A Response to Sartre's Concept of Freedom and to the
Existentialist Attempt to Found Ethics upon
Commitment

This paper aims to refute Sartre's concept of freedom which solely emphasizes
the individuation of self irrespective of others’ value and establishes the notion
of morality on this solipsistic subjectivism. With this aim, we argue following
the linguistic philosophical views of Abelson, Anderson, Apel, Benhabib,
Gewirth. As an existentialist Sartre believes in the immense potentiality within
human existence that can be achieved through one’s own freedom of choice.
We argue that such subjective individuation of self with the absolute freedom
within itself leads to inauthentic choices and actions that may impose
infringement on others’ freedom since here we didn’t find any conception of
one’s relation with other-selves. However, as social beings, humans presuppose
the importance of communication with others while choosing one’s action. In
this paper, we have tried to explain an individual’s freedom as a social being
through communication with others that overcome the subjectivity of Sartre’s
freedom and morality.

Keywords: Freedom of Choice, Absolute freedom, Sartre's freedom and
morality, Subjectivity

Introduction

Sartre, as an existentialist, identifies freedom with human existence that
precedes essence and distinguishes one’s own existence in the world. Sartre [1943]
equates freedom with the notion of human consciousness. According to him, since
consciousness is always consciousness of something, it is also the consciousness
of itself, and thus the consciousness of being and consciousness of freedom
[Sartre, 1943, 40]. The concept of freedom, for existentialist Sartre, is not just a
property of rational will, rather freedom is absolute and it lies within the basic
structure of human existence. It is not possible for a free individual not to choose
unless one chooses to cease one’s freedom of choice. Human freedom of choice
presupposes human existence. Individuals born into a world with particular
situations, called facticity. These situations limit one’s freedom by throwing
individuals into different factual situations. However, individuals by their own
freedom of choice can make a leap of faith from their existent factual situation
towards the future to transcend one’s own existence. Following this, human beings
are essentially free and create their own existence by their freedom of choice. As
an existentialist Sartre believes in the immense potentiality within human
existence that can be achieved through one’s own freedom of choice. Again, such
immense potential freedom always accompanies responsibility. An individual is
responsible for whatever choice one has taken for one’s own self even one’s very
desire of fleeing from one’s responsibilities. Thus, for Sartre, freedom is absolute
for individual existence. Now, such absolute freedom hooks a similar magnitude
of absolute responsibilities. Here, Sartre's position ‘I can neither seek within
myself for an authentic impulse to action, nor can I expect, from some ethic, formulae that will enable me to act’ [Sartre, 2007] leads to absolute subjectivity. Sartre perceives and defines freedom entirely from an individual’s subjective point of view and accepts an individual’s absolute freedom without being a concern for other-selves and the community. Such subjective individuation of self with the absolute freedom within itself leads to inauthentic choices and amoral and immoral actions that may impose infringement of others’ freedom since here we didn’t find any conception of one’s relationship with other-selves. However, as social beings, humans presuppose the importance of communication with others while choosing one’s action. In this paper, we have tried to explain individual’s freedom as a social being through communication with others that overcome the subjectivity of Sartre’s freedom and morality.

In his book, Persons: A Study in Philosophical Psychology, Raziel Abelson affirms that recent linguistic philosophy has led to a transformation of our understanding of the nature of the person and of morality. Whereas previous philosophers tended to see ethics as an applied science which was grounded in biology, history, and psychology, recent linguistic philosophy argues that the description of human action in psychological terms necessarily involves the moral point of view [Abelson, 1977, xi-xii]. For human action cannot be understood as human, that is, as conscious and free, unless we see that the self is profoundly social in its nature and that "the concept of a person entails that of a moral community of autonomous agents, each of whom recognizes the rights and interests of all others" [Abelson, 1977, xiv].

The paper has two parts and a conclusion. The first part briefly summarizes the argument of Gewirth for a universal ethics which is founded upon the isolated individual’s consciousness of one’s own freedom to pursue one’s own well-being, however one might existentially define that well-being. The second part examines the argument of Apel who offers a way of evaluating the attempt to found ethics upon existential commitment.

Gewirth’s argument of Ethics from the Isolated Person

Gewirth [1996] is an American linguistic philosopher who offers what he calls an argument for a universal set of moral values, including the right to life, the right to fundamental well-being as rational agents (for example, the right to an education), and the right to liberty (freedom that respects the freedom and fundamental well-being of others as rational agents). His argument begins with the isolated individual who is conscious of one's own freedom to pursue one's own well-being, however, that individual existentially defines that well-being. Gewirth argues that such a beginning point in the isolated individual is sufficient for establishing universal values. The argument has three steps. Any human agent as a conscious, free agent (i) must value one's freedom and well-being as the means necessary for any goal (if a person chooses any goal as valuable, then the person ought to value one's own freedom and fundamental well-being as a rational agent as the necessary means for that value because without one's freedom and
fundamental well-being as a rational agent one would be unable to know and
evaluate and unable to choose any goal; hence, a rational agent ought to value
one's own freedom and well-being as the basis of any other value), and (ii)
therefore must claim a prudential right to freedom and well-being since to allow
others to interfere with one's freedom and well-being would frustrate the very
purpose of one's action (by a prudential right, Gewirth means that any reasonable
person who values one’s own freedom and fundamental well-being as a rational
agent ought to insist that others ought not to offer any practical interference with
one’s agency), and (iii) accordingly ought to universalize that prudential right into
a moral right for all agents as agents since any human agent as rational and free
logically and prudentially ought to value one’s freedom and well-being as the
means necessary for any goal that the agent would know, desire, and choose. Even
if the goal is suicide, the agent must claim a prudential right to one's own freedom
and well-being at least temporarily as the means to one’s goal of self-destruction.
For no one who really wants to commit suicide wants anyone else to interfere with
one’s plan to end one’s life. [Beyleveld, 2012]

However, we could argue against the attempt of Gewirth to base ethics on the
individual's rational need to be logically consistent in valuing one’s own freedom
and fundamental rational well-being, at least temporarily while one intends to
rationally and freely carry out one’s intention to commit suicide. Gewirth's
argument appears to be open to the objection of Thomas Anderson against the
existentialist ethics of Sartre. Anderson has argued that "neither a meaningful
existence, nor logical consistency, nor consistency with reality has any intrinsic
value, nor can compelling reasons be given for valuing any one of them"
[Anderson, 1979, 145]. Furthermore, Hans Kung (2003) and Alasdair MacIntyre
[1981] offer a similar evaluation about the existentialist attempt to found ethics
upon one's radical free choice. For if the value of one's life as a whole is dependent
upon one's existential, primordial decision to, value one's life as a whole, and if the
nihilist or amoralist decides that the whole of one's life is without meaning in one's
judgment, why should one be bound to make prudential judgments about what he
ought to do to attain any end, even the end of suicide. An individual, it would
seem, can just say to oneself, "I just do what I do because I want to do it. I make
no moral or prudential judgments about what I ought to do, nor do I offer any
reasons for what I do. I am just me, and I offer no reasons to anybody for what I
think, say, or do."

Apel, Gewirth, & Abelson’s Argument from Linguistic Philosophical Point of
View

Gewirth has argued that a logical analysis of human action as rational and
free necessarily establishes that every agent ought to respect the freedom and well-
being, including that of rationality as a basic good, of all agents. However,
Gewirth's argument, like Sartre's argument for ethics, appears to be open to the
fatal objection that one need not choose to value one's own rationality nor one's
life as a whole. So, what difference does it make what anyone decides to do?
Apel's argument for morality is also founded upon the rationality and freedom of the human agent, but he emphasizes the radical social nature of human rationality. Furthermore, Apel argues that the human agent cannot make any rational statement, even in one's own mind, without presupposing both the reality of a human communication community and the absolute value of the universal moral community.

In one sense, Apel argues, logic by itself does not imply an ethic. As Kant noted, only the good will is unconditionally good. For all the other goods of a human being, including the intellect, can be used for evil ends. For example, a robber could use his intellect to plan a very effective bank heist. Because "the logically correct use of intellect can be employed simply as a means to an end by an evil will," it follows that "one cannot assert that logic logically implies an ethic" [Apel, 1980, 258].

However, "logic--and, at the same times, all the sciences and technologies—all human action requires some necessary preconditions for its possibility" [Apel, 1980, 258]. For any action which is to be intelligible to the self must presuppose, first, the reality of the human communication community, and second, the ideal human communication community in which the rationality and freedom of all agents ought to be respected. First, Apel argues that any human action, including logic, must presuppose the particular human communication community within which the agent has become rational and with which the agent is speaking either actually or potentially. Apel agrees with Wittgenstein that "One person alone cannot follow a rule and create validity for his thought within the framework of a 'private language'" [1980, 258]. The solitary logician can develop and prove a line of argument within Aristotelian logic only by internalizing the dialogue of Aristotelian logicians who could critically examine that argument.

Furthermore, the solitary logician, George Boole, can develop a non-Aristotelian logic, Boolean logic, only by internalizing "the dialogue of a potential community of argumentation in the critical 'discourse of the soul with itself (Plato)' [1980, 258]. For example, in the early 20th century when Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead wrote their foundational work in symbolic logic, *Principia Mathematica*, the new logical symbols and the validity of their arguments were not just intelligible to them as solitary thinkers. Their logic was intelligible also to the generations of logicians who followed and were influenced by that seminal work. Consequently, Apel concludes that "the validity of solitary thought is basically dependent upon the justification of verbal arguments in the actual community of argumentation" [1980, 258].

The validity of solitary thought presupposes not only the first condition of the reality of the communication community which has developed socially and historically, and which will continue to do so; that validity also presupposes as a second condition the universal moral community of rational agents. If individuals in a court room proceeding lied to each other in the presentation of evidences, the true guilt or innocence of the accused would be impossible to establish unless other evidences could be appealed to in order to disclose which statements were lies. Similarly, if participants in a scientific debate could lie to each other without these lies being discovered, the participants would be unable to establish the
reasoned truth in the matter. Furthermore, if participants refused to listen to each other's arguments or refused to offer reasons for their conclusions, rational argument would be impossible. By refusing to listen to each other and by refusing to offer to each other reasons for their conclusions, the participants would not be respecting each other's rationality and freedom. They would, in effect, be treating each other as things which could be conditioned by verbal punishments and rewards. But furthermore, as Abelson has argued, if an individual refused to offer reasons to himself for his own truth claims and conclusions, he would not be respecting his own rationality and freedom and would be reducing his self to a dimensionless point. Consequently, the validity of solitary thought presupposes that the individual ought to value one's own rationality and freedom, and the validity of reasoned dialogue presupposes that all rational agents as potential members in that dialogue ought to value each other's rationality and freedom. All actual and potential partners in that dialogue should recognize each other as possessing equal rights [1980, 259].

Furthermore, since all meaningful human actions presuppose that the agent must be capable of giving reasons both to oneself and to others for those actions and since all such actions make claims as to what is the factual state of the world and both the agent and others need to be able to validate those claims, all rational agents ought to respect their own rationality and freedom as well that of others. "In other words, all beings who are capable of linguistic communication must be recognized as persons since in all their actions and utterances they are potential participants in a discussion, and the unlimited justification of thought cannot dispense with contributions to a discussion" [1980, 259].

We can find a similar view in Sayela Benhabib’s inter-subjective concept of self. This standpoint presupposes an incoherent and improvised concept of self [Benhabib, 1992, 71]. According to this view, an individual self is recognized as a related entity among others in a community through the inter-subjective communication of speech and action between the individual self with others [Pandit, 2021]. Here an individual self is recognized as a related entity in a community where people believe in inner goodness of humanity, and they are related through the inter-subjective communication of mutual love, respect and benevolence with one another [Pandit, 2021]. This inter-subjective communication is based on mutual respect towards others’ rational capabilities and freedom of choice. Here, the ‘I’ or one’s own self-identity can only be ‘I’ among ‘we’ in a community through the freedom of speech and action [1992, 71]. This view inspires from Habermas and George Herbert Mead who hold that individuation does not precede association since it is that association that defines our inhabitation and the kinds of individual we will become [1992, 71]. This theory simply rejects the deontological, existential, or similar concept of individuation self that consider individual without any relation with the community and have developed self-identity and morality irrespective of the relationship with each other. Here the self-other relation is intrinsically connected, and the formation of self and morality is derived from this intrinsic connection of related self with others [Pandit, 2021]. According to Habermas, the evolution of the concept of self-identity and moral judgments is linked through the only one virtue, named justice
Habermas, 1990]. However, Benhabib rejects this strong formalist claim of the
justice-oriented theory rather she accepts that 'the fairness of moral norms and the
integrity of moral values can only be established via a process of practical
argumentation which allows participants full equality and in initiating and
continuing the debate and suggesting new subject matters for conversation' [1992,
73]. Benhabib establishes this form of moral communication as the basic insight of
her communicative ethics. Through this basic insight, Benhabib formulates
communicative ethics where moral justification comes from moral argumentation.
Communicative ethics is a procedural moral theory where individuals have the
freedom to share their morally justified perspectives but not like the
unencumbered self within an 'original position' among a predefined set of issues
and legislation of Kant and Rawls. Benhabib develops her communicative ethics
by viewing the individual self as a related entity who has the ability and
willingness to understand reasonably and compassionately others justified rational
opinion, decision, and freedom of choice through an inter-subjective paradigmatic
communication [Pandit, 2021]. This theory is based on the presupposition that an
individual self is always undergoing a psychic-moral formation, and this modern
understanding of individual self ‘make[s] it motivationally plausible as well as
rationally acceptable for them to adopt the reflexivity and universalism of
communicative ethics’ [1992, 74]. Thus, like Abelson and Apel, Benhabib also
recognizes that morality is fundamentally based on the inter-subjective social
communication where each member rationally and compassionately respects each
other's rational decision and freedom of choice.

Again, Gewirth attempted to found morality upon the dialectical necessity
that in any human action, even in suicide, the agent ought to claim, at least
temporarily, a right to freedom and well-being. My objection was that morality
needed to be based upon a primordial, existential decision to value one’s freedom
and well-being in a whole lifeline. That is, the mere dialectical necessity that the
agent ought to claim a temporary right does not refute nihilism. For all human
actions might mean no lasting value. However, Apel offers a way of responding to
my objection.

Apel grants that the human agent has a radical freedom of choice for self-
affirmation or self-negation and that this freedom of choice must be drawn upon
for the practical realization of the moral community. However, the moral ideal
which requires that every rational agent ought to value the rationality and freedom
of all rational agents is founded not on freedom of choice, but upon the necessary
presuppositions of the human communication community. If the nihilist were to
think that just as one’s own rational and free agency had no value, so also no other
rational and free agent had any value, and so moral obligation made no sense, the
nihilist would be refuting oneself. For the nihilist cannot make any intellectual
sense unless one presupposes both the reality of communication community from
which one learned logic and the moral value of the ideal communication
community which would rationally and freely evaluate the argument offered by
the nihilist. Hence, the nihilist owes a moral obligation to others as dialogue
partners whose rationality and freedom ought to be respected.
Apel notes that the thought of Wittgenstein, Charles Sanders Peirce, Josiah Royce, and George Herbert Mead support his argument. Wittgenstein argued against the very possibility of a private language. Peirce argued that truth was pragmatic in nature, requiring an indefinite community of investigators who sought a consensus in their disciplined, public, and active verification of claims to knowledge. Royce argued that any meaningful linguistic sign required a community of interpretation since a sign is not meaningful by itself. For the verbal gesture by itself is no more than a signal or emotive cry unless there are both a person who interprets the sign and a person to whom the interpretation is given. Even when a person is interpreting a verbal gesture as a meaningful sign to oneself, that person is internalizing the dialogue of the community of interpretation. Finally, Mead argued that self-awareness develops by looking back upon the self from the viewpoint of the other and that one's self-identity involves a role in a community because one controls one's actions from the viewpoint of the others in that community. Whereas particular identities relate one to particular communities, one's identity as a rational agent necessarily relates the individual to a community of universal discourse. For one can rationally discourse with oneself only if one's discourse is potentially intelligible to every other rational agent [1980, 139].

Consequently, Apel concludes that the solitary thought or inherently private language of the methodological solipsist, nihilist, or amoralist is an incoherence. One can think meaningfully as a rational being and attempt to found philosophy as Descartes did through a methodical doubt only by presupposing the very reality of the particular rational community in which one learned to communicate with others and with oneself and also by presupposing the ultimate value of the community of universal discourse in which the rationality and freedom of each person ought to be respected. Furthermore, the attempt to found moral value upon a primordial, existential decision to value one's rationality and freedom must also presuppose the reality of one's particular rational community and the transcendent value of the community of rational discourse. For if one's own freedom by existential commitment is the true source of the value of rationality and freedom, then one's freedom by an existential refusal should be able to negate in just as meaningful a way the value of rationality and freedom. But one who rejects one's own rationality and freedom cannot do so and remain rational or free! For the rejection of all rationality and freedom would turn oneself into a thing. In a parenthetical remark, Apel states his argument in the following way: "(If one wished to express this in speculative, theological terms, then one might say that the Devil can only become independent of God through the act of self-destruction.)" [1980, 269-270]. In the more precise terms of Apel's argument, the finite rational self cannot reject the self's own rationality and freedom without destroying the conscious and voluntary self. Furthermore, the self can reject the ultimate value of the community of rational discourse only at the cost of diminishing one's own rationality and freedom.
Conclusion

In the light of Apel's argument, we can now show how Alasdair Macintyre's questions about the basis of ethics can be answered without appealing to an existential decision of one's basic values. MacIntyre said that I cannot answer the question, "What am I to do?", unless I know the answer to this question about my life as a whole, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" [MacIntyre 1981, 201]. An answer asserted in an article on Gewirth's ethics was that one had to choose to value one's life as a whole in order to hold that the suicide of a nihilist was morally wrong. [O'Meara 1982]. Macintyre's answer was that the good life was the life of the virtues for they were not only essential means for the rational and free self to conduct its search for the meaning of life, but also, they were also worthwhile for their own sake as part of the goodness of a human life as a whole.

Apel's argument is quite similar to that of MacIntyre. Apel has argued that I cannot meaningfully ask any questions at all, including 'What am I to do?' or 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?', unless I presuppose the reality of my particular rational community and the ultimate value of the universal rational community. So, the very asking of those questions should indicate the correct answers. I know already from which communication community I have developed as a rational and free self, and I already know to which ideal communication community I ought to belong. So, I already know implicitly in the very act of asking those questions the real and ideal stories of which I am a part, and hence I know what I ought to do.

Apel indicates what I ought to do in his derivation of two fundamental regulative principles from the social nature of rationality: "First, in all actions and omissions, it should be a matter of ensuring the survival of the human species qua real communication community. Second, it should be a matter of realizing the ideal communication community in the real one. The first goal is the necessary condition for the second; and the second goal provides the first with its meaning—the meaning that is already anticipated with every argument" [Apel, 1980, 282].

Using Gewirth's distinction of basic, non-subtractive, and additive good as three levels of well-being, we may restate the principles of Apel. First, the obligation of every rational and free agent is not to harm the basic abilities of and non-subtractive goods already achieved by human rationality and freedom. Self and others in the real communication community should not be harmed. Secondly, the ultimate ideal of every rational and free agent is that each agent should act to create the additive value of the full development of rationality and creativity. Self and others should act to create the community in which every human agent can fully express his or her humanness, his or her rationality and creativity, in all aspects of human action: in labor, in knowledge, in political society, in personal relationships, in the arts, and in many other human activities. Similar to the argument of Apel against a solipsistic or nihilistic existentialist who would hold value applies only to himself or who would hold that no one's life has any value at all, Abelson argues against the amoralist who would refuse to make any moral judgments or even any prudential judgments about what one ought to do. Abelson would agree with Anderson that the radically existential a-moralist who would
even refuse to make prudential judgments of what one ought to do cannot be refuted, nevertheless the a-moralist reduces one's rational self to a dimensionless point. In effect, by refusing to engage in reason-giving locutions with oneself or with others, one acts as if one has his own private language which is unintelligible to others. Consequently, just like the determinist who makes oneself into a thing without freedom, so also the a-moralist makes oneself irrational by one’s refusal to offer reasons to oneself or to others. The a-moralist cannot coherently reject prudential ought-judgements and thereby attempt to avoid universalizing that every agent’s freedom and well-being ought to be respected.

In a similar analysis, Apel has affirmed that the argument of the methodological solipsist such as Descartes who attempts to found philosophy upon his essentially solitary thought or inherently private language results in incoherence. For rationality is inherently social and presupposes both the particular rational community in which one learned to communicate with others and with oneself and the universal rational community which would evaluate the truth-claims and logical validity of even the solitary thinker. Consequently, Apel offers a way of responding to MacIntyre who held that we cannot know what we ought to do until we know the story or stories to which our lives belong. In Apel's argument, one cannot meaningfully ask questions about the value of life as whole without assuming the real communication community from which one developed and the ideal communication community of rational and free agents who would evaluate both the way in which I raise the question and the way in which I answer it. Unless I respect the rationality and freedom of the real communication community and its potential for full development into the ideal communication community, I do not really respect my own rationality and freedom. But the very attempt to state a truth-claim or to formulate reasons for my actions and my conclusions is an attempt to respect my rationality and freedom precisely because I am offering reasons and not letting myself be reduced to a thing swayed only by passion. Hence, I ought to respect the rationality and freedom of the real and ideal communication community. Using Gewirth's terms for the three levels of goods, we can say that I ought not to harm the basic abilities of and non-subtractive goods already achieved by rationality and freedom in the real communication community and that I ought to act to create the additive good of the full development of rationality and freedom in all human activities. The basic value and full actualization of rationality and freedom call for an existential commitment for their practical realization. However, an existential commitment is not the rational presupposition of these basic values. For to have a meaningful option for a rational, free agent to decide, we must already assume what rationality presupposes, namely, both the real and the ideal communication community of rational and free agents.

Bibliography


