An Ethic of Authenticity

An Investigation of Jean-Paul Sartre's Posthumously published Notebooks for an Ethics
Gail Evelyn Linsenbard, with a preface
by Forest Williams
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reviewed by Mike Cross

The word 'Investigation' in the title of Gail Linsenbard's book is most apt. This is more than a description of an important yet comparatively unexamined work by Jean-Paul Sartre. Linsenbard sets out to appraise and to clarify, and in doing so she has made an important contribution to Sartrean scholarship. She argues, quite correctly, that although Sartre does not have a moral theory in the sense of an ethical system in the tradition of, for example, Immanuel Kant, he was engaged with ethics throughout his career. Furthermore, it is possible to trace the development of his thinking. Linsenbard's intention is to investigate those views on ethics that are to be found in the *Notebooks.* The *Notebooks* are, literally, notes of varying lengths written during 1947 and 1948 on a variety of topics including Kant, alienation, oppression, violence and rights. For the sake of clarification, Linsenbard supplements the material in the *Notebooks* with supporting material from earlier works by Sartre. She does not, however, pay much attention to later works such as the *Critique of Dialectical Reason.* This is unfortunate because the *Critique* provides us with a sense of the direction Sartre was taking in the *Notebooks.*

Linsenbard's book begins with an inquiry into what sets Sartre's ethics apart from the familiar traditions. We are provided with a brief sketch of the nature of meta-ethical inquiry, of deontological and teleological theories of ethics and, as a reaction to those, virtue ethics. For these she draws heavily on William Frankena's *Ethics.* Her argument is that Sartre's work fits none of the categories described. It is an argument that I think needs some refining. Running throughout the *Notebooks,* though not in any cohering fashion, is Sartre's libertarian socialism. As Sartre says, 'Ethics *today* must be revolutionary socialist ethics' (1992, p. 13). Sartre does not ignore normative principles. He is simply concerned about the status of those principles and about the attitude that might inform our understanding of their nature. The concern for the appropriate attitude can, I

think, locate Sartre if not within then probably alongside the tradition of virtue ethics. I also think that it is a mistake to argue that Sartre is not engaged in meta-ethical inquiry.

Linsenbard's point of departure for understanding Sartre's ethics as it appears in the *Notebooks* is his ontology in *Being and Nothingness.* She argues (p. 39) that *Being and Nothingness* gave rise to the ethical inquiry that motivated the *Notebooks.* Although, as Sartre says, 'Ontology itself can not formulate ethical precepts' (1969, p. 625), it does allow us to grasp human reality and the origin and nature of values. In short, *Being and Nothingness* describes the conditions for the possibility of moral experience and in that sense Sartre can be said to be involved in meta-ethical inquiry. The issues of meta-ethical inquiry and virtue ethics will be examined in more detail later.

In *Being and Nothingness* there is a fundamental distinction between non-experiencing material objects (being-in-itself) which are not free and experiencing being (being-for-itself) which is. As free experiencing beings we actively construct our lives by a constant process of going beyond the situation in which we find ourselves. We are all free projects 'in-the-making' and we are all `aiming toward a certain kind of future' (Linsenbard, p. 107). However, this radical freedom is not acknowledged by everyone and so a further distinction between two ontological conditions is introduced. These two conditions are bad faith and good faith. Linsenbard describes how, according to Sartre, bad faith involves assuming a role uncritically or accepting societal roles as antecedently given and failing to see oneself as the creator of the role one has chosen. Good faith, by contrast, is critical and open. Following from that, good faith `accepts that everything for consciousness is in question and so provisional' (p. 60). In good faith we accept the challenge of our freedom as its meaning is revealed in action.

Bad faith and good faith affect not only the individual but also those with whom the individual has some sort of a relationship and thus these ontological conditions have important ethical implications. For example, racism is an example of bad faith. The bad faith of racism is not bad because it violates an absolute or objective principle (p. 106). The racist's attitude is bad because the racist views Black people as naturally 'stupid', 'lazy', and so on. These labels limit the humanity of the Black person because they hinder his process of becoming by deciding in advance that his 'nature' is given. This limitation on the freedom of the other person constitutes a denial of his humanity. The racist, therefore, denies that we are all free projects-in-the-making and that we are all aiming towards a certain kind of future (p. 107).

Linsenbard engages in a comparison of Sartre and Kant. This is entirely appropriate given Sartre's criticisms of Kantian ethics. Whilst Sartre echoes Kant's view that what is essential to morality is the freely chosen act, the conclusions that each draws, the implications for moral theory, differ. Sartre differs from Kant in that for Sartre the idea of a freely chosen act rules out the possibility that duties can be known in advance on the basis of given principles or maxims which are universalisable. Indeed, as Robert Solomon points out, Sartre differs from Kant particularly in that he rejects the idea that principles can be justified independently of and prior to their application to a particular course of action (Solomon, p. 319). Ethics has to be concrete. Do not lie, never, no matter what the situation, 'In other words the world is inessential' (Sartre, 1992, p. 254). Note that it is the Kantian view of moral principles that Sartre criticises, not principles as such. It is Solomon again who points out (p. 319) that every human action presupposes specific normative

principles. In *Existentialism and Humanism,* the young student torn between joining the Free French Forces and staying with his mother can choose how to act and in doing so will have chosen a principle and having made his choice he has thereby chosen a principle for everyone.

Linsenbard could have made more of the idea that ethics has to be concrete because that is crucial to an understanding of just how different Sartre is from Kant. In the *Notebooks* Sartre is very clear that 'There is no abstract ethics. There is only ethics in a situation and therefore it is concrete' (1992, p. 17). Linsenbard (pp. 154-55) does emphasise that, for Sartre, the idea that there is only one right principle or rule to be followed in every concrete situation, which can be known independently in advance of any particular situation ignores the sensitivity that the moral life requires. However, there is more to be said. The idea that ethics is 'in a situation' and is, therefore, concrete follows from the idea that moral agents are 'in a situation' and are, therefore, concrete and it is the concrete lives of people that marks a significant difference between Sartre and Kant. Mary Warnock shows how, in the first volume of the *Critique,* Sartre is concerned to establish that nothing can be an end for itself except an idea. It is, therefore, wrong to treat humanity as an end because 'humanity is concrete ... not a mere idea.' There is no such thing as a kingdom of ends because each individual has his own end towards which he strives by making himself an instrument of change, a means for becoming what he is not. Therefore, no one can treat themselves as a final end and since this applies to everyone no one can treat anyone as a final end. Warnock (1965, pp. 164-5) notes that, 'Kant believed in a static, permanent, single end - humanity. Sartre (and Marx) substitute a changing and developing end.' The *Notebooks,* with its emphasis on the concrete, signals the development of this view.

As has been noted, in *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre argues that in choosing one chooses for everyone. (1970, p. 29) Could this mean that he is, in fact, at least committed to Kantian universalisability as a test of moral judgement? Linsenbard thinks not and argues that Sartre's idea goes back to the claim that existence precedes essence. There is for a human being no antecedently determined essence. What matters are the choices that we make and the fact that other people are affected by those choices. Since the self is in the world one's acts are never simply one's own. This, says Linsenbard, is a different stance from the use of universalisability as a test of the moral appropriateness of the choice of action. Well, yes, it is a different stance, but is it also Sartre's? In order to be clear it is important to understand what is meant by the claim that all other people are affected by the choices that we make.

It is instructive to look at what Sartre says in *Existentialism and Humanism.* Having said that in choosing for oneself one chooses for all men he goes on to say that, 'When a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a *legislator* deciding for the whole of mankind - in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility' (1970, p. 30 emphasis mine). Hence we experience anguish since 'Who, then, can prove that I am the proper person to impose, by own choice, my conception of man upon mankind? ... So every man ought to say, «Am I really a man who has

the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do»' (Sartre, 1970, pp. 31-2).

Linsenbard is correct in arguing that Sartre's idea goes back to the claim that existence precedes existence. However, this is not simply because what I do will impact upon you obviously and directly. It is more because, as she herself says (p. 91), drawing from Solomon, 'the action of each of us, for better or for worse, contributes to the over all portrait of human kind' (see Solomon, p. 320). The notion of the portrait is, I think, a more accurate understanding of Sartre's argument. This is endorsed by the idea that if 'existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves' (Sartre, 1970, p. 29). More strongly, in creating ourselves we simultaneously create 'an image of man such as [we] believe he *ought* to be' (Sartre, 1970, p. 29 emphasis mine). This, then, is the sense in which other people are affected by our choices.

Having set out some crucial ontological considerations, Linsenbard goes on to discuss some of the key ideas concerning what Sartre calls the moral attitude. This attitude involves an escape from bad faith and the acknowledgement and adoption of freedom as a value. This is what Sartre calls authenticity. Linsenbard thinks (p. 101) that 'one of Sartre's concerns in *Notebooks is* to show the conditions under which one may live one's life authentically and in good faith.' According to her (p. 145), 'The reflective conversion to authenticity is for Sartre a moral conversion, and has important implications for what he means by «ethics.»' She believes (p. 127) that for Sartre authenticity provides a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for morality and that what *Notebooks* offers is an account of why authenticity is necessary to morality. Authenticity requires the acceptance of freedom as a primary value. Authenticity requires, therefore, the reflective assuming of myself and others as free projects. Therefore, it seems that authenticity points,towards a particular kind of world, one in which we have, if we are to be authentic, to accommodate the freedom of everyone else. Since we are all free projects in the making there is a sense in which we exist equally with others. Authentic reflection leads to the recognition that the existence of others in the world is equal to oneis own. Authenticity concerns, therefore, the nature of human relations. The notion of authenticity can be understood, therefore, as an attempt to describe an ethical attitude towards those relations. It is an attitude which, since we are all free projects and exist equally with others, leads to solidarity with others. It is in the recognition of solidarity that a foundation for ethics is to be found. In *Being and Nothingness* conflict was thought to be the original relation between people. In the *Notebooks* there is a movement from conflict to mutuality or co-operation. Incidentally, this is a movement which continues in the *Critique.*

Of course, one can choose inauthenticity. However, the choice to be inauthentic is dishonest. One can choose to be dishonest but if one does then that is what one is. The strictly coherent attitude is that of honesty. Linsenbard argues (p. 140) that, for Sartre, choosing inauthenticity would mean choosing the non-ethical because one would have chosen to be dishonest and ignorant of the moral dimension of human life and of those conditions that make human flourishing possible. Choosing to be inauthentic perpetuates human conflict and leads to the misery of, for ex-

ample, racism and capitalist society's fascination with things which are secured only by the exploitation of others who are already socially and economically disadvantaged.

Linsenbard wonders what kind of judgement Sartre thinks he can bring to bear on one who is being 'dishonest' or 'incoherent' if these are things that one choose to be. What is at stake, she argues (pp. 140-2), is not logical consistency but existential consistency. If I have accepted freedom as a value, it would be existentially inconsistent, according to Sartre, to will that others are not free. This seems to amount to an acknowledgement of the way things are and therein lies the significance of Sartre's ontology. What existential consistency requires is that we live in a manner that is consistent with our existential condition where freedom is the reality of being human.

If meta-ethics has the job of articulating what constitutes morality, or of telling us what our normative ethics should be like, then it seems clear that Sartre is engaged in meta-ethical inquiry. It would seem that what Sartre provides is a prescription for the manner by which moral judgements should be made. He does not and indeed cannot tell us what those moral judgements should be. He cannot provide us with a specific course of action. He does, however, provide us with the manner of choosing a specific course of action. The manner is to be one of authenticity. Sartre clearly has things to say about the nature and status of moral principles and about the manner by which they may be identified. In examining the notion of authenticity it becomes apparent that certain things are recommended. One is to be active, as opposed to being either passive or an uninvolved non-participant: in events, for it is in being active that values are revealed. In *Existentialism and Humanism* it is the attitude of 'quietism' that Sartre deplores arguing that 'there is no reality except in action' and that man is 'nothing else but the sum of his actions' (Sartre, 1970, p. 41). Predicated on one's own freedom, there is to be commitment to the freedom of others. Since there is a reciprocity of freedoms there is also solidarity. Of course, there is no content to these notions of being active, committed to the freedom of others and solidarity. There are, for example, many ways of being committed to the freedom of others. So what Sartre has produced as the result of his meta-ethical inquiry is what Solomon (p. 314) calls 'a framework within which we can make normative judgements.'

Still, one has to wonder if Sartre does not go further and provide more than a framework. Attention to Sartre's libertarian socialism has already been drawn. A value that appears throughout the *Notebooks is* generosity. Early on, in a particularly gnomic message, Sartre writes, 'Classify values in a hierarchy such that freedom increasingly appears in it. At the top; generosity' (1992, p. 9). Indeed, later in the *Notebooks* and in an accompanying Appendix entitled 'The Good and Subjectivity' Sartre does produce two hierarchies, both featuring generosity at the top. Sartre (p. 129) regards generosity as 'the only means of being', and says (p. 494) that generosity is 'the original structure of authentic existence.' Generosity is an aspect of authenticity because it is through generosity that the 'Other' is revealed. Thus (p. 507), 'Through me, the Other's *qualities* appear ... the other *becomes* witty if I exist. He cannot be witty for himself.' I think that the concern for generosity as expressed by Sartre in the *Notebooks is* a further illustration of the way things are rather than a recommendation.

However, and this is not a serious problem, the issue of authenticity-generosity returns us to the subject of virtue ethics. I agree with Linsenbard that the *Notebooks is* Sartre's attempt to tease out the ethical implications of his ontology. Also Sartre was not a virtue ethicist in the Aristotelian sense of applauding the acquisition of certain habits and of there being a given *telos* towards which human activity is naturally directed. Yet I do not think that this is the end of the matter. In the *Critique* there is a central concern with need. Need involves both the lack of something and a determination to overcome that lack. It is from that determination that *praxis* arises. *Praxis* seeks that which is deemed to be of value and ultimately that which is deemed to be of value is human fulfilment itself. In that sense, *praxis* can be said to have a normative dimension. More than that, *praxis,* in seeking fulfilment, realises certain dispositions at the expense of others. It involves an evaluation of which dispositions are best and the realisation of those dispositions in activity (Crocker, p. 57). Sartre makes this particularly clear in his examination of Stalin in the second volume of the *Critique.* In the *Critique* dispositions are regarded as qualities, or ways of being, rather than as fully developed and fully settled states. As in the *Notebooks* Sartre continues to be critical of habits and persistently contrasts *hexis* with *praxis. So* it is that Sartre's thinking on these matters can be located along side rather than within the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics. However, the important point is that the view of praxis presented in the *Critique is, I* be-lieve, heralded by the view of authenticity-generosity, as the only means of being, portrayed in the *Notebooks.* We can thus see a development from the authenticity of *Existentialism and Humanism* to the ways of being which are part of the praxis of the *Critique* with authenticity-generosity in the *Notebooks* marking an important stage in that development.

Although, on my account, Linsenbard's understanding of authenticity in the *Notebooks is* rooted in Sartre's past, nevertheless, her achievement is formidable. We must put aside the proof reading errors (see pp. 97, 109, 112, 141). Linsenbard shows how, in the *Notebooks,* Sartre's starting point is to ask what does it mean to be a human being. Since we are what we are and the world is what it is as a result of our own free choices, we can go on to ask what kind of persons do we want to become and what kind of world do we want to make. The hope is that we and the world would, in some sense, become better. This, as Linsenbard acknowledges (p.155), gives Sartre's ethics a teleological orientation. There is, in other words, an implicit acknowledgement of the movement towards the position I identified in connection with the *Critique.* In the light of her inquiry into what sets Sartre's ethics apart from the familiar traditions, this is an interesting conclusion. What makes this a formidable work is that her investigation reveals how Sartre develops this orientation from his responses to the question that constitutes his starting point. My view is that she does so with greater clarity than Sartre himself. Linsenbard's book is a necessary addition to the bookshelves of every Sartre scholar.

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