

9. From Absurdity to Authenticity

Existentialism is an ethical theory. It is an attempt to answer the question of how one should live. The theory that existence precedes essence is intended as a framework for answering this question. The existentialist concerns with the ontology of human existence and with the fundamental origins of desires and behaviour, that is to say, are motivated by the idea that we cannot identify how to live well unless we have first understood how our lives work. We should take the canonical form of the existentialist theory of human existence to be the theory common to Beauvoir's *She Came To Stay* and *The Second Sex*, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and Sartre's 'Black Orpheus' and *Saint Genet*. We should take this as canonical precisely because it overcomes the explanatory deficiencies of Sartre's initial form of existentialism that incorporated his idea of radical freedom.

In this canonical form, existentialism is the theory that individuals do not have innate personalities that explain their outlook and behaviour, from which it follows that there is no human nature and there are no essential features of gender or ethnicity, but rather the individual's own projects exert a degree of influence over their outlook and behaviour that is proportionate to the degree to which that individual has previously deployed them in thought and action. It is through this sedimentation that the social meanings of one's environment become embedded in one's outlook, along with the values at the core of one's projects. This does not mean, however, that we are simply the products of our cultural surroundings. We retain the freedom to reconsider these projects and to alter or displace them through the same process of sedimentation. We will consider the prospects for this view of human existence in chapter 11.

How could an ethical theory be grounded in this theory of human existence? Beauvoir, Fanon, and Sartre agree that we ought to recognise and respect the structure of human existence. This is the existentialist virtue of authenticity, which they see as the basis of ethics. But their own theory presents a challenge to this prescription. If the reasons we encounter are dependent on the values at the heart of our projects, then how can any

reasons constrain which projects we should adopt? If it is our free choice of projects that brings reasons and values into our world, then what could require us to adopt the project of valuing human freedom? This is the existentialist problem of absurdity. In this chapter, we will first sharpen this problem, before considering the ways in which Fanon and Sartre argue for authenticity on grounds of human well-being. We will find these arguments insufficient, however, to establish that we all ought to embrace authenticity. In the next chapter, we will turn to Beauvoir's more promising argument for authenticity.

1. The Origins of Absurdity

If there are no values beyond those enshrined in the projects that the individual freely chooses, then there are no reasons that ultimately govern the choice of projects. This would mean not only that everything is permitted, but equally that nothing is justified. For if there is no objective reason to reject any project, so that lives of murder or tyranny are ethically equivalent to any other, then neither can there be any reason to adopt any particular project. There would simply be no reason to prefer any project to any other. The result would be not only nihilism, but also absurdity. None of our commitments or accomplishments could really matter, since there would be no reason why we should not have valued something else instead. We can identify more precisely the problem this poses for existentialist ethics by considering the development of the problem of absurdity across the works leading up to the existentialist offensive.

For when Sartre first used the term, in his 1938 novel *Nausea*, it was to describe the lack of structure in the world beyond our experience of it. 'The word Absurdity is now born beneath my pen', writes the diarist narrator Roquentin, a word to name what has already been revealed in his wordless and formless experiences of his own body and other objects in the world (N: 185). Roquentin also describes this lack of structure, and therefore lack of meaning or reason, in the world as contingency and as superfluity (N: 188). These terms are intended to capture the revelation that 'the world of explanations and reasons is not that of existence' (N: 185). Roquentin has these experiences because the only projects that have given his life meaning, his relationship with Anny and his work on a biography of an obscure historical figure, have come to an end. Sartre's idea here, as have seen in chapter 3, is that the meanings we find in the world are dependent on our projects.

It is this idea of absurdity that Camus develops in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Outsider*, but for him absurdity is not simply a property of the world beyond our experience. Rather,

absurdity is presented in those works as the tension between the lack of any objective meaning in the world and our innate and inescapable drive to find objective meaning in the world. One of the central concerns of these works is with the implications of this idea for ethical value. But his argument, as we saw in chapter 2, is that absurdity does not entail ethical nihilism. Ethical value is grounded, according to Camus, in our natural emotional fraternity. This theory of an innate drive for objective meaning and an innate emotional concern for other people sets Camus apart from the existentialists. But the distinction he implicitly draws here between meanings and values is one that is also central to existentialism. Where he has used this to confine absurdity to the realm of meaning, however, Beauvoir and Sartre see the problem of absurdity as threatening the realm of value.

By the time of writing *Being and Nothingness*, as we saw in chapter 3, Sartre no longer held the view articulated in *Nausea* that the meanings of things are dependent on our projects. His view had evolved into the idea that structures of meaning are already present as a result of our physically and socially determined relations with our surroundings, but we experience these meanings as presenting us with reasons and these reasons reflect the values enshrined in our projects. Thus, in *Being and Nothingness*, his first statement of his initial form of existentialism, it is the field of reasons, not the field of meanings, that is dependent on our freely chosen projects. Although some projects may be chosen for reasons grounded in other projects, Sartre argues, fundamentally our overall choice of projects 'is absurd in this sense – that the choice is that by which all foundations and all reasons come into being' (B&N: 501). Because it is the ground of all reasons, the initial choice of projects 'is absurd as being beyond all reasons' (B&N: 501).

Beauvoir argues in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, published the year after *Being and Nothingness*, for the similar view that although our unreflective engagement in life is shaped by values that matter to us, we can see on reflection that these values matter to us only because we are pursuing them. This is particularly clear when we have achieved some goal: it ceases to be valuable to us and we set a new goal, a new value, in its place. We seem to be faced with the absurdity of being aware that the things we treat as valuable only matter to us because we treat them as valuable (P&C: 90-1, 99-100). We cannot avoid this, moreover, simply by concluding that nothing really matters. Camus held that we cannot respond to his version of the problem of absurdity by renouncing the search for objective meaning, as we saw in chapter 2, because he considered that search to be essential to human nature. Beauvoir and Sartre likewise hold that the pursuit of projects that enshrine values is the very

structure of our existence, so we cannot live as though nothing matters. 'I live, even if I judge that life is absurd', argues Beauvoir, 'like Achilles always catching up with the tortoise' despite Zeno's reasoning (P&C: 100).

2. Why Irony Is Not The Answer

The problem of absurdity for existentialism, therefore, is not simply the tension between the unreflective commitment to values and the reflective judgment that these values depend on our commitment to them. It is that, given our form of existence, we are necessarily committed to values while also being aware that we generate these values by our commitment to them. 'The paradox of the human condition is that every end can be surpassed', as Beauvoir puts it, 'and yet, the project defines the end as the end' (P&C: 113). When we each 'step back' from the 'highly specific and idiosyncratic' set of concerns that shape our lives, as Thomas Nagel puts it, we can see these concerns 'with the detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand', a perspective on ourselves 'that is at once sobering and comical' (1971: 720). We cannot justify our set of commitments, argues Nagel, because 'the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality' rests on this set of commitments (1971: 720).

Nagel's solution is to embrace absurdity, to live with our commitments 'laced with irony': we should simply accept that our lives rest on 'the inertial force of taking the world and life for granted', which includes the evaluative commitments that we rely on to give reasoned justifications, so that those commitments cannot be given any ultimate justification (1971: 724). He compares the problem of absurdity with the epistemological scepticism. We justify our factual beliefs in terms of experience and reason, but if we cannot justify that practice itself then we should not conclude that all beliefs are equally unjustified. We should rather accept the irony that our practices of justification rest on 'natural responses' that cannot themselves be justified (1971: 723-4). It is a structural feature of the mind that beliefs are formed and justified by experience and rational connections with other beliefs. We cannot do otherwise, so must accept this process even though we cannot justify it. The problem with this response to absurdity, however, becomes clear when we ask what provides the analogous ground of our evaluative commitments.

If the existentialists are right, it is a structural feature of human existence that we endorse values. This exerts pressure towards the individual having a coherent set of values, because one cannot consistently act in accordance with contrary values and because situations may require one to decide the relative importance of some of one's values. But there seems to be nothing analogous to the role that experience plays in forming and justifying factual beliefs, nothing external to an individual's values that they must measure up to. Although we can evaluate someone's factual beliefs against the world we all live in, there seems to be no shared reality against which to evaluate an individual's evaluative outlook. If murder, oppression, and exploitation conflict with my values, then from my evaluative stance I would reject the outlook and behaviour of anyone who positively values these. But on reflection, I would have to accept that this rejection is no more than a subjective preference, with no more claim to authority over other people than their rejection of my outlook has over me. Indeed, if my evaluative commitments ought to be coherent, then I should integrate this reflection on the value of my values into my basic evaluative outlook itself. My unreflective engagement in the world ought to respect any coherent evaluative outlook no matter how different it is from my own.

An existentialist, therefore, could not adopt Nagel's response to the problem of absurdity. Existentialism is the ethical theory that we ought to recognise and respect the basic structure of human existence, which is that our motivations are ultimately rooted in our chosen and revisable projects. If we were to agree with Nagel's response to absurdity, by contrast, then we ought to view this project of authenticity as only one among many equally justified, and equally unjustified, evaluative outlooks. It might be objected that irony requires only respect for coherent ethical outlooks, so inauthenticity might be ruled out by being incoherent. 'I can bring a moral judgment to bear' on bad faith, argued Sartre in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, because 'it is a contradiction'; authenticity is required by 'a strictly consistent attitude' (EH: 48). Indeed, as we will see in the next chapter, the most promising argument for authenticity detailed in the classical works of existentialism proclaims that an imperative of authenticity is logically entailed by our own evaluative commitments. But to accept any argument that inauthenticity is incoherent is to reject the absurdity that grounds Nagel's irony. For it is to accept that one evaluative outlook can be justified objectively.

If we understand ethics broadly as the concern with how we should live, then we can distinguish three ethical questions posed by the problem of absurdity. What attitude towards our own evaluative outlook would it be reasonable to adopt? How can we avoid

or overcome the anxiety or distress that might be caused by the reflection that we have built our lives around commitments that do not really matter, around values that might just as well have been entirely different? Are there any objective reasons why we ought to adopt some particular attitude or behaviour, or at least why we ought not to have some particular values or act in some particular ways? The first of these three questions is motivated by a concern to organise our lives rationally. The second is motivated by the psychoanalytic concern to diagnose any beliefs, desires, or values that are causing distress. The third is the metaethical concern with the grounding of normativity. Nagel's recommendation of irony is designed to answer only the first two questions. But it entails an answer to the third, as we have seen, which is the permissibility of any coherent value system.

3. Eudaimonism and the Renunciation of Racial Essence

Fanon and Sartre both offer arguments for the virtue of authenticity that are grounded in the psychoanalytic concern with diagnosing sources of distress. These are eudaimonistic arguments. They aim to ground the normativity of ethics in the best life for the individual to lead, the life of happiness or well-being. Anxiety, despair, and other forms of distress detract from the quality of an individual's life. It is therefore better for the individual, other things being equal, not to have any attitudes that generate such suffering. Fanon and Sartre both aim to show that inauthenticity inevitably leads to distress. Sartre's argument is in part that experiencing the problem of absurdity through the lens of inauthenticity produces despair. Fanon's argument is not concerned with the experience of absurdity, but with the distress that he considers to be caused more directly by inauthenticity. Both arguments, as we will see, fail to ground robust ethical constraints of the kind that the metaethical concern about absurdity seems to demand.

Fanon presents his argument very briefly in the final chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, but this draws on the existentialist theory of the structure of human existence and the diagnosis of the psychological difficulties faced by black colonised people that he has developed across the whole book. Fanon dramatises the problem that he sees at the heart of these difficulties with an autobiographical anecdote. A child pointed him out on a train. 'Maman, look, a *nègre*; I'm scared!'. (BSWM: 91). The term '*nègre*' does not translate easily into English: in some contexts it is a classificatory term akin to 'Negro', but in others, particularly when accompanied by negative adjectives, it is deeply derogatory and offensive (Judy 1996: 60-1). This ambiguity is central to the child's use of the term in this

incident. In response to the child's exclamation, Fanon writes, 'I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features' and felt immediately 'deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders' (BSWM: 92).

Being identified as a '*nègre*' in this incident caused Fanon to have an intense experience of the connotations of the term that had been sedimented into his outlook through his colonial upbringing. Fanon argued that these sedimented ideas of the inferiority of the colonised have a pervasive influence on the individual's thought and behaviour, particularly on their self-image and their perspective on black and white people, as we saw in chapter 8. Occasional incidents bring these ideas into sharp focus, but their wider influence is generally unnoticed by the individual. This 'historical-racial schema' is woven 'out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories' provided 'by the Other, by the white man' (BSWM: 91). The threat posed by other people, therefore, is not the one that Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness* and dramatises in *Huis Clos*, that other people interpret behaviour as manifesting essential characteristics that differ from the individual's self-image. Neither is it analogous to the problem of anti-Semitism as Sartre analysed it, that the wider society has a particular stereotype of Jewish people. 'I am a slave not to the "idea" others have of me', Fanon writes, 'but to my appearance' (BSWM: 95).

Underlying the problem, according to Fanon's diagnosis, is the sedimented idea of blackness itself as associated with inferiority, with the childhood of humanity before civilisation, and ultimately with evil and death. This does not describe any particular behaviour of black people. It is not ultimately that black people are expected by their wider society to wear masks with particular features. It is rather that whatever the features of those masks are, they will be understood as features of inferiority and will be found aversive. The solution to the psychological difficulties faced by black people, Fanon argues in the final chapter, is therefore to erode the deeply instilled classification of people into black and white, colonised and coloniser, inferior and superior. Although his emphasis in *Black Skin, White Masks* is on the problems faced by black people, he is clear that he thinks the erosion of this classification will liberate everyone (BSWM: xvi, 12; Bernasconi 2005: 103, 108-9). 'It is through self-consciousness', an awareness of the true structure of human existence, he tells us, and consequent 'renunciation' of the idea of race, 'that man can create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world' (BSWM: 206).

Fanon has therefore argued for the virtue of authenticity on eudaimonist grounds. Our lives will be better, in his view, if we recognise and respect that our existence precedes our

essence. This conclusion is threatened by the problem of absurdity: if the values that shape a person's thought and behaviour are ultimately rooted in their projects, then what can ground the objective value Fanon places on a world without racialisation? Fanon does not address this metaethical question. As a psychiatrist, he is concerned with diagnosing causes of suffering and recommending ways to treat and prevent it. This takes for granted the value of overcoming distress. This value is likely to be shared by anyone suffering this distress to the extent that it significantly reduces their ability to achieve goals they value. But even if racialisation causes some problems for everyone, it would not follow that we ought to overcome it. For the process of doing so would come at the cost of ruling out the pursuit of other achievable goals whose value for us might outweigh the disvalue of racialisation. What consideration, then, could ground the demand to embrace authenticity regardless of our goals? This question takes us beyond the purview of Fanon's book.

4. Eudaimonism and the Threat of Despair

This strategy of arguing for authenticity through the problems caused by inauthenticity can also be found in Sartre's initial form of existentialism. The final section of *Being and Nothingness* proclaims that the book so far has not indicated any ethical imperatives. 'It is concerned solely with what is', he writes, 'and we cannot possibly derive imperatives from ontology's indicatives' (B&N: 645). The book does allow us, however, 'to catch a glimpse' of the ethics of authenticity: the existentialist psychoanalysis outlined in the book 'is moral description, for it releases to us the ethical meaning of various projects' (B&N: 645). It shows the falsity of any ethical theory that relies on either egoism or altruism being intrinsic to human nature, precisely because it shows human behaviour to be grounded in the individual's freely chosen projects, of which egoism and altruism are mere possibilities among others (B&N: 646). Sartre ends this section by raising the question of exactly what constraints an ethics of authenticity would impose, what its imperatives would be, and promises to devote a future work to this issue (B&N: 647).

What he does not address, or even raise, in this section is the question of why we should adopt the project of authenticity in the first place. He indicates that it is a recognition of the true structure of our existence, but does not give any reason why we should value living in recognition of that structure. Bad faith is the project of valuing an image of ourselves as having a particular fixed nature, which entails viewing people generally as having fixed natures. Why should we abandon this value? To put the question another way, why should we prefer the truth, of which we have always been somewhat aware,

according to Sartre, instead of continuing to prefer the denial of that truth and the illusion of having a personal essence? These questions are implicitly answered, however, through Sartre's emphasis on the role of existentialist psychoanalysis in the ethical conversion from bad faith to authenticity. For the very idea of psychoanalysis presupposes that the individual is suffering a problem that they want to solve. It presupposes, that is to say, that their life conflicts in some way with their own values.

Sartre outlines, in *Being and Nothingness*, two ways in which the project of bad faith conflicts with the values that the individual pursues. These are general eudaimonist arguments. Their conclusion is that we are all, each of us, better off without the project of bad faith. Such an argument needs to apply to everyone who pursues the project of bad faith irrespective of which other projects they pursue with it. The arguments that Sartre outlines in *Being and Nothingness* to this effect therefore focus on the interaction between bad faith and the individual's other projects whatever they are. The shortest and simplest of these arguments is presented in the final section of the book. It is that bad faith leads to despair. It leads, that is, to the view 'that all human activities are equivalent' and 'that all are on principle doomed to failure' (B&N: 646). From this perspective, it makes more sense to be a 'solitary drunkard' than to be 'a leader of nations', because the latter mistakenly thinks their projects matter whereas the former does not (B&N: 647).

This passage is often misunderstood. Sartre claims here that this 'despair' (*désespoir*), which is the evaluative demotivation characteristic of depression, arises from realising that people pursue their projects with the impossible aim of establishing that they have some particular essence (B&N: 646). He argues here that the impossibility of achieving this aim is made clear by existentialist psychoanalysis. But according to his phenomenology of motivation, this is not the only way we can become aware of it. For, as we saw in chapter 3, he holds that we experience the world as reasons that can be resisted, not simply as causes to which our behaviour automatically responds, and this experience implies that we do not have any fixed nature. This is why seeing ourselves as having such a nature is bad faith, or self-deception, rather than an honest mistake. We are already aware that people have no fixed nature. Sartre agrees that all projects aimed at establishing a fixed essence are doomed to fail, which is why he can seem to agree with the despairing view that it does not matter at all whether one strives to achieve anything or not.

This misreading relies on the assumption that aiming to demonstrate a fixed nature, which he here describes as establishing oneself as 'in-itself-for-itself' and earlier called the

'desire to be God' (B&N: 586-7), is a necessary feature of human existence. This is a project, however, with an evaluative structure. The idea that existence precedes essence, the core claim of Sartre's existentialism, entails that it cannot be necessary. Moreover, it is built on the same value as the project of bad faith. The passages where Sartre seems to imply that it is fixed, therefore, are better read as expressing his view that bad faith is a widespread project (Webber 2009: 106-111). Recognising that this project is futile leads to despair only if one does not also recognise that it is merely an optional project rather than an essential feature of human existence. It is only among people who 'believe that their mission' of establishing that they have a particular nature 'is written in things' who are 'condemned to despair' (B&N: 646). The threat of despair is therefore ubiquitous in bad faith, but removed by conversion to the project of authenticity.

5. Eudaimonism and the Trouble with Other People

Sartre's more complicated eudaimonist argument for authenticity in *Being and Nothingness* concerns the effect he considers bad faith to have on our relationships with one another. This analysis is also often misunderstood as a theory of essential structures of human existence, a misreading encouraged by some of Sartre's less careful statements. 'Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others', he writes at one point (B&N: 386). This might seem to indicate that he considers the interpersonal conflict summarised in Garcin's declaration in *Huis Clos* that 'Hell is ... other people!' is an intrinsic part of the human condition (HC: 223). But, as we saw in chapter 6, his view is rather that our relations with one another are distorted by the project of bad faith in such a way that inevitably produces conflict. The extended analysis in *Being and Nothingness* of the forms that this conflict can take is developed within the framework of bad faith outlined much earlier in the book.

His core argument in this analysis is that the project of seeing oneself as having some particular fixed essence is threatened in two ways by other people. One threat arises from the fact that their projects shape their perceptions of one's behaviour, leading them to formulate views of one's character that do not fully coincide with one's own. This is the problem that drives the narrative of *Huis Clos*, as we saw in chapter 8. Garcin's view of himself as essentially macho is threatened by other people's views of some of his actions as cowardly. But bad faith is also threatened by other people affirming one's self-image. For that affirmation does not seem valuable if it is merely the mechanical output of their own fixed essence. The pride in having one's self-image affirmed thus implies the other

person's freedom, which threatens one's project of seeing people as having fixed essences. It threatens one's bad faith in the same way that the waiter would threaten the bad faith of his clientele if he did not accede to their demands to behave in accordance with the essence of being a waiter.

Sartre details this argument through analyses of possible attitudes towards other people (B&N: 383-434; Webber 2009: 137-142). He concludes with a footnote reminding us that he has described only interpersonal relations in the context of bad faith. 'These considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation', he writes, but 'this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we cannot discuss here' (B&N: 434 n13). The theory of interpersonal conflict in *Being and Nothingness* is thus intended to ground a eudaimonist argument for abandoning the project of bad faith that underlies this conflict and thereby converting to authenticity. This eudaimonist argument is not developed in *Being and Nothingness*, presumably because it is beyond the book's purview as a work of ontology restricted to describing how things are. But we can immediately see the shape such an argument would have to take. It would not be enough to point out that bad faith causes conflict. For the basic premise of existentialism entails that whether overcoming this conflict would be valuable for an individual depends on that individual's projects.

We can raise a similar point about Sartre's shorter eudaimonist argument for authenticity. Why should someone who has become aware that people are generally trying to demonstrate some particular fixed essence that they do not in fact possess thereby fall into despair? This despair assumes that such projects are inevitable and that their futility is disvaluable. It is bad faith, according to Sartre, that causes the assumption that such projects are inevitable as part of human nature. But we might still ask why the futility of these projects must be valued negatively, why the person in bad faith cannot instead pursue projects that value this futility positively or neutrally (compare Landau 2012). The answer to this question must also lie in the project of bad faith itself. It is because this person still values a fixed nature that they disvalue the futility of trying to demonstrate it. This is why the conversion to authenticity is necessary to avoid despair. From the perspective of bad faith, the project of trying to demonstrate a fixed essence must seem inevitable and its futility disvaluable.

Likewise, the argument from interpersonal conflict is that this conflict is necessarily disvaluable to the person in bad faith. For the conflict is nothing more than the threat

other people pose to one's self-image as having a particular fixed essence and the futility of the only possible strategies for preventing that threat. Bad faith thus generates its own frustrations, which are valued negatively precisely because they frustrate the project of bad faith. This implies the value of a solution to these frustrations. But the only solution is to abandon the project of bad faith, which inevitably produces them, and embrace instead the idea that people do not have fixed natures, that existence precedes essence. The project of bad faith, therefore, provides the individual with reason to abandon it in favour of authenticity (Webber 2009: 142). Although values are grounded in our projects, the project of authenticity is valuable for everyone irrespective of their current projects. It is valuable for those in bad faith, whether they understand this or not, just as it is valuable, and already valued, by those who embrace authenticity.

6. Why Eudaimonism Is Not The Answer

Neither of the eudaimonistic arguments that Sartre outlines in *Being and Nothingness*, however, can fully resolve the problem of absurdity. For neither of these arguments can provide a satisfactory solution to the metaethical problem of the grounding of normativity. Within the general framework of existentialism, they face the same problem as Nagel's recommendation that we respond to the problem of absurdity by tempering our values with irony. The problem is that they do not provide reason to reject any internally coherent system of values. This problem for Sartre's eudaimonist arguments has two parts. One is that they do not provide considerations in favour of authenticity strong enough to require that everyone adopt the project of authenticity. The other is that the project of authenticity that they recommend does not set constraints on behaviour that distinguish it in practice from the nihilism it is intended to overcome. These eudaimonistic considerations in favour of authenticity, therefore, are not sufficient to ground the moral and political outlook that Sartre develops.

The first part of the problem arises from Sartre's aim of showing that the project of bad faith, which is the opposite of authenticity, has consequences of negative value to the person in bad faith. Arguments of this kind cannot show that this negative value must outweigh the positive value of remaining in bad faith. The person in bad faith has many strong reasons against embracing authenticity. The project of bad faith itself enshrines a value that grounds reasons to continue the project. If it is indeed, as Sartre claims, spread and reinforced by social pressure, then authenticity would carry a social cost to the individual. If bad faith shapes one's other projects, relationships, and self-image, as Sartre

claims, then conversion to authenticity would require substantial revision of one's life. Sartre's theory of bad faith requires that we accept the idea of sedimentation, as we saw in chapter 7, so overcoming bad faith would be a difficult long-term task, taking time and effort away from other valued goals. Sartre's eudaimonist arguments cannot show that these reasons to remain in bad faith are necessarily outweighed by reasons for authenticity grounded in the threat of despair and difficult interpersonal relations.

The second part of the problem arises because Sartre's strategy is to argue against an evaluative attachment to the idea that people have a fixed essence. Even if the argument succeeded, it would not show that we should positively value the freedom that, according to existentialism, structures human existence. All that is required to abandon the project of bad faith, that is to say, is the recognition that people do not in fact have fixed natures. This recognition does not entail any significant restrictions on one's behaviour towards other people. It does not rule out projects that disvalue other people's freedom and therefore does not rule out subjugating the lives and freedoms of other people to the pursuit of one's own goals. We can see this problem in Sartre's brief remarks on play, which he considers a temporary respite from bad faith (B&N: 601-2; Pitt 2013). Play is here defined by an attitude. It is in intending one's actions to express one's free creativity that play exemplifies authenticity. This sets no limits on the actions themselves. One can see oneself as freely, creatively, even playfully suppressing other people in order to achieve one's own goals.

Sartre's eudaimonistic arguments do overcome two of the three ethical problems of absurdity. Once we realise that the values that structure our lives depend on our projects, it is rational to adopt a playful attitude to our lives and the values we pursue. The anguish that comes from the recognition of absurdity is grounded, according to Sartre, in bad faith itself: it is because we deny that our values are enshrined in freely chosen projects that we are averse to any evidence that they are, as we saw in chapter 7. Authenticity replaces this anguish with play (B&N: 601). But these eudaimonistic arguments cannot resolve the metaethical problem of absurdity. For they do not rule out any coherent value system. They merely argue that in order to be coherent, any value system that included bad faith would have to generate reasons to continue in bad faith that outweighed the reasons in favour of authenticity that bad faith generates. It seems perfectly plausible that this condition could be fulfilled in many ways. Conversion to authenticity, moreover, seems not to restrict the content of the individual's value system either, except to require a playful attitude towards it.

In the context of existentialism, eudaimonistic arguments cannot establish an imperative that applies to everyone irrespective of their projects. For according to existentialism, the structure of human existence is one that we cannot fail to express equally in all of our thought and action. There can be no question here of the idea, which motivates Aristotle and other naturalist eudaimonist philosophers, that to flourish we need to act in accordance with our nature rather than against it, or should develop our defining natural capacity to its fullest extent. It is thus existentialism itself that constrains this eudaimonistic approach to merely indicating that authenticity has some value to be weighed among the individual's other values. And it is thus existentialism itself that constrains this eudaimonistic approach to showing that authenticity is valuable for everyone in bad faith. This requires that the argument is based on the problems caused by the denial of the true structure of human existence, which constrains these eudaimonistic arguments to concluding only that we should recognise that structure. They cannot show that we should value it.

7. From Eudaimonism to Humanism

It may be that Sartre accepted these shortcomings of his eudaimonist approach at the time of writing *Being and Nothingness*. Indeed, his book on anti-Semitism and Jewish culture, written the year after *Being and Nothingness* was published, introduces his conception of inauthenticity with this qualification: 'the term "inauthenticity" implying no moral blame, of course' (A&J: 93). In his lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, delivered as part of the existentialist offensive a year after the book on Jewish culture was written, however, Sartre declares that 'I am able to bring a moral judgment to bear' against inauthenticity (EH: 48). In this lecture, Sartre proclaims that there is a universal form of morality, which Kant accurately described as the imperative to will the freedom of oneself and of others (EH: 49). Sartre disagrees with Kant only over the specificity of morality: Kant thought that this universal form was sufficient to ground precise moral imperatives, argues Sartre, whereas in fact it merely circumscribes an arena of acceptable behaviour within which one is free to invent. 'The only thing that counts is whether or not invention is made in the name of freedom' (EH: 50).

In this lecture, therefore, Sartre clearly holds that authenticity is imperative for everyone irrespective of their projects and that this authenticity requires not only recognising but also valuing the true structure of human existence. The 'existentialist humanism' that

Sartre describes in this lecture is an ethical outlook that he argues we are all required to adopt (EH: 53). But because this is a popular lecture, Sartre does not provide much detail of how his argument for this categorical imperative to respect human freedom is supposed to work. He does say that 'once a man realizes, in his state of abandonment, that it is he who imposes values, he can will but one thing: freedom as the foundation of all values' (EH: 48). And he adds that 'as soon as there is commitment, I am obliged to will the freedom of others at the same time as I will my own' (EH: 48-9). But these comments are puzzling. Just what argument does he have in mind here? We have already seen that the eudaimonist considerations in favour of authenticity found in *Being and Nothingness* cannot establish these conclusions.

One way to resolve the puzzle is to read this passage in the lecture as developing a new argument for the imperative of authenticity. On this reading, Sartre's comments here claim simply that it is incoherent to respond to reasons that we encounter in experience, to treat as valuable the values that those reasons manifest, without also treating as valuable the ground of those reasons in our own freedom over our projects (Poellner 2005: 238). This reading seems supported by Sartre's claim that 'a strictly consistent attitude' requires that we embrace authenticity (EH: 48). In response, we might wonder what reason somebody in bad faith could have to respect this consideration of consistency rather than act on the reasons they have to preserve their bad faith. Perhaps more importantly, the idea that the reasons we encounter in experience are grounded in our projects is distinct from the idea that we are free to change our projects, so the most that this argument could show is that we should value our projects, not that we should value freedom. Indeed, the person in bad faith will anyway value their own projects as manifestations of their supposed fixed essence.

An alternative way to solve the puzzle is to deny that these comments are really intended to support an imperative of authenticity. On this reading, this passage of *Existentialism Is a Humanism* simply sketches the moral outlook entailed by the abandonment of bad faith in favour of authenticity, an outlook that Sartre intended to detail in later work (Gardner 2005: 349-50). This reading seems supported by Sartre's emphasis on authenticity as a recognition of the truth and bad faith as in error (EH: 47-8). But this would leave us with no solution to the metaethical problem of absurdity. For it provides us with no reason why we ought to recognise the truth. The eudaimonist arguments that Sartre indicates in *Being and Nothingness* are intended to provide such a reason, but as we have seen these cannot provide a reason that would necessarily outweigh the reasons to remain in bad faith. If it

were not his intention in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* to replace those arguments with a stronger one, then it is difficult to see why he did not simply state his eudaimonist arguments in this lecture. He might have recognised their shortcomings, but they do at least provide some universal motivation for authenticity.

It can seem, therefore, that we must choose between reading this passage of *Existentialism Is a Humanism* as a failure to demonstrate that everyone ought to value human freedom irrespective of their other projects or reading it as not even attempting to argue for any grounding of normativity beyond the projects individuals choose. Sartre's existentialist writings generally can seem to vacillate between an objective morality of freedom and a theory of human existence that precludes any objective morality (Thody 1981: 433-4). Indeed, there seem to be no resources in Sartre's works preceding or following *Existentialism Is a Humanism* that could be used to formulate a robust argument that authenticity is morally required of everyone and entails valuing the freedom of everyone. But we need not read the lecture purely with reference to his own writings. For it was presented as part of the existentialist offensive, a joint project to promote the shared philosophy of Beauvoir and Sartre. So we can read its comments on authenticity as summarising the argument for a categorical imperative to value human freedom in Beauvoir's essay *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, published the previous year. The next chapter is devoted to explicating that argument.

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. P&C. *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. Translated by Marybeth Timmerman. In Simone de Beauvoir, *Philosophical Writings*, edited by Margaret A. Simons, 89-141. Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- Bernasconi, Robert. 2005. The European Knows and Does Not Know: Fanon's Response to Sartre. In *Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, edited by Max Silverman, 100-111. Manchester: University of Manchester Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. BSWM. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2008.
- Gardner, Sebastian. 2005. Sartre, Intersubjectivity, and German Idealism. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43: 325-351.
- Judy, Ronald. 1996. Fanon's Body of Black Experience. In *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renée T. White, 53-73. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Landau, Iddo. 2012. Foundationless Freedom and Meaninglessness of Life in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. *Sartre Studies International* 18: 1-8.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1971. The Absurd. *Journal of Philosophy* 68: 716-727.
- Pitt, Rebecca. 2013. Play and Being in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. In *The Philosophy of Play*, edited by Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell, and Malcolm Maclean, 109-119. New York: Routledge.
- Poellner, Peter. 2015. Early Sartre on Freedom and Ethics. *European Journal of Philosophy* 23: 221-247.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. B&N. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. Edited by Arlette Elkaim-Sartre. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. EH. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Translated by Carol Macomber. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. HC. *Huis Clos*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. In Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis Clos and Other Plays*, 177-223. London: Penguin, 2000.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. N. *Nausea*. Translated by Robert Baldick. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963.
- Thody, Philip. 1981. Sartre and the Concept of Moral Action: The Example of his Novels and Plays. In *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp, 422-437. La Salle, IL: Open Court.