Re-thinking Ethics in Existentialism

Andre Benoit; Carleton University, Ottawa ON, Canada

Abstract:
This essay explores the thought of Heidegger and Sartre concerning whether existentialism is conducive to a certain ethics conceived of as a theory of moral conduct. In the Letter on Humanism, Heidegger stresses the importance of a return to the idea of “ethos” as a replacement for the metaphysically conceived “ethics.” Sartre, conversely, in his essay Existentialism is a Humanism outlines an ethics that draws heavily from the philosophical tradition. This paper’s guiding question is whether the study of human existence, given the views of these thinkers, leads to a particular ethics, or whether it suggests something like Heidegger’s return to the ancient Greek notion of “ethos,” that is, morality conceived of as a manner of being. The paper outlines the basic conceptions of human being held by these two thinkers, and shows how their individual conceptions of ethics unfold from these. I explicate and bring these thinkers’ conceptions of ethics into contrast in order to approach an answer to the question of whether existentialism is conducive to an ethics.

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The contention between Heidegger and Sartre over whether the study of human being lends weight to a type of humanism highlighted a fundamental disagreement within 20th century “Continental” thought concerning the status of ethics. In 1946, with his Existentialism is a Humanism, Sartre announced the birth of a new humanism, which was unique in that it proffered no definition of human nature, but portrayed a human condition, and established ethics which had been orphaned by the collapse of medieval theology, on this “concrete” ground. In his response to the burgeoning existentialist movement, the Letter on Humanism, Heidegger mentions ethics in connection with metaphysics and the “ethos” (p.270). Ethics is portrayed as a metaphysical perversion of ethos, and arrayed with the albatross of modern nihilism. This confrontation raises an important question for the study of ethics: does the study of human existence lend weight to an “ethics of existentialism” worthy to contend with the deontological and
consequentialist ethics of Kant and Mill, as Sartre believed, or does it show ethics to be a
deficient concept, corollary to a field of thought, namely metaphysics, that has lost touch
with its ontological basis, as in Heidegger? We shall approach a response to this question
here through a comparison of the views of these thinkers on ethics. To begin we will look
at Sartre and Heidegger’s respective approaches to the study of human being.

1. Divergent Approaches to Being

Sartre’s approach to philosophy is Cartesian; his existentialism postulates a
transcendent subjectivity (consciousness) confronted with a world of objects. However,
Sartre is careful not to make the same “mistake” as Husserl, and follow Descartes in
conceiving of consciousness as a substance, or something with “contents.” Sartre instead
returns to a Kantian conception of consciousness: consciousness is a no-thing, a wholly
transparent window on the world, which can only be spotted as reflected therein.
Husserl’s mistake, according to Sartre, was to place behind the activity of consciousness
an ego, a permanent a priori self that acts behind our awareness of objects. Husserl
believed that this self behind awareness could serve as the basis for a “phenomenological
reduction” to shed light on the nature of consciousness itself. Sartre, however, leaves
consciousness a bare “transcendental field,” a transparent awareness of the world,
effectively removing the vantage point of Husserl’s reduction. Sartre’s answer to Husserl
was to return to the bare consciousness of Kant. Heidegger’s break with Husserl, on the
other hand, was somewhat more radical.

Heidegger not only throws out Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, but also
turns over the whole tradition of philosophy since Descartes. The refractory dualism of
mind and world, a mainstay of Cartesian philosophy, is ousted from the treatment of
human existence entirely. Humanity is no longer divided between a “rational” mind and
“extended” world, but human being is essentially being-in-the-world. This is why
epistemology, the study of how the mind comes to know the world, is dissolved by
Heidegger’s conception of existence. To exist as being-in-the-world is essentially to be an
understanding of the world. Heidegger’s approach has little sympathy for dualisms.
Aristotle’s distinction between essentia and existentia, between "prime substances" and
the other nine “categories,” or beings and the most general features of their being, falls
from its traditional role as the placeholder of being. Heidegger’s study does not centre on
the most general characteristics of beings, but on the question of the understanding of
being constitutive for human being, that being which “takes a stand” on its being, and
which, as an understanding of being (its stand), discloses an open region wherein beings
may be discovered in their truth. Heidegger conceives of his philosophy as an
“ontological” interpretation of our “pre-ontological” understanding of being, or an
explication of the ground of our everyday understanding of the “to be” of beings, namely
our being (Being and Time p.39).

These approaches to the study of human being lend themselves to very different
conceptions of what it means to be moral. For Sartre, human being is understood as a
dialectical tension between consciousness’ reflection, the ego, and consciousness as a
bare transcendence towards the world. This tension gives rise to an unavoidable freedom
and responsibility, the basis of Sartre’s ethics. In Heidegger, since his thought leaves no
room for the distinction between subject and object, which he believes to be the product
of a certain mode of speaking (i.e. in reference to things present-at-hand) (p.203), ethics
becomes a derivative concept, the offspring of a history of speaking and thinking
theoretically (about beings) instead of poetically, dealing with the history of philosophy
as metaphysics. Let us examine these conceptions of human being more closely, so that
we might see how they lead to these very different approaches to ethics.

2. Consciousness and the Da-Sein

In the Transcendence of the Ego, Sartre argues that, since consciousness, stripped
of the transcendental ego, is a pure spontaneity (i.e. is groundless), the ego can only be in
the world, that is, a kind of object for consciousness. He describes this self-object as “the
spontaneous, transcendent unification of our states and our actions” (Transcendence of
the Ego 76). In other words, the ego is a coalescence of the various moments of
consciousness, unified by its projections. It is “spontaneous” because it arises out of
consciousness’ pure spontaneity, and it is “transcendent” because it channels the
transcendence of consciousness, that is, the “passing over” of consciousness towards its
objects. However, since the ego is an object, a passive thing for consciousness, it can only
ever appear to be transcendent. This is because consciousness constitutes it, and channels
its own transcendence through it in order to escape the anxiety of being a pure
spontaneity. This pure spontaneity of consciousness, absorbed in the ego, as a reflection
of consciousness’ moments, endows the ego with a creative power: the ego becomes the author of its projects (i.e. transcendent), since it begins to choose in terms of itself. Here the ego takes up the reigns of its own existence: “everything the ego produces affects it” (Transcendence of the Ego 82). Despite this, however, the ego remains an object for consciousness, and as such adrift in the vast ocean of possibilities present to consciousness, forced at every moment to project itself upon them, to *choose itself*. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre portrays this relation of consciousness to the ego as the futile struggle of a *for-itself* (reflective consciousness) to become its own *in-itself* (reflection), giving his conception of human being a distinctively Hegelian stamp. Elsewhere the struggle is condensed into an axiom: “Existence precedes essence” (Existentialism is a Humanism 348). Here a bare consciousness (existence) precedes the manner in which it chooses to be (essence), which constitutes its stand on its being (ego).

The consequences of this conception of human being form the foundation of Sartre’s ethics. First, since one is “between” consciousness and oneself as its object, one is fundamentally free, that is, necessitated at every moment to choose from among the possibilities present to consciousness. And since the choices one makes affect who one is, that is, determine one’s *essence*, choice is an immense responsibility. Forced at every moment to choose, one is always in the process of choosing oneself. In Being and Nothingness, Sartre writes that this responsibility gives rise to a “hypothetical imperative,” where if one wishes to have such and such a past (i.e. facticity), one ought to act in such and such a way (Being and Nothingness 646). Thus human freedom is fundamental, requires one to choose at every moment, and implies an essential responsibility.

Heidegger’s conception of human being is rather different, but in a way similar to Sartre’s. Both thinkers discard the transcendental ego of Husserl, and allow for a bare transcendence “towards” the world to take its place. Only, Heidegger does so in a way that departs entirely from Cartesianism (presumably without falling into idealism or realism, though some debate this). The difference between their views regarding transcendence may seem subtle at a glance, but the resultant difference between their outlooks on human being is quite profound. Sartre is left with a pure transcendence that confronts a world of objects, and Heidegger with a being thoroughly absorbed in a world.
Sartre’s analysis therefore goes straight into a discussion of the relation between consciousness, as a no-thing, and its objects. Heidegger’s analysis, conversely, takes as its point of departure a finite existence coloured through by a world, and embedded in a history and culture. In other words, where Sartre is left with an ego that channels consciousness’ transcendence, Heidegger is left with a being-in-the-world, the essence of which is captured eloquently by Heidegger’s term for human being, “Da-Sein.”

The term “Dasein” is extremely rich in meaning. The “Da” refers to one’s “there,” or one’s ek-static situation, and “Sein” to the whole of the existence out into which this "there" stands. The “there” is constituted, Heidegger tells us in Being and Time, by attunement and understanding (Being and Time 182). “Attunement” refers to the light in which beings appear, the way they are coloured by our “moods.” Dreyfus calls this “disposedness,” and highlights how moods are seldom private events, but more often shared states of being, as for instance when one shares in the “life of the party,” or when one “feels another’s pain” (Berkeley Lecture Series). Understanding is a term Heidegger uses to refer to the three temporal dimensions of involvement: first, there is a “circumspective” familiarity with one’s world, or "referential whole" (fore-having); next, a confrontation with the immediate that “makes the first cut” in the referential whole (fore-sight); and, finally, a sense of the relation of this part to the whole, its in-order-to, or possibility for use (fore-“concept”) (Being and Time 191). For example, when one goes to brush one’s teeth in the morning, one does so in light of a world wherein one ought to have clean teeth (fore-having), one approaches the toothbrush as the tool of this project (fore-sight), and, in using it, demonstrates a sense of its relation to the world, its in-order-to-have-clean-teeth (fore-concept). The “Da” of Dasein, therefore, is attuned understanding of the world, or of the being (Sein) out into which this attuned understanding (clearing) stands, that is, that of which this understanding is essentially an understanding. Therefore, in Heidegger human being can be interpreted as an understanding of being, which is a far cry from a consciousness that apprehends a world. In other words, here “transcendence” is not transcendence towards a world, but an involvement in a world.

What room does such a conception of human being leave for an ethics? Since there is only being-in-the-world, no subject over against a world of objects, “ethics,” as a
body of moral principles adhering to a subject, becomes a defunct concept. That is, there is no place in Heidegger’s thought for metaphysically grounded prescriptions by which an isolated subject “ought” to abide in its dealings with objects. Morality can only refer to a manner of being-in-the-world, a manner of being-there (Dasein), or a kind of attuned understanding. To discuss the essence of morality, a more “ontological” approach is necessary. We will discuss this approach as an answer to Sartre’s ethics, which we now turn to.

3. Sartre’s Ethics of Existentialism

We have seen that Sartre’s existentialism implies a fundamental responsibility to oneself for who one is, but this is not enough to form the basis of an ethics. As we saw, Sartre retains the ego, but only as an object for consciousness. The question then is how does Sartre move from a theory of existence involving a self-determining subject to an ethics? It follows from Sartre’s conception of human being that there can be no eternal, or absolute, moral values. The subject is entirely self-determining, and so its moral values are a product of its choices. It would seem to follow that an ethics of existentialism is impossible. Moral values, like anything else, depend upon the choices of the ego in its creative projects. Sartre does not deny this, but advances the view that a conception of the human condition can take the place of a metaphysical foundation for ethics. There are three aspects of Sartre’s existentialism that might together constitute the basis of an ethics: responsibility, bad faith, and being-for-others.

We have discussed responsibility in terms of human freedom and the necessity to choose. However, there is something that remains to be addressed. Sartre writes, “in fashioning myself I fashion man” (Existentialism is a Humanism 350), and this passage can only be understood in light of Sartre’s belief that the ego is “in the world,” and not “behind consciousness.” Thus we are not only responsible for choosing ourselves, but also for choosing what Sartre calls an "image of man" (Existentialism is a Humanism 350), which by our choice we invest with value. According to Sartre, by our actions we "affirm the value" of an image of being, and we do so before all humanity (Existentialism is a Humanism 350).

To achieve an ethics, however, we still require a way of differentiating between actions that affirm the value of immoral manners of being and those that affirm the value
of moral manners of being. For this we must look to the consequences of Sartre’s notion of bad-faith. Sartre follows Heidegger in asserting that the truth of one’s existence can be “covered over,” only here to cover over is not to “become lost in the ‘they,’” but instead to obfuscate the fact that one exists between an in-itself and for-itself in order to obtain reprieve from anxiety. This obfuscation takes the form of a kind of selective sight whereby one sees only one aspect of one’s being. Instead of bearing the full brunt of being “between” a transcendental field and its reflection, or a subject abandoned to the responsibility of having to choose its manner of being, one elects to see oneself as either a pure contingency (in-itself) or a pure transcendence (for-itself). In the first instance, one would make oneself an object, a pure passivity only capable of being acted upon; in the second, one would abandon the dead weight of one’s objective self to become a pure flight towards possibilities. The first would allow one to excuse oneself of one’s fundamental responsibility, and the second to do both that and to take leave of one’s perceived limitations. This means that when we take refuge in a sense of our “limitations,” for instance, we are acting in bad-faith, and when we suppose ourselves to be entirely without limitation, we are guilty of the same. Sartre refers to those who retreat into their contingency as “cowards,” and to those who assert themselves as groundless possibility as “scum” (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 366). This latter type of person is also referred to by Sartre as the “serious man,” and specializes in viewing the world in terms of absolute values. However, if one is capable of choosing in bad faith, one must also be capable of doing the reverse. Opposed to the dissembling of the cowardly and the serious is the “man of good faith,” who chooses in full acknowledgement of his freedom and responsibility.

How does this consideration of bad and good faith fit in with our discussion of responsibility? We have seen that, according to Sartre, one is responsible for investing with value an image of oneself before all humanity, and that this image consists of the manner in which one chooses to be. Now we see that there are two types of choice, namely choice made in good faith and choice made in bad faith. The essential consequence of these two observations, then, is that when one chooses, one affirms the value of an image of being, and, since the choice can be in good or bad faith, this image of being can be based on a lie (bad faith) or on the truth (good faith). So, when one acts in
bad faith, when one affirms the value of a lie, one creates a false image. Therefore, we arrive at the important conclusion: all actions that affirm the value of a manner of being which denies human freedom are necessarily based on a lie, and their value considered counterfeit. If we call this “image of being” a rule, we can formulate a very Kantian principle: if one acts in accordance with a “rule” (i.e. image of being) that denies human freedom, one propagates a falsehood, a logical contradiction. Thus we arrive at Sartre’s statement that, “One ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing; nor can one escape from that disturbing thought except by a kind of self-deception” (Existentialism is a Humanism 351). So we see how Sartre's hypothetical imperative becomes a categorical imperative. But there is still something missing from this “ethics.” All that we have managed to show so far is that one cannot deny one’s own freedom and be acting in good faith. There is still no reason to suppose that when one acts by a rule that denies the freedom of another, one is acting in bad faith.

Sartre’s ethics, in keeping with traditional ethics, prescribes a manner of treating the other, namely in a way that acknowledges her fundamental freedom. But Sartre’s philosophy, like most Cartesian systems, struggles with the problem of other minds, here other “consciousnesses,” or the possibility of solipsism. How does Sartre resolve this issue so that we can safely call a lie any action that accords with a rule, or image of being, that denies the freedom of others? Sartre declares that with the elimination of the transcendental ego the problem of solipsism has been put to rest (Transcendence of the Ego 104). Now one’s ego is only an object in the world, which, Sartre writes, is “no more certain for consciousness than the I of other men. Only more intimate” (Transcendence of the Ego 104). However, he would be forced to redact this view with the realization that even with the ego an object in the world, accessible to all, consciousness, the ground of the ego’s freedom and responsibility, is still “hidden” behind the self-object and so inaccessible to the other (Being and Nothingness 318). Therefore, the problem of solipsism remains in full force, since one only ever encounters objects in the world, never subjects. Sartre’s new solution, following “Hegel’s intuition,” is to make self-consciousness the result of encountering the other, so that awareness of one’s own subjectivity presupposes an awareness of the other’s. In the encounter with the other, the other’s consciousness, which is not an object for consciousness, is viscerally felt by
consciousness (the look). In feeling the presence of another consciousness, one becomes aware of oneself as an object for that consciousness, and in becoming so aware, one becomes aware of oneself as an object for one’s own consciousness. That is, one becomes aware of oneself as being between an in-itself and for-itself. Thus the encounter becomes the condition for the emergence of reflective consciousness or self-awareness. This means that one’s coming to know oneself is only effected through the medium of the other, and so one emerges as a self-conscious individual always already aware of the subjectivity of others. Therefore, one can never deny the freedom of the other and still continue acting in good faith. Awareness of the other’s freedom is a necessary condition for the awareness of one’s own freedom. An additional consequence of this is that the self-aware subject is always, so to speak, before the other. According to Sartre, since one’s “self” is in the world, one is always forced to answer the other’s estimation of one’s self-object. This makes the subjectivity of the other a limit to freedom (Being and Nothingness 672), which is why one’s “image” is always “before all humanity,” why everything happens to one “as though the whole of the human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing . . .” (Existentialism is a Humanism 352).

4. Metaphysics, Language, and the Ethos of Da-Sein

With the foundation of Sartre’s “ethics” laid out, we can now turn to Heidegger’s conception of ethos as an answer to metaphysical systems of ethics. But before we can go into Heidegger’s discussion of ethos, we must come to understand why he returns to this ancient word.

Heidegger believes that words thought and spoken with an eye to a more essential manner of experiencing existence, such as ethos, have been appropriated by metaphysics’ narrow theoretical manner of thinking, and so misconstrued. For example, being as phusis, the “emerging abiding sway,” has become an empty predicate (Kant); truth as aletheia, “discoverdness,” has become “correctness;” and ethos, the “abode of Dasein,” has become ethics, the “ought” separated off from being by Plato’s ruminations on the “Good” (Intro to Metaphysics 210-11). Heidegger charges metaphysics, and therefore the thinking of the West, with having forgotten being as the ground of beings. Therefore, a return to the ancient word “ethos” is necessary if we wish to begin thinking about morality in a more ontologically appropriate manner, that is, in terms of our being.
But why does Heidegger put so much emphasis on language in his treatment of ethics? This has to do with Heidegger’s conception of language as determinative for the “Da” of Dasein, for that attuned understanding of being discussed above. In *Being and Time*, words are portrayed as affixing themselves to the particular in-order-to’s of the referential whole, so that language points to this whole’s articulations (*as-structures*) (*Being and Time* 204). A hammer, for instance, as a “hammer,” is essentially an in-order-to-pound-in-nails. Something that looks like a hammer, but does not have the in-order-to of pounding in nails can only be the semblance of a hammer. Therefore, the word “hammer” first gains its meaning not from the object itself, but from our essential understanding of it, or in another way, from the basic manner in which we experience it in the world, i.e. from taking it up and using it. Heidegger’s sense of language changes considerably with the famous “turn” in his thought. Language becomes not merely a collection of words that affix themselves to the references (as meanings) of the referential whole, but instead something determinative for that whole. In other words, language becomes a cultural, historical, work of art. In the *Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger describes the work of art as that which “sets up a world,” or “holds open the open region of the world” (*Origin of the Work of Art* 170). The work is definitive for that world of which our understanding is an understanding. The precise manner by which the work accomplishes this setting up of the world is by allowing for what essentially is, the “earth,” to show itself in and through the work. To take an example of Heidegger’s, the Greek temple’s stone columns convey the essential qualities of stone (e.g. its stoic gravity) to those who daily interact with the temple. In Heidegger’s words, “The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves” (*Origin of the Work of Art* 168). Language, as a work issuing from the history of a people’s being, becomes for Heidegger “the house of being,” in which “man dwells” (*Letter on Humanism* 217). Therefore, the same can be said of language as was said of the temple: it gives to things their look, and to humanity its outlook on itself. Language "houses" one’s Da-sein, one’s attuned understanding of being.

How does our discussion of language bear on Heidegger’s discussion of ethos? Heidegger discusses ethos in terms of the question, “Whence and how is the essence of human being determined?” (*Letter on Humanism* 244). Heidegger’s answer, but
originally found in *Being and Time*, is that “the ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence [ek-sistence]” (*Letter on Humanism* 248). He explains this passage in the following way: “The sentence says: the human being occurs essentially in such a way that he is the “there” [das “Da”], that is, the clearing [i.e. understanding] of being” (*Letter on Humanism* 248). That is to say, the human being is essentially an understanding of being, as we saw above. He goes on to explain that by “existence” he means “ek-sistence,” which refers to the manner by which we exist, namely in the temporal dimensions (ecstasies) of our understanding. He writes, further, “Ek-sistence identifies the determination of what the human being is in the destiny of truth” (*Letter on Humanism* 249). Here we have one of Heidegger’s most important, if abstruse, observations in the *Letter*. He is saying only this: ek-sistence, or ecstatic understanding, is determined historically (the “destiny of truth” refers to “the happening of history” (*Letter on Humanism* 255). Ek-sistence here stands for the “Da,” and “Da-sein,” therefore, for the relation of ek-sistence to a people’s historical being, or “culture.” Therefore, we arrive at this depiction of human being: human being is essentially an understanding of being, which stands out in its temporal dimensions (ecstasies), and is determined historically.

Language enters into this discussion when we consider that it is the “house of being,” that is, determinative for that of which our understanding is an understanding, namely our being-in-the-world: “Language is the house of being in which the human being ek-sists by dwelling, in that he belongs to the truth of being, guarding it” (*Letter on Humanism* 254). Language, since it sets up the world of which we are each an understanding, that is, in which we are each an involvement, is determinative both for our present ek-sistence, and for the history in which this temporal understanding of ourselves and the world is a moment, or a “happening.” For example, the history of the West has been determined by a metaphysical manner of speaking and thinking, a metaphysical language, and so we today understand the world and ourselves in terms of metaphysical concepts. We are defined in the manner in which we “be,” our understanding of the world, by the language of metaphysics. Therefore, we, along with the history of metaphysics, have forgotten the ground of our understanding, that is, our being-in-the-world.

We have yet to show how ethos relates to this discussion of language, history, and human being. We have seen that language, as a historical work of art, sets up the world,
or the “open region” in which one stands as a “clearing of being,” that is, as an ecstatic understanding of the world. It should be mentioned here that by “world” we are not referring to a collection of beings, but instead to a manner of being, a “way of life.” The “world” is a referential whole that makes up the background of one’s projects: e.g. the carpenter has a world of tools and carpentry projects which refer to a broader world that serves as the context for these projects (Being and Time 100). The carpenter herself, as a carpenter, is an understanding of, or involvement in, the world, or the “open region,” from the vantage point of her carpentry projects, her own-most (authentic) involvement. When Heidegger tells us that ethos “names the open region,” he is saying that ethos, one’s essential “character,” is one’s way of life (Being and Time 269). This is what has been forgotten in the metaphysical term “ethics.” Being in an “ethical” manner is being-in-the-world. In other words, morality is woven into the fabric of a way of life. And since being moral is being-in-the-world, being in a moral manner can only be in an own-most manner, that is, existing as one’s own “vantage point on,” or involvement in, the world.

Let us take an example to clarify this conception of morality. In Chinese culture there is an emphasis placed on upholding one’s duty to the host at the dinner table; as a guest, one ought to show respect to the host by allowing for one’s first several glasses of wine to be in toast to her for her hospitality. From the vantage point of the guest at the dinner table, from this involvement in the world, it behooves one to be deferential to the host. In other words, to be in this manner, and to adhere to this manner of being, i.e. as the guest at the dinner table, is to be in a moral manner. This custom, which shows respect and appreciation, is not something the guest chooses. It is rather an aspect of the guest’s world, which the guest adheres to when she is “skilfully coping” (Dreyfus) at her best (i.e. being a good guest) (Being-in-the-World 58).

5. Authentic Being-in-the-World

We are now in a position to highlight some of the essential differences between these two views. As we have seen, Sartre’s ethics relies on a sense of human freedom, whereas Heidegger’s discussion of ethos portrays moral being as being one’s own-most in the sense of being one’s own involvement in the world, e.g. the good guest at the dinner table. The first sense emphasises individual action and responsibility, and the second abiding by one’s way of life, as determined historically. In Heidegger, we arrive at
something reminiscent of Plato’s conception of acting morally in the harmonious polis, namely fulfilling one’s role and minding that role. We should note that this conception of ethics is not a prescription, but merely a description of what “ethics” essentially is. In Sartre, conversely, we arrive at a kind of categorical imperative, namely to act in acknowledgement of the human condition. To do anything besides would be to exemplify a contradiction. So we see that Sartre tries to establish, from his Cartesian system, an ethics that can be used to address traditional problems in moral philosophy. Simone de Beauvoir would later describe this as an “ethics of ambiguity,” since it abhors absolute moral values, prescribing instead a manner of choosing, i.e. in good faith. Heidegger, on the other hand, directs us to culture as what determines moral action. From the vantage point of Sartre’s ethics, we might wish to put a question to Heidegger’s view.

Does Heidegger’s appeal to culture as the ground of moral action promote acts of bad faith? Does "being one’s own involvement" simply involve conforming blindly to the customs of one’s culture? Heidegger addresses this problem when he discusses the difference between those who “make the ‘they’ [das man]” their hero (Being and Time 422), the “in-authentic,” and those who become “authentic” (i.e. own-most). Ek-sisting authentically, in an own-most manner, is not a kind of conformism. In fact, conforming to the “they” is what first “covers up” one’s authentic being-in-the-world. In conforming to the “they,” one exists as the crowd exists, always deferring to itself for direction and approval (levelling). Losing oneself in this way has the palliative effect of allowing one to forget that one exists as “thrown projection towards death,” that is, as being towards one’s totality. Being authentic keeps the possibility of becoming a totality, one’s mortality, firmly in view, because here one exists with an eye to the whole of one’s being-in-the-world, or the whole of one’s ecstatic understanding (i.e. “fore-having”).

Conforming to "das man,” conversely, has the effect of allowing one’s view to fall from this whole to particular beings, as the objects of idle curiosity. Being absorbed in these objects gives rise to a form of speech Heidegger calls “idle chatter”, and to a form of writing he calls “scribbling,” which transform meaningful words into easy clichés, ready-made expressions (Being and Time 212-13). Therefore, existing in one’s own-most manner, in accordance with one’s own involvement, does not involve conformism. Since one essentially is an understanding of the world, to be in an own-most manner is only to
be oneself.

What, then, does being authentic involve? In *Being and Time*, being authentic involves existing in terms of one’s totality, the whole of one's ecstatic understanding. Here one acts in accordance with one’s understanding in its past, present, and future ecstasies. In doing so one brings one’s past and future ecstasies (one's “thrown projection”) to bear on one's present ecstasy, or “situation.” In the example of the good guest, this amounts to viewing the situation in terms of the context of the dinner (one’s facticity), and in terms of one’s future projects, which most likely involve maintaining good relations with those who would treat one to dinner. Moreover, since the world, which designates all manners of propriety, is “set up” by its artistic works, chief among them language, there emerges in Heidegger a second kind of authenticity. This kind of authenticity involves using words *care-fully*, that is, in terms of one’s totality, in order to speak from that totality. This is exactly the opposite of idle talk. Heidegger equates this “authentic” manner of speaking with poetry, and differentiates poetical thinking (*poiesis*) from theoretical thinking (*theoria*). Those who think and speak poetically, that is, from the whole of their ecstatic understanding, or their *being*, preserve a language, and therefore the world (i.e. “way of life”), by safeguarding its words against losing their relations to this whole, that is, their meanings, and becoming cliché. Heidegger calls these thinkers the “guardians of the house of being” (*Being and Time* 239). Therefore, being in a *moral* manner is being in an own-most manner, and *thinking* in a moral manner is thinking, or “safeguarding,” the meanings of the words that establish one’s way of life.

But does this view commit Heidegger to a ridged conservatism? Heidegger writes of something he terms the “*reciprocal rejoinder*” where own-most Dasein takes on the role of Hegel’s world-historical man (*Being and Time* 438). Here a particularly *incisive* Dasein hears “the call” of (i.e. *is elicited by*) its ecstatic situation (i.e. the call of its totality *through* its present ecstasy), and in so doing discovers something *essential* to its world that had hitherto gone unnoticed. In its heeding the call of its situation, or in its *being its own involvement*, this exceptional Dasein manages to highlight essential truths about its existence which serve to alter the course of its culture’s history. If we consider this in light of Heidegger’s later conception of the poetic thinker who “preserves” the world by recalling the *essential* meanings of the words that set it up, we arrive at
something that resembles Hegel’s world-historical man, but *qua* an artist. Here we have a Dasein whose observations (disclosure) stand as a trenchant critique of her time. The artists and thinkers of the American civil rights movement, like Bob Dylan and Martin Luther King, might serve as examples of this type of own-most involvement. So, it cannot be said that Heidegger’s view necessarily commits him to conservatism. Like in Hegel, each epoch is pregnant with the seeds of its own transformation.

6. “Worldlessness”

So we see how Heidegger’s conception of language and the world contribute to his understanding of *ethos*, as the world of one’s own-most involvement. Prior to this we discussed the approaches to, and conceptions of human being of these two thinkers, and drew from this the basis of Sartre’s ethics, as outlined in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. How far, then, have we come towards answering the question we posed at the beginning, namely the question of whether the study of human being is conducive to an ethics? Let us see if we can bring a response into view. We have seen that Heidegger, rather than offering moral *prescriptions*, provides a *description* of moral being-in-the-world. Sartre, on the other hand, seeks to establish an ethics on the basis of humanity’s fundamental freedom, claiming this to constitute a special kind of humanism. We know that Simone de Beauvoir would go on to establish a much more definite ethics from Sartre’s thought, namely her “ethics of ambiguity,” where one’s absolute freedom is tempered by its necessary correlate, absolute responsibility. In regards to Heidegger’s legacy, thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas would attempt to insert an ethics into his ontology, here by postulating a Sartrian confrontation with the eyes of the other, which issue an overwhelming moral imperative that infinitely overflows its concept, like the concept of God for Descartes. Heidegger, however, remained without an ethics, since he believed ethics to be an element of the world, and not something philosophers could simply construct. The thinker’s role, according to Heidegger, is to *preserve* a way of being, which includes its “morality.”

Heidegger's conception of human being prohibits him from expounding an ethics. The world, as determined by a people's history, is the site of morality. But while Heidegger may not propose any moral imperatives, he does offer a warning: a people who does not concern itself with preserving the meanings of its words through poetic
thinking risks losing touch with its manner of being, and so its morality. Heidegger terms this "worldlessness," and believes that metaphysics, since it forgets being, makes Western culture particularly vulnerable to this danger. Nietzsche, he tells us, suffered from worldlessness, which resulted in his attempt to undertake a "revaluation of all values," or a “reversal of metaphysics” (Being and Time 257). Worldlessness amounts to alienation from the shared world in which we are each an involvement, and Heidegger believes that Sartre's “existentialism” further exposes us to this danger.

This is where Heidegger's thought truly confronts Sartre's ethics. Everything that we are in Heidegger is determined by an understanding which is itself determined by a history of thinking about being, that is, of using words to convey our experience of being-in-the-world. As a consequence of metaphysics, which divides human being into beings, and brings these into opposition, humanity has become a-worldly, a-temporal, and a-historical, that is, an insular mind endowed with certain capacities over against a plenum of objects, evaluating them. Sartre's reversal of essentia and existentia to arrive at a self-determining subject does nothing to alter this conception of being. In fact, it exacerbates the danger of worldlessness since it conceives of the subject as determining its “world as a way of being” (Being and Nothingness 638); i.e. the subject now chooses its ecstatic situation. The world, along with the history in which this world is a moment, becomes itself a product of the subject's choices, since one chooses the manner in which the “world as a way of being” exists, its essence (existence precedes essence). It is for this reason that Heidegger characterizes Sartre's hovering subjectivity as the “tyrant of being” (Letter on Humanism 252). If morality is indeed an element of the world, than Sartre's subjectivity, since it forgets the world, poses a threat to morality.

7. Conclusion

The core of Heidegger’s critique of Sartre’s ethics has now come into view. Sartre’s ethics, since it supposes us to have mastery over our existence, serves to dis-embed the individual from her world and its history, exposing her to the danger of alienation, or worldlessness. Since morality properly belongs to the manner in which one exists, and not to a transcendental realm of metaphysical truths, Sartre’s existentialism can only serve to alienate one from a moral manner of being. The study of human being, for Heidegger, remains a descriptive occupation. However, one might suspect Heidegger
of, in effect, lending weight to a kind of moral relativism. We can begin to address this concern by considering that Heidegger gives over all truth (as aletheia) to the disclosing of the disclosure that is human understanding. Human being discovers its truths, including its moral truths, in the world. This is part of the artwork’s function in setting up a world, in that it conveys the truth of what essentially is (e.g. the qualities of stone).

Therefore, Heidegger’s opposition to metaphysical systems of ethics does not “break a lance” for moral relativism. If anything, moral relativism arises out of a kind of covering over of what essentially shows itself in the world, a kind of in-authenticity. Thus we move towards something like Sartre’s notion of bad faith, but without the Cartesian subjectivity. With these considerations, we can propose a tentative answer to our question: while it may not be the case that the study of human being is conducive to a particular ethics, it is possible that such study can help clarify the nature of morality so that we can better equip ourselves against becoming, as a people, a-moral.

Works Cited:


---. “Existentialism is a Humanism.” Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre. Ed. W.