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Inventing an Ethics: Existentialism and Engagement through Literature

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INVENTING AN ETHICS: EXISTENTIALISM AND ENGAGEMENT THROUGH LITERATURE

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Dedicated to others, for the purpose of engagement.

"A smooth sea never made a skillful Mariner"

– Anonymous (found in a fortune cookie)

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Abstract

The existentialist ethics of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir offers a unique perspective that challenges a traditional, normative picture that has been dominant throughout the history of ethical thinking and continues to dominate in contemporary discourse. The perspective in question refuses to rely on essence to ground its positions, opting instead to focus on the contingency of the subject and the interpersonal as being fundamental in the *invention* of moral values and ethical practices. This thesis looks to – in the first chapter – explore the relationship between the subjective and the interpersonal through a discussion of Heidegger's *Mitsein* and the "being-for-others" through the phenomenology of *le regard*. Doing so will enable us to clarify what is demanded of one in their conduct in a communal context. In the second chapter, we will endeavor to understand what constraints we have on how we are to respond to these demands. And finally, in the third chapter, we will characterize literature's capacity to facilitate suitable responses to that demand.

Primarily, I will seek to explore *engagement*, and argue that being engaged is the appropriate, "authentic", mode of being for the invention of ethics and values. This requires offering a picture of what it means to be engaged and will therefore require us to direct our attention to what Sartre and Beauvoir think literature is capable of accomplishing. My hope is that this discussion is useful in our deliberations about contemporary political and ethical issues, specifically, the difficulties we face in communication and communion between partisan perspectives.

Introduction

The discordance between thought and being that the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir maintains – being always exceeds or escapes our thinking of it – leaves us confronting the possibility that conventional philosophical methods of thinking are inadequate. What is clear enough though, if we are to subscribe to such a discordance, is that concepts alone are insufficient for dealing with questions of being, that is, we find that we have to move beyond idealism. To what degree thought can still think about being then depends on the degree to which we want to ascribe non-conceptual "thought"[1] to our cognitive capacities and/or processes. For our purposes, it will be supposed that there is not a *total* disconnect – Sartre and Beauvoir each think, for good reason, solipsism is something to be avoided – which means that we have to deal with some non-conceptual thought. Those philosophers that reach this conclusion have a tendency to place a good deal of emphasis on aesthetics as a way of navigating the murky waters that mediate thought and being. The existentialist ontology that is being used here requires such an emphasis, and it is literature in particular that appears to be the preferred method of navigation. Explaining this preference will be the main task of this project, and it is my hope that we will end up in a position to explore the efficacy of literature in achieving the role that Sartre and Beauvoir assign to it, especially in a contemporary context. That role, as I understand it and will argue, is primarily an *ethical* one, though not in a normative sense. Literature is supposed to set the stage for a capacity to invent an ethics collaboratively while avoiding "bad faith". It serves the purpose of enabling an ethics that is attentive to the condition of the responsible agent, and this attention is what we will consider existentialism's ethical character.

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[1] Could be described as "non-conceptual content", "non-conceptual process(es)", both, or something else entirely.

If thought and being are estranged, making determinations on what it means to *be* good will be particularly difficult, especially given that, when taken to its logical conclusion, essence and teleology must be taken to either be inaccessible (at least partially) or non-existent. As noted by Hannah Arendt in "What is Existentialism?", philosophy, with this realization, had to turn away from a thinking about essence since our thinking of it is never adequate.[2] Rather, it had to move toward a thinking about thinking itself, which manifests as reflections on existence. The framework we will be operating with is a continuation of this emphasis, and goes so far as to say that, for the self, existence precedes essence.[3]

The bases for many of the dominant ethical theories in the history of philosophy are taken out from under them with the assertion that existence precedes essence, and as a result, it is easy to think that existentialism has no place for the question of the good. It should be noted though, that the assertion does not *deny* essence, only that existence is placed before it. If an ethics is demanded, it can be invented, though there is nothing to determine how we *ought* to invent. The question of how we ought to invent is an unanswerable one: if existence is all the basis there can be for the production of essence, we cannot confer a universal notion (ought) that itself would require invention onto invention. Rather, the question is reduced to the bare ontological process, stripped of values and judgements.

However, while there can be no "ought", this is not to say that invention has no constraints. The ontological structure of the for-itself (the self) means that it is simultaneously a "lack of being"[4] and that it, nonetheless, creates its own being. Basically, the for-itself creates

[2] Hannah Arendt, "What is Existentialism?", *Essays in Understanding,* (New York: Literary Trust of Hannah Arendt Bluecher, 1994).
[3] Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism", *Essays in Existentialism*, ed. Wade Baskin, (New York: Citadel Press, 2003), 36.
[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 722.

something that it fundamentally cannot be, but that "something" constitutes its ek-static

presentation through its actions. It is the inheritor of its past actions and its present corporeality,

but it itself is not its past nor its present. At once, the for-itself is thoroughly an individuated

nothingness against being as well as a being whose actions are available to the public. The

"facticity" (as this publicity is called) of the for-itself means that it is not utterly solipsistic and

that its actions will have concrete impacts on others that, in turn, impact the for-itself.

Specifically, the success or meaning of my invention will be dependent on its manifestation as a

concrete action available to my judgement as well as others' judgement. Acting according to a

personal ethic will make that ethic available to others, which means that it is susceptible to both

praise and scorn, and – depending on one's prerogatives – that praise or scorn can serve as

support for the ethic enacted or as detraction. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre illustrates this

dynamic with the example of a voyeur who thinks he/she hears footsteps:

> But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this
> mean? It means that I am suddenly affected by in my being and that essential
> modifications appear in my structure…I now exist as *myself* for my unreflective
> consciousness. [5]

When presented with the potential of being seen, the voyeur suddenly is keenly aware of what

the body is doing and the motivation behind it, and in this case, it is enough for a feeling of

shame.[6]

This dynamic will be important for us in explaining what is demanded of us in our

invention. How one apprehends that an other is judging or is capable of it in the first place

requires a lengthy explanation of *le regard* ("the look" or "the gaze") that will establish an

exploration of the for-itself's relation to others. The true difficulty is that with the look, the for-

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[5] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 349.
[6] Notice how the individual does not need to actually be *seen* for this feeling to arise.

itself is apprehended as an *object of perception* (though an object with perceived intentions/motivations) such that, in my seeing an other person, I do not see another for-itself, but, in this case, a voyeur. I reduce the other to what he/she is doing or has done, and due to this, it is difficult to consider the other in accordance with their ontological structure, and the same can be said of their apprehension of me. Because of this, there lies a need for a mode of connection that takes us past the face-to-face such that I can consider the other, not by their appearances, but as primarily being in the same ontological position as myself. As such, through an analysis of *le regard,* we will characterize this "ontological position" such that we can further analyze its implications on our interactions with others.

This will also require an exploration of "bad faith", in which there is a basis for us to say that there is a *need* to surpass the face-to-face. Much of this comes down to the for-itself being *responsible*, which is less of a prescriptive claim than a descriptive one. We *are* responsible for our actions because of the ontological freedom that structures the for-itself, but only insofar as those actions, paradoxically, constitute a facticity, which runs contrary to this ontological structure. Facticity is always transcended, and to think otherwise is to be in delusion; this is what it means to be in bad faith. The second chapter is devoted to our transcendence of facticity, an exploration that should follow nicely from the discussion about that gaze that confronts us with that facticity.

In finishing this project, the third chapter will discuss literature in the context of not only transcending *le regard*, building off chapter one, but transcending facticity in the context of the community, that is, transcending our situation. Such an accomplishment is what we will call existentialist ethics and will require our literature to be *engaged*. However, given that it requires a transcendence of *our* situation – meaning that the transcendence is one past a particular set of

socio-political and historical dynamics, forces, questions, and challenges – we will briefly explore engaged literature's efficacy in confronting the contemporary situation that we find ourselves in.

Ultimately, this exploration is designed to present the existentialist ontology in a form I have deemed to be most convincing. Anyone familiar with either Sartre or Beauvoir will probably confirm that each had a tendency to produce hyperbolic rhetoric in conveying their positions, which can often lead to misapprehensions of the position. I aim to keep such rhetoric to a minimum. There are also a multitude of valid concerns that arise from many of the positions that I will be espousing, and while those concerns will only be addressed in passing so as not to distract, my hope is that we will at least be in a position to ask the right questions and to not reject the view as patently ridiculous. If we can land in such a position, then the main contribution I think that this project has is for a confrontation with contemporary challenges.

We find ourselves in a political climate where there is serious concern over how we conduct political and ethical discourse. While some hints of more profound reflections on ethics can be derived out of the proceeding presentation (non-anthropocentric ethical attitudes are explored in chapter one, the ontological priority of the ethical relation is explored at the end of chapter two) the aim here is to have a focus that can easily offer reflections on what appears to be especially pertinent for myself and most others in western society today. Existentialism is particularly attuned to addressing questions that arise out of political conflict, and through this exploration of it, perhaps we can see a path towards constructive communication between the two partisan factions that appear to only be drifting further apart in perspective. To get to this point though, we must address the communion of two perspectives in general. We must characterize the relation between one and an other.

Chapter One: Regarding *Le Regard*

One of the most valuable insights found in the existentialist ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir is that judgment can be informative at a fundamental level. What we see in the phenomenology of *le regard* (the gaze or the look) is that to be seen, heard, or felt is to be a fact. Facticity is then confronted in this interaction, and it has a profound effect on the way the for-itself (the subject) conducts itself. It serves as a limit to the contingency of the for-itself: the world may be constituted through me, but it can never become *mine*, as I am, ultimately, in and a part of the world as evidenced by the fact that *I exist here for-Others*. To be a seer, one must also be one that can be seen. But it is not just that the for-itself comes to confront the fact that it is seen, it is seen by *another* for-itself; in the moment of being perceived, one is perceived by *an* other. To speak of a broad and abstract Other does not quite capture the nature of *le regard* and its importance in the "existentialist" ontology.

Who the perceiver is conditions the experience of the other. Having a "significant-other" see me without pants will be a very different experience than having a stranger see me without pants. The difference, existentially speaking, is seen in how we come to understand ourselves through the apprehension of what the other is seeing. To use the previous example, the *who* of the perception will determine whether I come to understand myself as physically attractive or as someone who needs to put their pants back on. Either way, the experience likely spurs a particular emotion (pride or shame) and gives a limitation to how I am to understand the meaning of my actions. The other of the experience then serves a crucial role in the apprehension of our

being, and in the context of the *project*[7] that the for-itself conducts, this apprehension will inform how well or how poorly that project is being carried out.

Because of this, the broad and abstract Other does not hold a particularly significant role in the understanding of Being-For-Others. The for-itself is self-sufficient enough that it does not need to rely on the world – or *the* Other for that matter – to give any indication on which way(s) to apprehend it. But *an* other escapes apprehension in such a way that we encounter him/her as apprehend*ing*, thereby forcing ourselves into a confrontation with what they are seeing: our own facticity. Think of an experience of an apprehending other as one where we are thrown into their shoes (so to speak) and then back into ours whilst retaining the judgments formed from their perspective. How an other is apprehended as 'another for-itself' is complicated and will be elucidated on later in the chapter. For now: the focus of the chapter.

Given the picture described above, we have an intriguing, but potentially problematic understanding of the interpersonal relationship. To bring out what I claim to be a problem with the phenomenology of *le regard*, I will focus on Martin Heidegger's notion of *Mitsein*, and will explain how Sartre's critiques of the notion do enough to get us past the notion, but that his alternative picture does not address something that *Mitsein* addresses: how we come into the world. I will then proceed to attempt to provide an account that addresses this concern while maintaining the phenomenology of *le regard*. I will then explain the need for an ethics of engagement and why literature is crucial for such an ethics.

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[7] This is an extremely important term for us. The way we will be using "project" is as some imagined ideal mode of being, or a "striving to be __". We will see that the for-itself maintains a desire to be, and the project is that which the for-itself aims at becoming. Experience, broadly speaking, is defined and understood in terms of one's project (what does a sunny day, a rubix cube, or a salad *mean* in the context of my desire to be, say, a politically liberal Hollywood dramatic actor or an oblivious observational comic?), thus, the project is crucial for the construction of a meaning structure.

Mitsein versus L'enfer

Martin Heidegger does, in fact, utilize the broad and abstract Other in attempting to account for the role of the interpersonal. In Heidegger's case, he utilizes *Mitsein* (being-with), which is representative of his understanding that world is fundamentally shared. We can have interactions with particular others ("ontic" others in Heideggerese) and these may even have a profound impact on our day-to-day operations, but the presence of the ontological Other is constant: "They [others] are encountered from out of the *world* in which Dasein, heedful and circumspect, essentially dwells."[8] Dasein (there-being) is never alone in the world, as it is "always already the one that I share with others."[9] This serves to give more of a role to his notion of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*); since the world is always already shared, Dasein is thus thrown into a world of meanings and possibilities. World is not constituted *by* Dasein since Dasein comes into one already constituted through others. This enables Heidegger to escape the conventional subject-object distinction since (Dasein) the subject is *in-the-world*; the world is ready to be worked with (*Vorhandenheit* – ready-at-hand) without the constitutive power of a "transcendental I". It is the work that constitutes being, not a subject. The only way that the work could do this is if there is already an assignment, so to speak, for me to be concerned with. The fundamental characteristic of Dasein is one of being concerned with (busy with, at issue with) the world.

What is critical to note, and it will become clear why later, is that this working is *my* working. Despite the fact that world is shared, it nonetheless concerns *me*. World is shared, though the "mineness" of world is not shared since world concerns each of us differently. This is most apparent when put in terms of death; my death is un-substitutable, and since death is the

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[8] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. Joan Stambaugh, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 116.
[9] Ibid.

upper limit on Dasein's possibilities, the possibilities afforded Dasein can only concern it alone.

It should be asserted that *Mitsein* is in sharp contrast with the ontology of the for-itself, since the

consciousness of the for-itself is a constitutive activity, and because the for-itself's facticity is

not its own (no mineness in regard to facticity) but is thrust onto ourselves (by ourselves)

through the presence of alterity.[10]

Regarding the constitutive activity of the for-itself, it should be understood that the for-

itself is a product of a non-coincidence with existence and essence. Sartre and Beauvoir each rely

on a reinterpreted *Cogito* that serves to base existence such that it is given, we recognize this

given-ness (the "that"), and we are capable of advancing beyond it without also having essence

(the "what") given.[11] The "essence" of the for-itself is a manifestation of "projects" through its

"ekstasis"[12], that is, through action. We will see that "projects" are driven by the ontological

structure of the for-itself, but ultimately, they are always chosen. Here we see the hyperbolic

freedom characteristic of existentialist thought. Put in terms of projects, this freedom is exercised

through the freely chosen *projection out* in ekstasis. For example, a project of being a graduate

student will dictate one's conduct accordingly (wear certain clothes, react in certain ways, say

certain things, etc.).

They seem to think that this is a product of the guarantee of the "I think", or more

specifically, the think*ing*. *That* one is thinking is guaranteed before any reflection and we are

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[10] Sartre also runs contrary to the notion of "Being-towards-Death" and has a critique of it in *Being and Nothingness* (680-706). Essentially, he understands death as not only the upper limit on our possibilities (as with Heidegger) but also as a *product* capable of objectification at the hands of the Other. Instead of our facticity being defined in terms of the death, it is defined in terms of how others judge our death, once again putting our facticity in the hands (or eyes) of the Other.
[11] Hannah Arendt, "What is Existentialism?", 167.
[12] This term can be found on page 399 of *Being and Nothingness*. It seems to refer to the exteriority (ek-stasis) of the for-itself's subjectivity through action.

aware of this (evidently so), hence, each understand this to be an indication of a "pre-reflective consciousness". It can be summed up as this: if consciousness is an awareness (he borrows this notion from Husserl – "all consciousness is a consciousness *of* something") then a pre-reflective consciousness is an awareness of an awareness which allows us to understand consciousness as intentional actions rather than, for instance, as products or manifestations of some mind substance.[13] On a broader point, this allows for the (in)famous flip of the classical metaphysical conception that essence precedes existence; the existence of the for-itself precedes its activity that constitutes essence.[14]

The main distinction that can be made here is that with Heidegger, the being of Dasein is defined by the meaning structure that it is thrown into, whereas with Sartre and Beauvoir, the being of the for-itself can only be constituted through the invention of projects and affirmation of the meaning structures that are encountered (through the lens of those projects). The difference can further be accounted for when it is seen that with Heidegger, in maintaining our terminology, "existence" and "essence" come together and at once. Dasein's "existence" *is* its "essence", thus, invention is not needed for the constitution of "essence" or world. But with Sartre and Beauvoir this invention is inevitable, this is why they espouse an ontological freedom and responsibility relating to the self. Action is inevitable and therefore there is a demand to not deny this inevitability – otherwise we would be in "bad faith" (*mauvaise-foi*). This demand is representative of a pseudo-ethical dimension in existentialism that does quite a bit of work towards a robust understanding of ethical conduct given these ontological parameters, but we will return to this once we can satisfactorily dispense with *Mitsein*.

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[13] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, trans. 2010 Routledge, (New York: Routledge Classics, 2010), 11.
[14] This view will be explored in greater detail in the Chapter Three.

Before we can do so, we must elucidate the mine-ness of Dasein's world in contrast with the for-itself. As we have already seen, 'mine-ness' is a product of Dasein's individuation through the un-substitutability of its possibilities. But without *Mitsein* those possibilities are not given, thereby leaving us with an imperative to create possibilities. This creative activity would lend itself to thinking that what I create is mine, but with Sartre and Beauvoir, this is not so. Creation is limited primarily by the other instead of (as with Heidegger) one's own death, meaning that the limitations of the being of the for-itself is not limited by its own ontological structure, but by the ontic beings that it encounters. These beings are wholly other. So, the for-itself cannot understand its possibilities as "mine" because they are always subject to being conditioned and restricted by *le regard* of an other. We can invent all we want, but ultimately what we invent will be subject to (our apprehension of the) judgement at the hands of an other. I project myself out such that *I am judged*. As such, *le regard* brings me to confront my ekstasis *as objectifiable*.

This judgment is never guaranteed, but the gaze of the other is nonetheless comprehended in such a way that it is affecting us *as though it were guaranteed*. Two main factors play into why this happens for Sartre: (1) an other escapes apprehension in such a way that we come to comprehend[15] their presence as capable of apprehending me (at first), and (2) we have an implicit understanding of a connection between our bodies and our subjectivity. Sartre explains that:

> The unreflective consciousness does not apprehend the *person* directly or as *its* object; the person is presented to consciousness *in so far as the person is an object for the Other*. This means that all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness but in that I have my foundation outside of myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the other.[16]

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[15] Comprehend: pre-reflective apprehension of something.
[16] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 349.

Thus, we can both comprehend an other as apprehending and comprehend them as *objectifying* our bodies. So, while it is always the subject who is providing the leg work, the interaction is nonetheless a *de facto* interaction between two for-itselfs since the other for-itself is comprehended as being another for-itself. So, while the interaction is technically one's subjective comprehension of it *as an interaction*, that is, the interaction is only an interaction insofar as I comprehend it as such, I still, despite any attempts at denying it, comprehend it as such. The other is presented as escaping my ability to nihilate it, my apprehension of the other will always fail because of their resistance to being anything in particular, therefore, the other is taken as other, as not mine. Anything that I attribute to them may as well be produced by them, thus "their" judgements aimed at me are (practically speaking) not mine.

In summary, the for-itself has an existence *distinguished* from its essence, unlike Dasein, and its world is not its own in the sense that its possibilities and facticity are only afforded to it through that which is other, whereas Dasein's possibilities are afforded to it through that which is deeply personal or subjective. With Heidegger, world is ontologically shared, but ontically "mine", whereas with Sartre and Beauvoir, world is not shared (at least initially) and is ontically "theirs". Since world is not shared, it is the for-itself's task to fill in the nothingness that occupies the space where Heidegger's world is supposed to be, but its attempts are at the mercy of others.[17] With the differences between the two accounts elucidated, we can now move to explaining why there are differences. Since Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* is in many ways a

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[17] Sartre's play "No Exit" (*Huis Clos*) puts this dynamic on display: this is what motivates the famous proclamation by one of the play's characters that "Hell is others" ("*L'enfer c'est les autres*"). We must create, but our creation is always judged, and we must bear responsibility for the creation and subsequent judgement regardless.

reaction to *Being and Time*, and since we are seeking to stick with Sartre, we will predominantly look at Sartre's own objection to *Mitsein* found in *Being and Nothingness*.

<center>Ontological Sharing is too Self Concerned</center>

There are two main objections that Sartre levels against *Mitsein* in *Being and Nothingness*. The first appears to be that the notion has no phenomenological justification, which seems accurate due to its ontological orientation, though it is doubtful that this is a fatal flaw.[18] If we say the notion that we come into a world that is always already shared is needed to *explain* the phenomenologically based notions of *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* – that *Mitsein* is the condition for the possibility of the world of Dasein – then the objection can be dealt with. And this does, in fact appear to be the case for *Mitsein*. However, Heidegger did not appear to be too concerned with characterizing the social encounter. Irene McMullin, in her book *Time and the Shared World: Heidegger on Social Relations*, supports this by saying that "Heidegger only provides an account of the conditions for the *possibility* of sociality – immersion in a shared world through which we understand self and others – he does not account for its *reality*."[19]

This may not necessarily be problematic, although it is worth noting that what Sartre is offering is an account of otherness that *does not need Mitsein*. We can explain sociality *and* have phenomenological justification. Such a result is compelling, and it appears to, in part, come down to the approach. One indication of this can be seen in *La Nausée,* which perhaps offers a phenomenological illustration of the degree to which one can depart from a meaning structure,

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[18] It does not appear to me that *Mitsein* (being-with) is a phenomenologically dependent notion because it is, at bottom, simply an ontological condition for the possibility of ontic possibilities. *Mitdasein*, (being-there-with) however, does appear to be a mode of being available to ontic encounters.

[19] Irene McMullin, *Time and the Shared World*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 63.

which does not appear to be a possibility for Heidegger. We can even say that this departure is phenomenologically justified if we take the novel to be (in some way) indicative of possible experience. The *de trop* that Roquentin confronts throughout the novel – which would stand for the confrontation with the pure in-itself – does not appear to be possible for Heidegger's Dasein, as even when something is *Vorhandenheit* (presence at hand) it maintains a status within a meaning structure and does not represent a break from it.[20] There is no confrontation with the "in-itself" of a hammer when it breaks for Heidegger, there is rather a confrontation with ontological structures, namely, it appears, one's *own* death. In *La Nausée* Sartre would have Roquentin confronting *the hammer* that presents itself despite its lack of a signifier. Roquentin's experiences with the *de trop* would not be possible in Heidegger's account as even in a breakdown of possibilities our attention is diverted away from the ontic thing and toward the ontological. Sartre, who was adamant about maintaining a philosophical focus on the "concrete", perhaps has Heidegger's diversion to the ontological in mind when he paints *Mitsein* as being too abstract.[21] With Heidegger we lose sight of the particularity of things as things as they always point us back to fundamental Being instead of staying with the concrete.

The abstract nature of *Mitsein* may not be enough to disregard it, however it does seem to fuel the second, and perhaps more challenging charge against Heidegger: *Mitsein* actually leaves Dasein too isolated and incapable of engaging with others in the way that the being-for-others requires. Since Dasein takes ownership (makes it "mine") of its world – because the possibilities

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[20] The closest we may be able to get to *de trop* with Heidegger is in the encounter with Earth in the work of art. See: *Origin of the Work of Art* (1950)

[21] When Sartre accuses Heidegger of maintaining a "bastard form of idealism" by saying that Heidegger's "flight outside of the self, as an *a priori* structure of being, isolates himself as surely as the Kantian reflection on the *a priori* conditions of our experience" (BN, 336), I take him to be arguing against Heidegger on the grounds of being too far removed from the concrete (i.e. too abstract).

afforded Dasein, *through Mitsein,* are its possibilities – two Dasein's may share a world, but they do not share what concerns them (their "comportment"). Things always *concern me*, but only in a particular way. It is because of this that Sartre says that *Mitsein* "does not contain the power of becoming *that* Other", since it is impossible for me to comprehend the other's perspective, thereby eliminating any possibility for a recognition of myself as being an object for the other.[22] Heidegger leaves us with no possibility of imagining "what it is like" to be an other. There is only the guarantee that the possibilities of world are shared, but there is nothing to indicate how the other is concerned with those possibilities.

Even in an inauthentic mode, "Dasein is concerned in a particular way about its being to which it is related in the mode of average everydayness, if only in the mode of fleeing *from* it and of forgetting *it.*"[23] So there is no possibility of *not* being concerned, and by extension, no possibility of Dasein not being wrapped up in a world that is primarily "mine". An encounter with an other will not offer any confrontation with facticity as the other is already wrapped up in the meaning structure of Dasein's world, and therefore cannot come from the outside, as it were. Dasein is therefore too atomized in its being to enable the kind of concrete interaction with the other that the phenomenology of *le regard* seems to give viability to; if we are to give weight to the phenomenology of *le regard* then we must see Heidegger's understanding of the other as being at odds with this phenomenon.[24]

To reiterate, the issues that we see here with Heidegger are in relation to the tendency that his philosophy has of understanding everything in reference to either the Self of Dasein or to

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[22] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 334.
[23] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 43.
[24] Hannah Arendt has a similar critique in her article "What is Existential Philosophy?". She says that "the concept of Self [the "who" of Dasein] is a concept of man that leaves the individual existing independent of humanity and representative of no one but himself" (pg. 181).

Ontological Being which is never immediately available (though it makes a covert presence in ontic being). *Le regard* has us looking for a concrete interaction with the other. That is, we need the other to not refer us outside the interaction itself. Heidegger blunts the impact of these interactions by understanding them as not having their own ground, as being that which is *concealing* the Being that enables the concealing. The ground (which itself is groundless) is not available *on the surface*, and so what we encounter with the other is not their otherness, but the concealment of Being, which would mean, if we remain in accord with *Mitsein*, that the other is not taken as other, but simply as one that we share Being with, whose presence is always implied. There is no intrusive character in the interaction with the other such that their subjectivity could be confronted; only their non-unique shared relationship to Being is made available.

<div align="center">A Causa Sui Problem</div>

As is so often the case in philosophy, Sartre makes this critique whilst being in danger of committing the exact opposite problem: in emphasizing the uniqueness of *an* other, it can be argued that Sartre deprives us of an ability to satisfactorily ground the encounter with phenomena, including with *le regard*. Without *Mitsein* the for-itself is thrown into a world utterly devoid of meaning and so it must invent it.[25] As we have seen, the other serves as a limitation to that invention, but what is ambiguous is how this invention gets going. How does the for-itself *become* from a place of nothingness (how do we get something from nothing)?[26]

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[25] By 'meaning' I mean any kind of determination, signifier, sign, concept, value, etc.
[26] We have to be careful in answering this question because the for-itself is never creating meaning by *assigning it*, rather it is derived from a *nihilation*. In the nihilation of the in-itself, a phenomenon comes to be understood in terms of everything that it is not, that is, the particularity of a phenomenon is apprehended as such because it is exactly *not* something else. What this means is that sensory input in seeing a chair does not *give* us the concept 'chair', the phenomenon is derived from what it is *not* giving us, which allows our imagining capacities to

<div align="center">16</div>

The answer lies with projects. For Sartre and Beauvoir, we create projects for ourselves and it is in relation to these projects that the experienced world acquires meaning (we can see this in *La Nausée* if we stipulate that Roquentin has no project, and therefore is confronting the meaninglessness of things). All determinations, values, and significations are lifted off of things as his existential project progressively withers away. The feeling of *nausée* abates only at the end of the book when it is decided that he will produce artistic works. The question though is how this creation gets off the ground, so to speak.

In the section of *Being and Nothingness* titled "Existential Psychoanalysis" and in Beauvoir's work *Ethics of Ambiguity*, there are discussions of "original projects" that gesture at how projects generate. Each assert that the for-itself must necessarily be a "lack of being" because otherwise, there would be no becoming, only static and unmoved being – if the for-itself were full being then there would be no room for consciousness, and we would be reduced to an in-itself (hence why Beauvoir says that one must make "himself a lack of being so that there might be being").[27] And since desire is a lack, the for-itself must have a fundamental desire for being. Sartre elucidates the "original project" in succinct fashion when he says:

> Fundamentally man is *the desire to be*, and the existence of this desire is not to be established by an empirical induction; it is the result of an *a priori* description of the being of the for-itself, since desire is a lack and since the for-itself is the being which is to itself its own lack of being.[28]

So, the "original project" we are looking for appears to be: I must move towards being in general. This cannot be satisfactory since this is not the product of our own freedom, but only the

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fill in the gaps. The imagination, for Sartre, is a manifestation of knowledge, memory, and perception all rolled into one process by which the for-itself, through purely intentional acts of consciousness, experiences the world.

[27] Simone De Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, (New York: Carol Publishing, 1991), 34.

[28] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 722.

product of the structure of being-for-itself. While this structure is also what allows for freedom, it does not seem appropriate to be calling this a "project", which raises a further question of how we go from the desire to be to a specific project. We appear to lack the resources needed for a *particular* project to be invented where all we have is the simple desire to be *anything at all*. What sense could be made of the world without the particular project? It is supposed to filter the world thereby allowing meaning to be attained, and so without a particular project, we have no direction in invention.

The presupposition here is that no particular project could be invented *without particularity to begin with*. Facticity, and therefore the meanings of our projects, cannot get off the ground if it is the case that we are to invent from a position of desire to be. This is because we could hardly identify anything in particular, let alone identify a particular goal in mind. Even if project generation is an aesthetic process by which we gravitate towards a certain appealing form of being – appealing because of how it looks or how it feels – we do not have the means to assign any kinds of aesthetic values according to this account. I cannot get from a desire to be to the desire to be a baseball player without some meaning being given in my experience of (perhaps) watching baseball as a child.

It may be worth noting that this situation is one that *Mitsein* is fully capable of handling. But as we have already seen, *Mitsein* is incompatible with the phenomenology of *le regard*. The question then becomes: is this philosophy of projects needed for *le regard*? At minimum it appears that *this* philosophy of projects is in need of some adjustment if we are to continue with our analysis of the existentialist understanding of the other. However, it seems doubtful that we could do away with projects. As noted, facticity, which *le regard* is chiefly concerned with, is incapable of being understood adequately without a project through which we can derive

meaning. The other cannot serve as a limitation on my possibilities if those possibilities are not made available through a project, and there does not seem to be a satisfactory alternative to projects that would maintain our basic structure. So, what are our options?

One idea is to turn to Levinas and give a larger role to the other in the formation of the for-itself. Levinas, Sartre, and Beauvoir all share some significant similarities, one of which is particularly useful for our purposes: the idea that the presence of Being is uncomfortable. For Levinas, this manifests as the "*il y a*" (there is). This, similar to the in-itself, is the anonymous presence of *things*, things that escape our ability to understand or even name them. They escape apprehension but they are still *there*, foreboding and invasive. Sartre and Beauvoir escape this with invention, which is fundamentally a self-creation. But it is this self-creation which we are taking issue with, and it may be helpful to allow some elements of Levinasian thought into this escape by looking at the role the other plays. For Levinas, it is with the other that we find solace, for the other invites us away from being. Levinas says that "The face [of the other] is signification, and signification without context", which means that it is through the other that meaning "all by itself" is encountered.[29] The meaning of most things is always in relation to other things, that is, until one comes into a relationship with the other where meaning *qua* meaning is encountered. For Levinas, this can probably be characterized as an encounter with meaning in the form of ethics, where ethics and meaning are essentially understood in the same way. The other is meaningful because the other *is meaning* by virtue of its transcendence from being, and it is this transcendence which calls out for preservation (which is basically his understanding of the primordial ethical obligation). For our purposes however, it may be

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[29] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. 1985), 86.

permissible to associate meaning with the other, not as ethics, but as the movement *to* self-being

(the movement away from a lack-of-being). Provisionally, we would come to emulate others

around us because it is only through others that we could ever attain transcendence. Truly

attaining this would be impossible because we cannot *become* the other, but, at least initially, we

may strive to. The issue, however, is that we would still have no basis for the comprehension of

the other as other to begin with. This is because a comprehension requires a project, and here, a

project can only be derived from the other, but the only way that can be derived is if there is a

comprehension of the other, which we cannot have because we do not have a project. The other

would be needed for the possibility of comprehending the other as other, which is a

contradiction.

An option in resolving this contradiction is to say that meaning *can* be given in

appearances in certain forms. One small instance of this can be found in *La Nausée* when

Roquentin is speaking of a "*petit sens*":

> Yet it was there, expectant, it resembled a gaze. It was there, on the trunk of the chestnut
> tree... it was *the* chestnut tree. You could have sworn that things were thoughts which
> stopped half way, which forgot themselves, which forgot what they had wanted to think
> and which stayed like that, swaying to and fro, with a funny ***little meaning (sense)*** [my
> emphasis] which went beyond them.[30] That little meaning annoyed me: I *could not*
> understand it, even if I stayed leaning against the gate for a hundred and seven years; I
> had learned everything I could know about existence.[31]

No additional significance or attention, as far as I can tell, was given by either Sartre or Beauvoir

towards this passage, let alone to a "*petit sens*". For our purposes, this offers an avenue towards

introducing meaning being *given*, but not in a deterministic way. A "little meaning" acts,

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[30] In French: "Les choses, on aurait dit des pensées qui s'arrêtaient en route, qui s'oubliaient, qui
oubliaient ce qu'elles avaient voulu penser et qui restaient comme ça ballottantes, avec un drôle
de **petit sens** qui les dépassait."
[31] Special thanks to Dr. Raffoul for directing me towards this passage. Sartre, *Nausea*, trans.
Robert Baldick, (New York: Penguin, 2000), 193.

basically, as a little push towards some preference in a desire to be. One way of interpreting this is to say that this "*petit sens*" presents itself out of not just the *fact of things* (that there are things), but also that we are there, falling under their "gaze". Interestingly, the same can be said of the other, though this is significant because *petit sens* seemingly does not necessitate recognition of another's transcendence, all that is being stipulated here is that one's very existence besides things is sufficient to produce meaning (but only a small one).

What could work for our purposes is this: we confront facticity at an ontological level through the imposing presence of *things* (*de trop*), which serves to inform us, through a "*petit sens*", of our success in the original project to become a being in-itself – we will inevitably be shown to be unsuccessful – which prompts us to look to that which does not present itself as a thing (or not as much of a thing) and is therefore considered to be "like me", the other. From here, we can say that the other is taken *as other*. Additionally, we can also say that the desire for being gains particularity once it is impressed on us that *we are not things* by things. Essentially, we would keep trying to be certain things until we finally receive positive affirmation from an other, which is a process that would only be reinforced if we put this in conjunction with the alternative outlook provided above.

This allows for the foundation of a (I think) thoroughly plausible account of consciousness whereby we undergo a process of exculpation at an existential level.[32] This has the funny consequence of providing us with an ontology wherein we start out trying to be a thing, fail, and then essentially lower our standards by trying to be something that, in fact, can be reinforcing (the other). But it also gestures towards a non-anthropocentric understanding of

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[32] In other words, the *petite sens* normatively conditions us into a position of being able to comprehend an other as other, as another for-itself.

empathy. If, at some level, we aim at being like things and like non-human beings – in other words, if a lack of being tends to aim at things that have being (or appear to not have none) – then there could conceivably be an avenue for the for-itself to personify its surroundings and care for them, not by virtue of their meaning in the context of its projects, but by virtue of the thing's "*petit sens*".

The discussion provided above will not be considered crucial to the exploration of ethics beyond addressing a concern one may have with the ontological picture that we are utilizing. What use would a discussion of ethics have if we cannot get on board with the characterization of the (human) condition provided? The hope is that we are now better suited to continue with this picture without dismissing it outright.

Inventing Without Conflict

Inclusion of the *petit sens* would not appear to cause any immediate contradictions in the existentialist ontology, though too much attention to the *petit sens* begins to sound like bad faith in the sense that bad faith can be characterized as a preoccupation with the immediate. In the following chapter, we will explore bad faith in more detail, though not in the context of the *petit sens*. The main reason for this is that the *petit sens* appears to take us away from the pressing concern in our adoption of *le regard*. When Sartre says that "one must either transcend the Other or allow oneself to be transcended by him…The essences of the relations between consciousnesses is not *Mitsein*; it is conflict", we see that the objectifying/objectified oscillation of two for-itselfs leaves us in an uncomfortable situation.

We found that the notion of *Mitsein* cannot be adopted because we would not be able to enter into an impactful relationship with others in the way that the phenomenologically supported notion of *le regard* would suggest. But, this impactful relationship leaves us either

objectifying the other or being objectified; either trapped in our facticity or trapping another in theirs. As such, the relationship with an other in the face-to-face leaves us in bad faith, as we cannot escape reducing ourselves or an other to something that ontologically speaking we or they cannot be. We are left incapable of properly inventing *with* an other, only in spite of them, when under their gaze.

This inability may seem insignificant, after all, why do we need to invent with others? In fact, would it not be beneficial to simply avoid others altogether? There are two main things that make *le regard* an important function for the for-itself that would prove detrimental or unhealthy if neglected. On the one hand, given that projects are a function of a primal desire to be, a confrontation with facticity is paramount as it is only in this way that we can gain any perspective on the success of our projects. On the other, assuming an other's perspective (basically, empathy) and deriving possible other meanings for our actions is a confrontation with contingency. So here we have two fundamental functions of operation for the for-itself: assessing our actions in terms of what we want as well as apprehending possible meanings of our actions. While we cannot say that everyone has full capacity for both – it may be permissible to say that certain psychological disorders have manifestations of the absence of one or both – it can be said that each are critical in making determinations about reality, values, and future desires and actions. In social isolation, such determinations may be difficult to produce and would offer its own kind of limitation upon how the for-itself projects. In short, the solipsism that such an attitude cultivates is unhealthy, in addition to being untenable for an ethics, or even a solid politics.

But the face-to-face does us few favors in the context of the community, as meaningful discussions are distracted by the confrontation with facticity: how can there be growth past

partisan allegiance or bigotry if at each moment in political or ethical discourse one is reduced to their facticity as, say, a racist Democrat or a selfish member of the corporate elite? We have established that we must invent and in what setting we find that we must do so, now we must establish how.

Chapter Two: Existentialist Ethics – Transcending *Le Regard*

With the assertion that we come into relation with others without a pre-established sharing of the world, we find that there is a radical division between self and other, so a question of community becomes pertinent for us. We will see that the for-itself, despite no implied sharing, must concern itself with others, which bears on the imperative for invention. As for this imperative, we have established *that* we must invent, but our question now becomes: *how* is one to invent? We will see that the primary concern is in "authenticity", though it is crucial that in asserting that we must invent we also avoid losing sight of the publicity of the for-itself, as this means that our invention is available to others and has concrete impacts on the social community in which one is situated. In short, the question of "how" drives us to an exploration of an *ambiguous* ethics (hence the title of Simone De Beauvoir's book *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (*Pour une Morale de l'ambiguïté*)); one where, in action, the fundamental contingency of the for-itself is always kept in mind.[33] The guiding question here may be misleading for our purposes as we cannot be utilizing some guiding logic or principle if one is to *invent*, properly speaking. Because invention must be the grounding of our ethics, it would be inappropriate to suggest that the grounding would be grounded in something external to the inventor; that is, in accordance with some ethical principle or "law". Notions such as "good" must themselves be invented, so there cannot be an *a priori* grounding for a notion to dictate invention.[34] Rather, any notion of the good can only be *encountered*, and even then, it can only be taken as a product of invention.

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[33] It is the case here that *all* actions must have ethical considerations since all action is inventive for Beauvoir and Sartre.

[34] Since "existence precedes essence" no essential notion can dictate the movement from bare existence to essence.

Given the fundamental separation of the for-itself and the other it would be easy for us to simply fall into asserting that all ethics is personal, that is, subjective. However, to justifiably make such an assertion, we would have to say that each person's ontological structure is different and specific to individuals. We are clearly not saying this since *le regard* requires the same structure for each party – an other's gaze would have no impact if it were the case that that other was incommensurate with my fundamental ambiguity, and conversely there would be no possibility of empathy. Such a point would motivate Beauvoir to say that "[a]n ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all."[35] That which one can say regarding ethics can also be said by all others insofar as what is said is consistent with the existentialist ontology. Perhaps it may appear that we have contradicted ourselves given our rejection of *Mitsein*. But saying that one's being is *not* shared is simply saying that one's possibilities do not imply the presence of others. The ontological status of the other can be attributed *in the encounter*. So, since it is the case that one cannot limit one's considerations to oneself alone, one must be understood in the context of a social relation, though the encounter of *le regard* offers a difficulty.

The oscillation between for-itself and in-itself in the face of the other leaves the for-itself in a precarious position to be reliably handling those difficult questions of ethical conduct with others. It certainly seems easy for the for-itself to slip into refusing an other the recognition of their fundamental ambiguity, and the same can be said of an other toward the for-itself in question. The necessity of bringing the for-itself and the other into a position where each can be given appropriate consideration in invention leaves us with a problem that is twofold: on one

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[35] Simone De Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 18.

hand, we must articulate an answer to the question of "how" without betraying the fundamental ontology of the for-itself, and on the other hand, we must show that this answer is applicable to all for-itslef's and is therefore capable of handling situations where multiple individuals are concerned. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a notion that is integral for effectively moving beyond the face-to-face: authenticity.

Authenticity is a notion that Sartre apparently borrowed from Heidegger, though Sartre's use of the notion is slightly different owing to the differing ontologies of the self, and as a result, authenticity demands different things for Sartre and for Heidegger. A brief comparative exploration of authenticity will help us approach a more robust understanding of the "how" of invention by highlighting the key aspects of Sartre and Beauvoir's ontology that lend themselves to an emphasis on responsibility in particular. We will see that, ultimately, this emphasis creates a demand for active engagement with others and with one's situation, in other words, authenticity demands moving away from solipsistic or individualist focuses; it demands moving away from bad faith, or inauthenticity.

<div align="center">Ownership versus Responsibility</div>

The meaning structure available to Dasein is constituted in the instrumental comportment one has in the relation to Dasein's possibilities. Thus, insofar as the "'essence' ["Wesen"] of this being lies in its to be"[36], that is, if Dasein's being is defined in terms of its becoming, it is crucial for Dasein to concern itself with these possibilities, so as to, basically, be "its own"[37] becoming. This taking up of ownership is what Heidegger refers to as "authenticity". The notion is profound: there are possibilities available to us, and to fall passive in the realization of a

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[36] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 41.
[37] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 11.

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possibility is to essentially forfeit and be resigned to one's fate. With Heidegger there does not appear to be any obligation to it, but to perform inauthentically *and* to pretend as if no possibilities have been neglected seems disingenuous to say the least. As such, especially in the context of an investigation of human being, which Heidegger is attempting to conduct in *Being and Time*, authenticity takes on an ethical characteristic.

*In*authenticity for Heidegger and "bad faith" for Sartre (*mauvaise foi*) appear to be roughly equivalent in the sense that, for each, it is a denial or fleeing from possibilities, or as Sartre articulates it in *Being and Nothingness*, displaying an attitude of the "No".[38] For each of these ontologies, the task of the self is to, essentially, stay true to that ontology. Simply put, we can think of authenticity as being a kind of logical consistency. If one acts in accordance with one's ontological structure, then one can be said to be authentic. As we have seen though, the ontological structures differ beyond this point. The implicit sharing and the mine-ness of Dasein's world, as we have seen, means that the judgment of others has a limited impact in Dasein's relation to world. Our claim is that *Mitsein* has the consequence of always already implying alterity, thus blunting the impact of what has to be an impactful confrontation. But this rejection has the consequence of leaving the self in need of a meaning structure, which can only be produced through itself. By rejecting *Mitsein*, we, in effect, leave the self with no *given* meaning structure, and it is our position that it has to be a projection of a for-itself instead.

But because it is a projection *out* – the positing of meaning manifests through action – it is public and liable to judgment. Since possibilities are only made available to the for-itself through a process that is conditioned through the meaning structure that we project, and that meaning structure is conditioned by the other, it follows that it is impossible for the for-itself to

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[38] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 87.

take *ownership* because our possibilities are not, strictly speaking, *ours*. They are conditioned by a meaning structure that is publicly available and is, in turn, conditioned by judgment. However, since the meaning structure is not *determined* by judgment, that is, since it is nonetheless a projection that can only have its basis in the for-itself's freedom, we are always *responsible*. Our meaning structure is not given, only relations to things are[39], and they themselves cannot (at least totally) offer a determinate meaning. As such, we are responsible for what we do with, to, or about those relations.

This responsibility is what is rejected in the attitude of the No. In terms of the existentialist ontology, the attitude of the No, as Sartre says, is an attitude where "instead of directing its negation outward [it] turns it toward itself."[40] Instead of casting oneself out past facticity, one stays in the present; one restricts one's purview to the meaning of the immediate. Possibilities then can only be available too late, and the for-itself then falls passive to their environment. The woman on the date or the waiter at the café maintains their bad faith by not seeing beyond the surface, beyond what is "given", as such, they cannot apprehend their ambiguous structure.[41] The waiter can only see himself as a waiter, and the woman can only see her date as charming and without ulterior motives. In such a mode, the self and the world it is situated in is reduced to an in-itself; in effect, one's project is negated in favor of the given.[42] In "bad faith", responsibility is neglected as the for-itself loses sight of its projection out. Facticity is reduced from an artificial product of one's own actions to something that simply *is*. Action

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[39] And, tentatively, *petite sens.*
[40] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 87.
[41] I am alluding to two of the examples provided by Sartre in the second section of his chapter on Bad Faith in *Being and Nothingness*.
[42] There is an interesting parallel with psychoanalysis in that there is an underlying desire (the difference being that for us, it has to be a project) that the self deludes itself away from; the self loses sight of its operation in the attention to the present.

becomes reaction. As such, it can be said that an attention to responsibility, which we are taking to be authentic, requires an expansion of perspective.

Much of the difficulty here is in overcoming facticity. The "faith" of bad faith is in a trust that what is given is true as one (lazily) thinks that facticity tells enough of the story; as Sartre says, "One *puts oneself* in bad faith as one goes to sleep and one is in bad faith as one dreams."[43] Our actions suggest something fundamentally different than that which enabled those actions in the first place, especially when one is in the mode of bad faith. Our actions tend to suggest that we, in fact, *are* something in particular; as if a script had already been written dictating what I am, what I will do, and even what I eventually will do. But this ignores the foundations for the possibility of action at all.

As we have seen, Sartre and Beauvoir emphasize that in order to become, one must first be a "lack of being". As such, we can never embody our facticity, there can be no coincidence with facticity since the for-itself must be, at bottom, a projected nothingness. Action requires invention which requires a project which is always an effort towards something ontologically impossible, that is, being. So, the first trick for authenticity then is to wake up, as it were. To do so is to recognize the contingency that allows for action at all and to not fall passive to the superficiality of the given. Sustaining this means to keep in mind that no action can bring one to attain the status of an in-itself despite the concreteness of our actions. We "are" our actions, and at the same time cannot be reduced to them. There is no way out of it, invention will always constitute something that is fundamentally antithetical to the inventor, the nothingness of the for-itself is essentially trapped in facticity with no possibility of truly *being* its facticity – hence

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[43] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 113.

Sartre's famous claim that we are "condemned to be free."[44] With such a realization though, it becomes clear that the being of the for-itself can only be understood in terms of its becoming, in other words (Beauvoir's words), "[one] can coincide with himself only by agreeing never to rejoin himself."[45]

Engagement before Marriage

The paradoxical relationship between facticity and projection can be extrapolated into a paradoxical relationship between the public and the personal, and further, a relationship between the political and the politician (political actor). This is permitted by virtue of what public facticity and individuated projection mean in the context of the communal. All actions have political ramifications: this is displayed in Sartre's example of marriage in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (*L'existentialisme est un humanisme*) where the act of marriage effectively affirms the institution of marriage.[46] In a superficial sense, this should not be controversial; my actions serve to support or discourage the normalcy of those actions, as seen in the evident relationship between normalcy and frequency of participation. What is not established for us though is what this means for the for-itself's responsibility. Does, for example, getting married make me responsible only for *my* action, or do I then have to concern myself with the institution of marriage in general? The answer, annoyingly, has to be: "it depends".

To stay with the example, 20 years ago marriage from the perspective of the LGBTQ+ community would have invited contentious reflections on the institution of marriage. From this perspective, what would the act of getting married have meant? What would I have been responsible for in this context? The answers are not totally clear, though we can see that the

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[44] Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism", 41.
[45] Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 33.
[46] Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism", 37.

drastic acquiescence on the part of those opposed to non-heterosexual marriage, to the point that the practice has attained widespread acceptance, points to an interesting dynamic at play. It is not simply a matter of the frequency or popularity of an action that drives our values (that is clear here since non-heterosexual marriage quickly gained acceptance while it was largely illegal), sometimes (or perhaps most times), the popularity is only enabled in the questioning and confrontation with different perspectives and different values. As the voices of the LGBTQ+ community became more vocal, more public, it is plausible that there was an *engagement* with their perspective that informed the meaning of marriage. In existentialist terms, taking responsibility for the affirmation of the institution of marriage must mean, at the very least, being cognizant of the repercussions. Prior to the universal legalization of non-heterosexual marriage in the United States, affirmation of the institution of marriage meant going against the wishes of the LGBTQ+ community. If one was to be authentic, this would have required active consideration of the community's perspective.

Conversely though, responsibility can be restricted to individual considerations; there are situations where one does not need to look beyond his/her own perspective. Does my decision to not smoke cigarettes require consideration of those working for cigarette companies? It is likely they would prefer to have a source of revenue from me willingly inflicting damage on my lungs with their product than not. In this instance though, the meaning of my action is relatively obvious and immediate given public consciousness: I am choosing to avoid something that is un-controversially unhealthy. Insofar as this is consistent with my project and I have been sufficiently informed of the effects of smoking, I can feel safe in not extending my consideration beyond saying "no thank you" when offered a cigarette. It can be assumed to be such a mundane action that any repercussions are so negligible as to not merit a moment's thought. If we accept

this, it appears that one's considerations in the taking up of responsibility would expand in focus only when the meanings of my action or the repercussions for it are not totally clear or have the capacity for not being so. Making such a determination may, conceivably, be difficult in a variety of situations, and this is why active engagement is encouraged in this philosophy.

"Engagement" should be thought of as the standard that maintains authenticity in the context of a collective. In fact, it can be thought of as an integral component of what is meant by "authenticity". As we have seen, there is an element of universality in the ontology of the for-itself; no ontology is unique to one for-itself. What this means then is that what confronts one has the capacity for confronting another in a similar way. An existential threat, an ethical question, or a political conflict (this should not be taken as an exhaustive list) all have the capacity for being dealt with in a way that brings different perspectives and different levels of applicability onto the same plane of relation. Engagement, for our purposes, is that activity that has the explicit aim of realizing this capacity. With the example of marriage, there were drastically different perspectives at play, and engagement (plausibly) is what brought them into relation such that the issue could be handled collaboratively. With the example of cigarette smoking, there is very good reason to suppose that there is no relevant difference in perspective on the matter of *my* smoking, thus, engagement is not necessitated to much of a degree, if any. Thus, we see that authenticity via taking responsibility, *in some situations* (maybe even most), requires engagement.

In *Anti-Semite and Jew,* Sartre says that "there are some people who are attracted by the durability of a stone. They wish to be massive and impenetrable; they wish not to change."[47] It may be appropriate to say that as far as bad faith goes, this is as bad as it can get. And such an attitude is indeed a faith according to Sartre, as seen when he says "The anti-Semite has chosen hate because hate is a faith; at the outset he has chosen to devalue words and reasons. How entirely at ease he feels as a result."[48] The hatred of an entire group of people, for Sartre, amounts to nothing more than a weakness; where one gives in to the visceral reactions of a tormented soul in search of comfort in their given-ness. There is little sympathy for such an attitude under our model, but the (all too common) existence of such people presents a serious difficulty that needs to be dealt with. If my responsibility requires consideration of hatemongers, if my actions impact bigots, to what extent should their perspective be a matter of consideration? Given their placement in a communal nexus, considerations of the community would include them, and if we are not careful, their perspective will be given validation.

The first thing to point out is that consideration is not acceptance, and in fact, outright acceptance of an other's perspective would appear to be its own kind of bad faith anyway, as one would have reduced oneself to the other's image of them or at least would have deferred judgment so as to relinquish one's freedom. The main difficulty is in a situation where, say, we find that the legalization of non-heterosexual marriage impacts individuals with homophobic views to a significant extent. Should a transman consider the perspective of the homophobe in his decision to marry? When an action of affirming an ethic of tolerance comes in the form of

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[47] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker, (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 18-19.
[48] Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 19.

allowing a white-supremacist to give a lecture at a college campus, should we violate the ethic? In undermining hatred, one undermines the ethic, and in affirming the ethic, one creates an environment antithetical to the ethic.

Again, there are no clear answers that can be derived from the ontological conditions we have established, but there is something to be said about the authentic individual who considers the perspective of someone who deliberately refuses to understand their perspective in turn. No effective communication or reasoning can take place with that perspective, and as such, fundamental disagreement would be the only conclusion, as neither the authentic individual nor the bigot could have any reason for capitulation. The consideration would have to be limited as the bigot's perspective would itself be limited. What meaning could be derived from a perspective that does not extend beyond reactions? Given this, it appears that considerations would have to come down to what meaning one gives to an other that hates them. So long as this is coming from a place of authenticity, it is doubtful the hatred will be returned in equal measure, as the fundamental contingency of the bigot would be recognized. The transman could only consider the homophobe by offering scorn or pity, and the college event planners could have no reason to suspect that they would weaken the level of discourse on the college campus by only tolerating tolerance.

Ethicality of Ethics

As is usually the case in philosophical models, there are situations that prove awkward for the existentialist. This is especially the case when deliberating between two seemingly equally valid choices. The focus of the existentialist model is on the "how" of *being*, and not, as is typical of most ethical models, on actions in relation to the "good". The best our model can do in evaluating actions is in reminding us of our ontological condition, and the best it can do in

prescribing what one ought to do appears to be to simply choose.[49] One may be quick to

disregard this model given that it cannot offer much guidance on defining a morally "good"

action, but it is worth asking if this is necessarily what we want out of an ethics. Never mind the

view that a universally applicable understanding of the good is impossible or even a fiction,

regarding applied ethics, what we seem to really want out of a model is not a way of dictating

actions, but of evaluating them, especially from a retroactive perspective.[50] With this, we can be

more specific about a central deficiency of our model. Existentialism can give an evaluation of

responsibility, it cannot give one for *culpability*. But the model's deficiency produces the

essential optimism of the existentialist: the model itself gives us no avenue for assigning values

(giving an e-value-ation), but that does not mean that there is no avenue for it because there is

room for *us* to be that avenue. In this way, ethics is the primary concern of the for-itself, the for-

itself is the primary concern of existentialism.

       Existentialism is an ontological model that does not preclude applied ethics insofar as the

ethics being applied do not claim to have the capacity for universal application. Even if the

imperative or edict devised has universal acceptance, even if the definition of "good" is adopted

by all, the existentialist ontology demands we leave open the possibility for our ethics to become

something different. Existentialism can only offer what François Raffoul identifies as a

"philosophical reflection on the meaning of ethics as such, on the ethicality of ethics."[51] Here we

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[49] An example of this can be found in "Existentialism is a Humanism" where Sartre is addressing
the young boy who must choose between going to fight or staying with his sick mother. His
prescription is: "You're free, choose, that is, invent" (Essays in Existentialism, (New York:
Citadel Press, 1993), 45).

[50] If it is not an explicit retroactive analysis, then it is an analysis conducted that acts *as if* it is
retroactive.

[51] François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
2010), 1.

can offer a broad reflection on the overall topic of this project. A relationship to an other begins and ends with facticity – on both ends of an interaction or encounter there is meaning that has been produced – but in between we find freedom, we find invention, we find ethics.[52] The primary insight with existentialism is that if we divert focus away from the "between", as many ethical theories do, we end up losing sight of that which enables the beginning and the end of the interaction; we reduce the self to a substance or a product.

But there is more to be said about invention. We should see at this point that invention demands authenticity, and that a comprehensive understanding of authenticity should leave us with three main requirements in action: (1) the maintenance of an understanding of one's ambiguous position – even in the process of becoming – (2) an understanding that all that are capable of pursuing projects are ambiguous and cannot not be reduced to their actions, and (3) a taking up responsibility for one's actions, which requires certain levels of engagement depending on the action and the circumstances. Engagement has only loosely been defined, and for good

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[52] This contrasts with another notable philosophy that was largely developed in France, that of Emmanuel Levinas. With his thought, the encounter itself is ethical in that it produces a call for preservation in the face of the other's infinite possibility, which we are responsible for. It is only after this encounter (in the face of the third) that we reduce the other to something that can be signified (by virtue of a political compromise we make to accommodate all), therefore leaving us susceptible to forgetting the responsibility. This is an intriguing alternative perspective – and might have served me well in the rejection of *Mitsein* which grounds this project – though the reason I have preferred to explore the existentialist perspective is twofold, one philosophical the other personal. On the one hand, Levinas' philosophy puts the call for preservation in the position of being prior to reflection in seemingly the same position that Sartre situates the consciousness that comprehends existence, the "that" of relations. The establishment of the existence of the relation must then come at the same time, or, even more problematically, after the relation is already established as ethical, which means the relation is established as or before the existence of the self and the other (and the third) is. Thus, for Levinas, existence itself must take on a characteristic that appears to require a metaphysics that is a step-too-far for an atheistic project (which is probably fine for Levinas given his apparent espousal of God's presence in the face). On the other hand, reading Sartre and Beauvoir proved more exciting to read for me, which made the task of producing a thesis a lot more enticing.

reason given the abstract focus of this chapter. We defined it in terms of responsibility, which, as we saw, had to be circumstantial, because engagement is only demanded through responsibility. The proceeding chapter will attempt to offer a more robust understanding of engagement by maintaining a more practical focus.

Chapter Three: Engaged Literature

The demand for attention to the collective raises the question of how this is to be accomplished. It is clear that the solipsism of the for-itself can only lead to bad faith, meaning that the for-itself must consider its actions in terms of the action's publicity: what effect am I having on the public space/environment? This involves attention to the repercussions of individual choices, but it also involves the more daunting task of seeking out the other's perspective. We know that this is required of us, but we have yet to discuss the best means of accomplishing engagement. Hence, this chapter will attempt to offer an exploration of the most proficient means of attending to the contingency of others in order to more authentically invent determinations, specifically on the moral and political challenges that confront all in the public space.

Turning to aesthetics has been a common tendency among philosophers that concern themselves with contingency[53], and Sartre and Beauvoir are certainly no exception. Their focus on aesthetics in general was thoroughly at odds with the "art for art's sake" approach, instead favoring a pragmatic understanding of art's role. The artform of choice for Sartre and Beauvoir was literature – specifically a politically charged sort of literature. This preference essentially comes down to literature's capacity to (1) allow for an *interactive* play of the imagination, and (2) offer a common ground in the form of a situation representative of current social and political realities.

We can identify each as a condition for the accomplishment of a type of literature that aims at moral and political invention: we will call it *engaged literature*. The two capacities mentioned above will be considered conditions for the accomplishment of engaged literature and will be called: (1) an *aesthetic imperative*, and (2) a *situational imperative*. These two

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[53] Specifically, I have in mind Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

imperatives will be the main subjects of exploration in this chapter going forward. There will be an explication of each, followed by an exploration and critique of the implications of the picture provided. Ultimately, I think what will be shown is that the existentialist analysis and utilization of engaged literature offers a perspective and direction that is worthy of consideration in confronting and responding to the moral and political challenges that we face today.

Imagining with Words

However, to fully apprehend these imperatives, specifically the aesthetic imperative, we must provide a brief analysis of Sartre's understanding of the imagination – what is so crucial about an interactive play of the *imagination*? When Sartre says that "imagination is not an empirical power added to consciousness, but is the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom" we see that the imagination plays an integral role, not just in consciousness, but in our apprehension of our contingency as well, and the subsequent capacity for projects to not simply be products of a deterministic set of circumstances.[54] In other words, our reliance on freedom is, at least in part, dependent on the imagination. For us to encourage the taking up of the task of invention, it appears that we must be comfortable saying that the imagination defines consciousness.

In the context of *What is Literature?* (1948), the reliance on the imagination is a resurfacing of some of Sartre's earlier, pre-*Being and Nothingness* ideas – specifically from *The Imaginary* (1940) – which were not as motivated by ontological investigations but were more focused on surpassing the psychological idealism pervasive in European philosophy at the time. But despite the absence of any explicit ontological-oriented investigation, there is certainly an assumption about our being[55] that presents a basis for an exploration of consciousness that

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[54] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 186.
[55] To what extent we want to consider this an ontological assumption or a metaphysical assumption is not worth speculating on here.

closely aligns with the assertion that existence precedes essence. I am referring to Sartre's (infamous) retooled understanding of the *Cogito.*

Essentially, the thought is that the "I think" of "I think, therefore I am" is the self-discovery that takes precedent over the "I am"; the "I think" serves as the condition for the possibility of the "I am" as it suggests that built into thought, there is an implicit self-awareness of the *fact that* I am thinking. This is why Sartre says (in the *Transcendence of the Ego*) that "The *Cogito* of Descartes and Husserl is an apprehension of fact."[56] Only with this self-awareness can we proceed to establish an "I think" or an "I am". His exploration of the imagination is the supposed carrying-out of the logical implications of this fundamental assertion: if consciousness is based in a self-awareness, then what follows is that "All consciousness is consciousness of something" (hence his attraction to Husserl's phenomenology), which further implies that the relation between thing and the consciousness of that thing can only be mediated and defined *by and through consciousness.*[57]

Thus, his writings on imaginative consciousness take aim at views that grant perception primacy in the dynamic of consciousness, since such views suppose that our apprehension of the thing is derived from the thing directly or from some impression of the thing. In *The Imaginary,* such views are guilty of something called the "illusion of immanence" wherein we take the experience of something to be a product of that thing being *reflected* in thought – which Thomas Flynn, in his book *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography*, associates with a "habit of thinking space and in terms of space" (thinking: "what is bridging the space?").[58] The elements of a chair (those

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[56] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), 43.
[57] Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 11.
[58] Flynn, *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 105.

legs, that cushion, etc.), for example, are not found *in* one's image of the chair, as if the chair left *its* impression *onto* consciousness. Rather, the apprehension of an object for Sartre is a synthetic constitution of images, which then constitute what we call "knowledge" primarily by the imagination becoming familiar with its exculpations (acquiring a "feel" for surroundings) through perception. It can be seen that perception is not offering any-*thing* to us, that is, it is not perception that is directing the apprehension of the "what" (the concept) of the object, such a *reflective* activity is rather a matter for the imagination.

The difference between perception and imagination appears to come down to which consciousness is unreflective and which consciousness is reflective. Perception is *unreflective*, as it deals with the positing of the "that" of an object, which only requires a bare confrontation with a relation.[59] From perception's determination of a "that", a "what" is derived in the form of a synthetic image which accompanies perception. A particularly illustrative example Sartre provides is with the perception of a cube: we apprehend a six-sided figure at the same time that

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[59] Notice: "positing". Sartre says that "Every consciousness posits its object, but each in its own way", which may seem like a contradiction when applied to the unreflective activity of perception – if it is unreflective, then how can it be *positing*? (12). A contradiction here would arise if we were to assume that unreflective activity is without self-direction, that is, it operates separate from the self. This does not appear to be the case with Sartre. He says of perception that it "posits its object as existing" (12), and that the "object of perception is constituted by an infinite multiplicity of determinations and possible relations" (16). This implies that the multiplicity of determinations and possible relations constitute, specifically, the comprehension of the object as existing. But the determinations and relations cannot be the object of perception, rather I think it should be said that *out of these possibilities* comes an unreflective positing of the *existence* of the object. Perception is a positing of the "that" out of a confrontation with the in-itself. It is through this positing that we, without thinking about it, have the capacity for, say, determining that a picture or a character on a movie screen does not *actually* exist, while at the same time determining that the television or the phone on which we are viewing those figures *do exist*. What is particularly valuable about this view, in my opinion, is that perception always has the capacity of *being wrong*, that is, we have not committed ourselves to saying that perception must capture the world as it is.

we only perceive at most four sides on account of the imaginary activity.[60] While there is some

reliance on what is given to perception, specifically the contingent relations of existence, the

imagination is given primacy in terms of determining the acquisition of knowledge and

conceptualizations.

What we see then is that an activity that relies entirely on knowledge and concepts like

writing and reading will ultimately be an *imaginative activity*, that is, an activity where

perception is not depended upon will rely mostly on imaginative constitutions. It is worth noting

that because the imagination plays such an integral role in perception, an activity like reading has

the capacity to act very similarly to perception, even though there is no active perception of what

is being described in a text. So, while a word is an "irreal" object – it does not constitute a

tangible existence in the same way a "real" object would – the apprehension of the word 'chair',

for example, conjures an experience of a chair in a similar fashion to an actual experience of a

chair. The only difference being that the imagined chair would not have that existing presence

that an actual chair would have. But since the imagined chair could only be capable of being

imagined by virtue of a previous experience with an actual chair, the imagined chair would still

aim at the concrete. Since it is the imagination that dictates the experience of things, images,

even without a corporeal presence of what is imagined, take on a palpable characteristic.

What then is a play of the imagination? It is a reflective activity, but one that pushes,

challenges, or even breaks the meaning structure we utilize in understanding the world by

leading us into different perspectives. Such an activity, it can be said, has the capacity for taking

us out of the complacency of understanding and into a confrontation with the being of the for-

itself; it allows us to recognize the contingency of our projects. Once significations lose rigidity,

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[60] Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 8.

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the contingency of existence becomes apparent.[61] Since the activity is one where the positing of the existence of objects is suspended, where we immerse ourselves in a "experience" of the imaginary, we can introduce a palpable derivation of experience (object of imagination) into different contexts, different perspectives, and different forms. Instead of a constructive synthesis of reality, as we see in the perception of an object, the play of the imagination in an artistic mode allows for our perspective to expand beyond our normal purview. When the positing of the existence of what is being experienced is suspended, this allows *new contexts* for our meaning structures. If a meaning structure fails in some way, its contingency can be realized, thereby pushing us into a position where there can be a reconsideration of our projects.

A play of the imagination can have the capacity then to influence our projects by forcing us to confront being in novel perspectives, perhaps much in the same way as Jaspers thinks "boundary situations" are constructive in "philosophizing"[62]. But as has been shown, it is difficult for this to happen in the face-to-face encounter as the objectifying/objectified oscillation eliminates the possibility of exploring another's perspective beyond our superficial apprehension of their judgments. We may be able to put ourselves in the other's shoes, but we are limited in gaining access to their imaginative process. For doing that, we must turn to the artist.

The Birth of the Author

The artist's thought can claim an intrinsic richness that an expression of that thought cannot match. The artist is not reducible to the art since the artist is not reducible to that which artists do. In short, *no* for-itself can *be* an artist. At best, the for-itself can project itself as an artist. But

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[61] The fact that is possible is, on its own, an indication that the imagination *must* have some degree of freedom. If there was none, it would be impossible for a meaning structure to be changed; everyone would be psychotic.

[62] I am borrowing this understanding from Hannah Arendt's article "What Is Existentialism?"

we can say that it can only *become* an artist with the artistic action. It may therefore be said that the author is born when she takes up the pen.

    Here we are not speaking of an author that is a subject; rather, it appears we are speaking of something that only *can* be a subject when *considered* as an author. As has been established, only facticity can offer any grounding for anything approximating a subject, that is, any "essence" we associate with the for-itself can only be identified when it is a constitutive part of the for-itself's past or bodily ekstasis. Even if facticity does play a determining role in the actions and thoughts of the for-itself, it will always seem a step too far to assert that facticity determines that one *must be an author*. At bottom, to reiterate, there is *some* capacity for a comprehension of alternative possibilities – there will always be contingency – insofar as this is the case, no action can be totally accounted for and subsumed under a noun. On this point we may find agreement with Roland Barthes. His essay, "The Death of the Author", maintains that we are appropriately moving past the author-as-subject form of critique wherein "The *explanation* [his emphasis] of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person", where the author remains static in his/her mode of existence.[63] But I contend that Barthes mistakes the "death" of the subject with that of the author: the author must remain with the text.

     If the "death" of the subject does not mean the "death" of action, if we can say that action is possible (not a mechanistic reaction via deterministic forces), then an action can be assigned an actor. Given the fluid nature of the for-itself and (perhaps to a lesser extent) the imagination, an actor will not persist past the action. *But the action remains*, that is, facticity

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[63] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Image-Music-Text*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 143.

persists despite the fact that the actor does not. It may be more helpful to say that the for-itself spawns an action *as an actor*, then projects itself forward, onto the next set of possibilities, whilst retaining or wearing, as it were, the action in the form of its facticity. If we are to maintain that the for-itself is responsible for its facticity and therefore the action – which the thesis on the fundamental comprehension of contingency would commit us to saying – then the for-itself can only be responsible as *that* actor. This would be akin to saying that I am responsible for drinking coffee this morning *as the coffee drinker this morning*. This is in contrast to saying that I am responsible as *me* ('because I did it') where I retain the essential consistency needed to reify a subject. "I" play a variety of roles throughout the day, and "I" am responsible for each of the actions committed in each of those roles. Who is responsible? The one with the facticity!

If we are to then consider the written work as the product of an action then we should be permitted to maintain the presence of the author since the author, as actor, is maintained in the facticity of a for-itself. This means we have to disagree with the following characterization of writing by Barthes:

> writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.[64]

Since reading implies a writer, insofar as an author's texts are read, the action of writing becomes cemented in the past, invariably a part of the facticity of the one responsible for the action – responsible *as the author*. The author jumps to life in the text, synonymous with its action, and although the for-itself cannot be equated by any means with the author, the reader has no basis to divorce the author from the for-itself that takes up responsibility for it.

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[64] Barthes, "The Death of the Author", 142.

It is on these grounds that we can say that a written work can be considered an expression *of one's imagination*, since the author is retained; since the text is not autonomous. And this can be applied to all works of art; the painter remains with the painting, film-maker with the film, sculptor with the sculpture, and so on. Owing to this, we can now justifiably consider the work of art as having the capacity to bring into communion two imaginations. The various artistic relationships will now be considered in terms of their efficacy in forcing one to confront and consider their situation, as required by a demand for authenticity.

<div align="center">The Aesthetic Imperative</div>

The relationship between aesthetics and ethics for Sartre and Beauvoir is perhaps most apparent in the aesthetic imperative. The primacy of the upsurge of freedom for the for-itself limits the extent to which any sort of ethical injunction can have any authority. As such, at the outset, any ethical appeal must be an appeal to this upsurge, otherwise the for-itself is directed away from its freedom and towards a delusion. The artist appears to be in a particularly advantageous position for this purpose as they can fulfill a responsibility for enabling *responsiveness* (such a capacity is not an explicitly emphasized, though it is certainly implied). Perhaps contrary to what one may think, neither Sartre nor Beauvoir appear to think that offering literal edicts or injunctions is *necessarily* problematic insofar as the critic's capacity for response is not negated through the unavailability or immunity of the artist. Much of the focus for Sartre in his collection of essays on literature, titled *What is Literature?,* is on a reciprocal, volitional entering into the relationship between writer and reader.

> [A]t the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative. For, since the one who writes recognizes by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his [or her] readers, and since the one who reads, by the mere fact of his opening the

book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, is an act of confidence in the freedom of men.[65]

The activity ends up being collaborative as well, as evidenced when he says that "the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his [or her] work."[66] In other words, the writer *needs* the reader for there to be anyone to write to. This is integral to the very possibility of the activity, at least, in the engaged sense. Of course, there are occasions in which the critic and the artist do not enter into a reciprocal or collaborative relationship. On these occasions we see the *assertion* of the artist's work that yields to no critiques or dissent on the work. The injunction that is not an appeal to the freedom of the for-itself is that injunction that is either literally imposed – through manipulation (via hatred, shame, etc.), societal repression, or force – or is simply reaffirmed to those that already agree (contemporary online political echo-chambers come to mind). Engagement then requires a sort of dialectical process.

Just as the for-itself must keep open the possibility of becoming, so must art. But where we find that literature has a significant capacity for enabling engagement over other forms is when we speak of the directness of the relationship between writer and reader. Sartre seems to think that other art-forms are much more concerned with the art itself, that is, the critic will be more concerned with the form of expression than with what is being expressed. In the example of a painting of a chair versus a chair in a novel, Sartre says that one is taken to something concrete with the novel whereas one largely remains within the painting (so to speak) in their experience of it.[67] While visual and audio art-forms can make reference to the concrete things they represent or allude to, what restricts them is the fact that they themselves are experienced

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[65] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, (New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 47.
[66] Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 43.
[67] Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 4.

concretely, as tangible or palpable, and so the activity is as much about that initial experience (or more) as it is about its possible extrapolated meanings. A novel, however, presents something more direct because it is not the words themselves we are primarily concerned with, but the imaginative activity that they produce.

Sartre says that the experience of reading is like the experience of using one's extremities: "We *feel* it spontaneously while going beyond it towards other ends, as we feel our hands and our feet".[68] So it appears that a novel is effective so long as the words on the page are barely a subject of reflection in the activity of reading; so long as the focus of the imaginative activity is not diverted back to the pages that prompt the activity in the first place. If we are to agree with this, then what literature effectively accomplishes is reducing the role of the mediation between artist and critic such that each come into as direct of a relationship as possible without being face-to-face. The contentious nature of the face-to-face leaves both parties with an impossible situation for engagement.

One problem with other art forms, then, is that there is a distance between artist and critic that only serves to alienate them from each other. The extent to which the success of a painting, for example, depends on the critic's experience of *their own imaginative activity* is not total, thus, the painting is not a total appeal to the critic's freedom, which only constitutes a separation (if slight) that the engaged artist must not have.

It should be clear by now that literature is, at least, a strong candidate for accomplishing the aesthetic imperative; literature appears to be a sufficiently direct appeal to the reader's freedom, which entails that the reader thereby comes into a confrontation with the writer's freedom as well. This communion of writer and reader can be thought of as the condition that

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[68] Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 12.

ties two for-itself's to a common space in which to confront each other; one that reduces the role of objectified or objectifying presence such that it is the differing perspectives that come into confrontation. Given the fundamentally ambiguous, contingent, and divided starting point of the existentialist ontology, finding a common space is essential for any effective collaboration, let alone in devising or even discussing an ethics. But to get to a point in which any authentic discussion on ethics can take place, there are some methodological concerns that need to be addressed: what is the writer supposed to write about? The situational imperative should move us a long way toward doing so.

<center>Situational Imperative</center>

It appears that for the reader the text needs to be taken somewhere past the reader's own peripheries. Beauvoir makes a distinction between "information" and "literature" that should prove helpful in displaying why. According to Mary Sirridge in her article "Philosophy in Beauvoir's Fiction", Beauvoir maintains that "All genuine literature, autobiography, novel, or essay, has in ineliminable role to play because it allows us to bridge our 'irreducible separation' from each other", whereas "information" is only successful in getting us to "annex" something into one's situation without any real confrontation with the situation itself, or even the writer.[69] In other words, for literature to be engaged, it must have the capacity to lead the reader into confronting both the writer and the situation. Otherwise, perhaps it can be said, one is prone to complacency in one's own subjectivity. Sirridge mentions that for Beauvoir, "[literature] allows us to pass beyond our separation from one another – precisely by remaining aware that we are separate, although we coinhabit a point of view", which suggests that in the absence of this kind

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[69] Mary Sirridge, "Philosophy in Beauvoir's Fiction", in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone De Beauvoir,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 130.

of activity, the thinking of a situation is limited to one's own experience of it, which leaves one prone to either dismissing or ignoring aspects of it, as well as increasing the likelihood that the other will not come into consideration.[70]

The goal then is to come into confrontation with an other's experience of that situation that constitutes one's co-inhabitance. Thus, for literature to be considered engaged, it must primarily involve the writer's experience. Beauvoir seems to think that this expression inevitably aims at the universal.

> In order for the artist to have a world to express he must first be situated in this world, oppressed and oppressing, resigned or rebellious, a man among men. But at the heart of his existence he finds the exigence which is common to all men; he must first will freedom within himself and universally; he must try to conquer it: in the light of this project situations are graded and reasons for acting are made manifest.[71]

The commonality of the primacy of freedom with all for-itself's grounds the capacity for the writer to have any effect at all; for the writer to reveal anything; to be empathized with. As such, the writer's expression, if genuine, will have the capacity for universal understanding. The "genuine" expression appears to be given a term by Sartre in *What is Literature?*:

> when a book presents befuddled thoughts which only have the appearance of being reasons before melting under our scrutiny and dwindling into the beatings of a heart, when the teaching that one can draw from it is radically different than what its author intended, the book is called a message.[72]

A "message" appears to be precisely the opposite of "information", and we can see that they serve as the preferred mode of aesthetic expression given Sartre's statement that "contemporary writers should be advised to deliver messages, that is, voluntarily to limit their writing to the involuntary expression of their souls."[73] Sartre is not attempting to convey some mysterious

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[70] Sirridge, "Philosophy in Beauvoir's Fiction", 131.
[71] Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 78.
[72] Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 21.
[73] Ibid.

metaphysics of the subject when he uses the term "souls" so much as he is advocating for a style of writing that is primarily an expression of "genuine" experience. It is worth noting that it does not appear that there is anything here to preclude making ethical injunctions or edicts. Insofar as they are made as "involuntary expressions" of the writer's experience (which does not totally seem to be an incompatible condition), hard ethical judgements can be counted as engaged. A claim such as "genocide is morally impermissible" can absolutely be the product of one's experience with it (even an indirect experience probably yields such a result).

It is at this point that we begin to see why there is a politically charged element in this understanding of literature. The writers most suited for the purpose of engagement are ones that are attempting to convey a perspective (theirs in particular); to convey "messages" as a way of bridging a gap of sorts between the writer and the reader. That bridging is grounded on the *co-inhabitance* that was alluded to earlier. The line of questioning in *What is Literature?* – what is writing?, why write?, for whom does one write?, and finally, "what is the situation of the writer in 1947"? – suggests that, in the end, the writer's concerns must be *contemporary*.[74]For the writer/reader relationship to find co-inhabitance, it is not unreasonable to say that each party must be concerned with the day's challenges and questions, which is to say that they must be alive; living through the pressing questions that would drive each to the activity. This is indicated when Sartre says:

> Rousseau, the father of the French Revolution, and Gobineau, the father of racism, both sent us messages. And the critic considers them with equal sympathy. If they were alive, he [or she] would have to choose between the two, to love one and hate the other. But what brings them together, above all, is that they are both profoundly and deliciously wrong, and in the same way: they are dead.[75]

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[74] Sartre, *What is Literature*?, 123.
[75] Sartre, *What is Literature?,* 21.

It is implied here that each are "wrong" because any possibilities for malleability regarding the messages become quickly exhausted once the writer is deceased, and their ideas subsequently become outdated. The author of the text can only justify himself/herself insofar as the for-itself that is responsible for the text can assume responsibility for the text. Once that for-itself dies, in effect, the author does as well. Furthermore, the reciprocal invitation into the activity and mutual collaboration of literature is lost once the writer loses the ability to write. Even if we are to say that messages can serve a role once their author is deceased (I think they can), the possibility for *engagement* becomes lost without the possibility for dialectical exchange. Thus, engaged messages appear to be limited to those messages that are formed *within* the situation to which they find applicability.

One may be inclined to think that it is a bit extreme to say that there can be no value found in those messages of the past – many messages from even the most ancient time periods have yet to exhaust their capacity for obtaining new meanings (perhaps a testament to the extent that literary messages can be an imaginative catalyst) – even though engagement must involve the living – after all, with whom would we be engaged? But what I bring into question is the extent to which a message must be tied up in the for-itself that delivers it. Given that, for Sartre at least, the meaning of our actions are only dictated in retrospect, it does not seem like that dictation requires that the actor remain alive. The meaning of past events can absolutely be meanings produced *contemporarily*; for example, the meanings of the writings of the American founding fathers have shifted numerous times over the course of the country's history; the meaning we assign them today is likely not the same meaning we assigned them in the Civil War. It also may be permissible to assert that Sartre's writings (I hope) have not lost relevance to

our situation, nor have their possible meanings been exhausted even though he has been deceased for 38 years.

This opens a further thought on whether debating Sartre's messages, for example, *among the living* can count as engagement if that message can be found to have contemporary applicability. If this would count as engagement, then it seems that all we need is the *message*, and not necessarily the writer. It could also be said that the art form begins to lose relevance, that is, we do not necessarily need the aesthetic imperative except in the process of *discussing* the message. If we derive a message from, say, a song written by a musician and subject that message to a contemporary dialectical process, it would appear to be, in effect, the same practice as critiquing the dead writer's work.

It is fair to say that Sartre and Beauvoir each see literature as a vehicle for taking on the task of dictating our future, and as such, a decent response to these concerns could be that concerning ourselves too heavily with questions about the degree to which historical interpretations attain contemporary meanings and significance would be to miss the point. It would be to leave us inattentive to the matters at hand, and while these may involve some historical considerations, it would be disingenuous of us for our understanding of these contemporary matters to be dictated by the messages of the past. There is no reason to totally exclude them, though they must not be the primary focus. The experiences of the present situation are bound to offer more resonance and insight on the present situation than those past reflections derived from the experiences of that time. In other words, *relying* on the message left in the past is to engage in bad faith.

The trajectory of the existentialist line of thinking should be kept in mind: proper apprehension of the situation enables us to invent. If this proper apprehension means utilizing

historical analysis, if it means the promotion of some past value or solution, or even if it means that we subsume all of history under a teleological dialectic, then a writer is permitted in providing such analyses. What is crucial for engagement though is for a message to be applicable *for the contemporary reader or critic*. Engagement with another perspective requires that that other perspective be capable of responding, which is only possible so long as one is taking responsibility for that perspective. I do not want to go so far as to say that the perspective loses relevance once the author dies, though for *engagement*, there appears to be a need for the perspective to be assumed by someone in a position to continue writing from that perspective in order for there to be a possibility of responsiveness. I, for instance, have been assuming the existentialist perspective in this project for the purpose of exploring the proper conduct in our interactions with the community we are situated. The extent to which our present perspective has lost relevance by virtue of Sartre and Beauvoir being deceased has to be negligible (if it has lost relevance it would be for other reasons).

But what is crucial for this to be engagement is that *I am writing* from this perspective. The engaged assumption of a perspective from the past requires it to be resuscitated in the form of an attempt to address contemporary members of one's community. Is reading *Being and Nothingness* considered engagement? Only if it is for the purpose of addressing or attending to the contemporary situation in the form of utilizing it in expression or communication, as I have done, or for engaging with other expressions or works that utilize it, as perhaps you will do. What is crucial then is that the *activity* continues. For the situational imperative, there must be a broadening of perspectives *among those that share one's situation*, so any attention to the texts of the past must find applicability through expression.

Inaccessibility of Engagement

Literature may have an accessibility issue. Relying on engaged literature means that any ethical dialectic becomes a pursuit that sizable portions of a population in even contemporary western societies would be excluded from (two examples: because of an inability to pay for online subscriptions or an inadequate educational background). Essentially, one counter-point is that painting, sculptures, and music are all much more publicly accessible, and are therefore more suited for the task of engaging *in our time*, even if the aesthetic imperative is neglected. Though a decent response would be that engaged literature would have a capacity for a growth in participation, but it is difficult to see exactly how this would happen directly. There does not appear to be anything in the structure of the activity that would suggest that there must be a growth in participation, so such a growth would perhaps need to be an indirect byproduct of the activity.

There seems to be some ambiguity regarding exactly what engagement is designed to do. Is it supposed to bring one into communion with all, or is the focus more limited to the quality of the artist/critic relationship? I think it is more the latter given that in the accomplishment of the aesthetic imperative, each party must enter into the relationship volitionally, which explicitly public art would have difficulty in accomplishing (though an argument can be conceived wherein public art accomplishes the aesthetic imperative insofar as members of the society have made an implicit agreement for the existence of the art display, thereby accepting an invitation into the relationship). This serves as an indication that the focus is not so much on acquiring as many readers as possible, only that *someone* read the text.

Although, it is worth mentioning that such a concern is very much a product of our time. In fact, the historical analysis of the writer provided by Sartre in *What is Literature?* appears to

suggest that literature as we are familiar with it did not exist until after the French Revolution when it became possible for two consciousnesses of drastically different perspectives to come into some kind of relation.[76] Further on, near the conclusion of the work, he suggests that true literature is only possible in a classless society (though this would have the paradoxical result of eliminating the need or use for literature at all).[77] So the success of literature appears to depend on accessibility (accessibility of the classes in particular) for Sartre. For our purposes (in not depending on a view about class structure), questions of contemporary accessibility may require, ironically, an engaged dialectic on the extent to which such an activity can offer a broad enough survey of perspectives for us to apprehend our situation, identify ethical and political challenges, and invent solutions, views, and values. The question of what "broad enough" means can only be a circumstantial judgment. Essentially, the question we should be asking is this: is engaged literature capable of bringing together a sufficient, or at least acceptable, collection of perspectives such that we can gain a proper apprehension of a situation?

To the extent that we are willing to grant literature a superior status in allowing for this, the argument for literature's role in existentialist ethics is a good one. But different modes of expression and communication are certainly capable of arising and may even accomplish the task that we would assign literature better, or at least be more proficient given the demands of a particular situation. Understanding this argument in terms of the two imperatives is helpful in this way, as it allows us to engage in discussions on the efficacy of our modes of interaction in collectively deciding what is good, and maybe even how we want to decide so.

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[76] Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 74.
[77] Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 123.

For the purpose of attending to the issue I think is the most pertinent for us – bridging partisan perspectives – the online serialized show (through services like Netflix, Hulu, or HBO) and online video blog ("vlog") can be proficient towards engagement. Unlike with televised broadcasts, online services allow for a level of volitional entering into the relationship akin to reading a book. While the expression is typically more directive (less is left to the imagination), modern technologies have allowed for a practically unlimited capacity for one's imagination to be represented on screen, manipulated by viewers and critics, and even replicated in different contexts by all involved. The advantage here is that the show's (and to less of an extent, a "vlog's") very existence is heavily dependent on viewership in terms of numbers. The more people watch, the more successful the show is. Insofar as a show allows for imaginative playing and responsiveness[78] among viewers in addition to offering reflections on the viewer's situation, a show that is watched by a large number of individuals will be effective in encouraging *widespread* engagement.[79] An in-depth analysis of the different kinds of artistic modes in terms of contemporary engagement will not be explored further here, but I do think that this is a project worth exploring further.

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[78] The *serialized* show is especially conducive for this as they can evolve and, potentially, justify or learn from mistakes or injustices perceived and identified among the show's audience.

[79] Shows that come to mind where, I think, this description applies are Bojack Horseman, South Park, Black Mirror, and Orange is the New Black.

Conclusion

At the end of Chapter One there was a discussion on a "*petit sens*" that was speculated to be a possible resolution to any problems that would arise out of the *ex nihilo* or *causa sui* creation of a project. We introduced an element of the given into an explanation of how projects are (at least initially) invented. This discussion ended up not offering much in the way of answering the question of how we are to invent as all it could do is help to explain how there could be a possibility for invention in the first place. However, what is given is speculated to be *meaningful* and its comprehension must be a fundamental element of our ontological structure in the same way that freedom and responsibility are. As we have asserted that freedom and responsibility should not be neglected *because* they are fundamental features of our ontological structure, it appears we must say the same about this *petit sens*.

Attention to this *petit sens* should not require us to change the picture provided above as the engagement through aesthetic means is designed to be an attention to responsibility. We cannot be responsible for the *petit sens*, only what we do with it. It is, presumably, a constitutive element of the for-itself's projection, however, there is nothing there to demand us to be attentive of it. In fact, as was suggested, attention to it would be an attention to the immediate given, thereby leaving us in bad faith (one could slip into thinking one did not choose their project). There arises an apparent contradiction then: we should not neglect something that we, at the same time, should not be attentive to. Here, transcendence is enabled by something that, in transcendence, would be forgotten. What can we do?

We can focus on what the *petit sens means.* The *petit sens* is produced out of a relation whereby the existence of a *specific* being is confronted by the existence of a lack of being, which orients us towards desiring to be *that being.* If we take the existence of the project itself as

meaningful by virtue of its meaningful origination, we can simultaneously be attentive to a given meaning whilst maintaining a project. What we have effectively done is strengthen the importance of the project. It is not simply important for the purpose of transcendence, it is important *in itself*. As such, we have introduced an element of preservation into an attention to our projects, as well as others'. This may be a minor detail in the overall picture being presented, but it is worth exploring for the simple purpose of having a basis for the very basic claim that *we should treat each other with respect, as meaningful.*

One may raise the concern that this leaves us with an anthropocentric ethical focus when we should have an ethical concern for beings incapable of projects. While I am sympathetic to this impulse, what we have outlined is an ontological description, not an ethic. It is not that we should be responsible, we *are* responsible, and acting otherwise is not so much unethical as it is deluded. There are no resources here to say that bad faith is immoral. We *can* make determinations, however, that some understanding of morality or another is authentic or inauthentic. Regarding the claim made above, I think we have no basis here to say that respecting others is moral or immoral, rather we can only say that it must be authentic because it is consistent with our ontological structure. Saying we should be authentic is like saying we should believe the world is round: there is nothing inherently immoral about saying the earth is flat, but that does not restrict many from vehemently asserting that flat earthers should rescind their beliefs. When something is considered true, we should not act as if it is not, not because it is immoral to do so, but for the sake of logical consistency.

We can develop an authentic ethics that concerns all beings, and we can develop an authentic ethics that only concerns humans: it is up to us which one is preferable.[80] Hopefully, we are now in a position to see how we are to make such decisions under the existentialist ontology. Engagement through aesthetics is an intriguing answer to the question of how we are to invent, though how exactly this should be conducted is (intentionally) vague. It is difficult to gauge what contemporary society demands of us *aesthetically*, as well as ethically. Is literature the best mode of communication for the purpose of engagement? It seems more difficult to refute the claim that it is than to affirm its efficacy given the imperatives outlined. But even if this is not the case, if Sartre and Beauvoir's understanding of the role of literature is completely misguided, that does not necessarily mean existentialism should be rejected. The aesthetic analysis is existentialist, yes, but that does not mean a refutation of the analysis is at the same time a refutation of existentialism. We can conclude that, say, painting has as much capacity for engagement as literature and still be existentialist.

The exploration of literature was simply a way of moving us towards the questions that matter for us today. As mentioned in the introduction, we face serious challenges when it comes to the communication of information, and this has allowed for a bifurcation of perspectives that are incapable of finding common ground. The practical method of bringing them into communion is up for debate, but, and I take this to be the key insight of this project, we can comfortably say that this process must involve a broadening of perspective. Ultimately, this is fundamentally what existentialism demands of us; authenticity, responsibility, and engagement

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[80] The *petit sens* may offer some optimism for one that is partial to the former ethics as there appears to be room for a for-itself to develop meaningful associations with beings that are incapable of projects. Such associations, again, are derived, and do not fall under our responsibility, at least not until we act on those associations.

are all oriented away from the immediate and toward our projections, and the only way we can have any robust understanding of what our projections mean and what they are, in fact, doing is through the perspective that is not mine.

On this note, I conclude by suggesting that there is a need to devise or to maintain an understanding of a specific form of communication with the expressed interest of allowing right and left to de-atomize themselves. Additionally, I suggest that this exploration at least offers some positive orientation in attending to this need. From a philosophical standpoint, I think this perspective is to be preferred due to its capacity to balance itself at all levels between two untenable positions – idealism and solipsism/relativism – without relying on unwarranted quasi-metaphysical understandings of the given.[81] Above all, I suggest we resist rigidity in thought and in perspective so that we can allow for freedom to express itself: I believe this is ultimately what this existentialist ethics promotes.

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[81] Two things to note. (1) I have Nietzsche's "will to power" and Levinas' "call" in mind when I say "quasi-metaphysical". (2) The "*petit sens*" is not structurally conditioning, it makes its presence, presumably, only through the exculpatory process of the desire to be (anyone wanting to argue that the "desire to be" is unwarranted need only ask themselves if they have ever dreamed of being a celebrity, wanted desperately to be funny, etc.).

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Vita

Michael Foster Wickham, born in Seattle, Washington, acquired an interest in philosophy while obtaining his bachelor's degree from Washington State University. He concluded that working through existentialist thought was worth pursuing beyond graduation, so he decided to enter the Department of Philosophy at Louisiana State University. The department proved well suited for that pursuit. Upon completion of his master's degree, he will, ironically, have an existential crisis.