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# LOGIC AND EXISTENTIALIST ETHICS

By "existentialist" ethical theories we mean, in this paper, ethical theories 1) which acknowledge the impossibility of establishing any one moral judgment or principle of conduct on purely objective grounds whether through logic, or empirical observations, or linguistic analysis, or theology, 2) which hold that human beings can not avoid choosing modes or lines of behavior, and that these choices implicitly express ethical or normative commitments, and 3) which affirm that individuals should face up to and accept responsibility for the ethical or normative realities thus brought into existence. The first two criteria are formal and meta-ethical, the third is normative and prescriptive. Taken together they leave room for an unlimited plurality of substantive ethical principles reflecting individual choices.

There is no single, fixed answer to the question of the role of logic in existentialist theories. For the choice to be logical or not in forming ethical judgments or principles is, to the existentialist, simply one among others of the choices by which we make our character (or create our "essence"). Nevertheless, we may ask whether some uses of logic in ethics are incompatible with existentialism and others compatible. What, for example, can the existentialist take from Kant, and what must he leave out? Surely, one could be an existentialist and "choose" in some sense to commit himself to a Kantian ethic; but on the other hand, Kant assumed that he had uncovered an absolute ground for ethics based on the concept of reason itself, and thus the existentialist must leave something out of his Kantianism. More generally, an existentialist may or may not choose to use logic extensively in the development of his moral principles or judgments; but if he does so choose, what limits are placed upon him by virtue of his being an existentialist? Which specific uses of logic an be admitted within his meta-ethical framework? My paper will attempt to outline an answer both in terms of classical

ethical theories and contemporary ethical analysis. But my position also entails an internal criticism of certain existentialists, notably Sartre and De Beauvoir, who appear to over-step their own bounds in trying to establish a particular substantive ethics, through logic, upon the precepts of existentialism.

I

Before proceding further, I wish to distinguish three distinct senses in which "logic" might be said to occur in ethics. First we may consider the use of rational arguments to support ethical conclusions. In this case we have a set of statements, one of which is conclusion, the others reasons. When such an argument is offered seriously - that is, to justify or persuade - the reasons are statements which are considered more acceptable, initially at least, than the conclusion, and the relationship between the reasons and the conclusion is claimed to be such that the reasons logically support the conclusion. In simple arguments, all the reasons are offered in direct support of the conclusion; in more complex arguments there will be reasons to support the acceptability of first reasons, additional sub-arguments to support these, and so on. But all arguments, simple or complex, are finite; so that at the bottom of every argument, lie reasons for which no further reasons are adduced. When any individual judges an argument sound, he means that he accepts all the unsupported, basic reasons in the argument, and agrees that each conclusion and sub-conclusion in the argument is logically supported by its immediate reasons.

A second way in which logic might be related to a theory of ethics, is through a formal logic of ethical terms. In a pure form such a logic is an axiomatic system, having as undefined terms expressions like "is good", or "is better than", or "ought to be", Besides its non-ethical primitives and rules of formation and inference, it will then contain definitions and axioms which set forth relationships of equivalence and implication (and derivatively of consistency and inconsistency)

between statements containing these and other ethical terms. Such a logic can provide tests of validity for ethical arguments so far as they move from ethical statements to ethical statements by virtue of analytic relationships. But it will not, as a formal logic of ethical terms, involve any substantive postulates which can give content to its theorems.

Finally, logic may be related to ethics through a deductive system of substantive ethics. Here, as before, we have a logic of ethical terms. But in addition we have one or more substantive postulates, which lay down significant non-normative conditions which relate ethical statements to non-normative facts of some sort or other. Thus, for example, we can envisage a deductive system of utilitarian ethics; such a system would include, in addition to such purely formal theorems as "If x is better than y, then if y is good then x is good", substantive theorems like "If x produces more pleasure then y, then x is better than y". Here we assume that statements about the production of pleasure are taken as assertions of fact, statements that "x is better than y" as non-cognitive value-judgments. Alternatively, we could conceivably have a deductive Kantian ethic, or Aristotelian ethic, in which substantive postulates would relate value-judgments to presumptive cognitive judgments about whether some act could be universally willed, or whether it was in accordance with a natural faculty of reason.

These distinctions presuppose, at a minimum, that statements about what exists or what is necessary, are of a different type than statements about what ought to be, or is valuable in the ethical or normative sense. This thesis, well known in contemporary ethical analysis, can not and need not be defended here. But the point will be developed that this distinction is intimately related to the existentialist's distinction between being and existence, between facticity and choice, between the reality of objects and reality of ethical commitment. On the basis of this common ground we can see areas of compatibility between existentialism and certain contemporary analyses of the role of reason in ethics.

## II

The central thesis of existentialism places limits upon the use of logic and reason, since it concerns the ultimate grounds of human beliefs and commitments. Carried through consistently, existentialism implies that no rational argument, no logical system, can provide complete objective grounds to justify or establish the truth or rightness of any metaphysical assertion, epistemological principle or moral decision. But this does not mean that rational arguments and logical systems must be eliminated entirely. It eliminates only a certain use of rational arguments and logical systems; namely the attempt to use them, so prominent in classical philosophical argumentation, to provide conclusive, impersonal and objective grounds as the basis of philosophical and ethical judgments. Jaspers made this quite clear in characterizing the common element in the thought of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche:

> "Both questioned reason from the depths of Existenz. Never on such a high level of thought had there been such a thorough-going and radical opposition to mere reason. This question is never simply hostility to reason; rather both sought to appropriate limitlessly all modes of rationality.
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> "...they brought forth not some doctrines, not any basic position, not some picture of the world, but rather a new total intellectual attitude for men. This attitude was in the medium of infinite reflection, a reflection which is conscious of being unable to attain any real ground in itself."[1]

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[1] Karl Jaspers, Reason and Existenz, 1955 (The Noonday Press) p25.

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Thus, in theory at least, the existentialist can grasp, and if he chooses, use any of the formal logician's distinctions regarding validity, consistency or relevance. He can decide, no less than the next man, whether he accepts or rejects the premisses of an argument. He can make precise judgments, using canons of formal logic with his judgments of acceptability, about the soundness or unsoundness of arguments. What he can not do is to identify such judgments of soundness with objective justifications. Always he must admit that there are

reasons at the base of the argument which are not forced upon him by any external necessity, but which he has chosen to accept from among contrary alternatives. Even the choice to follow or abide by certain logical principles of inference, must be admitted to have its alternatives in irrational thought. Thus the element of individual choice is inescapable in the base of every rational argument, echoes throughout the structure of it, and is reflected in the conclusion.

Again, in theory an existentialist could, without overstepping his limits, commit himself to the use and development of one or another formal logic of ethical terms. Certainly existentialists need not require the development of such a logic. But neither do they proscribe it. Such a system could be useful in clarifying questions of consistency and implication in ethical statements, as well as validity in ethical arguments. That acceptance of such a system does not necessarily involve any claims respecting absolute truth, ultimate ethical realities or transcendental grounds, is readily seen by considering the conventionalism, prescriptivism, and pluralistic formalism found among logicians.

To treat all appeals to a logic of ethical terms as rooted ultimately in personal commitments, is not to treat the selection and use of such a system as arbitrary or a matter of whim. An existentialist could, for example, give as a reason for selecting a certain formal logic, that he finds it conforms to common usage. The finding that a logic conforms to common usage rests on observations which often turn out quite differently from what we might want them to be. But the decision to choose a logic by this principle involves a commitment having no such roots in empirical fact. Again, the rigorous development of any deductive system is not merely arbitrary, as anyone knows who has worked with them. Statements desperately desired as theorems sometimes seem to possess an implacable resistance to being proved. But this resistance, this apparently objective character, is of our own making. We have chosen at the outset to commit ourselves only to such statements as can be proven from the stated axioms by given rules of inference.

The apparent objectivity of the system reflects merely the initial subjectively grounded choice to abide by the principles at its base.

An existentialist could be committed to a formal logic of ethics, without explicit commitment to any specific substantive ethical principles. To be sure the commitment to a logic is a commitment and a choice, and in a broad existentialistic sense, perhaps, it has the character of ethical choice. Still, it is a commitment only concerning language, consistency and implication. It does not necessarily entail normative judgments about activities not purely linguistic, such as killing, or stealing, or exploitation, or lying, and others. With this distinction in mind, substantive ethics is shown independent of a formal logic of ethical terms. In what sense then, could an existentialist commit himself not only to a logic of ethics, but to one or more substantive principles of ethics?

Obviously, existentialism gives a place of central importance to substantive ethical commitments, claiming that even if we try to make none at all, we are thereby choosing a mode of behavior which establishes our character and its implicit substantive commitments. In its broadest and most consistent sense, existentialism makes no judgments about <u>what</u> we decide to be, or <u>how</u> we choose to act, but has a great deal to say about what reasons we give or fail to give for our actions. It labels as "dishonest" attempts to rationalize either what we do, or not do, by offering only cognitive statements,-i.e., facts or principles suggesting physical, psychological, sociological or assumed metaphysical determinants for our behavior - as reasons. Always, it insists, our behavior rests crucially, though in part, on individual valuative choices that might have been otherwise. Not only does it label arguments which ignore or deny such choices as "dishonest", it makes a normative judgment against them. And the kind of "honesty" which it prescribes is the internal intellectual honesty which acknowledges among the reasons for any chosen behavior, those non-cognitive ethical commitments which reflect

these subjective choices.

Thus the existentialist, like many contemporary analysts, must insist that substantive ethical conclusions are non-cognitive and rest crucially upon substantive normative premisses. In denying that ethical conclusions can be conclusively derived from purely factual statements, he sides with the opponents of naturalism in ethics. He goes farther, however, than non-naturalists like Moore who assume a non-natural ethical reality providing objective grounds for ethical judgments. He comes closer to the emotivist who makes such judgments relative to an individual's attitudes; though the existentialist rules out naturalistic "excuses" for these attitudes, and speaks of commitments, choice and decision, in preference to "attitudes".

Existentialism is thus completely congenial to the explicit formulation of substantive ethical principles, though it does not prescribe any particular content or organization of them. He requires only that they be recognized as non-cognitive commitments reflecting subjective choices among alternatives. Theoretically one could commit oneself either to courage or cowardice, to self-perfection or concern for the common happiness, to lying or candor towards others; the existentialist criteria require only that one accept responsibility for the values chosen, at least to oneself. One's explicit principles could, theoretically, be completely lacking in systematic organization, being used piecemeal, or they could be organized into one or more deductive systems integrated around basic commitments. Further, ones choice at one moment never settles the decision for all later times; the possibility of changing our commitments perpetually presents itself.

We see then that it is possible to be an existentialist and to commit himself and stay committed to some or other deductive system of substantive ethics. He might commit himself to an idealized language, or logic, of ethical terms, and accept also certain postulates which connect up those terms to non-normative

criteria. In one sense such postulates might be treated as definitions of such terms as "good" or "better than" or "ought". But however they are treated, it must be acknowledged, if one is an existentialist, that the acceptance of such postulates or definitions constitutes a choice, and thus that the whole system and all derivative judgments forfeit all claims to purely objective truth or correctness.

The immense variety of possible substantive systems which would be admissible is unlimited. Not only the great classical normative theories but a vast variety of individually developed systems reflecting individual choices are conceivable. There is even a sense in which the substance of such pseudo-ethical systems as sociological relativism, or Marxist historicism, could find a place within an existentialist framework. In all cases what must be acknowledged is the subjectivity of the ultimate commitment. For example, one might subscribe to the Communist conviction that forces of history lead inexorably to the triumph of Communism, and commit oneself to the bandwagon. But one must acknowledge that both the prediction of future history and the commitment to assist rather than resist the assumed outcome, rests crucially upon one's own acts of subjective choice.

On this thesis, then, existentialism limits only the kinds of arguments and reasons one can adduce in justification of the substantive theorems in ethical system. An existentialist could commit himself whole-heartedly to Mill's utilitarianism, acting and deciding as Mill would have done in any given problem of decision. But he would have to reject Mill's argument, in Chapter IV of Utilitarianism, that since "happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct"...therefore, "it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality". Again, if a Kantian, the existentialist could strive to utilize the categorical imperative to decide upon the rightness of any proposed action. But he would have to abandon Kant's claim

that, "a mere analysis of the concepts of morality can very well show that the alleged principle of autonomy is the sole principle of morality" since, "such an analysis shows that the principle of morality must be a categorical imperative, but the latter commands nothing more or less than this very autonomy". Again, one could join Toulmin in distinguishing various functions which words like "good" and "ought" perform in ordinary language. One might even agree that the function of ethical reasoning is related to the goal of correlating the behavior of all, by general rules, towards the harmonious satisfaction of desires and interests. One might further hold that this is the only function we ought to give to ethical reasoning, thus finding oneself in gear with Toulmin's substantive ethics. But as an existentialist, one would have to acknowledge, as Toulmin does not, that this analysis has not provided any impersonal standard of correctness in ethical reasoning, since the decision to make choices in accordance with the supposed function of ethical discourse in ordinary language, remains a subjective and personal choice.

The existentialist's limitations upon the use of logic in ethics thus implies a restraint which is seldom found in either classical or contemporary ethics. The desire to justify one's commitments by reference to some impersonal objectivity and avoid acknowledging a merely personal ground is found in relativists as well as objectivists, in non-naturalists as well as naturalists, in non-cognitivists as well as cognitivists. Among contemporary analysts emotivists come closest to meeting the existentialist's formal and meta-ethical restrictions at the crucial points, although they tend to pass over the existentialist's broad view that every conscious act of behavior expresses an implicit normative decision, and do not express the same indignant disapproval of thinkers and persons who refuse to recognize explicitly the subjective roots of their commitments.

## III

According to the thesis just developed, existentialist principles of ethics, qua existentialist, are merely formal and meta-ethical; they include a normative judgment, but one which is directed only at the kinds of reasons used in justifying of ethical conclusions, not at any substantive content of the conclusions themselves. Thus it tolerates a relativism and a pluralism with respect to substantive theories. Such a thesis faces two possible sorts of objection. ~~The~~ One comes from non-existentialists, who seem unable to see what possible use logic and reasoning could have in ethics if they are denied the function of providing objective justification for ethical conclusions. The other comes from certain existentialists themselves, who have tried to answer this objection by the claim that existentialism is not solipsistic and is not merely formal, but is capable of developing a universal substantive ethics on the foundations of existentialism itself.

I shall deal first with the latter objection as it is suggested by Simone De Beauvoir's book, The Ethics of Ambiguity. De Beauvoir attempts to defend existentialism against its critics by asserting that "those people are mistaken - or lying - who try to make of existentialism a solipsism" and that "the other charge which is often directed at existentialism also collapses: of being a formal doctrine, incapable of proposing any content to the freedom it wants engaged." (pp. 72-3). "Not only do we assert," she says, "that the existentialist doctrine permits the elaboration of an ethics, but it even appears to us as the only philosophy in which ethics has a place." (p. 34). In this writer's opinion this mode of defense is both unnecessary and internally inconsistent.

To a certain extent De Beauvoir is trying to remove certain genuine misunderstandings of existentialism. The charge that existentialism is solipsistic is,

indeed, a false one. It neither proclaims that nothing but one's self exists, nor implies that any individual must accept such a view. But it is, unless I misunderstand it completely, deeply committed to the acceptance of the egocentric predicament. It denies that any man can establish beliefs or principles concerning objective truth or right on grounds which are completely independent of his own subjective choices and decisions. A man can <u>believe</u> fervently in the existence of other men, in scientific law, historical reality or God, within the existentialist framework. He can also commit himself to the principle that other people <u>ought</u> to be truthful, or <u>ought</u> to work for the freedom of all men, or <u>ought</u> to concern themselves primarily with their relation to God. Thus the content and substance of an existentialists belief or commitment can be as objective in its <u>reference</u> as one pleases. But man deceives himself if he claims that beliefs of this sort are forced upon him, or are logically unavoidable by virtue of purely objective premisses and logical validity. He can not honestly claim that the rational grounds of his beliefs are purely objective and independent of personal choice. One must agree when De Beauvoir says that "existentialist conversion <u>does not suppress</u> my instincts, desires, plans and passions" (p. 34) and that the "existentialist doctrine <u>permits</u> the elaboration of an ethics" (p. 34). But she seems to confuse a defense of existentialism's permissiveness and encouragement of substantive ethics, with an argument that one can <u>derive</u> a substantive ethics from the foundations of existentialism. She seems to assume that to prove it is not solipsistic, she must escape the egocentric predicament. Thus she argues that to be an existentialist is to will one's self free, and to will one's self free implies willing others free, and thus claims to derive by logic an ethics which is humanistic in its goals, Kantian in its sensitivities to treating others as means, and democratic-socialistic in its opposition to economic and political exploitation. Along the way she rules out, as contrary to existentialism, a variety of ways of life including those of the

hermit, the nihilist and the adventurer.

De Beauvoir's substantive ethical commitments are no more incompatible with existentialism than Kierkegaard's, but her ways of arguing for them are. In the beginning of her book she characterizes existentialism as "refusing to set up as absolute the ends towards which my transcendence thrusts itself," and asserts that its first implication is "that the genuine man will not agree to recognize any foreign absolute...will abandon the dream of an inhuman objectivity," and "will refuse to believe in unconditioned values which would set themselves up athwart his freedom" (p. 14). Against this recognizable definition of existentialism, her effort to establish the particular substantive ethics to which she subscribes by logical deduction from the condition of man, appears as one more effort to disguise a personal commitment by appeal to impersonal and universal grounds. Even if a more careful examination should show her definition compatible with her mode of argument, there would remain the task of reconciling her views of the substantive implications of existentialism with the antithetical value-systems of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and reconciling her mode of argument with Jasper's assertion that the peculiar contribution of these men as existentialists was not some new doctrine, but a "new total intellectual attitude...which is conscious of being unable to attain any real ground in itself."

Thus we return to the original objection from non-existentialists. If existentialism denies to reason the function of providing objective justification, what other functions are there that would warrant the extensive use of logical arguments and systems in an existentialist ethics? The existentialist could give any of several plausible answers to this question without over-stepping the boundaries of his position. It is not necessary to establish what the function of reason is, or to assert that existentialism requires the use of logic in any particular capacity; after all, Kierkegaard elected to renounce the use of reason at certain crucial points. It is enough to show that there are plausible

types of commitment available to existentialists which are logically related to an interest in logical arguments or systems. An existentialist's commitment to logic might be purely aesthetic. So taken, the existentialist, in busying himself with logical analysis of arguments, or with developing logical systems, would express through his actions a kind of individual character and reflect his choice of an interest or way of life. On the other hand, an existentialist could be committed to seeking to understand sympathetically his fellow men as individuals. Logic could then recommend itself as a vehicle for the understanding of others. To seek out the reasons other men give for their normative conclusions and trace these reasons down to the ultimate subjective commitments at their base would lead to the better understanding of the unique structure and nature of each individual's character. This function of logic is in now way impaired by the denial that rational arguments can provide objective grounds for ethical decisions. Again, an existentialist could be committed to the process of rational discussion in ~~the process of~~ resolving human conflicts. On the basis of this commitment he might welcome the prospect of a pluralism of substantive ethical systems rich enough in variety to accommodate uniquely individual value-systems yet satisfying a common formal discipline which could be shared. This use of logical systems would never lead to the reconciliation of what emotivists call "ultimate disagreements in attitude", but ~~they~~ it could provide a method for avoiding obscurantism and locating more accurately the true sources of disagreement. By acknowledging the relativism of such systems this use of logic could mitigate the ferocity and fruitlessness of dogmatic conflicts and heighten the respect for individuality which is corroded by the objectivist's implicit claim to superior insight as against his antagonist. Finally, the existentialist's attempt to organize his own reasons and conclusions can be correlated with his desire to establish orderly relationships between his own ultimate and his more derivative

commitments. The existentialist who chooses to commit himself wholeheartedly to working for the greatest good of the greatest number, or to acting only on such maxims as he could will to be universal law, or to some other concept or principle, becomes through this commitment a kind of ethical person, takes on an ethical character. To try to develop a deductive substantive system embodying the principle he has chosen is to try to fill out its detail and trace out its implications in ways which bring out the nature of the choice being made. Thus logic can be used to sub-serve the existentialist's special concern with facing up to the kind of ethical reality or character he is creating in making the choices he makes, without denying the ultimacy of subjective commitment or making any decision less a reflection of personal choice.

In short, though not required by the theory of existentialism and little attended to by existentialism's proponents, the development of logic in ethics is not only compatible with, but could be highly conducive to the existentialist's demands for an intellectually honest ethical viewpoints freed from the self-deceit of absolutistic arguments.

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