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## Finding Meaning in the Lack Thereof: An Analysis of Nietzsche's and Sartre's Responses to the Problem of Existential Nihilism

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Eastern Kentucky  
University

**FINDING MEANING IN  
THE LACK THEREOF:**

An Analysis of Nietzsche's and Sartre's  
Responses to the Problem of Existential Nihilism

Honors Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of HON 420  
Fall 2017

By Daniel Hassall  
Mentored by Dr. Matthew Pianto,  
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**FINDING MEANING IN THE LACK THEREOF: An Analysis  
of Nietzsche and Sartre's Responses to the Problem of Existential  
Nihilism**

Daniel Hassall

Mentored by Dr. Matthew Pianalto, Department of Philosophy and  
Religion

**Abstract**

There have been countless philosophers who have attempted to create ways that humanity can overcome the threat of existential nihilism and the loss of objective meaning. Two of the most influential philosophers who have attempted to do this are Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. This paper analyzes both of their philosophical solutions to the problem of nihilism, comparing and contrasting. While similar in many respects, Nietzsche and Sartre differ on several key aspects: they approach nihilism slightly differently, they have different views about ethics and subjectivity, and Nietzsche is a determinist while Sartre advocates a radical free will. When comparing their solutions, Sartre has the superior solution because his ethical view is less problematic in terms of subjectivity and allows for a foundation for an ethical consideration for others, and because Nietzsche's determinism ultimately contradicts much of his message about the creation of beauty and embracing life.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Defining the Problem.....	4
Nietzsche.....	9
Nietzsche's Individualism.....	10
A Nietzschean Embrace of Life.....	16
A Dionysian Outlook.....	17
Sartre.....	20
Radical Freedom.....	20
Bad Faith.....	27
Comparison and Analysis.....	34
The Role of Nihilism.....	34
Level of Moral Subjectivity.....	37
Free Will vs. Determinism.....	42
Conclusion.....	50
References.....	52

## Introduction

What should people do in the face of a loss of objective truth? If there is no objective reason for life, is life worth living? Without an omniscient, omnipotent and all-good God to provide purpose and order for human existence, how should we live our lives? This is a topic that many philosophers, especially those considered to be Existentialists, have debated for years. Several of the philosophers who wrestled with these questions include Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. Both philosophers brought their own perspective, philosophical system and deeply personal touch when approaching one of the most universal of philosophical topics: the purpose of human existence in the face of nihilism and the lack of objective meaning. Each of their solutions touches on many of the same themes, such as despair or angst in the face of life's lack of meaning, individuality, creation of beauty, and the embrace of life. However, in several key ways their philosophical solutions are also very different. Since there are multiple solutions to this problem and clear points where they disagree, the question must then be asked: which of these solutions is the most complete? Which has the least potential problems, holds up to criticism the best, and whose solution provides the best potential for humankind? While each philosopher's positions has problems that can be criticized, the one that holds up best under scrutiny is Jean-Paul Sartre's brand of Existentialism. There are several reasons for this. First, there are troubling implications to Nietzsche's view of free will in relation to what it requires for a human to flourish. Additionally, the biggest reason is that Sartre's philosophy contains an element of universalism, while Nietzsche's philosophical project relies on pure subjectivity, which can lead to troubling conclusions ethically.

## Defining the Problem

When discussing solutions to a problem, it is wise to first define the problem. In this case, the problem stems from nihilism. Nihilism is a complex term which can mean multiple things depending on its context. For example, moral nihilism is a position which rejects objective moral truths, and epistemological nihilism is the denial of any potential objective truth. In this case, nihilism is meant to be understood as existential nihilism, a philosophical outlook that denies any intrinsic meaning or value in human life (allaboutphilosophy.org). While there are philosophers, poets, or writers who wrestled with these views throughout history (primarily religious thinkers and poets such as Shakespeare), it was never a dominant philosophy for much of human history. When did it gain enough traction to become a threat that needed solving enough to spark an entire philosophical movement attempting to address it? The clearest answer to this question is during the enlightenment, for this is the time that notable philosophers began to write about the issue in-depth (these philosophers being primarily Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard).

Why did this rather pessimistic philosophical outlook become more prominent during the enlightenment? The main answer to this question is the decline of religion during that time. As European society advanced technologically and scientifically, moving further into the modern era, it lost some of its need for a god. Scientific advancements began to explain how life worked, and in this way god was no longer needed as an explanation. Societal advances and innovations in travel caused more people to be exposed to more viewpoints, resulting in less dominant power in the hands of the Church. Standards of living, education levels, literacy, and access to books all

increased. With this, the idea of religion, Christianity particularly, began to lose power in Enlightenment Era Europe. This society appeared to lose its need for a god, they seemed to be doing fine without one. However, there were deeper consequences to the loss of faith in God than many had thought.

Without God, there was no longer an objective grounding for many things that had been taken for granted up until that point. Ethics and morality, knowledge, science, even an objective purpose for humanity were at risk. However, many people did not consider this immediately as they rejected religious faith, instead living their lives as if nothing had changed and morality or the meaning of life had objective meaning still. This is what Friedrich Nietzsche describes in his famed and oft misquoted Parable of the Madman (1974, Kaufman Trans.). In this parable, a madman descends from the hills into a town and cries out “I seek God! I seek God!” After confronting many townspeople and receiving no answer, the madman in the parable cries out to the crowd ““whither is God? I will tell you. We have killed him, you and I. All of us are his murderers”” (p. 180). While often cited by either Christians or Atheists as a definite standpoint on Gods existence, this parable is actually an allegory for Enlightenment Europe’s rejection of religion, but how it clung to the objective view of the world that religion granted them, out of fear of nihilism (or out of belief in a type of objectivity that does not require God, such as reason and logic). This is hinted at when Nietzsche notes in the story that many of the crowd that the madman was addressing did not believe in God, and simply laughed at the madman.

While he cries out that God is dead, the madman also pleads with the crowd to understand the severity of their deed (and symbolically, the consequences of rejecting

Christianity). The madman cries out “how show we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned was bled to death under our knives, who will wash this blood off of us?” (Nietzsche, 1974, Kaufman Trans. p. 180). For Nietzsche in this story, the blood in this story was the stain of the loss of objectivity. This stain is one that will forever mark and change humanity (though from his philosophical perspective it is a good thing). At the end of the parable, the madman gives up attempting to convince the crowd, declaring “I have come too early, my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way; it has not yet reached the ears of men” (p. 181). This frustration is something that Nietzsche himself shared, as he often decried the intellectual traditions of his time and claimed that it would be many years before his work would be properly understood.

The “Death of God” in Europe had many long-term consequences. There was no longer some higher power that people could point to in order to explain why tragic events happened, or to explain the purpose of life. Suffering seemed even more random and meaningless without God to explain it. In fact, this dilemma existed long before Nietzsche even wrote about it, as people have struggled to comprehend the existence of both God and suffering for as long as humans have existed. This is exemplified by a soliloquy from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, where the titular character proclaims “out, out, brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the state and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury. Signifying nothing” (Shakespeare, 1997, Muir Ed.). Traditional morality was also challenged, as God had often been used by theologians and philosophers alike as the grounding for objective ethical systems. The loss of all of these explanations for why



things the way they are and guidelines for how we should act can lead people into disillusionment or despair. This distress has been called different names by different philosophers. Soren Kierkegaard (while writing from the perspective of one of his many pseudonyms) refers to this as angst or anxiety, referring to uncontrolled fear in the face of the terrifying freedom to do anything, even the most self-destructive things (2014, Hannay Trans. p. 61). Albert Camus, another philosopher, refers to a similar concept which he calls the Absurd. He refers to the Absurd as “the confrontation between the human need (for objective answers) and the unreasonable silence of the world” (1955, p. 28). While Kierkegaard’s anxiety and Camus’ absurdity are not both addressing the exact same topic, they both are issues which arise from humans facing the lack of meaning that comes from existential nihilism. This struggle to find a way to embrace life in the face of nihilism is the core goal of any philosophical project like this, including Nietzsche’s and Sartre’s.

What negative consequences can come about from confronting existential nihilism? There are several common reactions which are problematic, the most clearly troubling being suicide. When faced with the fact that there is no purpose to life, no grand plan and no higher reason for all of the suffering in the world, one understandable feeling might be to question whether life is worth living. This is what Camus referred to when he wrote the famous first lines of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955). He said “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (p. 3). It is easy to see why one might consider suicide after experiencing existential nihilism, because it does at first seem like life is hopeless and cruel without an objective reason for

life. Nietzsche scholar Paolo Stellino (2013) describes this same phenomenon: “a characteristic feature of Nietzsche’s worldview is that existence is in itself meaningless and valueless. Given this premise, the question of whether life is or is not worth living is of pivotal importance. Within this context, suicide is taken into consideration as a possible (though not necessary) consequence of the awareness that life is meaningless and, therefore, not worth living” (pp. 10-11). In order to construct an adequate response to existential nihilism, one must answer why life is worth living without an objective meaning.

The next problematic result of existential nihilism is the lawlessness that can result from experiencing it. When faced with the lack of objective meaning, and the lack of eternal consequences for disobedience that are present in Christianity, why not do whatever you want? If it would be pleasurable to you, why not kill people, or commit rape, torture, steal, or otherwise cause suffering to others. It is clear why such an outlook is concerning. Most people would likely be repulsed by those actions, so any proper and complete response to existential nihilism would have to provide substantive reasons why such behavior is still unacceptable.

The other major issue that results from existential nihilism is simply a downtrodden, depressed life-view. When someone discovers that there is no higher power providing reasons for the universe and no objective meaning for their life, it would be understandable for them to become depressed by this. When they look around and see the meaningless suffering in the world, seeing themselves flung into the world without a purpose, a pessimistic perspective might be unavoidable. When faced with the most extreme consequences of existential nihilism, it is tempting just to agree that life is

painful and meaningless and just give up. While this person might not kill themselves (as addressed earlier), they very well might give up on life, begrudgingly going through the motions of human existence without any joy, happiness or satisfaction. In other words, they might be technically alive but their existence is an unpleasant experience that does not fully embrace their life. Thus, any solution to existential nihilism must also allow people to fully embrace their lives and find a “meaningful” existence despite the lack of objective meaning to life.

## **Nietzsche**

The first such solution is that proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche. Friedrich Nietzsche is one of the biggest influences on what would become the Existentialist movement, though he did not consider himself to be one (both because the term had not yet been invented and because Nietzsche refused to associate himself with any philosophical movements, preferring to stand alone). Nietzsche’s entire philosophical project was based upon a search for what it meant to truly embrace life as an individual in a time when systems of universal meaning were collapsing. As he put it, “what was at stake in all philosophizing hitherto was not at all ‘truth’ but something else - let us say, health, future, growth, power, life” (1974, Kaufman Trans., p. 35). Philosopher James Porter (2013) describes this attitude when he argues “If you love life you cannot be a nihilist about life. That is the premise of this essay which will suggest that Nietzsche belongs to a long anti-nihilist tradition.... Nietzsche knows about the love of life” (p. 143). While he is widely misunderstood as a nihilist because of his works attacking objective systems of meaning, that interpretation could not be further from the truth.

Nietzsche's philosophical project is focused on what we must do after discovering the fact of nihilism.

### **Nietzsche's Individualism**

The most important thing about Nietzsche's philosophy is that he was an extreme individualist. He often decried philosophies that he considered to stifle the individual under universal doctrines. Among his common targets were Christianity and the ethical system Utilitarianism. Objective systems like these mandate the universality of their values, which is why Nietzsche thought they were toxic for individual flourishing. It is not generally the values themselves which Nietzsche felt was dangerous (though he personally disliked the messages and values of both ideologies), but the need for a universal acceptance which squelched the individuality of all of its proponents. He remarked in *Human, All Too Human* (1996, Hollingdale, R. J. Trans.): "so that everywhere that this conception of good and evil prevails, the destruction of the individuals, their race and nation, is immanent" (p. 63).

When referring to Utilitarianism, Nietzsche called it slave morality (or a morality which is designed to make the masses feel better about their meekness). He stated "Slave morality is essentially a morality of utility. Here is the place for the origin of that famous opposition of 'good' and 'evil': into evil one's feelings project power and dangerousness, a certain terribleness, subtlety, and strength that does not permit contempt to develop" (1989, Kaufman Trans. p. 207). Here Nietzsche is critiquing slave morality and Utilitarianism, because he believes that they discourage characteristics which are needed for individual growth and flourishing (such as creation and taking full responsibility for one's actions through the creation of a subjective morality). In another book (Nietzsche,

1974, Kaufman Trans.) he also decries objective ethical philosophies for stunting individuality by claiming “morality trains the individual to be a function of the herd and to ascribe value to himself only as a function” (p. 174). These are his personal subjective critiques of the philosophical system, however, he is also critiquing the way that these values are used to subject the masses to a certain way of thinking and make certain beliefs considered “evil.”

While the key to Nietzsche’s philosophic project was this subjective and individualist perspective, there was more to do than just destroying objective systems of providing meaning. You must also find a meaning for yourself, by finding something that gives your life meaning for reasons other than the reasons provided by objective philosophies like Christianity, Utilitarianism or Kantian Deontology. Nietzsche believed that the only thing you can do once confronting nihilism was to find something which you would be willing to devote your life to for no other reason than you yourself believed it to be beautiful and important and worthy of passion. He stated this directly in *The Gay Science* (1974, Kaufman Trans.) when he said “one thing is needful: that a human being should attain satisfaction with himself, whether it be by means of this or that poetry and art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold” (p. 235).

For Nietzsche, one who successfully threw off the chains of objectivity and tradition would be forced to create. What he created was up to him, but when faced with the emptiness and suffering and pointlessness of human existence, the *Urbmensch* would not be phased and would create their own meaning and beauty. This level of bravery, the embrace of life in full awareness of its hardships, was for Nietzsche the pinnacle of humanity. They would transcend ideas of good and evil, selfishness or

selflessness, and beauty to be truly subjectively fulfilled. A person who did this would solely devote themselves to whatever they found satisfying, not caring about what society, religious institutions or other people thought about their choices.

However, is it true that absolutely anything goes under Nietzsche's philosophy? After all, this is the man who stated that "there is no facts, only interpretations" (Nietzsche, 1977, Kaufman Trans. p. 458), can I do truly anything I want to? If my personal subjective morality and meaning is created by brutally mistreating others, is that acceptable from a Nietzschean point of view? This is perhaps the stereotype, since there is a history of mischaracterizing Nietzsche.

Perhaps the most famous example of this attitude is that a certain (inaccurate) interpretation of Nietzsche's work was highly praised by the Third Reich and Nazis in Germany. This was mostly due to Nietzsche's sister, Elizabeth, who released heavily edited versions of Nietzsche's work after his death (particularly his unfinished work *A Will to Power*) where she removed any condemnation of anti-Semites. As Nietzsche scholar Julian Young (2010) notes that "the posthumous work that appeared in 1901 under the title *The Will to Power* was a philosophically disgraceful concoction on the part of the appalling Elizabeth" (pp. 534-535). Elizabeth went on to support Hitler and used a twisted version of Nietzsche's philosophy to promote the ideals of the Nazis, particularly put emphasis on the parts of Nietzsche's work where he discussed the "will to power" and the problems of slave morality. Of course, she did this while conveniently skipping the parts of Nietzsche's work where he points out the flaws in master morality as well as where he suggested that "it might be useful and fair to expel the anti-Semitic squallers out of the country" (1989, Kaufman Trans. p. 188).

However, regardless of the legitimacy of past interpretations of Nietzsche's subjectivism, the question still must be asked: is anything permissible under Nietzsche's philosophy? Does might make right for Nietzsche, as long as you have the power to do it? Is it as the character of Ivan in Dostoevsky's existential novel *the Brothers Karamazov* (1992, Pevear & Volokhonsky Trans.) states, "everything is permitted" (p. 263)? After all, the greatest danger that most people see from subjective or relativist ethical positions is what might be called in Nietzsche's case the "cruel *Übermensch*." There is always the threat in a purely subjective ethic that some would simply not care and do whatever they pleased, regardless of the pain and suffering it causes other people. Rape, murder and theft could just be deemed a part of a psychopath's subjective creation of meaning.

The answer to the extent of Nietzsche's pure subjectivity is, like the vast majority of his philosophy, a very nuanced and complex one. It is true that Nietzsche sought to destroy or deconstruct objective moral systems such as Christianity, Utilitarianism, or Kantian Deontology, but at the same time there are several philosophical perspectives which Nietzsche could be put under, depending on which passage of Nietzsche you pull from. Philosopher and Nietzsche scholar Simon Robertson (2009) noted that "regarding his positive program, Nietzsche has been variously read as a proto-Existentialist, egoist, virtue ethicist, consequentialist, and more" (p. 67).

Indeed, while it seems most obvious to lump Nietzsche in with moral subjectivists or relativists, there are also passages (particularly within *Beyond Good and Evil*) where he praises a type of self-interest driven Egoism as well. "Every un-egoistic morality that takes itself for unconditional and addresses itself to all does not only sin against taste: it is a provocation to sins of omission, one more seduction under the mask of philanthropy –

and precisely a seduction and injury for the higher, rarer, privileged” (Nietzsche, 189, Kaufman Tran. p. 149). He typically praised Egoistic philosophy for preserving the focus on the individual self and not mandating focusing on others or a “higher calling,” which frees the individual up to create their own meaning. However, while Nietzsche did direct praise at Egoistic ethical theories for this, it would not be fair to simply categorize Nietzsche as an Egoist, for his view on morality was far more complex than the typical Egoistic philosophy of “the right thing to do is purely what is in the individual’s self-interest to do.”

Instead, the best way to describe Nietzsche’s moral philosophy is to call it a form of perfectionism. Robertson (2009) also states that “a significant core of philosophers now regard Nietzsche’s positive ideal as a form of perfectionism, at least in the very broad sense that he advances a conception of human good consisting in or significantly involving the realization of excellence” (p. 67). Perfectionism seems to be the best fit for Nietzsche, since his philosophical project is almost entirely focused on the individual creation of values and flourishing, instead of promoting specific ethical theories.

Additionally, while concerned with the moral actions of an individual, Nietzsche seemed more interested in developing a type of mental virtues which allowed for the realization of individual greatness than with actions concerning others. He was far more interested in developing a mental fortitude to withstand the suffering of life and even to enjoy/find beauty in it (more on that later) than to dictate individual actions. The primary motivation for Nietzsche when it came to dictating actions and morality was to encourage a pure sense of responsibility within his philosophy. Due to the fact that there are no objective moral systems commanding our actions, Nietzsche thought that we had a



tremendous responsibility to take ownership of all of our actions, for we were the sole ones responsible for them. He remarked “for what is freedom? That one has the will to self-responsibility” (Nietzsche, 1990, Hollingdale Trans. p.103). All of our actions were granted infinitely more meaning and impact due to the fact that we are the only ones choosing them, instead of being assigned that meaning by a higher authority.

Thus the arguments about whether “everything is permitted” in Nietzsche are hardly conclusive. Within Nietzsche’s work there are multiple places where the argument can be made for a purely personal ethic where anything is acceptable, or an ethic with more limits. What cannot be argued however is that his emphasis is hardly on that. Instead of focusing on the ethical implications of his philosophy, Nietzsche put far more time and emphasis on the promotion of active creation of beauty and meaning, as well as willpower, individual responsibility and the full embrace of life.

Unfortunately, this does not ultimately deal with the threat of misinterpretation being used to justify harming others. Nietzsche himself despises the idea of using the will to power as an excuse for harming or subjugating others, as he clearly states in *the Gay Science* (1974, Kaufman Trans.): “certainly the state in which we hurt others is rarely as agreeable as that in which we benefit others; it is a sign that we are still lacking power” (p. 87). However, this seems to be more of an after-thought or analysis by Nietzsche himself (based on his own life experience) than a concrete statement of morality. After all, such an objective moral statement seems out of place in his subjective philosophy, though it could simply be Nietzsche reflecting on his own experiences and pointing out what has and has not worked for him.

Just because Nietzsche himself opposes that idea does not mean that it is impossible to interpret Nietzsche in such a way that justifies such behavior. Because of the fact that there is so many potential ways to interpret Nietzsche due to the subtlety (or vagueness?) of his writings, there are many ways to justify horrible acts under Nietzsche's subjective system of creation of meaning. Just because Nietzsche himself despises and would personally oppose Nazi's does not mean that a Nazi cannot take advantage of the extreme level subjectivity within Nietzsche to also justify his horrible and unethical actions. So while Nietzsche himself focuses on the development of virtues and a will to create meaning, this unfortunately leaves the door open for others to interpret his work in a way that justifies harming others.

### **A Nietzschean Embrace of Life**

Nietzsche was indeed more concerned with people living life to its fullest than what the individual choices in those lives were. This is clear when one of the key concepts of Nietzsche's philosophy is examined. This concept is the idea of Eternal Recurrence. Nietzsche describes this concept in one of the most often quoted sections of *The Gay Science* (1974, Kaufman Trans.). "What, if some day or night were to steal after you and say to you: 'this life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it.'" He continued to the heart of the principle of Eternal Recurrence: "would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse this demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine'" (pp. 273-274)! This principle

highlight's Nietzsche's concern with living life to its fullest extent, to the point where you would not consider it a curse to live life the same way you have been for eternity.

### **A Dionysian Outlook**

While this is the general framework for Nietzsche's philosophy, he wrote much more about his own personal outlook and how he used this framework to find beauty in life. While he would obviously not want his personal view to be considered the objective solution to nihilism that all should obey, it is useful both as an example of his method in action and just to see the merits of a specific philosophical outlook. Nietzsche himself preferred to approach life from what he called a Dionysian perspective. The Greek god Dionysus was a tragic figure, and Nietzsche believed that a tragic outlook similar to Dionysus, one which embraces and finds beauty within both pleasure and suffering and shies away from neither, should be adopted in order to live life to its fullest.

Why is a "tragic" outlook of the utmost importance? Because otherwise we might be so preoccupied with avoiding suffering that we might fail to get any enjoyment out of life. Nietzsche remarks in *The Gay Science* (1974, Kaufman Trans.) "what if pleasure and displeasure were so infinitely tied together that whoever wanted to have as much as possible of one must also have as much as the possible of the other?" He continued "To this day you have the choice: either as little displeasure as possible, painlessness in brief, or as much displeasure as possible as the price for the growth of an abundance of subtle pleasures and joys that have rarely been relished" (pp. 85-86). These are the two lifestyle choices we are presented with in Nietzsche's mind: to fully embrace life in all its pain, senselessness, absurdity, beauty, and joy, or shy away from all of it and live a life always trying to minimize those things but in the process also minimizing the things that make

life worth living. To embrace one would mean increasing and amplifying both the pleasure and pain that come along with life. Nietzsche later describes this concept more succinctly in *Twilight of the Idols* (1990, Hollingdale Trans.) by saying “in the Dionysian the entire emotional system is altered and intensified” (p. 84). However, while Nietzsche thinks that we should not shy away from suffering, he did not necessarily think that it was an inherent value either. He notes in the prelude to *the Gay Science* (1974, Kaufman Trans.) that “only great pain is the liberator of the spirit, being the teacher of the great suspicion that turns every U into an X... I doubt that such pain makes us “better”; but I know it makes us more profound” (p. 36). So suffering and pain is not necessarily to be desired in itself, but simply not to be avoided because of its value in forming good character and its tendency to also bring with it great pleasure and joy.

This can be seen even in Nietzsche’s own life. He famously suffered from a variety of illnesses for years. He sought to cure it through natural remedies, medicines, doctors, nothing worked. It severely limited his lifestyle for the majority of his adult life. Thus, when he speaks of embracing suffering, it is in many ways both literal and highly personal. Philosopher Philip Kain (2007) notes “what was he to do about his suffering? What was he to do about the fact that it came to dominate every moment of his life? He decided to submit to it voluntarily. He decided to accept it fully. He decided that he would not change one detail of his life, not one moment of pain. He decided to love his fate” (p. 61). His life is the perfect example of the embrace of the darker side of life, of suffering. He lived this aspect of philosophy exceptionally.

Regarding the beautiful and joyous aspect of life, Nietzsche found the most rewarding aspect of life to embrace to be the idea of creation and art. “Here, when the

danger of his will is greatest, art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the sublime as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the comic as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity” (Nietzsche, 1993, Whiteside Trans. p. 40). The beauty of art was the saving grace for Nietzsche, as he believed that tragic art (such as the Greek tragedies) were the best channel for the wide range of experiences and emotions needed to be fully human. Into art we can channel our pain, anger, jealousy, hate, love, happiness, hope, and so on.

Nietzsche makes connections between the Dionysian life-view and the love of art, particularly music. He explains, “music, as we understand it today, is likewise a collective arousal and discharge of the emotions, but for all that only a vestige of a much fuller emotional world of expression, a mere residuum of Dionysian histrionicism” (Nietzsche, 1990, Hollingdale Trans. p. 84). While experiencing art (whether it be music, poetry, theater, painting, etc.) is a beautiful thing and something that can help bring beauty in to life, the key for Nietzsche is not just experiencing art but to create it.

Creating is to seize beauty for yourself, to channel your pain and love and memories into something immortal which can also impact others. This is when Nietzsche believes we tap into the most fully human and powerful parts of ourselves. “We artists! We ignore what is natural. We are moonstruck and God-struck. We wander, still as death, unwearied, on heights that we do not see as heights but as plains, as our safety” (Nietzsche, 1974, Kaufman Trans. p. 123). Once again, this highlights the heights that humans can raise themselves to when they destroy objective systems of meaning and embrace their own subjective humanity without being constrained by fear of suffering or

pain. They reject these fears of their own safety or avoidance of displeasure in order to reach the peak of humanity, which is the first step towards becoming what Nietzsche calls an *Übermensch*. Nietzsche restates this in a slightly more direct way when he states in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1989, Kaufman Trans.) that “measure is alien to us; let us own it; our thrill is a thrill of the infinite, the unmeasured. Like a rider on a steed that flies forward, we drop the reins before the infinite, we modern men, like semi-barbarians, and reach *our* bliss only where we are most in danger” (p. 153). This, in a poetic way, succinctly describes Nietzsche’s solution to existential nihilism.

## **Sartre**

The next solution to existential nihilism that should be examined is that of the most famous existential thinker, 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre is perhaps the most famous Existentialist thinker for several reasons. He was at the forefront of the movement in the height of its popularity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and he not only defined the term Existentialist but was one of the few philosophers who openly defined themselves by it (many who often are referred to as Existentialist either existed before the term was coined such as Kierkegaard or disliked the term like Heidegger). Additionally, he coined many of the key terms and phrases that became associated with Existentialism. Thus, his philosophy became the most prototypical existential philosophy, despite him being far from the only one.

### **Radical Freedom**

If the key to Nietzsche’s philosophical project could be described as radical subjectivity, then the most important component of Sartre’s philosophy could be called

radical freedom. However, to fully comprehend Sartre's idea of freedom one must first understand what he considers the human condition to be. Sartre famously coined the phrase that for humanity, existence precedes essence. First, what does Sartre mean by essence? Essence is a philosophical term that dates back to Greek philosophers like Plato and Socrates. They would refer to the essence of something as the purpose or use of it. The essence of a knife is to cut, the essence of a cup is to hold liquid, and the essence of a boat is to sail on water. So what does it mean for existence to precede essence? Well, for all of those aforementioned objects their essence precedes their existence. They are tools made for a specific purpose, so their essence was determined before they were brought into existence. In traditional Christianity, humans have a predetermined essence before they came to exist as well, since God created humans for a very specific purpose.

According to Sartre and similarly designed atheistic existential philosophies, human existence precedes our essence. As Sartre (2007, Macomber Trans.) put it, "we mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself" (p. 22). The parallels with Nietzsche's philosophy is plain, where both refer to how humanity has no objective purpose and both focus on how humanity must define themselves and create their own meaning and purpose.

So according to Sartre, humans are thrust into the world without a definitive purpose. What then do we do? This is where Sartre's concept of freedom comes in. Immediately after defining what existence preceding essence means, Sartre (2007, Macomber Trans.) states "thus there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but also that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills

himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of Existentialism” (p. 22). As he said, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is our freedom and our curse for Sartre, since there is no essence or purpose for us, we must make our own and have no choice but to make our own. Every action we take is one that we are ultimately free to do.

The term used to describe Sartre’s freedom earlier, “radical freedom” is more accurate than it initially seems. His concept of freedom truly is radical, because humans are truly free to (at least theoretically) do anything that we set ourselves since we have no predetermined purpose, which is a scary proposition. This is what Sartre means when later he says that humans are condemned to be free: “condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (Sartre, 2007, Macomber Trans. p. 29). It is indeed a responsibility, because the meaning and purpose for not just yourself but the entire human race rests on your shoulders. Since the choice about who you are and what to do with your life is entirely in your hands, Sartre argues that in effect by choosing you are taking on a tremendous responsibility.

In fact, Sartre argues that we are not only responsible for our actions but also in a way our circumstances. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943, Barnes Trans) he describes the situation we are in regarding responsibility by giving the example of a man who goes off to fight a war. “Absolute responsibility is not resignation; it is simply the logical requirement of the consequences of our freedom. What happens to me happens through me, and I can neither affect myself with it nor revolt against it nor resign myself to it. Moreover everything which happens to me is mine” (p. 708). Sartre argues that since we



always in some way have a choice out of a situation (in the case of war, suicide or desertion to get out of it) and since our situation is often the result of our previous actions and decisions, we must claim not only responsibility for ourselves and our actions but also the situations we find ourselves in. He further states this by saying “if I am mobilized in a war, this war is *my* war; it is in my image and I deserve it.” He continues “any way you look at it, it is a matter of choice. This choice will be repeated later on again and again without break until the end of the war” (p. 708). By the merit of choosing that this option is preferable to disgrace or death, we must claim ultimate responsibility for our circumstances which might at first glance appear beyond our control.

On this notion of responsibility, Sartre (2007, Macomber Trans.) remarks “when we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that in choosing himself he is choosing for all men. In fact, in creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time choose an image of man as we think he ought to be. Choosing to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good and nothing can be good for any of us unless it is the good for all” (p. 24). Notice here the parallels but also the differences with Nietzsche. Like Nietzsche, Sartre is arguing the need for each person to create their own human ethic, and rejects traditional notions of good and evil. In fact, Sartre even rejects the idea that people’s choices are evil to them. This is strikingly similar to Nietzsche’s discussion of good and evil, how these concepts are constraining, and how they ought to be cast aside for individuals to be able to express their own personal values.

Since humans have complete freedom to do whatever we want because there is no purpose for our existence prior to our choices, and since our choices are ultimately not just defining ourselves but also what we think humanity should be, we are left with a tremendous responsibility. We are free to do whatever we please in a sense, however our actions have tremendous consequences. Additionally, there is in a way one thing that we are not free to do. According to Sartre, we cannot not choose something. Because we are thrown into this life without our consent and left to do what we want, we cannot not choose. Even to go to the extreme of “opting out of life” so to speak by killing yourself requires the choice to do so. Every single choice we make is one we are left no guidance from an objective source about what to do, and we have no option not to choose an action because even that in itself is a choice. This is getting at the core of what Sartre meant when he said that we are condemned to be free. This freedom is in many ways a weight on humanity, far from the blessing it initially seems to be. Sartre would likely agree with Soren Kierkegaard (2014, Hannay Trans.) when he said “anxiety is the dizziness of freedom” (p. 61), for Sartrean freedom is far from a purely positive characteristic, but also a core part of the human condition which places a tremendous burden of responsibility on each and every one of us.

This is perhaps demonstrated best in a famous example Sartre gives in *Existentialism is a Humanism* about a former student of his who was faced with a moral dilemma. This student sought advice from Sartre because he was faced with a difficult choice. At the time World War 2 was raging, and this student wanted to go sign up and be a soldier to help fight the Nazis. However, his mother had recently been left by his father and was grieving from the death of her son (the student's older brother) in the war. For

this reason he also wanted to stay and care for his mother. Sartre (2007, Macomber Trans.) describes the dilemma like this: “the young man had the choice of going to England and joining the Free French Forces – which would mean abandoning his mother – or remaining by her side to help her go on with her life” (p. 30).

This dilemma is interesting, because both choices have compelling motivations behind them as well as risks. Sartre points out that while the option to join the Free French Forces and fighting Axis forces clearly has the potential to benefit far more humans than staying behind to care for his mother, it also has the potential to not benefit anyone. There are multiple things that could happen which would result in that course of action being fruitless. He points out that the student could be detained and never reach England, or if he does arrive he could also be assigned to a desk job doing paperwork. So while this course of action had the potential to do more good for humanity, that good is an abstract type of good and is not guaranteed whereas staying to care for his mother guarantees that he will help her live a better and more fulfilled life in a concrete way. In fact, if he was to leave it would likely crush her (even more so if he was to die in the war).

So this choice is a complex one, but there are many ethical systems out there which could help him choose the “right option,” correct? No matter what objective system is used, Sartre does not think that they can help the student solve his dilemma. “What could actually help him make that choice? The Christian doctrine? No. The Christian doctrine tell us we must be charitable, love our neighbor, sacrifice ourselves for others, choose the “narrow way,” etc. But what is the narrow way? Whom should we love like a brother – the soldier or the mother?” (Sartre, 2007, Macomber Trans. p. 31) He also

discusses some ethical systems such as Kantian Deontology which claim to have objective answers even without a religious founding: “Kantian morality instructs us never to treat another as a means, but always as an end. Very well; therefore, if I stay with my mother, I will treat her as an end, not as a means. But by the same token, I will be treating those who are fighting on my behalf as a means. Conversely, if I join those who are fighting, I will treat them as an end, and, in doing so, risk treating my mother as a means” (Sartre, 2007, Macomber Trans. p. 31). Even objective systems of morality and ethics do not have a good answer for his dilemma.

Since no objective systems of morality or religion can guide him, many people assume that we then are left to rely on our instincts or feelings when making choices. However, Sartre does not believe that this can be used to guide our actions either. He points this out by saying “but how can we measure the strength of a feeling? What gave any value to the young man’s feeling for his mother? Precisely the fact that he chose to stay with her... The only way I can measure the strength of this affection is precisely by performing an action that confirms or denying it. However, since I am depending on this action to justify my action, I find myself caught in a vicious cycle” (Sartre, 2007, Macomber Trans. p. 32). Indeed, our feelings in Sartre’s philosophy are only really validated when we act on them, because just like everything else we choose to act on our feelings. We have the freedom to choose how to react to our feelings, so even these feelings cannot help guide our choices when we are facing the enormous responsibility that comes with the pure and radical freedom we possess. As Sartre (2007, Macomber Trans.) said, “in other words, feelings are developed through the actions we take; therefore I cannot use them as guidelines for action” (p. 32). So is there anything the

student can use to help guide his actions? According to Sartre, the answer is no. At least, no answer besides choosing for himself, utilizing his freedom.

This is what Sartre believes is the solution to the student's dilemma: to decide for himself, for nothing else can suitably determine the answer for you. Sartre (2007, Macomber Trans.) declares "Therefore, in seeking me out, he knew what my answer would be, and there is only one answer I could give him: 'You are free, so choose; in other words, invent. No general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do, there are no signs in the world'" (p. 33). This brings it back to Sartre's idea of true freedom. We determine what we are, who we are, and what our values are. We make these choices, in fact the only choice we cannot make is whether to choose or not because to elect not to choose is a choice in-itself. We define ourselves, and this is a great responsibility because to do this is to lay out our own blueprint for the values that we believe are best for humanity as a whole. This is the burden left on Sartre's former student, and he must recognize this and make the decision for himself.

### **Bad Faith**

The recognition of this freedom is an important aspect of this for Sartre, because if we fail to acknowledge our freedom and make our decisions accordingly, we will operate in what Sartre refers to as "bad faith." Sartre opens the discussion of bad faith in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* (1943, Barnes Trans.) by proposing the question "what are we to say is the being of man who has the possibility of denying himself?" (p. 87) He poses this question because the potential of self-denial or self-deception is the core of what it means to be in bad faith. For being in bad faith for Sartre is to be in denial about your true state of complete freedom. "We shall willingly grant

that bad faith is a lie to oneself, on condition that we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general” (Sartre, 1943, Barnes Trans. p. 87). Indeed, this distinction must be necessary, for a self-deception and denial on the level of Sartre’s bad faith is different from a standard lie. Sartre describes bad faith as “having in appearance the structure of falsehood. Only what distinguishes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. Thus the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here. Bad faith on the contrary implies in essence the unity of a single consciousness” (Sartre, 1943, Barnes Trans. p. 89).

The idea that bad faith is a self-deception, a lie to yourself, is fairly easy to comprehend. However, the inner workings of this mechanism required for bad faith are more complex than they initially seem, particularly due to the implication of a single consciousness. First, bad faith is not an outside experience which we are subjected to, because we in a way create it since we are creating this lie that we tell ourselves. As Sartre (1943, Barnes Trans.) puts it, “bad faith does not come from outside human reality. One does not undergo his bad faith; one is not infected with it; it is not a *state*. But consciousness affects itself with bad faith” (p. 89). We create this bad faith ourselves, and indeed we must be aware of what we are lying to ourselves about. In fact, we must truly be aware of the facts we conceal from ourselves. “It follows first that the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which mean that I must know in my capacity as the deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. Better yet I must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it more carefully” (Sartre, 1943, Barnes Trans. p. 89).

Additionally, while some people would attempt to explain bad faith as a sort of operation of the subconscious hoping to avoid the harsh truth of our freedom (what those in the psychoanalytic tradition would refer to a censor), Sartre also thinks this view is not correct when discussing bad faith. For this would imply a sort of lie without a liar, which contradicts the dynamic which Sartre believes bad faith is (a person lying to themselves, having the dynamic relationship of both the person being lied to and the person deceiving). Sartre (1943, Barnes Trans.) directly states this by saying “That which affects itself with bad faith must be conscious of its bad faith since the being of consciousness is consciousness of being” (p. 89). He later goes on to propose a definitive statement about his view on the relationship between the conscious and unconscious when it comes to bad faith: “But what kind of conscious can the censor have? It must be the consciousness of being conscious of the drive to be repressed, but precisely in order to not be conscious of it. What does this mean if not that the censor is in bad faith?” (Sartre, 1943, Barnes Trans. p. 94)

So according to Sartre, bad faith is something that we create by deceiving ourselves about the true freedom which we possess, or deny that we are not fully responsible for our situations (due to our facticity leading to us having responsibility for our grander situation, ala “this war is my war”). We must both be conscious of this truth in order to deceive ourselves, but also be conscious of it in a way which resembles unconsciousness to the truth so that we may in some way remain deceived by it. He gives an example to demonstrate how society can pressure us into acting in bad faith and conforming ourselves when he discusses a waiter that he watched working in a café. Sartre (1943, Barnes Trans.) described this waiter as pretending, putting forth a persona

of a waiter instead of being an authentic person. “His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes towards the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voices, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer.” He continued “All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at *being* a waiter” (pp. 101-102). This is a game we all play, Sartre says. In fact, society demands it. We want workers to be fully focused on their role. “A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Society demands that he limit himself to his function as a grocer” (Sartre, 1943, Barnes Trans. p. 102).

Unfortunately, this requirement of individuals in society to embrace their role and focus on being that archetype is doomed to failure for Sartre, and will inevitably fall into bad faith. After all, we cannot *be* a waiter. As previously discussed, humans cannot *be* anything, except ourselves. We are not tools designed for a purpose. People who work as waiters are not sculpted in the womb to be perfect waiters. We are simply humans acting as waiters, or as Sartre put it, trying to represent one. “I can not be he, I can only play *at being* him; that is, imagine to myself that I am he. And thereby I affect him with nothingness. In vain do I fulfill the functions of a café waiter” (Sartre, 1943, Barnes Trans. p. 103). He believes it the waiter fulfills the functions of the café waiter in vain because he can never ultimately be the “perfect café waiter,” only a representation of his view of one. There is no essence of a perfect café waiter, and even if there was the waiter could not achieve it because he cannot be a café waiter, only himself. However, there are



far more factors than just societal pressure which places us in bad faith, which is where Sartre's view of bad faith becomes slightly more disturbing.

In fact, Sartre believes that every human is essentially in a constant state of bad faith, even if we only define ourselves by our feelings or what we try to make ourselves. This is in-itself another type of bad faith. In regards to feelings, Sartre (1943, Barnes Trans.) describes "If I make myself sad, it is because I am not sad – the being of sadness escapes me by and in the very act by which I affect myself with it. The being-in-itself of sadness perpetually haunts my consciousness (of) being sad, but it is as a value which I cannot realize" (p. 104). Sometimes these feelings might just happen, for biological or psychological reasons so we would be in bad faith by attempting to define ourselves by them, since such an explanation would not acknowledge our state of radical freedom. Trying to define ourselves in this way is doomed to failure since if we have to choose to make ourselves sad, we are not authentically sad and just projecting that emotion on ourselves.

Indeed, authenticity seems to be the ultimate goal for Sartre in order to avoid bad faith, however achieving it seems to be a nigh-impossible task. He elaborates on the difficulty of this task by saying "to be sincere, we said is to be what one is. That supposes that I am not originally what I am. I cannot *become* sincere; this is what my duty and my effort to achieve sincerity imply. But we definitely establish that the original structure of "not being what one is" renders impossible in advance all movement towards being in itself or "being what one is" (Sartre, 1943, Barnes Trans. p. 106). This leaves us in a predicament about how we can escape bad faith.

It seems like regardless of what we do, we are stuck in bad faith because any attempt to become more like one is in fact drives us further away from what we are since it assumes we are not already what we are. All these movements seem futile and doomed to failure, and this is ultimately Sartre's determination as well. Bad faith is core to the human experience, in fact, it *is* the majority of the human experience. Further, even sincerity seems to be an exercise in bad faith because to do so is actually to contradict the purpose of sincerity, since by attempting to change yourself to be more like who you are, you are actually moving further away from what we are (with according to Sartre, is nothing or at least nothing besides the sum of our actions). "Thus the essential structure of sincerity does not differ from that of bad faith since the sincere man constitutes himself as what he is *in order not to be it*. This explains the truth recognized by all that one can fall into bad faith by being sincere" (Sartre, 1943, Barnes Trans. p. 109). According to Sartre, even attempting sincerity is to give in to bad faith, since sincerity assumes we are not already ourselves.

So it seems that while authenticity is the ultimate goal of Sartre's Existentialism, it is constantly opposed by the looming threat of bad faith. Furthermore, the actions that one would at first glance think would lead to greater authenticity actually can end up leading into bad faith as well. We cannot actively strive to be more authentic, because that action would in fact drive us further away from who we truly are. However, there is perhaps a solution to this similar to the solution of the paradox of happiness.

The paradox of happiness describes a situation similar to Sartre's bad faith, whereby attempting to make ourselves happier can actually cause us to take less pleasure from each action. Yet at the same time, we can make a conscious decision to do things

that make us happier. This serves as a good parallel for Sartre's bad faith. Trying to be more authentic can end up in a form of bad faith, but on the other hand all it seems that we can truly do is use our freedom. We can make choices, and in that way be more authentic by simply defining ourselves by our choices and acknowledging the project that is "me" is never finished and always evolving. Every choice we make is perpetually under threat of being in bad faith. As Sartre (1943, Barnes Trans.) notes "If bad faith is possible, it is an immediate, permanent threat to every project of the human being" (p. 116). In fact, for the vast majority of the time all humans will be in bad faith according to Sartre.

Ultimately, there is the potential for authentic use of our freedom. If we are not actively trying to be anything and instead simply choosing using our authentic radical freedom while recognizing that the project of "us" is never complete and we are constantly redefining ourselves, we might avoid bad faith. As philosopher Michael Butler (2015) puts it, "Sartrean responsibility calls for an ongoing process of interpretation of ourselves, our world, and our relation to the other people who populate it. Taking responsibility is thus an on-going process that is never finished" (p. 98). We may fail most of the time, but this is the burden of Sartre's freedom. Our freedom is indeed, as he describes, a condemnation. The only thing that we cannot choose is whether or not to choose at all, for not to choose is a choice itself. We must do choose in order to define ourselves, define humanity, and to fully be at all.

## Comparison and Analysis

### The Role of Nihilism

The parallels between Sartre and Nietzsche are fairly obvious. Both began from a common place of existential nihilism. They then sought to create a solution to the lack of objective meaning for humans through a very similar method: individual subjective creation of meaning. However, there are important differences between the two and their reactions to nihilism.

One such point of difference is how different the role of religion is in their philosophies. Nietzsche was alive during a period where religion was still the dominant perspective, though its influence was beginning to crumble. Nietzsche scholar John Gillespie (2016) notes that “In Nietzsche’s time, however, despite the metaphysical crisis represented in his writings, and the Enlightenment’s continuing influence, societies direction was still strongly influenced by belief in God and Christian values. His term then is, therefore, predominantly prophetic in nature” (p. 3). Nietzsche himself even references this allegorically during the parable of the Madman when he writes that the madman cries out “I have come too early, my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the hearts of men... This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars – and yet they have done it to themselves” (Nietzsche, 1974, Kaufman Trans. p. 182). For this reason Nietzsche discussed religion extensively, even writing an entire novel from the perspective of the religious figure Zarathustra.

Nietzsche considered himself an active destroyer of religion, critiquing the way that it restricts the authenticity and decision-making of the individual. He critiques it throughout the entirety of his works, from declaring the death of God in *the Gay Science* and later *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, to completely attacking the religious objective view of the world and morality in *Beyond Good and Evil*. The absence of God and destroying the effects of Christianity are one of the linchpins and core focal points of Nietzsche's entire philosophical project. He explains this himself in *Twilight of the Idols* (1990, Hollingdale Trans.) when he says that "Christianity is a system, a consistently thought out and complete view of things. If one breaks out of it a fundamental idea, the belief in God, one thereby breaks the whole thing into pieces: one has nothing of any consequence left in one's hands" (pp. 80-81).

Sartre, however, takes a different approach to the idea of God and the role of God in his philosophy is much less prominent. Unlike Nietzsche, Sartre was writing in post-World War 2 Europe where one of the worst atrocities in modern history was committed, and people's faiths were shaken to the core. Atheism was a more common outlook, and Christianity was on the decline in Europe. For this reason, Sartre did not feel the need to argue about the existence or non-existence of God; he took atheism as a given.

While in many ways the non-existence of God seems core to his philosophy (since our existence preceding our essence and a lack of design or purpose for humans seems core to our radical freedom), Sartre is so un-concerned with the existence of God that he insists that even if God existed it would not make a difference to humanity's core plight: "existentialism is not so much an atheism in the sense that it would exhaust itself attempting to demonstrate the nonexistence of God; rather, it affirms that even if God

were to exist it would make no difference – that is our view. It is not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the real problem is not one of his existence; what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of God” (Sartre, 2007, Barnes Trans, pp. 53-54).

Sartre believes that whether God exists or not, his concept of freedom, particularly the responsibility and angst associated with that freedom, are relevant to the core experience of humanity. His reasoning for this is that much of the pain and the weight that Sartrean freedom comes from the fact that we are dumped into the world and left without any guidance. Humans did not ask to exist or choose to exist, yet we are dumped into this world without meaning or an order to things. From there, we are also left with no guide for our actions, only the ability to choose our own path. In many ways, this need to use your freedom to take responsibility for your choices and beliefs is just as relevant if God exists then if Sartre is correct and there is not one. After all, God existing might mean that there is a designated path for humanity, but there is still freedom and responsibility associated with that because we have to decide what the path is. One could always say “just look at scripture for guidance to God’s plan,” but scripture requires interpretation. You have to decide what interpretation you believe is correct and take responsibility for that choice. This interpretation of human freedom and choice is even fairly consistent with many Christian view about the role that our freedom plays. Thus, while Sartre subscribes to an atheistic version of Existentialism, he does not feel that God’s existence is as core or impactful as Nietzsche does, instead thinking that it is almost an anecdotal point which would not impact how humans must face the dizzying freedom and responsibility they are forced into.

The difference in how the two deal with the non-existence of God is in many ways parallel to the way that nihilism is present in their philosophy. While both consider nihilism a starting point for the individual in the real core of their philosophy, their approach to nihilism is slightly different. Nietzsche is famously one of the philosophers who made it a goal to actively destroy systems of meaning, while Sartre took it in many ways as a given. As philosopher Christine Daigle (2004) described, “Nietzsche’s ‘militant nihilism’ becomes a ‘passive nihilism’ in Sartre: he is the consenting heir of a wave of active nihilism that took place before him” (p. 197). Indeed, Nietzsche saw himself as the active destroyer of those objective systems, and Sartre in a way rode his coattails when it came to the subjects of nihilism and the non-existence of God. Sartre instead focused all of his efforts onto what to do in the face of both of those things which he took to be facts.

### **Level of Moral Subjectivity**

Another departure between Sartre and Nietzsche is the level of subjectivity in their philosophies. As previously discussed, Nietzsche was a radical subjectivist and he believed that the only way to overcome nihilism was for each individual to set aside the objective systems of meaning and morality and create their own meaning instead of relying on a creator God (with some potential limitations depending on which philosopher’s interpretation of Nietzsche you follow). Sartre took a similar view when it came to radical freedom, but there was an additional element of responsibility that goes beyond what is present in Nietzsche. While Nietzsche also promoted a high level of responsibility and mental control within his own philosophy, since there is no objective authority instructing our actions and we are the only ones determining our values and

actions. Sartre takes the level of responsibility a step further since, as previously discussed, according to him we are not only responsible for defining ourselves but through our choices we are responsible for defining what we think humanity ought to be.

This universality in Sartre functions in many ways like the first formulation of Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative. In the Categorical Imperative's first maxim, Kant states that we ought to "act only in accordance with the maxim through which at the same time will that it becomes a universal law." Sartre's universalism is not as concrete, but still maintains a level of baseline concern for the rights and freedoms of others, since every action we take ultimately defines not only ourselves but humanity as a whole. This means that any action we take regarding others would be an endorsement of such an action being done to us. While there are a few crazies out there, most would agree that many of the horrendous actions that might be justified under a radical subjectivity such as rape, murder or torture would not be good to endorse on a universal scale. This could lead someone to creating a theory of justice like John Rawls theory (which uses a veil of ignorance instead of a universalizing principle but would likely end up with similar results).

This element of universality is perhaps the biggest moral and ethical difference between the two theories, despite the fact that both could be considered "subjectivist." While both require the element of subjective creation and a rejection of objective guides to action, Sartre's subjectivity is a softer one since it contains the idea that our actions, by virtue of being an expression of our authentic freedom, define what we think the pinnacle of what humanity ought to be since we have no guidelines on this matter and are forced



to decide for ourselves. This in many ways negates some of the threats of the pure subjectivism that is present in Nietzsche.

Despite Nietzsche's focus on the development of certain perspectives, mental fortitude and the virtue of creation, there is still the threat of the "cruel *Übermensch*." While the connection between Nietzsche's philosophy and the Nazi regime is tenuous at best and relied on a serious misinterpretation, there is still the threat with such radical subjectivism that it could be used to justify cruelty, subjectification of others and violence. After all, a focus on the creation of art, beauty, and embrace of life is lovely but many would be squeamish about the type of things that could be justified under a hard subjectivist stance. While many people can appreciate a passion for creation and for art, the potential for abuse that goes along with it within a Nietzschean system is worrisome. After all, no one argues that Louis C. K. has a passion for creating beautiful and meaningful art and that many ways his inner demons seem to push him to create comedy which enriches other people's lives, but this does not make the horrible acts he has committed in most people's eyes.

This highlights one of the most pervasive and effective criticisms of Nietzsche's philosophical project: his complete rejection of moralizing. While the work he did to destroy systems of objectivity is undeniably influential (and important from an existential perspective), the complete and utter rejection of any moralizing is a major weakness in his philosophy because of how it leaves his subjectivity open for interpretation and misuse by the cruel *Übermensch*. Simone de Beauvoir (1948, Frechtman Trans.) Sartre's colleague and sometimes lover, criticized Nietzsche in this way by saying "Thus it can be seen to what an extent those people are mistaken who try to make of existentialism a

solipsism, like Nietzsche, would exalt the bare will to power.” She continued “According to this interpretation, as widespread as it is erroneous, the individual, knowing himself and choosing himself as the creator of his own values, would seek to impose them on others. The result would be a conflict of opposed wills enclosed in their solitude” (p. 77). This is the threat of a purely subjective Nietzschean system, everyone being so entirely focused on themselves and realizing their own will to power that they attempt to subjugate others. This could result in a society where no one cooperates or works together for the good of the community, instead constantly struggling and fighting with each other because of conflicting values.

While obviously over-moralizing can be annoying and unproductive, Nietzsche might go too far by rejecting the concept of morality completely in favor of focusing on simply the creation of beauty and art. This is demonstrated more than ever in present times with the advent of social media which serves to highlight this type of self-righteous moralizing even more than in the past. No one particularly likes that one person who is always using social media as a chance to spout ad hominem attacks against those who they disagree with and to proclaim that they are the one truly moral person. However, just because that type of extreme behavior can be obnoxious, harmful to genuine intellectual discourse and repress individual growth and flourishing from a subjectivist perspective, does not mean that it is productive to reject moralizing as a whole. If there is a way that one can maintain a subjectivist perspective while also finding a way to maintain a universal foundation for respect of other people’s freedoms, is that not optimal?

Through his mild universalizing principle, Sartre provides the more satisfying solution to the potential problems of ethical subjectivity than Nietzsche does. Since by

choosing a particular way, we are defining what we think humanity should be, the risk of abusing the subjective perspective seems to be lessened. While there are of course fanatics out there who might consider it a positive thing to universalize violence against specific groups of people (such as a fervent Nazi might support universalizing violence against Jews), the amount of people who would promote such a perspective and exploit subjectivity for their own gain is far less than those who would under Nietzsche's pure radical subjectivity. While many people would be tempted to exploit subjectivity to promote their own self-interest, harming others for either personal pleasure or to gain wealth/success, far fewer would be willing to universalize such a principle. While there are a few people out there who really buy into Ayn Rand's philosophy and think that only our own self-interest should be considered when determining actions, most realize that a world full of self-centered, greedy people who are only doing what is best for themselves might not be the best world to live in and thus would not be willing to universalize these actions as Sartre describes.

There is perhaps a way to interpret Nietzsche that has some level of responsibility similar to Sartre, using the principle of eternal recurrence. After all, Nietzsche believes that in order to truly be embracing life we must be willing to live the same way for the rest of eternity. Thus, to some extent we have a responsibility to ourselves to be consistent in the way we live our lives and in our ethics, in order to authentically embrace our life forever. If we claim to hate greed or violence, we must avoid them ourselves at all times, lest we be hypocritical and not embrace life in every moment to the extent that the eternal recurrence principle calls for. After all, if we even for a moment give in and

become something we hate, according to a Nietzschean system we are responsible for it and can be defined by it, since that act is our creation.

If there is one thing that a person can be called on, even in a purely subjective ethic, it is whether they are consistent and honest with themselves. We still have a responsibility to ourselves, and even under a Nietzschean system, if someone is inconsistent in the way they apply their own subjective ethics, they can be called out for doing so. Unfortunately, this does not manage to provide near as much of an ethical foundation for consideration for others as Sartre's universalizing principle, it still does help avoid some milder criticisms. When compared, Sartre's soft subjectivism with universal responsibility is the preferable solution to Nietzsche's radical subjectivism because of the fact that it finds a way to maintain a basic regard for the rights and freedoms of others without the need for an objective morality. The idea is pure subjectivism is just too radical (and too dangerous) to be accepted regardless of where Nietzsche puts the emphasis. Perhaps we are not completely ready to set aside the notions of good and evil after all.

### **Free Will vs. Determinism**

So Sartre seems to offer the superior option when it comes to the difference in their view of subjective ethics, but there is another key difference between the two: their view of freedom and free will. Anyone who is remotely familiar with Sartre could tell you that Sartre is not only an advocate of free will but possesses a radical view of how free we are. Nietzsche on the other hand falls far more on the deterministic side of the spectrum. He firmly stated in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1989, Kaufman Trans.) that "the desire for 'freedom of the will' in the superlative metaphysical sense, which still holds

sway, unfortunately, in the minds of the half-educated; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* and to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness" (p. 28). Within his own writings, Nietzsche seems to view free will as a kind of wishful thinking or refuge for those unwilling to recognize their true situation. Instead, he sees the belief in determinism as an indication of a stronger will or intellect which is willing to acknowledge how other factors influence our actions, instead of clinging to a theory which is understandably appealing but not based in fact (or so he thought).

This is the easiest difference to spot between Nietzsche and Sartre, since freedom is such a vital core to Sartre's philosophy, while Nietzsche seems dismissive of the whole concept. Indeed, Nietzsche often argued that while we long for and experience a feeling of freedom, this comes from an improper understanding of causality and determinism. What are the implications of each of these views about freedom? Ultimately, both arguments have their flaws and problematic elements, though Sartre's seems more acceptable.

Beginning with Nietzsche, the problem does not necessarily come from Nietzsche's view in itself. After all, there are many philosophers out there who hold deterministic views. The problem comes from combining his view about freedom vs. determinism and his views on how we must create meaning for ourselves in order to overcome nihilism. As described earlier, the core of Nietzsche's philosophy is the creation of our own subjective values and beauty. This is all we can do to embrace life in

the fact of a lack of objective meaning. At first glance this sounds fairly optimistic, but when combined with his views on determinism this becomes much more pessimistic.

If we are predetermined to act a certain way or to commit certain actions, this becomes horrifying when we also realize that we must create our own meaning in order to experience happiness/joy and to embrace life. Nietzsche himself openly states that there are very few who are up to this task, and its dangers. "Independence is for the very few; it is a privilege of the strong. And whoever attempts it even with the best right but without inner constraint proves that he is not only strong, but also daring to the point of recklessness" (Nietzsche, 1989, Kaufman Trans. p. 41). According to him, the way of the *Urbmensch* is dangerous, in the sense that to fully embrace life is to open yourselves up to not only the highest levels of pleasure but also the worst pains. It is a dangerous path. As such, very few people can truly become an *Urbmensch*. However, if very few people can ultimately embrace life and find joy AND our lives are predetermined/we have no freedom to choose to become an *Urbmensch*, are the rest of us just doomed to suffer?

This is similar to a common criticism of Nietzsche, that his idea of the *Urbmensch* is highly in-egalitarian and focused on the flourishing of the few higher men. However, this is arguably worse and more pessimistic because it is not only focused on the flourishing of a limited number of "higher men" but also predetermines who is and who is not one of these higher men. This is not even a meritocracy, where the best will rise to the top through effort and force of will. Instead, it seems that who will truly be able to embrace life is determined by almost chance. Some of us are destined to set aside our objective morality, create our own meaning and truly experience life, while others appear to just be doomed to suffer.

Additionally, this seems to rob Nietzsche of the focus on moral responsibility within his philosophy. His purely subjective ethics is often defended by the idea that if morality is purely subjective, this makes us even more responsible for our moral choices since there is no objective moral authority or arbiter such as God to set the rules. Since there are no objective moral rules, this makes our actions more meaningful and we have greater responsibility since we are choosing for ourselves instead of being coerced. This seems to be a fair point, but if Nietzsche's view on determinism is correct then it seems to defeat this, or at least contradict it. How can we be responsible for creating our own purely subjective morality, to go beyond constraining concepts like good and evil, if every action we make is determined ahead of time by biological factors, effects of previous actions, or fate? Generally adopting a philosophical view of determinism radically changes how one views moral responsibility (since we are not technically responsible, we did not choose to commit these choices but these choices were caused by a variety of factors). Is it reasonable to then punish criminals if they did not choose to commit those crimes?

Even sticking to an entirely Nietzschean perspective to morality, this view can be problematic. If someone is not being authentic to the values they have created, if they are not embracing life to the extent dictated by concepts like the eternal recurrence, or if someone does not set aside objective systems of morality and meaning and depend on that objectivity as a guide to living life, can Nietzsche judge them? They seem to not be responsible for their actions here, thus it makes little sense for Nietzsche to spend as much time criticizing and rebuking those who cling to objectivity. It seems cruelly fatalistic, many of us are predetermined to not fully embrace life by embracing our

subjectivity. We have no choice in the matter and are simply fated to suffer through life dependent on objective systems of meaning for our happiness. Is it as Nietzsche scholar Brian Leiter (2007) argues, that “thus, the fact that one masters oneself is not a product of “free will” but rather an effect of the underlying type-facts characteristic of that person: namely, which of his various drives happens to be strongest” (p. 14)?

Before going any further, it must be noted that Nietzsche’s view of free will is not completely decided upon. Several notable philosophers, including Nel Grillaert argue that Nietzsche fits more into the compatibilism theory of free will, rejecting a hard stance of either complete free will or complete determinism. Grillaert (2006) argues that “The course of all being, all events, cannot be put into some kind of formula or law. Nietzsche particularly targets physical or scientific determinism... the concept of an ‘unfree will’ is ‘mythological’; in reality it is only a matter of ‘strong and weak wills’” (p. 46). Strong wills in this compatibilist sense would mean a will that is strong enough to recognize the forces which can influence and impact decision making while also asserting its own desires.

To be fair to this argument, within Nietzsche’s writings are these moments of praising strong wills and even the feeling of freedom. However, Nietzsche using a concept of the “feeling of freedom” does not mean that he is a compatibilist. As philosopher Donovan Miyasaki (2016) argues: “the evidence for the compatibilist reading generally and the freedom of agency reading specifically is quite slim. It relies primarily on Nietzsche’s use of freedom-connoting language, rather than any direct assertion or defense by Nietzsche of a morally substantial, alternative concept of freedom” (p. 258).



Indeed, compatibilist interpretations of Nietzsche are a minority among Nietzsche scholars. While (similar to those who wish to soften Nietzsche's ethics) there are some passages within Nietzsche to support this, particularly the passages where he discusses the concept of an "unfree will." However, even these passages do not fully argue for what compatibilists often say it does. Miyasaki (2016) notes "some interpreters of Nietzsche argue that this passage supports a compatibilist reading of his view of freedom. However, his claim that there are no causal connections is not a denial of strong determinism or necessity since, as he suggests in the very next passage, one might argue that the world 'follows a necessary and calculable course, although *not* because laws govern it, but rather because laws are absolutely lacking, and every power draws its final consequences at every moment'" (p. 259). So even these passages, while they may challenge some common ideas of determinism, are not enough to get Nietzsche out of the problem relating to the implications of his deterministic views.

The idea that the vast majority of people are doomed to suffer and never fully embrace life without any choice in the matter seems so negative that it damages Nietzsche's view significantly. Sure, his philosophy is still concerned with the affirmation of life, but of how many? What if I read Nietzsche but I happen to be someone who is predetermined not to be an *Übermensch*? The results of this seem unacceptable, or at least hard to swallow. Does Sartre's view fair better? The answer seems to be yes, though it has flaws of its own.

Ultimately the best arguments against Sartre's radical freedom come not from philosophers but neuroscientists. Advancements in neuroscience have given significant credence to proponents of biological determinism. It seems that to some extent that our

brain determines how we react to certain stimuli, with combinations of certain stimuli and hormones and nerve inputs causing predictable reactions. This seems to be a major blow to radical free will proponents like Sartre. After all, how can we have this radical free will to choose whatever we want to (with nothing forcing us to choose one way or another, only being able to choose) if our brain automatically determines how we react to certain things? This seems to strike a major blow to Sartre's view of free will, which is integral to his philosophical project.

However, there are two potential ways for Sartre's to avoid this problem. First, it seems that there is not enough evidence neurologically to definitively prove biological determinism. Marcelo Fischborn (2016) wrote for the publication *Philosophical Psychology* that "contrary to what one side has defended, experiments in neuroscience and psychology could, in principle, support deterministic statements that undermine libertarian free will. But, contrary to what those on the opposite side have insisted, results so far obtained fall short of actually supporting even those weaker statements of local determinism" (p. 7). It seems that the results of neuroscientists and psychologists have yet to definitively determine whether biological determinism overrides free will. This is a fact that Sartre's can use to defend their views.

Sartre's view could also be defended philosophically by specifying what is meant by "freedom." Sartre's view can be defended by specifying that freedom only means mental freedom to choose whatever we want, not physical freedom. While our bodies have predetermined reactions based on certain stimuli, chemical reactions in the brain, etc. we can still at a fundamental conscious level "choose" our actions regardless of bodily restrictions. This could be viewed similarly to a stoic view of how we cannot

control certain things, but we can control our reactions to them and override natural impulses.

This seems to be a rather easy way to get around the problem, though it does seem to make Sartre's view significantly less radical. Does this freedom being only in our mind diminish its extremity? If our freedom is only in our mind yet some of our bodily reactions are predetermined, does this become simply a mental veto button we have over our actions? Perhaps, but arguably this is a faithful interpretation given the situation of human facticity. If even the most extreme situations (such as being deployed in a war) represent our previous choices and by experiencing them we choose them and must claim responsibility for them, a strictly mental interpretation of freedom seems accurate. While limiting Sartre's concept of freedom to our mental freedom does seem to solve the contradiction between his view and what neuroscience says about how our brain works, it could also be accused of shortchanging his radical view of freedom. However, Sartre himself never directly addressed biology and neuroscience in his philosophy. Instead, he focused on the mental and psychological side of freedom. Thus, this seems to be a valid approach to solving this problem.

When it comes to the subject of free will, both Nietzsche and Sartre have serious issues with their viewpoints, but ultimately Nietzsche's view is more damaged by the problems than Sartre is. The depressing and even horrifying implications of his views about subjectivity, morality, and the need to create our own meaning when combined with determinism lead to unacceptable conclusions. While Sartre's view suffers some when attempting to make his view of freedom compatible with neuroscience, there seem to be several ways out of this for him with varying degrees of success. Nietzsche on the

other hand is left with troubling (and potentially crippling) problems regarding multiple aspects of his philosophy, including morality and human flourishing. Some might be willing to bite the bullet and accept the implications of Nietzsche's view because they view determinism as just how things are, however this is not needed given that current understandings of neuroscience have yet to definitively prove biological determinism.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, while both Sartre and Nietzsche have meaningful insights into the human condition, the death of God, and how humans can be satisfied and have a meaningful life, Sartre's view is superior to Nietzsche's. While not perfect, it has more virtues and less vices than Nietzsche's perspective. Sartre's view is superior regarding ethics, because it avoids many of the criticisms of Nietzsche's pure subjectivity by providing an element of universality to his ethics. This not only avoids many of the traditional criticisms of pure subjectivity and the atrocities it can be used to justify, but also provides the foundation for a moral consideration of others and their freedoms. Both views have problems with their views of free will and determinism. Sartre struggles to reconcile his view with scientific discoveries about how the brain controls the human body, but there are ways around this. Nietzsche on the other hand faces serious problems reconciling his deterministic views with his writings on morality, responsibility, and human flourishing. For these reasons, Sartre's solution to the problem of existential nihilism appears to be superior to Nietzsche's in a number of ways. His philosophical project seems to be the most complete, most pragmatically consistent (since Sartre's metaphysics of freedom and application of freedom in practical terms are consistent while Nietzsche's leads to a contradiction between his message and how to implement it),

and least problematic way for us to find happiness, subjective satisfaction, and meaning in a post-death-of-god world.

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