

SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM AND AESTHETICS:
ART FOR THE SAKE OF EXISTENTIAL AND SOCIAL PROJECTS

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Elijah Alexander Guerra

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SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM AND AESTHETICS:
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Thesis Supervisor:

Amelie F. Benedikt, Ph.D.
Department of Philosophy

Approved:

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.
Dean, Honors College

Abstract

Sartre's theory of existential aesthetics implies that the production of art for the sake of social change is a superior project to the production of art for art's sake. Sartre argues that literature is the prime form of art since it is more capable of revealing a situation to the audience than are other forms of art. I argue that other forms of art, such as painting, composing music, and writing poetry, are equally capable of revealing situations to the audience. I also argue that "art for art's sake" is capable of contributing to an individual's existential project.

I. Sartre's Existentialism

Introduction

For one who confidently affirms human freedom and who is concerned about what this freedom entails for the individual, one finds in existentialism a seemingly disturbing, yet strangely optimistic answer. At first, some may feel discomfort while reading existential texts because of the omnipresent themes of solitude, anguish, and despair. Other readers may find in these themes confirmation of their own natural attitudes and be pleased by the eloquently bold articulations of these ideas and moods. Still, one may feel even more unsettled or intrigued by the blunt and characteristically secular language concerning God, whether one is reading the Christian existentialists – Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Marcel – or atheistic existentialists, Heidegger and Sartre. If existentialism does not offer one a comforting account of human existence, it may still offer one the unmitigated authority over oneself that was prized by liberalists who faced both metaphysical and political arguments threatening this freedom. Existentialist texts are showered with encounters with arguments for determinism in which the

phenomenological claims to human freedom are challenged by scientific claims to a natural causation wholly inclusive of the processes within the human body and mind. Along with metaphysical freedom, one's freedom to act autonomously in any given society is a highlight of Sartre's existentialism and a basis for his ideology concerning how the artist should function as one who reveals the world to the audience and allows the spectators a unique opportunity to realize their responsibility for changing the world.

If existentialism's attitude concerning human freedom is one of optimistic commitment to the minimal existence of boundaries limiting action, it is also one of disturbing obsession with how this freedom is inextricably tangled with an individual's responsibility of claiming the entirety of one's existence as being freely chosen and modified at will. With this responsibility is included one's isolation as an individual who must generate one's own purpose and system of morals without the guidance of any person besides the self. Parallel to the individual's subjective approach to an ethical and teleological existence is the artist's subjective approach to establishing aesthetic values by way of original and autonomous creation. As I will discuss in later sections, the artist is without an objective system of aesthetic values and therefore must depend on his/her own artistic actions to demonstrate the aesthetic values he/she feels are worth being appropriated. Given the manner in which existentialism serves as a foundation for Sartre's existential aesthetics, I will begin my thesis with a discussion of Sartre's existentialism. The existentialist concepts I will explain are ones that will appear again in my discussion of Sartre's politically driven play *Dirty Hands*.

Sartre's Existentialism

To say that existentialism is the study of human existence would be to limit it to being a theory concerning different aspects of life; on the contrary, existentialism is an attitude concerning living in a universe where the individual is the source of meaning and morality. There are several forms of existentialism, given each philosopher's different attitude about human existence; nevertheless, there are a few themes that most existentialists agree are fundamental aspects of human nature such as the isolation of the individual, the despair of being inexorably grounded in consciousness, and the importance of choice in shaping one's existence. Above all, what is central to each existentialist's philosophy and crucial to my later examination of Sartre's existential aesthetics is the notion of absolute, unqualified human freedom. Perhaps the most notable and concise work for illuminating the attitude of existentialism is Sartre's lecture, "Existentialism is a Humanism," from which I will draw in order to set the stage for my later discussion of existential aesthetics.

Sartre has adopted Descartes' notion of the *cogito* as his starting point for constructing a philosophy of human existence ("Existentialism" 342). According to Descartes' notion of the *cogito*, the only thing of which one can be absolutely certain is that one exists. One may doubt everything concerning the physical world, but the only thing that is impossible to doubt is that one is engaged in the conscious act of doubting. Establishing the certainty of one's consciousness is the first step in establishing the certainty of things independent of consciousness. Descartes' method for establishing confidence in the existence of things independent of consciousness depends on God's existence. Descartes argued that God provided humans with both intellect and the power

of the will. Since God is probably not a deceiver, he would not provide us with faulty perceptive organs and, therefore, we can trust that the physical world independent of consciousness actually exists. Sartre, quite differently from Descartes, provided reason for believing in the existence of things independent of consciousness, but before I examine these reasons, I will explore Sartre's ideas concerning God.

Sartre identifies with being an atheistic existentialist rather than a Christian existentialist. He asserts that there is a profound absence of God in the universe and that, since there is no God who created humanity according to a human essence, humans exist undetermined and without an already established morality to refer to. Hence, human beings are "condemned" to freedom since there is no such morality instated by God and thus no God to judge which actions are right and which actions are wrong ("Existentialism" 349). The implications of there being no original human essence include (1) there being no objective truth and (2) there being no objective morality. Objectivity would mean that some idea is true independent of any person's knowledge of that idea. Objectivity would also require that an idea be absolutely true and unchangeable. However, Sartre argues that since ideas are *someone's* ideas and are dependent on a person's knowledge of those ideas, truth is subjective. As Sartre writes, "every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity" ("Existentialism" 342). There are a few ideas to expand upon in this statement. First, by "truth" Sartre is referring to values which are held by different persons. Since one person's values will be different from another person's, what is true for one person will not be true for another. The values of a person are established according to one's *subjectivity* and *setting*.

We have already observed that subjectivity is the root of all truth and that ideas are dependent upon a consciousness having those ideas. Similarly, truth concerning an environment that one perceives is dependent upon one's being conscious of that environment. This means that any truth applied to the environment is only applied as a result of a human subjectivity claiming that truth. For example, if I step outside this building and judge that "this street is empty," the fact that this street is empty is only true because I am there to judge it. If I return inside this building, leaving the street unattended, it is no longer true that this street is empty because there is no subjectivity to pass judgment upon it. To put it a bit more abstractly, truth only exists in a consciousness – and the universe itself is not conscious.

If truth is always *someone's* truth, and if the reality of an environment one perceives is dependent upon one's being conscious of that environment, how can we be certain that there is a physical world independent of consciousness? This is where Sartre's notion of the *human setting* comes in. The human setting, or situation, consists of five main components: place, past, environment, other people, and death. The human setting is also referred to by Sartre as the *facticity* of an individual, which is constituted by a few ways in which consciousness is necessarily fixed in the world. These elements of facticity can be seen as those factors of existence which are *given* and to some degree unchangeable. One's condition of being always in some location and around certain objects refers to the *facticity of one's place*. This aspect of existence includes the succession of locations one has occupied, tracking all the way back to one's birth. The facticity of one's place demonstrates that there is a physical world since it requires a human being to always be in some place and restricts one from having no location or

more than one location (*Being and Nothingness* 636). The *facticity of one's past* is defined as the un-modifiability of one's past events. This is not to say that one's future is determined by one's past, but rather that the events that one has chosen to occur in one's life enter into a history only accessible to memory (*Being and Nothingness* 637). The availability and usefulness of objects at one's disposal is the *facticity of one's environment*. Features of one's environment are always seen, interpreted, and used from a certain perspective with certain intentions (*Being and Nothingness* 648). The features of one's environment are already equipped with meanings concerning the utility of certain objects so that an individual may come into contact with an object for the first time and be informed about how it should be used or encountered. For example, if one were to lay hands on a whisk for the first time in one's life, that whisk will already have been assigned utility by other people even though the person for which this tool is new will have no idea what it is used for. Therefore, one can be certain that there exists an environment, as well as people, independent of one's consciousness since this assigning of meaning and utility occurred in other individuals' consciousnesses. The *facticity of other people* is exactly this situation of having objects in the world already constituted with meanings. This train and the material or passengers it transports are equipped with meaning; this map and the places that it refers to are equipped with meaning; the stars and their formations are equipped with meaning; the road signs are equipped with meaning. When an individual arrives in this world, these things and activities have already been assigned meanings by other people (*Being and Nothingness* 657). Finally, the *facticity of one's death* simply refers to the necessity of dying at some point and the boundary which is imposed on one's life (*Being and Nothingness* 681).

All five of these facticities combine to form one's total facticity, or *situation*.

Sartre also refers to the human situation as "being-in-the-world," a term which serves to further communicate the notion that every action is performed in a situational context. What these features of existence mean to an individual depend entirely on a person's fundamental project that one has chosen for oneself. The end which one pursues is always present in considering how one's place, past, environment, others, and death are viewed (*Being and Nothingness* 633). For example, if my fundamental project were to provide a peaceful and balanced home for my family, my past of earning funds to make possible this home would be seen as a positive contribution to this project. Similarly, my place in a dangerous and disorderly town would be seen as a hindrance to my progress toward this end. One's fundamental project is established prior to one's values being established since one first invents an image of the ideal self and human being and then chooses values that support this image by acting in a way that exercises these values. The significance of one's values depends on one's being free to choose one's project, since if one were determined by genetics or society to develop a certain project, one would not be responsible for driving this project; furthermore, if one were not responsible for one's project, one would not be responsible for choosing one's values.

I will first explain Sartre's notion of the indeterminate future and the freedom that results from the lack of an *a priori* purpose for humanity. Then, I will explain the formation of one's values according to one's vision of oneself and humankind. One has no absolute knowledge of the future in the sense that one would be able to predict with certainty that specific events will occur. On a more profound level, one does not know the *telos* of humanity, or the purpose to be satisfied by humankind. Life has no objective

meaning since there is no God to establish such meaning. As a result, there is no a priori path guiding humanity to a particular endpoint. One has no absolute knowledge of where one's future will take him/her, nor does one know absolutely the purpose of one's existence. All one knows is that every individual is free and that, as a result, one is responsible for deciding upon a meaning with which to define humanity ("Existentialism" 346). As a result, one must determine one's destination and telos for oneself and strive to fulfill a self-promise to arrive there. Subsequently, one's values will be formed according to one's actions toward achieving one's fundamental project ("Existentialism" 365). For example, if after witnessing the intense pain of others I decided that the ultimate purpose of myself and humankind should be to help the suffering attain relief, my *decision* would serve as an action and that action would exemplify certain values that complement this purpose. Even more, my *actions* as one who aids the injured would exemplify further values that would define myself and humanity.

To sum up Sartre's existentialism in a particularly simplified manner, one may claim that *human reality is action*. Truth is subjective and therefore one's reality is subjective; but this reality is only actualized through action, whether that action is a choice or a physical event. The paradox of Sartre's concerns with the ethical existence of humanity is that, on the one hand there is no objective morality since truth is a function of consciousness, yet on the other hand, one is obligated to act and create values as a result of possessing freedom. One is free to do anything yet one is entirely responsible for every action taken. This responsibility does not just mean that the human being is blamable for his/her actions, but rather it suggests that there is some ultimate value that people are

obligated to preserve. Sartre argues that one is obligated by one's own freedom to act in a manner that preserves freedom for oneself and humanity. Freedom is the ultimate value and "the basis of all values" (*Being and Nothingness* 363), which suggests that, far from being subject to an indifferent moral existence, the human being is obligated - in the sense that one's own being demands it - to act "in the name of freedom" ("Existentialism" 364). The paradox of denying morality yet encouraging a certain kind of action can be resolved if we consider Sartre's notion that the human being is necessarily free, and therefore is faced with the all-consuming consequence of such utter freedom: to value nothing higher than the freedom of oneself and others. Sartre has extracted a universal feature of humankind and established an ethics based on the furthering of this value toward an *indefinite end*.

An individual's imagination or vision concerning one's own life as well as the state of all humanity is interminable. An indefinite end is assumed as one's aim because to exist is to pursue transcendent goals which constantly demand of one's freedom the will to invent oneself and reinvent oneself ("Existentialism" 366). In contrast, to treat humanity as an end would be to finalize the concept of the individual in terms of a universal human nature, which offends existentialism by prioritizing the collective. Without freedom, existence would only be a succession of determined events toward an unalterable fate; without an open end for action, humanity would be limited to serving a finite ideal; without independence of consciousness, an individual would only be what others see and make of him/her. One can either recognize that one is a person who transcends both the natural succession of material cause and effect as well as the definitions assigned to oneself by oneself and others – thus living according to "sincerity"

and the will to constant reformation of the self – or one can live in “bad faith,” believing that one is a function of what the world and other people determine one to be.

Sartre defines “bad faith” as “hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth” (*Being and Nothingness* 89). One form of being in bad faith is believing that one’s actions are determined by natural forces, such as when a person acts as a result of having received a certain stimulus. According to this type of determinism, one is not responsible for one’s actions since the actions could not have been otherwise. A person would not have been able to prevent his/her actions, therefore the individual is not responsible for those actions. A determinist will find this idea pleasing insofar as he/she desires not to be responsible for his/her actions. The determinist is in bad faith in that he lies to himself about not being free and believes he is determined because he is pleased at not having responsibility. This type of bad faith involves a person who believes to an excessive degree that one is identical with the “in-itself,” which is that part of the self that is “fixed” to a greater extent than consciousness is fixed. Another form of bad faith is exercised when one believes that one is who others take him/her to be, such as when one relies on another person for an account of what type of person he/she is. This person is in bad faith since he chooses to replace his own choice of who to be with that of another person. One who claims that one is not complete until recognized and defined by another person believes to an excessive degree that one is identical with the for-itself, which is that part of the self that is made objective by the perception of others. However, the most common form of bad faith occurs when a person believes that one is who one takes oneself to be, such as when one defines oneself according to the position or occupation one holds. By believing that one is merely a secretary, or a student, or a mechanic, one is

reducing oneself to a set of practices or a set of actions that conform to that one role. One's freedom is limited by bad faith in that one is no longer a constantly evolving project, but rather a fixed entity with predictable patterns of action and thought.

To escape being in bad faith, one must strive for "sincerity." Sartre explains that "to be sincere...is to be what one is," meaning that one must be honest with who one is and not lie to oneself (*Being and Nothingness* 105). But the idea of sincerity is further developed as Sartre claims that sincerity is "a constant effort to dissociate oneself from oneself" (*Being and Nothingness* 109) On the surface, it seems that these are two incompatible notions of sincerity since the first states that one should be who one is and the second states that one should not be who one is; but actually, both definitions will seem to fit together once one acknowledges that *to be*, according to Sartre, means to constantly modify one's project of being according to one's values and actions in a manner that exercises to the fullest degree one's own freedom. Considering this point, sincerity *as being who one is* means being an individual who is defined by freedom alone, and sincerity *as dissociating oneself from oneself*, means letting go of definitions of the self as soon as they apply to the self. Sartre maintains that, more than merely refraining from lying to oneself about who one is, one should go further than defining oneself accurately and strive, above all else, to be true to one's own freedom.

II. Existential Aesthetics: Revelation, Appeal, and Social Freedom

If one has a passionate inclination for finding in works of art certain characteristics that lend to a piece's sensual beauty; if one is ardently committed to developing a theory of beauty that captures the essence of what makes a work of art *truly beautiful*; if all one is seeking to gain from art is a means to express emotion and creativity, then existential aesthetics is not the philosophy one needs to explore. More than an attempt to answer the question *what is beautiful*, Sartre's existential aesthetics may be considered as an attempt to answer the question *what kind of art is worth making?* or even the question *what purpose should art be concerned with fulfilling?* Existential aesthetics begins to answer these questions only after considering what it has learned about human existence from existentialism – particularly about how an individual values freedom above all other aspects of existence – and also after considering that art is a human activity in which products reflect, or reveal, to some degree the world we live in. Taking into account these considerations, Sartre's existential aesthetics is concerned mainly with how the artist exercises his/her own freedom and how the artist offers the audience an opportunity to exercise their freedom. What separates existential aesthetics from a theory of beauty that is concerned with the creative freedom of the individual is that existential aesthetics wants to *do something* with both the artist's and audience's freedom in the sense that what a work of art should aim to do is inspire a certain free action on the part of the spectator.

We have examined what Sartre takes as the roots of the individual's ontological freedom and have concluded that the individual develops values through actions that aim at one's fundamental project as well as one's vision of humanity. In order for an individual to reveal these values to the rest of society and protect the ultimate value of

freedom for oneself and humanity, social freedom must be held up as a higher end to be sought both for its own sake and for the sake of the individual, since the individual's freedom depends on the freedom of others. If, as Sartre suggests, the artist is the quintessential free individual and has come to prioritize the ultimate value of freedom in his/her life and work, then the artist's role is to reveal a situation that is limiting the freedom of his/her society. The artist will then exemplify the attitude appropriate for asserting freedom and taking action for the sake of liberating oneself and society. Sartre argues that since the revelation of a freedom-limiting situation requires that the artist directly signify objects in the world and demands the action of the audience, it is the linguistic arts that are best equipped with the means for accomplishing this revelation and appeal. Sartre concludes that the non-linguistic and poetic arts simply miss the mark. For this reason, theatre, novel, and film are the prime forms of art, whereas painting, sculpture, music, and poetry are not as suitable for acts of revelation and appeal. Next, therefore, I will examine Sartre's particular reasons for arguing that non-linguistic and even poetic art forms, which might be construed as linguistic, are less instrumental in improving social freedom.

While the writer uses words to refer to objects that exist in the world, the painter utilizes colors in order to create an aesthetic object which exists through imagination alone. The imaginary quality of the painted object is immanent even in representative works of art since it is through imagination that the object is recognized as being the aim of the colors and shapes used to portray the object. The totality of strokes of color in a painting exists as a material "analogon" for an imaginary object of which the spectator must bring to life. An analogon is a vehicle used for converting the real, material aspects

of the painting into *irreal*, aesthetic objects for the spectator to imagine (*The Imaginary* 191). An “irreal” object is one that is posited through the faculty of imagination, and this irreal object alone is the object of aesthetic appreciation in a painting (*The Imaginary* 189). When one looks at a painting of a flower, one is engaging in an act of imagination in which the material elements of the painting are the real objects and the flower that is depicted is the irreal, aesthetic object. The act of imagination involves a dismissal of the factor of imitation in the painting of the flower so that what is being focused on is an object that is distinguishable from the material elements by which the object is manifested. Through this act of dismissal, the spectator becomes responsible for creating the irreal component of the painting of the flower and thus completes the work of art. Therefore, what is beautiful in the painting of a flower is the object which the spectator has imagined rather than the colors that serve as analogons. The physical parts of a painting – the colors, shapes, and textures – are not the objects of aesthetic pleasure since these are merely useful for serving as an analogon for the irreal object (*The Imaginary* 189).

In general, what is real cannot be the object of aesthetic judgment since aesthetic judgment involves evaluating essences and, as Sartre posited, real objects merely exist and do not have essences. If I am at the foot of a mountain that is covered in bright, white snow, I may consider the experience I have of the mountain as being beautiful, but I cannot consider the mountain itself as being beautiful. To add the essential quality of beauty to the nature of the mountain would be to distort the reality of the mountain. I would be better off believing that the view I have of the mountain is beautiful since I am referring to an act of consciousness, particularly, the act of perceiving and enjoying the

mountain. Furthermore, since consciousness is more than what it is – in the sense that consciousness both exists and has certain essences – a conscious experience may possess aesthetic value. Similarly, the strokes of paint in-themselves do not contain aesthetic value, but rather provide a basis for consciousness to act upon and bring the unreal object to life.

Although the painter may create representations of reality, Sartre argues that painting is not *significant*; that is to say, the meaning that a painting contains signifies itself alone rather than something external to itself (*What is Literature?* 2). Whereas the object aimed at by the writer by the choice of his/her words is an object in the external world, the object aimed at by the painter and his/her painting is an object within the imagination of the spectator. Therefore, the meanings contained in a painting – the ideas, things, emotions, etc. – remain within the aesthetic object while the meanings contained in a linguistic work of art refer to a situation in the world. The strokes of paint are things-in-themselves, as the tree or park bench is a thing-in-itself. The only meaning that transcends the strokes of paint is the meaning immanent in the imaginary, aesthetic object. The meaning of any work of art, whether linguistic, non-linguistic, or poetic, can be understood by asking *what is the artist's purpose for creating such a work?* Thus, this meaning will not be the same for every spectator. In the case of the linguistic work of art, the author's purpose is suggested by words that signify objects and situations in the world, yet the reception of this purpose may be distorted depending on the audience's knowledge of the current situation of his/her world. In the case of the non-linguistic or poetic work of art, the artist's purpose is hidden behind the aesthetic aspect of the work and the audience can decide on it having *any meaning whatsoever*. For this reason, if a

non-linguistic or poetic artist were to create a work of art for the purpose of improving social freedom, then whether there would be action taken to achieve this purpose or not would be completely contingent on the audience's deciding to interpret it in this way.

As painters use colors to create imaginary objects; as sculptors use clay or metal; as composers use musical notes, so the poet uses words to create imaginary objects, yet these words aim toward a different end than that which is sought by literary writers. Writers of prose utilize words in order to reveal a situation to the audience and provide readers with possibilities of action. Writers of poetry, on the other hand, aim to produce a work of art in which words themselves are aesthetic objects and the meaning of the poem – as was the case with the painting – signifies itself rather than something external to itself (*What is Language?* 5). The poet treats words as things-in-themselves and only cares for them to signify something other than themselves insofar as what is aimed at is an emotion. This is why Sartre argues that the poet cannot be committed to producing art for the sake of social activism since the poet is only committed to conveying emotions (*What is Literature?* 10). However, emotions are not separate from words in the case of the poet, nor are words infused with emotion, since this would suggest the words emerged prior to the injection of the emotion that is being conveyed. The poetic words do not signify emotions, but rather “take hold of [emotions], penetrate them,” and convert them into illustrative and affective words (*What is Language?* 10). A poem is meaningful insofar as it is constituted by linguistic-emotional elements; therefore, poetic meaning resembles a substance rather than a signifier of an external situation.

What non-linguistic and poetic art forms all have in common is that they are all considered by Sartre to be “pure art,” or “empty art,” meaning the artists who participate

in these forms of art are committed to creating “art for art’s sake” instead of for the sake of social change (*What is Literature?* 17). The artistic elements they utilize – whether strokes of paint, clay, musical notes, or poetic words – aim toward an imaginary object, and this object is to be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities above all else. Therefore, the creative elements refer to an object that is inherent in a particular work of art instead of to a situation that is in the external world. Furthermore, the non-linguistic or poetic artwork is limited to providing the audience with only aesthetic possibilities rather than situational possibilities. A spectator will be responsible for interpreting the imaginary object for meanings and aesthetic qualities but will not be expected to form a plan of action based on these meanings and qualities. The linguistic artist’s expectations, on the other hand, require the audience to consider the aesthetic object along with its situational possibilities and react to them. I will now turn to an examination of the writer and his/her process of revelation and appeal.

A writer’s project, whether a play, film, novel, or short story, originates with a creative act that involves the author’s freedom alone. However, once the author has completed writing the project it cannot exist as an objective work of art except by being read or seen by an audience. Until then it remains an aspect of his/her own subjectivity as it can only present to the writer his own knowledge and intentions. The writer views his creation as an incomplete and indeterminate project and can only see his work from the inside (*What is Literature?* 31). The reader, on the other hand, views the writer’s work as an object and sees the creation from the outside. Therefore, the author does not write for himself, nor does he experience the effects of his work; rather, the writer makes an appeal to the reader so that the reader may “lead into objective existence” the work of literature

that has been created (*What is Language?* 33). Since a work of art requires an objectivizing act from a spectator, and since until this has occurred an artist has merely created a subjective compilation of personal ideas, “there is no art except for and by others” (*What is Literature*, 31). Here, Sartre’s aesthetics run parallel to his existentialism in that both the significance of the literary object and the significance of a human existence are contingent upon a human subjectivity assigning them significance. Since the literary object is void of significance when unexamined by a spectator other than the author, and since human existence in itself lacks a given purposefulness before an individual has decided on a certain purpose for him/her own self, the only manner in which the literary object or human existence can have meaning is by a human subjectivity assigning it meaning. Another existentialist concept that runs parallel to the contingent significance of the literary object is the contingent significance of an individual with respect to the “other.” Sartre’s concept of the “other” reveals that there is a necessary relationship between an individual and another person in order for that individual to exist as an objectively defined identity. An individual exists merely subjectively until someone else considers this individual as an object in the world. Similarly, a work of art remains a subjective entity created by the artist until it is observed by a spectator and, thus, objectivized.

But to have one’s work made objective is not the main project, but rather is necessary to furthering a larger project. Ultimately, the writer aims to reveal to the reader a human situation “so that the [reader] may assume full responsibility” before the situation and, subsequently, choose to act in a manner that will introduce change to the situation (*What is Literature?* 15). Thus, the writer aims to reveal a human situation in

order to guide the reader to a state of awareness and free the reader of ignorance. Without awareness of a situation, one lacks the possibility to change the situation and therefore has one's freedom limited with respect to this situation. Since the ultimate human value is freedom, and since the writer is in a position to assist the reader in augmenting the reader's freedom, the writer must present to the reader knowledge of the world by offering an aesthetic object that discloses an aspect of current human existence. Subsequently, the writer makes an appeal to the reader's freedom to "collaborate in the production of [the author's] work" (*What is Language?* 34). This entails that the reader (1) actualize the work of art by positing it as an object, (2) recognize what is being revealed by the writer, (3) "assume responsibility" for the world, and (4) fulfill the requirement of forming a creative act in order to introduce change to a situation.

Since the writer recognizes that the ultimate human value is freedom, the writer's appeal is not aimed at affecting the reader in a manner that will influence the way the reader acts. Thus, emotional appeal is not a preferable tool for the writer who is interested in optimizing freedom since any reader who is exposed to this type of appeal, and as a result acts according to the emotions adopted, is not considered to have acted in an absolutely free manner (*What is Literature?* 36). Instead, the writer's appeal only goes so far as allowing the reader to assume a situation as a task to be performed in some manner. This amounts to informing the reader of a situation and then abandoning the reader before the question of what action should be taken is posed. Sartre refers to the effect produced by this abandonment as the literary object's "silence". By this Sartre means that the purpose or meaning of the literary object is left unstated by words and merely suggested by the material within the work. This silence is both representative of the writer and

reader's freedom and active as an appeal by the writer for an original, creative response of the reader (*What is Literature?* 32). Here again, Sartre's aesthetics run parallel to his existentialism in that the silence of the literary object resembles the silence of the universe. As there is no response from the universe when one poses the question *what is the purpose of human existence?* so there is also no response from the author or even the literary object itself when one poses the question *what is the purpose of this work of art?* In the same manner that one freely decides what the purpose of one's existence will be, the spectator also freely decides what the purpose of the literary object is, and subsequently, the spectator decides how he/she will act once he has discovered the situation revealed by the author. If it weren't for the silence of the literary object or the universe, humans would not be free to act as autonomous individuals.

For Sartre, Theatre is the most effective form of art since it creates a situation that is tangibly present to the audience and since it demonstrates human action as it aims to achieve a state of freedom for an individual or group. The situation that a work of theatre is concerned with is that of an individual or group's freedom being threatened as well as the formulation of actions required in order to achieve freedom in the forms of both a general, existential liberation and as a liberation from a particular situation with social and political circumstances. The *general* type of freedom that a work of theatre aims to have the audience realize is a trans-historical element that is recognized and internalized by the audience regardless of the time period in which the work was composed. A spectator in the twenty-first century attending a performance of a play that was written in the seventeenth century, or even in the twelfth century, may not be able to relate to the social or political conditions within the work, but what will still be recognized is an

essential need for freedom that the characters express. The *particular* type of freedom that a play is centered on achieving for the audience is one concerned with a specific situation. This freedom can be viewed as a freedom *from* something oppressive, whereas the general type of freedom can be seen as a state of being ideally autonomous (Deranty).

Existentialism and theatre share in common a core element that unites and drives all elements involved: the *human situation*, or, what existentialism more specifically calls an individual's *being-in-the-world*. While existentialism seeks to have an individual become both aware of this situational existence and active in the purposeful modification of this existence, theatre aims to reveal to the audience a freedom-limiting situation through the actions of characters. Theatre's emphasis of the human situation is exceptionally profound compared to that of other art forms, considering how the spectator's experience of a play being performed is one of direct observation and intimate contact with the actors on the stage. The characters' emotions are spread to the audience members as if the characters' woeful tears or angry shouts were internalized by the spectators and as if these emotions urged the listeners to participate. The audience's contact with the actors is a lending force to the artist's appeal that is either significantly superior to that of other forms of art or altogether absent in other art forms (Deranty).

III. Existential and Political Situations in Sartre's Play *Dirty Hands*

Sartre's works of literature, whether his novels, short stories, or plays, are teeming with his existentialist concepts. Similar to how Sartre suggests a writer must make his/her audience aware of a situation, he includes in his own writings situations that make the audience aware of the human condition in general. In Sartre's play *Dirty Hands* he accomplishes producing a synthesis of both political and existential conditions to be called into question by the audience for the sake of reflecting on one's character, actions, and events passed in the world, as well as considering current and future states of affairs within a society. The characters in the play demonstrate individuals who base their values on political principles and how those individuals either act strictly according to those principles or make room for the values to change. Appropriately, Sartre's characters all maintain that freedom is to be sought above all else; however, they differ about whether that freedom is a function of one's personal development, the ultimate good for society, freedom from oppressors, or, in cases when one cannot bear complete responsibility, freedom from responsibility itself. The political situation Sartre presents in *Dirty Hands* is a familiar one that reflects back to events such as the German occupation, the Truce of Paris, and the assassination of a Soviet leader, all of which serve to illuminate the fundamental concern of the play: should one get one's hands dirty for the sake of a social cause? This concern is strung through several historical and contemporary references. It is also a prevalent theme in the world today. *Dirty Hands* is an entertaining and insightful commentary on politics in which both his contemporaries and future readers are able to find value.

In Sartre's play, *Dirty Hands*, the Socialist Proletarian Party of Illyria experiences internal strife as members' personal interests collide with the party's ideals. Hugo, a writer for the party newspaper, grows impatient with his status as one who relays information to other members yet does not participate in direct action. This twenty-one year old intellectual is ambitious to become a fighting limb for the party, yet he lacks the experience to be such a radical activist. When Louis, a leader in the Proletarian Party, proposes a mission to kill Hoederer, another leader of the party who is officiating differently than Louis would like him to, Hugo convinces Louis to allow him to carry out the mission. Hoederer plans to join together the proletarian party with fascist and conservative groups in order to present a greater resistance to the Germans. Louis opposes Hoederer's plans to negotiate, believing that the proletarian party will suffer from such an alliance. In order to become in closer contact with Hoederer, Hugo earns the position as Hoederer's secretary and is then situated, along with his wife, Jessica, to live in Hoederer's home. After studying the behavior of Hugo for a while, Hoederer catches on to his plot to murder him, yet Hoederer is willing to work with Hugo in order to examine further his personal situation and that of the party. Hugo forfeits several opportunities to kill Hoederer, but Hugo eventually murders him after catching Jessica and Hoederer kissing. Later, the proletarian party decides to follow Hoederer's plan of joining with the fascists and conservatives after all. Consequently, the party believes Hugo will target the communists out of disgust for having been assigned a pointless mission. After Hugo has been released from his prison sentence for killing Hoederer, the party seeks him out in order to kill him so that he will no longer be a threat to the party. Hugo argues with Olga, another member of the party, about whether he should testify as

having committed the murder impulsively – thus having his act dismissed as a sort of jealous passion – or testify as having intended the murder – thus proving himself responsible for the act and revealing himself as having been committed to eliminating Hoederer. Hugo decides to claim that he committed the murder for the sake of fulfilling the duty prescribed to him by the party, even though we suspect that he only decided to murder Hoederer the moment he discovered him embracing with Jessica.

Hugo's prioritization of party principles over practical actions shows him to be a naïve idealist who struggles to create his identity. Sartre shows that Hugo is quick to allow others to determine that identity for him, which is why he is eager to have Louis assign him with any mission whatsoever, as long as it gives him an opportunity for direct action: "Louis, I shall do whatever you want, no matter what." It is no coincidence that Hugo's nickname in the party is Raskolnikov, a character from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* who murders a person on the principle that those who are causing society more harm than good should be eliminated from society. Like Raskolnikov, Hugo has significantly less confidence in his actions than in his principles, which causes both characters much mental turmoil when faced with the consequences of those actions.

Hugo is clearly in "bad faith" in more than one way. He is first of all consumed by communistic ideology to the extent that practical reasoning is prevented. For example, when debating with Hoederer about the ultimate goal of the party, Hugo claims that "It has only one goal: to make our ideas, all our ideas, and only these victorious." Hugo ignores the notion that socialist ideals are only valuable when applied to a particular society with real individuals. Without a concern for the people for whom the party is fighting, the ideas are worthless, as Hoederer articulates in a conversation with Hugo: "If

you don't love men, you can't fight for them." Also, Hugo relies mainly on others to label him and give his identity meaning and significance. Since Hugo believes that he can only be a significant individual if others believe in him, he commits to revolutionary action partly in order to prove himself to other people: "How can you want to live when nobody believes in you?" Above all, Hugo is in existential bad faith by denying responsibility for his own actions. When Hugo is released from prison and reunited with Olga, she asks him "Are you proud of your deed? Do you claim it as your own?" A person who accepts responsibility and is authentic in their own freedom would claim every action he/she performed, taking responsibility for the formulation of the action, the performance of the action, and the consequences that follow. Hugo fails to accept any of the above. Louis was responsible for formulating the action that Hugo set out to perform while Hugo was eager to perform any action whatsoever that Louis proposed. Although Hugo is the one who shot Hoederer, he denies responsibility for the action: "It wasn't I who killed – it was chance." He claims that he had decided to let Hoederer help him become a better revolutionary and only killed him when he became angry at seeing Jessica and Hoederer kissing. Thus, Hugo believes that his passions took hold of his agency, rendering him not responsible for the action. If Hugo acted unfreely, due to passion, his act will be judged by others as not having been performed out of commitment to the ideal. In this case, the party would dismiss any fear of Hugo retaliating on discovering that the party reversed the ideal. However, Hugo rejects this interpretation of his action even though it would have saved his life. For Hugo, it would have been more disturbing to live with the idea that his revolutionary action was pointless than it would have been to die as a result of abiding to an ideal. As a final act of bad faith,

Hugo declares himself “unsalvageable,” thereby claiming that his action and his identity were now set in stone and terminally unfree.

Hugo’s character reveals to the audience a contradiction of Idealism: radical actions contradict the very ideals for which are being fought. On being asked in an interview about what Hugo represents, Sartre explains his protagonist as thus:

In the circumstances, I wanted to show the contradiction between an intellectual youth (with all the defects of an intellectual youth, but a youth which can always be helped to overcome the phase it is passing through – because revolutionary intellectuals can, after all, exist) and a moment in the objective development of the revolutionary dialectic which held out no prospects for them at all at that time (Contat & Rybalka, 220).

In Hugo’s case, the defects of being an intellectual youth are mistaking ideals for ends in themselves, the selfish and hasty eagerness to be directly involved in the revolutionary dialectic, and the untimely performance of radical actions. While the fact that the phase in the revolution held no prospects for the proletarian party should have altered Hugo’s perceptions of the proper course of action, he failed to recognize that the assassination of one leader within the party would make little difference to the course of the revolution. Hoederer’s policy of uniting forces with the fascists and conservatives is followed in the end regardless of being killed.

Despite the resistance of existentialism to define individuals with labels, if there is an existential “hero” in *Dirty Hands*, it must be Hoederer. His recognition of the limiting nature of principles and his prioritization of humanity over these principles earns him a power over intellectual idealists such as Hugo who are unwilling to compromise ideals

with human relations. Even more to Hoederer's existential quality is his willingness to act and risk ideals for the sake of humanity. The extent to which he is willing to risk these ideals stops short of shedding the blood of others, as he explains when he is criticizing Hugo for his idleness: "How you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands!... Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I've plunged them in filth and blood." Unlike Hugo, Hoederer does not wait to be given orders and does not rely on the opinions of others to determine who he is. Rather, Hoederer has determined his own identity by confidently performing actions and acknowledging his responsibility for their consequences. Furthermore, he takes an unpopular stand in the policy he formulated concerning the development of an alliance. From these characteristics, it can be inferred that Hoederer lives in authenticity and develops values expressive of his freedom as an individual.

Sartre crafts this play to reveal a situation concerning a revolutionary party's choice between pure ideals and, on the other hand, risking these ideals for the sake of achieving the desired ends. In a press interview, Sartre articulates the questions he would like the audience to formulate on observing the play: "The only question I am dealing with is, I repeat, whether a revolutionary may risk jeopardizing his ideals for the sake of efficacy. Has he the right to 'dirty his hands?'" (Contat & Rybalka, 2008) Sartre believes a writer is responsible for making the audience aware of a situation rather than convincing them toward a certain type of action. The audience must consider the consequences of both affirmative and negative answers and then decide for oneself what is right. However, Sartre did have his own answers and trusted his audience to uncover the motives behind the play. Should Louis shame egalitarian principles in having Hoederer

murdered for the sake of saving the fate of the party from the actions Hoederer would have performed? If Hoederer's policy would have caused the destruction of many lives, would his murder have been justified? Since his policy was eventually adopted, might there have been a better solution to Hoederer's opponents' concerns? Should Hugo lie to the party in claiming his identity as someone who killed for the sake of the party's ideals? If he does lie, he is in bad faith and will cause the end of his career within the party as well as his own murder. Should Hoederer taint the party's purity by joining together fascist and nationalist parties with the Proletarian Party for the sake of presenting a greater resistance to the Germans? Since his policy is developed in order that humanity will benefit from the alliance, is his cause worth jeopardizing his ideals for?

Although *Dirty Hands* is set in a fictional land of Illyria, it is extremely relevant to events contemporary to Sartre's time. Illyria's situation resembles that of Hungary's in 1944 when Hungary was occupied by German forces and the Communist Party in Hungary awaited the coming of Russian forces.

This play also reflects the situation of France in 1934 when Jacques Doriot was expelled from the French Communist Party (FCP) after attempting to establish relations between the FCP and the French Socialist Democratic Party (FSDP). Like Hoederer, who believed establishing alliances would benefit the party as a whole, Doriot advocated a Popular Front including the FCP and FSDP; also, similar to how Hoederer's route was eventually taken, the Communist Party eventually took Doriot's route, as Sartre explains in a conversation with Paolo Caruso about *Dirty Hands*:

A year later, to prevent the situation in France from degenerating into fascism and on specific Soviet instructions, the CP took the road which

Doriot had advanced, but without ever admitting he had been right (Contat & Rybalka, 219).

The questions posed by Sartre in the play apply to events such as this one and are intended to provoke suspicion concerning appropriate political action in situations of oppression and resistance.

Another parallel within *Dirty Hands* deals particularly with Hugo's assassinating Hoederer. Leon Trotsky, an exiled Soviet leader of the Red Army, anticipated being killed by Stalinists for the reason that Stalin thought he was a threat to the Soviets. On August 20th, 1940, Trotsky was assassinated by Ramón Mercader, an agent of the Soviet Union. Similarly to how Hugo became close in contact with Hoederer by being appointed as his secretary, Mercader made himself acquainted with Trotsky and became regular company in his home.

IV. The Value of Linguistic and Non-linguistic Arts with Regards to One's Existential and Social Projects

Sartre maintains that linguistic arts are superior to non-linguistic arts since words more accurately reveal a situation in the world than other artistic media. Of the linguistic arts, Sartre argues that theatre is the most effective art form since it places emphasis on the situation, in particular the characters' actions within the situation. The imaginary situation on stage reveals a real situation in the world and provides the spectator or reader with an opportunity to consider his/her position in the world and formulate an action that will change the situation. The resulting action, performed from the individual's own freedom, will then enter into the individual's system of values; thus, one's existential project of developing values by way of free actions is fulfilled. I will argue that forming one's existential project can be accomplished not only through actions considered as a result of experiencing linguistic works of art, but can also be accomplished through actions considered as a result of experiencing non-linguistic works of art. Non-linguistic art forms, like linguistic arts, are capable of providing the spectator or reader with an opportunity to bring freedom to one's society. Furthermore, I will argue that art for art's sake can contribute to one's existential project, despite its focus on themes other than social freedom.

Just as a play, such as Sartre's *Dirty Hands*, may invoke unrest concerning a situation in one's society, a painting, musical composition, or poem may invoke a similar unrest and provide the spectator or reader with an opportunity to be involved in that situation. Consider Picasso's painting *Guernica*, an imitation of the bombing of Guernica by the Germans at the time of the Spanish Civil War. The mayhem of desperate, muted

cries and the absence of a listening ear of one who may come to the rescue; the devastation of a woman as she holds a dead loved one in her arms; the disfigured bodies of blasted citizens and animals; a severed limb fallen to the ground like a piece of meat; an eerie blend of blue skin with black, suffocating smoke and nauseating flashes of white; doubtlessly, all of these aspects contribute to a gruesome painting. One would simply remark on the painting with a single, depressed word and walk away unsettled and weary. If a spectator of this painting during the time of the Spanish Civil War happened to then act against the war and violence, chances are these actions of protest had their source in a prior motivation rather than in the painting itself. Perhaps the point of art for social freedom's sake is for the artist to exemplify original, creative action in the name of a collective freedom as well as the freedom of oneself. *Guernica* is Picasso's protest sign against violence and his declaration of freedom to express his own values. Even if a spectator of his paintings realized only this freedom to create and express values for oneself, it would be a joy to the artist and an expression of choice and freedom for both artist and viewer.

Dmitri Shostakovich, a Russian composer of the twentieth century, proved that music can reveal a situation in the world as he composed his seventh symphony, "Leningrad," during World War II. Vladimir Belyakov remarks on how the composer wrote this work amidst the deafening blasts of bombs tossed between the Germans and the Soviets after the fascists invaded Russia: "Shostakovich continued to work on the symphony as the standoff dragged on. For the first time in history, a huge symphonic canvas was being created under incessant artillery bombardment and air attacks" (Belyakov). In August, 1942, the city of Leningrad was under siege by German forces,

leaving citizens without enough food to keep them alive and without enough wood and fire to keep their bodies from freezing.

Nevertheless, the premiere of Shostakovich's symphony brought together as many citizens of Leningrad that could fit into the Philharmonic Hall (Belyakov). They found hope in their country by listening to a work that depicted their suffering yet illustrated their determination. "Leningrad," with its songs of Russian pride and marches of grief and frustration, is a call to unity and endurance that motivated even the weakest to persevere. Sartre argues that the only meaning that a musical work contains is an internal, emotional one that is disconnected from the external world. However, it is no coincidence that the entire city of Leningrad as well as citizens from all over Russia, while being involved in the grave situation of war, found meaning and hope in Shostakovich's symphony and were moved to keep pushing through the war.

Despite Sartre's opinion that poetry treats words as aesthetic objects rather than signs to use for the revelation of a situation, it would be hard to argue that Elizabeth Browning's poem "The Cry of the Children" was created merely for beauty's sake, as Sartre would characterize it. A poet of the nineteenth century, Browning was dedicated to bringing awareness and change to situations in her time and society such as the unethical practices during a time of radical industrialization, the perceptions of women and their roles in society, and the rights of citizens regarding religion and politics (Avery). In "The Cry of the Children," the poet paints a horrid illustration of the slavish life-style of children too young to be fulfilling the demands of intensive manual labor:

Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping —

We fall upon our faces, trying to go;

And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
The reddest flower would look as pale as snow.
For, all day, we drag our burden tiring,
Through the coal-dark, underground —
Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
In the factories, round and round.

Not only is Browning calling into question the abuse of child labor by exposing the pain and desperation of these children, but she is also criticizing any person who allows such abuse and appealing for a change to relieve them of their detrimental situation. If this poem does not propose values an individual should develop for the sake of humanity, I would argue that no work of literature or theatre could either.

Whether these works of art inspired social or political action on the parts of the spectators is difficult to determine – just as difficult as it would be to determine whether Sartre’s *Dirty Hands* inspired action. The point of examining these art forms, both linguistic and non-linguistic, is to show how an artist’s social commentary, once seen by the spectator, leads to the spectator’s evaluation of both the situation and the commentary. The chances of any work of art motivating political action are slim, but by inspiring strong emotions within the spectator, she then perceives the portrayed situation as personally meaningful. The spectator will only truly be experiencing art for art’s sake if she does not pay mind to any social situation that may be associated with a particular work of art. The degree to which the work of art would further the individual in his/her existential project will match the degree to which the individual commits to incorporating the message within the work of art into his/her actions. Ultimately, for a work of art to be

of value to an individual's existential project, it must assist the individual to develop personal values and personal meaning.

The artist must not limit him/herself to creating art for the sake of social freedom. What Sartre does not see is that the very act of artistic creation exemplifies pure human freedom and so too does viewing that artwork. Sartre prioritizes focusing on the aspects of art that deal with social freedom; however, existentialism's prime value is the freedom of the individual, which is at its greatest power when the faculty of imagination is being exercised, whether that imagination is acting on one's own project or that of another.

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