

## IF YOU CHOOSE NOT TO DECIDE YOU STILL HAVE MADE A CHOICE

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In his 1945 work “The Humanism of Existentialism” Jean-Paul Sartre defends his philosophy of existence from several criticisms previously leveled at his work. One of the major accusations pointed at Sartre’s philosophy is that it makes ethical decisions worryingly subjective or even arbitrary. Through a series of anecdotes and analogies, Sartre attempts to show that this is not a fair representation of his theory and in fact, runs completely counter to his core tenets.

One of the central pieces of Sartre’s existentialism is that values are devised or developed rather than discovered or stumbled upon. Sartre begins by summarizing a common notion about the existence of an Abrahamic God. Sartre says that if God creates a person then “He knows exactly what He is creating.”<sup>i</sup> It is clear to God what is being created, how it is being created, what purpose it will serve, and how to measure how successful such a being is at fulfilling its purpose. “The individual man is the realization of a certain concept of divine intelligence.”<sup>ii</sup> This motivates the idea that essence precedes existence, or the universal concept of a person precedes the individual person. Under this conception, being a person has objective purpose, meaning, or values that are set by God. Thus, the view is such that one can discover or embody these values through various means.

Sartre claims that his own view, atheism, provides a simpler existential account of being than a theistic existentialism. “If God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept.”<sup>iii</sup> What Sartre means is that without a divine creator to conceive of the concept of people, we exist first, and are defined through our existence. Without a divine creator, there are no objective values. There cannot be intangible universal truths, for who could establish them. However, even the existence of God fails to provide objective values. Sartre preempts the objection from those who believe in God by saying, “In any case, I myself choose the meaning [messages from God] have.”<sup>iv</sup> Even in the case that God exists, one still must personally evaluate values and choose through their actions because the objectively right answer is unobtainable. We establish our own values through the very act of existing and choosing as we exist.

If Sartre is correct and value is subjective, then each of us must choose values for ourselves. This seems to lead to an undesirable consequence of Sartre’s existentialism; ethical decisions are relative to the point of absurdity. If values are subjective to each person, no one can judge another for things they choose to represent or not represent. Purely by choosing a particular stance on an issue, one has made it a good stance through their choice. A continuation of this criticism is that not only are ethical decisions subjective, they are also purely arbitrary. If all views are made good simply by choosing them, why take an active hand in choosing at all. One might as well roll a die each time they must make a choice about values, for whatever choice the die dictates will be a good one. It seems much more intuitive that we choose things because we perceive them as good, not that things are made good by choosing them.

Sartre responds to the charge that his view is subjective through an anecdote involving a young man at a crossroad. The young man had to decide between remaining in France with his mother, who dotes and relies on him, or running off to England to fight in World War II. Sartre describes the situation, “he was faced with two very different kinds of action: one, concrete, immediate, but concerning only one individual; the other concerned an incomparably vaster group... but for that very reason was dubious, and might be interrupted en route.”<sup>v</sup> Sartre says that the core of the young man’s problem was that no system of ethics could help him choose. Sartre applies the Christian doctrine, which he characterizes as “take the more rugged path,” to the situation, but puzzles over which is the more rugged path.<sup>vi</sup> In a similar application of the Kantian view, “Never treat any person as a means,

but as an end,” Sartre points out the both staying and leaving use either the young man’s mother, or those fighting as a means.<sup>vii</sup> All systems could provide motivations to do both actions, and none can provide the objectively correct answer. Since there is no objectively correct answer, Sartre proffers the advice, “You’re free, choose, that is, invent.”<sup>viii</sup>

Sartre’s response to the young man is satisfying in isolation, but I do not find it to be a more compelling alternative to other ethical systems. It seems that Sartre believes that part of the appeal of his response is tied up in the fact that it permits either action. However, it does not seem that a system of ethics is required to put forth a single right answer to any moral dilemma. It is possible for Sartre’s conception of the Christian doctrine, “take the more rugged path,” to be reinterpreted as “choose one of the most rugged paths.” Similarly, the Kantian view of “never treat any person as a means, but as an end” can be reconceptualized as “treat any person as an end to the fullest degree possible.” With these reconceptualizations, the appeal of Sartre’s response over other ethical systems evaporates. Sartre’s view, the Christian doctrine, and the Kantian view all permit the agent to create the choice as they see fit.

The example of the young man at a crossroads is in some ways loaded from the start. We are presented with two possibilities both of which seem intuitively right. Caring for one’s mother is good, but so is fighting Nazis. Can Sartre condemn the young man for his choice if the man takes a radically different approach and decides to murder his mother, so she does not worry when he goes off to fight? It seems that this action would be viewed as horribly unethical to any reasonable person. Certainly, the Christian and Kantian view could and would condemn this behavior. Was the young man not simply following Sartre’s advice to “choose, that is, invent.”<sup>ix</sup> Although his ground is shaky, Sartre attempts to find some to stand on here. “I realize that I cannot not will the freedom of others.”<sup>x</sup> What Sartre is saying here is that one is unjustified in depriving others of their freedom. “Although the content of morality is variable, a certain form of this morality is universal.”<sup>xi</sup> It is up to us to decide the composition of a moral framework, but this framework is bounded by the freedom of others. In the case that the young man murders his mother Sartre would say that he could and would condemn the man because the man infringed upon the freedom of another. I do not find this solution satisfying. While it might solve the worry about existentialism that the existentialist is committed to moral relativism, it seems like giving freedom this sort of value flies in the face of Sartre’s argument that values are not preestablished.

Sartre’s response to the charge that his view renders ethical decisions not just subjective, but arbitrary, requires more subtlety than his response to the subjectivity objection. Firstly, Sartre claims that the charge of arbitrariness fails to account for the weight of our decisions.<sup>xii</sup> Our choices commit us to being one way and not another. When faced with a choice, we must take responsibility of what we choose, and this forces us to take the choices we make seriously. Furthermore, Sartre says that we must choose. “What is not possible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing.”<sup>xiii</sup> Refusing to decide, is still a choice in itself. Finally, choosing something creates the value of it because we choose to give it value. This is the clearest evidence to Sartre that we do value things. In choosing to have children rather than to remain childless, I create the value of my choice to have children precisely because it has been chosen. In another possible world, I might decide to remain childless and by choosing to do so, I would have created the value of this choice. Choosing is something we take seriously, we cannot avoid choosing, and when we choose, we create the value of our choice. One may not refer to preestablished values when making their choice, but it is not an act of pure chance or as Sartre puts it, “caprice.”<sup>xiv</sup>

To illustrate his objection to the claim that his view is arbitrary Sartre uses an analogy of the creation of art. “Has anyone ever asked, ‘What painting ought [the artist] to make?’”<sup>xv</sup> Sartre claims that there is no objective truth as to what kind of painting should be made, or what qualities or features it must include. The painter creates as they work, not beforehand. Sartre says this is similar to ethics

because both cases involve creation and invention. Like the painter choosing as the work is created, we choose as our lives unfold. It is not necessary to rely on preconceived notions of what the final product should look like to make non-arbitrary choices about what is best for us as choices confront us. Sartre concludes his passage about the relationship between art and ethics by saying, “We define man only in relationship to his involvement.” He thinks it is nonsensical to look for value in choices rather than examining the value of the actions that stem from choices.

In one sense Sartre’s advice to the conflicted young man is better than the advice other ethical systems would offer. This is because rather than accepting an abstract moral system, Sartre’s advice forces the man to be wholly responsible for his choice. Despite this, it does not seem as though Sartre has satisfyingly defended his view from the objection that it is subjective. In order to avoid moral relativism, Sartre commits himself to the idea that we cannot infringe upon the freedom of others. In doing so, he accepts a tenet that seems to be in direct opposition with his insistence that there are no objective values. Regarding the stronger claim that Sartre’s view encourages arbitrary choice, I believe Sartre can respond appropriately. It seems as though we have a plethora of reasons to take the choices we make seriously, even if we accept Sartre’s existentialism.

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<sup>i</sup> Sartre, 292.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid, 298

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, 297.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid, 298.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid, 305.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid, 304.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid, 304

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.