THE DIFFERENT VOICES OF SARTRE'S ETHICS

Within twentieth century philosophy and psychology, Sartre's existentialist analysis of consciousness and the self holds one of the most radical positions. Central to this analysis was an emphasis on the absolute freedom of consciousness to determine its own meaning. To some, this position of hermeneutical omnipotence amounted to a French expansion of the philosophy of Humpty Dumpty, since Sartre certainly gave the impression that all one's thoughts and actions can mean anything one wants them to. When Alice questioned Humpty Dumpty about the way he had used a certain word, he explained to her that it's simply a matter of showing a word who's boss.[1] Many of Sartre's early critics questioned the possibility of ever grounding an ethical theory in a position that granted such unlimited power to consciousness. Indeed, Sartre was never quite able to deliver the projected work on ethics that he had promised in *Being and Nothingness*.

Sartre originally based his existentialist view of the self on the rejection of the reality of "human nature." He denied that the self has any intrinsic essence from which actions, feelings, or thoughts might emanate. Rather he saw that the qualities associated with the self were a result of reflective acts of consciousness that could be endlessly modified with the passage of time. In other words, there can be no fixed or substantial ego because the freedom of consciousness to revise and reinterpret itself means that self-reflection is synonymous with self-creation.

It is not surprising to find that a philosophical position that rejects a substantive core to the self would also reject any ethical system based on pre-existing rules or codified norms for behavior. The existential anguish that accompanies one's realization of the endless possibilities open to human

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[1]Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice* (New York: Forum Books, 1960), p. 269.

consciousness is linked to an ethical anguish as well, since ethical values are also endlessly revised in the exercise of one's own freedom.[2]

Recent discussions of moral development stimulated by the findings of Carol Gilligan and others have pointed to differing styles of ethical decision-making that reflect different forms of self-consciousness.[3] Gilligan's work suggests that when *autonomy* is elevated as the self's central characteristic, moral judgment tends to emphasize the importance of protecting the self from intrusions and violations by others, i.e., the essence of the so-called "justice" perspective, which focuses on principles of duty and respect for individual rights. Conversely, when the self is experienced in fundamentally *relational* terms—assumed by many psychologists to be more characteristic of female identity—, an ethics of "care" that aims at preserving relationship with others is more common. Here the concern is less one of preserving another person's rights than it is of rescuing her or him from feelings of isolation and abandonment.

Certainly, it is fair to say that Sartre's notion of consciousness places a higher premium on autonomy than relation. Indeed, *Being and Nothingness* portrayed conflict and hostility as the underlying ontological reality of relationship with the Other, and a line in *No Exit* described other people as "hell." Sartre presented the frightening potential of "the look of the Other" to objectify one's own existence and thereby compromise one's freedom through a kind of ontological rape.

Some critics have linked Sartre's assumption of such perpetual struggle between self and other, and of the apparent incompatibility of freedom and

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[2]A vulgarization of this model of consciousness and its ethical consequences survives in an ideology of ethical freedom within certain so-called "New Age" or human growth movements. The "vulgar existentialism" of such movements asserts not only that one chooses every circumstance and characteristic of one's life, but also that good and evil are totally relative. Sartre himself would never have endorsed such a position.

[3]Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

relatedness, to a fundamentally masculine view of the self.[4] The male self, it has been suggested by psychoanalytically informed interpreters like Nancy Chodorow, defines itself in opposition to others, and remains locked with them in a battle for autonomy.[5] It is no wonder, therefore, that morality becomes for the early Sartre an area of individual self-determination measured by one's relationship to oneself, not others. Authenticity lies in the lonely acceptance of the anguish of freedom. Is it then true that the existentialist ethic of authenticity is incompatible with a "relational" ethics of care and compassion?[6]

To be sure, among Sartre's first descriptions of the "look of the Other" is an emphasis on the sense of violation and loss of control produced by the Other's look and the challenge it presents to the freedom of an individual's consciousness. Whether one encounters the Other in a contest of consciousnesses or in the tender caresses of care, however, Sartre's early writings insisted on a specific technical point: Any relationship with another person—whatever its quality—modifies the world that person inhabits. Even the most benign and loving relationship places the Other in a world he or she did not create.

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[4]Cf. Linda Singer, "Interpretation and Retrieval: Rereading Beauvoir," *Women's Studies Int. Forum*, 1985, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 231-238. Singer's critique of Sartre only concerns the position of *Being and Nothingness* and tends to overdramatize the differences between Sartre and Beauvoir at that time.

[5]Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

[6]Nel Noddings argues that the existentialist assumption of the freedom of consciousness as the primary datum of human existence makes aloneness and anguish inevitable, while a view of identity rooted in relation sees joy as the fundamental human response to the world. She sees in Sartre a rejection of the fundamental relatedness of human beings. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 6. Cf. p. 51:

> "As I chop away at the chains that bind me to love others, asserting my freedom, I move into a wilderness of strangers and loneliness, leaving behind all who cared for me and even, perhaps, my own self. I am not naturally alone. I am naturally in a relation from which I derive nourishment and guidance. When I am alone, either because I have detached myself or because circumstances have wrenched me free, I seek first and more naturally to reestablish my relatedness. My very individuality is defined in a set of relations. This is my basic reality."

> From the moment that I exist I establish a factual limit to the Other's freedom. I *am* this limit, and each of my projects traces the outline of this limit around the Other. Charity, laisser-faire, tolerance—evenan attitude of abstention—are each one a project of myself which engages me and which engages the Other in his acquiescence. To realize tolerance with respect to the Other is to cause the Other to be thrown forcefully into a tolerant world. It is to remove from him on principle those free possibilities of courageous resistance, of perseverance, of self-assertion which he would have had the opportunity to develop in a world of intolerance. . . . Thus respect for the Other's freedom is an empty word; even if we could assume the project of respecting this freedom, each attitude which we adopted with respect to the Other would be a violation of that freedom which we claimed to respect.[7]

From this point of view, even an attitude of care represents a field for the Other's freedom which simultaneously opens and closes the range of possibilities available.[8] Thus a mother's conscientious care of her baby removes the child's possibility to overcome the pain of neglect and abuse. Whether anyone would advocate preserving such a possibility or preferring it to another is not the point. Many years later, Sartre observed the central importance of a mother's love for her child in developing the child's identity.

> . . . by this love and through it, through the very person of the mother—skillful or clumsy, brutal or tender, such as her history has made her—the child is made manifest to himself. . . . He will know his bodily parts, violent, gentle, beaten, constrained, or free through the violence or gentleness of the hands that awaken them . . . it is the total situation that is decisive since it is *the whole mother* who is projected in the flesh of her flesh.[9]

The underlying idea here is that the other people's actions condition both one's freedom and identity *no matter what those actions are.*

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[7]*Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 409.

[8]One possible explanation of the difference between the Jewish sage Hillel's formulation of the Golden Rule, "Do *not* do unto others as you would *not* have them do unto you," and Jesus' "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," is that Hillel's version reflects an understanding that overzealous care must also be checked.

[9]*The Family Idiot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 47.

And yet Sartre's original metaphor may raise some doubts in the minds of his critics. To call charity and tolerance something that "forcefully throws" the Other into a world he or she didn't ask for, suggests that our violations of each other's autonomy form the primordial structure of interpersonal relations. Only later in his life did Sartre begin to regard the original relation to the other as a positive rather than threatening force in constituting the self.

Furthermore, there are other characterizations of the Other's "look" within Sartre's work and other ethical dimensions that are associated with them. Thus, as Sartre became more aware of various forms of political and social oppression, he described a more contextualized "look." The "look" of the oppressed Other, for example, is a look of protest linked to an ethic of liberation. Thus, the colonized peoples of Africa were the ones whose perceptions unveiled the evil of European exploitation. In the final period of his life, moreover, Sartre gained an appreciation of the parent-child relation in the formation of identity. Here he described the look of the Other as one of affirmation and love, the basis on which one can begin to develop an ethics of care.

It would be wrong, however, to argue for the primacy of any of these positions within Sartre's work or to suggest a hierarchical ordering of them in his mind. The true evolution of Sartre's ethical thought lies in his growing appreciation of the intersecting ethical dimensions that inform our diverse interactions with others.

Psychologists such as Kohlberg and Gilligan have tended to pose ethical dilemmas to subjects as a means for studying their styles of ethical decisions. In his famous address "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre also described an ethical dilemma brought to him by a former student during World War II. The young man's mother was deeply troubled both by her husband's collaboration with the Nazis and by the death of her older son during the Nazi invasion. The young man knew that he was his mother's sole consolation and that she would be devastated if anything happened to him. And yet he was torn by his desire to leave his mother in order to find the French Free forces and join their fight against the Nazis. As Sartre described it, the young man

> . . . found himself confronted by two very different modes of action; the one concrete, immediate, but directed toward only one individual; and the other an action addressed to an end infinitely greater, a national collectivity, but for that very reason ambiguous—and it might be frustrated on the way. At the same time, he was hesitating between two kinds of morality; on the one side, the morality of sympathy,

> of personal devotion, and, on the other side, a morality of wider scope but of more debatable validity. He had to choose between those two.[10]

The two forms of morality Sartre refers to here do not correspond precisely to the notions of "care" morality and "justice" morality, though it would be easy to suppose that staying home to attend to one's mother would certainly come closer to Gilligan's focus on care for and attention to personal relations. It has little to do with the rights or freedom of the Other. On the other hand, going off to fight the Nazis would not only be closer to the justice perspective with its concern for duty and freedom, but would probably also be the more appealing option to an autonomous masculine self raised on the importance of values such as honor and vengeance.

One of Gilligan's colleagues actually posed Sartre's dilemma to a number of high school students. One female student responded as follows:

> If I were the boy, I think that I would have chosen to stay with the mother. I do not know if that would be best, but it is a more immediate and good solution. Are there no other men to be loyal to the state, when he is the only one whom his mother's existence depends on? I feel strongly toward directing actions toward the good of individuals. If everyone did so, logically, these actions would be for the good of everyone.[11]

According to Gilligan and Wiggins, this response is an example of the ethic of care, since it responds to the immediate need of the mother. It also implies that if such caring relationships were more universally practiced, then this individual act would also serve the common good. By looking at the situation in this way the respondent avoids "turning moral dilemmas into binary choice, win-lose situations."[12]

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[10]"Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1969), pp. 295-6.

[11]Carol Gilligan and Grant Wiggins, "The Origins of Morality in Early Childhood Relationships," in *Mapping the Moral Domain* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 132.

[12] *ibid.*

But is the response of Gilligan and Wiggin's subject really a superior response? Sartre certainly would have respected the inventiveness of the reasons she provides for her choice. After all, Sartre's own response to his student was "You are free, therefore choose,—that is to say, invent." Yet it is also true that her response makes little reference to the importance of devoting oneself to the fight against oppression that the student might also choose. In the aftermath of the war, Sartre realized that ethical discussion cannot take place outside the context of the present social arrangement of society or without consideration of the forms of oppression within that society. For Sartre, the care of individuals is ultimately futile if it leaves the fundamental structure of society unexamined. He says,

> Such is the present paradox of ethics; if I am absorbed in treating a few chosen persons as absolute ends, for example, my wife, my son, my friends, the needy person I happen to come across, if I am bent upon fulfilling all my duties toward them, I shall spend my life doing so; I shall be led to *pass over in silence* the injustices of the age, the class struggle, colonialism, Anti-semitism, etc. and finally, to *take advantage of oppression in order to do good*. . . . The good that I try to do will be vitiated at the roots. . . . But vice versa, if I throw myself into the revolutionary enterprise, I risk having no more leisure for personal relations—worse still, of being led by the logic of action into treating most men, and even my friends, as means.[13]

Clearly, what Sartre saw as the critical factor in ethical discussion was finding some way of describing the dialectical interaction of multiple ethical perspectives. To return to the student's dilemma, Sartre suggests that whatever the student decides for himself, the moral struggle of humanity must include a multi-leveled response. Some people will consume all their ethical energy in interpersonal relationships, while others are dedicated to structural social change. Ultimately, one must accept not only that each pole remains in perpetual tension with the other but also that in some way each implies the other.[14]

Perhaps, Sartre is being overly dualistic in his analysis to make a point. Surely, there is no reason why one could not simultaneously maintain humane relationships while also pursuing larger goals of social change. But the

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[13] *What is Literature?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 268-9.

[14] *ibid.*

underlying point remains. The student who attends only to the needs of his mother is forced to look aside from the war being waged by the Nazis, all the while that his own father collaborates with this degrading of democratic values. In truth, Gilligan and Wiggin's respondent did not really offer a "win-win" response either. Sartre implies that in the name of an ethic of personal care, one's perspective ironically may be too individualistic, and in the act of preserving individual relations, one may become blind to large scale injustice. By not being part of the solution to oppression, one becomes part of the problem.

In short, both of the student's choices were reasonable possibilities that reflected a clear appraisal of the situation and the needs it presented. There is no single *right* thing to do. Sartre denied that either one of these choices was better than the other. Rather, he simply accepted the uncomfortable fact that in ethical matters fulfilling one kind of responsibility may require neglecting another. There is no cheap resolution of the problem. One must have the courage to face one's life, and to assume responsibility for one's situation by accepting it as the field against which one is free to create an ethical response. This idea does not imply that any action whatsoever is acceptable, but only that the values of care on the interpersonal level and struggle for justice on the societal level cannot be arranged hierarchically.

Although Gilligan has sometimes given the impression that the female ethical "voice" of the care perspective is preferable to the justice perspective, she has usually tried to be considerably more circumspect about what constitutes the "better" response to such ethical dilemmas. She insists that what is important about the female ethical "voice" is not its superiority, but its ability to perceive and preserve the ethical ambiguity of the dilemma. When only one moral voice is heard, moral problems may seem to have "right" answers. For Gilligan, the acceptance of moral ambiguity is characteristic of what she calls "moral maturity,"[15] an idea that comes close to Sartre's ideal of "authenticity." Sartre, too, insisted that in exercising ethical choice one must remain aware of the underlying ambiguity, and that one must hear the call of different ethical voices—regardless of whether one's social situation or gender has sensitized one to a particular set of moral concerns like oppression vs equality [justice], or indifference vs responsiveness [care]. For Sartre, one's ethics will always reflect

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[15] *ibid.*

a "fundamental project" which has been *colored* by childhood experience, gender, race, ethnicity, class, etc.[16] Sartre was well aware of Gilligan's general point that ethical style may be a function of identity development, although the specific ways in which his ethics might have been conditioned by his own gender identity was not an issue that he really had ever considered.

The anguish of ethical choice stems from the fact that ethics for Sartre are simultaneously "inevitable" and "indispensable," and yet ultimately "impossible."[17] Not only is it impossible to establish fixed principles that would enable us to decide between competing ethical demands, but we must also recognize that the decisions we do ultimately make, may be thrown into doubt by future moments in history. Just as the self is itself always subject to revision by further acts of consciousness at any moment in the future, the "look" of the future casts its shadow back to undermine any fixed values we claim today.

> We feel that we are being judged by the masked men who will succeed us and whose knowledge of all things will be such that we cannot have the slightest inkling of what it will be; our age will be an object for those future eyes whose gaze haunts us. And a guilty object. They will reveal to us our failure and guilt. Our age, which is already dead, already a *thing*, though we still have to live it, is *alone* in history, and this historical solitude determines even our perceptions: what we see *will no longer be*; people will laugh at our ignorance, will be indignant at our mistakes.[18]

Sartre saw fixed or ready-made values as the foundation of oppression. They were the tools used by antisemites, racists, and colonialists to avoid looking at their own freedom and to justify their treatment of the less powerful.[19] Oppressors always see oppression as justified by certain natural facts about the world. Sartre felt that too much of what passes for morality is merely an internalization of the rules and attitudes of a particular society at a particular moment in history. Those who experience a certain natural legitimacy

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[16]Cf. *Search for a Method* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 110.

[17]*Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: New American Library, 1963). pp. 186, 224.

[18]*Saint Genet*, pp. 596-7.

[19]Cf. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1975), p. 44.

to their identities, tend to develop an ethics of "legitimate" rights that must be protected.

In the moral dilemma used by both Kohlberg and Gilligan to analyze moral development, one is asked how "Heinz" should respond when he realizes he cannot afford to pay the price a druggist is asking for a drug that will cure his wife's cancer. For Sartre, to respond to this dilemma would mean to investigate the social constructions that make medicine belong to the druggist and that thereby define the crime of stealing. In his discussion of Genet, Sartre sees theft as a product of a social construction that presupposes a definition of society, a property system, a legal code, and a particular kind of ethics.[20] In analyzing Jean Genet's social position as a thief, Sartre raises the question of the ways in which the sense of entitlement of well-to-do members of society that creates Genet as a criminal merely constitutes a form of bad faith itself.

In contrast, ethical authenticity requires recognizing the permanent instability of human reality and the continual struggle for extending liberation to all people. It enables one to pierce a passive acceptance of the given structure of society in order to perceive the underlying structures of oppression and inequity within it. Genuine caring human relations are only possible, therefore, in the context of simultaneous social change. While Gilligan emphasizes the importance of rediscovering women's moral voice, Sartre highlighted the distortions of the voice of those in power, i.e., a voice of inertia and legitimization. It is in the voice of the marginalized and oppressed Other that Sartre hears a voice that contests and transcends oppression. Thus, in their own ways Gilligan and Sartre are each trying to give ethical voice to the silenced.

Just as Carol Gilligan has recently shown that in a society that assigns certain roles to men and women, gender will affect moral decisions, Sartre emphasized that ethical authenticity is likewise determined by one's place in society. The first step of ethical analysis is the realization of the ethical significance of one's position vis à vis the others in the world.[21] Morality,

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[20] *Saint Genet*, p. 39.

[21] In *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), the moral implications of the existence of the Other are already implicit in Sartre's analysis:

> I am situated also as a European in relation to Asians, or to Negroes, as an old man in relation to the young, as a judge in relation to delinquents, as a bourgeois in relation to workers, etc. In short it is in relation to every living man that every living human reality is

therefore, requires a decentering of those in power and a redefinition of the meaning of otherness. In a certain sense, Sartre felt the need to "alter" himself in order to speak critically about oppression. As writer, he had to identify himself with the marginalized perspective of women, Jews, homosexuals, blacks, workers, etc. which collectively symbolized the transcendent power of Otherness. This "eccentric" perspective one experiences from the margin is critical if one is ever to question the tempting stable self offered by society.

It is true that Sartre's ethics began from a position of individualism that saw the Other as threatening rather than embracing [what he later called "the ethics of I"]. In *Being and Nothingness*, the "look of the Other" performs a perpetual decentering of the stability of the autonomous self. Although it would be easy to attribute this rather bleak view of human relations to the special bias and sensitivity of male identity development, which sees the Other only as a challenge to one's own autonomy, the "look" takes on a very different quality when the social situation is factored in.

Understood within its social context, the look of the Other performs a moral decentering as well as an ontological one. A "look" grounded in authenticity is one that identifies the oppression of racism, colonialism, antisemitism, and sexism. The "look" of the oppressed Other shows me how I may know myself *as oppressor*. This look reveals to the powerful that their own social position or power is accidental rather than justified or legitimate. From this point of view, Sartre suggested that white male bourgeois Christians must begin to feel fear or shame from the "look of the Other," especially if the Other is a victim of his own undeserved inherited power. One finds frequent allusions in Sartre's work to the clearer vision of the marginal Other whose perspective provides an ethical indictment of those in power. For the group in power, however, authenticity requires both acknowledging and questioning the inauthenticity that grants privileges for some people but simultaneously oppresses others. Unfortunately, the "respectable" members of society often can see in the rejected and negated members of society only their own rejected and negated choices, the dark side of their own personalities. Sartre wondered, "how can I reasonably think that a member of society's elite would be able to lower himself—if it can be called lowering himself—to the level of the oppressed and

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present or absent on the ground of an original presence. . . . The Other is present to me everywhere as the one through whom I become an object. (p. 279)

exploited people and to consider *with the eyes of the people*, the crushing pedestals on which the bourgeois hierarchy sits?"[22] Gender, race, class are accidents of birth, but to deny the social impact and benefit of these accidents is a sign of inauthenticity.

Sartre was right to see the challenge offered to my own moral perspective from the Other who presents a viewpoint that I cannot have myself. Indeed, this is the lesson of Gilligan's call to hear other ethical voices and to acknowledge other ethical ways of "looking." The conflictual element in Sartre's model of relationship was related at least in part to his concern about the oppression of certain groups in society.

Therefore, it is no accident that one observes in Sartre's work the gradual emergence of the marginalized Other—Jews, homosexuals, blacks and, to a lesser extent, women—as the loci of authenticity.[23] They are the critical external point of view that reveals a society's ethical being-for-its-Others. Sartre realized that his model of existential freedom and autonomy would become a humanism of bad faith if it did not take into account the power and privilege that diminishes members of some groups *as Other*. He rejected the notion of universal humanistic ethics based on some abstract democratic principle of seeing all people as just human beings. Rather, he favored a "concrete liberalism" that would consider all citizens concretely in their situation as Jews, blacks, women, etc. with individual needs as such.[24] Even when it was possible, Sartre opposed the assimilation of the minority into the majority's ideas and values, since assimilation would mean the collapse of authenticity by becoming identified with the "I" of the majority. The ethical integrity of the Other is linked to the role of otherness as a "category of challenge"[25] that

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[22]*Life/Situations*, translated by Paul Auster and Lydia Davis (New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 178.

[23]I have analyzed this issue in some depth in *Vulgarity and Authenticity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).

[24]*Antisemite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 146.

[25]Cf. Sandra Harding, "The Curious Coincidence of Feminine and African Moralities," in Eva F. Kittay and Diana T. Meyers, eds., *Women and Moral Theory* (Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987), pp. 296-315.

undermines accepted values and ideologies. Sartre's rejection of the universalism of the democrat anticipated Gilligan's concern that traditional ethics of justice tend to subsume the *particular other* into the *universalized generalized other*.[26] Sartre denied that abstract principles of morality could be applied to dilemmas like that of his student. "The content is always concrete and therefore unpredictable; it has always to be invented. The one thing that counts is to know whether the invention is made in the name of freedom."[27]

The qualities that Sartre idealized among the inhabitants of the margin were the ones he thought necessary for a new form of social existence. The spontaneity, sensitivity, vitality, etc. that drew him to Jews, women, and other outsiders needed to be developed in all people. Only then would the Other cease to be threatening and become capable of being encountered in a spirit of "transparency."[28] This ethical model of transparency focuses on the quality of the interpersonal relationship, not merely respect for each other's autonomy or "rights." The goal for the future is to repair the quality of relationship, not institute some abstract system of justice. As Hazel Barnes has pointed out, Sartre eventually developed a view of the Other's look that was not based on conflict and hostility. First there is the "look of transparency" wherein we see one another without distortion or secrets, with the openness of the mother's look at her baby. And out of this look it is possible to begin to look at the world together as a we.[29]

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[26]Cf. Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory," in *ibid.*, pp. 154-177.

[27]"Existentialism is a Humanism," p. 308.

[28]"I think that what spoils relations among people is that each keeps something hidden from the other, something secret. . . . I think transparency should always be substituted for what is secrecy. I can imagine the day when two men will no longer have secrets from each other, because no one will have any more secrets from anyone, because subjective life, as well as objective life, will be completely offered up, given." *Life/Situations* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 11.

[29]Hazel E. Barnes, "Sartre and the Emotions," in Simon Glynn, ed., *Sartre: An Investigation of Some Major Themes* (Aldershot, England: Avebury, 1987), p. 83.

As Sartre entered the final years of his life, he had begun to think about an "ethics of we"[30] that left behind individualism and was based on the idea that human consciousnesses interpenetrate and constitute each other in a primordial way. In the controversial interviews with Benny Lévy published just before his death, Sartre made some preliminary remarks regarding an ethics grounded in the idea of brotherhood rather than freedom. I do not accept the common charge one hears from many Sartreans that the only voice we hear in these interviews is that of Benny Lévy performing like a ventriloquist with an enfeebled Sartre. Rather I find it not only intriguing but totally consistent with Sartre's character—if one may appeal to such an un-Sartrean category as character—that Sartre invoked religious metaphors reminiscent of both prophetic Judaism and primitive goddess worship in order to express the links of mutual care that hold together all human beings.

Lévy's discussions had introduced Sartre to certain prophetic elements of Judaism, especially its moral critique of the existing structures of society. The prophets and their rabbinic successors retained a suspicion about established political power. In the Jewish idea of the messianic age, moreover, Sartre could see an approximation of his own vision for the advent of a new ethical existence for human beings. As Lévy presented it to him, Jewish messianism also offered a religious counterpart to Sartre's own ideas of "revolution." In its own way, prophetic Judaism had anticipated much of Sartre's own demand for a revolutionary break with the present state of society and a time when the suffering and oppressed groups of this society would be liberated.[31]

Sartre realized that the utopian changes he envisioned would require social relations to be based on a bond more basic than simply sharing the rights of citizenship and civil coexistence. He demanded a deeper bond, "the relationship of brotherhood (fraternité)."[32] As a model for this relationship, Sartre reached back even further into religious history, and introduced a discussion of primitive totemism. He suggested that what linked the members of primitive tribes in a relationship of brotherhood was their identification with a common descent from

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[30]"J.P. Sartre & M. Sicard: Entretien," *Obliques*, 1979, nos. 18-19, p.15.

[31]"Today's Hope: Conversations with Sartre," *Telos*, Summer 1980, p. 179.

[32]"Today's Hope," p. 170.

the tribe's totem animal. Unlike Freud, who had also studied primitive totemism, Sartre did not see the totem as a symbol of a dictatorial father. Indeed, he rejected Lévy's suggestion to see brotherhood as the idea that we are all sons of a single father, the mythic basis of the patriarchal religions of the west. On the contrary, he believed the primordial sense of brotherhood or kinship in primitive tribes is rooted in the idea of birth. To be members of the same species is to share the same parents, to be born of the same mother (or totem animal) who engenders us all. To bring about a future recovery of the sense of brotherhood will mean to reexperience this attachment through a common mother, that is, to achieve a solidarity rooted in a sense of global family.[33]

Jeanette Colombel notes that the posthumously published *Cahiers pour une Morale* of Sartre see brotherhood as an ancient link between people, going back thousands of years. It presupposes acceptance of otherness as the highest moral value. In his conversations with her, Sartre often grappled with finding a foundation for morality that was not based merely on a rational principle of obligation.[34] It was brotherhood that offered this foundation. Such brotherhood, moreover, does not arise out the violent revolt of the oppressed, but rather from the bond of tenderness linking mother and child. This was a theme Sartre had explored at length in his work on Flaubert, where he wrote ". . . in order to love life, to wait each minute for the next with confidence, with hope, one has to have been able to internalize the Other's love as a fundamental affirmation of the self."[35]

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[33]This may be the next dialectical stage beyond the brotherhood based on the oath of violence described in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: NLB, 1976). This earlier form of brotherhood arose out of a unified revolt against the oppressors who refused to recognize one's humanity and who defined one as Other. Since revolutionary brothers came together in a kind of oedipal revolt against the paternalistic power of society, it was not surprising that Sartre saw the bonds between them as totally self-generated. He wrote: "We are brothers insofar as, following the creative act of the pledge, we are our own sons, our common creation." (p. 437).

[34]Jeanette Colombel, *Sartre* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1985-6), vol. 2, pp. 739-43.

[35]*The Family Idiot*, vol. 1, translated by Carol Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 392.

What Sartre seemed to be groping for in his last interview was a symbolic foundation for renewed human relationships that many feminist theologians have rediscovered in the image of the Goddess. In saying this, please note that I am not ascribing any *theological conversion* whatsoever to Sartre, but merely noting the addition of a new *religious metaphor* to the long list of others he had used throughout his life. For many people attracted to this image, the goddess does not represent a metaphysical entity "out there," but rather an alternative model of relationship and connection to the parts of reality from which we have become alienated by traditional hierarchical, dualistic categories.[36] With the powerful image of a female totem like this, humanity might begin to transcend the divisions of self and other. Sartre explained:

> All of us are brothers in the clan inasmuch as we are born of the same woman, who is represented by the totem. They are all brothers in the sense that all are born from the womb of woman; and at that point the individuality of the woman is not a question. She is simply a woman, with the womb that will engender, the breasts that will nourish, the back that perhaps will carry. . . . When I see a man, I think: he has the same origin as myself, like me he comes from Mother Humanity, let's say, Mother Earth as Socrates says, or Mother. . . .[37]

We can only speculate about the direction Sartre might have taken this idea. At the time he spoke to Lévy, he thought he probably still had five to ten years left to work out his new ideas about ethics. If Jewish messianism was a way to imagine social and ethical progress in this world, then perhaps the mythic goddess might have offered him a symbolic model with which to reclaim a more maternal model of morality that values accepting, nourishing and supporting the Other, especially a weaker, dependent Other. Most exciting about the image of the engendering mother goddess is its potential for helping to build a model of cooperation between self and other, rather than irreversible separation and objectification. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir observed that men are valued above

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[36]Carol Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections," in Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 273-87.

[37]"Today's Hope," p. 171. In his *War Diaries*, translated by Quintin Hoare (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), Sartre had already considered, albeit somewhat critically, the idea of universal womb as the "final dialectical avatar of the idea of human species." (p. 27)

women because humans are raised above the animals not in giving life but in risking it. In the end, Sartre was prepared to abandon such a model. His search for connection with the Other had been hampered by a model of the self based, at least in part, on the male experience of separation from the original attachment to the mother, and transcendence of one's origins. Sartre's reconsideration of the concept of family as a model for human relations was leading him to a new understanding of self and other, and the possibility of an ethic rooted not only in the collective struggle against oppression but also in the primordial human experience of being cared for.[38]

Ironically, in the final discussions about the moral challenge of prophetic Judaism and its protest against oppression, and the maternal caring implied in the image of the Great Mother, Sartre was struggling to listen equally to at least two ethical voices whose apparent contradiction had brought his student to him for advice nearly forty years earlier.

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[38]Cf. Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education.*