sartre, we are radically free, not because we were never created by God, but because we are self-conscious beings capable of interpreting ourselves and the world. We have no recourse to rational moral principles, not because God did not create them, but because such principles always underdetermine the actions required of an existing individual in a complex, concrete situation.

The interpretation that results can be seen as a defence of both existentialism and atheism. Existentialism is spared the objection that its most central theses are the results of bad inferences from the truth of atheism; the atheistic world view is rescued from the suspicion that it necessarily faces the kinds of challenges associated with existentialist ethics. Whereas a satisfactory existentialist ethics may be possible, the atheist is not committed to defending this kind of ethics.

Consider Sartre’s famous claim that for human beings, “existence precedes essence.” We are unlike paper cutters
and other artifacts because our nature is not first conceived in the mind of a creator and only then brought into existence. Rather, "first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself." Sartre's view seems to be that atheism directly entails this: "there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it." But the nonexistence of God alone cannot give Sartre what he wants here. He is trying to demonstrate that there is something special about our kind of being, for he states that "if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept," and "this being is man." But if it is sufficient for this special status to not have our nature invented by a creator, then this status extends to everything, except artifacts. If there is no God, then God did not first plan and only then create the wide variety of nonhuman animals, plants, and inanimate objects.

Sartre clearly does not want to say that existence precedes essence for nonhuman beings, too, since he argues that existentialism gives human beings dignity by refusing to treat them as mere objects, that is, as collections of properties that together round out and complete their universal natures. But, again, this specialness cannot be explained by the fact that our natures are not preconceived by God "as a superior sort of artisan." For, if atheism is true, then there was no superior artisan to design tigers or palm trees or volcanoes. But some sense can surely be made of the idea that these kinds of things have essences. A tiger, for example, has a biological nature, presumably brought into existence through the process of evolution by natural selection. The same applies to human beings.

This is not a problem for Sartre, though, because the real justification for his claim that there is no human nature is not based on the nonexistence of God. The cleverness of the
slogan that “existence precedes essence” makes it easy to miss Sartre’s assertion that this means the same thing as saying that “subjectivity must be the starting point.” Here, the term “subjectivity” has a special sense: “Man is at the start a plan which is aware of itself, rather than a patch of moss, a piece of garbage, or a cauliflower.” We are self-conscious, self-interpreting, and world-interpreting beings. Like mere objects of various kinds, we are thrown into the world, and there are facts about our situation we do not choose or control. But we are unique in our ability to interpret these facts and to choose what significance they will have in our lives. A tiger has a biological nature that includes certain innate characteristics, which the tiger has no choice but to display. It is pushed around by its instincts. We also have innate and acquired characteristics. But we would be in bad faith if we claimed that these characteristics push us around and determine what we are and what we will be. To say that there is no human nature is to point to our unique capacity for transcendence, as conscious and free individuals.

Also, in Being and Nothingness, Sartre bases his view that existence precedes essence not on atheistic but on phenomenological grounds. One of the forms of human conduct he investigates is that of questioning being. He argues that questioning always involves a “nihilating withdrawal” from or a “nihilating rupture” with the world. Through the question, we stand back from some aspect of the world and interrogate it:

It is essential therefore that the questioner have the permanent possibility of dissociating himself from the causal series which constitutes being and which can produce only being. If we admitted that the question is determined in the questioner by universal determinism, the question would thereby become unintelligible and even inconceivable. A real cause, in fact, produces a real effect and the
caused being is wholly engaged by the cause in positivity; to the extent that its being depends on the cause, it cannot have within itself the tiniest germ of nothingness. Thus in so far as the questioner must be able to effect in relation to the questioned a kind of nihilating withdrawal, he is not subject to the causal order of the world; he detaches himself from Being.\textsuperscript{11}

We, as conscious beings, introduce nonbeing into the world through the conduct of questioning, among other forms of human conduct; and if we are to accept Sartre's interpretation, we must be able to stand back from being, question it, and interpret it; we are not caught in being. In short, we are free. This indicates to Sartre that "freedom as the requisite condition for the nihilation of nothingness is not a property which belongs among others to the essence of the human being."\textsuperscript{12}

Whatever we make of Sartre's controversial claims about subjectivity, radical freedom, and the human capacity for transcendence, we can say that if these are accurate depictions of human reality, they are not so because of the nonexistence of God. This is true, first of all, because not being designed by God does not guarantee freedom, as the case of nonhuman beings shows. Also, you could, it seems, accept Sartre's account of human freedom whether or not you believed in God. You could even believe God is responsible for our initial "turning up on the scene" only to send us on our way to be what we plan to be. Whether our characteristics come from God, nature, society, our past decisions, or any combination of these, Sartre can still make his case that we differ from other kinds of entities because of our ability to choose the meanings of these characteristics. Atheism is not the basis of this central thesis of existentialism, that human beings are not constrained by human nature but are radically free.
Turning now to Sartre’s treatment of moral value, we see again an apparent dependence of his moral views on his atheism. He criticizes those who would advance a secular ethics designed to leave traditional morality in place after the death of God.13 “The existentialist,” Sartre tells us, “thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears with him ... Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist.”14 Sartre here seems to endorse a central aspect of the divine-command theory of moral value. According to this view, moral principles would have to come into existence from the wishes or commands of God. The good is what God commands us to do, and the bad is what God forbids us from doing. In the statement cited above, Sartre seems to accept that this must be the source of any universal moral principles; he simply denies the existence of the source. Since there is no God, “we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct.”15

But, of course, it does not follow from the nonexistence of God that there are no universal moral values. In fact, if moral principles are to be objective, as moral realists tend to want them to be, they cannot be based on God’s commands. To accept the divine-command theory is to accept a kind of grand subjectivism, where the subject creating the values is God. God may be all knowing and powerful, but if there are no principles to appeal to in justifying his commands, then they are arbitrary and nonbinding. If Sartre had stopped here, not recognizing this problem and not addressing the fact that most philosophical moral systems have been secular, then it would be hard to find much of use in his treatment of morality in The Humanism of Existentialism.

But he does not stop here, and the remainder of his discussion suggests we ought to downplay the significance of his claim that everything is permissible because there is no God.
I think that Sartre’s most important point about universal moral principles is not that there are none but that even if there are some, there is always a large and unbridgeable gap between the contents of these imperatives and our choices. For Sartre, this has dramatic consequences for our existential situation.

Sticking with divine commands, it is interesting that Sartre, like Kierkegaard, discusses the case of Abraham and his decision to obey God’s command to sacrifice his son, Isaac. As an atheist, Sartre certainly does not believe that anything like this did or could happen, but he does not try to demonstrate this. He argues instead that no matter what the facts, the subject always has to interpret his or her situation before acting. The fact that Abraham believes that God approves of and commands this action provides Abraham with neither comfort nor relief from his responsibility. Abraham must choose to believe in God, to sustain this belief, to believe that God has really commanded something of him, and to interpret the meaning of that command. Here we find the root of Abraham’s responsibility and anguish.

Similarly, to someone who wants to claim that there are omens in the world, Sartre responds, “Granted—but in any case, I myself choose the meaning they have.” Sartre’s main objective, then, is to demonstrate that even if there are divine signs and commands, these could never force any particular interpretations, choices, or actions. Filling in the gap is always the individual’s responsibility.

This is the case even if there are objective moral principles, which I take to be the main point of Sartre’s account of the moral dilemma of one of his students. The young man was debating whether he should join the fight against the Germans or remain at home to care for his mother. Interestingly, Sartre does not try to show that certain moral theories are false but only that none is sufficient to guide the young man
as he makes his decision. The abstractness and formality of the proposed moral principles prevent our coming to a clear practical solution to the dilemma. For example, according to one of Kant's formulations of the categorical imperative, one ought not use another person as a mere means but always as an end. But this fails to provide any obvious answer. No matter what the young man does, Sartre claims, he risks using someone or some group of people, either his mother or the soldiers who are fighting, as a means rather than an end.¹⁹

Sartre does not argue that Kant's ethics or any objective moral theory is false. Sartre writes, "Kant says that freedom desires both itself and the freedom of others. Granted. But he believes that the formal and the universal are enough to constitute an ethics. We, on the other hand, think that principles which are too abstract run aground in trying to decide action."²⁰ General moral principles, by their very nature, require interpretation and implementation in concrete situations. As David Jopling explains, Sartre's student "could guide his inquiry and eventual choice by relying upon Christian doctrine, Kantian ethics, or general principles of utility. But the abstractness of their principles in specific and highly complex historical situations unavoidably underdetermines his final choice, and requires an element of interpretation and decision on his own part."²¹ As with divine commands, the individual needs to cover the space, without ultimate justification.

Sartre intends to show that in the moral sphere, as elsewhere, "there is always the element of invention."²² He wants to describe the unique and often terrifying character of our moral lives and to suggest that no attempt to spell out a universal system of moral principles can relieve us of the burden of personal interpretation and creation. As free moral agents, we cannot get around the necessity of choosing. Even Abraham, who was given a very specific command, still had to decide
whether it was really God who was issuing the command and what God meant or intended by issuing the command.

The same point applies if we think of value more in terms of meaning or purpose than in those of moral value. Sartre takes this approach when he writes, “if I’ve discarded God the Father, there has to be someone to invent values ... Moreover, to say that we invent values means nothing else but this: life has no meaning a priori. Before you come alive, life is nothing; it’s up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing else but the meaning that you choose.” Although it may be easier to see how God could dictate meaning or purpose than to see how morality could spring from divine commands, we can again emphasize Sartre’s point about the unavoidability of choice and responsibility, regardless of the existence or nonexistence of God. If God exists and decides that life in general or particular human lives have certain meanings, it is still incumbent on individuals to personally appropriate that God-given meaning. If, for example, it is written in God’s great plan that my purpose in life is to be a philosophy teacher, it is I who must nevertheless decide to accept this purpose, interpret it, and turn it into action.

There may be room to quarrel with Sartre on some of these points. For example, he certainly seems to have strong, perhaps absurdly strong, requirements for a satisfactory ethics. What is wrong, after all, with Kant’s belief that “the formal and the universal are enough to constitute an ethics”? Sartre’s response is that no formal and universal principle could allow his student to accept a solution to his dilemma “in perfect peace of mind.” Sartre almost seems to be complaining that no possible principle could compel an agent to accept a particular interpretation and action in particular circumstances. But of course, a law compelling a certain action would not be a moral law at all but a rigid law of nature. And even granting Sartre’s point that moral principles fail to
interpret themselves and always require a degree of "invention," we might argue that he tends to exaggerate the gap between universal principles and their practical applications. An injunction against using others as a mere means might not provide a simple solution to his student's extraordinary moral dilemma but would speak clearly against, say, feigning love and devotion to secure financial gain or sexual satisfaction.

But I am less concerned with the strengths and weaknesses of Sartre's view than with pointing out its general character with respect to his atheism. Specifically, what we have seen again goes to support his claim that, "even if God did exist, that would change nothing." Sartre makes this claim because he believes that his description of our moral experience would hold true, even if there were divine commands or objective moral principles. So we ought to conclude that at least these two fundamental features of existentialism do not depend on the truth of atheism, namely, that existence precedes essence and that "we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct." I do not mean to suggest that atheism has absolutely no relevance to Sartre's existentialism or existential phenomenology. Perhaps, for example, Sartre is right where he claims in Being and Nothingness that the notion of God is incoherent. On this view, God could not exist, because the idea of God is the contradictory idea of an "in-itself-for-itself," a "consciousness which would be the foundation of its being-in-itself by the pure consciousness it would have of itself." And if Sartre is right that the "fundamental project of human reality" is a futile attempt to be God, then perhaps it is this fact about us and not the plausibility of theism that best explains the widespread belief in God. But even if we accept all of this, it shows that atheism follows from a coherent existentialism or existential phenomenology, not that existentialism follows from
a coherent atheism, as Sartre claims at the end of *The Humanism of Existentialism.*

So why does this confusion occur in *The Humanism of Existentialism*? In the article, “Sartre’s Adolescent Rejection of God,” Ronald Santoni argues that, “Sartre’s initial basis for rejecting God is pre-philosophical, non-discursive, and flippant.” He shows, on the basis of Sartre’s own numerous admissions, that his atheism was the result of a bare “intuition” of what seemed to him a “manifest truth” he experienced vividly at eleven or twelve years of age. Having demonstrated this, Santoni argues that Sartre designed his later philosophical attempts to disprove the existence of God to rationalize Sartre’s lifelong atheistic intuition and to lay the foundation for a great atheistic philosophy. Santoni claims that, “The ingenuity or forcefulness of his argument in *Being and Nothingness* does not alter the fact that Sartre’s phenomenological ontology is not the basis for his adopting atheism.”

This is an interesting fact about Sartre, but it should hardly count as a criticism of his philosophy. We do not come to philosophy as blank slates, ready to form our conclusions only after the arguments take us to them. The original psychological sources of many of our philosophical beliefs are likely to be nonphilosophical and unreflective. Philosophers have put forth a number of interesting arguments to prove the existence of the external world, for example, but I am willing to bet that few of these philosophers, as psychological agents, have believed in the external world because of these arguments. They believe in the external world because they just cannot help but believe in it. But this is irrelevant to the quality of their arguments. Likewise, the fact that Sartre wanted to produce a philosophy that would cohere with and justify his atheistic intuitions is beside the philosophical point of whether atheism in fact follows from his philosophy.
That being said, an understanding of Sartre's philosophical ambitions may help us to understand his apparent confusion in *The Humanism of Existentialism*. Sartre was motivated by the fact that "a great atheist, [a] truly atheistic philosophy, was something philosophy lacked." Perhaps his desire to be that great atheist who developed a great atheistic philosophy made Sartre all too eager to see his important philosophical innovations as flowing directly from his atheism, even while being careful to support his main theses on independent grounds.

Sartre may also have considered the specifics of the popular opinions he was challenging. He wanted to argue against the idea that there is a fixed human essence somehow determining who we are and what we must be, and he probably recognized that the average person sees God as the source of this essence. He also wanted to emphasize that the individual can never completely justify his or her actions by appeal to universal moral principles, because he or she still needs to provide a justification of his or her choice and interpretation of those principles in concrete situations. Again, Sartre probably recognized that the average person sees God as the source of these moral principles. Thus, his preoccupation with God and atheism should not be surprising.

Whatever the explanation of Sartre's lack of clarity about the relationship between atheism and existentialism, there are good reasons for sorting all of this out. For better or worse, whether or not Sartre liked it, and whether or not we like it, *The Humanism of Existentialism* has become a defining document for existentialist thought. For many, it is the only existentialist work they will ever read. We therefore do Sartre a favour by clarifying these issues. This is especially true because it would be a natural reaction to Sartre's illegitimate move from atheistic premises to existentialist conclusions to think that he had no support for his position. Theodore
Schick, Jr, takes this approach in a recent article. He lumps Sartre together with religious fundamentalists who accept the divine-command theory:

The belief that morality requires God is not limited to theists, however. Many atheists subscribe to it as well. The existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, says that "If God is dead, everything is permitted." In other words, if there is no supreme being to lay down the moral law, each individual is free to do as he or she pleases. Without a divine lawgiver, there can be no universal moral law ...

The upshot is that both the fundamentalists and the existentialists are mistaken about what morality requires.\(^{35}\)

But as we have seen, Sartre can, should, and does support his conclusions on different grounds. Without recognizing the real nature of the relationship between Sartre's atheism and his existentialism, we easily fall into Schick's mistake of dismissing Sartre's view as merely an atheistic version of the divine-command theory.\(^{36}\)

Besides having the status as a seminal work in existential thought, *The Humanism of Existentialism* is also one of the most famous and influential attempts to defend an atheistic and humanistic world view. However, a strong case can be made that Sartre does this world view a great disservice with his discussion of what atheism entails. Many critics of atheism exploit the assumption that it has horrible consequences. Among these alleged consequences are nihilism and amoralism. It may be that Sartre's philosophy does not lead to these consequences. It may be, as Sartre claims and as Christine Daigle argues in the introduction to this volume, that the existentialist attack on traditional philosophical ethics opens the way for a new, nontranscendent grounding for morality. But we can say, at the very least, that Sartre is a famous and influential atheist who does much to confirm these suspicions of nihilism
and amoralism and simply asserts, "You've got to take things as they are." It is certainly a challenge to the idea that we have moral responsibilities to say, with Sartre, that it is up to human beings to create values. Atheists may take up this challenge and may respond successfully, but they need not take it up as an automatic consequence of being atheists. A more responsible treatment of atheism would leave it with a wider range of options for finding moral value and meaning in the world.

NOTES

1 Sartre, Humanism of Existentialism, 62.
2 Thanks to Christine Daigle for stressing this point for me.
3 Sartre, Humanism of Existentialism, 35–6.
4 Sartre, Humanism of Existentialism, 36 (emphasis added).
5 Sartre, Humanism of Existentialism, 35.
6 Sartre, Humanism of Existentialism, 51.
7 Sartre, Humanism of Existentialism, 35.
8 Sartre, Humanism of Existentialism, 34.
9 Sartre, Humanism of Existentialism, 36.
10 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 58.
11 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 58.
12 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 60. It is also worth pointing out that Heidegger, one of Sartre's main influences, establishes a similar point in Being and Time, without reference to the existence or non-existence of God. Heidegger writes that, "Only the particular Dasein decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting. The question of existence never gets straightened out except through existing itself" (Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson, 33). "The 'essence' of Dasein lies in its existence" (Heidegger, Being and Time, 67).
13 Sartre, Humanism of Existentialism, 40.
14 Sartre, Humanism of Existentialism, 40.


17 Sartre, *Humanism of Existentialism*, 58 (emphasis added).


29 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 724.

30 For discussions of Sartre’s antitheistic arguments in *Being and Nothingness*, see Williams, “The Problem of God in *Being and Nothingness*”; and Dinan, “Sartre: Contingent Being and the Non-Existence of God.”


33 In a further attack on Sartre’s atheism, Santoni goes on to argue that, “Sartre’s attitude toward God has unexpected marks of ambivalence” (Santoni, “Sartre’s Adolescent Rejection of God,” 66). For example, in the *Words*, Sartre writes, “Whenever someone speaks to me about [God], I say with the easy amusement of an old beau who meets a former belle: ‘Fifty years ago, had it not been for that misunderstanding, that mistake, the accident that separated us, there might have been something between us’” (cited in Santoni, “Sartre’s Adolescent Rejection of God,” 67). But I think this actually tells against Santoni’s earlier contention that the basis of Sartre’s atheism is unreflective intuition. If this tells us anything about the relationship between Sartre’s personal atheism and his philosophical arguments for atheism, I think it should indicate that
he maintained his atheism, for philosophical reasons, even as his initial atheistic intuitions waned in force later in life.


35 Schick, “Morality Requires God... or Does It? Bad News for Fundamentalists and Jean-Paul Sartre,” 32.

36 Another reason why the clarification of Sartre’s position is important is that if it is true that atheism functions as a kind of first principle for Sartre, then he is open to the charge that his arguments against the existence of God in *Being and Nothingness* are circular.


38 I am grateful for helpful comments and criticisms from participants at the symposium on Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics, at Concordia University, November 2002.
Despite Camus’ refusal to be labelled an existentialist, his early thought in *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* is sometimes seen as an example of existentialism’s incapacity to avoid ethical nihilism. Rather than discussing (once again) the accuracy of such judgments, I want to offer some reflections on the positive ethics Camus provided a few years later in *The Rebel*. To do this, I will compare it with certain aspects of Rousseau’s thought, however paradoxical this comparison may at first appear.

Even more than Hegel or Marx, Rousseau symbolizes the political folly that *The Rebel* opposes. What Camus sees in Rousseau’s *On the Social Contract* is a “New Gospel” deifying reason and the general will, an alternative mystique replacing a dethroned Christianity and laying the foundations for the Terror of the French Revolution. With the sovereignty of the people and the sacred power of laws, “the new God is born,” writes Camus. The alliance of religion and politics is, according to him, a source of absolutism. The link with the Terror is, to be sure, a posteriori, given that there was very
little conscious borrowing of ideas from the *Social Contract* during the Revolution. Nevertheless, the revolutionaries exalted the book and its author. As for Camus, he agrees with the critique of the *Social Contract* made by the liberals of the early nineteenth century, such as Benjamin Constant. Camus thinks that Saint-Just, followed by Marx and Lenin, simply furthered the deification of the political, or the politicization of the religious, initiated by Rousseau. It is, however, in order to understand twentieth-century totalitarianism that Camus, like his contemporaries Talmon and Arendt, wanted to go to the roots of the problem in Rousseau.

Camus' response to this political folly seems, however, to have some common ground with the thought of Rousseau, especially with his great works on moral anthropology. Even though Camus, to my knowledge, never explored this proximity and despite several contextual and intentional differences, I would like to point out a few echoes of Rousseau in *The Rebel*. These will, I hope, shed some light on the strengths and weaknesses of the work, as well as helping me avoid some of the beaten paths frequently taken by Camus scholars.

Before turning to the texts themselves, however, we should note the relationship between the intellectual positions of the two authors and the rough handling each received in his own century. In the eighteenth century, Rousseau adopted the most uncomfortable of positions, since he opposed not only the Church's defence of the divine right of kings and promotion of intolerance but also the Enlightenment's doctrine of self-interest, with the obvious result that he was attacked from both sides. Later, despite his considerable influence and the esteem he earned for his literary skills, his critics, especially the academic ones, called his philosophy of sentiment into question. Indeed, Rousseau's ideas gained a certain credibility only through a Kantian reading, and hence indirectly and perhaps without being correctly understood.
Camus' situation was analogous. In *The Rebel*, he tries to cut a path between Nietzschean amoralism (which inspires the ethics of the absurd in Camus' earlier work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*) and Marxist historicism. The severe attacks directed at him because of this are well known. The notion of measure, which he presents in the last chapter of *The Rebel*, has been viewed as either a transparent cover for nihilism or an easy refuge for the "beautiful soul." His ideas, moreover, have been attacked not only as objectively serving the political right wing (as his critics said at the time) but also as being intellectually suspect. Even those who admired Camus' refusal to wear the dogmatic blinders of Marxism felt obliged to defend him against the accusation of intellectual incompetence.

After some consideration, it appears that Rousseau and Camus were perspicacious about their respective centuries but did not know how to provide the theoretical foundations for their insights. Those who have praised their artistic genius have often done so only to emphasize the fragility of their ethics. In reflecting on their ethics, I want especially to point out the role played by sentiment – the sentiment of belonging, first, to nature and, next, to the species.

Camus begins with the fact of rebellion. Individuals rebel when they feel their limits have been crossed. With Camus, this is not a matter of abstract principle or rational argument, but rather, as with Rousseau, one of sentiment. Camus intended his ethics to extend this sentiment; indeed, his criticism of the modern era is that the various doctrines of ethics it has given birth to discredit rebellion. The historical revolution that human beings have turned to Camus considers to be compensation for the loss of a transhistorical salvation and to be an intellectually pathological choice giving the individual, by means of history and in the name of a presumed all-encompassing understanding, a new totality.
But does rebellion create a value or simply reveal something preexisting? Rebellion could not be a pure creation, since then it would be absolutely original, that is to say, a fiction. Camus speaks of it as an impulse that is continually on the verge of disclosing a preexisting value. And what is that value? Rebellion itself, since it "reveals the part of man which must always be defended" through rebellion. It expresses the individual's awareness of his or her rights through a refusal of a threat to those rights. The approach is therefore defensive, or negative, in that Camus defines the object of the threat in terms of resistance to that threat. But it is not a question of inventing a value within the framework of some form of humanism in which the individual creates his or her self. This rebellion is not Sartre's transcendence, or project, since it concerns neither something not yet existing nor a freedom to choose an end by annihilating something given. By contrast to the Sartrian project, this rebellion implies some degree of acceptance, or assent.

What does rebellion assent to? Camus responds that rebellion assents to human nature or at any rate reveals at least a "suspicion" of it. Thus, Camus points to a natural order, though describing it solely through the excesses that deny it. All the same, by reference to it, human beings can determine those limits appropriate to their actions. As an ethics, rebellion is at once both refusal and assent, both "yes" and "no," and precisely this balance or tension – what Camus calls measure – keeps the ethics of rebellion from betraying itself. So, measure intervenes in two ways: first, by preventing rebellion from undoing itself with the very means it has employed for protection from a threat, so its refusal of a threat becomes self-destructive; second, by keeping rebellion from assenting to life to such an extent that the threat sweeps away the rebellion, so its refusal is insufficient.
This negative method of Camus has its analogue in Rousseau's rooting of his critique of his society in the value of a hypothetical lost state of nature. Here, too, it is a question of suspicion: although such a state "no longer exists ... perhaps never existed ... probably never will exist," it is nevertheless necessary to refer to it "to have accurate notions in order to judge of our own present state." Rousseau explains what in society should be preserved by reference to two traits antecedent to any reflection: self-love (amour de soi) and pity. These concepts enable Rousseau to define an ethics without relying on reason, which in any case only serves, through its discourse, to stifle natural sentiment. And this explains why Rousseau replaces that "sublime maxim of reasoned justice," which commands us to act toward others as we would have others act toward ourselves, with a different, "much less perfect but perhaps more useful" maxim. Based on pity, this new maxim commands us to act in such a way as to do the least possible harm to others.

As in the work of Camus, here the moral criterion derives from the already present nature attested to by sentiment. The natural human being is not motivated by a moral exigency but goes about his or her self-preservation, as much as possible without harming others. In the same way, the rebel invents no value but reacts by an instinctive impulse to any threat to his integrity. Only when he begins to make speeches to justify his actions does he go astray. The rebel then acts like the philosopher denounced by Rousseau, who finds thousands of reasons for not responding to the cries of someone being murdered below his window. This is how reason stifles pity, just as Camus' rebellion stifles itself when it becomes ideology and manages to rationally legitimate suffering and murder.

Morality, therefore, is founded on neither the exercise of reason nor metaphysical assertions. Priority is given to sentiment,
which for both thinkers presupposes a certain skepticism: Camus’ “Thought at the Meridian” offers no more knowledge of the world than Rousseau’s Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar. But, according to the latter, skepticism is both unlivable and dangerous, and Rousseau thus criticizes relativism such as that of Montaigne. In like manner, Camus criticized the drift into nihilism, the dangers of which had been demonstrated by the war. Both Camus and Rousseau demand a practical commitment to supersede skepticism—a faith or a feeling of certainty. For Rousseau, this certainty arises through the voice of the heart, or the “divine instinct” that is conscience, supported by his hypothesis of the state of nature. For Camus, it proceeds from evidence of rebellion, supported by the participatory ecstasy of the memories of his youth in Algeria. Both writers, therefore, have recourse to a kind of nostalgia. But in contrast to Plato’s theory of the recollection of forms, here it is a matter of recalling, not knowledge, but a sensible experience.

Etienne Barilier’s excellent book on Camus explores this morality of sensibility by situating it in the dialogue of Socrates and Callicles in Plato’s Gorgias. In this exchange, a metaphysical vision of the universe is at odds with one reducing it to our immediate desires. Callicles sets brute nature, whose law decrees that the strong defeat the weak and that passions reign without measure, in opposition to the rules of morality that limit natural passion. To nature as measure, he opposes nature as force. Socrates denounces the superficiality of this brute and instinctive nature in the name of a deeper nature, one distinguishing good from noxious pleasure and providing a basis for the idea of justice to arise. Camus seems to play it both ways. Whereas he puts aside all religious and metaphysical transcendence, he wants to formulate an ethics after the war—and despite its absurdity—consisting in the measure attained by a rebellion that refuses to betray itself.
Camus and Rousseau

Does Camus, however, really have the means of founding such an ethics? Through his insistence on nostalgia for the experiences of his youth, Camus in a way replaces transcendence with this natural sentiment. But a sentiment does not necessarily lead to measure. It could explode into a frenzy of assent to nature, an unbridled delight in the pleasures of the body, as illustrated by that troupe of absurd figures in *The Myth of Sisyphus,* including the seducer and the adventurer. Camus brings into play the Socratic demand for a system of ethics based on an order of things allowing us to distinguish desire and morality but does it by Callicles’ means, that is to say, by brute nature, without a regulatory or intelligible power. What results is the tangle of exigencies in *The Rebel,* which perhaps explains the work’s grandiose style, in which classical philosophical debates are brought to swift conclusions with superb and often paradoxical phrases. Through a kind of dogmatism of sensibility, the ethical problem is resolved aesthetically, chiefly through the metaphors of sun and light.

Rousseau sometimes states more explicitly what is at stake. The rule of “yielding to sentiment more than to reason is confirmed by reason itself,” asserts the Savoyard Vicar. But Rousseau also uses a mix of philosophy and literature, where he calls into question traditional metaphysics, criticizes the use of reason, and bases ethics on a natural sentiment. Like Camus’ sunlit ecstasy, Rousseau’s voice of the heart speaks the evidence of nature and thereby renders perceptible the appropriate measure. Various fictions – such as those of the state of nature, the noble savage, and even the virtue of “the Ancients” – envelope the reader and elevate him or her from the sensible to the moral. This has caused at least one scholar to speak of Rousseau’s “Platonic temptations.” Now, I would say that Camus’ thought also contains metaphysical temptations, for neither writer provides a metaphysical basis for
measure, thus leaving human nature partly undetermined; nevertheless, their quest has a metaphysical or spiritual tone, which perhaps contributed both to their success with a wide audience and to their uncertain reputation among rationalist philosophers.

Camus' participatory nostalgia concerns not only nature but also other human beings. The criterion of rebellion is moral because it binds each individual to all other individuals: "I rebel – therefore we exist," he writes. Camus endows rebellion with measure by acknowledging the right of others to rebel. This is why he maintains that murder and rebellion are "logically ... contradictory": denying any single person the possibility of rebelling diminishes it for each. However, in The Rebel, Camus does not really give an argument for this rule so Kantian in appearance. Rather, the impossibility of murder derives from a sentiment of solidarity with, or carnal participation in, humanity. This solidarity is not a substantial unity overshadowing individuals; on the contrary, our experience attests to it, and it finds its moral expression in our consenting to take risks and make sacrifices going beyond our personal concerns.

Camus speaks of a "common texture" and an "obvious complicity," thus bringing our thoughts back, not only to the poetic prose of his youth – where, for example, he evokes the "homeland of the soul," in Noces – but also to Tarrou and Rieux's bathing scene in The Plague.

This theme, moreover, is present long after The Rebel, in Camus' last manuscript, The First Man. The narrator, Cormery's father, a soldier in the French army, recounts an episode from the war against the Moroccans. During an ambush, the latter killed and subsequently mutilated some French soldiers, cutting off their penises and stuffing them into their mouths. Could individuals permit themselves to do just anything under urgent and fearful circumstances? Those who committed this act, says Cormery's father, are not human
beings: "No, a man doesn’t let himself do that kind of thing! That’s what makes a man, or otherwise … I’m poor, I came from an orphanage, they put me in this uniform, they dragged me into the war, but I wouldn’t let myself do that." This restraint, wherein lies the humanity of the individual, is not demonstrable by reason. It is an intimate sentiment that asserts itself in any human being confronted with horror, especially corporeal horror. The original solidarity between individuals reveals itself, not through altruism, but through pity and the refusal to do violence to others’ physical integrity. The body sets the limit beyond which rebellion betrays itself, and it is when ideas justify this limit that it risks becoming a sham.

This original experience of solidarity is absent from Being and Nothingness because a movement of transcendence strictly defines the for-itself. Sartre criticizes the idea of a “crew” (or “team”), a concept that allows Heidegger to avoid the clash of transcendencies and thus the logic of conflict. On this point, Camus would be on Heidegger’s side, or still more precisely, on the side of Merleau-Ponty, who carefully explains his rejection of Sartre’s rigidity. For Merleau-Ponty, carnal participation must be the basis for analyzing our diverse relations with others, most notably conflict. Neither Merleau-Ponty nor Heidegger, however, ventures far into the terrain of ethics, whereas Camus makes the fundamental experience of carnal participation the basis of his ethics of measure, since it is the source of the limits that action must establish for itself.

It is well known that Rousseau defends no natural sociability. Natural human beings are solitary: they meet others and collaborate with them ephemerally. In the state of nature, even the mother-child relationship is quickly and readily ended, when the mother has satisfied the child’s primary needs. Rousseau’s position, however, does not seem to me
far removed from that of Camus. First of all, precisely in the case of the maternal relationship, Rousseau recognizes a fundamental corporeal bond, even as he takes care to exclude the family from the class of natural phenomena. Next, Rousseau’s and Camus’ ways of presenting the effects of pity in social life are analogous. In denouncing the anthropology of those who claim that reason, calculating and self-serving, motivates all human behaviour, Rousseau emphasizes the “emotion of anger and indignation [which] is aroused in the depths of the heart, and ... leads us to take up the defence of the oppressed.” He also recalls those sacrificial acts demonstrating that the “just man” contributes to the public good “to his prejudice,” rather than doing so in his own interest. When individuals listen to the voice of their conscience, their pity becomes manifest and can be so nurtured as to uphold social virtue. Here is a natural bond capable of producing effects, even though social life tends to stifle it. As fragile as such a basis may seem, it is better to cultivate morality from these primary sentiments than from reason, since the latter can be used to justify any behaviour, whether good or bad.

Initially Rousseau takes the definitive criteria for ethics from outside of society – that is, from the state of nature – and then seeks to translate these into a basis for life in society. These translations always risk betraying the purity of the original, however, as human beings must be radically transformed and denatured to recover the unity of the self in the state of nature. And so the question must be asked whether Rousseau can really reconcile state-of-nature sentiments and the city of the contract? Readers of Rousseau continually confront this difficulty. On the one hand, Rousseau strives to remain faithful to natural sentiment by developing a politics of pity, which can really never be other than a nonpolitics (as Hannah Arendt makes clear in her celebrated critique). On the other, Rousseauistic politics can be entirely dissociated
from sentiment only at the risk of betraying the ethics it is
supposed to serve. By making himself legislator in the Social
Contract, Rousseau takes this risk and indeed pays a heavy
price to elaborate his positive politics. A discerning reader of
Machiavelli, Rousseau perceives this tension between politics
and morality and confronts the consequences.

Camus, by contrast, is not ready to pay such a price, and
this explains his severe critique of Rousseau’s politics. Never-
theless, Camus faces the same difficulty, both when trying to
extend his ‘ethics of sentiment into the realm of politics and
when offering measure as a balance between morality and
politics. The difficulty becomes apparent when we read the
ethics of The Rebel as actually seeking to preserve dialogue.39
The hypothesis here is that rebellion demands acknowledg-
ment of dialogue and that individuals, when refused this pos-
sibility, say “no.” Such is their limit. The principle of rebellion
insists on sustaining dialogue about values and human nature
while mistrusting historical attempts to end it with an all-
encompassing ideological discourse. But is this really possi-
ble if the original solidarity, serving as an ethical criterion,
stands on a sentiment of participation and immediate partak-
ing of sensations? How are we to promote dialogue between
people who feel, rather than talk?30 Avoiding self-betrayal and
the pitfalls of ideology, an ethics of rebellion risks rejecting
any discourse that might justify it, and it thereby excludes
itself from any deliberation with others. In short, for there to
be any political life, is it not inevitable that rebellion betray
itself? In other words, is it not incapable of retaining its purity
and defending against threats without remaining on the level
of sentiment? This concern motivated Sartre’s and Francis
Jeanson’s savage critiques of The Rebel, critiques of the “rebel-
lious” or beautiful soul.31

At that moment of providing a political translation of their
ethics, however, Rousseau and Camus diverge, since the latter,
despite everything, opts for a position that is more "moral" than that of the former. Their relationship, nevertheless, cannot be reduced to a confrontation over the political deification of reason. For this would be to underestimate their common search for some measure to resist what they consider, each in his own century, the cynicism of reason: the one appealing to conscience in the face of the utilitarian blindness of the Enlightenment, the other appealing to rebellion as a counter to the "adolescent frenzy" of the age of ideology. The resulting ethics is certainly fragile but is positioned, as Paul Ricoeur remarks in his fine essay on The Rebel, at the heart of all the uncertainty in modern thought.32

N O T E S

1 Translated from the French by Neil Philip and John Whitt.
2 Camus, Rebel, 114.
3 Camus, Rebel, 116.
4 See Talmon, Rise of Totalitarian Democracy, and Arendt, On Revolution.
5 Camus, Rebel, 19.
6 Camus, Rebel, 16.
7 The limit is "inseparable from human nature," writes Camus in Rebel, 294.
8 Rousseau, Discourse, 114.
9 Rousseau, Discourse, 135.
10 Rousseau, Discourse, 134–5.
11 Rousseau, Emile, 290.
12 Barilier, Albert Camus, ch. 6. According to Roger Quilliot, editor of the Pléiade complete works of Camus (Camus, Oeuvres: Essais, 1622), Camus was planning on dedicating an entire section of his essay to Callicles, though in the end there is but a single rapid reference to him in Rebel, 27–8.
See especially the chapter, "Thought at the Meridian," where, for example, Camus invokes "the extenuating intransigence of moderation." Camus, \textit{Rebel}, 303.


See Gouhier, \textit{Les méditations métaphysiques de Rousseau}, ch. 4.

Camus, \textit{Rebel}, 22.

Camus, \textit{Rebel}, 281.

Camus, \textit{Rebel}, 15-16.

Camus, \textit{Rebel}, 281.

Camus, "Summer in Algiers," 90.


Camus, \textit{First Man}, 65.


Rousseau, \textit{Emile}, 289.

Arendt, \textit{On Revolution}, ch. 2. She shows that when pity becomes an abstraction, it can be at the origins of cruelty, as during the Terror of the French Revolution. It is therefore appropriate to distinguish compassion, as aroused by a particular instance of suffering, and pity, now a general category capable of authorizing violence in its own name.


Camus mentions a "communication between human being and human being which makes men both similar and united," but everything indicates that these "chains" are more those of the body than those of language. Camus, \textit{Rebel}, 281.

See the recent English translation of their texts, Sprintzen and Hoven, trans., ed., \textit{Sartre and Camus}.

In the conclusion of his major treatise, *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre announces that his next endeavour will be to deal with ethics. In the last section, “Ethical Implications,” he tells of how ontology and existential psychoanalysis can inform the individual that he or she is free and the source of all values. However, ontology and existential psychoanalysis cannot give moral prescriptions. All questions relative to freedom and how this freedom will deal with its situation are questions “which refer us to a pure and not an accessory reflection, [and] can find their reply only on the ethical plane. We shall devote to them a future work.” Those are the very last words of *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre never fulfilled his promise. What we have from him is the text of a public lecture, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, as well as posthumous ethical writings such as the *Notebooks for an Ethics*, about which he said in an interview with Michel Sicard, “I wrote ten big notebooks which represent a failed attempt at building an ethics ... I did not finish it because ... building an ethics is tough!” Furthermore, in the interview, he qualifies the ethics of the
Notebooks as being idealistic and individualistic. Sartre does give ethics another try and writes two other sets of notes on ethics in the 1960s. Should we privilege these later developments on ethics, which have a Marxist undertone, or should we still look at the earlier material for a more genuine existentialist ethics? Regardless, we know that Sartre later rejected this second ethics in favor of a third. This third ethics was controversial in that it was a much-contested collaboration with Benny Levy. All of these attempts at an ethics—the existentialist, the Marxist, and the later attempt—remain arguably inconclusive.

In his book on Sartre, Sartre, le dernier philosophe, Alain Renaut suggests an interesting hypothesis. He thinks that one of the least negligible external reasons for the abandonment of the Notebooks project by Sartre was the publication in 1947 of The Ethics of Ambiguity by Simone de Beauvoir. According to Renaut, this text responded directly to the necessity of writing an ethics on the basis of Being and Nothingness. Renaut's hypothesis is that Beauvoir's answer to the challenge found in the closing pages of Sartre's treatise is so successful that Sartre no longer needed to undertake this project.

Many a Beauvoir scholar would agree with Renaut's hypothesis, but they might also want to go further. It seems that Beauvoir's dealings with ethics had been more successful than Sartre's, even before Being and Nothingness (1943) and her Pyrrhus et Cinéas (1944) and Ethics of Ambiguity (1947). For one thing, she never agreed with Sartre's view of inter-individual relationships as purely conflictual. In an interview with Margaret Simons, she does insist that the problem of the consciousness of the Other was her problem; she was the one who introduced Sartre to the difficulties it presents. The way she deals with the problem is entirely non-Sartrean. Whenever she deals with the problem of the consciousness of the Other, she departs from the Sartrean theory, which is often
thought, mistakenly, to lie at the root of her own ethical writings. In fact, recent scholarship has shown that, rather than Sartre influencing Beauvoir, the reverse was probably the case.

As Simons explains, Beauvoir is always concerned with the individual’s being-with-others. Simons says, “This element of Beauvoir’s perspective differs decisively from the early individualism she shared with Sartre. And her divergence on this point is partially responsible for the tension that characterizes the perspective of The Ethics of Ambiguity.” Beauvoir’s treatment of the problem of the Other is entirely different from that of Sartre. Simons puts it this way: “For Beauvoir, the problem of the Other arises within an intersubjective context with the necessity of realizing the self while desiring fusion with the Other.” There is never a question of fusing with the Other in Sartre’s writings. What is interesting for me here is that the problem of the Other lies at the root of the ethical, since, as she says, “The category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself.” It is a fundamental category that is to be understood in terms of both pure alterity and reciprocity. Thinking in Hegelian terms, Beauvoir explains that fundamentally the relationship between consciousnesses is oppositional. But at the same instant that I posit the Other as an opposite, I also posit our relationship as reciprocal. This is absent from Sartre’s picture, and it may very well be that this different perspective on the Other is the ground for Beauvoir’s success in ethics and Sartre’s failure (or struggle, depending where you stand on this issue).

From a phenomenological standpoint, Beauvoir says that we are our bodies and that we are always situated. I am my body in this world. This world contains others. Others are thus as much a part of my world as I am a part of theirs. Others as conscious beings perceive me in their world and objectify me. But contrary to Sartre’s inevitable alienation by
The Ambiguous Ethics of Beauvoir

the Other, the situation is ambiguous for Beauvoir. Sartre made the relationship with the Other entirely conflictual and alienating. But Beauvoir sees it otherwise. First, she says that perception is "not a relation between a subject and an object where both are a stranger to the other: perception ties us to the world as to our homeland, it is communication and communion." I perceive the Other as an object in the world. Is my perception of the Other as an object of the same nature as my perception of other objects? If this is the case, I am bound to the Other I perceive in the world, as perception is both communication and communion. So I perceive the Other as object. However, I also know that the Other is a consciousness. The Other is both object (as a body of flesh in the world) and a consciousness (embodied in that flesh). Beauvoir uses the terms "immanence" and "transcendence." The Other, as well as I, is both immanent and transcendent: immanent because the individual is a part of the world, and transcendent because he or she can, by making use of his or her freedom, transcend his or her own situation, shape his or her interaction with the world and others in that world. I know that as I perceive the Other, the Other also knows these things of me, when he or she perceives me as part of his or her world. This is the conflict of consciousnesses for Beauvoir. Instead of a radical alienation, my encounter with the Other makes for an ambiguous perception, an uncertain relationship. This is the first sense of ambiguity for Beauvoir. Other senses will arise later, as I further examine her ethics.

If this is the initial situation in which we find ourselves in the world, Beauvoir will say that this ambiguous, potentially conflictual relationship with the Other is easily transformed into a positive, collaborative relationship. This can be done if we consider the exigencies tied to our flourishing as free individuals.

Although my aim is not to ensconce Beauvoir's ethics in a particular category, it will become clear that her ethics is
closer to some than to others. I intend to approach Beauvoir's ethics as a kind of virtue ethics concerned with the flourishing of the individual. Considering two ways of approaching ethics - the ethics of conduct and the ethics of character - I will argue that Beauvoir's ethics is more akin to the second approach. She is not concerned with providing recipes for right conduct. She is not looking for definite rules and principles, because, as she says, these cannot be established. She is clear, "Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods." \(^\text{12}\) In the realm of ethics, then, we have to be creative and invent rules of conduct for ourselves. But while we do that, we are always, or should always be, concerned with our own actualization of our free and ambiguous being (what I earlier called "our flourishing"). In Sartrean terms, we create an image of the human being as he or she should be. This image of virtue is then what we aim for through our actions. \(^\text{13}\)

The ethical problem is complex for Beauvoir. The phenomenological analysis shows that we are fundamentally ethical beings, as a result of our situation in the world. As Holveck sums it up, "Freedom arises in human action; hence, freedom is always situated, placed, embodied." \(^\text{14}\) Hence it is ethical. Further, our contingent existence in an absurd world initiates an ethical question: What should we live for? This is what Beauvoir tackles in Pyrrhus et Cinéas. Being concerned mainly with the question of the meaning or justification for human existence, Pyrrhus et Cinéas is not a work on ethics in the strict sense. But it is important to consider what she has to say in this work, as I think that the question of the meaning of human existence is of fundamental ethical relevance; it lies at the root of our actions. Hence, Pyrrhus et Cinéas may be said to be a work on ethics in a broad sense.

In this essay, Beauvoir is concerned with "what we should live for" or "how should we live." She wants to address the
question of the meaning of existence as a ground for orienting our lives and then choosing certain values. She defines human existence as a "constant reaching out for goals," that is, as a project (understood as a plurality of projects that the human being has in the world). She writes, "Man is present in the world in two ways: he is an object, a given that foreign transcendent beings overcome; he is himself a transcendence that throws himself forward into the future." And she further writes, "Only I can create the bond that ties me to the Other; I create it because I am not a thing but a project of myself toward the Other, a transcendence."

In a very Nietzschean way, she then says that the only thing that can give meaning to human existence is the goal that an individual sets for his or her self. This means, in fact, that the only meaning human life can have is the one given by an individual out of his or her own free choice. Beauvoir takes a step out of the solipsistic trap of personal striving by saying that "one's individual freedom supports and founds another's, like one stone supporting another in an arch." As she sees it, there is a relationship between individuals in which each one's being free will influence the other's being free. Nevertheless, a human being also needs other freedoms, for the following reason. She states,

I need those foreign freedoms since when I have achieved and gone beyond my own goals, my actions would fall back upon themselves, inert, useless, if they would not be carried away by new projects toward a new future ... The movement of my transcendence appears futile to me as soon as I have transcended it; but, if through other men my transcendence is prolonged always further away than the project that I form in the present, I will never be able to go beyond it.

According to Beauvoir, then, every individual chooses his or her place in the world. She asserts that this is a necessary
given of the human reality. We cannot help but take our place. The human being is a being-in-the-world. The world is there and provides resistance to human freedom. As Weiss explains, “the situation provides a necessary obstacle to my freedom. The situation is necessary because it forces me to engage my freedom concretely, which is the only way in which my freedom can become meaningful to myself and to others. It is also an obstacle because my freedom must triumph over the constraints the situation places upon the realization of my projects.” But as Beauvoir puts it, the world of things provides both a resistance to, and a necessary extension of, my being. In fact, Beauvoir insists more on the latter aspect, as she says, “The thing will define itself firstly not as a resistance, but on the contrary as the correlative of my existence.” At the same time that she posits the world and the human as a being-in-the-world, she asserts the absolute contingency of the human’s presence in the world: the individual is always unnecessary, and he or she is the only one who can make his or her life necessary and justified. The justification of the existence of the individual and his or her presence in the world will be achieved through the Other. The key is for one to be an object in the world of the Other. She thinks that an individual alone in the world would be paralyzed by the evident nonsense of all his or her goals. Beauvoir thinks that such a human being could not bear to live. What saves us, then, is the presence of others in the world.

Interestingly, Beauvoir finds a solution to the conflictual relationship with the Other without having to appeal to a theistic position of fraternity or brotherly community (which is the strategy adopted by someone like Gabriel Marcel). She says, “The existentialists are so far from denying love, friendship, fraternity that in their eyes it is only in human relations that each individual can find the foundation and accomplishment of his being.” We need the Other as a free being, as a being
who justifies my presence by objectifying it. Beauvoir reverses
the Sartrean view of the objectification I suffer from the look
of the Other as alienation and presents it as a blessing. I need
the others as free beings and as beings that exist for me. They
will then justify my existence, but they only do so if I make
them my fellow human beings. They are made such when I
acknowledge them as free beings. Anderson explains,

"I must assist all men in becoming my peers so as to attain the maxi-
mum justification possible" ... she writes [in Pyrrhus et Cinéas] ... We
have here the most complete argument offered by these exist-
entialists to support their view that man should choose the freedom
of others as well as his own. To sum it up – since God is dead, as are
all objective values, man is completely dependent on the freedom of
men if he is to attain meaning and value for his existence. Man fund-
damentally desires a justified existence and the knowledge that it is
justified, and this means he wants to be freely and positively valued
by all men, whom he wants to be his peers. Consistency demands,
therefore, that man both value the freedom of all men and aid them
in becoming his equals."

According to Beauvoir, then, I need the Other to justify my
existence, and the Other has to be free to be in a position to
do that. Freedom is thus promoted to the rank of the most
fundamental value in this ethics, since it is that by which exis-
tence is justified. We can thus see how Pyrrhus et Cinéas is
indeed an ethical work. The discussion of the meaning of
human life opens up to ethics as it establishes freedom and
the necessity of promoting our own freedom as well as that of
others as the foundation of ethics.

In The Ethics of Ambiguity, Beauvoir is still preoccupied by the
question of the justification of existence, and she further
explains how the Other's freedom is tied to mine. But she
slightly modifies her position on the justification of existence.
She now insists on a more individualistic approach in order to answer the question of meaning. She is, once again, very Nietzschean when she affirms that life is constantly seeking to overcome itself and that a human life is justified only if life’s effort to perpetuate itself is integrated within its overcoming. It seems that she is saying we must constantly overcome ourselves according to the goals we set for ourselves.  

Her conclusion on the question of the meaning of existence is this: We must be careful not to confuse the notions of absurdity and ambiguity: “To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won.” It will be won by the individual’s movement of transcendence, which will act upon the world and make it, as well as our own existence, meaningful. Is this an individualistic ethics? Beauvoir asks the question herself and answers, “Yes, if one means by that that it accords to the individual an absolute value and that it recognizes in him alone the power of laying the foundations of his own existence ... But it is not solipsistic, since the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others.” Every individual is the artisan of his or her own life and justifies his or her own existence, since the appeal to the Other is grounded in respect for the Other’s freedom. The individual thus justifies his or her existence in promoting the freedom of the Other, without which that justification would be impossible.

Beauvoir’s more complex view of freedom allows her to move beyond the Sartrean dead end. This sophisticated view establishes a very important distinction between different types of freedom. Where Sartre is caught with his description of the human being as always entirely free, whatever the circumstances or the situation, Beauvoir works out a more subtle
The Ambiguous Ethics of Beauvoir

notion of freedom. She never agreed with Sartre’s conception of freedom. In *The Prime of Life* she tells us about a discussion she had with Sartre at the time when he was preparing *Being and Nothingness*.

During the days that followed we discussed certain specific problems, in particular the relationship between “situation” and freedom. I maintained that from the angle of freedom as Sartre defined it—that is, an active transcendence of some given context rather than mere stoic resignation—not every situation was equally valid: what sort of transcendence could a woman shut up in a harem achieve? Sartre replied that even such a cloistered existence could be lived in several quite different ways. I stuck to my point for a long time, and in the end made only a token submission. Basically I was right. But to defend my attitude I should have had to abandon the plane of individual, and therefore idealistic, morality on which we had set ourselves.

In her book on Beauvoir’s ethics, Kristana Arp explains very clearly how Beauvoir distinguishes between natural (or ontological) freedom, power, and moral freedom. Here is how she explains it. Natural freedom is the freedom that Sartre talks about in *Being and Nothingness* and that Beauvoir so reluctantly accepts. It is the freedom we assert when we say that human beings are free (in Sartre’s words, condemned to be free). It is the freedom we discover in anguish and the one we flee when in bad faith. You can react in two different ways when faced with the discovery of your ontological freedom: you can either fail to choose to will yourself free (which would be the equivalent of bad faith) or “one can will oneself free by accepting one’s freedom and actively making oneself a lack of being.” Beauvoir says, “If man wishes to save his existence, as only he himself can do, his original spontaneity must be raised to the height of moral freedom by taking itself
as an end through the disclosure of a particular content.”

Moral freedom is the ontological freedom that I make the object of my actions. It is the consciously actualized freedom. Power, in contrast with the other two instances of freedom, has to do with the freedom from material and social constraints. It is this freedom in the human being that can be limited by outside forces and not our ontological freedom, which is always free. The three different freedoms are intertwined because, as Beauvoir goes on to say, moral freedom can develop only if power is not constrained. You need the absence of constraints to choose your ontological freedom, that is, to be morally free.

Before moving ahead in my discussion of freedom, I think it is necessary to say a few words about the role history plays in a human being’s situatedness. Beauvoir recognizes the fundamental historicity of the human being. As an historical being, I stand to be affected not only by my present situation in the world but also by historical developments resulting from my own and other people’s decisions, actions, and choices. Thus, my freedom can be constrained by my situation, as well as by my historicity. Considering the distinction discussed above, we can identify the freedom affected by history as power. Again, contrary to Sartre’s view, my freedom is not absolute, and Beauvoir recognizes that sometimes the historical situation will be determining and will limit my power.

I said earlier that according to Beauvoir, my freedom is tied to that of others. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she says, “This privilege, which he alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique object amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow-men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends.” We are beings-in-the-world and beings-for-others (saying beings-with-others, in a Marcellian fashion, would seem more appropriate). After having explained that
the problem she is addressing is that of the justification of existence for a being that is at best ambiguous, Beauvoir moves on to say, “But if man is free to define for himself the conditions of a life which is valid in his own eyes, can he not choose whatever he likes and act however he likes?” She refers here to the problem of amorality as posited by Dostoyevsky and then says that, “far from God's absence authorizing all license, the contrary is the case, because man is abandoned on the earth, because his acts are definitive, absolute engagements. He bears the responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself, where his defeats are inscribed, and his victories as well.”

This will be accomplished by freedom. It is freedom that is the source of both justification and values. She says, “It is the original condition of all justification of existence. The man who seeks to justify his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else.” This way, we become morally free. Freedom is that through which we can disclose (or rather unveil) being. Beauvoir explains,

it must not be forgotten that there is a concrete bond between freedom and existence; to will man free is to will there to be being, it is to will the disclosure of being in the joy of existence; in order for the idea of liberation to have a concrete meaning, the joy of existence must be asserted in each one, at every instant; the movement toward freedom assumes its real, flesh and blood figure in the world by thickening into pleasure, into happiness ... If we do not love life on our own account and through others, it is futile to seek to justify it in any way.

Beauvoir makes two claims regarding freedom. First, the existence of others as free defines my situation and is the condition of my own freedom. Second, to will myself free is also to will others free. The others define my situation in that they
give meaning to the world through their praxis. They are engaged in the world in a Husserlian fashion, and they infuse it with meaning. So my situation is defined by this meaningful world, made such by the action of the freedom of others. But again, as Arp puts it, "Being is not so much, as it were, manufactured by human freedom as disclosed as meaningful by it." What Beauvoir wants to say with the first claim is that the meaning of the world is not established upon one subjectivity infusing it with meaning but upon an intersubjective praxis. As Anderson was saying, the more the merrier, and it then becomes our task to make it so that ontological freedom can blossom and hence make the world more meaningful than ever.

But the necessity of the freedom of others is brought about in a more intricate way, as Beauvoir posits a connection between temporality and freedom. Actions develop in the future, and so in a way the future is the meaning of all action. As Arp explains,

only the future can give meaning to my actions, but the future does not exist yet. Then how can it give meaning to my present actions? The way for Beauvoir to extricate herself from this paradox is to appeal to the existence of other free human agents. As Beauvoir puts it, others open the future for me ... The meaning that is bestowed by the future on my actions comes from other free subjects who in concert with or in opposition to me create the future in the present through their projects and plans.

So the future does not exist as such. But a certain future does exist because of the projects of other free beings in the world. They can have these projects if they are morally free, and they are morally free only if there are no or very little constraints on their freedom, that is, if we have worked toward human liberation. The necessity of the freedom of others introduces
a moral precept in the existentialist scheme, as presented by Beauvoir: "the precept will be to treat the other ... as a freedom so that his end may be freedom; in using this conducting-wire one will have to incur the risk, in each case, of inventing an original solution."

The other problem that faces existentialism in ethics, besides the lack of a precise recipe to follow, is this: every human being is free. Every human being freely chooses his or her values. There are no a priori values, since there is no transcendent reality on which to ground them (as Sartre argued in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*). We are in a human universe, and values are human; they are chosen by human beings in a situation. If this is the case, we run the risk of being trapped in an ethical relativism of an extreme kind. However, this is not the case in Beauvoir's ethics. She successfully demonstrates that existentialist ethics is an intersubjective endeavour. Weiss explains, "it is essential to appreciate that for Beauvoir, attaining one's moral freedom is never merely an individual project, but always a social and political project as well. Thus the very project of 'willing one's freedom' always occurs within a broader context in which my freedom both enables and is enabled by, constrains and is constrained by, the freedom of others." This comes out of Beauvoir's fundamental phenomenological position on the self and others.

I am my body. I am a body in the world. The world is inhabited by others. They are bodies, but I can suspect they are body-subjects, just the way I am my body. I thus encounter others as consciousnesses. As such, they are, just like me, free and want to realize their freedom. Since I am not merely a being-for-others (which would lead us in an inescapable conflictual and alienating relationship), we can work together to see freedom blossom. My being-with-others commands that I promote the freedom of others as well as my own. This is because I am not alone in the world. I am always
with others, and I have to make others my peers. The question of course will be whether I choose to make them such.

I have called this chapter, “The Ambiguous Ethics of Beauvoir.” Beauvoir’s ethics is certainly existentialist. It shares many of the existentialists’ views. It is also phenomenological, as I have shown. But it is, on top of this, ambiguous in that it is a celebration of ambiguity. So by calling it an ambiguous ethics, I do not mean to say that its meaning is ambiguous. On the contrary, I think that Beauvoir is among the most successful existentialist thinkers in developing an ethics. Her ethics has been coined differently by various scholars, as a result of their focusing on different sets of Beauvoir’s writings. Those who focus on the same texts as I have here will call it an existentialist ethics. Focusing on *The Second Sex*, on the other hand, we can find an erotic ethics of generosity at work in Beauvoir’s philosophy. Finally, we can espouse Weiss’s project and focus on *A Very Easy Death* to uncover an embodied ethics close to an ethics of care.

For my part, I want to call Beauvoir’s ethics an ambiguous ethics, as it promotes this fundamental human feature: ambiguity. We are ambiguous in many ways. The human being is ambiguous in that it is torn between immanence and transcendence. The individual is also ambiguous as a being that is free and that has to make itself free. The individual is ambiguous in a third way, as a being that is in conflict with the Other and yet needs the Other to fulfill itself. This is due to our embodied reality; we are not just disembodied wills. There is thus a threefold ambiguity within human reality. Using the ontological language developed by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, which Beauvoir also uses in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Bergoffen explains human ambiguity, using the notions of “desire for disclosure” and “desire for possession.” She says, “Neither this desire nor that, we are the ambiguity of the two
desires that run through each other. We are the one of the ambiguous flow that is also and necessarily a two." This ambiguity comes in a third form in human action, as this absolute moment of creativity that the creation of values represents. The human cannot rely on anything but itself for the erection of values. The individual creates them yet wants them to hold absolutely for every human being. Finally, there is a fourth occurrence of ambiguity in that human action is a perpetual transcending. There is no goal to be reached besides the continual movement of transcendence. There is no fixed state to be attained but a perpetual movement of overcoming ourselves. And yet, back to the fundamental ambiguity of human reality, transcending ourselves requires our acknowledging our immanence and embodied reality.

Beauvoir opens her essay on ethics with a quote from Montaigne: "Life in itself is neither good nor evil, it is the place of good and evil, according to what you make it." She could not have chosen better words to summarize her own position. This quote expresses the ambiguous nature of human life and the fact that the human will make life what it will be for itself. Human flourishing, in Beauvoirian terms, means to actualize our freedom and our manifold ambiguity. As Weiss puts it, "the individual's failure to become ethical is directly due to his failure to live the tension between freedom and facticity." However, a human being is not bound to
failure. As I have shown, despite the fact that Beauvoir gives us no recipes, her philosophy gives us the necessary method and guidance to make of human flourishing a genuine possibility for the human being.

NOTES

1 I am indebted to the participants of a round table on Simone de Beauvoir’s contribution to ethics for this chapter. This round table took place in November of 2002, at Concordia University, at a conference on existentialism and ethics that I had organized. Participants in the round table were Kristana Arp, Laura Hengehold, Anna Alexander (now going by Alexander Antonopoulos), and myself. The presentations of these Beauvoir scholars, as well as the discussion that ensued, have been of great value in preparing this chapter. I also want to thank Monique Lanoix for her numerous and very useful comments on a draft of this paper, as well as Megan J. Penney for her insightful suggestions.

2 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 798.

3 My translation of “J’ai rédigé une dizaine de gros cahiers de notes qui représentent une tentative manquée pour une morale … Je n’ai pas achevé parce que … c’est difficile à faire une morale!” (Sartre and Sicard, “Entretien. L’écriture et la publication,” 14).

4 Stone and Bowman have worked a lot on this second ethics or, as they call it, the “dialectical ethics of the mid-1960’s.” They refer to this ethics as follows: “In addition to Notes for the 1964 Rome Lecture, there are two other manuscripts in the dialectical ethics: his Morality and History – notes for lectures of that title to be given at Cornell University in April 1965 – and unorganized notes of 1964 for these lectures” (Stone and Bowman, “Sartre’s Unpublished Dialectical Ethics,” 111). Stone and Bowman indicate that, “Both sets of notes are, we believe, two aspects of a single project – to understand moral phenomena historically – and they yield a single conception
of the human future ... [According to Simone de Beauvoir,]
Together they constitute 'the culminating point' of Sartre's think­
ing on ethics” (Stone and Bowman, “Sartre's Morality and History,”
7). There is considerable disagreement among Sartre scholars as to
whether we should privilege those later writings over the Notebooks.
One scholar, Thomas C. Anderson, argues that we should privilege
the Notes for Rome, since “Unlike Notebooks for an Ethics and the sec­
ond volume of the Critique of Dialectical Reason, the Rome lecture
was publicly presented by its author ... there is ample justification
for considering it the defining document of Sartre's second ethics”
(Anderson, Sartre's Two Ethics, 112).

5 In chapter 5 of this volume, Glenn Braddock argues on the basis of
Existentialism Is a Humanism that Sartre successfully devises an eth­
ics, and Braddock is not alone in thinking that a Sartrean ethics is
possible, despite the many difficulties that Being and Nothingness
places along the way. I have also argued for a Sartrean ethics, both
in other papers and in my book on Nietzsche and Sartre, Le
nihilisme est-il un humanisme?

6 Renaut, “L'éthique impossible,” 206. Of course, we may ask why
Sartre kept working on an ethics if he considered her publications
adequate. I think that he persisted because abandoning his own
notion of absolute freedom was a long process.

7 Here is the discussion with Simons and Jessica Benjamin, the other
interviewer: “JB: So when you wrote in She Came to Stay [written from
1937 to 1941 and published in 1943] that Françoise says that what
really upsets her about Xavière is the fact that she has to confront in
her another consciousness. That is not an idea that particularly came
because Sartre was thinking about that, or it was something that you
were also thinking about? SdB: It was I who thought about that! It
was absolutely not Sartre! JB: So that is an idea which it seems to me
appears later in his work. SdB: Ah! Maybe! ... (Laughter) In any
case, this problem was my problem. This problem of the conscious­
ness of the Other, this was my problem” (Simons, Beauvoir and The
Second Sex, 10). Simons’ interviews with Beauvoir are all reprinted
in Simons' book, along with essays she has written on Beauvoir's philosophy. What Simons says about Beauvoir's personality and her constant defence of Sartre is very interesting. Beauvoir's laughter in the above quote is indicative of these interviews being somewhat like "hide and seek." Here Beauvoir has been caught by her interviewer admitting that she may have influenced Sartre philosophically.


11 My translation of "pas une relation entre un sujet et un objet étranger l'un à l'autre: elle nous lie au monde comme à notre patrie, elle est communication et communion" (Beauvoir, "La phénoménologie," 364). Although Beauvoir is explaining Merleau-Ponty's position regarding perception, we know that she agreed with much of what Merleau-Ponty had to say about phenomenology. She writes a very favourable review of his book, and he is the first to be quoted in *The Second Sex* (even before Sartre!). In this work, she shares many of Merleau-Ponty's views, one of them being that of the subject as a body-subject.


13 It should be clear that the virtue ethics I find akin to Beauvoir's ethics is not an Aristotelian one but the one we find developed in the twentieth century by people such as Christine McKinnon.


15 My translation of "L'homme est présent au monde de deux manières: il est un objet, un donné que dépassent des transcendance étrangères; et il est lui-même une transcendance qui se jette vers l'avenir" (Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cineas*, 56). Since the completion of this chapter a very important publication, edited by Margaret A. Simons, has appeared, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, which introduces some of Beauvoir's texts to the English-speaking world for the first time. *Pyrrhus et Cineas* is among those texts. This book will play an important role in English-speaking Beauvoir scholarship, as each translation comes with a body of
notes and an introduction by a renowned Beauvoir scholar. In this chapter, I have maintained my own translations, not because I considered the one found in Simons' book deficient, but merely because I work mainly with the French edition. The English-speaking reader will find it worthwhile to consult Simons' translation, along with Debra Bergoffen's introduction.

16 My translation of “le lien qui m'unit à l'autre, moi seul peux le créer; je le crée du fait que je ne suis pas une chose mais un projet de moi vers l'autre, une transcendance” (Beauvoir, Pyrrhus et Cinéas, 16).

17 Of course, Beauvoir would deny this “Nietzschean connection” in her work. That is because she is very critical of the notion of the will to power, which she understands, mistakenly, as a will for brute power, the exercise of force. Had she seen how the figure of the Übermensch could be read otherwise, that is, as the human being that sets out to fulfill its own self though its actions by creating its own values, she would have seen how close her own position is to that of Nietzsche.

18 Arp, Bonds of Freedom, 24. Arp's book is invaluable for research on Beauvoir's ethics. She offers a detailed analysis of Beauvoir's works and concepts. As the reader will come to see, I rely heavily on Arp's analysis and interpretation.

19 My translation of “J'ai besoin d'elles [ces libertés étrangères], car une fois que j'ai dépassé mes propres buts, mes actes retomberaient sur eux-mêmes inertes, inutiles, s'ils n'étaient emportés par de nouveaux projets vers un nouvel avenir ... Le mouvement de ma transcendance m'apparaît comme vain dès que je l'ai transcendant; mais si à travers d'autres hommes ma transcendance se prolonge toujours plus loin que le projet que je forme au présent, je ne saurais jamais la dépasser” (Beauvoir, Pyrrhus et Cinéas, 110).


21 My translation of “La chose se définira donc d'abord non comme une résistance, mais au contraire comme le corrélatif de mon existence” (Beauvoir, “La phénoménologie,” 365).

22 Quoted in Arp, Bonds of Freedom, 36.
As I mentioned in note 17 above, Beauvoir would not agree with that but an increasing number of scholars interpret the Übermenschen as a human being that is on the path of overcoming.


She restates this in the conclusion of *The Second Sex*. In fact, we might want to read this book on the condition of women as an application of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Women need to be liberated so that they can be free, and this will benefit both women and men. She says, “It is for man to establish the reign of liberty in the midst of the world of the given. To gain the supreme victory, it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood” (Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 814).


Weiss argues that this aspect of Beauvoir’s philosophy is crucial for understanding her ethics (which Weiss interprets in terms of an embodied ethics). She says, “To acknowledge that body images have moral dimensions is itself a rejection of the mind/body dualism that has led to an exclusive identification of morality with the mind (and with reason in particular)” (Weiss, “Bodily Imperatives,” 129). Weiss also points to the fact that “To be moral does not require, as the Platonic model holds, separating my conscious ‘self”
from my body and its desires; it involves developing a moral agency that can only be experienced and enacted through bodily practices, practices that both implicate and transform the bodies of others” (Weiss, “Bodily Imperatives,” 158). This is to posit a moral agent that differs quite significantly from the traditional one.

40 In *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*, Debra Bergoffen makes a case for reading Beauvoir along the lines of an erotic ethics of generosity.

41 I have not pursued this line of inquiry, but Weiss made a case for it in her “Bodily Imperatives.”

42 Bergoffen, “Beauvoir: (Re)counting the Sexual Difference,” 257.


44 Weiss, “Simone de Beauvoir,” 111.
Merleau-Ponty offers us an existentialist philosophy that understands our freedom and responsibility as inseparable from our embodiment. Though he does not explicitly and systematically articulate an ethics, his notion of embodiment nonetheless implies a certain existentialist ethics. For, according to Merleau-Ponty, to be embodied is to be inherently in relation to others, and thus, as I will argue, it is to be implicated in and moved by an imperative to strive for mutual recognition. This paper seeks to elucidate this embodied ethics of mutual recognition.

Merleau-Ponty’s thought tends, in general, to move by way of a dialectical rethinking of the philosophical tradition. This chapter argues that even the ethics implicit in Merleau-Ponty’s work can be understood as a dialectical reworking of that tradition: his ethics can be understood, I contend, as a dialectical synthesis and rethinking of virtue ethics in the tradition of Aristotle and deontological moral theory in that of Kant.

According to virtue ethics, being ethical is a matter of fulfilling our nature, or doing what by nature we are meant to do
- excellently. Moral theory in the tradition of Kant, however, criticizes such virtue ethics and argues, instead, that the moral agent is someone who can act contrary to his or her embodied nature and according to a rational principle that transcends that nature. I propose that Merleau-Ponty's ethics comprehends and transforms these apparently opposing views. As in virtue ethics, Merleau-Ponty holds, we must live up to our own nature as embodied subjects capable of rational insight, and yet, as in Kantian moral theory, we answer to an imperative beyond us — an imperative to respect others and to promote their freedom and creative involvement in the world. These two sides come together in Merleau-Ponty's account because, for him, to be embodied is to be inherently implicated in others; and thus to answer to our own nature is always also to answer to something beyond us — namely, the freedom and creative life of others.

**VIRTUE ETHICS AND THE PROBLEM OF JUSTIFICATION**

Virtue ethics is an ethics in the tradition of Aristotle. For something to be good, according to Aristotle, is for that something to actualize its inherent potential, to excel in its inherent function. Thus, a good eye is one that sees well; and a good tree, one that grows and reproduces well. In the case of humans, since we are rational animals, our function is activity according to a rational principle. To be a good human — to be morally virtuous, or ethical — is to have made our "a-rational" parts (our desires and emotions) rational. To become good, in other words, is a question of cultivating, through habit, the kind of character wherein our desires and emotions embody a rational principle. We will then be people who desire the right things and feel emotion (anger, for instance) in the right ways, at the right times, for the right reasons, and toward the right objects.
Virtuous people are, thus, people who have fulfilled their own rational nature. They have come into harmony with themselves, or become fully what they are, by coming to embody a rational principle. Such harmony is evident in their integrity and insight. This integrity stands in significant contrast to the state of continent people. Continent people are those who struggle against themselves to do the right thing. While knowing intellectually the rational principle to apply and acting on it, they do this in conflict with themselves, since their own desires and emotions draw them in the opposite direction. Where their loyalty to some cause is challenged, for instance, continent people may act with loyalty but against their own desire to betray the cause and follow a more comfortable or profitable line of action. In virtuous people, in contrast, betrayal is not even experienced as a possibility. When presented with a challenge to their loyalty, virtuous people find it self-evident that they must stand their ground and take up this challenge; nothing draws them in another direction.

Whereas in continent people, we therefore find intellectual knowledge of the right thing to do, paired with the desire to do otherwise, in virtuous people we find an immediate, integrated perception of, and a being moved by, what the right thing to do is. Virtuous people operate with insight: they perceive immediately that standing their ground is what the situation calls for. And their perception of what is right coincides immediately with what they desire or feel impelled to do. Where continent people are in conflict with themselves, torn between answering to what is intellectually, or “in truth,” the right thing to do and their own personal desires and emotions, virtuous people are answering to themselves in answering to what is in truth the right thing to do. Virtuous people’s integrity is their self-fulfillment. Their a-rational parts have come to embody the rational principle that makes for good action, and thus they are what their own rational
nature intended them to be. Virtuous people are flourishing people, much as good trees are flourishing trees.

But is living up to our own (rational) nature all that there is to being good? Saying so seems to put us on par with other natural things – with good trees, good horses, good snakes. Could it really be true that to become good or ethical is, for humans, simply an issue of fulfilling a nature already laid out or intended for us?

To this question, deontological morality answers “no.” If being good is simply a question of living up to our nature, as other natural things do, then it seems that the issue of being good is merely one of being what you are, and there is no room for right or wrong here, no room for any sense of how you could be this or you could be that and that you ought to be one rather than the other. There appears to be no room for choosing one way of being over another; and insofar as morality, or being good, is a matter of facing a moral dilemma and choosing the right answer to it, there seems no room for morality as such. You just are what you are.

Another way to voice this criticism would be to say, if being good is simply an issue of living up to our species’ nature, it seems there could be no real justification for saying that this way of being (as opposed to a snake’s way of being or a horse’s way of being) is truly good, or the way we ought to be. To claim that any particular way of being was a good way of being, or how we ought to be, we would need to appeal to some kind of standard beyond ourselves, beyond our own given nature, or beyond “what we are.” We would need to consider our particular good in terms of an unconditional good in order to judge its real status.

On the basis of such criticism of virtue ethics, then, deontological moral theory in the tradition of Kant has argued that morality must involve a standard that we do not
by nature live up to, an unconditional standard beyond our own human nature to which we feel a duty. Only such a standard could bring a sense of what we ought to do and the basis for speaking of a moral right and wrong. This unconditional principle, Kant argued, is found within our moral experience itself. It is the categorical imperative – an imperative to do what is universally right, what answers not merely to the greatest number of people and their natural desires (as utilitarianism proposes to do) but to all rational beings in their inherent rationality and freedom.

For my purposes, then, the key difference between virtue ethics and deontological morality is that for the latter, we must answer to something other than ourselves, something beyond ourselves, something that transcends us and is not simply relative to, or conditioned by, our own nature. Whereas virtue ethics calls for an immanent development, a fulfillment of who we already are, a morality of the modern age calls for us to answer to something transcendent. The first calls for a fulfilling of our nature; the second claims that answering to our nature is not yet bringing us into the realm of the truly moral and that morality is an issue of fulfilling a duty, rather than one of fulfilling our nature.

In what follows, I propose that Merleau-Ponty offers us a synthesis of these apparently opposing accounts. He offers us an ethics in which answering to our own embodiment turns out to be answering to something that transcends us. To see how this is possible, let us consider the nature of embodiment and our situation in relation to other people.

**EMBODIMENT, HABIT, AND IMPERATIVES**

The debate between virtue ethics and deontological moral theory turns, in part, on the question of what role, if any, our
Merleau-Ponty's Embodied Ethics

bodily nature plays in our sense of morality. In this section, then, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment to explore the question of what it is to be an embodied being. We will see what Merleau-Ponty's ethics shares with virtue ethics, even as he goes beyond such ethics. I will argue that, for Merleau-Ponty, to be embodied is to be constantly coming to embody rational principles through habit, as do virtuous people according to virtue ethics, and that knowledge of the right thing to do involves being moved bodily by an imperative we perceive within our particular situation.

To say we are embodied beings, on Merleau-Ponty's account, is to make at least two claims about the human condition: first, that our bodily resources condition our perception, language, thought, and freedom; and, second, that our body, in its actions and expressions, is itself meaningfully implicated in the world and is not merely the physical instrument of a separate mind. As a result, we are moved bodily by meaningful imperatives we encounter in the world.

Let us begin by considering the first claim and in particular, how our bodily capacities condition our perception. This is easiest to see in the case of the development of a new habit. For, to acquire a new habit (and thus new bodily capacities) is, as Merleau-Ponty argues, to acquire a new way of perceiving.

Consider, for instance, how blind people become habituated to using a stick to navigate unfamiliar places. Initially, they may perceive the stick as an awkward object in their hands. Once, however, they become habituated to using it, the stick no longer exists for them as a perceived object but becomes that through which they perceive – an extension of their own arms, as it were. In perceiving through the stick, they do not interpret the meaning of sensations in their hands and infer what must be at the end of the stick. Rather, they simply sense things at the end of the stick: “the position of things is immediately given through the extent of the
reach which carries him [the blind person] to it”\textsuperscript{12} and the stick’s “point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight.”\textsuperscript{13} In becoming habituated to the stick, or developing a new bodily capacity for handling it, blind people therefore develop a new way of perceiving.\textsuperscript{14} They incorporate the stick into their bodies, such that they now “see through” and in terms of the stick: “To get used to a hat, a car or a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body. Habit expresses our power of dilating our being in the world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments.”\textsuperscript{15}

This notion that our bodily capacities, developed through habits, inherently inform our perceptions also entails that these bodily capacities inform our own sense of freedom. For our habits open up or rule out possibilities for us in the world. To develop the habit of walking, for instance, is to find new realms of experience and new sets of possibilities available to us. Children who have learned to walk perceive wholly new possibilities for engaging the world. Things that were formerly beyond these children and for that reason did not occur to them now manifest themselves as open to them. Cupboards, electrical outlets, and china figurines that formerly may not have figured in their experience now seem to become enticements at the centre of their attention, parts of the world that are open to them and call to them. Similarly, going for walks with adults now seems something they can be denied or granted, whereas neither possibility existed for a crawling infant. Correlatively, possibilities available to babies who could not walk are now, from the perspective of the toddler, ruled out. They can no longer expect to be picked up and carried all the time; nor can they expect others to fetch distant things for them all the time. Their very sense, then, of what is possible – of what they themselves
might do— is transformed; and even though certain babylike ways of acting are, from their perspective, less available, we would have to say these children have come to embody a greater freedom (along with greater responsibility).

To be embodied, then, is not to have a fleshy mass weighing down our minds and distorting our otherwise pure rationality. Our embodiment is rather our route into reality and what, through the acquisition of new habits, allows us to perceive new meanings and new possibilities in the world. As such, having a body is the very condition of our freedom.

Another way of describing our habit-body is to say that it is a kind of know-how, allowing us to perceive in a particular situation what routes of action are open to us and how we might take this situation up. Our habitual driving body, for instance, allows us to perceive immediately whether a gateway would be too narrow for our car or whether a parking spot would be large enough for it. In this sense, developing a habit is a matter of embodying a rational principle: it allows us to see our situation intelligently, that is, in terms of what is called for.

As in virtue ethics, then, in Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment, knowledge of the right thing to do is an issue of embodying, rather than applying, a rational principle. To apply a rational principle is what deontological moral theory supposes we must do: we must distance ourselves from our particular bodies, grasp a transcendent rational principle, and then apply it to our concrete situation. But Merleau-Ponty argues that this is not at all what occurs in the case of a knowledgeable person's intelligent action. To demonstrate this point, he asks us to consider an organist playing an unfamiliar organ. What we notice about this master musician is that though needing a little time to "get the feel" of this organ, he neither acts as if he were intellectually applying his knowledge of organ playing to this new instrument nor takes the amount of time that that would require:
Are we to maintain that the organist analyses the organ, that he conjures up and retains a representation of the stops, pedals and manuals and their relation to each other in space? But during the short rehearsal preceding the concert, he does not act like a person about to draw up a plan. He sits on the seat, works the pedals, pulls out the stops, gets the measure of the instrument within his body, incorporates within himself the relevant directions and dimensions, settles into the organ as one settles into a house .... During the rehearsal, the stops, pedals and manuals are given to him as nothing more than possibilities of achieving certain emotional or musical values, and their positions are simply the places through which this value appears in the world.\textsuperscript{18}

The master musician, in other words, operates not by applying intellectual knowledge but on the basis of a general way of perceiving, a way of taking things up in terms of their musical possibilities. He embodies the principle of musicality, which means that he has developed through his habits a special attunement to the demands of this kind of situation, an insight into such situations, and that, correlative, he is moved by the situation in a certain way.

Those who know what the right thing to do is, and who act intelligently and fittingly, are therefore by virtue of embodying a rational principle moved by a situation to take it up in a certain way.\textsuperscript{19} This is the second of Merleau-Ponty's two claims concerning the nature of embodiment. Knowledgeable people do not think about what to do but find the situation they are in setting out imperatives for them, or "bespeaking what must be done," and moving them bodily.\textsuperscript{20} Knowing how to do the right thing in some particular situation is thus a matter of a perceptual insight that finds directives within that situation itself. And we develop such insight not by contemplating intellectual principles but through developing habits of res-
ponding well to these kinds of situations, just as the master musician develops a capacity to deal well with a new instrument by developing the habit of playing well on these kinds of instruments.

Against the Kantian contention that morality depends on applying a rational principle, a philosophy of embodiment must object that to apply a principle is impossible unless we already embody an insight into the situation at hand – unless, that is, we can already perceive how this situation invites the application of this principle. If, for instance, the universal and rational principle is “always tell the truth,” we must be able to perceive what counts as truth in this situation. For it may be more truthful to refuse to answer a question (if that question transgresses or is unjust) than to give the literal truth. On this account, Kantian moral theory has misunderstood being human and morality and imposed an impossible ideal of pushing aside our embodied nature for the sake of rational action.

Nonetheless, Kantian, or deontological, moral theory has its own criticism of virtue ethics, which must be taken into account. The criticism, let us recall, is that there is no “ought” involved in virtue ethics and that the ethical person is really only answering to his or her own nature, rather than to something transcendent and universal. Indeed, the imperatives I have so far described seem to be simply functions of our own personal projects. It is insofar as I have the project of walking, driving, or playing music and insofar as I have developed habits to support these projects that I find imperatives in my situation to act a certain way. Is there, then, any imperative that is not simply one of our own making but that demands our answering to something beyond us? Or are we only ever expressing and fulfilling our selves and our chosen projects? To answer this question, we need to consider our interpersonal situation and relations to others.
SELF-EXPRESSION AND THE FREEDOM OF OTHERS

My aim, in this section, is to argue that other people are not just indifferent objects for us, with whom we may or may not seek relations. Rather, they are implicated in our very embodiment; and we, in theirs. This means that our own self-expressions necessarily and inevitably shape the possibilities and the freedom available to others.

If our behaviour and actions are, as I have argued, answers to imperatives we experience in the world, as “bespoken” by our situation, then they express not a self-possessed, inner self apart from the world but a particular situation and the actor’s being in that situation. They are expressions of how the world appears to that actor, how it moves him or her, and the kinds of imperatives he or she finds in the world. They are, in other words, expressions of our being in the world.

If, for instance, we respond to a situation defensively, this would not be a self-possessed and absolutely free choice. Our defensive response is, rather, an action summoned from us by the way a situation presents itself to us. It is insofar as we perceive in that situation a challenge to our place in the world and perceive in it the demand to defend ourselves that we take up the situation defensively.24

In such responses or expressions, there is some creativity and freedom, but it is also always a conditioned, or motivated, freedom. There is a creative freedom insofar as this response is an active taking up of a situation. Because any situation is inevitably somewhat indeterminate, or ambiguous, our taking up of a situation helps determine its meaning and the actor’s position in it. Our actions are thus self-creations because they enact claims about the nature of the situation and how the actor and others are situated in it. In a not-fully
determinate situation, our actions realize a certain way of being and a certain meaning in the world.\textsuperscript{25}

However, the imperatives or possibilities offered up by an actor's initial perception of a situation \textit{motivate}, or \textit{condition}, his or her free determining of its meaning. We cannot arbitrarily decide the meaning of the situation or of ourselves. We are, rather, moved by the still ambiguous "sens,"\textsuperscript{26} or meaning, of the situation to take it up in a certain way.

Thus, though our acts are inherently self-expressive, they are not so in the sense of being determined by an inherent nature or personality type; nor are they self-expressive in the sense of being unconditioned choices that create a certain self \textit{ex nihilo}. Rather, our actions are creative realizations of a way of configuring a situation that are motivated and constrained by the ambiguous meanings already at work within our situations.\textsuperscript{27}

The fact that our acts, as self-expressive, enact a certain positioning of the self and inaugurate a certain claim about the meaning of the situation entails that these actions implicate others. If, for example, one takes up an interpersonal situation defensively, such behaviour sets out the other as hostile; and if dismissively, it sets out the other as inferior. That is to say, an action meaningfully configures a whole situation and situates the self, the other, and the world in terms of each other.

The configuration of the situation is not, then, simply a subjective, or private, intention. The embodied behaviour of the actor (whether action, gesture, or speech) "secretes" an interpersonal meaning and thus implicates others bodily, setting out imperatives for others and calling on them to take up the positions delineated for them.

In our theorizing about relations with others, we often neglect the ways others implicate us in their bodily expressions,
because we are caught up in the Cartesian tradition, which supposes that the mind is internal, that others' ways of seeing and making sense of a situation are therefore private, concealed behind their eyes and movements. But if we attend to our lived experience of others, we find that this is not so. Rather, as Merleau-Ponty says, the body is an expressive power: "we see it secreting in itself a 'significance' ... projecting that significance on its material surrounding, and communicating it to other embodied subjects."^{28}

This expressiveness of the other's body works on us primarily in an unreflective way. Typically, we do not encounter the other's expression as a perceptual object; rather, we are swept up in its meaning and oriented by it. We feel moved, unreflectively, to respond in a complementary way to others' expressions, to take up the position they lay out for us. If they act warmly and respectfully toward us, we are called into solidarity with them and see the happy and harmonious dimensions of the situation. If they behave sadly, with dejection, then we typically feel an imperative to be consolatory with them and find ourselves looking for the "bright side." We are unreflectively and immediately moved to confirm and endorse the others' configuration of self-other-world to bring ourselves into unity with it.

At issue in our being moved by others' expressions is our very identity and place in the world. The other's expression, precisely because it is a claim about the meaning of this shared situation, situates us in a certain way; and because it is a claim about the truth of this shared situation, it calls for our confirmation of this way of being related to each other. We are moved to endorse, through our own actions, this person's delineation of self-other-world:

It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his. The gesture which I witness outlines [dessine en pointillé] an
intentional object [i.e., something in the situation]. This object is genuinely present and fully comprehended when the powers of my body adjust themselves to it and overlap it. The gesture presents itself to me as a question, bringing certain perceptible bits of the world to my notice, and inviting my concurrence in them. Communication is achieved when my conduct identifies this path with its own. There is mutual confirmation between myself and others.\(^9\)

The problem is that we may not be able to confirm the other's delineation of self-other-world without alienating ourselves. If the other has delineated me as hostile and he or she as needing to defend his or her self, but I do not take myself to be hostile, I may feel compelled to resist the other's configuration of the situation. Resisting constructively can be very difficult. For the other's expression of the situation has already set constraints on who I can be. The other has made it very easy for me to take up an antagonistic position and virtually impossible for me to offer constructive criticism or engage in any way that assumes a certain trust and solidarity between us. The other's defensive behaviour backs me into a corner and seriously constrains the possibilities for my own creative way of taking up the situation. I am compelled to answer to the other's configuration of the situation in some way, yet that is very difficult for me to do while remaining true to myself.

A person's behaviour or self-expression, then, inevitably shapes others' possibilities for self-expression. Or, to say this in another way, a person's actions always affect the freedom of others. We cannot act without implicating others in some way, and insofar as these actions demand a certain response from others that is at odds with who they are, such actions assert a denial of, and thereby impede, the freedom of others. However, insofar as these actions leave open possibilities for self-actualizing expression and constructive routes of action, they
support and promote the freedom of others. We can attain mutual freedom and creative self-expression, therefore, only through expressions that allow for mutual recognition.

The question that remains is whether there is implied any obligation or duty to recognize the other and to express ourselves in a way that lets the other realize his or her self. Is there a need to answer to anything beyond our own development and fulfillment?

EMBODIED ETHICS AND THE IMPERATIVE OF THE OTHER

Kant argued that if we look to our own moral experience, to the experience of duty, we find a principle of pure reason to which we must answer, a principle that transcends us in our particularity, a categorical imperative. I shall now argue that if we look to our own embodied experience of others, we find within it a principle that we must answer to, a principle that transcends us while also being immanent in our own embodiment. This is the imperative of recognizing others and thereby supporting their freedom.

I have claimed that another person’s expressions implicate us in our very sense of identity. If this is right, then already implied in this account of our embodied being with others is an obligation to answer to others’ perspectives and to seek mutual recognition. For, on this account, we can only become ourselves and fulfill our own sense of selfhood and existence in the context of another who recognizes us. And the other can only truly recognize us if we recognize him or her and thereby grant that other his or her own freedom.

To be embodied, I have proposed, is to act in the world in a way that makes claims about who I am, who others are, and what really matters in this world. Until another freely confirms or disconfirms my expression, however, I cannot ascertain
whether my claims are realistic, whether I am who I take myself to be, or whether this situation and I myself have a different meaning than I assumed.

This inherent openness or irresolution of our situation is due to the essential ambiguity of embodiment. As embodied beings, we are simultaneously subjects and objects; our subjectivity and objectivity are inseparable. I act in the world and realize myself as a certain self (my subjectivity) for others (my objectivity). Because I am inherently embodied, I cannot get wholly outside of myself to know who I am for others; I am never fully in possession of myself. Furthermore, how my actions or subjectivity impacts others depends on how others take up my actions, what meaning they can find in them. As a result, I can only come to know who I am in the world, through others.

We need, however, not simply others' confirmation but their free confirmation. Insofar as we need others' recognition to settle our own sense of identity, we are tempted to manipulate others into confirming us as we suppose ourselves to be. We make use of (unreflective) ways of pushing others into seeing us in a certain way, subtly coercing an endorsement from the other by playing on his or her desires and fears. But we can never find satisfaction in confirmations born out of such manipulations. For in this case, if a confirmation is given, it has its source in us and not in the other's free affirmation of us, and it therefore does not count for us as a real and independent confirmation of our reality and identity. Thus, I need others to be free in order to become myself – to attain to my own sense of identity, actualize myself, and experience my own reality and freedom in this shared world.

We can conclude, then, that our own sense of reality, our sense of being meaningful and creative agents in the world, our sense of freedom and flourishing is implicated in others' freedom and flourishing. We cannot pursue our own self-
realization without simultaneously working to support that of others. There is therefore an imperative built into our own embodied experience of realizing ourselves, to attend to and promote the freedom of others as best we can.

This imperative, it is important to note, is not an instrumental, or "hypothetical," imperative; it is not as if we promoted freedom in others only for the sake of gaining our own individual freedom. Instrumental imperatives suppose a self existing independently of the other and capable of making use of the other for his or her own gain. The self I have described, however, is one only realized in community with others, one who therefore depends ontologically on the free existence of others, and who finds in others' freedom not an instrument for his or her self but the fulfillment of his or her self and the possibility of a meaningful, shared world.

The imperative to promote the freedom of others is thus a fundamental one, like Kant's unconditional, or categorical, imperative. For it is the very condition of a meaningful, shared world in which we might each have projects of our own and realize ourselves as selves. The difference is that this imperative is born not out of a pure reason that transcends us (as Kant supposes) but out of our very nature as embodied beings – as beings inevitably implicated in others who transcend us.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy leads us, I propose, to an embodied ethics that is a dialectical synthesis of virtue ethics and deontological moral theory. This embodied ethics is like virtue ethics insofar as it calls for us to develop our own excellence, fulfill our own nature, and become, through the development of good habits, people of integrity, people who embody a rational insight into the human condition. But this embodied ethics also acknowledges that morality is a matter of answering not just to our own selves but also to something beyond us: to others who, in their own freedom and creative self-realization, transcend us. Merleau-Ponty can resolve the
tension between virtue ethics and deontological morality by arguing that we are the kinds of beings who, by nature, or in our very embodiment, are implicated in and have a duty to others.37

NOTES

1 I am indebted for the conception of this chapter to conversations I have had with David Ciavatta, Maria Talero, and – especially – John Russon. I would like to thank them for their insight and honesty and for their commitment to philosophy as an ethical endeavour of striving for mutual recognition, and thus as an endeavour requiring self-reflection and an openness to self-transformation.

2 Compare Douglas Low, “The Foundations of Merleau-Ponty’s Ethical Theory.” Low also argues that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy allows for a way between two opposing accounts of ethics, and he argues, as I do, that Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body as essentially intersubjective allows for this middle (and better) road. The opposition that Low takes up, however, is one between traditional and postmodern ethics.

3 To say that Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist ethics holds that we must answer to our nature may seem strange, as we tend to understand by “nature” an “essence” or “form,” and existentialism holds that there is no pre-given essence or form for us to live up to – rather than living up to some preset definition, we define ourselves through the ways that we live, the acts we engage in. However, I would in fact like to use “nature” in a looser sense so that it might accommodate a dialectical transformation in meaning by the end of this chapter. From the perspective of Aristotelian virtue ethics, “nature” might well be taken to mean our pre-given human form. Once we get to Merleau-Ponty’s view, however, there will be a shift in the meaning of this word. For he does indeed hold the existentialist view that we are self-defining. Nonetheless, along with other
existentialists (perhaps especially de Beauvoir and Sartre), Merleau-Ponty also holds that there is something given about being human, something that constitutes not an essence but our human condition. We are inherently embodied subjects. This will be the new sense of our "nature." And this nature as that of embodied subjects will, as we will see, place some ethical demands on us.

4 See, for example, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk 2, ch. 6, 1106a15-22.

5 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk 1, ch. 7, 1097b21–8a17, and bk 1, ch. 13, 1102a25–3a10.

6 For the claim that we are transformed through practice or the development of good habits, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk 2, ch. 1. For the claim that the result of such cultivation is good character, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk 2, chs. 4–5.


9 Aristotle says one reason that young people are not yet ready to study ethics and political science is that they have not yet had a chance to develop an insightful way of seeing: they do not yet find the right things self-evident, or they do not have the right "starting points." See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk 1, ch. 4, 1095b1–13.

10 Existentialism would, of course, also answer "no" to this question but for different reasons. See note 3.

11 See, for example, Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 15.

12 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 166; *Phénoménologie*, 167.


14 For another version of Merleau-Ponty's argument that our habitual way of being in the world informs our perceptions, see his account of the phantom limb. A phantom limb is experienced, according to Merleau-Ponty, because a mutilated person still sees as one in the habit of engaging the world with two legs or two arms. The world therefore still speaks to him of his two legs or two arms. See

15 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 166; *Phénoménologie*, 168.

16 For Merleau-Ponty, freedom is not, then, all or nothing: you can have more or less freedom, depending on your situation and habitual mode of being in the world. See, for instance, Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 189; *Phénoménologie*, 190. On this subject, see also Russon's *Human Experience*, ch. 5.

17 This is the vision of embodiment suggested by Kant and some readings of Plato.


19 For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on practical knowledge. Merleau-Ponty argues, however, that even theoretical knowledge is fundamentally embodied. See the chapter on “The Cogito” in Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, see also Hass and Hass, “Merleau-Ponty and the Origin of Geometry.”

20 Merleau-Ponty himself does not often use the word “imperative.” But his conception of the embodied subject’s relation to the environment is well captured by this word. Alphonso Lingis makes this clear in his many texts on Merleau-Ponty and imperatives. See, for instance, “Imperatives.”

21 See Bonhoeffer's essay, “What is Meant by ‘Telling the Truth’,” for an argument to this effect.

22 Against Kant’s notion that morality is a matter of applying a universal principle, Hegel argues that we could not even begin to apply a principle if we found no directives already in the situation (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ch. 4, pt C, subdivision c). Thus, the beginning of moral action is properly found in ethical spirit, where individuals are moved to act in a certain way by the self-evident demands experienced within reality itself (Hegel, *Phenomenology*, para. 437).

23 Sartre can be read as claiming that the imperatives we encounter are all products of our own previous choices. See, for example,
Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 487–8: "The for-itself discovers itself as engaged in being, hemmed in by being, threatened by being; it discovers the state of things which surrounds it as the cause for a reaction of defense or attack. But it can make this discovery only because it freely posits the end in relation to which the state of things is threatening or favorable." See also Sartre’s *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions*, where this notion is at the centre of his understanding of most emotions as involving a kind of bad faith.

24 If we have developed habits that give us insight into ourselves and this kind of situation, then our defensive reaction may be entirely appropriate. It could, however, also be based on problematic habitual ways of assuming ourselves in relation to others.

25 In this sense, Merleau-Ponty agrees with Sartre’s claim that, “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself” (*Sartre, Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 349).

26 Merleau-Ponty uses the word “sens” in a way that draws on all its meanings in the French language: meaning, sense, direction. Thus, when he speaks of the *sens* of something, Merleau-Ponty is speaking of a direction of meaning still somewhat ambiguous, or not yet fully determinate.


One might also articulate this difference – one between impeding others' freedom and promoting it – in terms of calling the other into a reactionary or creative position. As Nietzsche argues, to live reactively is to be on the path to nihilism, the willing of nothingness; we only fulfill ourselves and so flourish insofar as we enact our lives, our selves, creatively. See, for instance, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, essay 3, sec. 28, and essay 2, sec. 24. Therefore, insofar as we put others in a reactionary position, we impede their flourishing.

Other commentators on Merleau-Ponty's work have posed this question. Thomas Busch, in "Ethics and Ontology: Levinas and Merleau-Ponty," says, "The Levinasian question I would put to Merleau-Ponty concerns 'obligation'. Where does one locate obligation in the phenomenological field?" (p. 200). And William Hamrick, after discussing the ways people are bodily implicated in each other, or part of the same "flesh," says, "Flesh turned out to be what would create this unity and ground an ethics, but for reasons just given [because a sadist can be bodily implicated in the suffering of his or her victim], it is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Flesh cannot therefore be the 'principle of an ethics', though it is crucial" (Hamrick, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'Ethics' as an Ambiguous, Embodied Logos," 307).

It might be helpful to clarify further the question of transcendence. The notion of transcendence, as it operates in Merleau-Ponty's thought is importantly different from the notion of transcendence in Kant's thought. For Kant, we are to answer to universal principles wholly transcending the situation we are caught up in. For Merleau-Ponty, in contrast, there are no universal principles fully transcending our particular situation. All rational principles are rooted in our embodied situations. When Merleau-Ponty speaks of transcendence, he tends to mean one of two things. On the one hand (and especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*), he speaks of a transcendence within our perceptual or sensible experience (an immanent transcendence, if you will): it is
things and others that, even as they are given to us in perception, also transcend us in their inexhaustibility (see, for instance, Visible and the Invisible, 190, 195; Le visible et l'invisible, 245, 249). On the other hand (especially in the Phenomenology of Perception), he speaks of transcendence as a bodily “taking up” and creative refiguring of what is given to us (see, for instance, Phenomenology, 196, 225; Phénoménologie, 197, 226).

33 See Simone de Beauvoir’s novel, Le sang des autres: “One gesture, and something new would appear in the world, something that I’d created and that develops itself outside of me, without me, drawing after itself unforeseen avalanches.” Compare Jean-Paul Sartre’s discussion of “The Look,” especially Being and Nothingness, 349–54.

34 “A self-consciousness exists for a self-consciousness. Only so is it in fact a self-consciousness; for only in this way does the unity of itself in its otherness become explicit for it” (Hegel, Phenomenology, para. 177). What is implied in the idea that we find out the meaning of our actions only through others is that it is imperative for us to attend to, and learn from, the consequences of our actions. This contrasts significantly with Kant’s moral theory, where what matters is solely the principle behind the action and not the consequences of the action. For a helpful elucidation of the significant differences between Merleau-Ponty’s ethics and Kant’s moral theory, see Hamrick, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘Ethics’ as an Ambiguous, Embodied Logos.” Hamrick also draws out much better than I the essential ambiguity and uncertainty of moral decisions. He describes moral decisions as a kind of artistic endeavour.

35 See Hegel, Phenomenology, para. 192, on the unsatisfactory character of the recognition that a master coerces from his or her slave. Compare Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of this same dissatisfaction: “this mastery [of the other through seduction or manipulation] is self-defeating, since, precisely when my value is recognized through the other’s desire, he is no longer the person by whom I wished to be recognized, but a being fascinated, deprived of his freedom,
and who no longer counts in my eyes" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 193; *Phénoménologie*, 194).

For consideration of how this pretence of confirmation can nonetheless be maintained for extended periods of time through "collusion," see Laing, *Self and Others*, ch. 8. Sartre has also given us many vivid analyses of these kinds of manipulations and collusions. See Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of Emotion*, 70; and "Concrete Relations with Others," in *Being and Nothingness*, pt 3, ch. 3, secs. 1 and 2.

Promoting freedom in others for the sake of gaining our own freedom is what Hobbes calls for, as one of the moral virtues or laws of nature. See especially Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 14, para. 5, and ch. 21, paras. 1–7. This "natural law" arises out of a conception of humans as fundamentally individualistic. I, however, am arguing for a conception of human selves as only realized in community with others.

What, more concretely, would this embodied ethics look like? What would it take to pursue our own and others' self-realization? Answering such questions adequately would ultimately require another paper, but we might still draw out some general implications on the basis of what has been said. Ethical people would, as I have said, embody an insight into the human condition. They would live in a way that acknowledged their implication in, and responsibility to, others. They would work to promote the freedom and creative self-realization of others.

Where disagreements arose, they would operate with the assumption that the other is disagreeing not out of stupidity or a denial of what is right and moral but because the other lives in a situation involving different imperatives than their own. Thus, instead of simply, and moralistically, insisting on their own point of view, ethical people would, we would expect, take up this difference in perspectives as a call for self-reflection and better self-knowledge. In the light of this difference in perspectives, they would be moved to question themselves honestly concerning
whether they need to change their own lives, to come to perceive
in a way that does justice to what the other sees in his or her self
and the world. They would also hold others responsible for their
own self-reflection, soliciting them to become people better able to
recognize others and themselves. Ethical people would thus strive
in their everyday lives for mutual recognition and solicit such a
striving in those around them.
The essays in this book have all demonstrated the genuine possibility of an existentialist ethics. Moreover, they have shown that there are various ways to approach ethics from an existentialist standpoint and that these ethical endeavours present viable programs. It has thus been established that the existentialist enterprise in practical matters is neither a nihilistic dead end nor a relativistic or purely individualistic project. Every contributor to this collection has in one way or another shown that existentialist ethics implies a fundamental concern with the Other.

Sharing a similar conception of being-in-the-world, the existentialist thinkers discussed in this volume all consider the human being to be fundamentally a being-with-others. Even authors such as Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, who do not explicitly deal with interindividual relationships, can be shown to be ultimately concerned with the human being's interaction with the world of others. Indeed, the existentialist standpoint takes the individual to be a being-in-the-world and thus a being-with-
others. This is the ground for the ethical but also, I think, a ground for the political.

Reflections on ethics ultimately lead to reflections on the political. If ethics is about the life of individuals in groups, then the political should be the extension of this reflection. Ethics is about being good for our own selves; as many of the authors in this volume explain, being ethical is a matter of behaving authentically as free beings. Being ethical is about being true to our selves as free projects. This involves others and their own freedom and authenticity, as we are constantly in relationships with others. No one is an island. Hence, if the ethical begins with the individual, it immediately deals with the community, and the political is the logical extension of this initial reflection on the good.

If we derive ethical prescriptions that favour the flourishing of human beings by promoting the freedom of all individuals, there also has to be a political setting favourable to this development. This is how the existentialist thinkers presented in this volume all come to devote their attention to the political regimes of their time and the different possibilities open to human beings. They all look for a politics to support the ethics they propose. For most of these thinkers, ethics implies an uncoercive, progressive politics that for the most part promotes the free participation of individuals in the life of the community.

However, not all existentialist thinkers agree on the form that this political regime should take. Some consider democracy the best regime to favour an existentialist ethics of authenticity and freedom, whereas others turn their gaze to regimes centralizing authority in the hands of a few on the basis of some merit. Yet, still others consider Marxism the best democratic form and the one form of politics most favourable to the flourishing of authentic individuals.
Conclusion

It would be interesting to investigate the differences between the political propositions of the existentialist authors considered in this collection. However, such a project far exceeds the purpose of this conclusion. Let it just be said that the many agreements we find on the ethical plane would be found at the basis of the political preoccupations of these thinkers. Although the way they develop their political thought differs in interesting ways, all agree that politics must provide the setting for individuals to flourish as free human beings, that is, as able to undertake authentic and significant projects for themselves. However, these existentialist thinkers do not agree on the nature of that setting. But again, an examination of their divergences on this issue far exceeds the scope of the current study and this conclusion.

The essays included in this compilation have successfully demonstrated that ethics is possible, even after periods of devastating doubt and nihilism. Indeed, elaborating their own ethical programs out of skeptical and nihilistic grounds, existentialist thinkers preach by example. Existentialist ethics is not only possible, as the essays included in this volume have shown, but also actual. Given that we seemingly have not escaped the nihilistic and skeptical frame of mind completely, we might look to these thinkers for some solutions to our practical predicaments.
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