

## The significance Sartre's view of self-definition

- Sartre view of choice compared with Aristotle's
  - Aristotle's theory of choice
    - 1) Choice is (typically) the outcome of deliberation - of reasoning about what to do
    - 2) We always choose a means to an end
      - This is supported by an analysis of how we reason about what to do
    - 3) There must be "ultimate" ends which we do not choose, but which flow from human nature
      - If every end or goal were simply a means to some further goal, we'd have to have an infinite number of goals which is impossible
  - Sartre's theory of choice
    - 1) We choose ends as well as means, and all *significant* choice is a choice of *ends*
    - 2) No ends are set by human nature; all ends are chosen
    - 3) Choice is an expression of our freedom, not constrained by any "natural" ends or goals
- A contrasting view of human nature – (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, a. 2 – see Reading from Aquinas)
  - We find out what is good or worth having by finding out what we naturally desire
  - Aquinas thinks he can make a list of what by nature we desire
    - Self-preservation (in common with all things)
    - Sexual intercourse, the education of offspring (in common with animals)
    - Knowledge, living in social relations with other humans (specifically human goals)

### Is Sartre's rejection of "human nature" tenable?

- In denying "human nature" or essence, Sartre is *not* denying there are things true of virtually all human
  - Rather Sartre simply wants to deny that what your ultimate goals or purposes are is just a result of the fact that you're human
- Even so, there appears to be little doubt that the items on Aquinas' list *are* virtually universal goals of humans
- Three ways in which Sartre could defend his position while acknowledging the universal appeal of the items on Aquinas' list
  - Even if Aquinas' goals are virtually universal, different people *prioritize* those goals differently
    - Sartre can argue that such prioritizing is where we exercise our freedom and define ourselves
  - Sartre can argue that the meaning or significance of Aquinas' goals varies from culture to culture and – more importantly – from individual to individual
    - What survival, sexual intercourse, or companionship *means* to one person can differ radically from what these things mean to others
  - Sartre can argue that these Aquinas' goals do not capture what we *ultimately* are after in life
    - There are things each of us wants *out of* companionship, or erotic activity, or food, or drink
    - Aquinas' goals, in the context of our concrete lives, actually play the role of means to further ends that we have chosen

## Morality and Sartre's existentialism - why there is a problem

- Throughout the history of Western philosophy, only two approaches to the basis of morality or ethics
  - Teleological approaches
    - the right thing to do is the thing that promotes the ends or goals it is proper for men to have
    - in teleological approaches, the proper end or goal is almost always determined by human nature (compare Aquinas – but also, in different ways, Aristotle, Plato [Part I, chapter 4 of the *Republic*], or J.S. Mill's *Utilitarianism*)
  - Deontological approaches
    - the right thing to do is the action that complies with the rules of the law
    - Three answers to the question of what the rules or laws are or what gives them force
      - they are imposed by those in power (Thrasymachus)
      - they are instituted by God
      - they are self-evident truths discoverable by reason (e.g., among others, Immanuel Kant)
- Sartre's view clearly rules out most of these approaches
  - If in man existence precedes essence, then traditional teleological approaches can gain no foothold
  - If there is no God, then the force of any proposed rule cannot come from the fact that God imposed it
  - Even if there were rules imposed by God – or by those with political power – the question would always remain of why I should obey them

## Sartre on moral or ethical rules

- Sartre claims that if there is no God, there is no “*a priori* Good” (p. 258)
  - “If there is no God, then everything is permitted”
    - My interpretation: with a god, nothing can legitimate any set of rule for behavior – nothing can make them “binding” on us
    - As a result, we are “forlorn” – “In the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses”
    - Because there are no rules, our actions can never be pictured as “impermissible,” but also they can never be picture as justified (since there are no rules to justify them)
- Any rules we can formulate are too vague or broad to give us guidance in specific situations (see p. 259)
  - Illustration: the young man (p. 259) who must decide whether to join the free French forces
    - In this example, he uses the principle (“Never treat other people merely as a means to an end”) from which Kant thinks all moral constraints follow)
  - Sartre’s position here gains support from something that has been widely recognized since the beginning of philosophical reflection about ethical matters: that any rule or law will always admit of exceptions
    - Illustration with “Don’t kill innocent human beings”
    - If rules always admit of exceptions, then in the final analysis it’s always up to me – when I apply a rule – to decide whether it applies to the case at hand, i.e., whether the case at hand is an exception to the rule

## Sartre on morality

- Where does Sartre's position fit in relation to traditional accounts?
  - It is like traditional teleological accounts in that it stresses *goals* rather than *rules*
  - It is unlike traditional teleological accounts in that it denies that ultimate goals are set by human nature, and insists that each individual freely chooses his or her ultimate goals
- Can I appraise or judge the actions of somebody else with respect to whether that action is morally good? (pp. 264-67)
  - The fact that there are no *a priori* rules does not rule out the possibility of appraisal
    - In this respect, ethics is like art
      - In art, creation and invention supercede any rule
      - Yet we continue to judge and experience artistic creations as good or bad
  - Sartre maintains that there are (at least?) two bases for the appraisal of actions
    - We can judge that certain choices are based on error, others on truth (p. 265) – which is “perhaps a logical judgement”
    - We can make moral judgement proper
      - Man can only “want but one thing, and that is freedom as the basis of all values” (p. 256)
      - We can judge whether an actor is honest about the implication of his action for his own freedom and that of others (p. 257)