Sartre in Search of an Ethics
Sartre in Search of an Ethics

By

Paul Crittenden
For Maurice, brother, priest, and poet
TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations.............................................................................................. ix
Preface.................................................................................................................. xi

Part I (1939–1956)

Chapter 1: Ontology before Ethics ................................................................. 3
Chapter 2: Ethics after Ontology ................................................................. 17
Chapter 3: The Ethics of a Writer ............................................................... 43
Chapter 4: Manichaeism: Good and Evil ................................................... 61

Part II (1957 – 1980)

Chapter 5: Ethics in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* ...................... 77
Chapter 6: Towards a Dialectical Ethics ..................................................... 93
Chapter 7: On Morality and History ......................................................... 113
Chapter 8: Postscript: Ethics and Messianism ....................................... 143

References .......................................................................................................... 149
Notes.................................................................................................................... 155
Index................................................................................................................... 173
**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**Sartre, Jean-Paul**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Book Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASJ</td>
<td>Anti-Semite and Jew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BN</td>
<td>Being and Nothingness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDR</td>
<td>Critique of Dialectical Reason, volume I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DF</td>
<td>Determinism and Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FI</td>
<td>The Family Idiot, volume I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>The Humanism of Existentialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>The Itinerary of a Thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KWV</td>
<td>Kennedy and West Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR</td>
<td>Materialism and Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MH</td>
<td>Morality and History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Notebooks for an Ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PW</td>
<td>The Purposes of Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLN</td>
<td>Rome Lecture Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td>Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SM</td>
<td>Search for a Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TE</td>
<td>Truth and Existence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WL</td>
<td>What is Literature?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>Words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sartre, Jean-Paul and Benny Lévy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Book Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HN</td>
<td>Hope Now, the 1980 Interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study of Sartre’s ethics is concerned to a large extent with writings that he chose not to publish in his lifetime, leaving them for possible publication only after his death. One cannot know how his notes on ethics in the late 1940s or the conference and lecture notes of the mid-1960s might have been developed or transformed had he brought the work to completion as he had hoped. These writings nonetheless have great interest in their own right, and they throw considerable light on a number of his published works. The notes of the 1940s are particularly relevant to themes in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and also to *What is Literature?* (1947) and other of Sartre’s writings from the time; and his attempt to develop a dialectical ethics in the 1960s relates back to *Search for a Method* (1957) and *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) and forward to *The Family Idiot* (1971). His final attempt to write a book on ethics – with his secretary Benny Lévy – in the period not long before his death in 1980 is of much less interest in scholarly terms, though it has a poignancy of its own and serves as a witness to his conviction that, in his life and writings, morality had always been his dominant preoccupation.

This book grew out of a paper on the theme of conversion in Sartre’s early ethics, which I gave at a conference at the University of Queensland in 2005 held to celebrate the centenary of Sartre’s birth. I am grateful to Marguerite La Caze and the European Philosophy Research Group at the University for the invitation to speak at the conference and for their warm hospitality. Not long afterwards I gave a related paper on themes in Sartre’s ethics and aesthetics to the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics. I wish to thank Vrasidas Karalis, President of the Society and Chair of Modern Greek at the University of Sydney, for the invitation to speak to the Society, for his subsequent encouragement to me to write at greater length on Sartre’s ethics, and for his interest in the project as a whole. My thanks extend also to the many students who took my courses on Sartre’s existentialism at the University of Sydney in the years from 1978 to 2000. Finally, my deepest thanks go to my wife, Catherine, for her unfailingly generous interest, support, and encouragement.
PART I

(1939–1956)

“So the human moment, the ethical moment is that of the Apocalypse, that is, of the liberation of oneself and of others in reciprocal recognition.”

—Notebooks for an Ethics, 414
CHAPTER ONE

ONTOLOGY BEFORE ETHICS

1. Ethics as a Sartrean project

In the three or four years after the Second World War, Jean-Paul Sartre came into his own as a thinker, writer, and public figure. In the short period from 1945 to 1949, he published more than forty works in a wide range of genres on themes that “ranged from aesthetics, literature, ethics, politics, and philosophy to travel, art, and music” (Cohen-Solal, 280.) In philosophy the central focus of these hectic years was on ethics. That began famously, but not very satisfactorily, in 1946 with some provocative comments in the popular essay *The Humanism of Existentialism*, the short book that everyone read as a substitute for his major work *Being and Nothingness*. But Sartre’s main effort in ethics in these years was devoted, in fact, to a much more ambitious project, the attempt to develop a systematic ethics for the contemporary world.

From 1947, or a little earlier, he began to write down comments, notes, reflections, short essays, and longer pieces on ethical themes. This was in keeping with his announcement in 1943 in the closing pages of *Being and Nothingness* that he would devote a future work to ethics, dealing with questions that followed on from his phenomenological ontology in relation to freedom, responsibility, values, choice, bad faith, and embattled social relations (BN 628). But then, having compiled a good deal of material over the next two years in a couple of large notebooks, he broke off abruptly, set the project aside, and never returned to it directly again. The promised work on ethics never eventuated. The whole undertaking, he said later, was a misconceived attempt at an ethics, too abstract and idealistic. He kept the notebooks, nonetheless, as something that might be published posthumously, a work that would remain forever incomplete while serving as a witness to a stage in the development of his thinking. A substantial selection from the notebooks was subsequently published a few years after his death (*Cahiers pour une morale*, 1983), appearing in an English translation some years later (*Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1992).

The collection of notes, written mainly in 1947 and 1948, constitutes the principal body of Sartre’s work on ontological or existentialist ethics.¹
Reflections bearing on an ethics of truth, and related to themes in *Being and Nothingness*, also appear in a long essay, *Vérité et existence*, written in 1948. But this too he set aside and left unpublished even though it was quite close to completion at the time. The essay was finally published in French in 1989, and an English translation, *Truth and Existence*, subsequently appeared in 1992. Among published works from the period, *The Humanism of Existentialism* is significant, in part because of its popularity. Ethical themes are also found in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946), and in a small but indicative way in the essay “Materialism and Revolution” which also appeared that year. Apart from a reprise of ethical themes in *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr* (1952), the major published source for Sartre’s thinking about ethics at this time is to be found in the book *What is Literature?* (1948). It is also important to note that Simone de Beauvoir’s writings on ethics in these years, specifically *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) and *The Second Sex* (1949), take up, in their own way, all the main themes that concerned Sartre (and other considerations as well). Beauvoir’s account of existentialist ethics clearly constitutes a significant reference point for Sartre’s thinking at the time, though it also calls for primary consideration in its own right.²

In an informative introductory essay to *Truth and Existence*, Ronald Aronson writes that *What is Literature?* succeeded, where *Notebooks for an Ethics* failed, in moving Sartre, and his audience, from “the before to the after”: “a transition from the individual to society, from aesthetics to politics, from withdrawal into the imaginary to political commitment” (Aronson 1992, xxxi). This is a plausible comment on *What is Literature?*, but it is a curious remark in the sense that Sartre’s audience in the 1940s could not possibly have been moved by the *Notebooks* since they did not know of them, and certainly did not have access to them. In fact, Sartre drew on the unpublished ethical reflections in the work on literature to the extent that he was prepared to put them into the public domain. Their presence there, as I will argue, introduces a particularly idealistic strain into *What is Literature?*, without negating however its overall effectiveness in the terms Aronson proposes. It is nonetheless likely that the publication of the work, a focus of considerable debate at the time, was a factor in leading him to give up the plan for a book on ethics.

In the following years, Sartre came to be caught up more and more in radical political involvement as he moved from criticism of Marxist theory and practice to the idea of an existentialist Marxism. Like many on the left, he was inclined to treat ethical theory, certainly in its traditional forms, as largely irrelevant to the concrete concerns of politics and history. But he began to work closely on ethics again following the publication of
Ontology before Ethics

his second major philosophical work, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in 1960. The *Critique* was an ambitious attempt to combine existentialist and Marxist themes in a comprehensive account of social structures across history, with a particular focus on the conditions that shape and limit freedom. Convinced anew of the close connection between ethics and politics, his concern in the light of the *Critique* was to develop a system of ethics related specifically to socialism. As part of this new venture he presented a paper in 1964 at a conference in Rome on “Ethics and Society” sponsored by the Italian Communist Party. Around this time he also prepared a set of notes for lectures on ethics that he had been invited to give at Cornell University in 1965, notes that were left unfinished when he withdrew from the engagement in protest over the war in Vietnam. Still he continued on with the new venture in ethics and there was word a few years later that the work was well advanced; but once again the project was set aside.

Finally, Sartre was drawn to reflect on ethical themes in the last years of his life, in the late 1970s, in discussions with his young secretary Benny Lévy. Lévy had once been a committed Maoist, but was by this time a dedicated student of the Talmud. The focus of inquiry was the hope for a new social order marked by an “ethics of reciprocity” particularly in the context of Jewish experience in history and Jewish beliefs about God, the afterlife, and messianism. When Lévy published an edited version of these discussions just before Sartre’s death, many readers were surprised to find that the professed atheist philosopher seemed to have become interested in religious ideas at the end of his life. In the context of a discussion led by a Talmudist, his advertence to religious themes is hardly surprising. Nor was it a new development.

2. Freedom as the unique foundation of values

In his major ethical writings, first in the 1940s and later in the 1960s, Sartre took it as fundamental that ethics is a human undertaking. He had already put the point very clearly in some notes on morality in his *War Diaries* (1939–40) in writing that “morality is a system of ends; so to what end must human reality act? The only reply: to its own end. No other end can be proposed to it.” (Sartre 1984, 107). That is, the end that we are able to project, the end to be achieved in morality, must fall within human possibilities. For this reason “an eternal and transcendent existence – such as God or the divine will – could not be an end for human will” (107).

At the same time, he recognised that an understanding of ethics, certainly in the present epoch, had to take account of the religious
framework, beliefs, and aspirations in which ethics has long been situated. In this connection, consideration of the idea of God, specifically in the Christian tradition, appears as a basic theme in his ontology and subsequently in his notes on ethics. Furthermore, he draws extensively on religious ideas, models, and metaphors in his thinking, accounting for them by bringing them into a secular context as throwing light on the human condition. In the *Notebooks for an Ethics*, in particular, themes such as original fault or original sin, hell, conversion, salvation and deliverance from a fallen state, all have an illustrative place.

Ethics concerns good and evil. Its ultimate guiding principle, espoused by Sartre in the *Notebooks*, is that “the Good has to be done” (*NE* 555). With reference to what is to count as good or evil, however, there is considerable dispute, enough to lead many to the relativist view that there is nothing firm or generally true in ethics. This was not Sartre’s considered response to ethical diversity or disagreement. Contrary to popular opinion, he firmly rejected ethical indifference and took an anti-relativist, or absolutist, view of good and evil. That is, he held that some things, primarily actions, are morally good, and some are bad or evil. In taking this standpoint, he aligned himself, in general terms, with theistic ethics and, for the most part, with the classical Greek tradition. This is certainly the view that he took in looking back on his thought, as comes out clearly in a conversation with Simone de Beauvoir in 1974. Asked about traces of God that might remain in his thinking, he replied:

> Yes. In the moral field I’ve retained one single thing to do with the existence of God, and that is Good and Evil as absolutes. The usual consequence of atheism is the suppression of Good and Evil. It’s a certain relativism – for example, it’s regarding morals as being variable according to the point on the earth’s surface at which they are seen. (Beauvoir 1984, 439)

In comment on the Dostoievskian saying “If God does not exist, everything is allowed,” Sartre says: “In one way I clearly see what he means, and abstractly it’s true; but in another I clearly see that killing a man is wrong. Is directly, absolutely wrong.” He looks on morals and moral activity, he explains, “as an absolute in the midst of the relative.” The relative dimension is the human being in the world facing specific problems always in some particular situation. But the decision he takes with regard to others on this basis is absolute in character, not by reference to God or a purely objective order that excludes the subject, but in terms of what is fundamental in human existence and the self-other relationship.
What then is good, what is evil? Sartre’s response in the 1974 conversation is characteristically Sartrean. Good, he says, is essentially whatever is useful to human freedom, whatever allows freedom to give full value to what it has chosen; evil is whatever is harmful to human freedom. This proposal builds in the idea that the freedom of any given individual requires respect for the freedom of others. Even so, a critic might object that, at best, this is an overly formal or abstract account of good and evil. Perhaps too, the nominated absolutes, determined in each case by the free choice of sovereign individuals, would turn out to be strictly relative notions after all. This could be settled properly only by taking account of what Sartre says on these matters in his substantive writings on ethics. In the case of the existentialist ethics of the 1940s, this must start from his original ontology, his account of human reality, especially in *Being and Nothingness.*

Sartre places freedom at the heart of being human ("being-for-itself"), for it arises with the consciousness in which we are related to, but separated from, the world about us ("being-in-itself"). Human freedom, he proclaims, "precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of ‘human reality’" (BN 25). Being free is not a matter of choice for us, but we are otherwise perpetually engaged in choice; our freedom is without foundation, for "we are condemned to freedom,” “thrown into it,” obliged to take responsibility for what we do and for what we make of ourselves whatever our situation. For this reason freedom is experienced, albeit rarely consciously, as a deep burden of anguish relating to the future (which we must make to be), in the face of the past (which continues to haunt the present), and significantly, "when I consider myself in my original relation to values" (BN 38). Values, Sartre points out, are not things or objects; rather, they are demands that come to exist in being revealed to an active freedom and in being recognised as such (as things to be done, goals to be sought, etc). From this he concludes:

> It follows that my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation. (BN 38)

This analysis of freedom and value, presented as a thesis in ontology, could appear to express an extreme form of ethical relativism. But is this interpretation justified? Sartre supposes that anguish in respect of values is
an uncommon phenomenon: it is "the reflective apprehension of freedom by itself" and appears only when one has disengaged oneself from the world (BN 39). For the most part we are comfortably engaged in a world of values, which we take for granted in the goals we seek, in the myriad desires that constitute the web of our conscious life, in everything we do. Again for the most part, the values to which we lay claim will have been assumed in our upbringing in a particular family, society, and religious framework.

Sartre’s primary point about the value-founding role of freedom is that the values set by another source, such as an authority (parents, society, Church, etc), properly become my values only when I freely adopt them and take responsibility for them. This is where anguish arises, precisely in the realization that I bear responsibility for my behaviour and the values by which I live. In this situation, human beings typically flee from anguish in the face of freedom by living in bad faith. As a form of self-deception, this is the attempt to convince ourselves that we are not genuinely free, and hence not really responsible for our behaviour; it shows up, for instance, when one hides behind an authority to justify or excuse one’s behaviour or when one plays a role in relating to others. (Alternatively, bad faith consists in exaggerating the scope of our freedom by seeking to put out of play the “facticity” of our situation, the fixed or given factors within which freedom must operate, as when a gambler claims that the past means nothing and he can escape his addiction by a simple wave of the hand.)

Sartre’s conclusion that absolutely nothing justifies me in choosing this value or that, this scale of values or some other, is more problematic. The rationale appears to be that, since freedom is a given for which there is no accounting, there can be no accounting for the values of which it is the foundation. At the same time, there is no escape from values, for value haunts freedom: in its original upsurge value is “consubstantial with the [for-itself] – to such a degree that there is no consciousness which is not haunted by its value” (BN 94). As Sartre puts it, “my acts cause values to spring up like partridges” (BN 34). There is thus no escape from values, yet nothing justifies the adoption of any particular value or scale of values. This is suggestive of moral indifferentism, for if there is no way of assessing the value of values, then it seems that any particular value or scale of values would have as much claim as any other, and be as good as any other.

It would be premature, however, to conclude from this remark alone, appearing early in Part One of Being and Nothingness, that Sartre is
Ontology before Ethics

caught up in an ethics of indifference or relativism. Ethics is not under discussion at all at this point of the study. That freedom is the foundation of values is conceived as an ontological fact of human reality. Much later in the inquiry he will enunciate the principle that “Ontology itself cannot formulate ethical precepts. It is concerned solely with what is, and we cannot possibly derive imperatives from ontology’s indicatives” (BN 625). Sartre’s strong insistence here on an absolute separation between “what is” and “ethical precepts” could be questioned. But its expression at least makes clear that he does not think that one could establish anything about the ethical status of values from their origin in freedom. His treatment of value at this early point of the study is also limited because he has said nothing about “the nature of the for-others,” that is, the whole domain of relationships between the self and others. It is only in that context that freedom can take a concrete historical form in which it could be conceived, not simply as the foundation of values (in an ontological sense), but as the founding value (in an ethical sense). If this could be shown, then there would be a way of assessing the value of values and distinguishing between good and evil. If freedom could be established as the fundamental value, then good and evil would turn on whether the values we choose are of a kind to promote freedom for oneself and others, or not.

Clearly, this rather general and abstract response moves beyond ontology to ethics, hence beyond the ostensible scope of Being and Nothingness. In any case, Sartre reserves the topic for the promised book on ethics. There is a significant echo of the ontological thesis, however, in his 1946 lecture The Humanism of Existentialism, explicitly in an ethical context on this occasion and supported in this case by concrete examples. The critical starting point once again is that “we are condemned to be free” (ontologically speaking) conjoined with the Dostoievskian idea that if God does not exist then everything would be permitted:

If God does not exist, we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimise our conduct. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses. That is the idea I shall try to convey when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. (HE 41)

In arguing that moral decision (and responsibility) rests with the individual, Sartre sets out the case of a wartime student in his class who was faced with the choice of setting out on a risk-filled journey to England.
to join the Free French forces or staying at home to look after his aging mother who would otherwise be left alone (his older brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940 and his father was estranged). He finds himself facing a choice between two very different kinds of action: something concrete, immediate, and personal in caring for his mother, or the possibility of contributing to the liberation of his country provided he can make his way through Spain to England. He is wavering between two kinds of ethics, one of sympathy and personal concern, the other a broader ethics, but of more doubtful efficacy in the circumstances of the time. Christian teaching cannot settle the choice ("love your neighbour": but who is my neighbour in this case?), nor Kantian ethics ("treat the other as an end, not a means": but who would be the means, and who the end in this case?). The student comes to Sartre, his teacher, thinking by now that perhaps he should decide what to do simply on the basis of his feelings. But how does one determine the value of a feeling other than in the action to which it is related? He has sought advice, yes. But in consulting his teacher, he has chosen his adviser and already knows the answer he will be given. Sartre says: “I had only one answer to give: ‘You’re free, choose, that is, invent’. No general ethics can show you what is to be done” (HE 44-5).

The salient feature of the student’s difficult choice, though Sartre does not advert to it explicitly, is that either course of action, in the circumstances indicated, would be compatible with the exercise of responsible freedom and hence would be a good thing to do. (Some ethical systems hold that there is always just one right action in any given situation. But other accounts, notably in the tradition of Greek virtue ethics, question this contention.) Sartre’s rhetoric of invention in response to the student – “You’re free, choose, that is invent” – is misleading, as if it might encompass doing anything at all, such as ill-treating his mother or collaborating with the Nazis. Nonetheless, the advice that it is up to the young man to choose between the specified courses of action seems altogether right. He must make a choice and take responsibility for what he does.

The advice is also compatible with thinking of good and evil in non-relativist terms. For, as already suggested, each of the envisaged courses of action – joining the Free French to struggle against the Nazis, looking after his aging mother – could be considered a morally good kind of thing to do, and certainly not a bad kind of thing. Sartre acknowledges this point implicitly in insisting that, in either case, the student’s choice could not be described as arbitrary. A writer of novels and plays, he likes the idea of invention and goes on to speak of ethics (in practice) in terms of the
practice of an art in which many different styles are acceptable (as among poets or painters). This seems broadly attractive, within limits in each field (HE 55-6). Certainly, invention in morality comes in profoundly in the idea that one makes oneself – invents oneself – through the particular decisions one makes, above all at critical points in life (such as the wartime student faced).

In the same lecture, Sartre moves beyond freedom as an ontological datum to freedom as the basic value or goal. Moreover, he freely affirms in this source that once we are involved with others we discover that freedom as a value for me depends on the freedom of others. Hence he comments that “I am obliged to want others to have freedom at the same time that I want my own freedom. I can take freedom as my goal only if I take that of others as a goal as well” (HE 58).

3. Freedom, lack, value, and the desire for absolute being

In reality, the transition from Sartre’s ontology to the ethical plane is more complicated and problematic than his comments in The Humanism of Existentialism would suggest. The being of human reality (for-itself being) in his account is built around a certain equation of consciousness, freedom, lack, desire, and value. The for-itself, as conscious of the world of being (in-itself being), establishes itself precisely in the act of not being the being of which is is conscious. This leads him to say that human reality is a lack, specifically a lack of being-in-itself. Sufficient proof of this can be found, he proposes, in the existence of desire as a human fact since we desire what we lack. In Sartre’s words: “Desire is a lack of being. It is haunted in its inmost being by the being of which it is desire” (BN 87-8). That is, what the for-itself lacks ultimately is itself as in-itself (the projection of the self as total, independent being). This indicates that “the supreme value towards which consciousness at every instant surpasses itself by its very being is the absolute being of the self with its characteristics of identity, of purity, of permanence, etc., and as its own foundation” (93).

In being thrown into the world, we do not choose to be free. Now it appears that, in Sartre’s ontology, we do not freely choose the supreme value towards which we strive, for that is given with original freedom. Human freedom thus appears as choice in which everything we do is directed to a fixed (and unachievable) goal. In a summary towards the end of Being and Nothingness, the for-itself is defined as a lack of being (as purely contingent, as not being in-itself). Value in turn is the totality of being which is lacking. Next, freedom, treated as synonymous with lack, is
“the concrete mode of being of the lack of being”: that is, the for-itself chooses because it is lack; it chooses in order to go beyond itself towards being. Fundamentally, then, given that desire is a lack of being, the human being is the desire to be. From this it follows that the original or fundamental project in which we are engaged in everything we do is the project of being: “the desire to be exists and manifests itself only in and through jealousy, greed, love of art, cowardice, courage, and a thousand empirical expressions” (565). The overall project of being, in short, is the attainment of the complete, absolute being of the self, the condition of being a for-itself that would be at the same time in-itself, in a word the project is to be God:

Thus the best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God. […] God, value and supreme end of transcendence, represents the permanent limit in terms of which man makes known to himself what he is. To be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God. (566)

This prospect of a mad, futile quest for divine transcendence takes on even darker tones, first, in the light of Sartre’s account of the concrete relations that hold between the self and others-in-the-world, and subsequently in his analysis of the primary categories of behaviour.

Concrete human relations appear in Being and Nothingness as an unrelieved scene of mutual conflict in which everyone is on a par: “While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me. […] Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others” (364). There are, Sartre proposes, two basic attitudes we can take towards others: the project of identification or unity, expressed primarily by love; or the project of separation expressed in indifference or more profoundly in hate. Neither can succeed in its aim, and the two attitudes constitute a circle of failure from which there is no escape.

Love, the project of unity with the other, is a conflict in which each party seeks to appropriate the freedom of the other while wanting to possess this freedom as freedom. When love fails, as it must, it may turn to indifference, which is “a kind of blindness with respect to others” (380) and a form of bad faith, or else it turns to hate which seeks the death of the other. There is failure here as well, and the for-itself can do nothing except “to re-enter the circle and allow itself to be indefinitely tossed from one to the other of the two fundamental attitudes” (412). We know what the ideal of concrete social relations would be beyond the perspective of conflict,
but the goal lies beyond our reach, for “we shall never place ourselves concretely on a plane of equality; that is, on the plane where recognition of the Other’s freedom would involve the Other’s recognition of our freedom” (408). The reality is that we are locked into mutual conflict with others for possession and control of the world.

In the project of being, action is critical: “for human reality, to be is to act, and to cease to act is to cease to be” (476). Human conduct of all types can be subsumed under three cardinal categories: “having,” “doing,” and “being” (431). How are they related? In seeking the ultimate goal of being, the for-itself’s “doings” (or “makings”) of all kinds will emerge, he argues, as characteristically appropriative, as a means of taking possession of something; for example, “Art, science, play are appropriative activities either wholly or in part, and what they want to appropriate beyond the concrete object of their quest is being itself, the absolute being of the in-itself” (585). In this way “doing” is shown as reducible to “having.” Mere possession, however, is not enough. “Having” in its turn becomes a form of “being”: “the totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have” (591). What we desire to appropriate in an object is its being and, through it, the world: “to possess is to wish to possess the world across a particular object” (597).

In summary, freedom, lack, desire, and action come together in relation to the supreme value of one’s becoming a consciousness that is the ground of its own being, a being that would be at once complete and permanent:

Every for-itself is a free choice; each of its acts – the most insignificant as well as the most weighty – expresses this choice and emanates from it. This is what we have called our freedom. We have now grasped the meaning of this choice; it is a choice of being, either directly or by the appropriation of the world, or rather by both at once. Thus my freedom is a choice of being God and all my acts, all my projects translate this choice and reflect it in a thousand and one ways, for there is an infinity of ways of being and of ways of having. (599)

And finally:

Each human reality is at the same time a direct project to metamorphose its own For-itself into an In-itself-For-itself, and a project of appropriation of the world as a being-in-itself, in the forms of a fundamental quality. Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the in-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the Ens causa sui, which religions call God. […] But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion. (615)
This is the distilled burden of Being and Nothingness, a generally bleak text about bad faith, fractured human relationships, and futile effort expended on an impossible goal. But into this gloomy world, which owes something to Kafka and the dark times in which the book was written, Sartre admitted an occasional rare ray of light in some brief footnotes and a short conclusion that looks towards a work devoted to ethics.

While pointing out that ontology cannot itself formulate ethical precepts, he claims that “it does, however, allow us to catch a glimpse of what sort of ethics will assume its responsibilities when confronted with a human reality in situation” (625-6). A separation of ontology and ethics that nonetheless allows a glimpse from one to the other could appear to achieve the impossible. A plausible alternative reading would be that the ontology already contains relevant evaluative elements (as in his depiction of bad faith). The rationale Sartre offers is that the study of being – of for-itself being specifically – reveals, in fact, the origin and nature of value and opens up the possibility of an existential psychoanalysis of the vast variety of human actions all of which “aim at producing the missing synthesis of consciousness and being in the form of value or self-cause” (626). Analysis of this kind, he suggests, is moral description, “for it releases to us the ethical meaning of various human projects.” In revealing the ideal meaning of all human attitudes, it will show the inadequacy of attempts to construct an ethics around either egoism or altruism: for each is subsumed as one or another freely chosen project within the overall passion.

Above all, Sartre argues that existential psychoanalysis should lead us to repudiate the spirit of seriousness regarding values. This is the conviction that values exist in things independently of the human subject in such a way as to impose demands that call only for passive obedience. The basic criticism of this view – which, he claims, “rules the world” – is that it is an ethics on the plane of bad faith, precisely because, in rejecting the bond between freedom and value, it undermines human responsibility.

What difference does knowledge of “the real goal of the [human] pursuit” make? Is it possible that awareness of the fundamental project might open up “a means of deliverance and salvation?” (627). Sartre supposes that many people do in fact have this awareness; but to the extent that they remain caught up in the spirit of seriousness and can still believe that the pursuit of being is written in things, he says of them:

They are condemned to despair; for they discover at the same time that all human activities are equivalent (for they all tend to sacrifice man in order that the self-cause may arise) and that all are on principle doomed to failure. Thus it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or
is a leader of nations. If one of these activities takes precedence over the other, this will not be because of its real goal but because of the degree of consciousness which it possesses of its ideal goal; and in this case it will be the quietism of the solitary drunkard which will take precedence over the vain agitation of the leader of nations. (627)

This passage, with its talk of activities as all equivalent and all on principle doomed to failure, is sometimes seized on, mistakenly, as evidence of a Sartrian endorsement of moral indifference and quietism (in effect, the repudiation of the worth of human effort). The point is that this diagnosis of equivalence and in-built failure relates specifically to moral agents who remain caught up in the spirit of seriousness and belief in the quest for self-sufficiency – in other words, the vain quest to be God. So his statement about getting drunk alone or being a leader of nations is conditional in form; that is, if the goal of one’s basic project is to be God, then all one’s activities to that end are equivalent and all are doomed to failure. The comparison serves as no more than a wry comment.

The moral agent, informed by ontology, is aware that “he is the being by whom values exist” along with realising that the unity of all choices of possible courses of action has been constituted hitherto by the value of the ens causa sui (627). Is there a means of deliverance from the reign of this defining value? In the penultimate paragraph of Being and Nothingness, Sartre asks:

> What will become of freedom if it turns its back upon this value? Will freedom carry this value along with it whatever it does and even in its very turning back upon the in-itself-for-itself? […] In particular is it possible for freedom to take itself for a value as the source of all value, or must it be necessarily defined in relation to a transcendent value which haunts it? (627)

There is the guarded suggestion that ‘a freedom which wills itself freedom’ would properly express what it is to be a human being, a freedom always to be exercised, always at a distance from itself. More questions follow, but all these questions, Sartre says, can find their reply only on the ethical plane: “We shall devote to them a future work.”

Sartre’s reference in passing to a possible means of escape from ontological destiny picks up earlier brief announcements at critical points in the inquiry. In two places in particular he drew attention to the possibility of an ethics of deliverance linked with the prospect of a radical conversion that leads to self-recovery or authenticity and an escape from the hellish world from which there appeared to be no exit. Thus, having explored at length the twin circles of self-other conflict in love and hatred
in which we are tossed indefinitely, he added a concluding footnote that “These considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we can not discuss here” (412). Similarly, in a footnote at the end of the discussion of bad faith, he keeps open the possibility of a radical escape from the flight from freedom, noting that “this supposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted. This self-recovery we shall call authenticity, the description of which has no place here” (70). The idea of radical conversion and self-recovery in an ethics of deliverance subsequently became an important topic in the *Notebooks for an Ethics.*
CHAPTER TWO
ETHICS AFTER ONTOLOGY

1. Ethics and History

*Notebooks for an Ethics* is manifestly not the book on ethics that Sartre had hoped to write on the basis of themes in *Being and Nothingness*. The work does not have a unified structure, it is repetitive, does not situate itself very clearly in relation to other accounts of ethics, and certainly does not present a fully developed standpoint. This fits with what could be expected of a set of preliminary notes. It is full of interest, nonetheless, certainly in relation to Sartre's ontology and many of his later writings, and in particular as an attempt to think about ethics in a new way at a critical time in history. Over the course of the notes, he comments on various types of ethics and the nature of ethics as a whole, explores – sometimes at length, sometimes briefly – a wide range of ethics-related topics, criticises aspects of various established accounts, and sets out plans for developing what he calls a *concrete* ethics which would be a ‘synthesis of the universal and the historical’ and which would have a primary focus on human freedom in situation and a basic concern with the problem of human oppression.

Clearly, what he is seeking is an account of ethics as a branch of practical philosophy concerned with how to live well in relation to others and in society as a whole. Ethics in this sense is an element of political science, as in Aristotle’s philosophy (though this is not a connection to which Sartre adverts). At the same time, he is concerned with a theory of ethics, that is, he wants to arrive at a considered account of the nature, foundation, and authority of ethics.¹

One cannot know how the material assembled in the *Notebooks* (and related writings) might have been developed, critically re-considered, or transformed, had Sartre completed the work. In grappling with a rich but unwieldy text, I will attribute views to him, draw out a line of argument, and offer criticism, always on the understanding that this represents at best a reconstruction of an exploratory and preliminary stage in his thinking.
Sartre’s existential ontology is grounded in individual consciousness or freedom as trapped in conflict with others in an appropriative pursuit of power. The task he now faces is to retain this original starting point while seeking to develop an ethics that would provide for an escape from alienation and oppression to a new, creative way of being for oneself and for others. Sartre’s critical step in this venture is to characterise his ontology as itself historical, beginning with an initial event that is subsequently recapitulated in individuals and social formations over history. Ethics too, he continues, “must be historical: that is it must find the universal in History and grasp it in History” (NE 6). In adopting this manifesto for a concrete ethics Sartre was drawn nonetheless into depicting the human situation in terms of a mythic “sacred history.”

At the beginning there is an original fall or fault that reaches out to affect each for-itself, and the world of for-itselves, over history. Evil in the fallen state is identified as the “objectification of subjectivity” (or “subjective objectivity”), that is, the attempt to escape one’s own subjectivity (freedom) in bad faith and to suppress the subjectivity of others. This is what is recorded in the ontology, ostensibly without recourse to ethical categories. But there is also the possibility of overcoming this condition through conversion to authenticity, a process involving change within oneself and in relation to others, extended, ideally, across humanity as a whole. The study of conversion to authentic ethical existence is now the task for ethics. This framework appears early in the Notebooks in a broad initial plan for a “tough ethics” (8-20).

History begins with the appearance of the for-itself, specifically in the spontaneous movement in which it seeks to be the self-sufficient ground of its own being (in the project to be God). That is the original fault, “a fall and a memory of Paradise Lost,” which occurs in advance of our capacity to reflect on it. The fault manifests itself in bad faith, the spirit of seriousness, and original alienation from others. History as a consequence is dominated by inauthenticity and oppressive relationships. This original ontology cannot be bypassed; but we might go beyond it.

In an early note, Sartre asked why is it that we first choose the hell of inauthenticity, with the consequence that salvation can come only as the fruit of a new beginning (559). The response is that the inauthentic project “is first in the sense that it is the very structure of my existence”: I exist as a choice that is immediately engaged in action towards acquiring what I lack (the in-itself). This movement takes place on an unreflective or prereflective plane. So it is given always as having been there in advance of any possible reflection that might have obviated it. It follows that if there is to be a way out of the apparent impasse it must come later in a