The Diana McDonald Writer's Challenge   Student Works

2021

Anguish, Abandonment, Despair: Existentialism's Promise of Hope in a Time of Crisis

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      Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the first modern philosophers to truly achieve international acclaim in his lifetime. The stereotype of the philosopher/artist who only achieves posthumous fame does not apply to Sartre, who had a ravenous following in the 1950s and '60s as evidenced by the crowd of over 50,000 at his funeral. Many young intellectuals looked to what Sartre had to say to formulate their own opinions, and Sartre was able to make social and political noise in his lifetime that would go on to affect international politics. As former president of France Charles de Gaulle once remarked as he was pardoning Sartre for protests, "You don't arrest Voltaire." This is the legacy that Sartre has left behind: a massive body of work that has defined a generation's thoughts and actions. His philosophy has been a guiding light of culture since he first achieved acclaim in the aftermath of World War II. As such, it is important to examine the work of a man with this much cultural influence. The moral and ethical implications of Sartre's philosophy have been felt across the world and have influenced the way that many people see the world. Sartre's philosophy of freedom and responsibility condemn humans to be utterly free and to take full responsibility for not only our own actions, but the actions of the society in which we live, while paradoxically never being able to describe a way to live the good life, which leaves a lack of moral direction in Sartre's existentialism. I posit that a better moral direction is found in Simone de Beauvoir's existentialism, particularly as laid out in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

      It would help to start by trying to define what many consider Sartre's philosophy to be, "existentialism". Existentialism values freedom over all else, proclaiming that existence precedes essence. This means that the fact that we exist is an unchangeable truth. What is changeable is that we can, indeed have to, choose how we live. We are thrown into the world in our own "situation": the circumstances that we are born into. With this, there are "givens," as Sartre defines them, which are more things we cannot change, like our demographic and place of birth. These are the only things, however, that we cannot choose in our lives according to Sartre. Our "position" is a freely chosen stance towards our "givens." The values that we create, the life that we choose to live, and the choices made to get there are all our own choices. Sartre pushes back on any idea of an "essence" to humankind. Fate is a dirty word. As such, Sartre argues that there is no human nature: there is not one thing that connects all humans outside of the fact that we exist and there is no destiny for any of us: the lives that we lead are entirely our own. This

philosophy may sound pessimistic and many have made this criticism. But Sartre makes a compelling case that this philosophy is, in fact, toughly optimistic. The ability to make life choices and the freedom that comes with that autonomy is a relief to many who may feel that they are "stuck" in life with a pre-determined path to follow. Sartre tells them that there is no such thing: you are what you make yourself out to be.

This all sounds very nice in theory. However, Sartre twists this notion into something perhaps more sinister. We are utterly free. We are "condemned to be free" as Sartre puts it. We are so free that our freedom leaves us paralyzed in making decisions. Despair comes about through the realization that we are entirely dependent on these choices. We must choose, but we cannot know the future and our intentions may never come to fruition. We cannot know the actions that others may take, either. Nevertheless, we must make choices in life. By choosing, we create ourselves, and this despair accompanies all actions. In making these decisions, we are responsible, not only for ourselves, but for all of mankind. This is what Sartre calls "anguish". We cannot escape choosing, even when we do not wish to choose. "The existentialists say at once that man is anguish. What that means is this: the man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a lawmaker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, cannot help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility," as Sartre puts it in his essay defending existentialism. Forlornness, or abandonment, exists as we come to realize that we are alone in making these decisions. Sartre rejects God as God would absolve us of responsibility. With God, it is easy to blame our woes on factors that are out of our control. Sartre objects to this, claiming that there are no factors that are out of our control. We are what we make ourselves to be. In this way, humans feel abandonment because there is no standard to live up to, no being to judge our actions against. We choose our own values and actions. These three existential emotions, anguish, abandonment and despair, pervade all of Sartre's philosophy and are paramount to understanding what Sartre means by "freedom" and "responsibility".

What does Sartre mean by "freedom"? Sartre spent much of his career thinking about freedom and its role in existence. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre makes a distinction about his use of the word freedom, separating his "technical and philosophical concept of freedom…meaning only the autonomy of choice" and "the empirical and popular concept of 'freedom' which has been produced by historical, political, and moral circumstances [which] is

equivalent to 'the ability to obtain the ends chosen'". For Sartre, freedom is the autonomy of choice, which, as discussed in the previous paragraph, is the only thing that is guaranteed in our life: existence precedes essence. In this way to exist is to be free. Existence *is* freedom. One cannot separate choice from existence, and one cannot find a *reason* for existence: we simply *are*. Even in choosing to not decide, we are still making a choice. This leads us to Sartre's ideas about responsibility. Responsibility is heavily tied to the feelings of anguish and abandonment: we are all responsible for the consequences of our actions. Our actions do not only affect ourselves, either. "If I am mobilized in a war, this war is *my* war; it is in my image and I deserve it." Our actions have consequences for all people, and it is up to us to own up to those consequences. The conscious beings (for Sartre thought of consciousness as existence and therefore as freedom) are responsible for the world as it is. Events in the world only have meaning insofar as we place meaning on them.

This notion of "radical freedom" and responsibility has heavy ethical implications. I argue that Sartre (at least at the beginning) did very little to address these existential ethics. Sartre left the discussion of ethics very open-ended. However, the question of existential ethics is an important consideration. Some raised the objection that existentialist freedom has a "free-for-all" mentality when it comes to ethics. If we all lived by this code of ethics, the world would be in chaos. To this, Sartre writes that "man is in an organized situation in which he himself is involved." By this, Sartre means that ethics is situational, decided by the concrete human situation which we are thrown into. Our choices are not *random*; we still decide based off of our interests (conscious or not). Sartre argues that there is no *a priori* ethical law that must be followed. Humans choose their own ethical codes to live by. Sartre also argues that we should not judge others' morals so long as they choose their morals freely. This seems to abandon concern for ethics. To this, Sartre argues that ethics are an invention like any other, but that a person must still be held responsible for their ethics. People's choice of ethics is what they are.

Herein lies the contradiction: how can Sartre argue that we should not judge others morally as long as they have chosen freely, yet we should judge everybody morally since they are responsible for their choices? A similar paradox comes up in Sartre's philosophy regarding being-for-itself and being-for-another. In his thoughts about existential psychoanalysis, Sartre uses the term "being-for-itself" to describe ourselves (our ego) which we are aware of (I am aware of myself). Sartre must reckon how "being-for-itself" is entangled with "being-for-

another". We are not only aware of ourselves, but aware of how others see us as an object in the world. We cannot help but let the Others' gaze affect us. Sartre argues that we cannot know ourselves separately from the Others, yet we cannot know Others without knowing ourselves. Which is it? This paradox is related to Sartre's ethical knot: we must make our own choices and ethical codes without judging the ethical codes of others, yet we also should judge everyone else's moral codes because of their responsibility to us. In this way, Sartre's philosophy feels lacking: a lack of a real solid ethical foundation and some tight knots that are created by trying to apply this radical freedom to psychology does not feel adequate to be a philosophy to really embody and live by[1].

A better explanation of existential ethics that perhaps should hold more value is in the writing of Simone de Beauvoir, another influential existential philosopher and a longtime romantic partner of Sartre's. Beauvoir has gained acclaim as one of the most popular feminist philosophers for her book *The Second Sex* (much of which was written in response to Sartre's philosophy and his treatment of her). Some of her other writings, however, heavily revolve around this question of ethics in existentialism. Beauvoir is typically regarded as a mouthpiece for Sartre's existentialist philosophy, and this is not entirely false. Beauvoir did echo many of Sartre's sentiments. In her own lifetime, she has said that Sartre was the true philosopher, not her[2]. However, her writing on existential ethics, particularly in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, is far more detailed in its examination of existentialism and ethics and its criticisms of Sartre's early philosophy in *Being and Nothingness* (*Pyrrhus and Cineas* was published in 1944, just one year after *Being and Nothingness*). Beauvoir also tackled this topic of existential ethics years before Sartre would attempt the same.

Beauvoir uses Sartrean terminology and ideas to examine ethical questions. Like Sartre, Beauvoir uses these ideas of being-for-itself and being-for-another and believes in this notion of "radical freedom". However, for Beauvoir, this radical freedom has an immediate ethical consideration of other free subjects in the world. The external world seems to be a crushing and objective reality whereas the other reminds us of our individual freedom. Lacking a God to guide

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[1] In this paper, I will not even examine the question of free will (which ties into Sartre's ideas of radical freedom) and recent neuroscience research which seems to suggest that humans do not have free will since our brains know what we are going to do before we even do it. If Sartre were around today, I'd be curious to see what his conclusion would be regarding this research.

[2] Though, as Kate Kirkpatrick points out in her biography of Simone de Beauvoir, this statement is frequently taken out of context, but I won't go into the details here.

us through morality, we must create bonds with others through ethical action. We must take an active part in the world through endeavors that express our own freedom as well as encouraging the freedom of all other beings. In *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, Beauvoir uses these ethical ideas to construct an ethics that uses Sartrean terminology yet is somewhat at odds with Sartre's ethics (or lackthereof). Like Sartre, Beauvoir believes that we are thrown into the world and that free beings are constantly engaged in projects which transcend the situation into which we are thrown. Our own transcendence is realized through projects which are valuable in themselves, meaning that they do not rely on external validation or meaning. Beauvoir maintains the existentialist idea of freedom and the consequent responsibility that this freedom entails through emphasizing that our projects must come from individual spontaneity and not from an external institution, authority, or the like. Beauvoir has a heavy emphasis on the power of the individual. However, unlike Sartre, Beauvoir does not consider the "Other" as a threat to freedom as Sartre does in his idea of the "gaze". Beauvoir keeps the idea of the Other's gaze turning me into an object but sees the Other as a necessary axis of my freedom. In other words, without the Other, I could not be free. This is in stark contrast to Sartre's negative connotations of the Other and the reminder that we are nothing but objects in the Other's view: "Hell is other people", Sartre says. Beauvoir's thoughts about the Other are refreshingly optimistic and a reminder that without other beings, we could not ourselves be free.

Beauvoir continued her work with existentialist ethics in her work *The Ethics of Ambiguity.* Published about four years after Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* continued many of the ideas that Beauvoir first proposed in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and fleshed out more of the details, a task that Sartre would not attempt for more years to come. In it, Beauvoir goes into detail about what she believes radical freedom really entails, setting few but notable boundaries on the idea of freedom that Sartre was not yet willing to set. "A freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied," Beauvoir writes in *Ethics.* She argues that our greatest ethical imperative in life is to create our own meaning while protecting the freedom of others to do the same. To Beauvoir, to be free is not to have license to do whatever one wants (as Sartre would define freedom is *Being and Nothingness)*. Rather, freedom is about the conscious assumption of projects which are chosen spontaneously. Beauvoir is also far more sympathetic to the idea that humans cannot flourish on their own than Sartre is. She recognizes the sanctity of the individual while also recognizing that we are situated within a

community and are necessarily bound to Others. She defends this position by fully fleshing out the idea proposed in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* that individual projects cannot succeed unless there are Others whose projects intersect with our own. Again, Beauvoir's ethics are far more inclusive and optimistic than Sartre's in *Being and Nothingness*, where little to no boundaries are set on ethical and moral issues. At the time, Sartre was flirting with Marxism, which seems to be in direct violation with Beauvoir's and his own existentialist ethics. At this time, Sartre seemed to be living in contradiction with his own philosophy, a contradiction he would later recognize, leading him to give up Marxism in favor of a more anarchistic worldview.

There is one other notable difference between Beauvoir and Sartre in this early period of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. For the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*, one's situation is something that we must take a "position" towards, and to take a position of submission would be living in "bad faith." Some have interpreted this to mean that Sartre condones actions of oppression and to put down on people who "submit" to mental illness. Beauvoir, however, recognizes that some situations are much more strict and unsurpassable inhibitors to action. She gives the examples of slaves and women in many cultures whose laws, values, customs, Gods, etc. are given to them without being freely chosen. Their situation is defined by the enforcement of external institutions and power structures. These people cannot transcend their situation because they do not even recognize their ability to be free, believing their situation to be the natural order of the world. Beauvoir points out that these individuals cannot simply be living in "bad faith" because they have been told by their oppressors that this is how the world operates and they cannot recognize their freedom to choose otherwise.

Simply put, Beauvoir believes that the freedom of the self requires the freedom of others and to act alone or without concern for others is not to be free. This is a different approach to existentialist ethics than what Sartre took on early in his career with *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*, which emphasized the freedom of the individual to act freely regardless of the systems in which they live. Sartre emphasized the importance of the individual freedom where Beauvoir put the emphasis on the freedom of the individual having conditions, namely that the freedom of the individual cannot be in violation with the freedom of the Other. Sartre took a very different approach, going so far as to argue that the Other is a possible threat to individual freedom. In Sartre's early ethics, there is not really a reason for one to be compassionate to others; they are simply other objects in the world as we are objects to them.

Although Sartre likely assumes that with radical freedom, everybody would act as comrades, there is no real reason that that must be the case. As long as I am free, the status of the other does not concern me much, and since I choose my own values and ethical codes, I will judge them however I please. Beauvoir, however, requires us to be compassionate to others, because if they are not free, we cannot be free. Because our projects are defined by the projects of others ("No project can be defined except by its interference with other projects"), if my project is intersecting with others' who are not free, then I am not truly free. In this way, Beauvoir's existentialist ethics are far more compassionate than those of Sartre, and for this reason, Beauvoir's are perhaps more valuable to society[3].

The philosophical insights of existentialism, particularly of Simone de Beauvoir, is still entirely applicable to us today. While it was developed in post-WWII Europe and absolutely captured the feelings of anger and despair that pervaded the population then, current circumstances in our society, particularly surrounding issues of social justice, living through a pandemic, and the need for change, show something of a parallel to the sentiment that existentialists of the 1940s and -50s were capturing. Particularly poignant is Beauvoir's point about the freedom of others being a necessary and sufficient condition for our own freedom. If we live in a society where not everyone has total and equal autonomy, then none of us can truly claim to live freely. As long as there are oppressed people in our society, we are not able to claim that we live in a truly free way. At the time of writing, incredibly restrictive voting laws are being passed in Georgia, the rights of trans people are under attack in Arkansas, and the general atmosphere of social anxiety regarding access to vaccines for COVID-19 show that we are clearly a long way from total and complete autonomy. Beauvoir would tell us that we must be working to secure rights for everybody in our contemporary American society in order for us to be truly free. We must be actively working to fight the systems of oppression that are trying to control the freedom of others. Our choices, as Sartre and Beauvoir will remind us, are all that we have in this world to make it a place that we want to live in. Choosing to wear a mask to protect our neighbors, to get vaccinated, to protest injustice, and to fight for those who are less

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[3] It is, of course, imperative to mention that Sartre's ethics changed throughout his career and his later ethics very much mirrored the ethics of Simone de Beauvoir. However, the fact that Beauvoir was able to clearly lay out the ethical and political value of existentialism years before Sartre ever could (even after given the opportunity in *Being and Nothingness*), is proof enough that if one wants to really understand the ethics of existentialism, one should perhaps look to Beauvoir first.

privileged than ourselves are just some of the choices that individuals in our society have been given in the past year and being on the right side of these choices is one way that we as a society can reckon with our current state and try to change the society in which we live for the better. Existentialism has laid out a groundwork for why choice is so important for our liberty as individuals and similarly can give us a guide to our own responsibility for the society in which we live. We must recognize our responsibility to not only ourselves but everyone around us for the circumstances in which we live. The society that we live in is *our* society in a very literal way to an existentialist. It is a system that we are responsible for. Do we really want to make it a place that is exclusive to the majority of people who live in it? Do we want to make our society a place where only few can flourish, and the rest must struggle to survive? The individual, to the existentialist, must be actively working to make the society in which they live a "livable" place for them. Otherwise, they are complacent. This may sound pessimistic, but as already demonstrated, this is really, in fact, an optimistic call-to-action. It may sound intimidating, but there is no other way to see it. To an existentialist, the individual has incredible power, which is a powerful statement when the task of changing the systems of oppression that we are increasingly fed up with seems to be a Herculean task.

Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were able to capture the anxiety and despair that the world felt following WWII and provide a framework for how to think in the darkness that followed. Many young people were able to find comfort in the freedom that existentialism allowed them and in the bid for radical change that Sartre promoted. Strangely, in the rather pessimistic language of "anguish, abandonment, and despair", a relieving and tough optimism shone through that propelled Sartre to the stardom that he would maintain throughout his life. The ideas of freedom and responsibility that were central to Sartrean thought gave hope to many young European and American people alike and the ethical and feminist call for equality that Beauvoir espoused was incredibly influential in the history of feminist thought and gave a new voice to women across the world. The overall hopefulness of existentialist freedom has led many people to not only read the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, but to truly live it.

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