

Founding an Existential Ethics: Sartre's Existentialism is a Humanism Revisited

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In his important, widely-read book on Sartre published in 1979 Peter Caws concludes that Sartre's early philosophy, the existentialism laid out in his 1943 work [Being and Nothingness](#), offers no philosophical basis for making moral judgments. If so, there is no hope of him or anyone else ever constructing an existentialist ethics. My recent project has been to show how an ethics can be based on the existentialism of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre.¹ Such a project can only hope to succeed if challenges like the one Caws makes can be met. In this paper I respond to Caws. I conclude that while the criticisms Caws makes of Sartre in his chapter on "Freedom and Existential Morality" are correct, it does not follow from them alone that existentialism cannot serve as the foundation of an ethics.

In his published lecture [Existentialism is a Humanism](#), Sartre took great pains to rebut the charge that existentialism provides no basis for moral judgments. But, Caws judges, the position Sartre takes is "philosophically implausible" (Caws 113). Caws criticizes in particular an argument Sartre makes early in this piece, an argument Caws identifies (rightfully I think) as a type of generalization argument similar to the argument underlying Kant's categorical imperative. Sartre starts by noting how existentialism holds that every human being must choose him or herself. But, he goes on, in choosing oneself each person also chooses "for all men": "In fact," he says, "in creating the man we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he should be." Furthermore, this image of man as he should be is "valid for everybody and for our whole age" (Sartre 25-26).² Sartre even describes the individual as "a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity in its entirety should be" and proclaims that to shrug off the question "What if everyone acted this way?" is to be in bad faith (Sartre 28-29). Sartre's argument is basically that in choosing what *I* should do I am implicitly making a moral judgment about how others should act. Therefore, the reasoning presumably goes, in exhorting individuals to choose themselves, existentialism does validate moral standards.

Caws rejects Sartre's position for a number of reasons. For one, there is the problem of giving concrete examples of how individual choice legislates in this way for others. One example Sartre gives, that of the worker who chooses to join a Christian trade union rather than become a communist, at first seems promising.

It is true that there cannot as a matter of fact be two different but opposing political solutions to the same problem in the same community. It is also true that there cannot be two true but incompatible global religions, and that, if I choose a religious belief that is avowedly prescriptive in morals, then I do subscribe to a form of legislation for all men (Caws 121).

But, Caws objects, this case is more the exception than the rule. The political commitments people make are often based solely on a desire to bring about a certain change in the status quo. Caws does not mention the further example that Sartre gives of the person deciding to marry and have children, who, Sartre says, by so choosing is “involving all humanity in his choice” (Sartre 27). This example is puzzling, to say the least. Surely Sartre cannot mean that if I choose to marry and have children I think everyone should marry and have children. He must mean this choice commits me to taking the position that marriage is a legitimate institution. This point might be better made by the reverse example: some people, although involved in heterosexual relationships very much the same as that of a married couple, choose not to get married, because it goes against their political, e.g. feminist, convictions.

Caws also singles out examples of individual choice in Sartre’s other works that go against this notion that in choosing for myself I choose for others. In [Anti-Semite and Jew](#) Sartre argues people should have the option to choose themselves as Jews. But certainly this would not mean choosing that all people should be Jews. Secondly, when in [Saint Genet](#) Sartre recounts a conversation Genet had in prison with another inmate, Sartre emphasizes that what the other inmate does not understand is that Genet’s question ‘Should *I* steal?’ is not the same as the question of whether anyone should steal.

Caws does not discuss the three other examples of moral choice that Sartre gives in [Existentialism is a Humanism](#) *itself* where in choosing for himself the person clearly does not choose for others. The case Sartre discusses at greatest length is that of his student who has to decide between going away to join the forces of the Free French and staying to care for his aged sick mother. Sartre claims there is nothing that he, or any ethical doctrine for that matter, can say to guide him. At this point he does not exhort the young man to create an image of humanity valid for all through his choice. Rather, he says, “You’re free, choose, that is invent” (Sartre 47). By this I presume he means to invent an original solution. Would the original solution the young man invents be the right one for everyone in his situation?

The example of moral choice that immediately follows is that of a young man Sartre knew when he was a prisoner of war, who chose to become a Jesuit after a series of personal setbacks. Sartre implies this choice is authentic because it sprang from the

man's own interpretation of his past. But Sartre goes on to add that other interpretations were possible: "for example, that he might have done better to turn carpenter or revolutionary" (Sartre 49). But if by his choice this man was creating a model for all humanity, it would make a great difference if he chose instead to become a carpenter or revolutionary.

Finally, Sartre mentions two literary characters who make diametrically opposed choices in similar circumstances, i.e. whether to resign themselves to the fact that the man they love is engaged to someone else. These "two strictly opposed moralities" are equivalent, he says, because each takes freedom as its goal (Sartre 87). But obviously someone who resigns herself in such a situation does not create a model valid for someone who chooses to disregard her lover's prior commitments and vice versa.

The substantive criticism Caws makes of Sartre's argument, that in choosing for myself I judge what others should do, is more important, because in it Caws pinpoints exactly why this approach to morality is clearly the wrong one for existentialism to take. The main problem, Caws says, is that "what is lacking in Sartre's use of the generalization argument is a class over which the generalization can operate" (Caws 120). It cannot be the class of all rational agents as in Kant, or even all human beings. Sartre cannot appeal to any essential property, such as rationality, that all humans share, because for him existence precedes essence. (So Sartre's talk of "humanity in its entirety" is merely rhetorical.) Of course a generalization argument like this need not cover the class of all humans; it could merely apply to all those people who are in the same situation as the individual making the choice. But, as Caws recognizes, Sartre cannot use a more limited version of the generalization argument either. According to existentialism there is not a single other individual who is in the same situation I am in. In [Being and Nothingness](#) Sartre explains how my situation is always "illuminated," as he puts it, by my ends (Sartre, [Being and Nothingness](#) 487.) It acquires its specific meaning only in relation to my goals and point of view. As Caws summarizes, "the same objective state of affairs may correspond to very different situations in light of different projects" (Caws 120). Furthermore, as Sartre reminds us in [Existentialism is a Humanism](#), "Choice always remains choice in a situation" (Sartre 79). If each person's situation is unique, then each person's choice of him or herself is unique. It is inconsistent with his whole philosophy for Sartre to suggest that in choosing for oneself one is choosing for anyone else, let alone "humanity in its entirety."

This criticism demolishes Sartre's generalization argument. If all hope of showing existentialism can provide a foundation for moral judgment depended on this argument's success, things would not look good for existentialism. Luckily for existentialism, it does not. In the rest of this paper I want to show another solution to

this problem, a solution even alluded to (albeit obliquely) in [Existentialism is a Humanism](#), although Caws does not mention it.

In his book Caws does not discuss how Sartre shows another way existentialism can serve as the basis of moral judgments. To characterize what Sartre says as an argument is overly generous, so perhaps it is no wonder Caws skipped over it. I contend, however, that once Sartre's statements are interpreted in light of Simone de Beauvoir's more in-depth treatment of this same idea in her essay [The Ethics of Ambiguity](#), they begin to make more sense. This approach to showing how existentialism can serve as the basis of moral judgments bears no resemblance to Sartre's generalization argument and I think holds much more promise.

These two works, [Existentialism is a Humanism](#) and [The Ethics of Ambiguity](#), were composed during the same time period. Sartre gave the lecture on which the published text of [Existentialism is a Humanism](#) is based on October 29, 1945. He then wrote up his notes and handed it to Beauvoir to "correct" and flew off to the U.S. for a long visit.³ The final version went straight from Beauvoir's hands to the publisher, apparently, because the book went into print in February before Sartre returned to Paris on March 15, 1946. Right after Beauvoir corrected Sartre's text she began to work on [The Ethics of Ambiguity](#).

At this later point in [Existentialism is a Humanism](#) Sartre says, first of all, that existentialism does give us the basis to judge that acting in bad faith is wrong. Sartre sees this judgment to be a logical judgment, not a moral judgment ("judgment of value"). People in bad faith are making a philosophical error; they deny the extent of human freedom. But if accusing someone of bad faith is not a moral judgment, as this distinction implies, then acting in bad faith is not the same thing as acting immorally. As critics have pointed out, we can certainly imagine someone who avoids acting in bad faith, but still acts immorally. In this vein Caws describes a person who responds with "smug self-congratulation with respect to acts judged hideous by ordinary standards" (Caws 113).

It is promising, then, that Sartre does not simply identify acting immorally with acting in bad faith. However, when Sartre goes on to explain how existentialism gives us a basis to make not just philosophical judgments, but moral judgments as well, what he says is quite confusing. Apparently, eschewing bad faith is the first step towards a further realization. Sartre says, "if man has once recognized that in his forlornness he imposes values, he can no longer will but one thing and that is freedom as the basis of all values."⁴ Furthermore, Sartre goes on:

. . . in willing freedom we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others and that the freedom of others depends on ours. Of course freedom as the definition

of man does not depend on others, but as soon as there is involvement, I am obliged to will the freedom of others at the same time as I will my own freedom. I can take my freedom as a goal only if I take the freedom of others as a goal as well. Consequently, when in total authenticity I've recognized that man is the being in whom existence precedes essence, that he is a free being who, in various circumstances, can will only his freedom, I have at the same time recognized that I can will only the freedom of others. (Sartre 82-84)

Once it is revealed to me by existentialism that for this reason I should will others' freedom, I can then presumably condemn morally those who do not. Making such moral judgments is only possible from what Sartre calls "a point of view of strict authenticity" (Sartre 85).

Unfortunately, this passage hardly provides a persuasive, or even clear, argument based on existentialist precepts that I can only will my own freedom if I will the freedom of others. It is at this point that it is extremely helpful to turn to Simone de Beauvoir's [The Ethics of Ambiguity](#). In what follows I am going to draw from this work to try to make some sense out of this passage in [Existentialism is a Humanism](#), as well as to show how a plausible argument can be made for this conclusion.

First, it is necessary to explain what it means to will one's own freedom. Right away a potential problem arises. It seems strange, even contradictory, to talk of willing one's own freedom in the context of existentialism, because it was Sartre after all who so dramatically proclaimed humans are condemned to be free. It would seem that according to existentialism there is no need to will oneself free because one already is free. Beauvoir recognizes the potential inconsistency here (although Sartre seems not to have). She avoids it by postulating two different levels of freedom: what she calls natural freedom and moral freedom. As to natural freedom, she says, "Every man is originally free" (Beauvoir 25). (Natural freedom is thus equivalent to what Sartre calls "freedom as the definition of man" in the above passage from [Existentialism is a Humanism](#).) But, according to Beauvoir, not everyone achieves moral freedom. In order to do so one must actively will oneself free "by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence" (Beauvoir 25). It all depends on what attitude one takes to one's original freedom. Obviously, in order to achieve this level of freedom one must give up bad faith: you cannot will yourself free if you deny you are free. But giving up bad faith by itself is not sufficient to achieve moral freedom. To do so one must will others free as well, that is, work to enable them to enjoy this higher level of freedom too.

This last claim is also made in this passage from [Existentialism is a Humanism](#): "I can take my freedom as a goal only if I take the freedom of others as a goal as well." What does this mean exactly? To take my freedom as a goal is to aspire to what Beauvoir

calls moral freedom. So it means that for me to gain moral freedom requires that I work towards others achieving it. This claim is tied to the claim, also in this passage, that my freedom “depends entirely on the freedom of others” (Sartre 83). My moral freedom depends on the freedom of others, not my natural freedom. It does not make much sense to claim that what Beauvoir calls natural freedom, which I cannot escape, depends on the freedom of others.

Why does my achieving moral freedom depend on others achieving it? Much of [The Ethics of Ambiguity](#) is devoted to answering this question. I see Beauvoir to be making two different but inter-related arguments for this conclusion: 1) an argument from temporality that draws from Heidegger’s and Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of this topic, and 2) an argument from intentionality that makes use of Husserl’s concept of intersubjective constitution. In the first argument Beauvoir stresses how all action is directed to the future. However, the existential status of the future is problematic. Christians, Enlightenment proponents of progress and Marxists are wrong to posit the future as something already existing, Beauvoir charges. The future only exists in so far as it is sketched out in the plans and projects of humans working together to fulfill their goals. My projects necessarily intersect with those of others and have significance only because they so intersect. In the second argument Beauvoir explains how my actions gain meaning only within a “human world” of values and these values are brought into being by other human subjects, not by me alone. Other subjects must be, or have been, engaged in ‘willing themselves free’ in order for my actions to have meaning, even for myself.

My summary of Beauvoir’s arguments, although brief, at least show an argument can be made for Sartre’s claim in [Existentialism is a Humanism](#) that “I am obliged to will the freedom of others at the same time as I will my own freedom” (Sartre 83). Caws has shown Sartre’s generalization argument does not succeed. I think Beauvoir’s arguments, and her whole approach to founding an existentialist ethics (hinted at in the above passage from [Existentialism is a Humanism](#)), have a much greater hope of succeeding. These considerations do not exactly redeem [Existentialism is a Humanism](#) as a piece of philosophical reasoning. Overall, Caws’ judgment of the piece is well-grounded. But perhaps he need not have given up so entirely on the idea of an existentialist morality on the basis of this work alone.

Notes:

1. See Kristana Arp, [The Bonds of Freedom: The Existentialist Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir](#). Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2001.

2. I am quoting from my translation of the French original, because the most commonly used English translation mistranslates key terms, notably “mauvaise foi” and “bonne foi.” Also, please bear in mind that Sartre is following here the custom of his day of using “man” or “men” to refer to all humans.

3. In a letter to Sartre dated December 15, 1945 Beauvoir writes, “This morning I worked and finished correcting your lecture at the Flore.” [Letters to Sartre](#) 391. The French word is “corriger.” See [Lettres à Sartre](#) 260.

4. I am translating the French term “vouloir” as “to will” in these passages, although the translator of the most often-used translation, Bernard Frechtman, translates it as “to want.” Frechtman is also the English translator of [The Ethics of Ambiguity](#) and he usually translates “vouloir” there as “to will.”

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