

Sartre's Second Century

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Edited by

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To
Heather
and to
Kevin and Solveig

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CHAPTER FIVE

SARTRE AND NIETZSCHE: BROTHERS IN ARMS

CHRISTINE DAIGLE

Nietzsche and Sartre have been two major figures for the twentieth century. Both stand at the centre of the existentialist movement, one as a precursor, and the other as its main proponent. Interestingly, the deep connections found between Sartre's and Nietzsche's thought have been little investigated. It is only recently that works have begun to appear on this "Nietzschean connection".¹ This chapter will investigate what I consider to be the crux of the connection: the reconstructive ethical programme that both propose as a solution to nihilism.²

Indeed, as I see it, there is a necessary connection between nihilism, the search for meaning, and ethics. If one is a nihilist and consequently rejects traditional worldviews, as Nietzsche and Sartre do, then one must tackle the problem concerning the meaning of existence, i.e. one must establish a new worldview. Following this rejection, ethics is reconsidered and new ethical proposals are presented in order to guide the human being in a post-nihilistic world. In this chapter, I will explain how both Sartre and Nietzsche share the same kind of nihilism that hinges on an atheistic worldview. Although there certainly is a difference in their nihilistic attitudes, I will argue that this divergence ought not to be mistaken for a divergence in their nihilism. Nietzsche's and Sartre's nihilism, regardless of how it is manifested, will nonetheless result in the same essential problems. Both thinkers have to deal with the loss of meaning that accompanies the disappearance of a metaphysical Christian worldview.

¹ See my *Le Nihilisme est-il un humanisme? Étude sur Nietzsche et Sartre*. For a specific analysis in English of the question of meaning and its articulation with the problem of nihilism, see my "Sartre and Nietzsche". For a study of the Nietzschean influence on Sartre's literature, see Louette, *Sartre contra Nietzsche*. One may also consult the article by Debra Bergoffen, "Nietzsche's Existential Signatures".

² An earlier draft of this chapter was given as a paper at the Centenary Conference of the UK Sartre Society at the Institut Français, London, in March 2005.

Their immanent thinking forces them to look within the human realm alone for that meaning of life. They both find it in the notion of human creation. Both claim that although there is no intrinsic meaning to the world nor to the human's existence, the human being can still infuse meaning in his own life and in the world. This shedding of meaning, to both thinkers, is a crucial component of post-nihilistic human existence. Consequently, this will lead Nietzsche and Sartre to build an ethics that rests on the reconstruction of human values. Throughout this chapter I will demonstrate how close Nietzsche and Sartre in fact are, and how, because of this, they can be considered to be fighting the same battle: the establishment of a new morality based upon their new answer to the quest for meaning. I will show that both have similar manners of grounding their ethics in ontology.

The “unaware Nietzschean”

Before getting to the crux of the argument, a few things need to be said about the reception of Nietzsche in Sartre's thought. Nietzsche is an ambiguous figure for Sartre and in fact, Sartre may have misunderstood a lot of what Nietzsche had to say. Owing to his misunderstanding of Nietzsche, I call Sartre an “unaware Nietzschean”. I believe that Nietzsche was not only very present in Sartre's intellectual universe, but that he could possibly have influenced his thinking, despite the fact that he misunderstood his philosophy.

There are many references to Nietzsche in Sartre's works. However, it is not clear that Sartre had a comprehensive understanding of Nietzsche's writings. For one thing, he uses only a small number of direct quotations from Nietzsche and some of the quotations that he does in fact use are taken from Charles Andler's biography on Nietzsche instead of from Nietzsche himself.³ It is very likely that he gathered most of his information from reading this particular biography as well as that of Daniel Halévy. It is also speculated that he may have read a selection of aphorisms published by Jean Bolle in 1934, or even the selection of aphorisms published as *La Volonté de puissance* by Geneviève Bianquis in the late 1930s—however, the latter is doubtful.⁴ In his *Écrits de jeunesse*

³ This is the biography of Nietzsche in six volumes by Charles Andler. Contat and Rybalka think that Sartre had read at least volume 2. See their commentary in Sartre, *Écrits de jeunesse*.

⁴ Not only is this doubtful, but given the nature of the text and the many editions that *The Will to Power* has gone through, it is not clear what picture of Nietzsche Sartre could have derived from such a reading. The collection of aphorisms that

(*Juvenilia*), Sartre explicitly claims to have read Nietzsche, though he is not very specific with regard to which texts he has in fact read.⁵ Furthermore, it is possible that Sartre could have learned about Nietzsche through his earlier education, especially by having to write a paper on him in a class he took with Brunschvicg.⁶ Annie Cohen-Solal explains that at the moment of writing his early novel, *Une Défaite* (*A Defeat*), Sartre did re-read Nietzsche, specifically *Ecce Homo*.⁷

Nietzsche is an ambiguous figure for Sartre: he says that he is more a poet than a philosopher; the form of his thought is better than the thought itself.⁸ He loathes Nietzsche's vitalism and his notion of the will to power (which he accordingly misunderstands as being the brute desire to exert power over others). Sartre furthermore rejects the Nietzschean notion of eternal recurrence, which he exposes in *Saint Genet*, by showing that he understands the notion in a literal fashion—a reading now rejected by most, if not all, Nietzschean scholars. His interpretation of Nietzsche's "Overman" also reveals his misunderstanding of Nietzsche, as he presents this creature as the fruit of a natural evolution in which only the strongest survive. The one thing that he admires in Nietzsche is the atheism that leads to "terrestrial thought". It is to Nietzsche's nihilism that he refers approvingly in the opening pages of *Being and Nothingness*. In fact, Nietzsche is the first philosopher mentioned by name in the treatise. I would like to contend that this is no small thing.⁹ The person of Nietzsche and his life must have interested him immensely since he did write *Une Défaite*, a novel on the famous Tribschen triangle (Nietzsche, Richard and

bears the title "The Will to Power" is constituted of notes published posthumously. I am in agreement with Mazzino Montinari who contests the use of the text and claims that despite its many avatars *The Will to Power* as a work by Nietzsche does not exist. See his "*La Volonté de puissance*" *n'existe pas*.

⁵ See Sartre, *Écrits de jeunesse*, 471.

⁶ When questioned about his education in an interview by Rybalka, Pucciani and Gruenheck, Sartre stated that the *lycée* and the Sorbonne were determining of his knowledge in philosophy. He was also asked whether he was influenced by Nietzsche, to which he answered: "I remember giving a seminar paper on him in Brunschvicg's class, in my third year at the École Normale. He interested me, like many others; but he never stood for anything particular in my eyes" (Rybalka, Pucciani, Gruenheck, 9).

⁷ See Cohen-Solal, *Sartre*, 146.

⁸ This he says in his "Carnet Midy", a little notebook he had found in the subway and filled with notes of all kinds (*Écrits de jeunesse*). See my previous works for a listing of Sartrean statements on Nietzsche and their sources.

⁹ He says: "[...] but if we once get away from what Nietzsche called 'the illusion of worlds-behind-the-scene' [...]" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2).

Cosima Wagner). Something in Nietzsche's philosophy must have also been attractive, at least to the young Sartre, as he included several Nietzschean ideas on morality in this other early novel, *Er l'Arménien* (*Er the Armenian*). Further proof of Sartre's continued interest in things Nietzschean can be found in the fact that he wrote a text which Contat and Rybalka describe as follows:

One of the most mysterious texts by Sartre and one that it seems no-one has read (it is not yet found and might be lost) is a long study on Nietzsche that he began in the period of the *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1947-1948) and which, according to Sartre, was a part of his ethical research.¹⁰

Although it is not clear whether Sartre's interest in Nietzsche stemmed from a recognised affinity or from a spirit of opposition—seeing himself as an opponent of Nietzsche—I would like to make the claim that Sartre is in fact much closer to Nietzsche than he would like to admit. True enough, if there has been a Nietzschean influence on his thought, this influence can be seen as slowly disappearing as Sartre's preoccupations become increasingly political. However, I am not concerned with the later developments of Sartre's philosophy, preferring instead to concentrate on his earlier existentialist philosophy.

Two Nihilists

Sartre's and Nietzsche's common point of departure is nihilism. As I have indicated, the initial reference to Nietzsche in *Being and Nothingness* is indeed a reference to his nihilism. In fact, Nietzsche and Sartre hold the same kind of nihilism even if this nihilism is expressed differently in both thinkers. As I like to put it, we are dealing with a "militant nihilism" in Nietzsche and a "passive nihilism" in Sartre. Indeed, Nietzsche is waging

¹⁰ My own translation of: "L'un des textes les plus mystérieux de Sartre et que nul ne semble avoir encore lu (il n'est pas localisé à l'heure actuelle, et peut-être est-il perdu) est une longue étude sur Nietzsche entreprise à l'époque des *Cahiers pour une morale* (1947-1948) et qui, selon ce que Sartre nous en a dit, faisait partie de sa recherche éthique" (Sartre, *Écrits de Jeunesse*, 194, footnote). Perhaps this is the analysis of the ethics of the will to power that Sartre had promised in Appendix I of the *Notebooks*. But, contrary to what Contat and Rybalka assert, it seems that at least Simone de Beauvoir read it, as we can gather from this part of their discussion: "S. de B.—'Then after *Being and Nothingness*, you began writing a work on ethics [...]. That was the book in which you wrote an important, long, and very fine study of Nietzsche.' J.-P. S.—'That formed part of it.'" (Simone de Beauvoir, *Adieux. A Farewell to Sartre*, 180).

a war against the metaphysical-religious tradition of Christianity whereas Sartre is merely the consenting heir to this kind of nihilism. He no longer needs to fight since the predominant worldview of Nietzsche's time has already crumbled. All he needs to do is nod approvingly.

Nietzsche's own nihilism comes as a reaction to the nihilism he finds already active within the metaphysical-religious tradition. This accounts for the severity of his nihilism. He diagnoses one form of nihilism, proposing a stronger one as a remedy. The nihilism he diagnoses is that of the Christian and rationalistic worldview that negates both the human life and the human being itself through the weight it places on transcendence. The immanent life of the individual is here seen as devalued in favour of a supposed "after-life". In other words, the human is seen as striving for an illusory beyond. Further, the traditional anthropological position is nihilistic in that it values only the rational aspects of the human being. In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche explains: "If one shifts the centre of gravity of life out of life into the 'Beyond'—into *nothingness*—one has deprived life as such of its centre of gravity."¹¹ Of course, Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is intimately tied up with his critique of the philosophical tradition upon which it is based. After all, "Christianity is Platonism for 'the people'."¹² For him, they both present an ethics of "impossible virtue".¹³ Much of this is also shared by Sartre, but again, he presents his own criticism in a much more moderate form. His statements are so mild in comparison to Nietzsche's that we may say that in Sartre we find a "subdued Nietzsche".

As a remedy to the nihilism he diagnoses, Nietzsche proposes atheism. Atheism is the first step of his own nihilism. Since God is responsible for holding the whole system of values together, rejecting God means destroying the entire system. This, Nietzsche undertakes as a task in order to clear the ground for the reconstruction of values he has in view. However, as any close examination of the Madman's announcement of the death of God would reveal, this liberation from the yoke of an alienating worldview will first be experienced by humans as abandonment. God is dead, we killed Him. The madman asks:

Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist*, §43, 165.

¹² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface, 2.

¹³ Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §87, 88.

continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?¹⁴

The immediate result is thus a loss of meaning for the human being. It hence becomes necessary to tackle the question of meaning in hopes of ultimately establishing new meanings as a replacement.

Sartre agrees with all this. He also considers the death of God as a genuine liberation for human beings, as expressed in such plays as *The Flies* (*Les Mouches*, 1943) and *The Devil and the Good Lord* (*Le Diable et le bon Dieu*, 1951). As he explains though, this liberation is also a condemnation as we are entirely responsible for what we make of ourselves. We are condemned to be free, i.e. to be responsible for ourselves and for our lives. Sartre has said that the death of God is the equivalent to the death of all transcendence but with it comes “the opening of the infinite”,¹⁵ that is, the infinite of human possibilities. As he puts it in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, “In this way, man finds himself the heir of the mission of the dead God: to draw Being from its perpetual collapse into the absolute indistinctness of night. An infinite mission.”¹⁶ Thus, nihilism brings us to the loss of meaning, a meaning that the human being will have to create in the wake of God’s death and the absence of any transcendent.

Two Optimists

Immediately following nihilism, the human must deal with the question of the meaning of existence. One must find an answer to the question of whether life has any meaning and, if the answer is positive, one must also determine what exactly that meaning is. The rejection of the traditional worldview means a loss of a meaning-provider and consequently of meaning itself. One must replace God by providing life with a new meaning. And it is only through this that one can hope to erect a new ethics entirely. Interestingly, Nietzsche and Sartre are both optimists in relation to this quest for meaning. They believe that there is a meaning to human existence and that we can uncover what that meaning is, since the human being is the sole meaning-provider.

Their dealings with the problem are in each case very similar. Both begin by stating that the world does not have intrinsic meaning.¹⁷

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §125, 181.

¹⁵ Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 494.

¹⁷ Their theoretical bases for claiming this are different. I have given the details of this in my previous works (see note 1).

However, they both agree that despite this *a priori* lack of meaning, the human being is in a position to create his own meaning. Actually, both see the human being as an intentional consciousness that sheds meaning on the world as soon as it grasps it. The human being is thus fundamentally creative in that she literally makes the world her own.

Interestingly, the first answer given to the problem of meaning in both thinkers' writings is an aesthetic answer. Both provide us with an aesthetic justification of life: Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* and Sartre in *Nausea*. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the initial identification of creation as artistic creation is immediately broadened by Nietzsche into an aesthetic creation, that is, the creation of both oneself and one's world. However, in Sartre's case, it takes some time before the notion of artistic creation indicated as the solution to the problem in *Nausea* is broadened. In fact, it is only through the development of a number of texts published in the early 1940s, and through the writings later collected for his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, that such a solution fully emerges.

Nietzsche presents an interesting angle on his answer to the question of the meaning of life in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, namely an angle that is particularly relevant to his ethical proposals. He says that life is meaningful only as an expression of the will to power, i.e. as the constant overcoming and re-creating of oneself. Life can only be meaningful if it is dynamic and creative. When the individual sets out to become an Overman, she is on the path of creation and is thusly justified. The human ought to embody the affirmative and creative ideal of the Overman. I will address this in more detail in a coming section.

Sartre's handling of the problem is similar to that of Nietzsche's, although in his case the artistic justification persists somewhat longer. In *Nausea*, Roquentin finds meaning in his decision to become an artist.¹⁸ He understands that the creative artistic act is the only act that can redeem human existence and give it a justification. Otherwise, an individual is purely contingent in an absurd world. In his *Notebooks*, Sartre revisits the problem of the meaning of life and now addresses it in terms of the human being as *project*. The human's coming to the world is both a creative and an interpretive event. By his uttering "il y a", "there is", the human sheds a layer of meaning on the in-itself, making it a human world. Sartre explains that "it is not in contemplation that Being will be unveiled as having a meaning: it is in effort so that man has a meaning, that is, in action [...]. To

¹⁸ True enough, the ending of *Nausea* does not give the reader a clear indication that Roquentin will take up that newly-found project. Nevertheless, his decision, as well as the rationale he comes up with to adopt this artistic stance, is revealing of Sartre's position at this point regarding the question of meaning.

act is to posit that Being has a meaning.”¹⁹ This is posited as the human being’s duty. Further, Sartre adds the dimension of the Other: I create meaning for myself and interpret the world in which I act; however, only through the intervention of the Other can I make my presence in the world necessary.

Although Sartre is very close to Nietzsche in his dealings with the question of the meaning of life, this is one aspect that distinguishes him. In Nietzsche, there is no appeal to the Other. Both however agree that life can be made meaningful through the creative act of the human being.

Questions of Ethics 1: The Ideal Type

The nihilism of Nietzsche and Sartre opens up the way to a humanistic ethics. Their ethics are humanistic insofar as they both focus on the individual and her flourishing. Such ethical developments would have been impossible under the yoke of an alienating worldview such as that of the metaphysical-religious tradition. Now that they both have rejected it and proposed the human as meaning-provider, they are free to adopt a humanistic stance.²⁰

Nietzsche’s ethics is to be found in three key concepts: the will to power, the eternal return, and the Overman. Nietzsche conceives of the human being as a creature that embodies the will to power. *Wille zur Macht* is a surpassing or overcoming principle that can be interpreted as a driving force that pushes beings forwards toward growth. Nietzsche defines “power” as the feeling of growth. Human beings are motivated by the will to power just as the whole world is driven by the will to power. The human being and life are the will to power. This view of the human being rests at the base of Nietzsche’s ethical concept of the Overman. In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche says that “We are responsible to ourselves for our own existence; consequently we want to be the true helmsman of this existence and refuse to allow our existence to resemble a

¹⁹ Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 486.

²⁰ By “Humanism” here I understand a theory or philosophical viewpoint that focuses on the human being, its potential and flourishing and has faith in such. I understand that both Nietzsche and Sartre are critical of humanism as it was expressed in certain philosophies. However, if they are critical of certain philosophical viewpoints that claim to be humanist it is, most of the time, because they consider that these fail in providing the human with a worldview that leaves room for the human’s free development. In that sense, their humanism is more demanding and requires that no restraints be imposed on the human being (be they religious or moral).

mindless act of chance.”²¹ In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the Overman is this figure who is successful in being his own master, the true helmsman of his own existence. He is an over-man, that is, more than a human being.²² This *Übermensch* is thus a human being who is both human and more than human. She is the human being who has overcome the fragmentation we find in the metaphysical-religious tradition. She is a reunited being, a human being who has decided to fully live what she is. She is a human being who knows that life is will to power, of which she is a particular instance. She wishes to incarnate and materialize this will to power in herself. By doing so, she saves herself from alienation and re-affirms her whole being. Further, she accepts the hypothesis of the eternal return. She is ready to suppose that her actions, her decisions, and her entire life will eternally return, repeating every single moment in the exact same way. The change that occurs between man and the Overman is enormous. This is why we cannot speak of an elevation to the status of Overman, but must speak instead of a transfiguration. Even the highest type of man that we find in Nietzsche is much lower than the Overman. In fact, as Nietzsche has it, the higher men would call the Overman a devil!²³

The figure of the Overman must be understood in terms of a moral ideal. It is meant as an emulative figure that illustrates human potential. Only a human being who would decide on being her own creator, i.e. an individual who would fully embody the will to power that she is, could possibly become such an Overman. One may ask whether or not this ideal type, the Overman, is a state that can be reached by striving human beings. However, I do not think this is the case. Nietzsche leaves the question open as to whether there will ever actually be Overmen. When he announces the coming of superior men, he is not in fact announcing the coming of the Overman (as these are very distinct figures in his philosophy).²⁴ I think it is more fruitful to think of the Overman as a non-fixed state of being, or as a state of constant becoming. Indeed, as an Overman would accept and conceive of life and herself as instances of the will to power, she would be in this state of becoming. As an embodied will to power, she would be seeking to grow beyond and to overcome herself, thus we would find her only in a constant state of flux, a state of perpetual

²¹ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 128.

²² We must bear in mind that the German term is gender neutral. “Übermensch” literally means “over-human being”. Had Nietzsche wanted to restrict this possibility to men, he could have used the term “Übermann”, but he never did.

²³ See Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “Of Manly Prudence”.

²⁴ See the multiple warnings against so-called “higher men” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

becoming. This is the meaning of the “over” of “Overman”. Furthermore, the individual must aim at this constant state of becoming in order to live in accordance with what she really is, i.e. a will to power. This is the key to the Nietzschean formula found in *The Gay Science*: “*What Saith thy Conscience?*—Thou shalt become what thou art.”²⁵ In order to achieve this, the notions that concern the creation of oneself and the creation of values must come into play.

It is imperative that the individual be her own creator if she is to be on the path to the Overman. Nietzsche advocates a morality of self-mastery where the individual makes her own rules. The meaning of the “master morality” is to be found therein. It has often been misunderstood to refer to a morality of powerful masters who would keep weaker individuals under their yoke (as Sartre understood it). However, what Nietzsche has in mind is in fact quite different. Following the death of God, the individual who is left only to herself would consequently face an ethical void. No values are left to stand after nihilism has come to fruition. Nietzsche insists that it would be a mistake for the individual to proceed by finding another transcendent being or realm on which to ground her values: the past experience of Christian morality indicates that any such re-adoption is likely to result only in the re-alienation of the individual. Instead, the post-nihilistic individual must rely on herself as the ground for values. Only an ethics that regards the human being as an embodied will to power can allow for the complete flourishing of the human being.

These descriptions of the human being as becoming or overcoming itself towards the Overman will sound familiar to Sartreans, who are used to dealing with the human being as a project in Sartre’s works. In fact, the notion of overcoming seems to be appropriate when the time comes to talk about the for-itself in the world. If Nietzschean ethics revolves around the notions of the will to power, the eternal return, and the Overman, that of Sartre revolves around the notions of freedom and authenticity.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes the for-itself and all of its structures. Therein he explains how the for-itself constantly strives to be an in-itself. Of course, so long as we are living beings, this project will always necessarily fail. Only in death can one achieve this. However, this does not prevent the for-itself from constantly striving towards this impossible goal; Sartre himself regards the for-itself as a “futile passion”. At a more fundamental ontological level, one can say that the intentionality of consciousness has made it so that the for-itself is always a projection of itself, i.e. a projecting of itself in the world that also lets

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 270.

oneself be affected by its being-in-the-world. The for-itself is a potential being that must aim toward a possible that it will never attain. Again, this is very close to the Nietzschean descriptions of overcoming. The Overman is not a fixed goal but it is a constant striving.

Let us recall what the human being as project is striving towards. In the *Notebooks*, Sartre says that the individual strives for authenticity by aiming to be the creator of being and holding her own freedom as the foundation of herself and the world. By an act of will, freedom makes its aims essential to its own project. The authentic being is the one who knows that she is the creator of herself, of the world, and of values. It is the being that also accepts the responsibility that ensues. The authentic person gives meaning and value to her life in accepting and affirming herself as the free creator of a meaningful world. She is a contingent and free creator. Here we come full circle, since it seems that authenticity is simply the affirmation of one's own way of being. However, the for-itself is necessarily a creative being. Authenticity requires that one recognises and accepts this creative endeavour. Again, we are very close to Nietzsche. The Overman is the person who recognises and accepts that her being is the manifestation of the will to power and its dynamic of overcoming.

In both cases then, we are dealing with an ethics that is humanistic in that it favours the flourishing of the individual above all else. The individual must strive to be what she is, by embodying the will to power for one, or freedom for the other. Both ethics thus have as an aim to actualise the true being of the human rather than some sort of transcendental ideal. It is in each case an immanent, humanistic ethics.

Questions of Ethics 2: Ethical Rules

Both thinkers have proposed certain rules in order to help the human being attain either Overman-status or authenticity. In Nietzsche, we are dealing with vitalism and the eternal return, whereas in Sartre, we are talking in terms of freedom.

The vitalism of Nietzsche's philosophy is founded upon the will to power: life is good in itself as will to power. As something that is intrinsically good, life itself can serve as an ethical standard. Life as will to power then, is that standard by which the value of everything will be determined. Nietzsche explains this:

What is good?— All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man.

What is bad?— All that proceeds from weakness.

What is happiness?— The feeling that power *increases* — that a resistance is overcome.

Not contentment, but more power; *not* peace at all, but war, *not* virtue, but proficiency (virtue in the Renaissance style, *virtù*, virtue free of moralic acid).²⁶

Given the passage above, we can formulate the fundamental moral principle of Nietzsche's ethics as: All that affirms, creates and promotes life as will to power is good. Individuals must make use of this criterion in choosing their values. Individuals should pursue the goods that are conducive to the promotion of life as will to power. In doing this, individuals will also be promoting their own being as will to power. This, for Nietzsche, is the way of authenticity and human flourishing. Because, ultimately, this is Nietzsche's fundamental concern, we can here say that his ethics of the Overman is truly a humanistic ethics.

Before turning our attention towards Sartre's own ethical proposals, it is necessary to look into the role played by the eternal return in Nietzsche's ethical realm. It is important to state immediately that this notion is not meant as an ontological description of how the world actually is or how it evolves. That is, Nietzsche is not advocating a cyclical theory of time and the universe. When he advances the eternal return, it is as a thought experiment that individuals can use as a guide for their actions, similar in function to a "categorical imperative".²⁷ We must then understand the eternal return as an ethical hypothesis. In the section of the *Gay Science* entitled "The Greatest Weight" (or "The Heaviest Burden" as it has also been translated), the eternal return is presented in the conditional formulation of "what if...?" This hypothesis is used to validate every choice. The text has it that one is followed by a demon that unveils the "truth" of the eternal return of the same. The question is then: How would you act, knowing that your deed will eternally return? How would you react to such an announcement?²⁸ Hence, the key to practical deliberation lies in asking oneself whether the deed that one is about to commit is something that one wishes to see eternally return. Individuals

²⁶ Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, §2, 125-26.

²⁷ It should be noted that every attempt to "prove" the eternal return is to be found only in the unpublished part of his work. In the published material, the eternal return is always formulated in the conditional mode. This, of course, would make it a "hypothetical imperative" in Kantian terms and not a "categorical" one as I state above. When I refer to the eternal return as something akin to Kant's categorical imperative, I mean that it can serve the same role: when faced with a decision, one can take the formula and weigh options according to it.

²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §341, 273-74.

must choose *now* as if even this choice was to recur indefinitely. Only a choice or a deed that contributes to human flourishing is a choice or deed that one will wish to see eternally recur.

Will to power and eternal return are articulated together as ethical guidelines. A choice is good if it promotes life as will to power. It is also good if one wants it to recur eternally which, consequently, will be the case only if the choice serves to promote life as will to power. The goal being to realise oneself as embodied will to power, that is, to lead a flourishing human life as involving both the constant overcoming of oneself and the creation of oneself, the will to power and eternal return can assist us in making the right choices, which are, according to Nietzsche, life-promoting choices.

If we were to formulate a Sartrean fundamental moral principle it would read like this: All that affirms, respects and promotes freedom is good; all that negates and destroys it is bad. Human beings must make their choices in view of the promotion of their own freedom, since they can strive towards authenticity only by promoting themselves as the free beings that they truly are. In the Sartrean scheme, there is no room for a device like the eternal return. In fact, he was very critical of it in his *Saint Genet*.²⁹ His reasons for being so critical, however, are misplaced. He understands the eternal return as a nihilistic attitude. He also takes Nietzsche to mean it literally, that is, as a cyclical theory of time or ontological model of the universe. Accordingly, his reading of the notion of the eternal return is basically ill-founded. That being said, this does not mean that Sartre would have adopted such an ethical device, had he read Nietzsche properly. Nonetheless, the ethical rule that he does propose is very close to that of Nietzsche. In fact, it can be read as being essentially the same if one looks closely at the relationship between the will to power and freedom.

Nietzsche conceives of freedom as “something one has and does *not* have, something one *wants*, something one *conquers*”.³⁰ This formula from *Twilight of the Idols* is reminiscent of Sartre’s description of the for-itself as freedom and as the being that is what he is not and is not what he is.³¹ For Nietzsche, freedom is something within the human being³² that

²⁹ See Sartre, *Saint Genet Actor and Martyr*, 346-50.

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, §38, 103.

³¹ See *Being and Nothingness* for numerous instances of this formula describing the for-itself.

³² Could it be that there lies the ultimate difference between the two? Freedom is something one *has* for Nietzsche whereas freedom is something one *is* in Sartre. The very being of the human being is freedom in Sartrean philosophy. For

one must assume and actualise, something that one must will, just like in Sartre. Peter Caws's description of Sartrean freedom reveals how close this concept is to that of the will to power. He says: "What Sartre calls 'original freedom' is, therefore, nothing other than the presuppositionless and undetermined upsurge of the for-itself in every moment of my life",³³ just like the Nietzschean will to power.

For some time I have conceived of the fundamental divergence between Nietzsche and Sartre in the following terms: in the end, will to power and freedom can be conceived of as referring to the same fundamental human drive. What differs from Nietzsche to Sartre is that Nietzsche says that this will to power is also active in the world outside of human beings, while Sartre speaks of freedom only in relation to the human being. For example, Zarathustra exclaims that wherever he finds life, he finds will to power at work.³⁴ This has been interpreted to mean that human beings, animals, plants, and even the world itself as a living and evolving organism, are all expressions of the will to power. The will to power would thus be a force at play beyond the human being, something that Sartrean freedom is not.

However, this divergence might not withstand scrutiny. If one interprets Nietzsche as a proto-phenomenologist, we could find the same ontological setting as that which we find in *Being and Nothingness*, i.e. a phenomenological ontology that revolves around the notion of an intentional consciousness.³⁵ Simply and very briefly put, it could be that, when Nietzsche claims that "This world is the will to power—and nothing besides",³⁶—he could be referring to the same thing as the circuit of selfness that Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness*. Nietzsche talks about being itself as being irrelevant for humans; what really matters is the world as it exists for us. In this case, the world is necessarily the world of

Nietzsche, the being of the human being is will to power. Is will to power freedom? As I will argue now, the answer is yes.

³³ Caws, *Sartre*, 115.

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 137.

³⁵ Granted, it is difficult to equate Sartrean consciousness with Nietzschean consciousness, but I do not think the task is impossible. As a suggestive experiment, compare the multi-layered, labyrinthine self described by Nietzsche in different texts (particularly *Daybreak* and *The Gay Science*), with the complex consciousness described by Sartre in the *Transcendence of the Ego*.

³⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, §1067, 550. This is the most famous utterance of this idea. However, it stems from the *Nachlass*. Its corresponding published aphorism states it somewhat differently: "The world viewed from inside, the world defined and determined according to its 'intelligible character'—it would be 'will to power' and nothing else" (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §36, 48).

the will to power. Since human beings are fundamentally an embodiment of will to power and since they make the world in accordance with themselves, the world is necessarily a world of will to power. If this is the case, we would be dealing with the same ontological setting in both Nietzsche's and Sartre's philosophy. Hence, what I had previously identified as a fundamental divergence would vanish, revealing that they are in fact much closer than I had initially thought. Whatever the case may be, even if the divergence were to persist, one would still have to recognize that their ethical proposals are very much akin.

Conclusion: Brothers in Arms

I have shown that the philosophies of Nietzsche and Sartre stand very close together in the realm of ethics. They both share the same nihilism and both propose the same solution to it, namely a solution that is elaborated through a positive and optimistic answer to the question of the meaning of existence. The ethics founded upon their respective ontologies present an ideal of authenticity that, in each case, urges the human being to strive towards self-actualisation. This is the meaning shared between the Nietzschean Overman and Sartre's notion of authenticity. My claim is that the Overman is essentially a Sartrean authentic person and vice versa.

One is still left to question whether or not there remains any divergence between the two (especially now that I contend that the divergence pertaining to the will to power as worldly phenomenon does not hold). However, I think there is still a divergence, particularly in the ethical realm. Nietzsche's ethics is humanistic, but, perhaps above all, it remains individualistic. There is little opening to the Other in his ethical philosophising and when Nietzsche does address relationships among humans, he slips into a messy political talk that is difficult to reconcile with his ethical views.³⁷ In contrast, Sartre explicitly presents an opening to the Other. It could be a failed one, as some have argued, but at least there is the attempt along with the recognition that one cannot be ethical without the Other.³⁸

³⁷ I have discussed this tension in my "Nietzsche: Virtue Ethics... Virtue Politics?" In this article, I argue that Nietzsche's ethics is akin to virtue ethics. I then discuss how the aristocratic politics clashes with an ethics that favours the flourishing of all and conclude that in order to be coherent, Nietzsche must stand for a "virtue politics", i.e. a politics that would favour the flourishing of all in the group.

³⁸ More often than not, commentators take the failed opening to the Other as the backbone of their argument for the abandonment of the *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Some have argued that Sartre's opening is successful only when he seriously

That being said, I have shown that in the ethical realm, Nietzsche and Sartre are really fighting the same battle despite the fact that they express their ethical views differently. They want to liberate the human being from the yoke of an alienating worldview in order for her to be capable of ethical growth in her striving towards Sartrean authenticity and Nietzschean overcoming. Theirs is thus truly a humanistic ethics.

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tackles Marxism in his Marxist treatise, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. For my part, I remain sceptical of the Sartrean success. As I have said earlier, I am concerned with Sartre's existentialist philosophy. The conflictual relationships he has so strongly delineated in *Being and Nothingness* defeat in advance any attempt to resolve the said conflicts. It is also not true that Simone de Beauvoir is successful in that matter. If she is indeed successful in elaborating an ethics in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, it is because she does *not* develop it on the basis of the Sartrean ontology as has been claimed, but rather upon her own understanding of human reality as ambiguous and upon her own understanding of interpersonal relationships. She sees these as potentially conflictual, but not irremediably so. A way out of conflict is possible. See my "The Ambiguous Ethics of Beauvoir".

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