

Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*

THOMAS BALDWIN

Sartre presented 'Existentialism and Humanism'¹ to a popular audience in Paris late in 1945.² As he implies in the discussion which is appended to the text of the lecture (pp. 57–58), he was here simplifying his views so as to make them intelligible to a wide audience.³ In this he succeeded only too well; the lecture has become exceedingly well known and has been regarded as a definitive presentation not only of Sartre's philosophy at the time, but also of 'existentialism'. One thing I hope to show in this essay is that this is not a sensible view to take; Sartre's text requires a good deal of interpretation and qualification in the light of his other writings of the period, and what emerges is a position which is uniquely his own. One way in which this can be seen is by considering Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism' of 1947⁴ which is a response to Sartre's lecture and is, indeed, Heidegger's only direct response to Sartre's work. In the lecture Sartre had associated Heidegger with himself as an 'existential atheist' (p. 26), but in his letter Heidegger emphatically dissociates himself both from atheism and from existentialism as characterized by Sartre, and goes on to criticize the position advanced by Sartre in the lecture. Yet despite the popular exaggeration of the significance of Sartre's lecture, it is certainly worth studying; for not only is it short and accessible, though in some respects misleading, it is also one of Sartre's few indications of the positive ethical theory which so many of his writings require but do not supply.

Very briefly, Sartre's aim in his lecture is to exhibit existentialism as an optimistic account of the human condition (pp. 44, 56), in the sense that each of us has the possibility of living a life worth living. This conclusion is not far from the theological thesis that each of us has the

¹ Sartre's title is 'L'Existentialisme est un humanisme', whose meaning is distorted in Mairé's translation of it. Despite this error, Mairé's translation is largely reliable, although his introduction is not. My references are to the 1948 edition (Methuen: London).

² The occasion is described by S. de Beauvoir in *The Force of Circumstances* (Penguin: London, 1968), 46.

³ According to Sartre's friend François Jeanson, Sartre even came to regret the publication of the lecture. Cf. F. Jeanson, *La problématique Morale et la pensée de Sartre* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 36.

⁴ In M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, D. M. Krell (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1978).

possibility of salvation; but Sartre is emphatic that God does not exist (p. 28), so the possibility of salvation has to be understood in secular terms. This is, indeed, one reason why existentialism is a 'humanism', by which Sartre means here that the values in terms of which human life is worth living are imposed by us upon ourselves (this is another point Heidegger rejects). 'Humanism' is, however, a dangerous word for Sartre to use, for it is also associated with the thesis that we should be guided in the conduct of our lives by a simple love of humanity. This is a thesis Sartre had ridiculed in his earlier book *Nausea*⁵ (pp. 168ff.), and in *E&H* Sartre seeks to maintain his distance from a humanism of this kind (pp. 54–55). Yet other aspects of Sartre's position in *E&H* bring him rather closer to it than he admits: for does he not here proclaim respect for human freedom as a fundamental value whose recognition by us is an essential element of that self-realization 'as truly human' (p. 56) which he presents as within our reach? A few years later Sartre would have responded to this challenge by insisting that there is no question of achieving his ideal respect for others without a radical egalitarian transformation of society that goes beyond anything conceived within the simple humanism he rejects; only within such a transformed society can we attain the 'true and positive humanism' which in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*⁶ (p. 800) he contrasts with the 'bourgeois humanism' he had ridiculed in *Nausea*. An important question concerning *E&H* to which I shall return is how far this response is actually implicit in the position there advocated. Although attributing it to Sartre at this time helps to make sense of what he says, it also threatens the optimism of the work: for if attainment of the ideal requires a new kind of society, then that ideal may be, for all practical purposes, unattainable.

The optimism of *E&H* also comes under threat from a different source: it stands in very sharp contrast to the position advanced in Sartre's earlier, and most directly philosophical, book *Being and Nothingness*,⁷ where he had written that 'man is a useless passion' (p. 615) and that 'we discover that all human activities are equivalent, and all are in principle doomed to failure' (p. 627). Passages such as these would very naturally seem to invite the criticisms to which, as Sartre says at the start (p.23), the lecture is intended to respond. Yet since in

⁵ First published in 1938; my references are to the translation by R. Baldick (Penguin: London, 1965).

⁶ First published in 1960; my references to it as *CDR* are to the translation edited by J. Ree (London: New Left Books, 1976).

⁷ First published in 1943. My references will be to the 1958 edition of the translation by H. Barnes (Methuen: London), which is now the standard edition of this translation. There are other editions, however, with different page numbers.

this earlier work Sartre seems to be articulating in detail precisely the existentialist position which, in *E&H*, he claims to imply the contradictory conclusion, we face an immediate difficulty in interpreting Sartre's response. Is he now rejecting the position of *B&N*, or are the premises from which he draws contradictory conclusions different in the two cases? There is no way of resolving the issue without looking further at the arguments, so let us now turn to examine Sartre's 'existentialism'.

The term 'existentialism' was, I think, introduced in 1943 by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, and applied by him to Sartre. Sartre initially tried to dissociate himself from it. But by 1945 he had come to embrace it, and in *E&H* he states what he takes to be the common doctrine of existentialists as follows (p. 26): 'What they have in common is simply the fact that they believe that *existence* comes before *essence*—or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective' (as I have already said, Sartre should be here taken to be speaking for himself alone). What does Sartre mean by the famous phrase 'existence precedes essence', which is intended to be understood as a distinctive characterization of men (and women)? He gives us some help by describing some kinds of things for which 'essence precedes existence', and some conceptions of man according to which the same would be true for men. Cases of the former are 'paper-knives and books' (examples expressive of Sartre's primary interests!), which are produced to fulfil a purpose; and one case of the latter is the conception of man as a creature of God. But Sartre goes on to add, as further cases of the latter, secular conceptions of man as possessed of an essential human nature which is prior to any individual's actual historical experience of life. Hence it looks as though, under the slogan 'existence precedes essence', Sartre wants to repudiate all conceptions of human nature according to which there are certain universal features constitutive of humanity. Indeed he seems to say just this (pp. 45–46): 'it is impossible to find in each and every man a universal essence that can be called human nature'. Yet one wants to protest, surely 'existence precedes essence' is itself intended to provide a universal account of human nature? And does not Sartre himself write (p. 52) of 'freedom as the definition of man'? I think that this protest is justified. But for the moment I want to reflect on the significance of his apparent position, that there is no universal human nature.

In the case of things for which 'essence precedes existence', it seems clear that the 'essence' of the thing (its purpose or function) not only explains significant features of it, but typically also provides criteria for its evaluation as such—for determining whether it is good of its kind. Hence if men were things of this general sort, their essence or nature should provide criteria for their evaluation and thus a foundation for moral reflection. Such, indeed, was the line of thought pursued by

Aristotle and it is no surprise to find Sartre explicitly rejecting Aristotle's approach to ethics. If, therefore, we take Sartre's repudiation of all conceptions of human nature at face value, we can link this with the rejection of that very influential tradition of ethical thought which seeks to ground moral values in human nature. And once moral values are not grounded in that way, and are also denied any supernatural foundation in a divine plan, it seems reasonable to infer that Sartre's view is that judgements of moral value have no objective content at all, and are instead to be interpreted simply as expressions of choices or preferences. There are several passages in *E&H* which suggest that this is the correct way to interpret his position: one has only to put together the anti-naturalism apparent in the following passage (p. 34)—'Thus we have neither behind us [i.e. in human nature], nor before us in a luminous realm of values [i.e. in God's will], any means of justification or excuse'—and the emphasis on the role of choice apparent in the following passage (p. 29)—'to choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the evil. What we choose is always the good.' Once passages like these are judged to be central to Sartre's position, it seems appropriate to set it alongside the influential position propounded by Hare in *The Language of Morals* (1952), and to treat Sartre's existentialist ethics as a rhetorical version of the position familiar in the more sober context of British philosophy as 'emotivism' or 'prescriptivism', according to which judgments of value are essentially expressive or prescriptive, and not descriptive (it is notable that Hare connects his prescriptivism with the denial that the concept *man* is a 'functional' concept—cf. *LOM* p. 145—which again seems just a sober restatement of Sartre's repudiation of a morally significant concept of human nature). This interpretation of Sartre's ethical theory is certainly the standard one current amongst British and American discussions of it.⁸ Yet despite its pre-eminence, and the apparent basis for it in *E&H*, I want to argue that it needs to be substantially qualified.

The most obvious reason for this is that in *E&H* Sartre states that a correct understanding of human life imposes certain values upon one—honesty to oneself in one's own life, and sufficient respect for the freedom of others that they are able to live their lives as they choose, subject to the constraint on their part of similar respect for others. For

⁸ Cf. A. MacIntyre, both in his early article 'Existentialism' (which occurs in *Sartre*, M. Warnock (ed.) (New York: Anchor, 1971), esp. pp. 54–55 and in *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), esp. Ch. 3; M. Warnock, *Existentialism* (London: Oxford University Press 1970), 123; A. Danto, *Sartre* (London: Fontana, 1975), 141; F. Olafson, *Principles and Persons* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967), 65–66.

whatever one thinks of this claim, which I shall discuss in detail, it implies that these values have a privileged status, are in a sense rationally founded, in a way which is inconsistent with a straightforward emotivism that denies a rational basis to any judgment of value. This privileged status is indeed apparent in the optimism of *E&H*, for this implies that a life which embodies these values is a life worth living, and this is a thought which has no obvious place within an emotivist ethical theory.

I shall not immediately specify, and argue for, my alternative interpretation of Sartre's position. Instead I want to return to Sartre's slogan 'existence precedes essence', for it does not simply have the negative significance I have so far discussed. For as far as that goes, at least if 'essence' is understood to imply facts of any evaluative significance, it would seem legitimate to classify together men with such things as islands and chemical elements which lack any intrinsic moral significance. But it is clear that Sartre would reject any such classification, on the grounds that human life has a subjective aspect which makes it quite different in kind from that of anything else; he writes (p. 28) 'we mean to say that man primarily exists—that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so. Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus, or a cauliflower.' Sartre's discussion here is not, I think, as precise as one might wish, but his position can be elucidated with some help from Heidegger's *Being and Time*,⁹ from which Sartre took the phrase 'existence precedes essence' (*B&T* p. 68). Heidegger is very careful to separate the ordinary concept of existence, which applies to any actual object, from a special concept which he takes to apply distinctively to man and which he often expresses by the use of a hyphen, as in 'ex-istence', or, sometimes, with an idiosyncratic spelling as well, as 'ek-sistence' (cf. *Letter on Humanism* pp. 204ff.). The point of this idiosyncratic spelling is not just to mark a distinction, for, relying in a far-fetched but characteristic way on etymology, Heidegger hopes also to suggest something of the content of the latter concept—that it is a mark of man to 'stand out' from himself, in particular by forming intentions concerning his future by reference to which his present actions have to be understood. Returning now to Sartre, my view is that when, explaining the sense of 'existence precedes essence' he says that 'man primarily exists' (*E&H* p. 28) he has switched from the ordinary concept of existence which he was employing in his discussions of paper-knives and such-like to something like Heidegger's concept of ex-istence, in which paper-knives do not ex-ist

⁹ First published in 1927. My references to it as *B&T* are to the translation by Macquarrie and Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973).

at all, and neither do islands and chemical elements. So although these things lack any intrinsic purpose and might therefore be said to be things for which 'existence precedes essence', since they do not exist at all they do not fall within the intended scope of Sartre's slogan.

My present concern is not with the question as to the extent to which Sartre faithfully reproduced Heidegger's account of human existence (Heidegger certainly felt that Sartre had not done so—cf. *Letter on Humanism* p. 207). Rather I want to elucidate some aspects of the account of human life that Sartre himself propounds. Some parts of this are easy: first, determinism is false of us—'since we have defined the situation of man as one of free choice, without excuse and without help, any man who takes refuge behind the excuse of his passions, or by inventing some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver' (*E&H* pp. 50–51). In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre several times (pp. 35, 120, 439; cf. *CDR* p. 235) interprets 'essence' as 'past', and though there is no hint of this in *E&H* it is easy to see how, on this interpretation of 'essence', combined with a Heideggerian interpretation of 'existence', 'existence precedes essence' entails the absence of any determination by the past. This is probably the most famous doctrine of Sartre's early philosophy. It is obviously highly contentious,¹⁰ but I will say little about it beyond observing that Sartre's thesis is not a simple-minded affirmation of a contra-causal power of the human will. One aspect of Sartre's more radical position emerges from the passage I have just quoted: according to Sartre we choose our passions, or emotions, as much as any other feature of our lives (*B&N* pp. 443ff.). In propounding this thesis Sartre realizes that he is departing from our familiar concept of choice: for he is seeking to exhibit both our familiar choices and those aspects of our lives which we usually regard as involuntary, such as some of our emotions, as rooted in a deeper choice, which in *Being and Nothingness* he calls the 'original choice of fundamental project'. This doctrine is alluded to in *E&H* when Sartre writes (pp. 28–29)—'what we usually understand by willing (*vouloir*) is a conscious decision taken—much more often than not—after we have made ourselves what we are. I may will to join a party, to write a book or to marry—but in such a case what is usually called my will is a manifestation of a prior and more spontaneous decision.' The theory of this deep choice is developed at length in part IV of *Being and Nothingness* and applied in Sartre's studies in 'existential psychoanalysis', e.g. those of Baudelaire, Genet, Flaubert, and of course himself in *Words*. In the earlier among these works, and in *E&H* itself (p. 43), Sartre links this theory with the thought that at any point in our lives each of us can

¹⁰ In so far as Sartre argues for it, the arguments occur at *B&N* pp. 23–24, 433–438, and in other earlier writings.

radically transform our characters. But as his detailed biographical studies developed, Sartre came to place great emphasis upon the reactions of young children to their early environment, and to acknowledge that although these reactions are in some sense voluntary, once they have occurred they fix the pattern of life in ways that cannot in practice be significantly modified later; he writes (*Search for a Method*¹¹ p. 65 fn. 5)—‘Of course, our prejudices, our ideas, our beliefs, are for the majority for us unsurpassable because they have been experienced first in childhood; it is our childish blindness, our prolonged panic which accounts—in part—for our irrational reactions, for our resistance to reason’. This is clearly a substantial change of view. I shall return later to assess its significance for the ‘optimism’ of *E&H*.

In sketching Sartre’s conception of human life as rooted in the sovereignty of the deep will, I have been trying to present the psychological significance he attaches to the thesis that in man existence precedes essence. The resulting psychology is deeply problematic, especially in respect of our cognitive capacities since the inherent commitment of these capacities to truth, and their dependence upon causality, conflicts with the description of them as voluntary. At the time of *E&H* Sartre sought to elude these problems by inviting us to conceive of man in the image of God the omnipotent creator,¹² but there is good reason to doubt whether this is a satisfactory resolution of the issue, since most truths are not subject to our will. For our purposes, these problems do not matter crucially, but what is relevant is Sartre’s use of the term ‘humanism’ to present this conception: ‘It took two centuries of crisis . . . for man to regain the creative freedom that Descartes placed in God, and for anyone finally to suspect the following truth, which is an essential basis of humanism: man is the being as a result of whose appearance a world exists’.¹³

Since in *E&H* Sartre is primarily concerned with questions of value, the ‘humanism’ that he here presents might be expressed by saying ‘man is the being as a result of whose appearance values exist’. However there is an important difference between Sartre’s views about values and those about the world: in the latter case, Sartre is emphatic that he is not an idealist, for although the conception of ‘brute existents’ independent of us is, for some reason, not the conception of a world, it is none the less essential to any conception of a world (*B&N* p. 482; cf.

¹¹ First published in 1957. My references are to the translation by H. Barnes (New York: Vintage, 1968). Cf. also Sartre’s comments in ‘Itinerary of a Thought’ in *New Left Review* 58, (Nov.–Dec. 1969), 44–45.

¹² Cf. ‘Cartesian Freedom’ in Sartre’s *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (London: Hutchinson, 1955).

¹³ *Op. cit.*, note 12, p. 184.

the role of 'matter' in *CDR* p. 180). By contrast in his account of values there is no analogue of 'brute existents': he explicitly commits himself to the 'ideality'¹⁴ of values, which he associates with the thought, which we have already encountered, that by our choices we express, or even create, values, and it is in this context that he introduces his concept of anguish—'it is anguish before values which is the recognition of the ideality of values' (*B&N* p. 38; cf. *E&H* pp. 30–32).

This doctrine of the ideality of values seems to imply the emotivist account of values which the standard interpretation ascribes to Sartre. As I have already indicated I do not believe that this interpretation does justice to Sartre, but in the light of this doctrine of the ideality of values it would be obviously incorrect to ascribe to Sartre a straightforward realist conception of values as facts within the world. In *B&N* that conception is rejected as belonging to the 'bourgeois' misapprehension of life—it is from within that misapprehension that 'values are sown on my path as thousands of little real demands, like the signs which order us to keep off the grass' (*B&N* p. 38). In coming to a more satisfactory interpretation of Sartre's views, it helps first to introduce a conception of values as someone's deepest preferences; this is a thoroughly subjectivist conception of value in which values are always someone's values, and there is a fact of the matter as to what someone's values are: his values are determined by his deepest preferences. I introduce this primarily in order to set it aside, for it is a completely uncritical concept of value, within whose terms conflicts of value are reduced to differences of preference. But it does have some relevance to Sartre in that some of what he says in *B&N* about value is surely to be understood in terms of this concept of value; e.g. when he says (p. 92) 'Now we can ascertain more exactly what is the being of the self; it is value' he is employing this concept of value, and the remark just expresses his psychological doctrine of the sovereignty of the deep will.

The concept of value employed in *E&H*, however, is not simply descriptive of preferences. On the standard interpretation of Sartre, his position none the less remains close to that which identifies values with deep preferences; for on the emotivist view, although judgments of value do not describe one's preferences, they express them. But, as I observed before, this does not yield the result that Sartre commits himself to in *E&H*, that some judgments of value are rationally founded. To understand how this is possible, I think we have to recognize that in *E&H* Sartre employs a critical concept of value such that these values are defined in terms of the choices made by ideally

¹⁴ By 'ideality' here Sartre of course means, not that values are ideals (as, say, justice or mercy might be) but that they are 'ideal' in the sense which contrasts with 'real'.

reflexive Sartrean subjects, that is, people who understand correctly both themselves and the nature of values. Those who fail to understand themselves, or the nature of value, certainly have values in the psychological sense of deep preferences, and their choices will express and realise these values. But their choices will not define the content of the critical concept of value, or, as Sartre puts it (*E&H* p. 51), will not define *moral* values. Morality is to be understood in terms of the choices of ideally reflexive Sartrean subjects.

Obviously it still has to be shown that any choices are required of these ideally reflexive subjects, but to get a better grasp of Sartre's intentions, one needs first to introduce the concept of freedom to which that of value is linked in his thought. Three kinds of freedom are present in Sartre's work. One is the freedom of will, understood in a full-blooded libertarian sense to exclude any compatibilist compromises with determinism. But in *E&H* Sartre is more interested in a freedom which is defined in relation to values as the condition of being the 'foundation of values' (p. 51). I think one can best understand this freedom by thinking of it in quasi-political terms, as a 'negative' freedom from any authoritative source of moral guidance, either supernatural (e.g. divine) or natural. This freedom is not epistemological: Sartre's view is not that we lack knowledge about how we should live, although there is a fact, perhaps supernatural, of the matter about it. Rather his thought is that as far as natural and supernatural facts go, nothing is determined about moral value. It is when he expresses this thought that Sartre seems to have just an emotivist conception of value—as in the following passage from *Being and Nothingness* (p. 38): 'It [value] can be revealed only to an active freedom which makes it exist as value by the sole fact of recognizing it as such. It follows that my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that *nothing*, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that value.' This passage certainly seems to conflict with the thesis about the content of the concept of moral value advanced in *E&H*. There are two ways of responding to this apparent conflict. One is to invoke the fact that there are good reasons, which I shall discuss later, for supposing that some of *Being and Nothingness* should not be taken as an unqualified expression of Sartre's views. Alternatively, and I think preferably, one can take Sartre to be saying here only that nothing external to my freedom, and my grasp of it, justifies me in adopting this or that value; which leaves space for the view of *E&H* that certain values are required of one who has a grasp of his freedom. On this view, then, our negative freedom from moral authority does not extend to all considerations: for some questions as to value are determined by facts about human consciousness and its relation to others, where these facts are not regarded as natural facts. Behind this last proviso lies the ontological distinction

in *Being and Nothingness* between the Being-in-itself of natural facts and the Being-for-itself of facts about consciousness; but it would not be sensible to pursue that matter here, so let us just assume the coherence of this proviso.

What are the facts about human consciousness that are relevant to questions of moral value? Sartre's view, I think, is that the facts are basically those embodied in the assertion of the two freedoms we have already encountered, the metaphysical freedom of an uncaused will and the negative freedom from moral authority. Hence the content of the critical concept of moral value can be defined by reference to the deliberative perspective of someone who understands his freedom in these two respects. Furthermore, we can introduce a third 'positive' freedom, that of someone who has attained this ideal deliberative perspective.¹⁵ The first two freedoms are unavoidable, and in respect of them 'man is condemned to be free'; but the third, moral, freedom has to be achieved through the self-conscious orientation of one's life in accordance with the principles of the other freedoms. And it is in relation to the possibility of achieving this freedom that the optimism of *E&H* is to be understood (p. 56)—'we show that it is . . . by seeking an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human'. The fact that Sartre does thus conceive of morality as a kind of 'liberation' shows clearly, I think, that despite his initial protestations to the contrary, there is for him a deep connection between his conception of human nature and that of morality. Indeed this works at two levels: first, the content of morality is defined in terms of the will of an ideally reflexive Sartrean subject, one who grasps himself as that whose 'existence precedes its essence', although it remains to be seen whether Sartre can here obtain what he hopes for. Secondly, the fact that such a subject achieves a kind of freedom through his ability to determine himself as a moral subject implies that through morality one comes to be in harmony with oneself, with one's own nature as a being whose 'existence precedes its essence'.

Anyone familiar with Kant's ethical theory will have recognized many similarities between that theory and that which I am ascribing to Sartre. This is neither a novel comparison (it was central to G. Lukacs' brilliant critique of Sartre¹⁶) nor unacknowledged by Sartre himself who in *E&H* describes his attitude to Kant as follows (p. 52)—'Thus

¹⁵ The description of Sartre's views in terms of a contrast between negative and positive freedoms also occurs in Jeanson's book op. cit., note 3, pp. 27, 249ff.

¹⁶ In *Existentialisme ou Marxisme* (Paris: Nagel, 1948), esp. pp. 128ff. I consider Lukacs' to be still the most helpful critical study of Sartre's early ethical theory.

although the content of morality is variable, a certain form of this morality is universal. Kant declared that freedom is a will both to itself and to the freedom of others. Agreed: but he thinks that the formal and the universal suffice for the constitution of a morality. We think on the contrary that principles that are too abstract break down when we come to defining action.' So Sartre agrees with Kant that there is a 'universal form' of morality, which can be specified by reference to a will, or choices made in accordance with freedom. His disagreement with Kant consists in denying that a specification of this universal form of morality generates, in the abstract, a specification of the content of morality. The significance of this disagreement obviously depends upon the form/content distinction Sartre is employing, and he is unhelpful in specifying it. But it is in this context that he tells his well-known story about a young Frenchman during the last war who had to choose between looking after his mother in Occupied France and leaving her there alone in order to join the Resistance in England. Sartre rightly observes that the Kantian principle that one should never regard another as a means, but always as an end, will not enable the young man to resolve this dilemma, since whichever choice he makes will leave him open to the accusation that he has not fulfilled his duty, and therefore failed to respect as an end the person to whom the duty is owed. So Sartre concludes that one cannot determine in advance how a dilemma of this kind should be resolved; the right thing to do can only be defined by the choice made by an ideally self-conscious agent whose will is (somehow) determined by the Sartrean ideal of moral freedom—he writes (pp. 52–53): 'The content is always concrete, and therefore unpredictable; it is always to be invented. The one thing that counts, is to know whether the invention is made in the name of freedom.'

The implication of this story would seem to be that Sartre's form/content distinction is just a distinction between general moral rules and particular moral decisions. Thus the disagreement with Kant would amount only to the thought that the application of general rules to particular cases, especially where there is a conflict of rules, is not determined *a priori*, but requires reference to the situation of the particular moral agent. This is scarcely a contentious thought. However, I do not think that Sartre's disagreement with Kant, and his criticisms of 'abstract' systems of morality, concerns only the distinction between general rules and particular cases. For this would leave all general moral principles to be determined without reference to the situations in which they are to be upheld, and Sartre frequently inveighs against any such abstract conception of morality; for example in his *Notebooks* he writes (p. 522). 'The project pursued by the man of authentic action is not directed to "the good of humanity", but, in certain particular circumstances with certain particular means at a

particular historical occasion to the liberation or development of a particular concrete group' (cf. *E&H* p. 47, *What is Literature?* p. 57). Thus for Sartre the moral values appropriate to a situation are to some degree relative to that situation, and somehow defined by the agents in that situation. Sartre, I think, never spells out how these values are defined, and this is a major omission from his ethical theory. One line of thought consistent with his general approach would be the 'contractualist' view developed by John Rawls and others,¹⁷ according to which the content of the concept of justice is defined, in particular historical situations, by reference to the principles which free and equal agents in those situations would choose to impose on themselves. There is here a 'form/content' distinction which roughly matches Sartre's intentions; and it fits well that those who follow this line of thought regard themselves as in some measure of agreement with Kant.

I should emphasize that I am not proposing the 'contractualist' conception of justice as an interpretation of Sartre's views; I am only suggesting that it provides an acceptable way of filling the large gap which is manifest in his theory when one tries to determine how the moral values appropriate to a particular situation are supposed to be determined. It may still be objected that since, on the contractualist view, moral values are defined by communal decisions, it cannot be right to employ it to fill out Sartre's existentialism, since this embodies a radically individualist perspective. I have some sympathy with this objection, which focuses on a source of genuine tension within Sartre's philosophy; but I will discuss it in more detail later when I consider whether Sartre can legitimately build his Kantian framework—that 'in willing our own freedom we will that of all others' (*E&H* p. 52)—upon the conception of the determination of moral values by a free will that he has offered.

Before attempting this task, however, I want briefly to indicate how the characteristic pessimism of *B&N* is to be fitted into this picture. For, as I mentioned, that pessimism stands in sharp contrast to the optimism of *E&H*. The key to resolving this conflict is the recognition that the form of human life generally described in *B&N* is conceived as misapprehending itself radically and, as a result, leading a life that is largely futile. This misapprehension is supposed to consist basically of a self-deceiving flight from the freedoms that are unavoidably our own: finding our responsibility for ourselves too distressing, we lapse into deterministic beliefs which offer us the illusory comfort of causal excuses. Likewise, finding the fact that we lack authoritative guidance concerning moral issues too much to bear, we fall back into a belief in the reality of values. Obviously, Sartre's descriptions of these beliefs as

¹⁷ Cf. *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1972).

misapprehensions is dependent on the truth of his claims about our two unavoidable freedoms, and in *B&N* he strains plausibility by holding that these misapprehensions are always self-deceiving, since, in his view, we are all aware of these two freedoms. But what matters in the present context is that because much of the gloom that pervades *B&N* is supposed to arise, not from Sartre's existentialism itself, but from a failure to make explicit to oneself the truth of that existentialism, and thus to attain Sartre's third freedom, moral freedom, there is no essential conflict with *E&H* which is explicitly addressed, on the contrary, to those who have a correct awareness of themselves, as in the following passage (p. 52): 'Consequently, when on the level of total authenticity I recognize that man is a being whose existence precedes his essence, and that he is a free being who cannot, in any circumstances, but will his freedom, at the same time I realize that I cannot not will the freedom of others'.

Yet there are two respects in which this reconciliation of *B&N* and *E&H* is too quick. First, it may be said, is it not a thesis of *B&N* that the characteristic misapprehensions of oneself there described are essential features of human life? Yet if they are, then there is no possibility of the enlightened position which *E&H* presents. Secondly, it may be felt that the account which Sartre gives in *B&N* of our relations with other people, according to which we are always 'de trop' in relation to others (p. 410), does not take as a premise the characteristic misapprehension of oneself. But if so, then there is a conflict between the commitment to willing the freedom of others which is emphasized in *E&H* and the position of *B&N*, that 'respect for the Other's freedom is an empty word; even if we could assume the project of respecting this freedom, each attitude which we adopted with respect to the Other would be a violation of that freedom which we claimed to respect' (p. 409).

Both of these points raise important issues. In relation to the first, I think it has to be accepted that in *B&N* Sartre vacillates, without clearly indicating that he is doing so, between an absolutely general point of view from which the misapprehensions characteristic of the flight from freedom appear as contingent and a more restricted point of view within the perspective of a life informed by these misapprehensions. This makes the text, already formidably difficult, even harder to interpret, and explains Sartre's notorious footnotes (pp. 70, 410) in which he shifts from the restricted point of view of the main text to a more general point of view within which he withdraws from the position laid out in the main text. Yet even in the main text there are some unequivocal statements about the possibility of living a life informed by a correct understanding of oneself (pp. 159–160, 580–581, 626–628). In *E&H* such a life is described as one embodying 'authenticity' (p. 52), a term which comes from Heidegger (though he characteristically felt that his

use of it had been misunderstood—*Letter* p. 212). More frequently, Sartre uses the terms 'impure' and 'pure' reflection to describe the two points of view, and I shall follow this practice. He initially associates these terms with the distinction to be found in the work of the philosopher Edmund Husserl between our ordinary introspective consciousness of ourselves, which is held to be 'impure' because we conceive ourselves as things within the world, and a special form of 'pure' self-consciousness in which we somehow apprehend ourselves as that through whose activity there is a world.¹⁸ I doubt whether 'pure reflection' as thus conceived describes anything coherent, but this doubt does not matter much now. For Husserl this distinction, although of great philosophical significance, has no immediate ethical implications.¹⁹ But in Sartre's writings it is these implications which are crucial. *Being and Nothingness* is primarily an exploration of impure reflection (p. 581); but he closed the book with the promise of a further work devoted to ethics (*La Morale*) in which he would explore for the first time a life of pure reflection. Unfortunately, Sartre never produced this work, and much of the difficulty in interpreting his ethical theory is a consequence of his failure to do so.

Not surprisingly, *Existentialism and Humanism* has often been used as a guide to this hypothetical work.²⁰ But Sartre's recently published notebooks *Cahiers pour une Morale*²¹ (written 1947–48, published 1983) reveal for the first time his intentions for this work. Since there are two notebooks which are together 600 pages long, there is no question of summarizing here their content. But one theme in particular is very marked: that to attain pure reflection is to overcome alienation—from nature, oneself, others, and history. For Sartre these forms of alienation all embody misunderstandings of ourselves—essentially we conceive ourselves as just another thing within the world. It might seem therefore that pure reflection requires only a proper understanding of oneself, and its attainment is only a theoretical transformation, as it is for Husserl; but Sartre makes it clear that since, in his view, pure reflection includes a recognition of our responsibility for ourselves and of our role as creator of values, it constitutes also a moral transformation. Its significance for him is well expressed in a lecture he gave in

¹⁸ Cf. Sartre's essay *Transcendence of the Ego* (New York: Noonday, 1957), 64–65.

¹⁹ A point rightly stressed by J. Habermas in the appendix to *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon, 1971).

²⁰ Likewise Sartre's *What is Literature?* (originally published in 1948; my references will be to the English translation published by Methuen in 1967).

²¹ I would recommend anyone interested to start by reading the second notebook (pp. 429ff.) which includes (pp. 484–487) something like a prospective table of contents for the projected book.

1947 in which the intended connections between pure reflection, Kant's ethics, and—a new theme—Marxism, are very straightforwardly set out:²²

It may be that one can imagine a society of men living out their lives, from infancy, so that reflection would never appear . . . We can also conceive a society in which reflection would always be a world of lies. We can do so the more readily since it is our own society. There is also a third type of society, realizable though perhaps utopian, a society in which one would practice pure reflection; this would be a city of Kantian ends . . . If the city of ends were realized by some miracle, this city would endure by itself because we would have obtained the beginning of a new era, as Marx says.

Although passages such as this make very clear Sartre's intentions concerning pure reflection, it is still proper to ask whether his ethical theory, and his account of human life, suffice to substantiate these intentions. In particular, in *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre claims that the pure reflector must avoid self-deception (p. 51) and respect the freedom of others (p. 52). The issue we face is whether Sartre is entitled to attach these implications to his conception of pure reflection.

In the case of self-deception, it may seem entirely straightforward, since self-deception is inconsistent with pure reflection. But, as Sartre explicitly allows (*E&H* p. 51), a question can still be raised as to why the pure reflector has to choose to avoid self-deception and preserve his conditions of pure reflection. Illusions about oneself can after all be comforting. One response is simply to observe that since belief aims at the truth, self-deception, the inculcation of beliefs which one takes to be false, is inherently irrational. But this is too brief; for although the general point can be conceded, we can also envisage cases in which, it would seem, the inherent irrationality of self-deception is more than compensated for by other advantages (self-esteem, peace of mind, freedom from distractions), and thus in which, all things considered, a modest degree of self-deception is the rational choice. For the pure reflector, however, this outcome is excluded. Sartre aims to exclude it by insisting that 'when once a man has seen that values depend upon himself, in that state of forsakenness he can will only one thing, and that is freedom as the foundation of all values' (*E&H* p. 51). In so far as this offers us any help, it surely requires us to assign to the pure reflector a pre-eminent desire to avoid self-deception, grounded in a recognition by him of the great value of the condition of pure reflection. Yet this

²² 'Consciousness of Self and Knowledge of Self', pp. 136–137 in *Readings in Existential Phenomenology*, N. Lawrence and D. J. O'Connor (eds).

gets things the wrong way round for Sartre, since here the choice is grounded on a recognition of value, and not vice versa, as Sartre's Kantian theory requires. None the less, it is only by tacitly appealing to some such consideration that Sartre can make plausible the thought that the pure reflector is committed to rejecting self-deception in all circumstances.

This is a point of considerable strategic significance in relation to Sartre's ethical theory. For at this point the theory looks as if it is grounded in a conception of human nature more substantive than that presented under the formula 'existence precedes essence'. That formula, I suggested, is at work in Sartre's appeal to the perspective of choices made by an ideally self-conscious subject, the pure reflector. What I have now argued is that this perspective does not by itself yield the result Sartre wants concerning self-deception. But we can get what we want here if we introduce a feature which in *Being and Nothingness* is presented as the essential characteristic of human consciousness, namely that it is always attended and informed by a mode of self-consciousness; this is why the being of consciousness is said to be being-for-itself (*B&N* pp. xxxiff.). Typically this mode of self-consciousness is only inchoate ('non-thetic' in Sartre's terminology), but the pure reflector differs from the rest of us precisely in having a lucid grasp of that which is inchoate for us (*B&N* pp. 155ff.). Thus the pure reflector's judgment of the great value of a condition which excludes self-deception can be seen as grounded in his recognition that this condition is the explicit articulation of what, for Sartre, just is the essential structure of human life.

This, I repeat, is not how Sartre himself presents the matter. My claim is only that Sartre's discussion invites a completion of this kind. For his theory, like Kant's, suffers from the defect that the formal structure provided by the will of an ideal subject, in this case that of the pure reflector, does not suffice by itself to determine the intended moral values. We have to add a specification of the judgments of value which the ideal subject brings to his choice, and these judgments cannot themselves be the outcome of choices. Instead it is plausible to represent them as grounded in an understanding of human nature, and my claim is just that Sartre's account of human consciousness in *Being and Nothingness* provides the basis for the judgment of value which is presupposed by his pure reflector's condemnation of self-deception.

It is now time to turn to Sartre's argument for the other substantial ethical feature of the pure reflector's life: that he wills the freedom of others. As I indicated some time back, there is an obvious difficulty in combining this view with the position presented in *Being and Nothingness*. The strategy I have been pursuing implies that the resolution of this difficulty lies in the switch of perspective from that of impure to

pure reflection. But, again, it is one thing to say that pure reflection requires respect for the freedom of others; it is another thing to substantiate this implication. In *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre attempts to do so by introducing a thesis about our mutual interdependence—‘in thus willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely upon the freedom of others and that the freedom of others depends upon our own’ (p. 51). When we recall that Sartre’s three freedoms are, respectively, the metaphysical freedom of the free will, a negative freedom from external moral authority, and the moral freedom of the pure reflector, this must strike us as an unwarranted thesis. Clearly, the first two freedoms are, for Sartre, unavoidable, and thus in no way dependent upon others; and so far nothing has been said about the transition from impure to pure reflection to imply that the attainment of moral freedom is dependent upon others. Sartre acknowledges the first of these points, when he goes on to say (p. 52): ‘Obviously, freedom as the definition of man does not depend upon others’; but he then just repeats the conclusion he needs to argue for—‘I cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim’. This is a manifestly unsatisfactory argument. If anything the stress on the role of the will in Sartre’s early philosophy lends support, not to an ideal which requires respect for others, but to the single-minded pursuit of self-fulfilment irrespective of others.²³ Something like this ideal does find expression in Sartre’s work; for example, in writing in 1947 of Baudelaire, who is held by Sartre to have stopped just short of the moral freedom of pure reflection, he writes.²⁴ ‘the man who is damned enters into a solitude which is like a feeble image of the great solitude of the man who is really free’. I think that Sartre here touches on an authentic feature of existentialism (if one can so speak), for the stress on the perspective of the solitary individual is very prominent in the writings of Kierkegaard (who is an existentialist if anyone is). This perspective is part of the legacy of Protestant Christianity, with its stress on the unmediated relationship between God and the individual Christian, and the implication that salvation is to be found by pursuing that essentially solitary relationship.²⁵

Part of the interest of Sartre’s philosophy derives from his developing appreciation of the inadequacy of this existentialist individualism. In

²³ For a clear expression of this tendency cf. the Air Vice-Marshall’s speech in Ch. 12 of Rex Warner’s novel *The Aerodrome*. The similarities with some Sartrean theses is almost uncanny, but the moral implications are developed in a direction Sartre would not have liked.

²⁴ *Baudelaire* (London: H. Hamilton, 1949), 70.

²⁵ Despite his stress on ‘being-with’ the perspective of the individual is still primary in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*; cf. the significance of death (p. 284) and the ‘sober anxiety’ described on p. 358.

his early philosophy this individualist perspective is grounded in a Cartesian epistemology, which is emphatically proclaimed in *Existentialism and Humanism* (p. 44): 'Our point of departure is, indeed, the subjectivity of the individual . . . And at the point of departure there cannot be any other truth than this, *I think, therefore I am*, which is the absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself'. If this is the 'absolute truth' which we grasp in self-consciousness, then there seems no inherent reference to others in the pure reflector's explicit articulation of his consciousness. In *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre attempts to mitigate this result by saying that in self-consciousness we also grasp ourselves as apprehended by others in one way or another (p. 45), and thus that self-consciousness does, after all, involve our relations with others. But apart from the fact that there is here still no reason why pure reflection should require respect for others, rather than any of the other attitudes to others which self-consciousness reveals to us as ours, it still seems that others are conceived to concern me only in so far as their attitudes to me infect my own self-consciousness, and thus that I need have no conception of them as subjects of consciousness in their own right, irrespective of their attitudes to me. But some such conception is a prerequisite of any genuine respect for others.

Yet Sartre's theoretical commitment to this ideal is unquestionable. His remarks in *Existentialism and Humanism* are not idiosyncratic, but can be matched in almost all his writings of the period.²⁶ He usually expresses it in the terms I have already cited by linking pure reflection to the achievement of the 'city of ends', i.e. a community in which the actions of each are guided by an equal concern for all. The phrase comes, of course, from Kant and confirms the essentially Kantian slant of his ethical theory. But the question which remains is how this theoretical commitment is to be justified. Sartre's answer to this question must lie in the account of impure reflection and what the attainment of pure reflection requires. Yet in *Being and Nothingness* the predominant theme is that impure reflection is motivated by fear of freedom, and there are no inherent social implications to this account which belongs within the tradition of existentialist individualism. However, there is also in *Being and Nothingness* a subordinate line of thought, to the effect that in impure reflection we think of ourselves as we are for others (p. 161), a thought which has to be understood in the context of Sartre's general account of our relations with others in *Being and Nothingness*, which is that these are relations of conflict which lead us to have an improper, alienated conception of ourselves in so far as we

²⁶ Cf. *What is Literature?*, pp. 44, 203–204, 216–217, *Cahiers*, pp. 487, 516.

are led to think of ourselves only as we are for others (p. 285). What we have to consider, therefore, is whether there is here a basis for an argument to the conclusion Sartre maintains.

This question is given added significance by the fact that in the 1947–48 notebooks I have mentioned it is this line of thought which is now given prominence. Sartre here suggests that impure reflection arises within social relationships which lead us to conceive ourselves wrongly as things within a world structured by deterministic causes and objective values. Just what kinds of social relationship are thus alienating is answered in several ways in the notebooks: at different points Sartre mentions oppression, social stratification, and the dehumanization of workers by the machines at which they work. But he suggests a more general approach in the following passage, from the start of the second notebook (p. 429):

All history is to be understood in terms of this primitive alienation from which man cannot escape. The alienation is not simply oppression. It is the predominance of the other in the couple of Other and Self, the priority of the objective and, as a result, the necessity for all conduct and all ideology to be projected in the element of the Other and to return alienated and alienating upon their promoters.

A question which this passage raises is what Sartre here means by 'this primitive alienation from which man cannot escape'. Since the focus of the notebooks is precisely upon the radical conversion through which alienation is overcome and pure reflection attained, Sartre cannot here mean that it is not possible to transcend this 'primitive alienation'. Rather his thought must be that each of us has to pass through the experience of primitive alienation. And when the point is understood in this way it is very natural to interpret it in the light of Sartre's accounts of the experience of childhood, of the inescapable experience of growing up in a world dominated by others—especially parents and siblings. If Sartre's thought is interpreted in this way, it connects directly with a central thesis of his later writings, that alienation is unavoidable as long as people meet each other under conditions of scarcity, which he takes to be inevitable as things now stand (*CDR* pp. 120ff.). For he also advances the view, as we saw before, that our childhood prejudices are insurpassable and if, as I am suggesting, these prejudices are a mark of our primitive alienation, then their unsurpassability is of a piece with the thesis of the general impossibility of escaping from alienation which informs his later work. This thesis conflicts with the optimistic tone of *Existentialism and Humanism* and the notebooks; what makes the difference is the introduction in the later work of the thesis about the presence of scarcity and its consequences.

We need not concern ourselves with these later writings, and I want to return to the question of the significance of conceiving of impure reflection as essentially motivated through the 'primitive alienation' of growing up in a world dominated by others. For once it is understood in this way it does follow that pure reflection requires relations of mutual respect in which free agents meet each other in circumstances in which they do not seek to subordinate one another. In the notebooks Sartre attempts to specify in detail what such relations involve, and he alludes critically to the account of social relationships which he had presented in *Being and Nothingness*. But he draws the conclusion he wants in an emphatic form early on (p. 16): 'One cannot achieve the conversion *alone*. In other words, morality is only possible if everyone is moral.'

This now looks as though it provides a grounding for the thesis of *Existentialism and Humanism*, not there grounded, that in willing our own (moral) freedom, we are bound to will that of all others. Yet there remains here an issue comparable to that encountered in connection with self-deception. In that case it was easy to see that pure reflection excluded self-deception, but less easy to see just why the pure reflector should choose to remain a pure reflector by refraining from self-deception. In the present case, the new account of impure reflection has the consequence that pure reflection requires respect for others. But it still remains to be explained why the pure reflector should regard this aspect of his situation as one to be preserved. I think, however, that one can in this case simply exploit the earlier line of argument to provide an instrumental justification. For the earlier argument, which invoked the pure reflector's recognition of his condition as the explicit development of the essential structure of all human consciousness, led to the conclusion that the pure reflector had a pre-eminent interest in his condition. What has now been argued by Sartre is that this condition requires relations of mutual respect and it therefore follows that the pure reflector has an interest in the maintenance of these relations. It is no objection to this reconstruction of Sartre's position that this interest is only derivative; for that is how Sartre presents the matter in *Existentialism and Humanism*. But what is true is that on this view pure reflection is a good deal harder to attain than appeared within the perspective of existentialist individualism. The moral content of pure reflection is in this respect purchased at the cost of severely qualifying the optimistic view that it is readily attainable by us. For even without the bleak pessimism of Sartre's later writings, with their associated thesis of the ineliminability of scarcity, the transformation of the concept of pure reflection, or authenticity, into a condition with social implications takes away from any individual the possibility of attaining that condition alone. And there is a further problem inherent in this approach: how can Sartre, a member of a less than ideal society, regard

himself as knowing what are the conditions of pure reflection? On his own premises, Sartre must regard his own self-consciousness as a case of impure reflection: but if so, then is he in a position to define for us the nature of pure reflection, and the content of a morality defined in terms of the pure reflector's will? Sartre must allow that one can somehow have a theoretical grasp of the requirements of pure reflection without oneself attaining that condition. But I shall not speculate how this is supposed to be possible, nor whether its possibility is indeed defensible.