

Existentialism and Ethics

Introduction

Existentialism is a term that refers to a period of intellectual history concerned with the nature of the human condition. With the development of some of its key ideas in a particularly dreadful period of history, and its roots in the examination of man's position in, his experience of and his relation with the universe, it seems to have a profound connection with the moral aspect of human existence.^[1]

In this paper, which aims to explore the relationship between existentialist ideas and ethics, I will first try to discern any possibility of having a theory of ethics based on existentialist ideas. Following that, I will discuss specific concepts and notions from existential philosophy which might help build a feasible basic moral framework. Further, I will utilize these concepts to examine what an existentialist ethics might look like.

The Basis for an Existentialist Ethical Theory

In the past, there have been two main arguments against the possibility of a system of ethics based on existential ideas. These provide a good starting point in our exploration of the association between existentialism and ethics.^[2]

First, skeptics claim that existentialism is merely descriptive. Existential philosophy has been driven by ontology. Despite the apparent intimacy between existentialism and ethics, existentialism speaks about "what is" rather addressing "what ought to be". The description of how the world *is* and an understanding of how it *ought to be* seem to be quite distinct from one

another, maybe even impossible to link as David Hume wrote famously in his book ‘A Treatise with Human Nature’.^{[2][3]}

Second, existentialism holds the idea that the world we are thrown into is inherently meaningless, and that meaning can be found only through our choices and actions. This feature of existential thought has led many to believe that due to the lack of inherent meaning, it cannot be said with certainty that a certain action is right or wrong. This makes the picture of an existentialist ethics seem like simple subjectivism, where any action can be valid based on circumstances and that there is no objective way of telling which action is more morally appropriate.^{[1][2][4]}

Despite these objections, it appears that when understood well enough, an existentialist ethics would be much more intricate. Knowing that the field studies the nature of the human condition, it is not limited only to the individual, but is also greatly concerned with the interactions of the individual with the world, as demonstrated by the hundreds of pages written about such interactions in the principle texts of existentialism. That is to say that the primal concern of existentialism is not restricted to the understanding of the individual, but is also in the involvements of the individual with the world. Since moral issues are a matter of such interactions between individuals or groups and other presences in the world, such as that of an individual/group with an object in the world or an individual/group with another individual/group, existentialism provides for a very rigorous foundation for an ethical theory.

Furthermore, to see what an existentialist ethical theory would look like in spite of these skepticisms, it might be useful to address the presented objections in a way Sartre does in his work “Existentialism and Humanism”.^[5] Sartre builds on his argument that human beings have a

‘radical freedom’, and with it comes the responsibility of all the choices made by them. This means that every man is entirely liable for the consequences of the actions he takes. Sartre argues that humans have a moral responsibility to realize their own freedom and that of others.^{[5][6][7]}

Sartre argues that in valuing other people’s freedom, we maintain a ‘strict consistency’. Since I cannot avoid recognizing my own freedom, any attempt in doing so would be an act of bad faith. In saying this Sartre implies that the value of freedom is self-evident.^{[6][7]} That is to say that on careful examination of our beliefs, as Crowe contends about this way of reading Sartre, we would find that we are already aware of the inherent moral value of freedom.^[2]

We can thus conclude that an existentialist ethics is possible as existentialism explore the nature of the interactions between an individual and the world he is thrown into, which is the very matter of moral claims. In addition to this, existentialism gives us the rubric of ‘freedom’ to evaluate the righteousness of our intentions and actions.

With this claim, we can proceed to examine one of the key facets of existentialism which seems to be a key element for the development of an existentialist moral code.

Freedom and Responsibility

Sartre’s argument for the radical freedom of humans begins with his notion of forlornness and abandonment. In ‘Existence and Humanism’, he presents the idea that there is no sense of a predefined pattern that human beings are meant to fit into. This is to say that without the presence of a condemning or omnipotent higher power such as God, there is nothing to adequately describe the purpose of the existence of man - we are thrown into the world without any inherent purpose or meaning, or anything to control what we are or what we choose to do. However, with man’s ability to choose, self-definition can be achieved through the choices and

commitments made by him. This fact entails that humans have complete freedom in their Being, and gives existentialism its catchphrase ‘existence precedes essence’.^{[6][7]}

Without any idealistic set of characters to base his life on, man is free to create any sort of meaning in his life from his interactions with the world by making choices. However, for Sartre, it is in this freedom that the responsibilities of man for the world and for himself as a way of being are made manifest. Here the word “responsibility” is in its ordinary sense as “consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object.”^[6]

As Sartre points out, of all the actions a man might choose to do so as to create himself as he wishes to be, there is not a single action which creates an image of a man he ought to be. Thus, in making a choice between two possible actions we merely affirm the value of the chosen action. Say we happen to choose action A over action B — in our commitment to action A, we not only affirm the value of choosing A for ourselves, but we wish the same choice upon everyone. Here, by value, Sartre refers to the various aspects of our being which make a claim on us. For example, when we see a person who is in pain we encounter him as “to be helped”, or when we are given a task we encounter it as “to be done”. Values, as a result, appear with a character of demands.^{[7][8]} Why I ought to help someone or be honest or work diligently rests, as a result, upon my choice only after which such values can be affirmed. In his own words, “In my action is, in consequence, a commitment on the behalf of mankind.”^[7]

This way of understanding the affirmation of a moral system fits in well with the views presented by Nietzsche, where an act that is morally good/bad has only become so because of society’s own proclamation that it is a morally good/bad way to act.^[9] Since our choices clearly

have a deep impact on the way morality might be thought of, our responsibility in choosing seems to be greater than we suppose.^[7]

It is in freedom that we can choose, and in choice that we can affirm the values of a certain decision. Therefore, it is in that freedom (not defined in terms of acting rationally, but existentially as choice and transcendence)^[8] where the origin of value lies. As a result, this freedom is inherently valuable for morality, and in our freedom, our moral responsibility is made manifest.

What does an existentialist moral code look like?

Meta-ethics

With the concept of abandonment and the absurd, it appears that there is no inherent meaning in existence. Since there is no higher power or set of concrete rules to actually guide man on his choices, it is in man's freedom and his choices that lies the key to morality. Consequently, from an existentialist standpoint, what is right/wrong depends entirely upon the choices made by man which in turn affirm certain kinds of values, and moral statements remain truth-apt.

Additionally, the realization that in choosing rests an essential part of the image of morality does not entail that morality is a matter of the preferences of an individual. As such, this realization of the need to value freedom is in itself not restricted to the value of our own freedom, but also the freedom of other human beings. Thus, it is not possible for freedom to be regarded as a purely subjective value, but as more of a relativistic one, one which deals not only with a constraint to personal choice but to the consequential impact of any decision. As a result, a moral system based on existentialism is not one which is purely subjective.

Normative Ethics

As we have talked about the importance of freedom in moral experience, it follows that any set of actions which limit the value of freedom are morally indefensible.^[2] Such actions, which intentionally or consequentially limit or conceal freedom, are forms of bad faith, as they amount to nothing more than acts of deception.^{[2][6]} Thus, for an existentialist, any action that might limit the freedom of yourself or another individual based on the facticity is morally unjustifiable. However, at the same time, this does not necessarily mean that any action which does not limit or conceal the freedom of a being-for-itself is morally correct.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that the idea of freedom here does not mean that everything is permitted. In all cases, we talk about freedom from an existentialist perspective, where it refers to the realization of our own potentiality based on a complete knowledge of our own facticity and position in the world.

Conclusion

While we haven't prescribed an entirely exhaustive guide to a moral code, we have shown the close connection between the nature of existential thoughts and their impact on ethics, and have looked closely at what a system of ethics derived from an existential standpoint might look like. It seems quite clear that not only is existentialism an appropriate place to start thinking about morality, it is one which is ideal.

The notion of the moral potential of human beings is certainly one that is quite liberating, one where we feel the necessity for us to adopt our own moral codes by making choices which are in line with the freedom of not only ourselves but also with the freedom of others. In being free, we must choose, and with our choices bear a moral responsibility for the consequences.

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