
The Nature of Freedom in Sartre's Existentialist Ethics

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ABSTRACT

The locus of Sartre's ethical position lies in his conception of freedom. It can also be said that the very foundation of his ethical position lies in his ontology wherein he propounds his existentialist thesis. This paper will explore the nature of freedom and its related concepts in his existentialist ethical position. Freedom for Sartre is inextricably linked with authenticity; and this, in turn, is contrasted with the notion of bad faith. To understand the ethical position requires one to understand the relationship among these concepts. It has also been argued by many that existentialism cannot have an ethical dimension, given the individualistic stance it puts forth. This paper attempts to argue against such claims, and also examine Sartre's existentialist ethical position by comparing and contrasting it with other traditional moral theories, including Kant's and Aristotle's moral theories.

Keywords: *Freedom, Authenticity, Inter-subjectivity, Essence, Virtue*

INTRODUCTION

Existentialism, as a movement, holds central the idea that the unique existence of an **individual in concrete situations** cannot be sufficiently grasped by universalistic theories. It is a reactive movement against such dogmatic as well as universalistic theories predominant in the western philosophical tradition. For most of the traditional theories, there is a pre-defined human essence, what(so)ever one calls it: the essence precedes human existence. Even for Kant, there is a marked difference between phenomena and noumena, or appearance and essence of what things appear to us and what it really is. For Jean Paul Sartre, in his existentialist position, human existence is considered as preceding human essence; consequently, there is no essence behind appearance. Phenomenon is 'absolutely indicative of itself' (BN, xlvi). There is nothing hiding behind the appearance of a 'being' and its appearance reveals what it truly is.

According to Sartre, there is no essential nature to refer to, no ideals as such that one should abide by, an existentialist would ask to first observe one's practical situation and inescapably 'choose' to act. The person is thus defined by the choice one makes. This choice here is perceived as an expression of freedom – an autonomy of choice. Such thoughts influenced many contemporary movements in the social and political sphere. For instance, some feminist movements, influenced by it, struggle against those traditions that pre-define and fix the role of women. However, feminist movements are not just reactive against the dogmatic ideals, but complemented with the right existentialist attitude, it reaches a pioneering and a compelling stage.

AN INSIGHT INTO THE NOTION OF FREEDOM

‘Freedom is the necessity of human beings’ existence’. It can be noted that the use of the term ‘necessity’ here should not be confused with the logical technicalities involved in the varied understanding of the word ‘necessity’. Neither is this a question about whether existence is necessary or accidental. For, according to Sartre, existence is accidental and we are ‘thrown into this world’. However, ‘necessity’ is to be understood in answering the question that, if once one exists, what can be inferred of its existence? In the conception of it, the first mark of human existence is the defining characteristic of consciousness which is also expressed in relation to ‘freedom’. As for the atheist existentialist, like Jean Paul Sartre, his atheistic position articulates how one can’t escape freedom. Nevertheless, the issues concerned are the nature of such a freedom, whether it is absolute or determined, or whether there is a possibility of absolute freedom given the contingent existence of human beings.

The expression given above opens the possibility of several disagreements. The first disagreement with such a claim will arise from one’s attempt to define what ‘freedom’ is, let alone ‘existence’. The disagreement that lies with the concept of ‘freedom’ and such a statement as the above comes can come from various spheres as that of social, political, ethical, theological, philosophical, and others. Given the nature of numerous interpretations from varying perspectives it would thus be futile to come to one definition of it. Therefore, to escape the ambiguity associated with the term, it is better to redefine the limits of our context. Consequently, this paper will set the limit on the discourse of ‘freedom’ from Jean Paul Sartre’s existentialist view. Let us try to examine how freedom becomes a necessity for a being whose existence is contingent, in Sartre’s existentialist position.

Sartre’s conception of “existence precedes essence” rests upon the fact that individual’s existence comes prior to its essence; a person exist first, then gives meaning to one’s existence. There is no essence or nature *a priori* to a human being. It expresses the view that “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.¹ There is no pre-defined essence of humans, no fixed description of the nature of humans; one is what one makes of oneself. The development of his existentialist approach is also well founded on his atheistic position. He believes that since there is no God to have a conception of humans, there is no human nature, or essence. Even if there is a God, it does not change anything. The nature of humans is subjective, depending on the individual circumstances of how one lives one’s life. The ‘subjectivity’ of an individual is what results when one talks of the nature of humans. According to Sartre, a person simply ‘is’, before anything else, one then propels oneself towards the future which at the same time is also aware of one’s actions.

Every action one commits one is fully responsible for it, implying the boundless ‘freedom’ a being possess. A person is free to make oneself and confer meaning to one’s life. So, what a person is, is dependent on one’s choices. This realization of the boundless freedom creates anxiety to the person. The idea of such a freedom is too much for the individual to take. To escape this, one falls into bad-faith, where one lies to oneself in denying the reality leading to an inauthentic self. To come pass through this state of bad-faith is the state of authenticity, a state which most existentialists believe one should lead – an authentic life. Heidegger too had an influence on Sartre, the *dasein* or the being-in-the-world, very much like Sartre’s being-for-itself, is free to interpret itself. Both beings aim for an authentic life which can be achieved by

‘choosing to choose’. Although Heidegger claims in *Letter of Humanism* that Sartre has misunderstood him in conceiving the nature of Being, many similarities between the two can be found.

THE NATURE OF SUCH AN EXISTENTIAL ETHICS: FREEDOM AND ETHICS

When we say that Sartre’s existential thesis implies an ethics, it does not mean that he emphasizes on actions that are socially acceptable or unacceptable like in traditional normative ethics. He does not really talk about judging the actions performed by the agents by referring to some moral principles; however, his intention is to make people realize the ethics of ‘authenticity. One of the most important concerns in his ethics is ‘not to escape from the consequences of one’s actions’ but to take responsibility of it.

Ethics from an existentialist’s viewpoint questions traditional moral theories and religious doctrines that tend to describe the human condition with reference to an essential human nature, or universalistic moral principles. Sartre’s form of existentialism is thus committed to the idea that the unique existence of an individual in concrete situations cannot be sufficiently grasped by universal theories. Philip Mairet in the introduction to *Existentialism and Humanism* wrote that “the reality of everyone’s existence proceeds thus from the ‘inwardness’ of man, not from anything that the mind can codify, for objectified knowledge is always at one or more removes from the truth”.ⁱⁱ The existentialist believe in a vision of a world or an environment of humans, where an individual person, as a unique being, has the freedom or power to choose the right course of one’s own actions. Such an ethics is possible only if we understand the ontological basis of it. To exactly understand Sartre’s position on ethics is challenging as he did not really work on an ethical position. But considering his strong existentialist position, we can try to comprehend his vision on the possibility of an ethics. The basis of it rests on understanding and exploring the relation between freedom and authenticity.

The notion of freedom plays a central role in understanding Sartre’s ethics. It can be said that for Sartre, freedom is the necessity of existence. Every existentialist position that he advocates comes from his ontological stance where he expound the nature of ‘being’, and upholds the view that consciousness is ‘absolutely free’. Freedom for him is the autonomy of choice. Such autonomy implies that one cannot help but choose (in a situation). There is no pre-defined human essence or nature, no *a-priori* conception of a person. It is the person who confers sense and meaning to the world. A person is absolutely free to choose out of the various possibilities and alternatives. Thus, one is condemned to choose.

ⁱⁱⁱThe realization that one is free implies that one is responsible for all the actions that one commits. There is no one to put the blame on, there is no excuse. Choosing comes with a sense of responsibility, for the ‘choice’ of the individual is manifested through actions. Thus, whatever consequences the action entails, ultimately, the person is responsible for it. This awareness of responsibility causes angst and despair in the individual. In order to escape from such form of reality they turn into living a life of ‘bad-faith’. Bad faith is the condition where one deceives oneself, it is when a person knows the truth, but does not admit it. He says, “...in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. Thus the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here”.^{iv} Contrarily, to be ‘authentic’ means the acceptance of the fact that ‘we are alone in

this world, without excuse or reason for being, abandoned to choose our values without reference to anything that could justify them in the eyes of the universe’.

The ethical position of Sartre stresses the importance of action. He states that “there is no hope except in his action, and the one thing which permits him to have a life is the deed”.^v This externalizing ‘act’ of the individual is the ‘choice’ of the individual of which only she is responsible, and which is rooted to what has been internalized, i.e., the past of the individual. The necessity of this ‘choice’ in a person’s action in making history clearly demonstrates Sartre’s insistence on the existence of freedom in making the society, and where the society in turn makes him. Thus, the goal of ‘totalization’^{vi} is thus a ‘totality’, a completed goal. Yet again, these achieved ‘totalities’ become a part of another ‘totalization’ to complete a larger project. So basically, as long as there are humans in this world, the process of totalization never ends and so does freedom. There is no ‘end’ to freedom as long as human beings exist. The end of ‘freedom’ marks the end of existence. Therefore, it is freedom, the autonomy of choice that leads to an ethics of authenticity.

In his *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre states that when one chooses freedom, one chooses for all. Although it has a Kantian undertone, it is not strictly so. The reason being that Sartre is not implying that one should universalize what one considers is good for oneself to be applied to the whole of humanity. Since there is no God, nor any prevenient conception of human nature and moral values, the image that a person makes for oneself becomes an image for all. When a person affirms the value of oneself, one is also affirming the value of freedom for others. In this way, in fashioning oneself one fashion for all, and thus one bears the responsibility for one’s own self as well as the others. Those who deny that they don’t, deceive themselves. However, this view invites some serious implications.

One such point was raised by Mark Tanzer in his book *On Existentialism*. He asks, “if there is no determinate human essence, then there can be no univocal conception of what, exactly, it is for a human being to achieve itself. But there can be no univocal standard to determine whether an action is good or evil... does the existentialist’s denial of a determinate human essence destroy the possibility of morality?”^{vii} There are, thus, many important questions that emerge in the practicability of an existential ethics. Since there is no univocal conception of human nature or moral values, how can one determine the difference between good actions and evil actions? If a human is free, is everything in fact permissible? If the existentialists talk about an authentic existence, to accept the human condition, then, what counts as human condition? If Sartre insists on the primacy of individual subjectivity, defining the other as a threat to one’s freedom, how can one have an ethics based on such a notion of individuality? The answers for these questions lie in a clear understanding of the ethics of authenticity.

FREEDOM AND THE ETHICS OF AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity and inauthenticity can be considered contrary to each other. Authenticity is “a deliberate and sustained project in which a person affirms his freedom and takes full responsibility without regret for his past, for his present situation and for his actions within that situation. That is, he assumes full responsibility for his being-in-situation. Authenticity involves a person recognizing and valuing the fact that he must continually choose what he is without ever

being able to become what he is once and for all”.^{viii} Denial of such a reality would be a sign of an inauthentic existence or bad faith.

The ethical aspect of existentialism does not assess actions as right or wrong objectively or universally. But the denial of such an assessment does not nullify the existence of an ethical component. This sets existentialist ethics in contradistinction to the traditional morality that we know of. For them, the virtue that needs to be cultivated is ‘authenticity’ and what needs to be avoided is ‘bad-faith’. It is not the same as the virtues that need to be cultivated in Aristotle’s virtue ethics, for it is not the habitual cultivation of virtues. The virtue for existentialist ethics is the truth of human existence, which people, generally, has the tendency to escape. However, the absolute freedom of human beings associated with authenticity does not unleash anarchy, where everything is permissible regardless of any rules or laws whatsoever. The absolute freedom unleashes free actions channeled in projects undertaken by individuals in every steps of life, and since life is defined by free actions in such projects, it comes with a strict sense of responsibility. This sense of responsibility can be evaded or embraced; if evaded, one denies the truth of reality; embracing it would lead to an authentic existence.

The practical implications of the foundation of ethics which Sartre had laid can be seen further elaborated in Simone’s works. The ethics that she focused on is to fight against oppression and injustice. An authentic existence, thus, consists in affirming one’s freedom as well as the freedom of others. It not only tells a person to value their own freedom, but that of others as well. Such an existential ethics does differ from the normative ethical theories that we deal with, traditionally. The good and the bad of it does not refer to some universal human nature conceived by an infinite entity, nor does it refer to universal moral values of *a priori* origin. For Sartre, one does not seek authenticity. In the *Notebooks for an Ethics*, he says that if one seeks authenticity for authenticity's sake, then one is no longer authentic. For him, “the one and only basis of the moral life must be spontaneity, that is, the immediate, the unreflective.”^{ix} This is quite similar to what he expressed in his *Existentialism and Humanism* that morality is “to do with creation and invention. We cannot decide *a priori* what it is that should be done.”^x The lack of human essence does not imply a failure to define oneself or a failure to have a conception of morality. A person can define oneself in many possible ways through one’s actions. Thus, in one’s actions lies one’s reality, beyond this, there is nothing. Instead of destroying the possibility of morality, it establishes a strong moral position.

The issue on authenticity does invite a serious question on whether it is to be considered individualistically or socially. For Simone de Beauvoir, there seems no problem in considering it to have a social dimension. But for Sartre, the doubt lingers. To be authentic requires no reference to an independent objective moral conception of what is good and bad, nor is it subjective in the sense that what is considered good or bad is a matter of approval or disapproval of the speaker. Actions depend on the situation one is in. The truth is concrete; all humans are on the same plane. The values we affirm are created and recreated on this plane. Since humans are incapable of choosing the bad, what they choose for them is the image of what a human ought to be. This image that I commit to becomes valid for all those in the similar situation. I thereby bear the responsibility of this image that I created for myself, and the others. Although one has the responsibility of the entire humanity on one’s shoulders, this, however, does not mean that one can take decisions of other’s lives. No one can take the concrete real life decisions for others. The reason being that the others are also free agents who will ‘will’ their lives according to their

projects. Although Sartre advances a seemingly individualistic nature of freedom, positing the other as having a conflictual relation with the self, he did sense the need for this relation to be reconciled and which he also attempted in the later phase of his philosophy. Thus, if we are to answer the question whether Sartre's notion of authenticity has in it a social element, then we can argue that it has. Although it is not categorically structured out in his early existentialist position, we can say that in his later phase, he has tried to develop the social aspect of his existentialist position.

After establishing the relation between authenticity and freedom, we hereby come to the conclusion that such an absolute sense of freedom practically is not possible and that to realize this sense of freedom, we need to acknowledge the importance the other has on my freedom. If we believe that authenticity is only subjective then there can be any authentic person, like an authentic thief or an authentic murderer. Storm Heter argues in support of the social dimensionality of authenticity that if we accept only the individualist sense of authenticity (which will become a form of ethical subjectivism) then it would also allow "for the existence of authentic serial killers, authentic Nazis, authentic racists, and so on, then authenticity is not an ethical virtue".^{xi} Since Sartre was against any form of tyranny or dogmatism that exists in moral, social or political spheres; and morality for him involves people to be creative and invent, we can, without doubt, disregard the possibility of an authentic Nazi, or an authentic racist.

THE INTER-SUBJECTIVE FREEDOM

Sartre attempted to explore the inter-subjective relations that exist among beings. In his early philosophy, he portrayed a hostile relation that exist between the being-for-itself and the others. It is conflict that defines an inter-subjective relation. Such a relation was clearly depicted by his conception of the 'look' of the other, which is constantly trying to limit one's freedom. This line of thought typically belonged to early Sartre, where he expressed the extremity of his thought in considering other people as 'hell'. He used his plays and short stories to convey his thoughts and convictions. An opposite demonstration of his phrase 'hell is other people'^{xii} can be seen in his plays *No Exit*; and *The Flies*, where he portrayed the gripping look of the other as 'eyes' that gaze.^{xiii} The 'absolute freedom' of early Sartre advocated an antagonistic view of the others. He held that through the 'look' of the other, one can see the limitations of one's possibilities.

Furthermore, the characteristic of the 'other' is such that it is both a subject as well as an object. For instance, let us consider Sartre's example in his *Being and Nothingness* of a person, who out of jealousy or curiosity peeps through a key hole of a closed door. Initially, when the person is alone and too engaged in its act, one is not conscious of one's own action. During this moment, every object placed in relation to the person, with her as the center. However, when the person realizes that another person was all the while watching her, she suddenly gets conscious of her action. The whole world re-structures in such a way that the person is no longer the center of her.^{xiv} In the look of the other, the person feels ashamed. Here, the existence of the person has been reconstructed in a totally new way. S/he is being judged by the other as someone being 'caught' while eavesdropping. In this way, the other becomes a subject for the person caught, wherein she becomes an object. Likewise, the other can be an object as well, for instance, when a group of people are talking to each other, each one is aware of the people surrounding oneself; each one perceives the other, and the other form object(s) of awareness for each person in the

group. This shows the 'other' as an object. Sartre expresses that there is always an attempt for the beings-for-itself to always try to judge the 'others' or try to classify them under a certain form of behavior. Just as in this example, the person who caught the other in the act of peeping will label the person as an 'eavesdropper'. In such a way, the 'others' freedom becomes an obstacle in doing what one wishes to do. Sartre rightfully said, "Thus in the look the death of my possibilities causes me to experience the other's freedom."^{xv}

In this case, when the person was caught in the act of peeping, one suddenly becomes aware of the fact that one is being watched by another person. Instantly, one feels ashamed and embarrassed, which was not felt earlier when one was alone. Thus, only at the look of the other does one realize that one is being labeled as 'this' or 'that' as an object. Thus, people's judgments become a hindrance to our freedom, which puts an end to our possibilities. Sartre puts it as,

"While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me... Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others."^{xvi}

The passage reflects the antagonistic and conflicting nature of the relation between the two beings. Given this view, a set of challenging situation arises. One can ask, how can one view the other always and every time in hostility? Is conflict the only aspect that defines the inter-subjective relation? Certainly, Sartre addresses this problem and attempts to provide a solution. He suggests one can be indifferent to the look. This, however, does not succeed in solving the problem completely. There are several other concerns, for instance, his view still continues to be individualistic in nature as he clings on to his notion of 'absolute freedom'. Indifference is not the solution to resolve the conflictual relation that exists between the beings. Sartre is right in maintaining that the freedoms conflict but wrong to make it the only relation. At this point, what complements Sartre's challenging position is to consider Simone de Beauvoir's position on the same.

Sartre's emphasis on subjective experience which is sometimes considered individualistic in nature does aim at an authentic existence; but, it is not confined to this subjectivity. The existence of the other is not a burden but a very condition of freedom and authenticity. Since we live in the midst of the world, we necessarily encounter the other in our life. Although, he defined the other as a threat to our freedom expressed through the 'look', he also accepts that it is at the same time uplifting. This emphasis on the importance of the other is more clearly expressed by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, where she reconciles the notions of individuality and the other in the formulation of an existential ethics. She states, "the existence of others as freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom."^{xvii} According to her, rather than defining the relation with the other as conflictual, as Sartre did, she believed that the freedom of the individual can only be realized by affirming the freedom of the other. She moved beyond what Sartre had advocated in adding another element in the notion of freedom as the centrality of ethics: the notion of moral freedom. This idea of moral freedom recognizes and advocates one's moral freedom and the freedom of the others. The foundation of such a moral freedom lies in the ontological freedom.

Here, we can reflect on the exact nature of such a freedom and how it is connected to a view of ethics. There has always been an apprehension about the possibility of an existentialist ethics,

arguing that existentialism advocates a ‘subjective’ and an individualistic view. Thus, it would be dubious to infer ethical implications from such an outlook. For Sartre, it can be said that his ethical position is founded on his ontology of human freedom. Thus, the attempt here is to show that the prevalent conflicting inter-subjective relation that exists can be seen resolved through the possibility of an existential ethics.

An Observation of Sartre with Other Traditional Moral Theories

This discussion is essential to see where we can place Sartre’s existential ethics – whether it can be placed within the traditional moral domain or whether it is beyond it. Although Sartre was against any universalistic moral theories, many similarities can be drawn between his ethical understanding and with other universalistic moral theories. For instance, similar to Kant, when he says that moral agents make the values and laws by themselves, Sartre also advocated that a person gives values and meanings to one’s own life; in which they believed that whatever one chooses for oneself as good is good for all. Sartre believed that there are no ‘given’ good as such; instead, something is made good by choosing it. One is incapable of choosing ‘bad’ for oneself, if one is in an authentic existence. When he said that when ‘one chooses for oneself, one chooses for all, and in fashioning oneself, one fashions for all’, it does seem to suggest Kant’s ‘universalizability principle’^{xviii} where an action can be universalized as having a universal validity. John Macquarrie in his book *Existentialism* expressed such a view of Sartre as “apparently Kantian”.^{xix} However, this is not so.

Furthermore, Kant distinguished between autonomy and heteronomy; autonomy indicates the ability of the moral agent to legislate moral laws for oneself. Heteronomy, on the other hand, emphasizes the view that there is an external source for moral principles. Kant by rejecting heteronomy of all forms, thus, accepts that moral laws are created by the moral agents themselves and thus tries to universalize the moral maxim achieved, if there are no contradictions in doing so.

Sartre too distinguished between ‘authenticity’ and ‘inauthenticity’. An authentic life is one without bad faith; the realization of the fact that one is responsible for one’s own actions; that one is born without any essence(s), and whatever values and essence(s) one accrues, one makes it by choosing it. Inauthenticity means denial of this truth; a life of constantly lying to oneself, believing in the view that there is an entity or source that guides human action, it’s a form of putting the burden of one’s actions to something or to an imaginary external source; and in the process, escape the responsibility of one actions.

John Macquarrie said, “Kant’s distinction between autonomy and heteronomy might seem at first to be similar to the existentialist distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity, but it is not really so. Both are protests against the unthinking acceptance of an externally imposed code of morals, but Sartre’s view is infected with a subjectivism quite absent in Kant because of the Sartrean rejection of an objectively valid ‘practical reason’.”^{xx} Such similar notes of course do not ascertain that they are the same. Despite the similarities, both the positions still stand to be distinct and different to each other. One position (as that of Kant) believes in the absolute validity of its moral principle when once universalized, while that of Sartre believes that no objective moral principle(s) can address the concrete human situation. However, Sorin Baiasu has expressed a strong similarity with Kant and Sartre in stating that “the only thing which is

supposed to be valid for all situations and all agents is what I have called the criterion of morality, the value of authenticity, for Sartre, and the Categorical Imperative, for Kant.^{xxi} Of course, such criterion for Sartre cannot be expressed in an absolute normative way as did Kant.

Scholars over the years have tried to interpret Sartre's existentialist ethics in terms of virtue ethics. I argue that we cannot consider his ethical position in such a manner, at least not in the conventional sense of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics, first and foremost, is an agent-based normative ethical theory. Here, one is inclined to develop and cultivate the moral character of the agent. Aristotle's virtue ethics advocated the cultivation of qualities like prudence, justice, courage and temperament, also considered the cardinal virtues; such qualities are considered the characteristic of a good person. For him, virtue is a matter of choice. Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by the rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine.^{xxii} He believed that human beings too have different functions, but the *teleos* or the 'good' of human being lies in a function that they fulfill better than anything else; Aristotle defines our good or *teleos* with the exercise of our rationality, it then becomes that the virtues are those traits of character that will enable us to pursue this good.

Furthermore, Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, III-5, laid an important emphasis to moral responsibility where he has said that moral responsibility is ascribed to only those actions that is voluntary and not to involuntary actions. All human actions are in fact involuntary, either caused by some external forces or due to ignorance; and voluntary actions involve those actions done deliberately as a choice from various possibilities. For all the voluntary actions that one does, one has to take responsibility for that. On a similar note, an authentic being, according to Sartre, is the one who takes responsibility of one's own actions. Such a person admits the fact that since one is radically free in a given situation one chooses one's own actions, and is fully responsible for any consequences one's actions entail.

It does seem at first that there is a similarity with regard to the idea of 'virtue', though somewhat differently conceived. However, Sartre's ethical position fails majorly for these following reasons to provide a strong ground to be interpreted in terms of virtue ethics. In the attempt to comprehend his ethics, we come to the understanding that his ethics does not advocate any normative objective moral theory. Secondly, there is no idea of an essential human nature, which every human should thrive to be or that ought to strive towards normative perfection; in fact, this would be an excuse to escape reality to an inauthentic existence. Lastly, with regard to Aristotle's conception of involuntary actions, Sartre would view that to claim our own actions to be influenced completely by external factors to the extent that it becomes involuntary and thereby escape taking responsibility would definitely fall into the pit of determinism and consequently lead to bad-faith. Therefore, Sartre's virtue ethics, as Neil Levy says, contains only a single virtue, that of the "cultivation of the virtue of authenticity in ourselves".^{xxiii}

CONCLUSION

In the contemporary discourse on existentialism, there is an emerging need to establish an ethical position. Through this we can assess the practicability of such an ethics. We cannot chase after a movement that is long gone, but we can try reviving and retaining those themes which very much constitute our everyday concrete existence. Existential ethics comes closer to ethics based

on the agent rather than an ethics based on conduct. Existence is contingent, and since humans create the values, the values are, therefore, contingent. No actions can be absolutely or objectively right or wrong. Thus, in the spontaneity of life, one cannot predict the future. One must act and live without 'hope'. The relevance of the ethics of authenticity is various in all walks of life. It can also be seen as an existence free from oppression.

Against the many reproaches of existentialism, of its incapability to consider the solidarity of humankind, of having an ethical element, it can be safely inferred that there is a good deal of consideration for the possibility of an inter-subjective experiences and relationships. The existentialist position indeed starts from individual subjectivity, but the individual is *always and already* found in the world. The belief in the absolute freedom of the individual is the beginning of an authentic existence, an existence where one is true to one's own self. Sartre does admit of a conflicting relation of the individual with the other, but the conflict can be resolved through 'mutual recognition', by uplifting each other. The autonomy of choice does not imply that one can oppress others according to their will. David Detmer has expressed this clearly in his book that "it is simply and uncompromisingly wrong to "play" with other people's lives without their consent, to "choose" a role for them as my slaves, to "invent" a world in which I enjoy fantastic wealth while they starve".^{xxiv} In the early phase of Sartre, this threat from the other and the inter-subjective conflictual element of human existence can be seen resolved in his later phase, when his philosophical position took a political turn. It is important to note, however, that the ethics Sartre promised in the end of his *Being and Nothingness* can be seen reflected in Simone de Beauvoir's works.

The optimism that it expresses far reaches any morality that has been assessed objectively. It teaches the individual to start from its subjective experience, to affirm its freedom and extend in affirming the freedom for all. The realization of such autonomy brings with it a strong sense of responsibility to the individual. This is the truth of human reality. The resilient foundations of an existential ethics for Sartre is by now very clear. It hinges on his notions of freedom that leads to his ethics of authenticity.

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ENDNOTES

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- ^v Sartre, JeanPaul, 1989, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (Trans.) Philip Mariet, London: Methuen, p. 44
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