Scientific Research Publishing

Open Journal of Philosophy, 2023, 13, 342-371
https://www.scirp.org/journal/ojpp
ISSN Online: 2163-9442
ISSN Print: 2163-9434

Who Is the Real Existentialist? Debunking Sartre's Distinction between Christian and Atheistic Existentialists

Randall S. Firestone

El Camino College, Crenshaw Blvd., Torrance, California, USA
Email: Randyfirestone@verizon.net

How to cite this paper: Firestone, R. S. (2023). Who Is the Real Existentialist? Debunking Sartre's Distinction between Christian and Atheistic Existentialists. *Open Journal of Philosophy, 13,* 342-371.
https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2023.132024

Received: March 11, 2023
Accepted: May 16, 2023
Published: May 19, 2023

Abstract

In Sartre's 1946 article "The Humanism of Existentialism," Sartre places existentialists into two categories, Christian or atheist, and contends that existentialism works differently for each of them. This paper argues that such a distinction should not have been made because existentialist beliefs, views, and themes do not differ based on one's religiosity. This paper specifically examines three examples in Sartre's article which undermine his position, and further argues that Sartre made an equivocation fallacy by conflating two different types of essence, one's innate essence and one's character essence. The paper then explores six central existentialist themes to demonstrate that in their existentialist beliefs both the theist and the atheist agree. Those six themes are authenticity, sincerity vs. bad faith, the absurdity of life, the meaning of life, choice, and responsibility. The paper also examines the issue of moral objectivity vs. non-objectivity, and argues that not only is this not an existentialist issue, but even if it were one's belief on moral objectivity does not cleanly correspond to one's religious beliefs, so here again there is no basis to distinguish the Christian and the atheist. The paper concludes that any disagreement between existentialists who are Christian and those who are atheist comes down to differences in their religious beliefs, not their existentialist views.

Keywords

Existentialism, Religious Existentialists, Christian Existentialists, Atheistic Existentialists, the Humanism of Existentialism, Existentialism Is a Humanism, Responsibility, Choice, Absurdity, Meaning of Life, Absurdity of Life, Authenticity, Authentic, Inauthenticity, Inauthentic, Sincerity, Bad Faith, Moral Objectivity, Moral Relativism, Moral Non-Objectivity, Existentialist Despair, Existentialist Anguish, Existentialist Angst, Character

Essence, Innate Essence

1. Sartre's Error

In Jean-Paul Sartre's 1946 article "The Humanism of Existentialism," which was based on a speech he gave in 1945, Sartre provides us with what has become the leading paper in explaining the fundamental concepts and attitudes of Existentialism. In that article, Sartre goes to great lengths to distinguish existentialists who are Christian from those who are atheists, and makes it clear that he believes that existentialism works differently for each group.[1]

> What complicates matters is that there are two kinds of existentialist; first, those who are Christian, among whom I would include Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both Catholic; and on the other hand the atheistic existentialists, among whom I class Heidegger, and then the French existentialists and myself. (Sartre, 1946: pp. 291-292)

Later in the paper Sartre implies that it is only the existentialist who is an atheist who feels forlorn or abandoned in the world because they must make choices for which they are fully responsible but have no God to turn to who can validate that their choices are moral or beneficial.

> When we speak of forlornness, a term Heidegger was fond of, we mean only that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this… Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He can't start making excuses for himself. (Sartre, 1946: pp. 295, 296)

In the last paragraph of his paper, Sartre seems to even suggest that religion runs counter to existentialism when he states that "Existentialism is nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position." (Sartre, 1946: p. 308) He then concludes his article by not merely defending his existentialist beliefs, but by mocking the Christian:

> It isn't trying to plunge man into despair at all. But if one calls every attitude of unbelief despair, like the Christians, then the word is not being used in its original sense… In this sense existentialism is optimistic, a doctrine of action, and it is plain dishonesty for Christians to make no distinction between their own despair and ours and then to call us despairing. (Sartre, 1946: p. 308)

That is how his talk and article ended—with emphasis on a difference between the atheist and the theist, instead of the common beliefs they share in their exis-

[1]Sartre sometimes contrasts the atheist specifically with the Christian, other times the distinction is based on the belief in God. For this reason, I will use the terms Christian, theist, and religious person somewhat interchangeably in this paper.

tentialist views.[2] This paper contends that Sartre was incorrect to think that the beliefs of existentialists who are theists in general, or Christians in particular, in any way run counter to the key ideas, principles, and themes of existentialism, including those existentialist themes which have been emphasized by the atheistic existentialists. Moreover, there has been an unreflective acceptance of Sartre's distinction between existentialists who are Christian and those who are atheists which has been reinforced over time to the detriment of existentialism in the following ways.

First, as Sartre's article is the first introduction to existentialism for so many people, especially students, his dismissal of religious existentialists as somehow not "fully" existentialist is likely to have discouraged many theists from taking Existentialism seriously and giving it its due. This is buttressed by the fact that the most well-known philosophers associated with existentialism are the atheists Sartre, Camus, and Nietzsche.

Second, many Christian philosophers who have adopted existentialist views have accepted Sartre's distinction and made a concerted effort to point out problems with the views of their atheistic colleagues.[3] This is disheartening because their critiques are really on the atheistic position, not on existentialist views and themes, although the critiques often misleadingly appear to be challenging existentialist ideas.

Third, this distinction is a source of confusion. Sartre asserts that not all the existentialist beliefs of the atheist and the theist coincide, but precisely where he believes the divergences occur are anything but clear. This is because Sartre's analysis of this point is faulty, and his own examples undermine his position.

As such, we can say that there are existentialists who are theists, and other existentialists who are atheists, but the differences between them have little bearing on their existentialism itself. In other words, the ideas that make up and form the content of Existentialism do not differ based on whether the existentialist is a Christian or an atheist.

I am certainly not asserting that there are no differences in the beliefs and belief systems of the atheist and the theist. They have substantial differences in their life orientations and world views. But I am arguing that this is irrelevant to existentialist ideas because existentialism is an enterprise that explores the hu-

[2]One might ask why Sartre was so intent on drawing the distinction between the atheist and the theist when it came to their existentialism. This is a difficult question to answer, but we can say that Sartre's atheistic philosophy often engaged with Christian ideas and dogma. Kate Kirkpatrick, author of the 2017 book *Sartre and Theology*, gives us an idea of how often Sartre thought about religion and how it shaped many of his beliefs, including his atheism: "On his view, all human beings long for a clear-sighted witness to see our true selves and to promise the justice we can't see in this world. We can take refuge in the idea of God, to escape the brute fact that we may never be truly seen by another and that justice may never come. Faith in God is one of the many ways that human beings avoid freedom and responsibility: in short, Sartre says, faith in God is bad faith… The idea of God—whether God exists or not—had a profound influence on Sartre's philosophy. And this philosophy was not formed in an irreligious cloister—it met, engaged with, and inspired theology." (Kirkpatrick, 2017)

[3]See for example Kingston's book *French Existentialism*: *A Christian Critique* (Kingston, 1961), or the books and articles of Paul Tillich and Gabriel Marcel.

man condition. It is an attempt to see what humans share. Nobody makes this clearer than Heidegger, who devotes his book *Being and Time* to an examination of what it is to be a human being, which includes an examination of how humans are different from other beings and entities.[4] Sartre is engaged in a similar enterprise throughout many of his philosophical writings.[5]

Because existentialism is observing and analyzing the human condition in general, it is not an enterprise that is concerned with the different belief systems associated with different groups. There is no capitalist existentialism or Marxist existentialism, hedonist existentialism, feminist existentialism, etc., although one certainly can (and many have) used existentialist themes and ideas within any of these frameworks. So, for example, existentialist principles and themes were fruitfully applied to feminist views by Simone de Beauvoir when she explains that what it is to be a human being applies equally to both men and women. Beauvoir specifically states that a woman, as much as a man, wants to be autonomous in that they wish "to engage in freely chosen projects," and further, each woman has "an indefinitely open future" in that a girl, just like a boy, can grow up and choose to be a doctor, lawyer, astronaut, cook, or philosopher. (Beauvoir, 1949: p. 303)

Similarly, there are Marxists who are existentialists and non-Marxists who are existentialists, but the two groups do not differ in their existentialist views; rather, their differences are based on their attitudes toward Marxism.[6] And I contend that this same logic holds for the religious person and the atheist. The human condition which existentialism examines applies to each of them with equal force.

So although the atheist might suffer from types of anguish that the theist does not, and likewise the theist might suffer from types of anguish that the atheist will not, both groups suffer the types of anguish that are common to all people, and this is what existentialism addresses—the commonalities that we all share. Specifically, only those of particular religious beliefs will suffer the angst or anguish associated with the possibility that they or their loved ones might go to Hell, and only the atheist will suffer the anguish that what awaits them after

[4]Heidegger explains his focus on what it is to be a human being or Dasein as follows: "Being is always the Being of an entity… As ways in which man behaves, sciences have the manner of Being which this entity—man himself—possesses. This entity we denote by the term 'Dasein' …Moreover, Dasein itself has a special distinctiveness as compared to other entities, and it is worth our while to bring this to view in a provisional way." (Heidegger, 1927: sections 3 & 4. pp. 212-213.) This focus on the question of what it is to be a human being was a natural progression from Husserl's Phenomenology and phenomenological method, which is not surprising since Heidegger was a student of Husserl.

[5]See, for example, Sartre's chapter on bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* where Sartre explains that human beings have facticity and transcendence, and are for oneself and for others (Sartre, 1943: pp. 86-116). These terms will be explained later in this paper.

[6]We should note that certain aspects of Marxism are probably incompatible with some existentialist views. For example, the idea that a violent Communist revolution would inevitably occur in every country (causal determinism) would not be a view endorsed by existentialists who would believe that since we have free will there is no inevitability about the future. However, a Marxist could certainly endorse many of the other existentialist beliefs, such as existentialist beliefs on the importance of our choices and personal responsibility. Similarly, the specific beliefs of some Christians would cause them to dismiss some existentialist beliefs but still allow them to endorse other existentialist views.

death is eternal nonexistence. Though there are real differences in the types of anguish each may suffer, there are also some types of anguish common to both and that is due to the human condition that applies to everyone, such as the anguish of whether they are making good decisions in their lives, are treating people in a manner of which they can be proud in their own eyes, are engaging in worthwhile activities, and are leading lives which are meaningful to them. These shared types of anguish are where the existentialist enterprise resides.

Section 2 of this paper will examine three examples used by Sartre in "The Humanism of Existentialism" which show that the existentialist who is a theist and the existentialist who is an atheist hold identical views when it comes to important aspects of existentialism. We will also see that Sartre made an equivocation fallacy by conflating innate essence and character essence. Section 3 will then examine six prominent existentialist themes to demonstrate that both the existentialist who is a Christian and the existentialist who is an atheist endorse each of these themes. Both sections seek to establish that the foundational and primary existentialist positions are not altered due to one's belief or non-belief in God, and therefore Sartre should not have differentiated existentialists based on their religious beliefs or lack thereof.

2. Three Examples from "Existentialism Is a Humanism"

2.1. The Paper-Cutter and the Book

Sartre asserts that what the atheist existentialists "have in common is that they think that existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1946: p. 292), while claiming that this is not true about the religious existentialist. What Sartre means by this is that people are born and then create their character or essence through the choices they make and actions they take. Each person decides whether they will be a truth-teller or liar, generous or selfish, compassionate or uncaring. When you are born nobody knows, not even your parents, which of these you will choose. But it is through these choices (and only through these choices) that we develop our character or essence. We can call this our character essence, and it is formed by our actions.

Nobody knows our character essence when we are born. For example, when we look at a little baby, we have no idea what decisions they will make and actions they will take in their lives. That will be up to them. What we do know is that whether the child is brought up to be a Christian or an atheist, as the child grows into adulthood their choices and actions will form their character essence. The child's character essence cannot be formed before he or she makes their choices and takes their actions. Note that you change your character essence when you change your actions, as you can become a truth-teller even if you had been a habitual liar in the past, and you can become outgoing even if your natural propensity or inclination is to be an introvert.

Sartre claims that this contrasts with the creator or manufacturer of a paper cutter and the author of a book who know the essence of what they are creating

before it is created. For example, the manufacturer of the paper cutter knows that they will be creating a paper cutter, the type of paper cutter it will be, the specific characteristics of the paper cutter, such as its size and shape, and the situations where this paper cutter would be most practical and useful. Sartre asserts that the Christian existentialist is in a similar situation because they believe that God knows your essence before you are created. But we need to notice that Sartre is no longer addressing character essence here, but rather is addressing what we can call our innate essence or starting point.

> When we conceive God as the Creator, He is generally thought of as a superior sort of artisan… and that when God creates He knows exactly what He is creating. Thus, the concept of man in the mind of God is comparable to the concept of paper-cutter in the mind of the manufacturer, and, following certain techniques and a conception, God produces man, just as the artisan, following a definition and a technique, makes a paper-cutter. Thus the individual man is a realization of a certain concept in the divine intelligence… Thus, here too the essence of man precedes the historical existence we find in nature. (Sartre, 1946: p. 292)

Sartre does not seem to recognize that he is conflating innate essence with character essence when he uses the word "essence" in the above quote. These are two different types of essences. Sartre describes our innate essence as the "realization of a certain concept in the divine intelligence" and "precedes the historical existence" of the birth of each individual. What is our innate essence? It would be our genetics and the innate abilities and limitations that come along with our genetics, including our free will. This would include our natural or genetic dispositions and temperaments, such as being more drawn to introversion instead of extroversion. If there were an all-knowing God who created us, then that God would know our innate essence. But if God gave us free will, as most Christians believe, then it would be up to us to create our character essence. Indeed, according to most Christians, our actions are up to us, not God because God gave us free will, and those actions will determine our character essence and whether we later will go to and reside in Heaven or Hell.

In other words, if I am understanding Sartre correctly, he commits an equivocation fallacy by using the word essence to mean something different for the theist than for the atheist by not distinguishing our innate essence from our character essence. When Sartre addresses the theist's beliefs about essence, he is referring to innate essence, not character essence, but when he addresses the atheist's position on essence, he is addressing character essence. More importantly, it is only our character essence that Sartre and existentialism are concerned about, and in this the theist and atheist stand in the same position as they both must create their character essence by their decisions and actions.

Indeed, Sartre's important point that "existence precedes essence" is not making an observation about our innate essence because our innate essence is

present when we are born. Our existence does not precede our innate essence, and both the theist and the atheist would agree with this as we are all born into a particular set of biological and social circumstances that set certain limits on our abilities, create particular propensities, etc. However, "existence precedes essence" is about our character essence which is continually being formed after our birth or existence has begun.

To summarize this point, most Christians believe that they control their after-life destination and existence in either Heaven or Hell by their free-will actions on earth. Their essence as a good or bad person is up to them to create by their decisions and actions. As such, both the Christian and the atheist agree that one's character essence is formed after we exist, and therefore both likewise support the statement that "existence precedes essence."

Certainly, human beings are not like books or paper-cutters. Our character essence will be created by us; we are not born with it, and this is as true for the Christian as it is for the atheist.

2.2. The Anguish of Abraham and the Madwoman

Our second example also demonstrates why Sartre should not have created the distinction between existentialists who are theists and those who are atheists. Sartre believes that we have anguish over the responsibility of setting an example, and most of us believe that certain actions set a good example while others set a bad example. I think every parent understands Sartre's point of view, as we may tell our children to tell the truth or to not lose their temper, but if in our children's presence we do not follow our own advice, we feel anguish over our hypocrisy and the mixed message we are sending to them. Sartre further explains how responsibility leads to anguish:

> All leaders know this anguish. That doesn't keep them from acting; on the contrary, it is the very condition of their action… We shall see that this kind of anguish, which is the kind that existentialism describes, is explained, in addition, by a direct responsibility to the other men whom it involves. (Sartre, 1946: p. 295)

Sartre then supports his view of anguish by his example of the "anguish of Abraham," and buttresses this with the story of an apparently insane or demented woman.

> You know the story: an angel has ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son; if it really were an angel who has come and said, "You are Abraham, you shall sacrifice your son," everything would be all right. But everyone might first wonder, "Is it really an angel, and am I really Abraham? What proofs do I have?"
>
> There was a madwoman who had hallucinations; someone used to speak to her on the telephone and give her orders. Her doctor asked her, "Who is it who talks to you?" She answered: "He says it is God." What proof did she

> really have that it was God? If an angel comes to me, what proof is there that it's an angel? If I hear voices, what proof is there that they come from heaven and not from hell, or from the subconscious, or a pathological condition? Who proves that they are addressed to me? (Sartre, 1946: p. 294)

Notice that Sartre gives us the example of Abraham, clearly a religious person, and that even though Abraham believes in God, he cannot use that as an excuse for killing his son. If Abraham had put his son to death, then he would have been fully responsible for having done so.

Let us look at the choices and decisions that Abraham would have to make before his final decision to kill his son. Abraham would have to answer each of the following questions in the affirmative:

1) Do angels exist?

2) Is it really an Angel that is communicating with me, or is the Angel just something I created or imagined in my mind, perhaps due to a pathological condition or an imaginative nature?

3) Is there a God?

4) If it is an angel, was the angel really sent by God?

5) Did the angel correctly hear and understand God's message for me?

6) Did the angel correctly communicate God's message or command to me?

7) Is the angel delivering the message to the right Abraham, or could it be intended for another person named Abraham?

8) Should I follow or obey God's message?

This last question is crucial because even if there is a God and the angel is correctly communicating God's desire to and for Abraham, Abraham still can refuse to kill his son. After all, perhaps God is testing Abraham to see whether Abraham will stand up to Him and do what is right, even if that means to disobey or challenge God. Similarly, it is possible that God wants Abraham to demonstrate that he is not a blind follower, but worthy to be a righteous leader, and righteous leaders do not kill their innocent children.

The philosopher Thomas Anderson, a theist, interprets Sartre similarly and concludes that there is no escaping responsibility for your decisions. One cannot appeal to Scripture or God's law since a person can always choose to not follow Scripture. Anderson states: "I cannot appeal to any objective value criterion, such as God's law, to justify the values I choose since that criterion itself would be of value only if I freely choose it to be." (Anderson, 2010: p. 5)

The point is that the religious person, Abraham in this case, cannot evade responsibility for their actions. They cannot even blame God if they follow God's wishes or commands. Indeed, if we have free will, as most Christians believe, both the religious existentialist and the atheistic existentialist will have anxiety or anguish over whether they have made a good choice, and further, will have responsibility for their actions. What is true of the atheist also is true of the religious person. Responsibility for one's decisions and actions, the centerpiece of Sartre's philosophy, applies to everyone, whether they believe in God or not.

2.3. The Student's Dilemma

In Sartre's third example he explicitly shows us why the existentialist who is religious is in the same position as the atheist. First let's look at the atheist. Sartre claims that the existentialist who is an atheist is forlorn, meaning he feels forsaken or abandoned in this world in the sense he must make decisions and take actions, and is fully responsible for those decisions and actions, but cannot know or demonstrate that those decisions and actions are moral or the right or best ones, as they do not believe there is a God to tell us what is moral, right, or the best. "When we speak of forlornness… we mean only that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this." (Sartre, 1946: p. 295)

Continuing with that line of thought, Sartre goes on to explain that man is "condemned to be free" because one is born into the world, must take actions, and due to their possessing free will, each person "is responsible for everything he does," even though they cannot be sure they have made a good decision or have acted in a manner that will achieve a satisfactory result. (Sartre, 1946: p. 296)

But after telling us that the atheist is forlorn because they cannot be sure that what they are doing is the best course of action, he again undercuts his distinction between existentialists who are atheists and those who are theists with the example of his student who came to him for advice of whether to go fight in the war (World War II) or stay with his mother. His student, who was apparently a Christian, finds himself in the same boat as the atheist in that despite his religious beliefs, he does not know what the best action is. Sartre describes the situation as follows:

> To give you an example which will enable you to understand forlornness better, I shall cite the case of one of my students who came to see me under the following circumstances: his father was on bad terms with his mother, and, moreover, was inclined to be a collaborationist; his older brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940, and the young man, with somewhat immature but generous feelings, wanted to avenge him. His mother lived alone with him, very much upset by the half-treason of her husband and the death of her older son; the boy was her only consolation.
> The boy was faced with the choice of leaving for England and joining the Free French Forces—that is, leaving his mother behind—or remaining with his mother and helping her to carry on. (Sartre, 1946: pp. 296-297)

Sartre argues that his student's religion could not save him from this dilemma.

> Who could help him choose? Christian doctrine? No. Christian doctrine says, "Be charitable, love your neighbor, take the more rugged path, etc., etc." But which is the more rugged path? Whom should he love as a brother? The fighting man or his mother? Which does the greater good, the vague act of fighting in a group, or the concrete one of helping a particular human being to go on living? Who can decide *a priori*? Nobody. (Sartre, 1946: p. 297)

Sartre's point is supported, first, by the fact that this exact situation does not appear in Scripture. Second, one could cite Scriptural passages to rationally support either choice. Third, even if Scripture described a strikingly similar dilemma, disparities in time, culture, and precise situation after the elapse of 2000 years or more make for differences that could suggest or even dictate a different result. One simply cannot be sure what to do based on Scripture or their religion.

One might object that when Scripture does not provide a clear answer to modern-day problems, one is relieved of responsibility by going to their priest or minister for advice. But this will not work because you choose which priest or minister to consult, and you decide whether to follow their advice, so there is no escaping responsibility. Sartre explains as follows:

> But if you seek advice from a priest, for example, you have chosen this priest; you already knew, more or less, just about what advice he was going to give you. In other words, choosing your advisor is involving yourself. The proof of this is that if you are a Christian, you will say, "Consult a priest." But some priests are collaborating [with the Nazis], some are just marking time, some are resisting. Which to choose? (Sartre, 1946: p. 298)

So we see here that Sartre's own example demonstrates that the religious person is in the same shoes as the atheist: each of them must make decisions, and neither of them can be sure, at least in many cases, that they are making the moral or best decision, and yet they are fully responsible for their decisions and actions. Both the Christian and atheist experience forlornness because they must make decisions and take actions for which they are responsible despite the uncertainty of whether they are doing the right thing and/or taking the most effective action to achieve the results they desire.

We can see that Sartre's own examples in "The Humanism of Existentialism" undermine his distinction between existentialists and instead demonstrate that the main ideas of existentialism apply equally to the atheist and the religious person.

3. Existentialist Themes

In this next section, I want to explore six of the fundamental themes of Existentialism with the intention of demonstrating that all existentialists, whether they are religious or not, share the same or substantially similar viewpoints on these themes, again demonstrating that Sartre should not have divided existentialists into two separate categories based on their beliefs about the presence or absence of God. The six existentialist themes we will look at are authenticity, sincerity vs. bad faith, the absurdity of life, the meaning of life, choice, and responsibility.[7]

[7]Due to lack of space, we cannot examine all existentialist themes. Although I have mentioned the idea of anguish or angst, we will not be exploring the various views and insights of the prominent existentialists on this issue. Likewise, we will not ruminate on the existentialist theme of the importance of the individual, which had been downplayed by earlier philosophers such as Hegel and those philosophers who had emphasized the common good as opposed to individual autonomy and

3.1. Authenticity

One of the central themes of Existentialism which we find in the writings of both the theists, such as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, and the atheists, such as Sartre and Nietzsche, is the importance of being an authentic individual. Authenticity in this context is about having views which are truly your own views, and which are based on your own reasons. Existentialists believe that most people lead largely inauthentic lives in that their views are a mere reflection of societal views. They follow the ideas, values, morals, rules, customs, and the generally accepted ways of living of their society, religion, community, and parents. Unreflective or blind following is inauthentic, and all of us, whether we are theists or atheists, have the ability to question our society and to be authentic.

Sartre was a champion of authenticity. His philosophy centers around the idea that we cannot blame societal expectations for our behavior since we can choose to act contrary to those expectations. Sartre's famous example of the waiter in the café in *Being and Nothingness* drives home this point. Society might expect the waiter to act in a certain way, but the waiter need not do so. In fact, the waiter can even choose to not come to work, even though he may mask from himself this possibility. Similarly, the soldier cannot blame their actions and evade responsibility based on the claim that they were just following orders as they could choose to disobey those orders. "Society demands that he limit himself to his function as a grocer, just as the soldier at attention makes himself into a soldier-thing…" (Sartre, 1943: p. 229) But the soldier is not a thing, they are a person, and can choose to not follow orders when to do so would result in the deaths of innocent victims.

The reputed founder of Existentialism, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who lived a religious life devoted to Christianity, stressed the importance of authenticity, as reflected in the following passage:

> The more the collective idea comes to dominate even the ordinary perspective, the more forbidding seems the transition to becoming an individual existing human being instead of losing oneself in the race and saying "we," "our age," "the nineteenth century." (Kierkegaard, 1846: p. 23)

Although Kierkegaard was a devout Christian, he emphasized that one should not be a blind follower of religion. He acknowledged that his belief in God required a leap of faith because the existence of God could not be proven. Moreover, he actively questioned the Lutheran Church, which was the dominant church in Denmark.

> But one thing I will not do, not for any price: I will not by suppression or by performing tricks try to produce the impression that the ordinary Christianity in the land and the New Testament's Christianity are like one another. (Kierkegaard, 1855a: p. 33)

In fact, Kierkegaard viewed one of his missions as questioning the accepted ideas of Christianity. He explained as follows: "My only analogy is Socrates. My

task is a Socratic task—to rectify the concept of what it means to be a Christian." (Kierkegaard, 1854-1855: p. 23)

Although the superb Russian writer whose ideas are associated with existentialism, Feodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), was a religious person, he too cautions us about blindly following religion. In the chapter "The Grand Inquisitor" in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, a Cardinal expresses the Church's demand for blind obedience, which clearly Dostoevsky is perturbed about.

> But, with us, all will be happy and will no longer rebel or destroy one another as under Thy freedom. Oh, we shall persuade them that they will only become free when they renounce their freedom to us and submit to us. (Dostoevsky, 1880: p. 58)

The existentialist who did the most extreme questioning of both Western morality and Christianity was the German atheistic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). He viewed most people as acting and living like they were part of a herd who blindly followed one another without questioning or reflection. Nietzsche declares "To lure many away from the herd, for that I have come." (Nietzsche, 1885: Z, I, 9: p. 23) The philosopher's role, according to Nietzsche, is to question society, not to accept the ideals of their time.

> More and more it seems to be that the philosopher, being *of necessity* a man of tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, has always found himself, and *had* to find himself, in contradiction to his today: his enemy was ever the ideal of today. (Nietzsche, 1887: BGE, VI, 212: p. 327)

Nietzsche champions the "sovereign individual" or what he elsewhere calls the *ubermensch*, his idea of the ideal person.

> …we will find as the ripest fruit on its tree the *sovereign individual*, the individual resembling only himself, free again from the morality of custom, autonomous and supermoral (for "autonomous" and "moral" are mutually exclusive), in short, the human being with his own independent long will… (Nietzsche, 1888: GM, II, 2: p. 86)

Sovereign individuals resemble only themselves because they do not unreflectively accept their society's ideas, values, and norms, and are supermoral or above morality in the sense that they do not blindly follow conventional ideas and rules about morality.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), another German existentialist, describes what inauthenticity looks like in very unflattering terms. He asserts that a human being, what he calls Da-sein, is for the most part dominated by societal views and values, what he refers to as "the others" and the "they."

> Da-sein stands in *subservience* to the others. It itself *is* not; the others have taken away its being from it… What is decisive is only the inconspicuous domination by others… the they unfolds its true dictatorship. We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way *they* enjoy themselves. We read, see, and

> judge literature and art the way *they* see and judge. But we also withdraw from the "great mass" the way *they* withdraw, we find "shocking" what *they* find shocking. (Heidegger, 1927: p. 124-125)

Heidegger makes it clear that philosophers and philosophy are engaged in an authentic enterprise because it is in the very nature of philosophy to question one's society. Moreover, he asserts that this questioning is a necessary enterprise: "Philosophy is one of the few autonomous creative possibilities and at times necessities of man's historical being-there." (Heidegger, 1935: p. 483)

So we can see that for the existentialist, authenticity is very important, and this involves questioning the ideas and values that one is raised with and is continually exposed to in their society. But notice that both the existentialists who are Christian, such as Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, and the existentialists who are atheists, such as Sartre and Nietzsche, agree that one should be free to question authority, including their Church leaders. This demand for authenticity falls squarely on all existentialists, not merely the atheistic ones. Of course, some religious persons are rather dogmatic and refuse to question the received doctrines. In this regard, such persons fail to fully embrace existentialism. But, as Kierkegaard and others have shown, this need not be the case. One can be wholly religious and wholly an existentialist. The point to take away is that the mere belief in God does not require a watering down of existentialist principles.

3.2. Sincerity vs. Bad Faith

There is a different type of authenticity which had roots in Heidegger's writings and flourished with Sartre. It is the idea that to be authentic one must be true to the type of being that a human being is. Sartre calls this sincerity. When one deceives themselves about the type of being that they are, Sartre says they are in bad faith.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's preeminent work, Sartre explains that there are four primary ways to be in bad faith, although these four are not exhaustive of all the ways someone can be in bad faith. The first two ways to be in bad faith are to either ignore or overemphasize one's facticity or one's transcendence. Facticity consists of the facts about oneself, such as where one was born, their height, who their parents are, and what they have done in the past (their experiences). By transcendence Sartre means our possibilities, which includes our future hopes and dreams. To understand a person, you must understand not only what they have done, but also what they intend to do in the future. For example, if one of my students were to tell me about themselves, they might well tell me about their future goals, whether it is to be an attorney, a doctor, an entrepreneur, a social worker, or a philosophy professor. That information would tell me something important about them.

Sartre points out that we often tend to overemphasize or ignore either our facticity or our transcendence. For example, when I say that I cannot do something which I can do, I am ignoring my capabilities and denying my transcendence,

my ability to take this action in the future. Similarly, if I claim that I will do something that I am physically incapable of doing, I am ignoring my facticity. When we do either, then according to Sartre we have acted in bad faith because we have failed to recognize the type of person that we are.

Heidegger had previously explained that we are born into a world with other people, and that we are constituted by that world and other people. A child would not survive without the help of their parents or others. Others influence us and we influence them. Of utmost importance, we are all reflections of the values and ideas accepted in our society. Sartre picks up on this, but instead of focusing on how society influences the individual, Sartre focuses more on how specific individuals we encounter in our lives affect our image of ourselves and our behavior. He concludes that there are another two aspects of a human being in that we are both "being-for-others" and "being-for-myself." (Sartre, 1943: p. 227) This means, at least in part, that we care about what others think of us—how they view us, judge us, compare us to others, etc. Sartre believes that we are in bad faith whenever we summarily dismiss the opinions others have of us, but also if we too-readily accept those opinions. We must juggle or balance other's views of ourselves. While we should give those views due consideration, we must take care to avoid either improperly rejecting or improperly accepting them. In his book *Saint Genet*: *Actor and Martyr*, Sartre poignantly expresses this point: "We are not lumps of clay, and what is important is not what people make of us but what we ourselves make of what they have made of us." (Sartre, 1952: p. 262)

Sartre notes that it is difficult to avoid bad faith. For example, we often talk by using labels. It makes communication more efficient. For example, we might describe someone as being kind, nice, selfish, inconsiderate, or otherwise. But Sartre notes that whenever we do so we act in bad faith because a person's character is not set in stone. While someone may have been selfish in the past, they have the ability to change and to not act selfishly in the present and future. So we have denied their transcendence when we attach a label to them, unless we make clear that the label only applies to the past.[8]

To be authentic or sincere, and to avoid acting in bad faith or being inauthentic, one has to balance these opposing parts of ourselves, both our facticity and our transcendence, and also being-for-others and being-for-myself. But this ap-

[8]Sartre demonstrates the torturous nature of speaking in this way when he describes the bad faith situation of an individual who refuses to acknowledge their identity. "To the extent that a pattern of conduct is defined as the conduct of an individual and to the extent that I have adopted this conduct, I am defined by it. But to the extent that human reality cannot be finally defined by patterns of conduct, I am not limited to it." (Sartre, 1943: p. 235) In other words, if we define a person by certain actions, the fact that they engaged in such conduct in the past does not necessitate that they will do so in the future. They are not defined by these actions forever, just as one is not honest or a liar forever. Every day, people make choices about whether to tell the truth or lie, so any label cannot dictate the future. However, when we label people, we tend to view that label as a permanent fact, and Sartre concludes that this puts us in bad faith by failing to recognize that our character traits can change over time based on our decisions and actions.

plies equally to the religious person and the atheist. The religious person has facts about themselves and possibilities for the future, just as the atheist does, and will have the same temptations to overemphasize one of these to the exclusion or detriment of the other. Likewise, both the religious person and the atheist must try to not be overly sensitive to the opinions of others about them, but also not be overly dismissive of those opinions. Further, both the Christian and the atheist need to be careful when they label a person's character traits and imply this is the person's character not only now, but also into the future. We can see that both the religious person and the atheist have identical challenges in maintaining sincerity or authenticity, and in avoiding bad faith or inauthenticity.

3.3. The Absurdity of Life

A common existentialist theme which became a centerpiece of the philosophies of Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Franz Kafka (1883-1924) is the idea that life is absurd. What many people may not realize is that the idea of the absurd comes up in the thought of other existentialists, including Sartre and Heidegger.

The absurdity of life covers a broad range of ideas.[9] One aspect of the absurd is that both individuals and even the human species seem insignificant when considered against the backdrop of the billions of years that the universe has existed. Further, our lives do not seem important when one realizes we are only one person among the more than 8 billion people alive now and the more than 100 billion that have lived in prior generations. Moreover, very few of us will be remembered even a mere 100 years from now.

Heidegger drives home this point in his famous chapter titled "The Fundamental Question of Metaphysics" from his book *Introduction to Metaphysics*, when he asks the question of why there is something (or essents) rather than nothing? Why is there a universe with things, including human beings? His obvious implication is that we need not have been here. Heidegger goes on to describe that although we are here, any human life seems completely insignificant, more like an unnoticed blink of an eye than a meaningful event in the history of the universe.

> Accordingly, if our question "Why are there essents rather than nothing?" is taken in its fullest sense, we must avoid singling out any special, particu-

[9]Some ideas associated with the absurdity of life but which will not be explored in this paper, many of which are broached by Camus in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, are the following: We plan for the future, but the future brings us closer to death. "Tomorrow, he was longing for tomorrow, whereas everything in him ought to reject it." (Camus, 1942b: p. 192) We expect nature to care for us and to care about us, but nature is indifferent and even hostile toward us. "The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia." (Camus, 1942b: p. 192); For some people, life is full of hardships and then they die, and for many others life is doing the same things day after day and then they die, so what was the point of it all? "Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday… Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life…" (Camus, 1942b: p. 191) Life is unfair as bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people, but we still expect life to be fair.

> lar essent, including man. For what indeed is man? Consider the earth within the endless darkness of space in the universe. By way of comparison it is a tiny grain of sand; between it and the next grain of its own size there extends a mile or more of emptiness; on the surface of this grain of sand there lives a crawling, bewildered swarm of supposedly intelligent animals, who for a moment have discovered knowledge. And what is the temporal extension of a human life amid all the millions of years? Scarcely a move of the second hand, a breath. Within the essent as a whole there is no legitimate ground for singling out this essent which is called mankind and to which we ourselves happen to belong. (Heidegger, 1935: p. 481)

In his book *Nausea*, Sartre too notices this same absurdity of a human life as each of us need not have existed. We easily could not have been born. Here are some passages where Sartre expresses such sentiments:

> We are a heap of living creatures, irritated, embarrassed at ourselves, we hadn't the slightest reason to be there, none of us, each one, confused, vaguely alarmed, felt in the way in relation to the others… I dreamed vaguely of killing myself to wipe out at least one of these superfluous lives… The word absurdity is coming to life under my pen… The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity… like other men they cannot succeed in not feeling superfluous. And in themselves, secretly, they are *superfluous*, that is to say, amorphous, vague, and sad. (Sartre, 1938: p. 216, 218)

Like Heidegger, Sartre confronts us with the uncomfortable idea that in the big scheme of things, none of us are needed, none of us are important, and as such there is an absurdity to our existence. Moreover, eventually, we will all be lost to time.

Camus drives home a similar point when he gives us the example of someone excitedly talking in a phone booth.

> Men too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive. (Camus, 1942b: p. 192)

In his book *The Stranger*, Camus poignantly expresses the seeming pointlessness of life and the ultimate skepticism about life's value that may come along with it.

> Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why… What difference could they make to me, the deaths of others, or a mother's love, or his God; or the way a man decides to live, the fate he thinks he chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to "choose" not only me but thousands of millions… All alike would be condemned to die one day. (Camus, 1942a: p. 186)

One might be tempted here to say that this is a case where the religious person does in fact differ from the atheist. The Christian will not view themselves as superfluous in the sense that they believe they were created by God, and God must have a purpose in mind for them, such as to develop good character to earn the right to experience everlasting happiness in Heaven and with God. Be that as it may, I still think that Sartre's overriding point applies to all people, including the religious person.

First, assuming arguendo that a perfect God exists, it seems that God did not have to create any given individual. As stated by the theist F. Temple Kingston, "It is true that a Christian existentialist can assert that he exists because God wills him to exist, but the question of why God wills him to exist is unanswerable by any creature." (Kingston, 1961: p. 196) In that sense each of us is contingent and superfluous.

Second, in the big scheme of things, it does not appear that any individual is so vitally important that they would change the trajectory of the universe, again making us superfluous. The universe will go on existing long after the earth and human life disappear.

Furthermore, it seems to me that religious people are just as likely to have questions and thoughts as to the importance and value of their lives. If we take suicide as the ultimate indicator that someone does not think their life is worth living, research indicates that religious belief and affiliation does not protect one from having thoughts of committing suicide.[10] This may be some indication that the gravity of the absurdity of life can strike any individual, whether they are religious or not. The extremely religious Kierkegaard makes this point.

> I have just returned from a party of which I was the life and soul; wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me—but I went away—and the dash should be as long as the earth's orbit----------and wanted to shoot myself. (Kierkegaard, 1855b: p. 7)

As Camus so insightfully observed, "At any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face." (Camus, 1942b: p. 190)

3.4. The Meaning of Life

If our lives are contingent and superfluous, and thus are absurd, then how can

[10]Here is an abstract summarizing a 2016 mega-study of religion and suicide: "Although religion is reported to be protective against suicide, the empirical evidence is inconsistent. Research is complicated by the fact that there are many dimensions to religion (affiliation, participation, doctrine) and suicide (ideation, attempt, completion). We systematically reviewed the literature on religion and suicide over the last ten years (89 articles) with a goal of identifying what specific dimensions of religion are associated with specific aspects of suicide. **We found that religious affiliation does not necessarily protect against suicidal ideation,** but does protect against suicide attempts. Whether religious affiliation protects against suicide attempts may depend on the culture-specific implications of affiliating with a particular religion, since minority religious groups can feel socially isolated. After adjusting for social support measures, religious service attendance is not especially protective against suicidal ideation, but does protect against suicide attempts, and possibly protects against suicide. Future qualitative studies might further clarify these associations." (emphasis added) (Lawrence et al., 2016).

life have any meaning? First, we need to be clear what we are addressing here. It is a little strange to ask the question of what the meaning of life is, as sentences, books, and movies have meaning, but life seems quite different from these things. The issue of the meaning of life is really about how an individual finds their life to be meaningful. But how are any of our lives meaningful if we exist for a mere speck of time in the long history of the universe?

The atheistic existentialists, such as Sartre, Nietzsche, and Camus, provide similar answers to this question. As they believe that there is no ultimate purpose for the world or mankind, and there is no God to give us meaning, everyone must create their own meaning and purpose. Sartre explains as follows:

> Before you come alive, life is nothing; it's up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing else but the meaning that you choose. (Sartre, 1946: p. 307)

Indeed, each person must choose for themselves what will be meaningful to them—what they will view as contributing to a meaningful life. Nietzsche expressed this idea as follows:

> That my life has no aim is evident even from the accidental nature of its origin; that *I can posit an aim for myself* is another matter. (Nietzsche, 1873: p. 40)
>
> To what end the "world" exists, to what end "mankind" exists, ought not to concern us at all for the moment except as objects of humor… on the other hand, do ask yourself why you, the individual, exist, and if you can get no other answer try for once to justify the meaning of your existence as it were *a posteriori* by setting before yourself an aim, a goal, a "to this end," an exalted and noble "to this end." Perish in pursuit of this and only this—I know of no better aim of life than that of perishing…in pursuit of the great and the impossible. (Nietzsche, 1876: p. 112)

Camus, likewise, does not see any necessary purpose or meaningfulness in life, but concludes that this should not discourage one, for if all we have is this lifetime, then it is all-valuable.

> For on the one hand the absurd teaches that all experiences are unimportant, and on the other it urges toward the greatest quantity of experiences. (Camus, 1942b: p. 195)

And Camus similarly concludes that we must create meaningfulness in our life.

> When the throne of God is overturned, the rebel realizes that it is now his own responsibility ***to create*** the justice, the order, and the unity that he sought in vain within his own condition, and in this way to justify the fall of God. Then begins the desperate effort ***to create***, at the price of crime and murder if necessary, the dominion of man. (Emphasis added) (Camus, 1951: p. 25)

As such, Camus believes we should embrace the absurdity and lead a full and exciting life. He declares that "the absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself." (Camus, 1942b: p. 194)

But one might respond that this is surely a difference from the Christian who believes that their purpose in life is to be in a loving and close relationship with God while developing good moral character on earth. Paul Tillich, apparently thought that the atheist was in a very different position than the theist when it came to the meaningfulness of life, as summarized from Robert Wicks in his chapter "Christian Existentialism."

> Tillich describes a particular kind of courage that is distinctive to atheistic existentialism, namely, a courage in the face of despair: upon realizing that the world is essentially and objectively meaningless, one summons the courage as a free individual to create meaning for oneself. (Wicks, 2020: p. 135)

This response, however, is inadequate because whatever one believes is their life purpose still must be expressed in specific decisions and actions, and each theist must decide for themselves how they will interpret and serve God's purpose. In other words, the religious person has a plethora of options from which to choose. Do they wish to find meaning in placing the primary focus of their life on serving their church, or praying to God, or helping others, or working to save the environment, or furthering social justice issues, etc.? Will they serve God by doing a job they find meaningless but with the purpose of supporting their family? Of course, they can do many of these things at once, but each person would have to prioritize their many different goals. The atheist, surely, is in the same position. All human beings must choose what they will do, and likewise must create the meaningfulness they find in their actions.

Kierkegaard, a religious existentialist, places the impetus on the theist to find what is meaningful for them, even though he believes that God is behind it:

> The thing is to understand myself, to see what God truly wishes *me* to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for *me*, to find *the idea I can live and die for*. (Kierkegaard, 1855b: p. 7)

What someone will find so meaningful that they would be willing to live and die for will vary with each person. What would make one person's life meaningful will not necessarily make another person's life meaningful, and due to the variety of human personalities, dispositions, and characters, it is not surprising that each of us will find meaningfulness in our own ways. Additionally, both the Christian and the atheist may come together and find meaningfulness in similar endeavors, such as joining together and donating their time and money to a specific charity.

In other words, the Christian believes that their overall purpose in life is transcendent or of a higher or spiritual nature, but still must decide for themselves which activities they will do, and which activities will provide meaning for

them and make their lives meaningful to themselves. They may find meaning in activities that clearly serve their transcendent purpose, or they may find meaningfulness in other ways. Moreover, it is up to them to make or create that meaningfulness. For every person, the search for meaning is a personal search, is unique for each individual, and is the result of a conscious decision as to what would be meaningful to them. This is true for all people, theist and atheist alike.

3.5. Choice

Existentialism stresses the importance and power of our choices. We choose to question our society and be authentic or not, we choose whether we will recognize or deny the facts about ourselves and our future possibilities, we choose to contemplate the absurdity of our lives, we choose to create meaning and purpose in our lives, and we choose to accept or reject our responsibility for not only what we do, but also our attitude toward a situation. Sartre drives home this last point when addressing sadness, which he argues is a choice which we make.

> I am sad… But at the very moment when I adopt each of these attitudes, do I not know that I shall not be able to hold on to it? Let a stranger suddenly appear and I will lift up my head, I will assume a lively cheerfulness. What will remain of my sadness except that I obligingly promise it an appointment for later after the departure of the visitor?… And in this case even, should we not say that being sad means first to make oneself sad? (Sartre, 1943: p. 231)

Camus similarly believes that we always have the choice to have a good attitude or not. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes Sisyphus, who the Gods had condemned to roll a rock to the top of a mountain for all eternity, as the master of his fate. But how can he be the master of his fate when he has no freedom as to what he does? Camus reminds us that Sisyphus is the master of his attitude to what he is doing. "His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing… One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (Camus, 1942b: pp. 197-198)

Sartre's existentialist philosophy hinges on the importance of our choices. The choices we make determine our character. He writes, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism." (Sartre, 1946: p. 293)

The religious existentialist Kierkegaard likewise stresses the importance of the choices we make. He concludes "nonetheless, even in matters that in and of themselves are innocent, what one chooses is always important. It is important to choose correctly… choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality." (Kierkegaard, 1843: p. 12 & 13) Moreover, when Kierkegaard claims that "*it is easier to become a Christian when I am not a Christian than to become a Christian when I am one*," he is stressing that religion is a choice. (Kierkegaard, 1846: p. 29)

Nietzsche's philosophy is built on the idea that our choices are important, and

that we can choose to create values and meaning in our lives. His famous concept "the will to power" is about choosing or willing to act to achieve our goals.

Merleau-Ponty explains that our choices push us in a certain direction which has momentum. This momentum not only shapes the future choices we will have, but also often makes it difficult to change the course we are headed in our lives. He writes that "the very notion of freedom demands that our decision should plunge into the future," that "one instant must be able to commit its successors," and "even our own pieces of initiative, even the situations which we have chosen, bear us on…" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: pp. 280-281, 287)

Certainly the existentialist who is a Christian would agree with the importance of our choices and perhaps to an even greater degree than the atheist as they believe that our choices will determine where we go in the afterlife—to an eternity in heaven or an eternity in hell. For the Christian, our choices are even more important than life or death choices as they believe that our choices necessarily seal our fate for all of eternity.

Again, we see that both the Christian, and the atheist agree on a central theme of existentialism. They both recognize the power and importance of our choices. These choices are not to be taken lightly, and the existentialist philosophers bring to light the view that we should not be casual with the many choices we are making in our lives. Those choices have consequences for us and others, often significant consequences.

3.6. Personal Responsibility

Existentialism is strongly associated with the belief that we are responsible for our actions. This existentialist belief stems from their uniform belief in free will.[11] If we have free will, then it would seem that we have at least some responsibility for our actions as we could have acted otherwise. Sartre makes the issue of responsibility one of the centerpieces of his philosophy and devotes more energy to this subject than do the other existentialists. However, although all the existentialists believe in personal responsibility, not all of them have the same

[11]Some readers have misunderstood Nietzsche and have concluded that he did not believe in free will, as supported by some of Nietzsche's statements about fate. This is, however, a misunderstanding of Nietzsche and what he means by fate. In fact, Nietzsche makes it clear that one can overcome their fate by the exercise of their free will. When describing the sovereign individual, Nietzsche declares "how this mastery over himself also necessarily brings with it mastery over circumstances, over nature and all lesser-willed and more unreliable creatures… who gives his word as something on which one can rely because he knows himself to be strong enough to uphold it even against accidents, even "against fate"… this power over oneself and fate." (Nietzsche, 1888: GM II, 2: p. 86-87) Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins have a good analysis of Nietzsche's position in this regard. They summarize as follows: "Nietzsche, like Kierkegaard and Sartre, insists that our destiny is in our own hands, however set or constrained by fate or circumstances or our own characters… (One might say, in line with one of Nietzsche's best-known bits of euphoria, that we are more like the oarsman of our fate, capable of heroic self-movement but also swept along in the sometimes cruel but glorious sea.)" (Solomon & Higgins, 2000: p. 180) It seems that Nietzsche's view on free will and responsibility might be closer to the view of Merleau-Ponty than to that of Sartre. For those who are skeptical about whether humans have free will, I recommend my paper on the subject which argues that in certain situations, free will is the best explanation of our actions. The paper also examines several neuroscientific experiments. (See Firestone, 2017: pp. 64-93)

view on the degree of responsibility we have for our actions.

Sartre's view is often considered extreme and uncompromising as he asserts that we have full and total responsibility for all our intentional actions. In other words, no matter what our upbringing, our experiences, our opportunities, and the situations we find ourselves in, we have no excuses for our behavior and bear full responsibility for what we do.

> We are alone, **with no excuses**. That is the idea I shall try to convey when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, **he is responsible for everything he does**. (Emphasis added) (Sartre, 1946: p. 296)

Heidegger, on the opposite side of the spectrum, took the position that when an individual follows societal ideas, expectations, values, and morality, which he believed they almost always do, they are relieved of responsibility. So for Heidegger, we bear no responsibility for the great majority of our actions. Society, or the "they," relieves or disburdens the individual ("Da-sein") of everyday responsibility.

> However, because the they presents every judgment and decision as its own, it takes the responsibility of Da-sein away from it. The they can, as it were, manage to have "them" constantly invoking it. It can most easily be responsible for everything because no one has to vouch for anything. The they always "did it," and yet it can be said that "no one" did it. In the everydayness of Da-sein, most things happen in such a way that we must say "no one did it." Thus, the they *disburdens* Da-sein in its everydayness. (Heidegger, 1927: pp. 125-126)

Heidegger's view is certainly an outlier among existentialists. We might say that on the issue of personal responsibility, his view is contrary to the dominant existentialist position, but we should notice that the "they" or society cannot disburden the person from responsibility if that person is acting contrary to societal views and expectations. So even Heidegger believes that at times an individual is responsible for their actions.

Sartre's close colleague Maurice Merleau-Ponty is somewhere in the middle of these two views. He implies that our personal responsibility is not total, but rather only partial because our decisions do not possess "absolute freedom." He explains his views as follows:

> The choice would seem to lie between scientism's conception or causality, which is incompatible with the consciousness we have of ourselves, and the assertion of an absolute freedom divorced from the outside… at the outset, I am not an individual beyond class, I am situated in a social environment, and my freedom, though it may have the power to commit me elsewhere, has not the power to transform me instantaneously into what I decide to

> be… The idea of situation rules out absolute freedom. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945: pp. 279-280, 286, 288)

Although existentialists do not agree on how much responsibility the individual possesses, let us consider if Sartre's strong view of responsibility impacts the religious person any differently from the atheist.

Sartre's extensive view of personal responsibility is that we are not only responsible for what we do, but also for what we do not do. He states that "… what is not possible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing." (Sartre, p. 304) Sartre thus claims that one is responsible not only for their acts of commission, but also for their omissions. This idea may at first seem somewhat demanding, but it permeates our legal system. For example, if your failure to properly service and maintain your car's brakes leads to brake failure or dysfunction which results in an accident that causes injury to other people, you are guilty of both civil and criminal negligence. You are responsible for your omission or failure to maintain your brakes in good working order.

Carrying through with this line of thinking, Sartre reasons that since we are responsible for our choices, and our non-choices or non-actions are also choices, then if we do not help those in need, then we are responsible for not helping them. That is why Sartre makes the bold declaration that a person "is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being." (Sartre, 1943: p. 251)

Being responsible for the world may seem to be unrealistic and daunting, but if we understand Sartre's point it can be viewed as quite reasonable. It makes existentialism a philosophy of action. As finite beings, there is always a limit to what we can do. We cannot help everyone in need. When I spend time working for what I deem to be a worthy cause, I know that I am simultaneously neglecting countless other worthy causes. We all, including the theist, must make these hard choices. Sartre's point is that if we do little to nothing, we are responsible for doing little to nothing. If we devote much of our time to help others, we are responsible for doing so. I can take solace if I volunteer my time to improve the world on one social justice issue, even if I do not commit my time in supporting other worthy social justice issues which I also support. For Sartre, both the atheist and the religious person have this responsibility, whether they want to have it or not. It flows out of Sartre's assumption that we have free will. How we use or do not use our free will is each person's responsibility, whether they are a theist or an atheist.

Another important point about Sartre's view of personal responsibility is that we cannot relieve ourselves of responsibility for our actions by claiming that we had to act that way due to our preexisting character. He points out that our normal way of thinking distorts the way things actually are. For example, you might claim that you did not go up and talk to strangers at a networking event because you are shy, but the fact is that you could have gone up and talked to them. You are using your shyness as an excuse. Your shyness is not set in stone

and your behavior is not an inevitable outcome of your propensity toward shyness. The reality is that you could have gone up to those people and talked to them and not acted in a shy manner. When we view a character trait as unchangeable and beyond our control, we are making an excuse to relieve ourselves of responsibility. Sartre, however, believes that we can never relieve ourselves of the responsibility for our intentional actions. Sartre provides us with the example of the coward to demonstrate this.

> But when the existentialist writes about a coward, he says that this coward is responsible for his cowardice. He's not like that because he has a cowardly heart or lung or brain; he's not like that on account of his physiological heart make-up; but he's like that because he has made himself a coward by his acts. There's no such thing as a cowardly constitution; there are nervous constitutions; there is poor blood, as the common people say, or strong constitutions. But the man whose blood is poor is not a coward on that account, for what makes cowardice is the act of renouncing or yielding. A constitution is not an act; the coward is defined on the basis of the acts he performs. (Sartre, 1946: p. 301)

Without a doubt, the existentialist who is religious would agree with this. We can change our character by a change in our actions. One cannot use a character trait as an excuse for their actions because one can choose to act contrary to that character trait, and further, one can create a new and different character. So this feature of Sartre's existentialism would apply equally to the religious person and the atheist.

One might think that Existentialism is a very negative and depressing philosophy as Sartre claims that the existentialist suffers from anguish, forlornness, and despair. We have already discussed anguish and forlornness. As for despair, Sartre points out that despair is present because we do not have full control over the outcomes of situations, as both nature and other people may thwart our goals and efforts. He says that "I cannot be sure that, after my death, fellow-fighters will carry on my work to bring it to its maximum perfection." (Sartre, 1946: p. 299) Certainly this is as true for the religious person as for the atheist.

However, instead of being a pessimistic philosophy, Sartre declares that "there is no doctrine more optimistic, since man's destiny is within himself." (Sartre, 1946: p. 301) The word destiny here is somewhat misleading as Sartre does not believe that we have prewritten destinies; rather, what he means is that our actions and thus our character are up to each of us to create. If we apply Sartre's views on responsibility, one is responsible for all their good actions and positive traits of character, and therefore would presumably deserve praise or credit for these. This certainly can and often does provide a source of optimism for each of us. As for those traits of which we are not proud, although we bear responsibility, according to Sartre it is within the power of each of us to change. We may

have habitually lied in the past, but we have the ability to tell the truth from now and into the future. This gives each of us hope that we can become the persons we wish to be. What could be more optimistic than this? And if we have free will, then the ability to change for the better applies as much to the Christian as it does to the atheist. Indeed, taking responsibility is not all bad, and having the power to change for the better can be quite empowering.

4. Was Sartre Right? The Atheist vs. the Theist on the Objectivity of Morality

One might claim that there is an important difference between the atheist and the theist when it comes to their views on moral objectivism vs moral non-objectivism or moral relativism. In "The Humanism of Existentialism," Sartre sets forth what seems to be a non-objectivist view of morality in that he asserts that there is no clear and objective right or wrong, moral or immoral; rather, humans create our own values and moral judgments.

> The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it is very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an a priori Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoyevsky said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist. (Sartre, 1946: p. 296)

Near the end of the article, Sartre again distinguishes the existentialist who is an atheist from the existentialist who is religious by claiming that only the atheistic existentialist needs to create the values he will follow, while for the religious person those values were created by God. Sartre states that "if I've discarded God the Father, there has to be someone to invent values." (Sartre, 1946: p. 307)

On the contrary, the religious person believes in the objectivity of morality since God has communicated to humans what is morally right and what is morally wrong, as evidenced by Scripture. Isn't this a difference between existentialists who are atheists and those who are religious which legitimizes Sartre's distinction between the two? The answer to this is "no" for a variety of reasons, the most fundamental of which is the fact that the issue of moral objectivity is not an existentialist theme.

We need to first note that not every idea that Sartre and some of the other existentialist philosophers explore, endorse, or advocate is an existentialist idea or a part of existentialism. Most philosophers write about many ideas that cover a variety of different philosophical fields. More important, many of the existentialists discussed in this paper do not address the issue of moral objectivity. This is unlike the six existentialist themes we have explored, each of which is ad-

dressed by the great majority of the renowned existentialists.[12]

Additionally, books on metaethics which explore the issue of the objectivity of morality never refer to existentialism. There is a good reason for this. The question of whether morality is objective or non-objective is not an existentialist issue.

In fact, when examining various encyclopedias of philosophy on the topic of existentialism, I have not seen any which include the issue of the objectivity or non-objectivity of morality as an existentialist theme. For example, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy has subheadings on the existentialist themes of Existence Precedes Essence; Freedom; and Authenticity, and the Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy discusses existentialism under the headings of The Human Condition; Freedom and Responsibility; Everyday Existence, Anxiety and Guilt; and Authenticity, but neither encyclopedia lists the issue of moral objectivism vs moral non-objectivism as a topic or theme of existentialism.

If these facts are not convincing enough, we can best decide if the issue of moral objectivity is an existentialist idea, a religious idea, or otherwise, if we inquire as to the source or basis of one's view on moral objectivity. In doing so, we will see that the existentialist views on the major existentialist themes of authenticity, bad faith, the absurdity of life, the meaning of life, the importance of the choices we make, and responsibility do not dictate or even strongly suggest what one's views on moral objectivity will be. On the contrary, it is one's religious belief that is more of a driver on this issue. Certainly the vast majority of theists believe that morality is objective because there is a God who tells us right from wrong. Moreover, when Sartre wrote "everything is permissible if God does not exist," he made it clear that his non-objectivist view of morality was based on his atheism, not on his existentialist beliefs. Indeed, although existentialists such as Nietzsche and the early Sartre seem to champion the view of moral non-objectivism, this is at most tangentially relevant to their views on existentialist issues. We can conclude here that moral objectivity or lack thereof is not an existentialist theme and is more closely tied to one's religious beliefs than their existentialist beliefs.

[12]Recall that I have argued for the position that both the theist and the atheist endorse the same beliefs about the six primary existentialist themes. If they disagree about the correct view to hold on the objectivity of morality, then we should be suspicious about whether this is an existentialist theme. One might respond that the existentialists do not agree on the degree of responsibility that one has, but we should recognize that they all believe that there is some degree of responsibility for one's actions, and this is unlike many atheists and theists who completely disagree on the issue of moral objectivity. Moreover, although many existentialists do not address the issue of whether morality is objective or not, all, or almost all the famous existentialist writers consider the issue of responsibility. For example, Kierkegaard states that although the crowd "weakens his sense of responsibility," Kierkegaard asserts that the crowd is an abstraction and implies that it cannot relieve the individual of responsibility: "What a falsehood! The falsehood first of all is the notion that the crowd does what in fact only the individual in the crowd does." (Kierkegaard, 1859: p. 32) Nietzsche addresses responsibility in a variety of ways, such as when he claims that the sovereign individual will keep their promises and not place the responsibility on accidents or fate. Nietzsche specifically writes about responsibility when he states: "For what is freedom? That one has the will to self-responsibility." (Nietzsche, 1889: 38, p. 103)

But even if this were an existentialist theme, it would not differentiate the theist from the atheist because one's religious beliefs do not cleanly and seamlessly correspond to one's view on moral objectivity. One could be an atheist and simultaneously believe that morality is objective, so Sartre's atheism did not necessitate that he reject moral objectivism. For example, many atheists follow either Kant's categorical imperative or the Utilitarian happiness maximization test to objectively determine moral right from moral wrong. These people are both atheists and moral objectivists.

This is supported by the change of mind Sartre had on this subject as he seems to have become a moral objectivist later in life although he continued to be an atheist and continued to hold his existentialist views. Thomas Anderson draws this conclusion.

> Clearly, then, in the 1960s Sartre grants an objectivity to values that his earlier work did not. That objectivity does not come from some transcendent being or realm, it issues from our actual human needs. That objectivity gives values/norms an independence from human freedom since our choices can neither create nor remove the value of certain objects. Protein and love are valuable for the organism we are whether or not we freely choose them to be or want them to be. (Anderson, 2010: p. 9)[13]

Indeed, it is apparent that the issue of whether morality is objective is not an existentialist issue. Furthermore, even if it were, neither existentialism nor atheism entail any specific position on the objectivity of morality since some atheists who are existentialists are moral non-objectivists, while others hold the same objectivist view that most theists hold. Because this is not an issue where the existentialist who is a theist necessarily has a different view than the existentialist who is an atheist, we see once again that there is no justifiable reason to distinguish existentialists based on their religious beliefs.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that in their existentialist views, both the religious person and the atheist agree, and Sartre's distinction between the two should not have been made. Both are real existentialists. We have seen that Sartre's own examples

[13]One could argue that even in his earlier years Sartre advocated a limited moral objectivism. Allen describes his view thusly: "As freedom is the source of all values, so it is their criterion. A course of action is to be approved that makes for the realization of freedom, to be disapproved if it militates against it." (Allen, 1953b: p. 75) This view is supported by Sartre's own words in "The Humanism of Existentialism" when Sartre propounds the following: "if man has once become aware that in his forlornness he imposes values, he can no longer want but one thing, and that is freedom, as the basis of all values… And in wanting freedom we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that the freedom of others depends on ours… Consequently, when, in all honesty, I've recognized that man is a being in whom existence precedes essence, that he is a free being who, in various circumstances can want only his freedom, I have at the same time recognized that I can want only the freedom of others." (Sartre, 1946: p. 306) Although Sartre's logic seems questionable here, it is interesting to see that he appears to resist a full morally relativistic view which is totally unbounded since he does seem to assert that one "should" respect the desire of others to exercise their own freedom in their own way.

demonstrate this and undermine his position. Any disagreement between existentialists who are Christian and those who are atheist comes down to differences in their religious beliefs, not their existentialist views.

I have further argued that to be a full-blown existentialist, no matter what one's view on religion, one would endorse the importance of authenticity and the questioning of society; they would realize the kinds of beings they are, namely, beings composed of facticity and transcendence and who care about what others think of them but can reject others' opinions; they contemplate the absurdity of life; they understand that they are the ones who create meaning and purpose in their lives; they realize the importance of the choices they make; and they acknowledge that they have some responsibility for what they do and who they are (their character) because they have free will. For both the theist and atheist their existence precedes their essence or character. For these reasons, Sartre should not have differentiated existentialists who are religious from those who are not.

It is interesting that in the last paragraph of his article, Sartre seems to walk back his distinction between the Christian and atheistic existentialist when he asserts the following about existentialism: "Rather, it declares that even if God did exist, that would change nothing." (Sartre, 1946: p. 308) I think that is correct. Both atheistic and religious persons who follow existentialist thought adhere to the same fundamental existentialist ideas, beliefs, and philosophies, notwithstanding their different beliefs about the existence of God.

I have argued that Sartre's distinction between existentialists based on one's religiosity was both mistaken and detrimental. It seems to me that existentialists, whether they are a Christian or an atheist, should come together to support and develop existentialist themes, not be at odds with one another. This idea was fittingly expressed by the late Reverend E. L. Allen:

> To use for the purposes of theology the categories of existentialism is not therefore to have recourse to an alien system, it is to take part in an activity by which philosophy and theology can fertilize each other in turn. (Allen, 1953a: p. 42)

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Allen, E. L. (1953a). Existentialism and Christian Theology. *Hibbert Journal*: *A Quarterly Review of Religion*, *Theology, and Philosophy, 42,* 40-47.

Allen, E. L. (1953b). *Existentialism from Within: A New and Christian Approach to the Interpretation of Existentialism*. The MacMillan Company.

Anderson, T. (2010). Atheistic and Christian Existentialism: A Comparison of Sartre and Marcel. *Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications, 154,* 1-24.

Beauvoir, S. (1949). The Second Sex. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 296-307, Parshley, H. M. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Camus, A. (1942a). The Stranger. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 184-187, Gilbert, S. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Camus, A. (1942b). The Myth of Sisyphus. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 187-198). Oxford University Press.

Camus, A. (1951). *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Dostoevsky, F. (1880). The Brothers Karamazov. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 48-64, Barnett, C. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Firestone, R. S. (2017). An Argument for Libertarian Free Will: Hard Choices Based on either Incomparable or Equally Persuasive Reasons. *Open Journal of Philosophy, 7,* 64-93. https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2017.71005

Heidegger, M. (1927). Being and Time. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 117-146, Stambaugh, J. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Heidegger, M. (1935). Introduction to Metaphysics. In L. Pojman (Ed.), *Classics of Philosophy: The Twentieth Century* (Vol. III, pp. 480-497, Mannheim, R. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (1843). Either/Or. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 8-14, Swenson, D. & Swenson, L. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (1846). Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 17-23, Martin, C. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (1854-1855). Attack upon Christendom. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., p. 23, Martin, C. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (1855a). Kierkegaard's Letters. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., p. 33, Martin, C. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (1855b). The Journals. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 6-8, Martin, C. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (1859). The Point of View for My Work as an Author. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 32-33, Lawrie, W. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Kingston, F. (1961). *French Existentialism: A Christian Critique*. University of Toronto Press. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487589257

Kirkpatrick, K. (2017). *Sartre Does God*. Forum for Philosophy. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/theforum/sartre-does-god

Lawrence, R., Oguendo, M., & Stanley, B. (2016). Religion and Suicide Risk: A Systematic Review. *Archives of Suicide Research, 20,* 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2015.1004494

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). The Phenomenology of Perception. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 277-290, Smith, C. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1873). *The Portable Nietzsche* (Kaufmann, W. Trans.). Penguin Books.

Nietzsche, F. (1876). *Untimely Meditations* (Hollingdale, R.J. Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1885). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Kaufman, W. Trans.). Penguin Books, Viking Penguin, Inc.

Nietzsche, F. (1887). Beyond Good and Evil. In *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (Kaufman, W. Trans.). The Modern Library/Random House, 1992.

Nietzsche, F. (1888). On the Genealogy of Morality. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 79-92, Clark, M. & Swenson, A. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1889). *Twilight of the Idols* (Hollingdale, R.J. Trans.). Penguin Books.

Sartre, J. P. (1938). Nausea. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 214-218, Alexander, L. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Sartre, J. P. (1943). Being and Nothingness. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 224-238, Barnes, H. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Sartre, J. P. (1946). The Humanism of Existentialism. From Existentialism and Human Emotion. In C. Guignon, & D. Pereboom (Eds.), *Existentialism Basic Writings* (2nd ed., pp. 290-308, Frechtman, B. Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

Sartre, J. P. (1952). Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr. In R. Solomon (Ed.), *Existentialism* (2nd ed., pp. 259-262, Frechtman, B. Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Solomon, R., & Higgins, K. (2000). *What Nietzsche Really Said*. Schocken Books.

Wicks, R. (2020). *Introduction to Existentialism: From Kierkegaard to the Seventh Seal*. Bloomsbury Academic. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474272544