

On the Coherence of Sartre's Defense of Existentialism Against the Essentialist Charge of Ethical Relativism in His "Existentialism and Humanism"

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I. Introduction

Although its slim volume may suggest otherwise, Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism and Humanism" treats a wealth of existentialist themes. Indeed, within its pages, Sartre characterizes many of the hallmarks of existentialist thought, including subjectivity, freedom, responsibility, anguish, forlornness, despair, and so on. Perhaps most importantly, however, Sartre's "Existentialism and Humanism" occasions a defense of existentialism against its most frequently dealt criticisms, particularly the essentialist charge that existentialism necessarily gives rise to ethical relativism. And while this defense may seem convincing at first, in many places, it also seems to abandon, for the sake of its project, the fundamental commitments of existentialism, at least as Sartre understands them.

Thus, in this essay, I critically examine the coherence of Sartre's defense of existentialism against the essentialist charge of ethical relativism. To the extent that that defense relies largely upon his espousal of an existentialist ethics, I examine, in particular, whether that ethics coheres with the fundamental commitments of existentialism as he understands them. Following this examination, I conclude that (a) the fundamental commitments of existentialism preclude Sartre from coherently positing objectively valid normative ethical statements, that (b) because he nonetheless posits such statements in his espousal of an existentialist ethics, his defense of existentialism against the essentialist charge of ethical relativism breaks down, and finally, that (c) although this incoherence presents a substantial problem for Sartre, one may still defend his *attempt* to espouse an existentialist ethics.

For the purposes of its project, I segregate this essay into four parts, followed by a conclusion. In the first part, I briefly illustrate the origins and fundamental commitments of existentialism at large, and then move to characterize Sartrean existentialism in particular. In the second part, after characterizing the essentialist charge of ethical relativism, I

illustrate Sartre's defense of existentialism against that charge and, accordingly, his espousal of an existentialist ethics. Thereafter, in the third part of this essay, I examine which sorts of ethical statements, if any, Sartre can coherently posit relative to the fundamental commitments of existentialism. After distinguishing between the various sorts of ethical statements ethicists have, at least historically, understood the philosophical project of ethics to provide for, I argue that, in places, Sartre's existentialist ethics does not, in fact, cohere with the fundamental commitments of existentialism as he understands them. I then move to consider, in the fourth part of this essay, whether one may still defend Sartre's attempt to espouse an existentialist ethics, even in light of the apparent incoherence between that ethics and the fundamental commitments of existentialism. I then close this essay with a brief review of its project, arguments, and conclusions.

II. On the Origins of Existentialism and Sartrean Existentialism

Owing to its nature as an expansive philosophical and literary movement, existentialism eludes any concise, comprehensive characterization. And yet, no characterization of existentialism, comprehensive or otherwise, ever omits from its project that ubiquitous, Sartrean slogan: "existence precedes and commands essence" (Sartre 1992: 565). To be sure, this axiomatic assertion alludes to much of what founds existentialism, distilling it into a sort of pithy dictum. Without qualification, however, Sartre's assertion is as ambiguous as it is abstract, and thus, if one is to clearly grasp its magnitude, one must understand it within the context of its conception. To understand existentialism, then, is to understand its development as a *movement*, one that reacted against long-established assumptions that, until existentialism's conception, had restricted the philosophical and literary horizons of nineteenth and twentieth century intellectuals.

Although many scholars cite Sartre as the first philosopher to explicitly embrace the existentialist label, his espousal of existentialism was not without inspiration, nor was it without precedent (Crowell 2004). Other oft-cited existentialists and proto-existentialists include Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard; German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers; and French philosophers Gabriel Marcel, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Sartre 2001: 20). In addition, among the movement's literary figures, scholars include Russian authors Mikhail Lermontov and Fyodor Dostoevsky; French authors André Malraux, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Albert Camus, and Jean Genet; and Irish-French author Samuel Beckett (Sartre 2001: 20). In the end, however, it is Kierkegaard who finds credit as the progenitor *per se* of existentialist thought. Indeed, as Doreen Tulloch puts it in her "Sartrean Existentialism," it was Kierkegaard's "revolt against Hegelian 'objectivity' [that] provided the starting point for the 'father of existentialism'" (1952: 31).

As Tulloch understands it, existentialism takes its conceptual roots in the proto-existentialist thought of Kierkegaard and, in particular, from his reaction to Hegel. As she characterizes that reaction:

In Kierkegaard's view, what is most real and important in and to the existing person escapes capture by [Hegel's] 'objective' method. The unique real existing person eludes the dialectic of Hegelian idealism just as surely as it eludes the 'scientific method' of positivism. We must divest ourselves of both rationalist and empiricist prejudices when we approach reality in order to find out what it is. (Tulloch 1952: 31)

Thus, as Tulloch explains, Kierkegaard rejected the objectivity of Hegelian idealism in so far as he found its dialectic powerless to describe the circumstance of the "real existing person" (1952: 31) or, more generally, the human condition. To the extent that Hegel's objective method precluded any subjective definition of the human condition, it could not, at least according to Kierkegaard, offer any substantive definition of what it means to be the subject of a human experience. As Tulloch continues, however, Kierkegaard's criticism would endure beyond the nineteenth century alone, finding continued expression in the thought of twentieth century philosophers such as Gabriel Marcel, whose expansion upon Kierkegaard's criticism would lend it both support and inertia:

Marcel, working in a Red Cross bureau during the war of 1914-18, was brought, under the impact of other peoples' profound experiences, to turn from the idealism of his youth and dialectics, which he now found abstract, to personal meditation on the significance of human life and of being. As for Kierkegaard, so for Marcel, neither the 'outsider's' attitude of the scientific observer, nor the abstract objective attitude of the rationalist can take up and make intelligible those immediate experiences which form the very stuff of the concrete fullness of life. (Tulloch 1952: 31)

Thus, what connects the critiques leveled by Kierkegaard and, almost a century later, Marcel, is a repulsion from the abstruse ambiguity of any and all objective definitions of the human condition. In their minds, such definitions so abstracted from the reality of the human experience as to fundamentally divorce themselves from that reality, thus condemning themselves to irrelevance. In brief, Kierkegaard and Marcel "desire[d] for the concrete" (Tulloch 1952: 31). What they needed, and what they called for in their philosophies, was a more concrete, subjective definition of the human condition.

To this end, then, one may understand existentialism as a reaction against what were, prior to its conception, the established philosophical methods for describing the human experience and defining the human condition. As Kierkegaard's argument against the objectivity of Hegelian idealism suggests, these established philosophical methods focused upon discerning that which is *essential* to the human condition, defining that condition in objective terms of universal relevance and, as a consequence, establishing an ideal towards which all human beings ought to strive for in their existence. As Steven Crowell clarifies in a contribution to *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

Traditionally, philosophers have connected the concept of existence with that of essence in such a way that the former signifies merely the *instantiation* of the latter. If "essence" designates *what* a thing is and "existence" *that* it is, it follows that what is intelligible about any given thing, what can be thought about it, will belong to its essence. It is from essence in this sense ... that ancient philosophy drew its prescriptions for an individual's way of life, its estimation of the meaning and value of existence. (Crowell 2004)

Thus, as Crowell's clarification emphasizes, prior to existentialism's conception, the established philosophical methods for describing the human experience and defining the

human condition relied heavily upon a notion of *essence*. It thus follows that one may appropriately, if broadly characterize any philosophy that relies upon such established philosophical methods as a sort of *essentialism*.

Taken as a whole, essentialism maintains “that objects have essences and that there is a distinction between essential and non-essential ... predications” (Audi 1999: 281). As regards the human condition in particular, however, essentialism maintains that “man acts or expresses his existence within a frame of reference which is his nature or essence” (Tulloch 1952: 36). And as Crowell points out in his article, it follows from this anthropic application of essentialism that ethical prescriptions for how the human being should *ideally be* derive from how the human being *essentially is*, that is, the essence of the human condition.^[1] Indeed, in so far as the forebears of existentialism understood the human condition as an exception to this essentialist rule, it is with essentialism in this particular sense that existentialism takes issue. For in the proto-existentialist minds of Kierkegaard and others, objective definitions of the human condition were often as peripheral to the human experience as they were pervasive in the scope of their implication, and thus existentialism focuses much of its philosophical energies upon a *reexamination* of the human condition, a *reconsideration* of that which defines one as the subject of a specifically human experience. As Tulloch puts it more concisely:

This emphasis on ‘subjectivity’ and on the significance of the mode of being of a conscious self is the most fundamental and general characteristic of all existentialist philosophy.

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Existentialists are ... interested in what are characteristically *human* situations, and they may be said to take their point of departure from what is *the* human situation ... (Tulloch 1952: 32)

To this end, then, Jean-Paul Sartre, the man most responsible for the popularization of existentialism in the twentieth century, would find a philosophical springboard in the works of proto-existentialists like Kierkegaard. Indeed, as Stephen Priest maintains in his introduction to Sartre’s *Basic Writings*, one of Sartre’s most renowned and important contributions to philosophy, namely, “the massive and complex *L’Etre et le Neant (Being and Nothingness)*” (Sartre 2001: 13), develops and expands upon the criticisms first advanced by Sartre’s existentialist forebearers. According to Priest, one may read *Being and Nothingness*, in part, as “an antidote to the positivism and pseudo-science [of] twentieth century philosophy” (Sartre 2001: 13), but also as “the imposition of the ontological constraints of ‘existentialism’ on ... ‘essentialism’” (Sartre 2001: 13). This is to say, simply, that Sartre sought, in his *Being and Nothingness* and other works, to further the existentialist criticisms of his predecessors. He sought to espouse an understanding of the human condition that, much like those of proto-existentialists like Kierkegaard, would provide for a more concrete, subjective definition of that condition. It is in his “Existentialism and Humanism,” however, that Sartre’s espousal of these and similar ideas is at its clearest and most concise.

First delivered as a lecture at Paris' *Le Club Maintenant* in October of 1945, Sartre's "Existentialism and Humanism" provides, as Priest asserts, "an excellent introduction to Sartrean themes" (Sartre 2001: 20), even if Sartre himself considered it "an inadequate substitute for reading his denser works" (Sartre 2001: 20). In the essay, Sartre "clarifies and partly revises his view of existence and essence" (Sartre 2001: 24), focusing upon how that view applies to the human condition. Indeed, Sartre makes this project clear from the very outset of the essay, where he explains what he takes to be the meaning of existentialism: "by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity" (1993: 32). Sartre quickly moves to qualify this ambiguous assertion with an identification of those commitments common to all brands of existentialism: "What they have in common is that they think that existence precedes essence, or if you prefer, that subjectivity must be the starting point" (1993: 34). Yet, as Sartre himself puts it, "Just what does that mean?" (1993: 34) – what does it mean for existence to precede essence in the human condition, and why must subjectivity be the so-called "starting point" (1993: 34) for the definition of that condition? In an attempt to answer these questions, Sartre distinguishes between artifacts and human beings that clarifies, in no uncertain terms, what he takes to be the fundamental commitments of existentialism. He begins by relating what he takes to be the ontology of manufactured artifacts:

Let us consider some object that is manufactured, for example, a ... paper-cutter: here is an object which has been made by an artisan whose inspiration came from a concept. He referred to the concept of what a paper-cutter is and likewise to a known method of production, which is part of the concept, something which is, by and large, a routine. Thus, the paper-cutter is at once an object produced in a certain way and, on the other hand, one having a specific use; and one can not postulate a man who produces a paper-cutter but does not know what it is used for. Therefore, let us say that, for the paper-cutter, essence – that is, the ensemble of both the production routines and the properties which enable it to be both produced and defined – precedes existence. Thus, the presence of the paper-cutter ... is determined. Therefore, we have here a technical view of the world whereby it can be said that production precedes existence. (Sartre 1993: 34)

According to Sartre's description, then, the ontology of a paper-cutter is one in which essence precedes existence. Due to the paper-cutter's nature as an artifact conceived and made real by an artisan, its existence is contingent upon its essence. By analogically equating the ontology of artifacts to human beings, Sartre relates what he takes to be a typically *essentialist* ontology, using Christianity as an example:

When we conceive God as the Creator, He is generally thought of as a superior sort of artisan ... the concept of man in the mind of God is comparable to the concept of a paper-cutter in the mind of the manufacturer, and following certain techniques and a conception, God produces man, just as the artisan, following a definition and a technique, makes a paper-cutter. Thus, the individual man is the realization of a certain concept in the divine intelligence. (Sartre 1993: 34-5)

Thus, in the mind of the essentialist, at least as Sartre understands it, the human condition is not unlike the artifactual condition. In the example of Christianity, God, as a sort of supreme artisan, conceives and makes real human beings, and thus, like artifacts, their existence is contingent upon their previously-conceived essence. This is to say, simply, that just as an artisan conceives an artifact's essence and, accordingly, what that artifact should ideally be *prior* to actually manufacturing that artifact, so does God conceive the human being's essence and, in turn, what the human being should ideally be *prior* to its actual existence. To this end, then, and in so far as Christianity is typical of other brands

of essentialism, essentialism fundamentally connects the philosophical project of ethics to the notion of essence – how the human being should *ideally be* derives from how the human being *essentially is*.

But of course, Sartre takes issue with this essentialist ontology. As he understands it, it leaves no room for the existentialist provision of a more concrete, subjective definition of the human condition. As Sartre contends:

Atheistic existentialism, which I represent ... states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man, or, as Heidegger says, human reality. (Sartre 1993: 35)

Thus, Sartre means to distinguish the human condition from that of artifacts, in so far as he understands that condition to be self-defining, not predefined.^[2] Of course, it follows from this distinction that Sartre believes, contrary to the essentialist, that how the human being should ideally be is not derivative from how the human being essentially is. And indeed, with this distinction the real meaning of the existentialist assertion, “existence precedes and commands essence” (Sartre 1992: 565), becomes clearer: “What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that ... man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself” (Sartre 1993: 35-6). As Priest characterizes the implications of this assertion:

In the case of human beings ... existence comes before essence. Sartre means there is no predetermined human essence and there is no human nature fixed in advance of human existence. Human beings first of all exist and subsequently make themselves what they are by their own actions. When we are born we have no essence as human beings. Only the totality of choices we make in like makes us the people who we are. (Sartre 2001: 25)

Albeit broad – there are, after all, many characteristics essential to the human condition, for example, the human genome – Priest’s characterization nonetheless charitably relates Sartre’s understanding of the fundamental commitments of existentialism, characterizing what Sartre means when he speaks of the precedence of existence before essence in the human condition and, more concisely, subjectivity: “the power of being self-conscious and existing for oneself” (Tulloch 1952: 37). Sartre means that the human condition acquires definition through existence, that is, through the choices and actions of real existing human beings, and that a consequence of this is that human beings “make themselves what they are by their own actions” (Sartre 2001: 25) – their actions are not, as essentialism maintains, governed by how they essentially are or should ideally be. Thus, although Sartre would likely agree that there are characteristics essential to the human condition, he firmly denies that there is an essence of the human condition from which ethical prescriptions for how the human being should ideally be might derive. And, to this end, Sartre furthers the existentialist reexamination of the human condition. He abandons the detached objectivity of essentialist ontologies for the intimate subjectivity of his own, existentialist ontology, an ontology that accounts for the universal diversity of human experience.

III. On Sartre’s Espousal of an Existentialist Ethics

In addition to a characterization of the fundamental commitments of existentialism, one of the central projects of Sartre's "Existentialism and Humanism" is a defense of existentialism against its most frequently dealt criticisms. Indeed, the first line of the essay makes this project explicit, where Sartre writes, "I should like on this occasion to defend existentialism against some charges which have been brought against it" (1993: 31). One of these charges, and that which Sartre focuses most upon in his essay, comes from, as he puts it, "the Christian standpoint" (1993: 32), which charges existentialism with the following:

denying the reality and seriousness of human undertakings, since, if we reject God's commandments and the eternal verities, there no longer remains anything but pure caprice, with everyone permitted to do as he pleases and incapable, from his own point of view, of condemning the points of view and acts of others. (Sartre 1993: 32)

Of course, it is only out of convenience that Sartre associates this charge with "the Christian standpoint" (1993: 32) exclusively – its substance alludes to the commitments of *all* brands of essentialism, of which Christianity is a mere example.

The key point in Sartre's characterization of this essentialist charge is that (a) because the philosophical project of ethics is, as all brands of essentialism maintain, fundamentally connected to the notion of essence, and (b) because existentialism breaks that connection where it asserts the precedence of existence before essence in the human condition, thereby denying that there is any essence of the human condition from which ethical prescriptions might derive, it follows that the fundamental commitments of existentialism provide only for a *relativist* ethics. In other words, if the project of ethics is to describe how the human being should ideally be based upon how the human being essentially is, but existentialism denies that the human condition has any essence beyond that which each individual human being defines for himself or herself, then the ethical question of how *we* should ideally be becomes the question of how *I* should ideally be. It follows from this, of course, that if the essence of the human condition is relative to the existence of the individual human being, as the fundamental commitments of existentialism suggest, then, once again, the fundamental commitments of existentialism provide only for a relativist ethics.

But of course, Sartre does not intend for the fundamental commitments of existentialism to give rise to ethical relativism, and thus, in his "Existentialism and Humanism," he defends existentialism as sort of *humanism*, in part by espousing an existentialist ethics. As Catherine Rau summarizes Sartre's understanding of existentialist humanism in her "Ethical Theory of Jean-Paul Sartre," "Existentialist humanism ... is the conviction that 'there is no other universe than a human universe, the universe of human subjectivity'" (1949: 536). As Sartre understands it, then, the humanism of existentialism merely underscores the emphasis that all brands of existentialism place upon subjectivity and, in particular, *human* subjectivity. As Rau continues, "This definition sums up Sartre's ethical theory and gives indications of the ontology and epistemology with which he seeks to

support that theory” (1949: 536). In other words, Sartre intends, in his “Existentialism and Humanism,” not only to espouse an existentialist ethics, but to support that ethics upon the fundamental commitments of existentialism as he understands them, thus abating, among other charges, the essentialist charge that existentialism necessarily gives rise to ethical relativism.

Prior to espousing an existentialist ethics, then, Sartre must explain the fundamental commitments upon which he will support that ethics. And although it is hard to draw the line where Sartre’s characterization of the fundamental commitments of existentialism ends and where his espousal of an existentialist ethics begins, he does lay a foundation for that espousal where he describes his understanding of existentialism’s first principle:

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is also what is called subjectivity, the name we are labeled with when charges are brought against us. (Sartre 1993: 36)

Clearly, this passage expresses Sartre’s recognition that existentialism’s fundamental commitments to the precedence of existence before essence in the human condition and, more concisely, to subjectivity, are what invite many of the charges existentialism faces, the foremost being, again, the essentialist charge of ethical relativism. To this end, then, Sartre moves to clarify and expand upon his characterization of the “first principle of existentialism” (1993: 36), asserting that “existentialism’s first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him” (1993: 36). Thus, existentialism’s “first move” (1993: 36) is to assert that, because the human condition is one in which existence precedes essence, and thus is also one in which essence is self-defining, not predefined, individual human beings are, indeed, *free* to define their essence, but they are also *responsible* for their essence.

As Sartre continues, however, this responsibility is much wider in scope than one might assume: “when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men” (1993: 36) and, of course, herein lies the beginning of Sartre’s espousal of an existentialist ethics. He expands the implications of the choices and actions of the individual human being to implicate *all* human beings. Moreover, in so doing, he not only foreshadows his espousal of an existential ethics, but also alludes to that ethics’ fundamental reliance upon a sort of *universalization*. Indeed, this reliance becomes even more apparent where Sartre adds, of the implicative scope of the individual human being’s choices and actions:

When we say that man chooses his own self, we mean that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that that in making this choice he also chooses all men. In fact, in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. (Sartre 1993: 37)

Thus, in so far as the individual human being defines his or her essence through his or her choices and actions, and, in so doing, chooses and acts how he or she believes *all* human beings should choose and act, it follows that how the individual human being defines his or

her essence implicates *all* human beings. In brief, Sartre concludes that “our responsibility is much greater than we might have supposed, because it involves all mankind” (1993: 37).

Sartre further characterizes the *specific* sort of universalization his existentialist ethics relies upon where he turns to more particular, hypothetical examples as means for explanation. He provides two such examples where he writes:

If I am a workingman and choose to join a Christian trade-union rather than be a communist, and if by being a member I want to show that the best thing for man is resignation, that the kingdom of man is not of this world, I am not only involving my own case – I want to be resigned for everyone. As a result, my action has involved all humanity. To take a more individual matter, if I want to marry, to have children; even if this marriage depends solely on my own circumstances or passion or wish, I am involving all humanity in monogamy and not merely myself. Therefore, I am responsible for myself and for everyone else. I am creating a certain image of man of my own choosing. (Sartre 1993: 37)

Indeed, it is from this hypothetical that Sartre offers another of his ubiquitous slogans: “In choosing myself, I choose man” (1993: 37). Clearly, Sartre means to suggest that, in choosing and acting, the individual human being is responsible not only for the definition of his or her own essence, but for that of *all* human beings, in so far as, given a particular set of circumstances surrounding a particular ethical dilemma, the individual human being’s choices and actions imply how *all* human beings should choose and act given the same set of circumstances surrounding the same ethical dilemma.

Thankfully, Sander Lee offers, in his “Central Role of Universalization in Sartrean Ethics,” additional insight into precisely *which* sort of universalization Sartre’s existentialist ethics relies upon. As Lee writes:

Paul Taylor, in his *Principles of Ethics*, distinguishes between three distinct meanings of the term “universalizability.”

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These three uses are labeled by Taylor as (1) Logical universalizability, (2) The universal applicability of a rule, and (3) The universal acceptability of a rule.

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Sartrean ethics would utilize the notion of universalization only in its first sense as logical universalizability and not in its other two senses. (Lee 1985: 59)

Thus, according to Lee, of the three sorts of universalization Taylor describes, Sartre’s existentialist ethics relies only upon the first, logical sort. Of his understanding of “logical universalizability” (1985: 59), Lee writes:

Logical universalizability applies to all evaluative and prescriptive judgments of actions in that such judgments are seen as entailing the universal judgment that all persons in circumstances which are identical in all of their morally relevant aspects ought to follow the same course of action. This use of the term places its emphasis on the logical consistency with which an individual constitutes his moral judgments. Within this context, there are no claims made as to how the individual ought to make such judgments or whether such judgments could be shown to be reflective of a set of moral principles which are objectively valid in the cognitivist sense. (Lee 1985: 60)

This is to say, then, that in so far as Sartre’s existentialist ethics relies specifically upon the logical sort of universalization, it asserts that, again, given a particular set of

circumstances surrounding a particular ethical dilemma, the individual human being's choices and actions imply an understanding of how *all* human beings should choose and act given the same circumstances surrounding the same ethical dilemma. In this manner, the choices and actions of the individual human being implicate *all* human beings. Moreover, because *this* sort of universalization does not reflect, as Lee puts it, any "moral principles which are objectively valid" (1985: 60), it seems, at least upon first glance, in keeping with the fundamental commitments of existentialism.

Having thus characterized his existentialist ethics' fundamental reliance upon logical universalization, Sartre moves to present the substance of that ethics, positing ethical prescriptions *per se* so as to properly refute his essentialist detractors' charge of ethical relativism. To this end, Sartre asserts:

Certainly, many people believe that when they do something, they themselves are the only ones involved, and when someone says to them, "What if everyone acted that way?" they shrug their shoulders and answer, "Everyone doesn't act that way." But really, one should always ask himself, "What would happen if everybody looked at things that way?" There is no escaping this disturbing thought except by a kind of double-dealing. A man who lies and makes excuses for himself by saying "Not everybody does that," is someone with an uneasy conscience, because the act of lying implies that a universal value is conferred upon the lie. (Sartre 1993: 38)

In this ethical prescription, then, Sartre maintains that, in choosing and acting, "one should always" (1993: 38) consider the implications of one's choices and actions, for in so choosing and acting, one is, again, responsible not only for the definition of one's own essence, but for that of *all* human beings. This is to say that, in choosing and acting, the individual human being confers upon his or her choices and actions a "universal value" (Sartre 1993: 38) such that *all* human beings are implicated. And thus, Sartre reiterates his ethical prescription that "every man ought to say to himself, 'Am I really the kind of man who has the right to act in such a way that humanity might guide itself by my actions?'" (1993: 39).

The substance of his existentialist ethics thus espoused, Sartre concludes the central project of his "Existentialism and Humanism," having shown that, at least in his mind, the philosophical project of ethics *is not*, in fact, fundamentally connected to the notion of essence. Accordingly, and to the extent that Sartre's existentialist ethics coheres with the fundamental commitments of existentialism, existentialism *does not* necessarily give rise to ethical relativism, a conclusion Sartre heralds as his essay draws to a close: "let us at once announce the discovery of a world of intersubjectivity; this is the world in which man decides what he is and what others are" (1993: 52). By logically universalizing his understanding of freedom and responsibility in the individual human being, Sartre lays a foundation for his proposition of ethical prescriptions *per se*, asserting that, because the choices and actions of the individual human being implicate *all* human beings, "one should always" (1993: 38) consider the implications of one's choices and actions, for in so choosing and acting, one is responsible not only for the definition of one's own essence, but for that of *all* human beings. And it is with the espousal of this existentialist ethics that Sartre claims to have answered the essentialist charge of ethical relativism: "I think

we have answered a number of the charges concerning existentialism. You see that it can not be taken for a philosophy of quietism, since it defines man in terms of action. ... Consequently, we are dealing here with an ethics of action and involvement” (1993: 50).

IV. On the Ethical Statements Dilemma in Sartre's Existentialist Ethics

As is perhaps true of all philosophies, the existentialist ethics Sartre espouses in his “Existentialism and Humanism” is problematic. And although the problems plaguing that ethics are likely numerous, one warrants particular attention, especially in so far it stems, in part, from that ethics' fundamental reliance upon logical universalization. As I will hereafter refer to it, this *ethical statements dilemma* in Sartre's existentialist ethics echoes the essentialist charge of ethical relativism and, accordingly, questions whether Sartre can support an existentialist ethics upon the fundamental commitments of existentialism. In particular, it questions which *sorts* of ethical statements, if any, Sartre can coherently posit relative to these fundamental commitments, and thus requires a characterization of the sorts of ethical statements ethicists have, at least historically, understood the philosophical project of ethics to provide for. As I will argue, the ethical statements dilemma in Sartre's existentialist ethics presents that ethics with a substantial problem, shedding light upon an incoherence between it and the fundamental commitments of existentialism, at least as Sartre understands them.

Historically, ethicists have understood the philosophical project of ethics to provide for two sorts of ethical statements. As Roger Hancock clarifies in the introduction to his *Twentieth Century Ethics*, such works as A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* and C. L. Stevenson's *Ethics and Language* segregate the overall project of ethics into two related projects: that of *metaethics* and that of *normative ethics* (1974: 5). In particular, Hancock credits the conception of this segregation to G. E. Moore, whose *Principia Ethica*, distinguishes between “two fundamentally different ways of interpreting what he [Moore] took to be the basic question of ethics ... ‘What is good?’” (1974: 4). Hancock explains this distinction where he writes:

The question ... could mean either (a) “What particular thing, or general kind of thing, is good?” in which case it would be answered by *e.g.* “What Smith did yesterday was good” or “Books are good,” or (b) “What is the meaning of the term ‘good?’” or, as Moore prefers to phrase it, “How is the good to be defined?” (Hancock 1974: 4)

From this, Hancock concludes that, in so segregating the project of ethics, “Moore ... introduced the distinction between normative ethics and meta-ethics as now understood ...” (1974: 4). As Hancock explains, the former sort of question belongs to the project of normative ethics, while the latter sort belongs to the project of metaethics (1974: 4).

Thus, in so far as Moore's segregation of the project of ethics is exhaustive, that project

provides for two corresponding sorts of ethical statements: normative ethical statements and metaethical statements. Hancock clarifies the difference between the two where he writes, of normative ethical statements, that “a normative ethical judgment is one in which an ethical predicate (such as ‘right,’ ‘wrong,’ ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ ‘obligatory,’ etc.) is *used* in the sense that it is actually ascribed to the subject, as in ‘Killing in self-defense is not wrong’” (1974: 3). Thus, normative ethical statements are concerned with the presentation, criticism, and so on of ethical prescriptions. For example, an ethical statement to the effect that one should always consider the universal implications of one’s choices and actions, as Sartre’s existentialist ethics maintains, would be of the normative ethical sort. Metaethical statements, on the other hand, differ substantially: “A meta-ethical statement, by contrast, might be defined as a statement *about* a normative statement which is not itself a normative statement” (1974: 3). As Hancock continues, “Roughly speaking, meta-ethical statements are statements which answer general logical and epistemological questions about normative ethical judgments ...” (1974: 4). Thus, contrary to normative ethical statements, metaethical statements are concerned with the nature of ethics *per se*, and, to this end, are also concerned with the nature of normative ethical statements *per se*. For example, an ethical statement to the effect that the project of ethics is fundamentally connected to the notion of essence, as essentialism maintains, would be of the metaethical sort.

Thus, given Hancock’s characterization of normative ethical and metaethical statements, and given Sartre’s understanding of the fundamental commitments of existentialism, the question arises as to which sort of ethical statement, if either, Sartre is able to coherently posit relative to these fundamental commitments. Whatever the case, it is at least clear that these fundamental commitments must *strictly constrain* that ability, particularly in so far as they assert the precedence of existence before essence in the human condition and, more concisely, subjectivity, for these fundamental commitments suggest an inability to coherently posit ethical statements that are valid for all human beings. In his “Existentialism and Humanism,” however, Sartre only *regards* that constraint in his proposition of metaethical statements; he *disregards* it in his proposition of normative ethical statements, and, to this end, opens his existentialist ethics to substantial questions of coherence.

As regards the coherence of Sartre’s proposition of metaethical statements, although he never *explicitly* posits such statements in his “Existentialism and Humanism,” he does posit one such statement *implicitly* and, relative to the fundamental commitments of existentialism, coherently. Indeed, in so far as (a) the fundamental commitments of existentialism deny that the human condition has any essence beyond that which each individual human being defines for himself or herself, and in so far as (b) Sartre makes it the central project of his “Existentialism and Humanism” to defend existentialism against the essentialist charge that, by breaking what essentialism maintains is the fundamental connection between the project of ethics and the notion of essence, the fundamental

commitments of existentialism necessarily give rise to ethical relativism, it follows that Sartre *must* posit, if only implicitly, the metaethical statement that the project of ethics *is not*, in fact, fundamentally connected to the notion of essence. In other words, Sartre's defense of existentialism against the essentialist charge of ethical relativism *implies* his proposition of a metaethical statement contrary to the substance of that charge, namely, that the project of ethics is fundamentally connected to the notion of essence. In turn, while the fundamental commitments of existentialism, along with the central project of Sartre's "Existentialism and Humanism," constrain his ability to posit metaethical statements, they do so only in so far as they prevent him from positing metaethical statements to the contrary of that metaethical statement which his defense of existentialism already implies. And although this is surely a criterion for coherence applicable to all statements, it follows that, because Sartre posits no additional metaethical statements in his "Existentialism and Humanism," let alone contradictory metaethical statements, where he implies the metaethical statement that the project of ethics is not fundamentally connected to the notion of essence, his proposition of metaethical statements coheres with the fundamental commitments of existentialism.

On the other hand, as regards the coherence of Sartre's proposition of normative ethical statements, where he posits those statements in a manner that implies their *objective validity*, rather than their *subjective validity*, they do not cohere with the fundamental commitments of existentialism. As Howard Caygill characterizes the distinction between objective and subjective validity in his *Kant Dictionary*:

Subjectively valid judgments ... require no pure concept of the understanding, but only the logical connection of perception in a thinking subject ... Objectively valid judgments, on the contrary, ... are manifest by the fact that they are universally and necessarily valid ... (Caygill 1995: 410)

Thus, although this distinction is not exclusively Kantian, Caygill understands it to distinguish between two manners in which statements may lay claim to validity. Simply put, whereas objectively valid statements are universally valid, subjectively valid statements are not, and thus, whereas objectively valid normative ethical statements are valid of all human beings, subjectively valid normative ethical statements are valid only of individual human beings, in particular, those who posit such statements. Thus, given this distinction, and given the fundamental commitments of existentialism to the precedence of existence before essence in the human condition and, more concisely, to subjectivity, it follows that Sartre's ability to posit normative ethical statements is constrained in so far as he can coherently posit only *subjectively* valid normative ethical statements. For to posit such statements as objectively valid would be to suggest that the substance of those statements is valid of *all* human beings, and thus it would also be to concede that the project of ethics is fundamentally connected to the notion of essence, a concession which Sartre must deny if he is to properly defend existentialism against the essentialist charge of ethical relativism.

And to be sure, there are places in his "Existentialism and Humanism" where Sartre's

proposition of normative ethical statements regards this constraint. Indeed, with the following, Lee clarifies Sartre's proposition of such statements in his "Central Role of Universalization in Sartrean Ethics":

when Sartre criticizes someone on moral grounds, he is doing so on the basis of his own freely chosen moral values, values whose validity springs only from their status as having been freely chosen by Sartre, and possessing no objective validity. In other words, if I choose to criticize someone as being morally "wrong" ... that moral judgment will have no objective validity in and of itself, but will be valid relative only to the set of moral values which I have created for myself on the basis of my condition as a free and responsible individual. (Lee 1985: 64)

Thus, as Lee responsibly notes, where Sartre posits normative ethical statements concerned with the *criticism* of ethical prescriptions, he must qualify those statements with a concession of their subjective validity. In so far as such is the case because, again, Sartre cannot coherently posit, relative to the fundamental commitments of existentialism, objectively valid normative ethical statements, it follows that the same must hold true of Sartre's proposition of normative ethical statements concerned with the *presentation* of ethical prescriptions. Where Sartre posits such normative ethical statements, however, he does not so qualify them, for to do so would be to concede the essentialist charge of ethical relativism.

Of course, Sartre's disregard for this constraint upon his ability to posit normative ethical statements stems, in part, from his reliance upon logical universalization as a support for his espousal of an existentialist ethics. To clarify, Sartre's defense of existentialism against the essentialist charge of ethical relativism relies largely upon his espousal of an existentialist ethics, one supported upon the fundamental commitments of existentialism as he understands them. In order to espouse such an ethics, however, Sartre must derive ethical prescriptions from the fundamental commitments of existentialism, a difficult task to be sure. Thus, as a means to support this derivation, Sartre relies upon an appeal to logical universalization, but of course, before that, he begins his espousal of an existentialist ethics with a relation of existentialism's most fundamental commitment: "existence precedes essence, or if you prefer, ... subjectivity must be the starting point" (1993: 34). From this he concludes, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself ..." (1993: 36). Moreover, because of this, the individual human being is free to define his or her essence, but is also responsible for that essence (1993: 36). In turn, by logically universalizing his understanding of the individual human being's freedom and responsibility, Sartre lays a foundation for his later proposition of ethical prescriptions. As he writes:

When we say that man chooses his own self, we mean that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that that in making this choice he also chooses all men.

.....
Thus, our responsibility is much greater than we might have supposed, because it involves all mankind. (Sartre 1993: 37)

Sartre concludes from this that, because the choices and actions of the individual human being implicate *all* human beings, "one should always" (1993: 38) consider the

implications of one's choices and actions, for in so choosing and acting, one is responsible not only for the definition of one's own essence, but for that of *all* human beings. But of course, such a normative ethical statement as this, which clearly presents an ethical prescription, requires that Sartre qualify it with a concession of its subjective validity, at least in so far as it is to cohere with the fundamental commitments of existentialism.

Nowhere, however, does Sartre so qualify such statements. Rather, his language implies their *objective* validity, particularly where he employs third-person constructions as a means to posit ethical prescriptions for *all* human beings. Thus, while Sartre's existentialist ethics' fundamental reliance upon logical universalization may lay a foundation for his proposition of ethical prescriptions, it does not thereby afford such normative ethical statements coherence with the fundamental commitments of existentialism. And indeed, this presents a substantial problem for Sartre: where he posits normative ethical statements, he must qualify them as either subjectively valid, in which case he undermines his defense of existentialism against the essentialist charge of ethical relativism, or objectively valid, in which case his existentialist ethics fails to cohere with the fundamental commitments of existentialism. Thus, no matter how Sartre qualifies the validity of the normative ethical statements he posits, he finds himself stuck. To the extent, then, that Sartre maintains, in his "Existentialism and Humanism," the objective validity of many of the normative ethical statements he posits, his proposition of such statements does not always cohere with the fundamental commitments of existentialism, and thus, in places, his espousal of an existentialist ethics breaks down.

V. On a Possible Defense of Sartre's Existentialist Ethics

Clearly, the ethical statements dilemma in Sartre's existentialist ethics sheds light upon an incoherence between that ethics and the fundamental commitments of existentialism, at least as Sartre understands them. From these fundamental commitments, Sartre derives his understanding of freedom and responsibility in the individual human being, and, in turn, by logically universalizing this understanding to implicate *all* human beings, he lays a foundation for his later proposition of ethical prescriptions. In this manner, and as a means to defend existentialism against the essentialist charge of ethical relativism, Sartre attempts to support an existentialist ethics upon the fundamental commitments of existentialism. Yet, as the ethical statements dilemma makes clear, no matter how Sartre qualifies the validity of the normative ethical statements he posits, his espousal of an existentialist ethics breaks down. Thus, in so far as he maintains the objective validity of many of the normative ethical statements he posits, Sartre fails in his attempt to defend existentialism against the essentialist charge of ethical relativism, and, in turn, the ethical statements dilemma in his existentialist ethics substantiates that charge.

Nonetheless, one may still be able to defend Sartre's *attempt* to espouse an existentialist, even in light of this dilemma. This is to say that, even if the espousal of a non-relativist,

existentialist ethics is as impossible as the essentialist charge of ethical relativism suggests, one may still defend Sartre's attempt to do so, if not by defending his existentialist ethics *per se*, by shedding light upon a problematic assumption implicit in the essentialist charge that that ethics faces. Indeed, as I will argue, in so far as (a) the essentialist charge of ethical relativism implicitly advocates the contrary of ethical relativism, namely, ethical *absolutism*, and in so far as (b) absolutist ethics are no more exempt from the problem of relativity than are relativist ethics, it follows that the essentialist charge of ethical relativism is perhaps less potent than it may initially seem.

As Sartre suggests in the beginning of his "Existentialism and Humanism," the essentialist charge of ethical relativism stems from a more fundamental fear that, upon a denial of "God's commandments and the eternal verities, there no longer remains anything but pure caprice, with everyone permitted to do as he pleases and incapable, from his own point of view, of condemning the points of view and acts of others" (1993: 32). Thus, at least according to Sartre, the essentialist charge of ethical relativism stems from a more fundamental fear that to deny the eternal verities would be, in the end, to render the philosophical project of ethics impossible. For in so far as (a) the project of ethics is to describe how the human being should ideally be based upon how the human being essentially is, and in so far as (b) existentialism denies that the human condition has any essence beyond that which each individual human being defines for himself or herself, it follows that existentialism perverts the ethical question of how *we* should ideally be into the question of how *I* should ideally be, and thus gives rise to ethical relativism. Accordingly, the *ultimate* fear behind the essentialist charge of ethical relativism is that, given a denial of the eternal verities upon which the project of ethics depends, the societal infrastructures necessary for the sustenance of civilization would undergo a sort of anarchic, entropic degeneration. Implicit in the essentialist charge of ethical relativism, then, is a clear "need to avoid relativism" (Rorty 1991: 28), that is, a need to maintain, for various reasons, an objective definition of the human condition.

Indeed, in his *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Richard Rorty offers an even more precise characterization of this essentialist need to avoid relativism:

The ritual invocation of the 'need to avoid relativism' is most comprehensible as an expression of the need to preserve certain habits of contemporary European life. These are the habits nurtured by the Enlightenment, and justified by it in terms of an appeal to Reason ... (Rorty 1991: 28)

Thus, Rorty characterizes the need to avoid relativism as, more precisely, the "need to preserve certain habits of contemporary European life" (1991: 28), particularly those cultivated and justified by the Enlightenment, for example, civil discourse, mutual respect, tolerance, and so on. As Rorty continues, however, the need to preserve such habits stems from yet another, more fundamental need for objective truth:

The tradition in Western culture which centers around the notion of the search for Truth, a tradition which runs from the Greek philosophers through the Enlightenment, is the clearest example of the attempt to find a sense in one's existence by turning ... to objectivity. The idea of Truth as something to be pursued for its own sake ... is the central theme of this tradition. (Rorty 1991: 21)

Thus, at least according to Rorty, the need to avoid relativism is indicative of a concordant need for objective truth, the “central theme” (1991: 21), as he puts it, of the Western philosophical tradition. It follows that, in so far as the need to avoid relativism is implicit in the essentialist charge of ethical relativism, and in so far as that need may be more precisely characterized as a need for objective truth, one may understand the essentialist charge of ethical relativism as implying the following dichotomous claim: that (a) existentialist subjectivity is problematic, in so far as it provides for a subjective definition of the human condition, and, to this end, can provide only for a relativist ethics, and that (b) essentialist objectivity is, by comparison, unproblematic, in so far as it provides for an objective definition of the human condition, and thus is able to provide for a contrarily *absolutist* ethics. Indeed, Sartre himself takes note of this implicit advocacy of ethical absolutism where he writes, “Can it be that what really scares them in the doctrine I shall try to present here is that it leaves to man a possibility of choice?” (1993: 33). Clearly, then, as Sartre understands it, and as Rorty’s characterizations ultimately suggest, the essentialist charge of ethical relativism implies that an unproblematic ethics is an absolutist ethics. Perhaps, then, Sartre is correct in his wager; what truly frightens his essentialist detractors is the possibility that his existentialist ethics might afford some reasonable degree of discretion when it comes to answering the questions of normative ethics.

But to be sure, the advocacy of ethical absolutism implicit in the essentialist charge of ethical relativism is, at best, an imperfect satiation of the essentialist appetite for objective truth, for there is a sense in which absolutist ethics are subject to the very same problems as relativist ethics. Indeed, as Sartre clarifies, allegorically:

There was a madwoman who had hallucinations; someone used to speak to her on the telephone and give her orders. Her doctor asked her, “Who is it who talks to you?” She answered, “He says it’s God.” What proof did she really have that it was God? If an angel comes to me, what proof is there that it’s an angel? And if I hear voices, what proof is there that they come from heaven and not from hell, or from the subconscious, or a pathological condition? ... If a voice addresses me, it is always for me to decide that this is the angel’s voice; if I consider that such an act is a good one, it is I who will choose to say that it is good rather than bad. (Sartre 1993: 39)

Thus, as Sartre’s allegory points out, if the project of ethics is to describe how the human being should ideally be based upon how the human being essentially is, then even if there did exist an essence of the human condition from which ethical prescriptions for how the human being should ideally be might derive, that essence, that objective definition of the human condition would still be subject to the *relative interpretations* of individual human beings. Indeed, Sartre further clarifies this interpretive relativity of objective truths where he writes:

For example, when a military officer takes the responsibility for an attack and sends a certain number of men to death, he chooses to do so, and in the main he alone makes the choice. Doubtless, orders come from above, but they are too broad; he interprets them, and on this interpretation depend the lives of ten or fourteen or twenty men. (Sartre 1993: 39)

Thus, the manner in which the individual human being acts upon his or her interpretation of a broad, objective definition of the human condition is not unlike the manner in which a

military officer must act upon his or her interpretation of comparably broad orders. Accordingly, there is a sense in which absolutist ethics are no more exempt from the problem of relativity than are relativist ethics. For in so far as absolutist ethics must themselves derive from individual human beings' relative interpretations of an essence of the human condition, absolutist ethics offer little more than a mere illusion of absolutism. It thus follows that the essentialist charge of ethical relativism facing Sartre's existentialist ethics wanes in its seeming potency, for its implicit advocacy of ethical absolutism is subject to the very same criticisms it levels against Sartre's existentialist ethics. And to be sure, what is a problem for the thesis *and* antithesis is, at least within a dialogic context, a problem for neither.

VI. Conclusion

In the first part of this essay, I characterized existentialism as a movement in reaction against what were, prior to its conception, the established philosophical methods for describing the human experience and defining the human condition. To this end, I argued that existentialism focuses much of its philosophical energies upon a reexamination of the human condition, and that, from this reexamination, concludes that the essence of the human condition does not, in fact, precede the existence of individual human beings. Following this, I turned to Sartre's landmark "Existentialism and Humanism" for a definitively Sartrean characterization of the fundamental commitments of existentialism. I then characterized, in the second part of this essay, the essentialist charge of ethical relativism against which Sartre attempts to defend existentialism. In so far as that defense relies largely upon Sartre's espousal of an existentialist ethics, I then moved to characterize that ethics and, in particular, its fundamental reliance upon logical universalization. In the third part of this essay, I identified the ethical statements dilemma in Sartre's existentialist ethics, and argued that that dilemma presents Sartre with a substantial problem: where he posits normative ethical statements, he must qualify them as either subjectively valid, in which case he undermines his defense of existentialism against the essentialist charge of ethical relativism, or objectively valid, in which case his existentialist ethics fails to cohere with the fundamental commitments of existentialism. Of course, I concluded from this that, regardless of how Sartre qualifies the validity of the normative ethical statements he posits, he finds himself stuck. To the extent, then, that Sartre maintains the objective validity of many of the normative ethical statements he posits, I argued that his proposition of such statements does not always cohere with the fundamental commitments of existentialism, and thus, in places, his espousal of an existentialist ethics breaks down. Finally, in the fourth part of this essay, I argued that, even in light of the ethical statements dilemma in Sartre's existentialist ethics, one may still defend Sartre's *attempt* to espouse such an ethics. Indeed, in so far as (a) the essentialist charge of ethical relativism implicitly advocates ethical absolutism, and in so far as (b) absolutist ethics are no more exempt from the problem of relativity than are relativist ethics, I concluded that the essentialist charge of ethical relativism is, indeed,

less potent than it may initially seem, for its implicit advocacy of ethical absolutism is subject to the very same criticisms it levels against Sartre's existentialist ethics.

Thus, one may still defend Sartre's attempt to espouse an existentialist ethics, even if that ethics *per se* is problematic. Indeed, after a critical examination of that ethics, it is clear that (a) the fundamental commitments of existentialism preclude Sartre from coherently positing objectively valid normative ethical statements, that (b) because he nonetheless posits such statements in his espousal of an existentialist ethics, his defense of existentialism against the essentialist charge of ethical relativism breaks down, and finally, that (c) although this incoherence presents a substantial problem for Sartre, one may still defend his attempt to espouse an existentialist ethics.

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[1] *Essentialism* is a broad philosophical term that, unlike the term *existentialism*, does not necessarily refer to a cohesive school of thought. As it is understood in Crowell's anthropic sense, however, it does suggest a sort of antithesis to existentialism, and it is essentialism in this particular sense that this essay hereafter concerns itself.

[2] Although one may read Sartre as positing the incoherent claims that (a) existence precedes essence in the human condition, and thus, that the human condition is self-defining, not predefined, and that (b) the human condition is essentially self-defining, to read Sartre as such is uncharitable. It is clear that Sartre's understanding of the human condition as self-defining is a function of his understanding that any definition of the human condition is a product of the individual human being's choices and actions, and that these choices and actions are, in turn, contingent upon the individual human being's existence. Thus, one may read Sartre more charitably as positing the claim that the human condition is essentially *existent*, that is, that its essence derives from the existence of individual human beings, and that, to this end, existence precedes essence.