Chapter 3: Relativism and Existentialism

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One (very old!) debate about ethics concerns whether the claims of morality (such as “it’s wrong to light kittens on fire and throw them at babies”) is **relative** to a person’s culture, religion, or individual circumstance, or whether these are **objective** claims that apply to everyone (even if they happen to disagree!).

In this chapter, we’ll look at two of the most influential versions of relativism: cultural relativism and existentialism. We’ll also be looking at the problems that these views encounter.

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# What is Cultural Relativism?

As any historian, sociologist, or anthropologist could tell you, different cultures, religious groups, and subcultures often have different views about ethical matters:

* Different societies have different views about sex (monogamy vs. polygamy, views on homosexuality, etc.), eating (many societies restrict certain sorts of animal products), and treatment of the dead (burial vs. cremation).
* Most modern democratic societies hold that women and men are morally equal, that people should have substantial levels of freedom of religion and speech, and that people have a *moral* right to participate in governing themselves (by voting). However, other societies have laws and customs that restrict the rights of women, enforce laws that are explicitly religious in nature, and reject democratic decision-making. In some societies, things such as homosexuality or adultery can be punishable by death, and female circumcision remains common.
* Infanticide (the killing of infants) is widely condemned in most modern societies. However, it was widely practiced by many societies in the past. Female infanticide has been especially common, especially in hunter-gatherer societies.
* Until relatively recently, forcibly capturing and enslaving people from different races/tribes/religions/etc. was widely practiced. Most (though not all) religious, political, and philosophical leaders in these societies seemed to have little problem with it (or, at least, they didn’t seem to say much in opposition to it).

Given these cultural differences, **cultural relativists** have proposed that what legitimately counts as “ethical” or “moral” behavior depends ONLY on one’s culture. According to James Rachels’s oft-quoted essay “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”[[1]](#footnote-1), cultural relativists believe the “that there is no such thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes, and nothing more. Moreover, our own code has no special status; it is merely one among many.” Rachels argues that culturally relativism is FALSE (as well as harmful), and ought to be rejected. In this lesson, we’ll be looking at both cultural relativism and Rachels’ arguments against it, in a bit more detail.

## Ethics versus Metaethics

Ethics concerns the study of right and wrong actions, or the good and bad attributes of the people doing these actions. So, ethics is interested in questions like “Is killing people always morally wrong” or “Is anger always a vice?” By contrast, **metaethics** studies the methods and presuppositions of ethics. In other words, metaethics wants to know what ethics is “all about.” Cultural relativism is one of several popular views about metaethics:

**Objectivism** (or **moral realism)** holds that the right- or wrong-making features of actions are independent of what any particular person or culture believes. So, for example, some objectivists are **Platonist** (or **non-naturalists),** who think the morality exists independently of the physical world, and that moral truths can be known by the use of pure reason. Some are **divine command theorists,** who hold that moral truths depend of the will of a divine being. Other objectivists are **naturalists** who think that morality depends on natural features of the world (such our capacity to feel pain, reason, etc.). Many proponents of the ethical theories we’ll be covering in later chapters (utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, and natural law theory) assume that that *some* form of moral realism is true.

Objectivism is probably the most popular metaethical position among ethicists (both historically and up to the present day). It is defended by everyone from Plato to John Stuart Mill to Martin Luther King. And it’s important to remember that objectivism doesn’t need to be simplistic. For example, objectivists are perfectly capable of recognizing that the right thing to do is sometimes tough to figure out, depends on the circumstance, and so on. Their minimal claim is that individual people (and even whole cultures) sometimes get things (from gossiping and cheating to slavery and genocide) WRONG.

In contrast to moral realism/objectivism, **moral relativism** holds that moral truths are “relative” to an individual’s psychology, society, religion, etc. One classic form of relativism is **subjectivism,** according to which the emotions and beliefs of individuals are what make actions right or wrong *for them.* For example, the Wicked Witch of the West wants to murder Dorothy, so that means murdering Dorothy really is OK (at least for the Wicked Witch). This obviously goes against the common intuition that murdering Dorothy would be bad/wrong. In philosophy, most subjectivists describe themselves as “anti-realists” or “error theorists”—they don’t actually think that morality is “real,” even though the overwhelming majority of humans *think* that it’s real. (Many subjectivists recommend forgetting about subjectivism when it comes to make moral decisions—they argue that it’s better to act *as if* there were objective moral norms.) One popular version of subjectivism is **existentialism,** which we’ll be returning to later.

Finally, **cultural relativism** holds that the truth of ethical claims depends on the culture one happens to be a member of. This means that you can’t determine what’s right/wrong all by yourself (i.e., it’s not subjectivism), but there’s also no objective truth of the matter. As a matter of historical fact, most cultures generally disapprove of things like lying or murder, so we can say that these things are (usually) wrong. However, many cultures have also made exceptions to these rules, when it came to their application to various groups (such as members of other tribes/nations). Therefore, it would be perfectly fine to do bad things to these people.

**Ethics and Metaethics.** It’s important to remember that all three metaethical views might agree with the claim that “murder is wrong.” However, they think so for very different reasons. Objectivists tend to think murder is wrong because of something “outside” you, whether this be God’s will, or simply the fact that this would cause lots of people unhappiness. By contrast, subjectivists would say that murder is wrong (for you) if and only if you find it distasteful. Finally, a cultural relativist would say that murder is wrong because society (in the form of the law, religion, and public opinion) holds that murdering people is wrong. All these positions should be distinguished from **moral error theory (or “moral skepticism”)** according to which there simply are NO truths about moral matters. (Moral error theorists have the same attitude toward morality than atheists have toward God).

## What do Cultural Relativists Believe? Why Do They Believe it?

“One thing I would really like to tell them [first graders] about is cultural relativity. I didn't learn until I was in college about all the other cultures, and I should have learned that in the first grade. A first grader should understand that his or her culture isn't a rational invention; that there are thousands of other cultures and they all work pretty well; that all cultures function on faith rather than truth; that there are lots of alternatives to our own society. Cultural relativity is defensible and attractive. It's also a source of hope. It means we don't have to continue this way if we don't like it." (Kurt Vonnegut, Playboy Magazine).

**Getting clear on “Cultural Relativism.”** While the basic idea that “morality varies by culture” is pretty common, what exactly is this supposed to mean? As Rachels notes, cultural relativists seem to have a number of things in mind (I’ve altered his list a bit):

1. People from different cultures, as a matter of fact, have different ethical codes.
2. There is no “objective” or “universal” standard by which we could say that one’s culture code is better/worse than any other.
3. Our own culture’s moral code isn’t any better (or worse) than those of other cultures. If we try to judge the behavior of people in other cultures, we are just showing our ignorance.
4. A culture’s “code” really does determine what is right and wrong in that culture, even if individuals disagree with this.
5. We should adopt an “attitude of tolerance” toward the practices of other cultures.

The important thing to note here is that *some* of these things might be true (or almost true) while others might be false. For example, we might think that 1 is true, 2-4 are false, and the truth of 5 depends on how one interprets it (in fact, this is what many critics of cultural relativism have argued). So, even if we end up rejecting cultural relativism (as Rachels does), it doesn’t mean we have to say that it is wrong about *everything.*

**The Cultural Differences Argument.** Defenders of cultural relativism often seem to have in mind an argument like the following:

1. Premise: There is widespread disagreement about morality between cultures. For example, some cultures approve of infanticide while others disapprove it.
2. Conclusion: So, there is no objective fact of the matter. What counts as “right” and “wrong” depends on one’s culture.

The problem with this argument is that it is **invalid.** That is, it has a bad *form—*one can believe the premise is true, and still hold that conclusion is false. To show this, we can produce a **counterexample** (an argument of the same form with a *true* premise and a *false* conclusion):

1. Premise: There is widespread disagreement about science between cultures. For example, some cultures believe the earth is flat, while others believe it is round.
2. Conclusion: So, there is no objective fact of the matter. What counts as “true” and “false” about the shape of the earth depends on one’s culture.

**What does this show?** By producing a counterexample, we have NOT shown that cultural relativism is false. We’ve merely shown that one popular *argument* for it doesn’t work. This is an important distinction—for example, you might *agree* with someone’s political or moral views, while still thinking his or her *reasons* for holding them (“I just blindly believe whatever my parents told me”) are not very good.

## Problems for Cultural Relativism

“I'm here to say to you this morning that some things are right and some things are wrong. Eternally so, absolutely so. It's wrong to hate. It always has been wrong and it always will be wrong. It's wrong in America, it's wrong in Germany, it's wrong in Russia, it's wrong in China. It was wrong in 2000 B.C., and it's wrong in 1954 A.D. It always has been wrong, and it always will be wrong. It's wrong to throw our lives away in riotous living. No matter if everybody in Detroit is doing it, it's wrong. It always will be wrong, and it always has been wrong. It's wrong in every age and it's wrong in every nation. Some things are right and some things are wrong, no matter if everybody is doing the contrary.” (Martin Luther King, Rediscovering Lost Values)

The majority of ethicists disagree with cultural relativism. There are a few reasons for this:

1. **It means that one can never legitimately *praise* or *blame* the behavior of people from other cultures, no matter what.** According to cultural relativism, we can never justifiably say things like “It is morally wrong for majorities (in other societies) to engage in genocidal campaigns against minority” or “Societies that provide support for new mothers are morally admirable.” All we can say is “I guess other societies do things different than us. Things that seem morally horrible to me are just fine for them, and my society can’t/shouldn’t learn from the things that seem good.”
2. **It means that the “majority view” is correct and good *by definition,* and that social reformers trying to change this view are always wrong and bad.** Cultural relativists hold that right and wrong are *completely determined* by cultural approval. These means, for example, those social reformers like Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and so on were *wrong* when they tried to change peoples’ views*,* at least if the majority disagreed with them at first. This is true for *every* issue: majority opinion determines the morality of abortion, animal rights, gay rights, and so on. In every case, those who are trying to change things are wrong by definition.
3. **It entails that it is *impossible* for societies to make moral progress.** Finally, cultural relativism holds that a given society’s morals are always “correct” (by definition), there is no way the society can ever make progress (or get worse). This means, for example, that U.S. decisions to eliminate slavery, to expand the vote to women, and so on weren’t *morally* any better than what they had been doing all along. Things have never gotten any better (or worse), and they never will.

## What Cultural Relativism gets wrong (and Right)

It might seem we are stuck between a rock and a hard place: the cultural relativists note that there is widespread moral disagreement (which they argue makes objective, universal morality kind of unbelievable), while their critics note cultural relativism, if taken seriously, has some pretty absurd consequences: e.g., it turns out that Hitler was a good guy, and MLK wasn’t. However, this isn’t the end of story. As it turns out, the main factual claim of cultural relativism (that different cultures have massive disagreements about *values*) aren’t entirely true:

1. **Not all difference in BEHAVIOR imply a difference in VALUES or MORALS.** As Rachels points out, it might *seem* like societies that allow infanticide value infants less than those that forbid it, or that those embracing vegetarianism value non-human life more. However, these differing behaviors might actually have nothing to do with values. For example, in societies that practiced (female) infanticide (a) conditions were very harsh, there was no birth control, and a mother who chose to raise all her children to adulthood might very well see them all die (from lack of food, etc.), and (b) these societies *also* tended to have very high rates of male mortality (due to mostly to violent conflict with other tribes). Similarly, vegetarian societies are often associated with religious beliefs that animals have *souls* or *minds*, while meat-eating societies often have religious beliefs that entail animals are something *tools* or *machines.* If this is the case, then the people in these societies actually *agree* on values; they just disagree on how best to practice them.
2. **Societies actually AGREE on many important moral issues (because they have to).** There are certain moral rules that almost *every* society will have to have, at least if they want to survive. For example, there need to prohibitions against murder and theft, and people need to generally be honest.Similarly, it’s pretty tough to find examples of cultures that don’t value character traits like courage or generosity. Cultural relativism seems most plausible when we focus on differences, but it’s important to remember that are many, many important moral norms that seem pretty “universal.”

**What Cultural Relativism Gets Right.** So far, we’ve focused on the problems with cultural relativism, and why it doesn’t “work” as a moral theory. However, this doesn’t mean that the moral diversity of different cultures has nothing to teach us! In particular, it is important to remember the following: **No matter how strongly you *feel* about something, you can’t *assume* that the beliefs and practices of your own culture are superior to those of other cultures**. As children, we quite naturally identify strongly with the moral values of our parents, religions, peer groups, etc. We internalize these values in the form of “gut feelings” concerning right and wrong behavior. What cultural relativism teaches us is that we should be very, very careful about assuming that these feelings are correct when others disagree with them, since those with *different* upbringings have other, equally strong gut feelings opposed to our own.

## One More Example: Testing Out a New Sword

To close our discussion of cultural relativism, we’ll consider a famous thought experiment by the philosopher (and critic of cultural relativism) **Mary Midgley:**

*To show this [that moral relativism isn’t coherent], I shall take a remote example, because we shall probably find it easier to think calmly about it than we should with a contemporary one, such as female circumcision in Africa or the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The principles involved will still be the same. My example is this. There is, it seems, a verb in classical Japanese which means "to try out one's new sword on a chance wayfarer.' (The word is* tsujigiri*, literally "crossroads-cut.") A samurai sword had to be tried out because, if it was to work properly, it had to slice through someone at a single blow, from the shoulder to the opposite flank. Otherwise, the warrior bungled his stroke. This could injure his honor, offend his ancestors, and even let down his emperor. So tests were needed, and wayfarers had to be expended. Any wayfarer would do—provided, of course, that he was not another Samurai. Scientists will recognize a familiar problem about the rights of experimental subjects.*

In other words: in this particular time and place, it seems to have been morally acceptable for (high status) samurai to cut (low status) travelers in half, just in order to see how their new swords were working. (With a little research, it’s not difficult to find all sorts of these examples, from all sorts of cultures.) Midgley notes that, in response to this scenario, the moral relativist will say something like “Since you are not a member of that culture, it is not your place to judge. You cannot make more judgments about whether cutting strangers in half with swords is right or wrong.” Midgley thinks this is clearly wrong (and expects the reader to agree).

## Review Questions

**Question 1.** Consider a few of the following historical and current cultural practices. Would you say that these practices are *morally admirable* (“Good! Maybe even better than the ones we have.”), *morally blameworthy* (“Bad! This culture ought to have adopted different practices. If we could do so effectively, it would be OK for us to try to intervene and stop this practice.”) or *morally neutral* (“It’s different from the way we do things, but it’s a morally irrelevant difference.”). Explain and defend your answer. (Feel free to do some outside research.)

1. Laws outlawing or restricting homosexuality, premarital sex, masturbation, etc.
2. Laws outlawing pornography or hate speech
3. Laws allowing marriage at or around puberty (12 to 14 years old)
4. Legalized polygamy
5. Legal, moral, or religious rules restricting women’s or minorities’ access to education, employment, political participation, etc.
6. Forced circumcision of female infants and children
7. Legalized marriage among first cousins
8. Laws requiring attendance at religious services, or other sorts of religious observance
9. Corporal punishment (such as caning or whipping) for some crimes, instead of prison time.

**Question 2:** Explain the potential problem in asserting both of the following claims: “Morality is relative to culture” and “Genocide is always wrong.” How does this relate to the debate between moral realism and moral relativism?

**Question 3:** Both moral realists and relativists often claim their theories provide support for the idea of “tolerance” (basically, that we are morally required to be tolerant of different views and lifestyles, and not attempt to force people to live exactly like us). Which view does a *better* job supporting tolerance?

# The “Existential Ethics” of Sartre and De Beauvoir

**Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980)** was a famous French philosopher, playwright, and novelist. His most famous works include the philosophical book *Being and Nothingness,* and the plays *No Exit* and *Nausea*. He was married to **Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986),** who was one of the most important feminist philosophers of the twentieth century, who wrote books such *The Second Sex* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity***.** Both Sartre and De Beauvoir are famous for their defense of **existentialism** which is the focus of this lesson. We’ll primarily be focused on the presentation given in Sartre’s essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” which is probably the most “popular” defense of existentialism as Sartre and de Beauvoir understood early in their careers (later, their views would become a bit less radical and more “nuanced”).

**A little background to the essay.** The essay was written in 1946, just after Nazi Germany had been defeated and France had been liberated. During the war, Sartre had been captured by the Nazis and briefly held as a prisoner of war. However, he had been released within a year and allowed to go back to Paris. While back in Paris, Sartre had NOT joined his fellow existentialists (such as **Albert Camus)** in fighting the Nazis, but had instead spent his time working on philosophy (and had even took a teaching position that had been held by a Jew). After the war, “existentialism” became very popular (especially with college students), but was also attacked by many people for spreading “immorality.” Sartre’s essay is an attempt to (1) explain what *exactly* existentialism is and (2) to show how existentialism relates to ethics. For Sartre, this was also a personal matter, since many of the French opponents of existentialism (both right-wing Catholic conservatives and left-wing Marxists and Socialists, all of who defended different forms of moral realism) had argued that Sartre’s behavior during the war was ethically wrong.

## Who Are All These People That Sartre Talks About?

“Existentialism is a Humanism” was written for ordinary people, and not just for philosophers. However, “ordinary people” in mid-century Paris actually knew quite a bit about the history of philosophy. With this in mind, here are a few of the most important people and ideas that Sartre assumed his readers would know about.

* **Aristotle (384 to 322 BCE)** was Plato’s most famous student. He is known as the “father” of biology and logic. He argued that humans were *essentially* “animals capable of reason” and that being “ethical” or “virtuous” just meant being a *good* rational animal. He concluded that cultivating character traits such as courage, moderation, honesty, friendliness, and generosity was *objectively right* for all humans. His views were later adapted by the theologian **Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274),** and they now serve as the basis for Catholic thinking on ethics. Aristotelianism and Thomism dominated philosophy (and science) until Descartes. (These views are closely related to what we now call “virtue ethics” and “natural law” theory, both of which existentialism deny).
* **Rene Descartes (1596 to 1650)** was a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist (“Cartesian coordinates” were his invention, as were “laws of nature”). Among many other things, he is famous for his **cogito** argument “I think, therefore I am,” and for his claim that humans are essentially “thinking things” (as opposed to physical objects or animals, which simply take up space and obey the laws of physics). He was a **dualist** who held that the human mind (or soul) existed independently from the body (or brain).
* **Immanuel Kant (1724 to 1804)** was a German philosopher who has greatly influenced modern thought on ethics, art, and psychology. He argued that all rational beings (such as humans) are ethically required to follow the **categorical imperative:** “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction.” This means, for example, that it is unethical to lie. After all, if you universalize lying (for example, “What would happen if everyone lied all the time?”) you reach a contradiction (for example, “In that case, there would be no point to lying, since no one would believe you.”) He held that the categorical imperative was knowable **a priori** (“simply by thinking about it, and not dependent on the five senses”).
* **Karl Marx (1818 to 1893)** was a German economist and philosopher. His view of **historical materialism** holds that (1) the most important beliefs and desires of individual humans are entirely determined by their material circumstances(that is, by how their society produces and owns things, and the person’s position in this society) and (2) ethical people should therefore focus their time and energy on trying to improve everyone’s material circumstances. (Marx: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”)

Sartre also mentions some thinkers he would classify as existentialists (even though they didn’t use these terms): the Danish philosopher **Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855),** the Russian novelist **Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881),** and the German philosophers **Frederich Nietzsche (1844-1900)** and **Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)**. These are very different thinkers! Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky are Christians, while Heidegger (and probably Nietzsche) are atheists. Heidegger’s association with Nazi Germany was (both at the time and up to the present day) a matter of considerable debate, with many French and German “continental” thinkers (such as Sartre and de Beauvoir) arguing that his general ethical approach could be saved, while English-speaking “analytic” philosophers largely rejected his work.

## What is Existentialism? Why Should I be an Existentialist?

**Existentialism,** according to Sartre, is the thesis that “existence precedes essence.” Here, **essence** means something like “nature, purpose, or correct use”, while existence simply means “you exist, and are having experiences of the world around you.” While existentialism was a broad movement (associated with a number of different literary and philosophical ideas), Sartre’s version of it is a form of moral subjectivism. That is, it entails that the moral rightness or wrongness of action depends on the properties of the person doing the action (and their feelings, beliefs, and attitudes) rather than on “objective’ features of the world.

* Everyone (including Sartre) would agree that the sorts of tools made by humans have essences. So, for example, the essence of a hammer is “to pound nails”, the essence of a car is “to transport people and goods”, and the essence of Microsoft Word is “to create electronic documents.” These essences make it possible to say objectively what is “good” or “bad”—for example “A good hammer is one which pounds in nails well; a bad hammer doesn’t do this as well.”
* Many philosophers have held that humans *also* have essences, and that these essences determine what it means to be “good” or “bad”, or “ethical” or “unethical” in an **objective** sense (the *world* determines what is right or wrong). So, for example, Aristotle thought that humans were essentially “rational animals,” while Marx thought that they were essentially “products of their culture.” Many religions hold that God made humans in somewhat the same way as humans make tools.
* Existentialists emphasize that humans are forced to *choose* their own “essence”, “purpose,” or “goal.” This means, according to Sartre, that value is **subjective** (each *individual* gets to determine what is right or wrong for him- or herself).

So what does this mean for ethics? Sartre emphasizes two closely related ideas:

**Idea 1: Human beings ought to feel (some) angst/anxiety about ethical choices, since there is no correct answer.** Existentialists claim that we always have to make ethical choices without knowing what the right answer is (in fact, they don’t think there is a right answer). Kierkegaard (a Christian existentialist) gives the example of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham *thinks* that God has told him to kill his son, but there is no way for him to know (1) whether this was really God (and wasn’t a demon or a mental illness) and (2) whether he ought to obey God (after all, there was no way of knowing whether God was *good.*).

This sense of existential **angst** (“How can I possibly live in a world with no objective values?”) leads naturally to **despair** (“I must decide for myself. No one can help me.”) Sartre emphasizes this does NOT mean we should be grumpy, sad, or suicidal—it just means that moral issues are tough, and we have to face this fact in order to live as **authentic** (“embracing the values we have chosen for ourselves, and acting according to these values”) human beings.

**Idea 2: “If there is no God, everything is permitted” (Dostoyevsky).** Existentialists argue that there could be an objective morality *only* if (1) God existed AND (2) it is possible for us to *know* that God existed. However, atheist existentialists (like Sartre) think that God *doesn’t* exist, while religious existentialists (like Kierkegaard) think we can’t *know* whether God exists.

Sartre gives an example of an ethical question that he thinks is “unsolvable” without God. A young man asked him whether he should (1) join the army to fight the Nazis and liberate France or (2) stay home and care for his dying mother. Sartre claims that, without God, *there is no right answer to these sorts of questions.*

## Why Should I Believe You? Objections to Existentialism

Sartre discusses a number of objections that other philosophers have raised to existentialism and tries to answer them:

*Objection 1: Since existentialism teaches that all human action is futile, it leads to* ***QUIETISM*** *(passive contemplation; unconcern with what is happening around us).* Sartre responds that existentialism does NOT mean that human action is futile, but rather that actions have whatever meaning we assign to them. This means that, if we want to lead meaningful lives, we *have* to “get involved” with activities such as love, politics, and art. We should not be quietists.

*Objection 2: Existentialism presents an unrealistically pessimistic view of human life, which overemphasizes the role of anxiety and despair.* Sartre responds that existentialism holds that a life must be judged by “what you do with it.” So, for example, a great artist *must actually produce great works of art* and a kind person *must actually be kind to people.* For some people, this causes angst and despair, since it means they can’t make excuses like “I know I acted badly, but I’m still a good person on the inside…” Sartre thinks this is actually an optimistic view of life, since we have control of what kind of people we are (there’s no “original sin”).

*Objection 3: Since existentialism claims that the existence of individual human “subjectivity” precedes everything else, it can’t account for the importance of our relationships with other people.* Sartre responds that most of our subjective life is spent interacting with other people, and that no one (even an existentialist) can seriously entertain thoughts like “I am the only creature who really exists and matters, and everyone else is a figment of my imagination.”

*Objection 4: Since existentialism claims that all value is subjective, it makes it impossible for us to say that things like murder (or Fascism, or the Holocaust) are wrong.* Sartre responds here by saying that, when we choose how to lead our *own* lives, we are effectively claiming “This is the ethically *best* way to live for someone in my circumstances.” This allows us to meaningfully disagree with how other people choose to act. It’s unclear how this can be reconciled with Sartre’s idea that people don’t have a shared “essence” (and thus, my “good life” might be entirely different from yours).

This last objection has generally been considered the strongest/most difficult objection for Sartre (and de Beauvoir) to answer, and is probably the main reason why “existentialism” never caught on among many philosophical or religious thinkers. Later in their careers, Sartre and de Beauvoir attempted to incorporated more “objective” elements of ethics to help answer it.

## Questions For Review

1. What do philosophers mean by essence?What is the essence of a chair? Of a bicycle tire?
2. Sartre claims that an individual human’s essence (and especially his or her choice of values) is due entirely to his or her free *choices*, and is NOT affected by things such as biology or culture. Do you think a biologist would agree with this? Would a sociologist?
3. Sartre’s example of the student is intended to show that SOME ethical choices “have no right answer.” Do you think that he succeeds in showing that this holds for EVERY ethical choice? Why or why not?
4. What do you think of Sartre’s own ethical choices during the war (which allowed him to get out prison camp, get a university teaching position, and publish his work in Nazi-controlled Vichy France)? Were these actions right? Wrong? A matter of subjective choice?
5. Do you think that adopting existentialism provides a satisfactory method for finding meaning/purpose in life? Why or why not?

# Reading: Mary Midgley, “Trying Out One’s New Sword”[[2]](#footnote-2)

All of us are, more or less, in trouble today about trying to understand cultures strange to us. We hear constantly of alien customs. We see changes in our lifetime which would have astonished our parents. I want to discuss here one very short way of dealing with this difficulty, a drastic way which many people now theoretically favor. It consists in simply denying that we can ever understand any culture except our own well enough to make judgments about it. Those who recommend this hold that the world is sharply divided into separate societies, sealed units, each with its own system of thought. They feel that the respect and tolerance due from one system to another forbids us ever to take up a critical position to any other culture. Moral judgment, they suggest, is a kind of coinage valid only in its country of origin.

I shall call this position **"moral isolationism" [Brendan’s Note: This is very close to what we’ve called “cultural relativism”.]** I shall suggest that it is certainly not forced upon us, and indeed that it makes no sense at all. People usually take it up because they think it is a respectful attitude to other cultures. In fact, however, it is not respectful. Nobody can respect what is entirely unintelligible to them. To respect someone, we have to know enough about him to make a *favorable* judgment, however general and tentative. And we do understand people in other cultures to this extent. Otherwise a great mass of our most valuable thinking would be paralyzed.

To show this, I shall take a remote example, because we shall probably find it easier to think calmly about it than we should with a contemporary one, such as female circumcision in Africa or the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The principles involved will still be the same. My example is this. There is, it seems, a verb in classical Japanese which means "to try out one's new sword on a chance wayfarer.' (The word is ***tsujigiri,***literally "crossroads-cut.") A samurai sword had to be tried out because, if it was to work properly, it had to slice through someone at a single blow, from the shoulder to the opposite flank. Otherwise, the warrior bungled his stroke. This could injure his honor, offend his ancestors, and even let down his emperor. So tests were needed, and wayfarers had to be expended. Any wayfarer would do—provided, of course, that he was not another Samurai. Scientists will recognize a familiar problem about the rights of experimental subjects.

Now when we hear of a custom like this, we may well reflect that we simply do not understand it; and therefore are not qualified to criticize it at all, because we are not members of that culture. But we are not members of any other culture either, except our own. So we extend the principle to cover all extraneous cultures, and we seem therefore to be moral isolationists. But this is, as we shall see, an impossible position. Let us ask what it would involve.

## Some Questions about “Moral Isolationism”

We must ask first: Does the isolating barrier work both ways? Are people in other cultures equally unable to criticize us? This question struck me sharply when I read a remark in *The Guardian* by an anthropologist about a South American Indian who had been taken into a Brazilian town for an operation, which saved his life. Then he came back to his village, he made several highly critical remarks about the white Brazilians' way of life. They may very well have been justified. But the interesting point was that the anthropologist called these remarks "a damning indictment of Western civilization." Now the Indian had been in that town about two weeks. *Was* he in a position to deliver a damning indictment? Would we ourselves be qualified to deliver such an indictment on the Samurai, provided we could spend two weeks in ancient Japan? That do we really think about this?

My own impression is that we believe that outsiders can, in principle, deliver perfectly good indictments—only, it usually takes more than two weeks to make them damning. Understanding has degrees. It is not a slapdash yes-or-no matter. Intelligent outsiders can progress in it, and in some ways will be at an advantage over the locals. But if this is so, it must clearly apply to ourselves as much as anybody else.

Our next question is this: Does the isolating barrier between cultures block praise as well as blame? If I want to say that the Samurai culture has many virtues, or to praise the South American Indians, am I prevented from doing *that* by my outside status? Now, we certainly do need to praise other societies in this way. But it is hardly possible that we could praise them effectively if we could not, in principle, criticize them. Our praise would be worthless if it rested on definite grounds, if it did not flow from some understanding. Certainly we may need to praise things which we do not *fully* understand. We say "there's something very good here, but I can't quite make out what it is yet." This happens when we want to learn from strangers. And we can learn from strangers. But to do this we have to distinguish between those strangers who are worth learning from and those who are not. Can we then judge which is which?

This brings us to our third question: That is involved in judging? Now plainly there is no question here of sitting on a bench in a red robe and sentencing people. Judging simply means forming an opinion, and expressing it if it is called for. Is there anything wrong about this? Naturally, we ought to avoid forming —and expressing—crude opinions, like that of a simple-minded missionary, who might dismiss the whole Samurai culture as entirely bad, because non-Christian. But this is a different objection. The trouble 1%ith crude opinions is that they are crude, whoever forms them, not that they are formed by the wrong people. Anthropologists, after all, are outsiders quite as much as missionaries. Moral isolationism forbids us to form *any* opinions on these matters. Its ground for doing so is that we don't understand them. But there is much that we don't understand in our own culture too. This brings us to our last question: If we can't judge other cultures, can we really judge our own? Our efforts to do so 1611 be much damaged if we are really deprived of our opinions about other societies, because these provide the range of comparison, the spectrum of alternatives against which we set what we want to understand. We would have to stop using the mirror which anthropology so helpfully holds up to us.

## Consequences of Accepting Moral Isolationism

In short. moral isolationism would lay down a general ban on moral reasoning. Essentially, this is the program of immoralism, and it carries *a* distressing logical difficulty. Immoralists like Nietzsche are actually just a rather specialized sect of moralists. They can no more afford to put moralizing out of business than smugglers can afford to abolish customs regulations. The power of moral judgment is, in fact, not a luxury, not a perverse indulgence of the self-righteous. It is a necessity. I Then we judge something to be bad or good, better or worse than something else, we are taking it *as* an example to aim at or avoid. Without opinions of this sort, we would have no framework of comparison for our own policy, no chance of profiting by other people's insights or mistakes. In this vacuum, we could form no judgments on our own actions.

Now it would be odd if Homo sapiens had really got himself into a position as bad as this—a position where his main evolutionary asset, his brain, was so little use to him. None of us is going to accept this skeptical diagnosis. We cannot do so, because our involvement in moral isolationism does not flow from apathy, but from a rather acute concern about human hypocrisy and other forms of wickedness. But we polarize that concern around a few selected moral truths. We are rightly angry with those who despise, oppress or steamroll other cultures. We think that doing these things is actually *wrong.* But this is itself a moral judgment. We could not condemn oppression and insolence if we thought that all our condemnations were just a trivial local quirk of our own culture. We could still less do it if we tried to stop judging altogether.

Real moral scepticism, in fact, could lead only to inaction, to our losing all interest in moral questions, most of all in those which concern other societies. When we discuss these things, it becomes instantly clear how far we are from doing this. Suppose, for instance, that I criticize the bisecting Samurai, that I say his behavior is brutal. What will usually happen next is that someone will protest, will say that I have no right to make criticisms like that of another culture. But it is more unlikely that he will use this move to end the discussion of the subject. Instead, he will justify the Samurai. He will try to fill in the background, to make me understand the custom, by explaining the exalted ideals of discipline and devotion which produced it. He will probably talk of the lower value which the ancient Japanese placed on individual life generally. He may well suggest that this is a healthier attitude than our own obsession with security. He may add, too, that the wayfarers did not seriously mind being bisected, that in principle they accepted the whole arrangement.

Now an objector who talks like this is implying that it *is* possible to understand alien customs. That is just what he is trying to make me do. And he implies, too, that if I do succeed in understanding them, I shall do something better than giving up judging them. He expects me to change my present judgment to a truer one —namely, one that is favorable. And the standards I must use to do this cannot just be Samurai standards. They have to be ones current in my own culture. Ideals like discipline and devotion will not move anybody unless he himself accepts them. As it happens, neither discipline nor devotion is very popular in the West at present. Anyone who appeals to them may well have to do some more arguing to make *them* acceptable, before he can use them to explain the Samurai. But if he does succeed here, he will have persuaded us, not just that there was something to be said for them in ancient Japan, but that there would be here *as* well.

Isolating barriers simply cannot arise here. If we accept something as a serious moral truth about one culture, we can't refuse to apply it—in however different an outward form—to other cultures as well, wherever circumstances admit it. If we refuse to do this, we just are not taking the other culture seriously. This becomes clear if we look at the last argument used by my objector—that of justification by consent of the victim. It is suggested that sudden bisection is quite in order, *provided* that it takes place between consenting adults. I cannot now discuss how conclusive this justification is. What I am pointing out is simply that it can only work if we believe that *consent can* make such a transaction respectable—and this is a thoroughly modern and Western idea. It would probably never occur to a Samurai; if it did, it would surprise him very much. It is our standard. In applying it, too, we are likely to make another typically Western demand. We shall ask for good factual evidence that the wayfarers actually do have this rather surprising taste—that they are really willing to be bisected. In applying Western standards in this way, we are not being confused or irrelevant. We are asking the questions which arise *from where we stand,* questions which we can see the sense of. We do this because asking questions which you can't see the sense of is humbug. Certainly we can extend our questioning by imaginative effort. We can come to understand other societies better. By doing so, we may make their questions our own, or we may see that they are really forms of the questions which we are asking already. This is not impossible. It is just very hard work. The obstacles which often prevent it are simply those of ordinary ignorance, laziness and prejudice.

If there were really an isolating barrier, of course, our own culture could never have been formed. It is no sealed box, but a fertile jungle of different influences —Greek, Jewish. Roman, Norse, Celtic and so forth, into which further influences are still pouring—American, Indian, Japanese, Jamaican, you name it. The moral isolationists picture of separate, unmixable cultures is quite unreal. People who talk about British history usually stress the value of this fertilizing mix, no doubt rightly. But this is not just an odd fact about Britain. Except for the very smallest and most remote, all cultures are formed out of many streams. All have the problem of digesting and assimilating things which, at the start, they do not understand. All have the choice of learning something from this challenge, or, alternatively, of refusing to learn, and fighting it mindlessly instead.

This universal predicament has been obscured by the fact that anthropologists used to concentrate largely on very small and remote cultures, which did not seem to have this problem. These tiny societies, which had often forgotten their own history, made neat, self-contained subjects for study. No doubt it was valuable to emphasize their remoteness, their extreme strangeness, their independence of our cultural tradition. This emphasis was, I think, the root of moral isolationism. But, as the tribal studies themselves showed, even there the anthropologists were able to interpret what they saw and make judgments—often favorable—about the tribesmen. And the tribesmen, too, were quite equal to making judgments about the anthropologists—and about the tourists and Coca-Cola salesmen who followed them. Both sets of judgments, no doubt, were somewhat hasty, both have been refined in the light of further experience. A similar transaction between us and the Samurai might take even longer. But that is no reason at all for deeming it impossible. Morally as well as physically, there is only one world, and we all have to live in it.

## Brendan’s Questions

1. What does Midgley mean by “moral isolationism”? What might be an argument for this view?
2. In your own words, how would you describe Midgley’s arguments against moral isolationism? Do you think they work?
3. Do you agree with Midgley’s claim that “the moral isolationists picture of separate, unmixable cultures is quite unreal”? Why or why not?
4. In the end, do you agree with Midgley that we can (in certain circumstances) make moral judgements about practices (such as ***tsujigiri***) of other cultures?

# Reading: Existentialism is a Humanism (Excerpt)[[3]](#footnote-3)

By Jean Paul Sartre

My purpose here is to defend existentialism against several reproaches that have been laid against it.

Existentialism has been criticised for inviting people to remain in a quietism of despair, to fall back into a the middle-class luxury of a merely contemplative philosophy. We are reproached for underlining human nastiness, and forgetting, as the Catholic Mme. Mercier has it, the smile of the child. All and sundry reproach us for treating men as isolated beings, largely because we begin with the 'I think' of Descartes. Christians especially reproach us for denying the reality and seriousness of human society, since, if we ignore God's eternal values, no-one is able to condemn anyone else.

Existentialism is being seen as ugliness; our appeal to nature as scandalous, our writings sickening. Yet what could be more disillusioning than repeating those mottoes like 'don't fight against tradition', or 'know your station'? They say that man is base and doomed to fall, he needs fixed rules to keep him from anarchy. It has become fashionable to call this painter, or musician or columnist an "existentialist" - a term so loosely applied that it no longer means anything at all.

However, it can be defined easily. Existentialists are either Christian, such as the Catholics Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, or atheists like Heidegger and myself. What they have in common is to believe that existence comes before essence, that we always begin from the subjective.

**[Brendan: What two kinds of existentialism does Sartre distinguish? What does he claim that they have in common? Explain this view.]**

## “Existence Before Essence”

What does this mean? If one considers a manufactured object, say a book or a paper-knife, one sees that it has been made to serve a definite purpose. It has an essence, the sum of its purpose and qualities, which precedes its existence. The concept of man in the mind of God is comparable to the concept of paper-knife in the mind of the artisan. My atheist existentialism is rather more coherent. It declares that God does not exist, yet there is still a being in whom existence precedes essence, a being which exists before being defined by any concept, and this being is man or, as Heidegger puts it, human reality.

That means that man first exists, encounters himself and emerges in the world, to be defined afterwards. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. It is man who conceives himself, who propels himself towards existence. Man becomes nothing other than what is actually done, not what he will want to be.

And when we say that man takes responsibility for himself, we say more than that - he is in his choices responsible for all men. All our acts of creating ourselves create at the same time an image of man such as we believe he must be. Thus, our personal responsibility is vast, because it engages all humanity.

If I want, say, to marry and have children, such choice may depend on my situation, my passion, my desire, but by it I engage not only myself, but all humanity in the way of the monogamy. In fashioning myself, I fashion man. This helps us to understand some rather grandiloquent words like anguish, abandonment, despair.

The existentialist declares that man is in anguish, meaning that he who chooses cannot escape a deep responsibility for all humanity. Admittedly, few people appear to be anxious; but we claim that they mask their anguish, that they flee it. This is what Kierkegaard called the anguish of Abraham. You know the old story: An angel commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. But anyone in such a case would wonder straight away, is this an angel? am I the Abraham? If we hear voices from the sky, what proves that they come not from hell, or the subconscious, or some pathological state? Who proves that they are addressed to me? Each man must say to himself: am I right to set the standard for all humanity? To deny that is to mask the anguish. When, for example, a military leader sends men to their deaths, he may have his orders, but at the bottom it is he alone who chooses.

And when we speak about 'abandonment', we want to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to follow this conclusion to its end.

The existentialist is strongly against that sloppy morality which tries to remove God without ethical expense, like the French professors of the 1880's who saw God as a useless and expensive assumption but still wanted definitive rules like 'do not lie' to exist a priori.

The existentialist, on the contrary, finds it rather embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with him any possibility of finding values in a heaven. Dostoevsky wrote "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted"; that is the starting point of existentialism.

We are alone, without excuses. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. There is no power of 'beautiful passions' which propel men to their actions, we think, rather, that man is responsible for his own passions.

The existentialist cannot accept that man can be helped by any sign on earth, for he will 3interpret the sign as he chooses. As Ponge has truly written "Man is the future of man".

To give you an example of this 'abandonment', I will quote the case of one of my pupils who came to me. He lived alone with his mother, his father having gone off as a collaborator and his brother killed in 1940. He had a choice - to go and fight with the Free French to avenge his brother and protect his nation, or to stay and be his mother's only consolation. So he was confronted by two modes of action; one concrete and immediate but directed only towards one single individual; the other addressed to an infinitely greater end but very ambiguous. What would help him choose? Christian doctrine? Accepted morals? Kant? I said to him, "In the end, it is your feelings which count". But how can we put a value on a feeling? At least, you may say, he sought the counsel of a professor. But, if you seek advice, from a priest for example, in choosing which priest you know already, more or less, what they would advise.

When I was imprisoned, I met a rather remarkable man, a Jesuit who had joined that order in the following way: As a child, his father had died leaving him in poverty. At school he was made to feel that he was accepted only for charity's sake and denied the usual pleasures. At eighteen he came to grief in a sentimental affair and then failed his military examinations. He could regard himself as a total failure, but, cleverly, took it as a sign that the religious life was the way for him. He saw the word of God there, but who can doubt that the decision was his and his alone? He could as easily have chosen to be a carpenter or a revolutionary.

As for 'despair', this simply means that we will restrict ourselves to relying only on our own will, or on the probabilities which make our action possible. If I am counting on the arrival of a friend, I presuppose that their train will be on time. But I am still among possibilities, outside my own field of action. No God, no intention, is going to alter the world to my will.

In the end, Descartes meant the same, that we must act without hope.

**[Brendan: What does Sartre mean by “In fashioning myself, I fashion man”? Or, in other words, how do my choices about \*my own life\* reflect a choice on what I think about the right choices \*for all humans\*?]**

## Objections and Replies

Marxists have answered "Your action is limited by your death, but you can rely on others to later take up your deeds and carry them forward to the revolution". To this I rejoin that I cannot know where the revolution will lead. Others may come and establish Fascism. Does that mean that I must give up myself to quietism? No! Quietism is the attitude of people who say: "let others do what I cannot do". The doctrine that I present is precisely the opposite: there is reality only in the action; and more, man is nothing other than his own project and exists only in as far as he carries it out.

From this we see why our ideas so often cause horror. Many people have but one resource to sustain them in their misery; to think, "circumstances were against me, I was worthy of better. I had no great love because I never met anyone worthy of me. I wrote no great book because I had no time. I am filled with a crowd of possibilities greater than anyone could guess from my few achievements ."But in reality, for the existentialist, there is no love other than that which is built, no artistic genius other than in works of art. The genius of Proust is the works of Proust. A man engages in his own life, draws his own portrait, there is nothing more.

This is hard for somebody who has not made a success of life. But it is only reality that counts, not dreams, expectations or hopes. What people reproach us for here is not our pessimism, but the sternness of our optimism.

If people reproach our writings, it is not because we describe humanity as frail and sometimes frankly bad, but because, unlike Zola whose characters are shown to be products of heredity or environment, you cannot say of ours "That is what we are like, no one can do anything about it". The existentialist portrays a coward as one who makes himself a coward by his actions, a hero who makes himself heroic.

Some still reproach us for confining man within his individual subjectivity. But there is no other starting-point than the "I think, I am" - the absolute truth of consciousness, a simple truth within reach of everyone and the only theory which gives man the dignity of not being a mere object.

All materialisms treat men as objects, no different in their being bundles of determined reactions than a table or a chair or a stone. We want to constitute a human kingdom of values distinct from the material world.

Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, contrary to the philosophy of Kant, we are discovering in the cogito not just ourselves but all others. We discover an intersubjective world where each man has to decide what he is and what others are.

It is not possible to find in each man the universal essence called human nature, but there is a human universality of condition. Any purpose, even that of the Chinese, or the idiot or the child can be understood by a European, given enough information. In this sense, there is a universality of man; but it is not a given, it is something perpetually re-built.

That does not entirely refute the charge of subjectivism. People tax us with anarchy; they say that "you cannot judge others, because you have no reason to prefer one project to another. You give with one hand what you pretend to receive from the other. "Let us say that moral choice is comparable to a work of art. Do we reproach the artist who makes a painting without starting from laid-down rules? Did we tell him what he must paint? There is no pre-defined picture, and no-none can say what the painting of tomorrow should be; one can judge only one at a time. Amongst morals, the creative situation is the same, and just as the works of, say, Picasso, have consequences, so do our moral judgements.

That student who came to me could not appeal to any system for guidance; he was obliged to invent the law for himself. We define man only through his engagement, so it is absurd to reproach us for the consequences of a choice.

But it is not entirely true that we cannot judge others. We can judge whether choices are founded on truth or error, and we can judge a man's sincerity.

The man who hides behind the excuse of his passions or of some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver. "And what if I wish to deceive myself?" - there is no reason why you should not, but I declare publicly that you are doing so.

We will freedom for the sake of freedom. And through it we discover that our freedom depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that their freedom depends on ours. Those who hide their freedom behind deterministic excuses, I will call cowards. Those who pretend that their own existence was necessary, I will call scum.

To the objection that "You receive with one hand what you give with the other", that is, your values are not serious, since you choose them, I answer that, I am sorry, but having removed God the Father, one needs somebody to invent values. Things have to be taken as they are.

One has reproached me ridiculing a type of humanism in Nausea, and now suggesting that existentialism is a form of humanism. The absurd type of humanism is to glory in "Man the magnificent" ascribing to all men the value of the deeds of the most distinguished men. Only a dog or a horse would be in a position to declare such a judgement.

We cannot, either, fall into worshipping humanity, for that way leads to Fascism.

But there is another humanism, the acceptance that there is only one universe, the universe of human subjectivity. Existentialism is not despair. It declares rather that even if God did exist, it would make no difference.

**[Brendan: Why are some people horrified by existentialism, according to Sartre? What is your reaction to existentialism? Do you find the view plausible?]**

# Reading: Being and drunkenness: how to party like an existentialist (by Skye Cleary)



Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in Paris, June 1977. *Photo by STF/AFP/Getty Images*

Existentialism has a reputation for being angst-ridden and gloomy mostly because of its emphasis on pondering the meaninglessness of existence, but two of the best-known existentialists knew how to have fun in the face of absurdity. Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre spent a lot of time partying: talking, drinking, dancing, laughing, loving and listening to music with friends, and this was an aspect of their philosophical stance on life. They weren’t just philosophers who happened to enjoy parties, either – the parties were an expression of their philosophy of seizing life, and for them there were authentic and inauthentic ways to do this.

For de Beauvoir in particular, philosophy was to be lived vivaciously, and partying was bound up with her urge to live fully and freely, not to hold herself back from all that life had to offer. She wrote that sometimes she does ‘everything a little too crazily … But that is my way. I have rather not to do the things at all as doing them mildly.’

Sartre loved the imaginative playfulness that alcohol facilitated: ‘I liked having confused, vaguely questioning ideas that then fell apart.’ Too much seriousness hardens the world, pinning it down with rules, they felt, suffocating freedom and creativity. Taking parties too seriously dissipates their effervescence. Seriousness flattens them into institutions, hollow shams of gratuitously flaunted wealth and materialism, pathetic pleas for acknowledgement through the gazes of others, or hedonistic indulgences in sordid ephemeral pleasures that serve only to distract participants from their stagnating lives. A serious party neglects the underlying virtues of playfulness and generosity that make a party authentic. De Beauvoir tried smoking joints but, no matter how hard she inhaled, she remained firmly planted to the ground. She and Sartre self-medicated with amphetamines to remedy hangovers, heartbreaks and writers’ blocks. Sartre tripped on psychedelics for academic purposes: he took mescaline to inform his research on hallucinations. But alcohol would always be their drug of choice for partying.

A party isn’t a party without others, of course, and, although Sartre is renowned for his line ‘Hell is – other people!’ in *No Exit* (1944), that was far from the whole story for him: both he and de Beauvoir discovered themselves in their relations with other people. ‘In songs, laughter, dances, eroticism, and drunkenness,’ de Beauvoir writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), ‘one seeks both an exaltation of the moment and a complicity with other men.’ For her, complicity and reciprocity are the foundation of ethical relationships because other people provide the context of our lives. And because our world is infused with the meanings that other people are giving it, our existence can be revealed only in communication with them.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Parties can cultivate our connections to others, bring meaning to one another’s lives, and reveal the world with them. They can also confirm one another’s existences, serving as a reminder to friends that they matter, and that one matters to one’s friends. Moreover, the warmth and laughter that authentic partying sparks can help people cope with the chaos of life. De Beauvoir wrote of her wartime parties in occupied Paris: they saved up food stamps and then binged on food, fun and alcohol. They danced, sang, played music and improvised. The artist Dora Maar mimed bullfights, Sartre mimed orchestra-conducting in a cupboard, and Albert Camus banged on saucepan lids as if in a marching band. De Beauvoir wrote that: ‘We merely wanted to snatch a few nuggets of sheer joy from this confusion and intoxicate ourselves with their brightness, in defiance of the disenchantments that lay ahead.’ These were small acts of rebellion in the face of real fears for the future.

Critics of de Beauvoir and Sartre would try to discredit them with accusations of inspiring orgies, encouraging hedonism, and being what the philosopher Julia Kristeva in 2016 called ‘libertarian terrorists’ who formed a ‘shock commando unit’ to seduce their sexual victims. Nevertheless, they weren’t encouraging all-out hedonism, because they didn’t value personal pleasure over responsibility. For de Beauvoir, there’s nothing philosophically wrong with having orgies, it’s the same as with any other aspect of life: it matters how you approach the situation. If a person, she wrote, ‘brings his entire self to every situation, there can be no such thing as a “base occasion”’. And it’s true that de Beauvoir and Sartre had many lovers, but casual sex wasn’t part of their repertoire. They thought that promiscuity was a trivial use of freedom and, instead, wanted intense love affairs and friendships. (Nevertheless, people were hurt in these relationships, and although de Beauvoir acknowledged responsibility for this, neither she nor Sartre were ever held morally *accountable* by others in any meaningful way.)

Rejecting social norms is a process of destruction: refusing to be defined primarily by what others think you should be, how you are supposed to act, and the choices you are supposed to make. Partying can involve a similar act of destroying such expectations, as well as expending time, money, food, drink and brain cells. Some might call this a waste, but what are we saving ourselves for? A good life isn’t always a long one, and a long life isn’t necessarily a happy or fulfilled one. Rather, what’s important is to embrace life passionately. Existence is a process of spending ourselves, and sometimes requires leaving our former selves behind to create ourselves anew, thrusting forward into the future, disclosing our being into new realms. We do this by opening ourselves to, and playing with, possibilities.

Yet partying like an existentialist also calls for caution. While it can be a reprieve from a world full of despair and distractions, it’s bad faith to use it as a means to escape one’s situation. Running away from life or succumbing to peer pressure reduces oneself to what de Beauvoir called an absurd ‘palpitation’**. For partying to be authentic, it must be freely and actively chosen, done purposefully, and in a way that reflects one’s values**. Furthermore, too much partying can become exhausting and monotonous when it siphons off the zest from life and becomes a repetitive and meaningless series of encounters, which is why existentialist parties tended to be only occasional events. Camus would ask de Beauvoir if it’s possible to party as hard as they did and still work. De Beauvoir replied no. To avoid stagnation, she thought that existence ‘must be immediately engaged in a new undertaking, it must dash off toward the future’.

Authentic existential partying, then, requires a kind of self-mastery: to hold oneself in the tension between freedom and responsibility, playfulness and seriousness, and to nurture our connections without denying our situations. It encourages us to create our own links with the world, on our own terms, vigilantly detaching ourselves from internal chains, including habits or dependencies such as alcoholism. Such partying also incites us to challenge external chains, such as institutional restrictions, and so the stubborn insistence on living life as one chooses and in ways that strengthen our bonds to one another can be an act of revolt. An existential approach to partying recognises that although life can be menacing, it can and should be enjoyable, and being with others in the playful mode of partying can help us bear the darkness through a shared sense of euphoria, harmony and hope.

Both de Beauvoir and Sartre spent their rich lives embracing new undertakings, but took their whiskey and vodka bottles with them. This led to serious health problems, including cirrhosis, but they never regretted their partying or drinking, and by their own philosophy, there is no reason they should have done. They chose it freely, did it on their own terms, and took responsibility for the consequences. That’s what partying like an existentialist is all about.

## Brendan’s Questions

1. What was Sartre and de Beauvoir’s attitude toward parties, according to Skye Clearly? What functions did parties play in their lives?
2. Critics of existentialism have argued that existentialists often use their view as an excuse to mistreat others (for example, in sexual relationships). What do you think of this criticism?
3. What does it mean to party “authethically”, according to this essay? Can you think of examples where you have—and haven’t—partied in such a way?
4. Alcohol use, recreational drug use, and sex outside of committed relationships have frequently been seen as “moral failings” (by thinkers from a wide variety of cultures and religions). However, this essay suggests they can part of an authentic, well-lived human life. What do you think?

# Case Study: Drinking Dilemma

*From: Parr Center for Ethics, NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ETHICS BOWL, Case Set for 2020-2021 National Competition.*

James loves to host parties at his house. He also organizes wine and cheese receptions at the company he owns as well as birthday parties for his employees. But lately, James has been thinking about not serving alcohol anymore.

James enjoys celebrating his friends and employees. There is something valuable about the sort of “bonding” that happens when people hang out with drinks; it feels like there is an additional layer of intimacy that is important for developing relationships. Alcohol also tends to put people in a better mood, makes their jokes seem funnier, and loosens their tongues. It certainly seems to James like everyone has more fun when alcoholic drinks are widely available.

These benefits seem minor though in comparison to the potential risks. James is especially worried about sexual harassment happening at one of his parties. He knows that inappropriate jokes and gestures are not uncommon when people are drinking. Even offensive jokes about someone’s race, disability, or class have been made in the past. James knows a couple of his employees who have stopped attending his parties because of such incidents.

Alcohol can also lead to sexual contact happening faster and with less thinking. James knows of at least one unintended pregnancy that took place as a result of alcohol consumed at a party he organized, and plenty of sexual contact that one or both parties later regretted. Alcohol can also cause violent behavior – such as fights or domestic violence incidents. What he does worry about are driving accidents, especially since he’s seen more than a few people leave his parties a bit too tipsy to drive safely.

James’ concerns run pretty deep. However, he doesn’t want to be paternalistic. It’s not his problem if people have unprotected sex, make offensive jokes, or drive dangerously. He’s certainly not responsible for what they do. And most of his friends and coworkers drink lightly and responsibly at these parties anyway.

James is also considering giving up alcohol himself for some of these same reasons. He doesn’t want to do something he’d regret later. He’s also realizing that he spends way too much money on alcohol, and the money can surely be used for something better. But for now, the main decision he’s struggling with is that of serving alcohol at parties and receptions he organizes.

## Discussion Questions

1. Should James stop serving alcohol at his parties? Why or why not?
2. What are the best reasons for and against buying and serving alcohol to others?
3. Whose responsibility is it to take measures to mitigate the negative effects of alcohol: the consumer, the vendor, the society, or some combination thereof?

1. James Rachels and Stuart Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (McGraw Hill, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mary Midgley, “Trying Out One’s New Sword,” in *Heart and Mind* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jean-Paull Sartre, “Existentialism Is a Humanism (1946),” trans. Philip Mairet, Marxists.org, 2005, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)