

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

1 myself for an authentic impulse to action, nor can I expect, from some ethic,
 2 formulae that will enable me to act' [Sartre, 2007] leads to absolute subjectivity.
 3 Sartre perceives and defines freedom entirely from an individual's subjective point
 4 of view and accepts an individual's absolute freedom without being a concern for
 5 other-selves and the community. Such subjective individuation of self with the
 6 absolute freedom within itself leads to inauthentic choices and amoral and
 7 immoral actions that may impose infringement of others' freedom since here we
 8 didn't find any conception of one's relationship with other-selves. However, as
 9 social beings, humans presuppose the importance of communication with others
 10 while choosing one's action. In this paper, we have tried to explain individual's
 11 freedom as a social being through communication with others that overcome the
 12 subjectivity of Sartre's freedom and morality.

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

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

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32 **Gewirth's argument of Ethics from the Isolated Person**

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34 Gewirth [1996] is an American linguistic philosopher who offers what he
 35 calls an argument for a universal set of moral values, including the right to life, the
 36 right to fundamental well-being as rational agents (for example, the right to an
 37 education), and the right to liberty (freedom that respects the freedom and
 38 fundamental well-being of others as rational agents). His argument begins with the
 39 isolated individual who is conscious of one's own freedom to pursue one's own
 40 well-being, however, that individual existentially defines that well-being. Gewirth
 41 argues that such a beginning point in the isolated individual is sufficient for
 42 establishing universal values. The argument has three steps. Any human agent as a
 43 conscious, free agent (i) must value one's freedom and well-being as the means
 44 necessary for any goal (if a person chooses any goal as valuable, then the person
 45 ought to value one's own freedom and fundamental well-being as a rational agent
 46 as the necessary means for that value because without one's freedom and

1 fundamental well-being as a rational agent one would be unable to know and
 2 evaluate and unable to choose any goal; hence, a rational agent ought to value
 3 one's own freedom and well-being as the basis of any other value), and (ii)
 4 therefore must claim a prudential right to freedom and well-being since to allow
 5 others to interfere with one's freedom and well-being would frustrate the very
 6 purpose of one's action (by a prudential right, Gewirth means that any reasonable
 7 person who values one's own freedom and fundamental well-being as a rational
 8 agent ought to insist that others ought not to offer any practical interference with
 9 one's agency), and (iii) accordingly ought to universalize that prudential right into
 10 a moral right for all agents as agents since any human agent as rational and free
 11 logically and prudentially ought to value one's freedom and well-being as the
 12 means necessary for any goal that the agent would know, desire, and choose. Even
 13 if the goal is suicide, the agent must claim a prudential right to one's own freedom
 14 and well-being at least temporarily as the means to one's goal of self-destruction.
 15 For no one who really wants to commit suicide wants anyone else to interfere with
 16 one's plan to end one's life. [Beyleveld, 2012]

17 However, we could argue against the attempt of Gewirth to base ethics on the
 18 individual's rational need to be logically consistent in valuing one's own freedom
 19 and fundamental rational well-being, at least temporarily while one intends to
 20 rationally and freely carry out one's intention to commit suicide. Gewirth's
 21 argument appears to be open to the objection of Thomas Anderson against the
 22 existentialist ethics of Sartre. Anderson has argued that "neither a meaningful
 23 existence, nor logical consistency, nor consistency with reality has any intrinsic
 24 value, nor can compelling reasons be given for valuing any one of them"
 25 [Anderson, 1979, 145]. Furthermore, Hans Kung (2003) and Alasdair MacIntyre
 26 [1981] offer a similar evaluation about the existentialist attempt to found ethics
 27 upon one's radical free choice. For if the value of one's life as a whole is dependent
 28 upon one's existential, primordial decision to, value one's life as a whole, and if the
 29 nihilist or amoralist decides that the whole of one's life is without meaning in one's
 30 judgment, why should one be bound to make prudential judgments about what he
 31 ought to do to attain any end, even the end of suicide. An individual, it would
 32 seem, can just say to oneself, "I just do what I do because I want to do it. I make
 33 no moral or prudential judgments about what I ought to do, nor do I offer any
 34 reasons for what I do. I am just me, and I offer no reasons to anybody for what I
 35 think, say, or do."

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38 **Apel, Gewirth, & Abelson's Argument from Linguistic Philosophical Point of** 39 **View**

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41 Gewirth has argued that a logical analysis of human action as rational and
 42 free necessarily establishes that every agent ought to respect the freedom and well-
 43 being, including that of rationality as a basic good, of all agents. However,
 44 Gewirth's argument, like Sartre's argument for ethics, appears to be open to the
 45 fatal objection that one need not choose to value one's own rationality nor one's
 46 life as a whole. So, what difference does it make what anyone decides to do?

1 Apel's argument for morality is also founded upon the rationality and freedom
 2 of the human agent, but he emphasizes the radical social nature of human
 3 rationality. Furthermore, Apel argues that the human agent cannot make any
 4 rational statement, even in one's own mind, without presupposing both the reality
 5 of a human communication community and the absolute value of the universal
 6 moral community.

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

14 However, "logic--and, at the same times, all the sciences and technologies—
 15 all human action requires some necessary preconditions for its possibility" [Apel,
 16 1980, 258]. For any action which is to be intelligible to the self must presuppose,
 17 first, the reality of the human communication community, and second, the ideal
 18 human communication community in which the rationality and freedom of all
 19 agents ought to be respected. First, Apel argues that any human action, including
 20 logic, must presuppose the particular human communication community within
 21 which the agent has become rational and with which the agent is speaking either
 22 actually or potentially. Apel agrees with Wittgenstein that "'One person alone'
 23 cannot follow a rule and create validity for his thought within the framework of a
 24 'private language'" [1980, 258]. The solitary logician can develop and prove a line
 25 of argument within Aristotelian logic only by internalizing the dialogue of
 26 Aristotelian logicians who could critically examine that argument.

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

38 The validity of solitary thought presupposes not only the first condition of the
 39 reality of the communication community which has developed socially and
 40 historically, and which will continue to do so; that validity also presupposes as a
 41 second condition the universal moral community of rational agents. If individuals
 42 in a court room proceeding lied to each other in the presentation of evidences, the
 43 true guilt or innocence of the accused would be impossible to establish unless
 44 other evidences could be appealed to in order to disclose which statements were
 45 lies. Similarly, if participants in a scientific debate could lie to each other without
 46 these lies being discovered, the participants would be unable to establish the

1 reasoned truth in the matter. Furthermore, if participants refused to listen to each
2 other's arguments or refused to offer reasons for their conclusions, rational
3 argument would be impossible. By refusing to listen to each other and by refusing
4 to offer to each other reasons for their conclusions, the participants would not be
5 respecting each other's rationality and freedom. They would, in effect, be treating
6 each other as things which could be conditioned by verbal punishments and
7 rewards. But furthermore, as Abelson has argued, if an individual refused to offer
8 reasons to himself for his own truth claims and conclusions, he would not be
9 respecting his own rationality and freedom and would be reducing his self to a
10 dimensionless point. Consequently, the validity of solitary thought presupposes
11 that the individual ought to value one's own rationality and freedom, and the
12 validity of reasoned dialogue presupposes that all rational agents as potential
13 members in that dialogue ought to value each other's rationality and freedom. All
14 actual and potential partners in that dialogue should recognize each other as
15 possessing equal rights [1980, 259].

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

25 We can find a similar view in Sayela Benhabib's inter-subjective concept of
26 self. This standpoint presupposes an incoherent and improvised concept of self
27 [Benhabib, 1992, 71]. According to this view, an individual self is recognized as a
28 related entity among others in a community through the inter-subjective
29 communication of speech and action between the individual self with others
30 [Pandit, 2021]. Here an individual self is recognized as a related entity in a
31 community where people believe in inner goodness of humanity, and they are
32 related through the inter-subjective communication of mutual love, respect and
33 benevolence with one another [Pandit, 2021]. This inter-subjective communication
34 is based on mutual respect towards others' rational capabilities and freedom of
35 choice. Here, the 'I' or one's own self-identity can only be 'I' among 'we' in a
36 community through the freedom of speech and action [1992, 71]. This view
37 inspires from Habermas and George Herbert Mead who hold that individuation
38 does not precede association since it is that association that defines our in-
39 habitation and the kinds of individual we will become [1992, 71]. This theory
40 simply rejects the deontological, existential, or similar concept of individuation
41 self that consider individual without any relation with the community and have
42 developed self-identity and morality irrespective of the relationship with each
43 other. Here the self-other relation is intrinsically connected, and the formation of
44 self and morality is derived from this intrinsic connection of related self with
45 others [Pandit, 2021]. According to Habermas, the evolution of the concept of self-
46 identity and moral judgments is linked through the only one virtue, named justice

1 [Habermas, 1990]. However, Benhabib rejects this strong formalist claim of the
 2 justice-oriented theory rather she accepts that 'the fairness of moral norms and the
 3 integrity of moral values can only be established via a process of practical
 4 argumentation which allows participants full equality and in initiating and
 5 continuing the debate and suggesting new subject matters for conversation' [1992,
 6 73]. Benhabib establishes this form of moral communication as the basic insight of
 7 her communicative ethics. Through this basic insight, Benhabib formulates
 8 communicative ethics where moral justification comes from moral argumentation.
 9 Communicative ethics is a procedural moral theory where individuals have the
 10 freedom to share their morally justified perspectives but not like the
 11 unencumbered self within an 'original position' among a predefined set of issues
 12 and legislation of Kant and Rawls. Benhabib develops her communicative ethics
 13 by viewing the individual self as a related entity who has the ability and
 14 willingness to understand reasonably and compassionately others justified rational
 15 opinion, decision, and freedom of choice through an inter-subjective paradigmatic
 16 communication [Pandit, 2021]. This theory is based on the presupposition that an
 17 individual self is always undergoing a psychic-moral formation, and this modern
 18 understanding of individual self "make[s] it motivationally plausible as well as
 19 rationally acceptable for them to adopt the reflexivity and universalism of
 20 communicative ethics" [1992, 74]. Thus, like Abelson and Apel, Benhabib also
 21 recognizes that morality is fundamentally based on the inter-subjective social
 22 communication where each member rationally and compassionately respects each
 23 other's rational decision and freedom of choice.

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

32 Apel grants that the human agent has a radical freedom of choice for self-
 33 affirmation or self-negation and that this freedom of choice must be drawn upon
 34 for the practical realization of the moral community. However, the moral ideal
 35 which requires that every rational agent ought to value the rationality and freedom
 36 of all rational agents is founded not on freedom of choice, but upon the necessary
 37 presuppositions of the human communication community. If the nihilist were to
 38 think that just as one's own rational and free agency had no value, so also no other
 39 rational and free agent had any value, and so moral obligation made no sense, the
 40 nihilist would be refuting oneself. For the nihilist cannot make any intellectual
 41 sense unless one presupposes both the reality of communication community from
 42 which one learned logic and the moral value of the ideal communication
 43 community which would rationally and freely evaluate the argument offered by
 44 the nihilist. Hence, the nihilist owes a moral obligation to others as dialogue
 45 partners whose rationality and freedom ought to be respected.

1 Apel notes that the thought of Wittgenstein, Charles Sanders Peirce, Josiah
2 Royce, and George Herbert Mead support his argument. Wittgenstein argued
3 against the very possibility of a private language. Peirce argued that truth was
4 pragmatic in nature, requiring an indefinite community of investigators who
5 sought a consensus in their disciplined, public, and active verification of claims to
6 knowledge. Royce argued that any meaningful linguistic sign required a
7 community of interpretation since a sign is not meaningful by itself. For the verbal
8 gesture by itself is no more than a signal or emotive cry unless there are both a
9 person who interprets the sign and a person to whom the interpretation is given.
10 Even when a person is interpreting a verbal gesture as a meaningful sign to
11 oneself, that person is internalizing the dialogue of the community of
12 interpretation. Finally, Mead argued that self-awareness develops by looking back
13 upon the self from the viewpoint of the other and that one's self-identity involves a
14 role in a community because one controls one's actions from the viewpoint of the
15 others in that community. Whereas particular identities relate one to particular
16 communities, one's identity as a rational agent necessarily relates the individual to
17 a community of universal discourse. For one can rationally discourse with oneself
18 only if one's discourse is potentially intelligible to every other rational agent [1980,
19 139].

20 Consequently, Apel concludes that the solitary thought or inherently private
21 language of the methodological solipsist, nihilist, or amoralist is an incoherence.
22 One can think meaningfully as a rational being and attempt to found philosophy as
23 Descartes did through a methodical doubt only by presupposing the very reality of
24 the particular rational community in which one learned to communicate with
25 others and with oneself and also by presupposing the ultimate value of the
26 community of universal discourse in which the rationality and freedom of each
27 person ought to be respected. Furthermore, the attempt to found moral value upon
28 a primordial, existential decision to value one's rationality and freedom must also
29 presuppose the reality of one's particular rational community and the transcendent
30 value of the community of rational discourse. For if one's own freedom by
31 existential commitment is the true source of the value of rationality and freedom,
32 then one's freedom by an existential refusal should be able to negate in just as
33 meaningful a way the value of rationality and freedom. But one who rejects one's
34 own rationality and freedom cannot do so and remain rational or free! For the
35 rejection of all rationality and freedom would turn oneself into a thing. In a
36 parenthetical remark, Apel states his argument in the following way: "(If one
37 wished to express this in speculative, theological terms, then one might say that the
38 Devil can only become independent of God through the act of self-destruction.)"
39 [1980, 269-270]. In the more precise terms of Apel's argument, the finite rational
40 self cannot reject the self's own rationality and freedom without destroying the
41 conscious and voluntary self. Furthermore, the self can reject the ultimate value of
42 the community of rational discourse only at the cost of diminishing one's own
43 rationality and freedom.

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46

1 **Conclusion**

2

3 In the light of Apel's argument, we can now show how Alasdair MacIntyre's
 4 questions about the basis of ethics can be answered without appealing to an
 5 existential decision of one's basic values. MacIntyre said that I cannot answer the
 6 question, "What am I to do?", unless I know the answer to this question about my
 7 life as a whole, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" [MacIntyre
 8 1981, 201]. An answer asserted in an article on Gewirth's ethics was that one had
 9 to choose to value one's life as a whole in order to hold that the suicide of a nihilist
 10 was morally wrong. [O'Meara 1982]. MacIntyre's answer was that the good life
 11 was the life of the virtues for they were not only essential means for the rational
 12 and free self to conduct its search for the meaning of life, but also, they were also
 13 worthwhile for their own sake as part of the goodness of a human life as a whole.
 14 Apel's argument is quite similar to that of MacIntyre. Apel has argued that I cannot
 15 meaningfully ask any questions at all, including 'What am I to do?' or 'Of what
 16 story or stories do I find myself a part?', unless I presuppose the reality of my
 17 particular rational community and the ultimate value of the universal rational
 18 community. So, the very asking of those questions should indicate the correct
 19 answers. I know already from which communication community I have developed
 20 as a rational and free self, and I already know to which ideal communication
 21 community I ought to belong. So, I already know implicitly in the very act of
 22 asking those questions the real and ideal stories of which I am a part, and hence I
 23 know what I ought to do.

24 Apel indicates what I ought to do in his derivation of two fundamental
 25 regulative principles from the social nature of rationality: "First, in all actions and
 26 omissions, it should be a matter of ensuring the survival of the human species qua
 27 real communication community. Second, it should be a matter of realizing the
 28 ideal communication community in the real one. The first goal is the necessary
 29 condition for the second; and the second goal provides the first with its meaning—
 30 the meaning that is already anticipated with every argument" [Apel, 1980, 282].
 31 Using Gewirth's distinction of basic, non-subtractive, and additive good as three
 32 levels of well-being, we may restate the principles of Apel. First, the obligation of
 33 every rational and free agent is not to harm the basic abilities of and non -
 34 subtractive goods already achieved by human rationality and freedom. Self and
 35 others in the real communication community should not be harmed. Secondly, the
 36 ultimate ideal of every rational and free agent is that each agent should act to
 37 create the additive value of the full development of rationality and creativity. Self
 38 and others should act to create the community in which every human agent can
 39 fully express his or her humanness, his or her rationality and creativity, in all
 40 aspects of human action: in labor, in knowledge, in political society, in personal
 41 relationships, in the arts, and in many other human activities. Similar to the
 42 argument of Apel against a solipsistic or nihilistic existentialist who would hold
 43 value applies only to himself or who would hold that no one's life has any value at
 44 all, Abelson argues against the amoralist who would refuse to make any moral
 45 judgments or even any prudential judgments about what one ought to do. Abelson
 46 would agree with Anderson that the radically existential a-moralist who would

1 even refuse to make prudential judgments of what one ought to do cannot be
 2 refuted, nevertheless the a-moralist reduces one's rational self to a dimensionless
 3 point. In effect, by refusing to engage in reason-giving locutions with oneself or
 4 with others, one acts as if one has his own private language which is unintelligible
 5 to others. Consequently, just like the determinist who makes oneself into a thing
 6 without freedom, so also the a-moralist makes oneself irrational by one's refusal to
 7 offer reasons to oneself or to others. The a-moralist cannot coherently reject
 8 prudential ought-judgements and thereby attempt to avoid universalizing that
 9 every agent's freedom and well-being ought to be respected.

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

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