



Personal Reflection

Thinking, Relating and Choosing: Resolving the Issue of Faith, Ethics and the Existential Responsibility of the Individual

by Neil Alan Soggie

Abstract

Which is worse: Doing evil or being evil? If we are free to define ourselves through our choices, as existentialism posits, then the latter is worse. This paper attempts to resolve the issue of the difference between religious (group) ethics and the ethics of a person of faith that embraces individuals with an existential understanding. In the existential view, the individual (whether the self or the other) is the primary concern, and so the issue of personal relational morality supersedes religious narratives, social morality and popular ethics (White, 2002). If we think and choose, there is the possibility that we may occasionally make a mistake and do evil. However, if we do not think about our choices, and if the conventions we hold happen to be flawed in some way, then we become defined by a continual cycle of mistakes. Existentialism teaches that we become who we are in the process of making choices; therefore the difference between doing evil and being evil can be found in the small but important flow of thinking, relating and choosing.

I was visiting with friends recently, and their observations and comments sparked angst within my soul. For this reason, I am writing on this topic of the ethical life, whatever that may mean, and in so far as any of us can live it. In essence, I am writing to try to resolve the issue, or at least clarify the argument for myself, of the difference between religious ethics and the ethics that embraces individuals who may also cleave to an existential understanding.

I wish to begin by clarifying that, contrary to the views of some of my friends, not all existentialists are atheists, even though, of course, Sartre and Camus claimed to be (O'Donovan, 1995; Sartre, 1983/1992).

In fact, it has been my experience that many people who embrace existentialism (in one form or another) are people of faith (Evans, 1995; Tillich, 1990; Wong, 1989; Wong & Fry, 1998). This is the conundrum that I run up against: Is it required that a person of faith adhere to that faith's rules and conventions (what are often termed *ethics*) in order to be authentic (Gill, 1991; Tillich, 1990)? To put it another way, if one is to be an authentic *believer*, the ethical system of the religion (it is often assumed) must be accepted, or else it can be argued that the person is not a member of that faith or religion (Gill, 1991; Tillich, 1959/1964, 1923/1980). It is true that reality demands some variability in faith and belief, but I speak now in

terms of the external critic looking at a person of faith and seeking to highlight hypocrisy, as people often do. External critics may argue that a person is not a real Christian, Jew, Muslim, or whatever, unless he or she believes, in line with the belief of the particular religious community, that a certain thing is wrong or sinful and must be punished (Gill, 1991). Indeed, even people within religious communities will often speak in those terms of those members who differ from the party line. Therefore, I will discuss how one can be a person of faith and yet differ from his or her faith group's view of ethics. It may be true that the same argument could be used of dissenting views within a professional or political organization as well, but that is for another debate.

As a preamble to this discussion, I wish to highlight Nietzsche's "God is dead" ("Gott ist tot") dictum in his work, *The Gay Science* (1882/2001). Nietzsche's depiction is often interpreted as a criticism of religion, when in fact it was probably more of an incisive observation that was calling people to authenticity while observing a paradigm shift in society (Young, 2007). Firstly, I see Nietzsche's dramatic expression via the Madman as a sociological observation of the secularization of society and the diminishing role of the church. Secondly, I see this statement as a call for people not to be limited by an absolute system of thought such as religion when they deal with life (Reginster, 2008). As such, I confess that this essay does not present anything new, as it has all been said before, and it has been communicated especially well by Friedrich Nietzsche. Hopefully, however, the following discussion will help clarify the process that led Nietzsche (and others) to a process of life choices, while making the issue personal for myself (and possibly, as is my hope, for the reader as well) (Carlsson, 2009).

There is certainly a good deal of variability with regard to what is meant by ethics, so perhaps that is the first place to start. As Jean-Paul Sartre suggests in *Notebooks for an Ethics* (Sartre, 1983/1992), a classification of values must lead to freedom. As he suggests, such a classification brings about a sense of order, which makes freedom more and more apparent. What this seems to suggest is that Sartre did consider values and ethics important to freedom (Martin, 2006). What this implies is, in essence, that we must show consideration for each other if we, as persons, want to be as liberated as possible within a social order (White, 2002).

In light of this basic view, the classification of values from an individual (existential) responsibility point of view is different from what we might think of as religious ethics (Abrahams & Mbuy-Beya, 1994).

This point highlights the need to clarify that *religious ethics* are generally rules and practices dictated by a corporate narrative, which produce a relative conformity of behaviour in a community (Schweiker, 2004). In existential works, *ethics* generally refers to a valuation for choosing; that is, ethics refers to a determination of right and wrong in any situation (Sartre, 1983/1992). In light of these differences, what might be ethical to a religious person is not necessarily ethical in the view of an existentially-aware person. Hence the use of the term *ethics* (without the clarification of *religious* or *existential*) in normal everyday discourse obviously presents a problem, and it often results in a good deal of undue judgment of others. In light of this, I hope it is clear that what might not be religiously ethical may be existentially ethical (Manson, 2009). However, most people will argue that what is not ethical in either form is not moral. The key difference between these two ethical views seems to be the focus of the valuation process (Graham, 2001; Jaffee, 1990). The religious view of ethics is group based, and it places a high value on the social narrative. In the existential view, the individual (both the self and the other) is the primary concern, and so the issue of personal relational morality supersedes religious narratives, social morality and popular ethics (White, 2002).

None of this is in and of itself sufficient to dismiss the basic argument that a personal existential ethic can potentially be no ethic at all, as it is simply *doing what you want*. If existential ethics, at least as presented by Sartre (Kerner, 1990; Sartre, 1983/1992), is nothing but a way to conform our wishes into a logical framework, then what does this say of free will? According to this view, existential ethics logically leads to Locke's dictum that we are not free to choose our desires; we are free only to serve our desires (Kane, 1985).

In fact, this does not leave the existentialist free, as an animal, simply to do whatever strikes his or her fancy, for the rational side comes up in every action (O'Donovan, 1995). This is where the existentialist can then plant and root the ethical system of life: in choices (Sartre, 1983/1992; White, 2002). Further, the existentialist recognizes that s/he does not live in isolation, for relatedness is also a key part of the existential understanding of the self (Spinelli, 2007). Therefore, like a good Confucian, the existentialist must consider his or her relatedness in the choices that are made (Dalmiya, 2009). To be understood in relation forms the domain of any decision; both Locke and Sartre would agree that we are ultimately responsible (Bourke, 1968; Kerner, 1990; Schweiker, 2004).

To form the sphere of relatedness domains for making an ethical decision, the existentialist must first view the self and the relatedness of the self within the self (Evans, 1995). The relatedness of different drives and competing desires and goals within the psychic apparatus certainly plays into the whole schema of what is personal (Dinwiddie, 1999; Evans, 1995). Furthermore, the person must take into consideration a balance of these drives in order to be true to the self and to appease these drives in some way. The attainment of such balance constitutes personal authenticity and forms the core of existentialism (Evans, 1995; Graham, 2001; Sartre, 1983/1992). Tied with this, of course, is the weight of recognizing personal responsibility, the idea that a person is alone in determining what he or she would do (Sartre, 1983/1992).

A consideration of self is not the end of existential ethics (Evans, 1995; Kerner, 1990). The existentialist recognizes that what most consider *reality* is constructed via cultural and social spheres, and so these spheres too must be considered (Kerner, 1990; Wong & Fry, 1998). People live in participatory narratives that can be called either culture or religion, but whatever these narratives are called, it is important to respect them because they are the created contexts within which people live (Barton, 2007; Spinelli, 2007). Hence, the rules and valuations that result from these participatory narratives need to be weighed in any personal decision (White, 2002). Every individual, even the most radical existentialist, must live and relate within these groups, for it is part of the foundation of being human (Bourke, 1968; Richerson & Boyd, 2008). The existentialist recognizes that these rules are group constructions. As such, the rules may appease group loyalty more than true morality, and so this too must be weighed in consideration of the choice.

This consideration of religious or cultural ethics connects to relatedness as well, because every culture attempts to regulate behaviour, and most cultures have legal systems that support this effort. Therefore, the individual must also weigh the regulated rules of the society versus the criminal acts within a society. While the individual may make a decision to act based on reason and deep thought, the person must be willing to deal with the societal ramifications of a rigid, unthinking, precedence-based, common-law system that tends to frame most people's views of right and wrong (Edelman & Suchman, 1997). In other words, every existential choice must also be weighed in light of the possible reaction of unthinking people.

All of this, then, ties back to the underlying values

common to most existential thinkers: the issues of choice and relatedness. As we make a choice, we recognize that our context of existence is framed and formed by other people, and that we do not know ourselves except in relationship to ourselves within ourselves and in relationship with those around us (and then in the narratives created in these groups) (Evans, 1995). Therefore, to care for ourselves also necessitates the care of others; for, while hell may be "other people", they are also the means through which our choices assume meaning (Kerner, 1990; Schweiker, 2004). Insofar as the other is thus the foundation of the self, an existential ethical system must therefore also consider the other (and not just the societal/group ethics or the intrapsychic ethic) (Evans, 1995).

Conclusion

It seems clear that the existentially inclined person can indeed break with the religious ethics of his or her faith community. Indeed, he or she may be required to do so at times in order to avoid a pattern of unwilled choices that harm others. In fact, a person who breaks with a religious rule or ethic may indeed be choosing to be a more authentic *believer* than those who mechanically follow convention. Many of the religions with ancient origins have existential ethical decision-making structures to overcome the dilemma of simply following religious rules and dictums. Here are just a few examples: the Hebrew call for justice and care in Leviticus 19, the Egyptian principle of *Ma'at*, the Hindu principles of *Dharma* and *Karma*, and the teaching of Jesus to *do unto others*.

This whole process of valuation in relatedness does bring some significant weight to the process of choice in the existential ethical life. The existential ethical life involves an acceptance of life as a relating that necessitates a series of choices. These choices inevitably result in anxiety as we attempt to live a life of authenticity. Authenticity, then, can be defined as choosing and being true to the relatedness that gives life to ourselves and those around us. We are formed, in part, by the choices that we make and the relatedness that we have with ourselves and others. Therefore, we must be careful to live existentially authentic lives, especially in the context of faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words connect authenticity and ethics: "What is worse than doing evil? His response – "Being evil" (Bonhoeffer, 1949/2005, p. 67). As Bonhoeffer's words remind us, we are often faced with the task of thinking about the relatedness that we have with others and of balancing this with our participatory social (religious) narrative when we make decisions. The key to this, from the existential

perspective, is to think and not to automatically follow convention and religious (or political, or social) rules. If we think and choose, there is the possibility that we may occasionally make a mistake and do evil. However, if we do not think about our choices, and if the conventions we hold happen to be flawed in some way, then we become defined by a continual process of mistakes. This process violates

the valuation of the person and can lead one to choose evil continually. The implications are ominous (particularly for those with power over others), since the existentialists make it clear that we become who we are in the process of making choices. The difference between doing evil and being evil can be found in the small but important flow of thinking, relating and choosing.

About the Author

Neil Soggie is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Crandall University in Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada. He is professionally associated with the Canadian Psychological Association and the American Counselling Association. He is the author of several books including: *EXISTO: Worldview and a Meaningful Existence* (2005, Hamilton Books); *Myth, God, and War* (2006, Alta Mira Press) and *The Mythic Mind* (2004, Word Alive Press). He is also the author of the psychological test, *Spssi-4: Simple Projective Subtle Screening Inventory Psychometric Manual* (1997, 2004, 2006, Mind Map Inc.).

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