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Existentialist Morality and its Practicality

In this paper, I will argue that both the philosophies of Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and Jean-Paul Sartre in “Existentialism is a Humanism” provide an adequate and even necessary framework for a person and society to act morally despite rejecting the existence of a priori moral tenets. For the purposes of this paper, I define morality as the ability to differentiate between right and wrong and the obligation to follow such principles. I find that while existentialism only offers a subjective difference between right and wrong, this difference, and importantly the obligation to act according to it, still is heavily present. Camus and Sartre differ in several key aspects of their philosophy, including over what one’s responsibility to the self is with Camus believing in a fundamental human nature and Sartre rejecting it. However, despite these differences, Camus’ and Sartre’s philosophies are both centered around the idea of having freedom of one’s actions, while still tethering morality to a responsibility towards the self and humanity. Both texts offer no concrete moral maxim beyond this responsibility to the self, but both offer evidence that a society living under such a framework will still be able to run efficiently and smoothly as long as this responsibility is fulfilled.

I will first examine the explicit and implied responsibilities of existentialism that appear in Sartre’s and Camus’ works. This includes examining any key differences in regards to morality that arise between Sartre and Camus’ work. I will then analyze how these duties serve to facilitate a broader moral system. Afterwards, I will examine

criticisms of my position and address their validity. Finally, I will conclude by assessing the framework of an existentialist moral system based upon the concepts and analysis laid out in the rest of the paper.

Sartre in "Existentialism is a Humanism" seeks to defend existentialism from criticism that the philosophy is too theoretical and too subjective to be valid as a moral guide. Sartre retorts by arguing that "man is condemned to be free" (Sartre 5). In doing so, Sartre lays a basic framework for a moral philosophy. Freedom is something to be necessarily valued, thus preserving this sense of freedom becomes Sartre's primary moral tenant. Freedom is the end that must be preserved, and "once a man has seen that values depend upon himself, in that state of forsakenness he can will only one thing, and that is freedom as the foundation of all values" (Sartre 12). The best way for freedom to be maximized is left subjective. No one action can necessarily be fundamentally deemed moral or immoral. However, the existence of freedom as something to strive for does allow for a distinction between a right way to act and a wrong way to act. Actions that fundamentally limit the freedom of the self or humanity go against the best interests of man and therefore are not morally compatible with existentialist philosophy. Any action taken in good faith is permissible under existentialist ethics, but because freedom is so quintessential to the human condition, acting in a way that intentionally limits man's freedom is self-deception and "evidently a falsehood, because it is a dissimulation of man's complete liberty of commitment" (Sartre 12). This commitment must be universal to all humanity because our own freedom "depends entirely upon the freedom of others and that the freedom of others depends upon our own" and thus we are "obliged to will the liberty of others at the same time as my own. I

cannot make liberty my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim” (Sartre 12). A keyword here is “obliged.” A common criticism of existentialist philosophy is that it makes everything permissible, but under an explicit obligation to will man’s freedom, an action can only be situationally but not universally permissible, thus creating and preserving a basic system of morality.

Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* was written to tackle the philosophical problem of suicide, which Camus calls the “only truly serious philosophical problem” (Camus 3). To do this, Camus attempts to analyze if and why life is ultimately worth living through the examination of “the absurd.” The conclusion Camus comes to is stated in the preface: “even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate.” Inherently, this makes *The Myth of Sisyphus* intertwined with moral philosophy. Camus presents an obligation to continue living through an embracing of the absurd. While *The Myth of Sisyphus* does not attempt to defend the ability for an existentialist morality to exist and not erode in the same way that “Existentialism is a Humanism” attempts to, but it doesn’t have to. The simple maxim to value and prolong one’s own life through the embracing of the absurd serves as a fundamental basis for a functioning moral system.

From here, Camus continues to build upon a basis for a moral system without any concrete actions being assigned an a priori moral value (outside of perhaps suicide). He writes “I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion. By the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death—and I refuse suicide” (Camus 64). Like Sartre, Camus places an emphasis on maximizing one’s freedom. Camus particularly focuses on the idea that man’s freedom is naturally limited— they don’t get a say in what

sort of freak events or occurrences may happen at any time. He further suggests that man naturally limits their own freedom by not embracing the absurd. For example, we are groomed for certain occupations by virtue of our family's history or how we are brought up in school. Thus, part of the revolt that Camus talks about is an attempt to maximize our otherwise limited freedom.

Compared to Sartre, Camus has a more nuanced and complex definition of freedom. He separates the absurd freedom- the freedom over one's thoughts and actions- from a greater spiritual freedom to completely choose one's destiny that people try to seek out despite not being able to. According to Camus, "freedom to be, which alone can serve as basis for a truth, does not exist. Death is there as the only reality" (Camus 57). He goes on to note that humanity has "adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave of his liberty" (Camus 58). Almost paradoxically, this leads Camus to conclude that the best way to maximized freedom is by accepting its limitations. Accepting that freedom is limited means accepting that the future is not guaranteed- or rather that "there is no future", and that there is, therefore, no point in concerning oneself with the future and to instead focus on what one can control in the present. This in turn restores one's "freedom of action" (Camus 53). Thus, embracing the absurd maximizes freedom because doing so one is paradoxically ceasing to try to maximize their freedom to dictate their future, allowing them to recognize their true freedom lies in part in the conscious choice and revolt to not pursue eternal freedom. An absurd freedom is being free from the future and hence free to embrace the struggle at hand. This allows for "the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it" (Camus 54).

Unlike *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “Existentialism is a Humanism” does not go into the same depth of defining different types of freedom and their complexities and never explicitly separates freedom into the illusion of freedom and the limited freedom we do possess. However, I argue that Sartre implies a similar definition through his assertion that we must will the freedom of others in order to also will our own. This assertion rightfully suggests that our actions can influence how other people react in response. However, it also does not deny that we only truly have control over how we act and are otherwise heavily influenced by the actions of others. On a similar note, *The Myth of Sisyphus* does not talk about maximizing anyone’s freedom by one’s own, and yet I still argue that *The Myth of Sisyphus*’ idea of freedom is compatible with “Existentialism is a Humanism’s”. The absence of greater freedom beyond one’s thoughts and action doesn’t preclude (and in fact forces) the individual from deciding how to use their freedom of action. Camus agrees that a defining characteristic of man is wanting to be free, and he likewise argues that man should try to maximize his freedom- granted under very specific additions. It follows, therefore, that the absurd man in *The Myth of Sisyphus* would agree with Sartre’s maxim to act as you will all of humanity to act if nothing else out of their own self-interest. We should not concern ourselves and embrace the absurd if someone is acting in a way that limits our control over our lives, but this is not to say that we shouldn’t still use our limited freedom in a way that promotes others. This is not to argue that Camus and Sartre present identical definitions of freedom, but rather to argue that they are compatible when constructing a system of morality that rejects objective moral truth. Sartre offers the legislating principle of acting as a representative for humanity, while Camus offers a more personal directive to

accept absurdity and the futility of trying to control more than one can control. These views of freedom together can be used jointly to form a basic existentialist guide of how to live a good life through maximization of freedom both for the self and for others. Both philosophers ultimately create a sort of obligation to maximize freedom in order to live the best life. How and what this freedom is remains subjective, but both Sartre and Camus make it possible to differentiate between actions that embrace this goal of freedom from actions that in Sartre's words would be a "deception" of the self.

Still, it is beneficial to examine how Sartre and Camus' philosophies may contradict each other. One key difference between Sartre and Camus' philosophies is the role of passion. Sartre believes that existence precedes essence, and thus he believes passion to be the creation of man. According to Sartre, "The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand passion as a destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, and which, therefore, is an excuse for them" (Sartre 5). Man can have their passions, but so too does man have the power to choose his passions. One's choice to follow their passions is just that, a choice, and thus Sartre believes that "any man who takes refuge behind the excuse of his passions, or by inventing some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver" (Sartre 11). Under Sartre's notion that with total freedom comes total responsibility, passion is not the driver behind man's condition or choices because that role belongs only to man himself.

For Camus, man is a creature driven by passion and along with freedom and revolt is even one of the main consequences of the absurd man that Camus examines. Part of this difference comes from that unlike Sartre, Camus does believe that essence

precedes existence (which while it is outside the scope of the paper is part of the reason there is debate over if Camus deserves to be categorized as an existentialist).

According to Camus, man is by nature a passionate creature, and this is one of the things that separates them from other animals. To the question of whether there is a point to death, Camus responds “I cannot know unless I pursue, without reckless passion, in the sole light of evidence, the reasoning of which I am here suggesting the source. This is what I call an absurd reasoning” (Camus 9). Camus’ absurd man is defined in part by his passion for life and living more and is synonymous with the very notion of living a good life. This is especially seen through the heralding of Sisyphus as an absurd hero. He is driven by the passion for life, tempting the gods by outrunning and escaping death for a few more years on Earth. In the afterlife, as punishment Sisyphus is famously condemned to rolling a boulder up a hill for eternity only for it to fall back down to the bottom for Sisyphus to have to start again. Yet, he is content because, in a true absurdist fashion, “a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling” (Camus 123). Through his passion, Sisyphus, even in death, lives to see another day. He lives to see another battle, and in the absurdist nature of his life, this is enough to make him content.

The question becomes whether these disagreements create substantial differences over morality for “Existentialism is a Humanism” and *The Myth of Sisyphus* to be incompatible with each other. I found that even though these elements are in direct contrast with each other and fundamental parts of both Sartre and Camus’ philosophies, this does not greatly change the end result of following their philosophies in terms of morality. For starters, I don’t see the issue of essence versus existence to be

a moral question, especially when taking into consideration that Sartre and Camus still ultimately come to similar conclusions that no rulebook can be used to find the right way to live or the meaning of life. Both still otherwise reach similar existentialist views on the meaning and purpose of life, and therefore on a moral front the matter of essence versus existence to become relatively moot.

The issue of how Sartre and Camus view passion, is a more difficult question to answer because it does have moral implications for both philosophies. In a unique way, however, I think this actually bolsters the ability for an existentialist system of ethics to function. It embraces the notion of moral subjectivity and demonstrates that not a single way of thinking works for everyone. For Sartre, just because passion is something that is created by man doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. Nor is Sartre's rejection of passion an outright rejection of its purpose, rather "Existentialism is a Humanism" warns of the dangers of passion as a "destructive torrent" or an excuse. Camus believes that man is inherently a creature of passion, but that doesn't prevent man from exercising self-restraint. Speaking on moral systems, Camus even goes so far as to point out that "A mind imbued with the absurd merely judges that those consequences must be considered calmly" (Camus 68). The subject of passion causes *The Myth of Sisyphus* and "Existentialism is a Humanism" to offer different perspectives on how to live the best life, but because both offer views of morality where nothing is prohibited by nature, how one views passion becomes one of the many subjective things that influence how one may make moral decisions under an existentialist system. Thus, Camus and Sartre's differences on passion not only don't greatly affect the compatibility of their moral theories with the other, but it emphasizes the existentialist notion that there is no one

right answer and numerous methods can be used to ultimately reach similar conclusions that still work within the system.

Up until this point, most of this essay has addressed the compatibility of “Existentialism is a Humanism” and *The Myth of Sisyphus* as complimentary moral systems, but in defending existentialist ethics it is also necessary to examine criticisms of their practicality. In a 1955 essay in response to Sartre’s existentialist philosophies, American philosopher Alvin Plantinga addresses the primary concerns regarding the implementation of an existentialist ethic system. Plantinga suggests that “If the basis of the obligation to desire freedom and to accept it is that as a matter of fact we do desire it, then anyone who refuses to desire it has by that very fact destroyed the basis for his obligation to desire it... Any choice is as good as any other; there is no possibility of making a moral mistake” (Plantinga 250). This is arguably the most common criticism of existentialism, that it is not sufficient enough in discouraging certain behaviors because nothing is inherently immoral. To some degree, this is true. There is an absence of a clear sense of right and wrong that exists in any other system of ethics. However, I disagree with Plantinga’s premise that there is not a sufficient enough obligation to “desire” freedom. Australian philosopher Jonathan Crowe makes the argument critics of Sartre make the mistake of simply interpreting that Sartre is saying that freedom is subjectively valuable when in reality we should be viewing Sartre’s argument that the “worth of freedom is self-evident.” Hence, “since the value of freedom is self-evident to anyone who carefully considers the nature of ethical action, it would be inconsistent for us to act in a way that undermines freedom’s moral value. In other words, any attempt to deny freedom’s worth is unsustainable because it goes against moral values that

anyone would recognise, upon reflection, to be correct” (Crowe). Viewing the value of freedom as self-evident makes promoting freedom as a value a moral obligation. Only the person acting truly knows if they are acting in good fate, and the difference between right and wrong may be more subjective than other moral theories, but that doesn’t mean that there isn’t a difference between right and wrong. Ultimately, I think the argument that existentialist morality is too subjective is misguided because it condemns it for effectively having no enforcement value when in reality no moral system does.

There is no inherent repercussion if we don’t hold ourselves to the categorical imperative, or if someone doesn’t follow set virtues of honesty or modesty. Under religious codes of ethics, there may be a belief in an afterlife that serves as an “enforcement” measure, but even then there is nothing holding anyone from following these ethics in life. Morality is a system of right versus wrong and nothing more. We can’t prove whether someone is acting out of self-deception, but that doesn’t change that they are acting out of self-deception if they aren’t fulfilling their duty to be a representative of humanity.

Additionally, a lack of ability to non-subjectively define morality does not prevent someone from facing consequences for their actions. Looking at *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “there may be responsible persons, but there are no guilty ones, in its opinion. At very most, such a mind will consent to use past experience as a basis for its future actions...A mind imbued with the absurd merely judges that those consequences must be considered calmly. It is ready to pay up.” (Camus 68). The absurd man recognizes that not having an a priori sense of morality makes it difficult to condemn actions on a moral level. However, they must still consider the overall repercussions of their actions

and furthermore be willing to openly accept these repercussions. This is particularly relevant in legal systems. The code of law may or may not align with what defines their subjective moral compass, but the legal system is the socially constructed guidelines society agrees as being mutually beneficial for the functioning of everyday life.

Accepting the repercussions of this legal system is part of the price that the absurd man pays for continuing to live in society, and Camus' recognition that they must be willing to accept the repercussions is an important reason why society won't simply collapse under an existentialist code of ethics as some critics suggest.

In conclusion, an existentialist framework of society does not mean a morally bankrupt or malfunctioning society. Despite direct contrasts in how they see passion and existence, both Albert Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* and Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" provide sufficient basis for a moral philosophy that while has no a priori existence, still provides a framework of how to live a moral and authentic life primarily through a mutual focus on the goal of maximizing one's own freedom. Sartre's central point is that given that man is free they are forced to act as a representative for all of humanity forms the foundational obligation needed in a moral system. Camus further looks at the multiple different forms of freedom. He agrees with Sartre that man naturally desires freedom, but explains that the absurd man realizes that eternal freedom is impossible and embracing this paradoxically allows man to maximize their freedom through the realization that all they have control over are their thoughts and actions. Together, Sartre and Camus offer two different philosophies that together are compatible in acting as a concrete, however subjective, base of sound moral decision making.

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