

SARTRE AND CONTEMPORARY MORAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Much has been written about Sartre's contribution to the field of psychology. His phenomenology as whole and his proposal for an existential psychoanalysis in particular, have contributed to the field of humanist psychology in general and existential psychology specifically. Less has been written, however, about Sartre's contribution to the field of moral psychology apart from the occasional analysis of his notion of "bad faith" or the use, by moral philosophers, of some of his colourful examples to illustrate a point. In this article, I want to examine an issue in contemporary moral psychology in light of Sartre's philosophy, particularly as he develops it in his early major work, Being and Nothingness. The issue that I wish to address is that of practical reason. In contrast to both the neo-Humean and neo-Kantian positions, I want to explore a Sartrean alternative, which situates moral motivation neither in ordinary empirical desires, nor strictly in practical reason. Moral motivation, on a Sartrean account, is rather to be understood in ontological terms as an expression of the desire to be.

I. The Possibility of Practical Reason

A number of philosophers working in the field of moral psychology have responded to the Humean account of moral motivation, implied in Bernard Williams' rejection of so-called "external" reasons, by giving, in one guise or another, a rationalist or a Kantian-inspired account. I am thinking in particular of the responses given by R. Jay Wallace, Christine Korsgaard, and David Velleman. Williams distinguishes between internal reasons, which rely upon antecedent desires within the agent in order to be effective, and external reasons, the rationality of which is capable of motivating action independently of the agent's pre-existing desires.¹ External reasons, understood in this way, have the power to give rise to the requisite

¹ Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 20–39.

motivation in the agent. Williams finds such a notion implausible and argues that there must be something already existing in the agent's subjective motivational set that gives rise to (moral) action. Reason plays a secondary role in this process (often understood in means-ends terms), subordinate to desires. R. Jay Wallace argues that the rationalist position can withstand the challenge of the Humean arguments. Wallace uses Thomas Nagel's distinction between motivated and unmotivated desires to help make his case. On his interpretation of Nagel's concepts:

a motivated desire is one whose associated evaluative belief admits of a rationalizing explanation, where the desire is formed because the agent has arrived at the evaluative belief. A crucial assumption here is that the rational explanation for an evaluative belief may account for the formation of the motivated desire as well, so that the reasons which explain the belief will equally be reasons for the motivated desire. To say this, it seems, is to admit that it is an independent principle or norm of rationality that one should desire in accordance with one's evaluative beliefs, where this means that one should desire those ends and activities one takes to be desirable, to the extent one takes them to be desirable.²

Rationality has a role not only in helping us to achieve what we do in fact desire, but also in helping us determine what is desirable. Our response to reason's judgment about what is desirable can be said to demonstrate the efficacy of reason. In this sense, Wallace suggests that reason is indeed capable of motivating human action.

David Velleman proposes a different solution to the problem concerning skepticism about practical reason. He thinks that the debate that has been inspired by William's distinction embodies a "false dichotomy."³ Velleman removes this dilemma or dichotomy by reinterpreting its terms. Instead of opposing external reasons to internal ones, Velleman suggests that we understand reasons for acting as "features of a single kind, whose influence depends on a single inclination." (PPR, 705) The inclination of which he speaks is not one that "distinguishes some agents from others, but rather an inclination that distinguishes agents from non-agents." (PPR, 705)

² R. Jay Wallace, "How to Argue About Practical Reason," *Mind*, New Series, vol. 99, no. 395 (1990): 355–85, here 366.

³ David J. Velleman, "The Possibility of Practical Reason," *Ethics*, vol. 106, no. 4 (1996): 694–726, here 695. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PPR.

Velleman attempts to resolve the internal reasons versus external reasons debate by making a particular kind of inclination a condition of agency. It is the particular character of this inclination that makes possible a form of the external view or, more accurately, overcomes the division between the two views. This inclination itself implies rationality or implies the effective role of rationality in moral action.

Of course, understanding desire or inclination in this way represents a significant shift from the classic Humean position. As Velleman tells us the desire or inclination he has in mind is different from the individual desires that are often understood to be at play and that distinguishes agents from each other. For instance, on the Humean view, our desire to be healthy or lead a healthy lifestyle is not an end pursued primarily because of reason, although reason may help us in determining the means for such a pursuit. This end, like the other ends of human choice and action, is determined by our desires. Some desires might have more immediate ends, such as the desire for chocolate or for a cigarette, whereas other desires may have ends the fulfillment of which may be more long term, such as the desire for good health. In either case, it is specific empirical desires or a collection of these desires that move us. The inclination that Velleman has in mind cannot be adequately characterized in terms of short- or long-term ends. This inclination, he tells us, is ultimately our “inclination towards autonomy.” (PPR, 725) But what does he mean by this?

Velleman thinks that a defence of practical reason must distinguish between the formal and the substantive object of practical reason. If one takes the object of practical reasoning to be “figuring out what to do” or figuring out “the best thing to do” for instance, then, according to Velleman, one has only stated the formal object of practical reasoning. The enterprise of practical reasoning must, in addition to its formal object, have a substantive object, just as a game, in addition to having the formal object of winning, must have a substantive object, which determines that of which winning consists (such as scoring more goals). Velleman characterizes the substantive object of reason in terms of its constitutive aim. He argues that just as theoretical reasoning has the constitutive aim of arriving at true belief, so practical reasoning has the constitutive aim of acting autonomously. Acting autonomously, on Velleman’s view, consists in consciously controlling one’s behaviour, as opposed to our merely reflexive or somewhat automatic actions and reactions. He characterizes the goal of action as follows:

What is this goal? A hint lies in the fact that consciously controlling one's behaviour is not something that one can do without aiming to. Maybe, then, the aim without which there is no conscious control of behaviour is simply the aim of being in conscious control of one's behaviour. If so, then the constitutive aim of action will turn out, in Kantian fashion, to be autonomy. (PPR, 719)

I am not fundamentally opposed to the approach to this issue taken by Velleman, but I want to develop an alternative account that operates from a different framework for understanding both desire and human action and therefore focusses on different features of human experience. The account that I am developing is influenced not by Hume or Kant, but rather by Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre offers an account of human desire that provides choice and action with a substantive object, but this object is not autonomy, even if Sartre is famous for promoting a conception of freedom. The substantive object of human choice and action on Sartre's account, at least in his early work, is to be understood as emanating from the human desire to be.

II. Sartre's Alternative View of Desire

What does Sartre mean by the desire to be? This desire seems to fit neither the Humean notion of an empirical, physiological desire nor the Kantian inspired inclination for autonomy that Velleman describes. Sartre's account of desire is an ontological one, but one the reality of which is expressed in our ordinary empirical desires. For Sartre, the desire to be is to be understood as our desire to be complete, or to experience ourselves as complete. To experience ourselves thus is to experience ourselves as both subject and object. Sartre characterizes our subjective experience as being-for-itself. Consciousness exists as a presence to itself just as it is a presence to the world.⁴ He characterizes the world of objects as being-in-itself. That dimension of reality characterized as being-in-itself lacks transcendence or consciousness or a presence to itself. It "is what it is." (BN, 74) It exists as complete in itself.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, (tr.) Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 73–79. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BN.

In contrast to being-in-itself, being-for-itself, the being of human consciousness, exists as a lack, as something incomplete. Sartre believed that we are moved by a desire for completeness, to become an in-itself-for-itself, a conception of being that corresponds to the traditional Christian notion of God:

This is why the possible is projected in general as what the for-itself lacks in order to become in-itself-for-itself. The fundamental value that presides over this project is exactly the in-itself-for-itself—that is, the ideal of a consciousness that would be the foundation of its own being-in-itself through the pure consciousness it would have of itself. It is this ideal that can be called God. (BN, 566)

Why are we moved thus? Sartre's own view is couched in Romantic/Christian mythology even if he rejects both worldviews. Both Christianity and Romanticism possess powerful myths of a fall that forever alters human experience. According to Christianity, Adam's disobedience or original sin destroyed human innocence, made us aware of our nakedness, and alienated us from God, nature, and each other. Likewise, according to Romanticism, the evolution of human consciousness gave rise to an awareness of our individuality—our separation from nature, our fellow human beings, and ultimately from our own selves. This awareness divides our experience into both a subject and an object dimension. We come to view our fundamental experience in subjective terms and the external world as objective. Thus, the Christian notion of sin evolves or transforms, in the context of Romanticism, into the concept of alienation. As mentioned above, Sartre rejects both the Christian and Romantic accounts of human nature, but he thinks that these myths reveal a certain truth about the human condition.

He expresses the truth that these myths reveal in a chapter of *Being and Nothingness* titled "The Existence of Others." In particular, his discussion of the Other, the look, and shame reveal their significance. He tells us:

My original fall is the existence of the Other. Shame—like pride—is the apprehension of myself as a nature although that very nature escapes me and is unknowable as such. Strictly speaking, it is not that I perceive myself losing my freedom in order to become a thing, but my nature is—over there, outside my lived freedom—as a given attribute of this being which I am for the Other. (BN, 263)

And further in that same chapter:

Shame is the feeling of an original fall, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have “fallen” into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am. (BN, 288–89)

And finally,

To put on clothes is to hide one’s object-state; it is to claim the right of seeing without being seen; that is, to be pure subject. This is why the Biblical symbol of the fall after the original sin is the fact that Adam and Eve “know that they are naked.” The reaction to shame will consist exactly in apprehending as an object the one who apprehended my own object-state. (BN, 289)

Thus, the human condition is to be understood in terms of our divided experience. On the one hand, we exist as a first-person perspective on the world, a subject who is present to the world. On the other hand, we exist as objects in the world just as trees, rocks, cars, and houses exist. The existence of the Other, and in particular the Other’s look, makes us aware of the object side of our being. It is this awareness of being objects for others, just as others are objects for us, that gives rise to this particular desire for being. According to Sartre, we want to experience ourselves from the perspective of an Other in order to comprehend ourselves completely (objectively and subjectively). Since we cannot literally occupy the perspective of the Other, we must internalize this otherness and, in doing so, view our self as an object. Indeed, the image of the self as a complete thing or as an object that inhabits us (an ego) is a hypostatization of consciousness that results from this interdependent relation with the Other.

But even though Sartre works within a Romantic (and Christian influenced) framework for understanding being, one which accounts for the desire for wholeness or completion, he recognizes the impossibility of our achieving the aim of this desire. The absurdity of the human condition lies in the disproportion that characterizes our being. This disproportion is to be understood in terms of the tension between what we fundamentally desire and the impossibility of finding fulfilment. Just as we cannot experience the look of the Other while simultaneously experiencing the Other’s eyes as objects (BN, 258), so we cannot in general experience ourselves as objects at the same time as we are experiencing ourselves as subjects. This is what it is to be human. This does not remove the desire in question because we know that the Other holds the key to what we are. He or

she sees me and knows me in a way that I never can. This is why late in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre proposes his existential psychoanalysis. Like the empirical psychoanalysis of Freud and his disciples, existential psychoanalysis recognizes the need for the perspective of otherness (in this case represented by the analyst) in attempting to understand the person. What differentiates these two forms of psychoanalysis is their aim. Empirical psychoanalysis aims at identifying the complex whereas Sartre's proposed form aims at identifying the original choice or the fundamental project. The fundamental project can be understood as the general project of being, but also as the more specific project of becoming a self, a project which is a particular expression of the former. Understood in these terms, the self takes the form of a completed thing, an ideal that expresses the value implied by the desire to be God.

But what kind of choice is this? The notion of choice that Sartre employs to characterize the original choice is not a choice in the everyday sense in which we use this term. It is not a matter of deliberation or a weighing up of options. This original choice precedes all deliberation and logic. It is better characterized as a fundamental attitude (a term that Sartre uses as well to characterize this phenomenon). Sartre describes it as follows:

Existential psychoanalysis seeks to determine the original choice. The original choice operating in the face of the world and being the choice of position in the world is total like the complex; it is prior to logic like the complex. It is this which decides the attitude of the person when confronted with logic and principles; therefore there can be no possibility of questioning it in conformance to logic. It brings together in a prelogical synthesis the totality of the existent, and as such it is the center of reference for an infinity of polyvalent meanings. (BN, 570)

This pre-logical choice or attitude is that with which we face the world and it determines the specific character of our fundamental project. I say the specific character because in one sense everyone's project is the same. It is the project of becoming God or becoming complete which expresses our desire to be. But in another sense, this project is very specific and individual. One's project of being gets expressed through the many subordinate projects that one engages in. One's fundamental attitude (positive, negative, determined, etc.) informs the project with one's personality. It is this choice or fundamental attitude that unifies the person and her various life projects.

In his later work, particularly his notebooks for a work on ethics, which was never completed, Sartre discusses the possibility of an

existential conversion. He introduces this notion already in *Being and Nothingness*, but does not elaborate on it. Instead, he defers discussion of this notion to his later promised work on ethics. The conversion results from a recognition of one's failure to be.⁵ The conversion is an ethical conversion in an important sense, since the shift in one's project moves from aiming at the impossible goal of being to the more authentic goal of a finite creature, which is expressed in the project of doing. The latter project recognizes the limited nature of being human and provokes a relation with the Other that moves away from appropriation and identification (requirements of the project of being) and toward solidarity with others. Exploring the implications of an existentialist conversion to my current thesis would be an interesting project in itself, but I must leave that for another article. The fundamental desire that motivates the project of being and that gets transformed by conversion into the project of doing is the desire on which I want to focus in offering a Sartrean understanding of the debate concerning practical reason.

III. Sartre: Desire and the Goal of Human Action

Now, how does all of this relate to Velleman's discussion of the goal or aim of human action? Velleman, in response to the internalist/externalist debate, suggests that the dilemma is false because there is a sense in which reason is not independent of desire or inclination. Reason, on this view, is dependent on an inclination, but that inclination is precisely one by virtue of which one can be called a rational agent. It is an inclination towards rationality or an inclination to be susceptible to reasons. Sartre, as well, characterizes the fundamental project in terms of desire. However, whereas Velleman's inclination towards reason is what determines whether or not one is a rational agent, Sartre's fundamental desire is characteristic of being human (not necessarily a rational agent). It is this desire that *moves* us towards becoming persons, since it is a desire that unifies our personality by way of our fundamental project. In his discussion of existential psychoanalysis, Sartre characterizes this desire in the following terms:

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

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, (tr.) David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 472.

result of an a priori description 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. The original project which is expressed in each of our empirically observable tendencies is then the project of being...the desire to be by no means exists first in order to cause itself to be expressed subsequently by desires a posteriori. There is nothing outside of the symbolic expression which it finds in concrete desires. There is not first a single desire of being, then a thousand particular feelings, but the desire to be exists and manifests itself only in and through jealousy, greed, love of art, cowardice, courage, and a thousand contingent, empirical expressions which always cause human reality to appear to us only as manifested by a particular man, by a specific person. (BN, 565)

Sartre is not denying the role that physiology plays in an explanation of desire, but he is rather emphasizing what he takes to be desire's ontological basis. The study of desire is not exhausted in an account of the ways that we attempt to satisfy our physical urges. Beyond strictly physical desires lay the desire for fulfilment, love, recognition, achievement, self-respect, self-esteem, and so on. The basis for these, and ultimately that which shapes the even more straightforwardly physical desires is the desire expressed in the project of being. This desire is not to be thought of in reductionist or causal terms as if there were some basic desire prior to the more specific desires that we possess. As Sartre tells us in the quote above—this desire only exists in the particular desires that individual people experience.⁶ The various particular empirical desires do not stand in relation to the desire to be as exemplars to a Platonic universal, but rather they give reality to this desire, the only reality that it has. The desire expressed in the project of being provides a way of making sense of the psychological tendency to want to move toward a unified personality, a structure that is endorsed by Christine Korsgaard and Harry Frankfurt.⁷ The basis of this unity, according to Sartre, lies

⁶ Admittedly, it sounds strange to think of certain mundane empirical desires as expressions of the desire *to be*. Does my desire for asparagus express this more fundamental desire? In a sense, for Sartre, the answer is yes. My physical hunger is an important factor, but I could have satisfied that by eating bananas or bread. My tastes, of course, play a role, but I believe that taste itself would reflect part of the particularity of my project on Sartre's view.

⁷ Christine M. Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1989): 101–32, "Self-Constitution in the Ethics of Plato and Kant," in *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 100–27; and Harry G. Frankfurt, "Identification and Wholehearted-

in the responsibility one takes for one's being, including the actions that express the character of one's project. In agreement with Kant, Sartre rejects the Humean account of selfhood as an idea based on impressions that are united by memory and imagination. Such a picture does not adequately account for the unity of the personality. On the other hand, and in agreement with Locke, he rejects the notion of positing a separate substance as an explanation of the self. Sartre tells us:

But what each one of us requires in his very effort to comprehend another is that he should never have to resort to this idea of substance which is inhuman because it is well this side of the human. Finally the fact is that the being considered does not crumble into dust, and one can discover in him that unity—for which substance was only a caricature—which must be a unity of responsibility, a unity agreeable or hateful, blameable and praiseworthy, in short personal. This unity, which is the being of the man under consideration, is a free unification, and this unification cannot come after a diversity which it unifies. (BN, 561)

It seems to me that this unity of responsibility, which precedes the diversity that it unifies, arises from the desire to be or, more specifically, the desire to be the foundation of one's own being, a desire the value of which is expressed in the project of being-in-itself-for-itself. It is this desire that offers an alternative understanding of the goal of action to the one offered up by Velleman.

Velleman, as discussed earlier, sees autonomy as providing a substantive aim for practical reason and a constitutive goal for action. He goes on to characterize autonomy in terms of having conscious control over one's behaviour. For Sartre, the goal of action is to be ultimately understood in terms of the project of being.⁸ This project is motivated by desire, but like the inclination for rationality that Velleman describes, this is not an ordinary empirical desire. It is a desire that, like the inclination for rationality, precedes the actual engagement of practical reason. The difference lies in the fact that the inclination for rationality or reasons that Velleman presents is a condition of one being a rational agent to begin with, whereas the

ness," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 159–76.

⁸ Of course, as I discuss above, the project that emanates from this fundamental desire may be converted from *being* to *doing*, but what I am concerned with primarily in this article is the motivating effect of this desire and its relation to the internal/external reasons debate.

desire for being that Sartre describes is concerned with the attitude that one will take in the face of reasons or of logic. One's fundamental attitude towards life will make one more or less susceptible to reasons in the sense that Velleman talks about, but it will not necessarily establish a definite boundary between those who are and those who are not rational agents. On the Sartrean account, people are more or less rational, or are more or less responsive to reasons. One's attitude towards reason or reasons will shape the character of one's project, which is really to say, will shape one's character.

It is this fundamental attitude or choice that determines one's end or the specific nature of one's project and that subsequently determines one's attitude towards empirical desires on the one hand, and reason on the other. Neither empirical desires nor reason adequately characterize one's motivation to action. One's fundamental attitude can make one the kind of person that acts in opposition to normal empirical desires or inclinations, or it can move one to act in opposition to reason. (BN, 443) It is this attitude, or the choice of ends that arises from it, that determines whether a reason is internal or external, and it is thus more basic than either.

The substantive goal of action then, on a Sartrean view, is to attain completion, to become an in-itself-for-itself. Of course this goal, unlike the goal of autonomous action, is an unrealizable one. As I mentioned earlier, Sartre accepts this as the goal of human desire while rejecting the possibility of attaining this aim. It is the striving itself that gives life meaning, but it would not be meaningful if it did not have a recognizable end—an end which nonetheless is unattainable. (BN, 202–203)

Does this mean that Sartre is an internalist in the context of the debate associated with Williams? One might be tempted to assume so based on the fact that humans are moved by a fundamental desire that precedes reason, but such a conclusion would be premature. It seems to me that Sartre, like Velleman, might regard this debate as invoking a false dilemma. Reason does appear to play a role subordinate to the desire for being in Sartre's philosophy, but this desire, like the inclination towards rationality, is not an ordinary empirical desire of the kind normally referred to in the internal-external reasons debate. Reason may not be capable of motivating action on its own, independent of this desire and the fundamental attitude that accompanies it (a condition that would be necessary for a strictly external reasons account), but on the other hand, this desire is quite indeterminate when it comes to reason. It can accept reason's force as authoritative and capable of moving one towards action in the way that Velleman's rational agent does, or it can be indifferent

towards reason. It is not like Velleman's inclination towards reason in which either you have it or you do not. It is also not like the ordinary Humean account whereby particular empirical desires must be present in order to motivate one to act in accordance with reason. Sartre's phenomenology rejects a sharp split between the internal and the external. Ontologically speaking, both reason and our ordinary empirical desires are subordinate to the more fundamental desire for being. We can choose to act in accordance with our empirical desires or passions, or in accordance with reason (choose in the fundamental sense of taking an attitude toward either of these secondary attitudes). On the other hand, reason and empirical desires are that which concretely express this desire that constitutes human reality. Without them, this desire has no reality.

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