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Rethinking Existentialism: A Response to Eshleman, Kirkpatrick, and Romdenh-Romluc

Jonathan Webber

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Abstract

This paper is a response to critiques of my book *Rethinking Existentialism* from Matthew Eshleman, Kate Kirkpatrick, and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc published in this symposium. My response begins with a Beauvoirian reflection on the nature of this discussion. It then works through the symposium's main themes. First, it reformulates Eshleman's 'bridge problem' to defend my view that eudaimonist arguments cannot establish that we ought to respect freedom. Next, it shows how my interpretation of Beauvoir's argument for authenticity can incorporate Kirkpatrick's reading of Beauvoir's ethics. Then it uses Romdenh-Romluc's description of Fanon's therapeutic methodology to present a comparative reading of Fanon and Sartre. This is followed by an argument that Romdenh-Romluc's reading of Fanon can be incorporated into my existentialist interpretation to the benefit of both. The penultimate section incorporates Beauvoir's theory of the myths of femininity into my account of her theory of gender sedimentation. The final section considers how Eshleman's emphasis on social interdependence might enrich Sartre's picture of authenticity. The paper closes with brief comments on the value of reading these texts together.

Keywords

authenticity, freedom, gender, race, project, sedimentation

Philosophy is a conversation. We discuss the ideas and theories that interest us and we consult the thoughts of our forebears. But there is a curious difference between these two dimensions of the discipline. While we tend to listen to the voices of our forebears with the aim of taking inspiration and perhaps finding whole solutions to our problems, philosophical conversation between contemporaries very often takes the form of dispute, as though we think that insight is a scarce commodity or inquiry is a zero-sum game.

I am very pleased that Matthew Eshleman, Kate Kirkpatrick, and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc — whose works I have found insightful and inspiring over many years — have turned their philosophical attention to the central themes of my book *Rethinking Existentialism* and to my specific thoughts about those themes. Their searching critical questions and careful presentations of alternatives have enabled me to reconsider those themes in a way that, to my mind, has much improved my thoughts about them. I am very grateful for this productive conversation and hope that my response is similarly helpful for their own work.¹

This paper begins with some reflections on the nature of the texts we are discussing, which I use to frame my understanding of the conversation we are having in this symposium. Then I refine Eshleman's presentation of what he calls 'the bridge problem' to defend my view that eudaimonist existentialist arguments cannot establish that we ought to respect freedom. Next, I reformulate my interpretation of Beauvoir's argument for authenticity and show how it can incorporate what Kirkpatrick presents as an alternative reading of Beauvoir's ethical theory. The middle section of the paper uses Romdenh-Romluc's description of Fanon's therapeutic methodology to present a new comparative reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* and Sartre's 'Black Orpheus'. The following section develops this to show how Romdenh-Romluc's

¹ This symposium started out as a book panel at the UK Sartre Society conference 2023, held at the Maison Française d'Oxford. I am grateful to Matt Eshleman for organising both the panel and this resulting published symposium, and to the organisers of that conference for hosting the panel.

therapeutic reading of Fanon can be incorporated into my existentialist reading to the benefit of both. The penultimate section argues that my reading of Beauvoir's theory of the sedimentation of gender is improved by drawing on her theory of the myths of femininity, which Kirkpatrick presents as an alternative. The final section returns to Eshleman's response to the bridge problem and clarifies contributions that his emphasis on Sartre's theory of social interdependence might make to the theory of authenticity. The paper closes with some brief comments on the value of reading these texts together as the core writings of classical existentialism.

1. Mapping the Terrain

In her essay 'Literature and Metaphysics', first delivered as a lecture at the end of 1945, Beauvoir contrasts philosophical prose and literary fiction as two distinct ways of making explicit 'an original grasping of metaphysical reality' (LM: 274-4).² Philosophical prose presents a systematized theory of the essential structures of reality in abstract terminology. Beauvoir's examples of philosophers whose writing is entirely of this kind are Aristotle, Spinoza, and Leibniz, all of whom aim to describe only timeless and objective truths. By contrast, she tells us, the philosophical theories articulated by Plato and Hegel require them to describe the concrete world of sensory experience, for which they rely on literary techniques. Then she argues that Kierkegaard makes extensive use of literary fiction because his philosophy 'underscores the role and value of subjectivity'.³

² LM: Simone de Beauvoir, 'Literature and Metaphysics', translated by Veronique Zaytzeff, in *Philosophical Writings*, by Simone de Beauvoir, edited by Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmerman, and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 269–276.

³ Beauvoir completes this sequence by claiming that 'the novel is the sole form of communication possible for Kafka, since he wishes to portray the drama of man confined in immanence', a metaphysical vision that 'cannot, without contradiction, be expressed in a categorical manner' (LM: 274). It is unclear whether Beauvoir means that Kafka is a philosopher who can only express his vision in literary fiction, or whether she means that Kierkegaard is the limiting case of a philosopher's reliance on fiction, beyond which lies Kafka who is not a philosopher at all. Perhaps this ambiguity is intended.

Beauvoir's next claim is that 'existentialist thought today' is sometimes expressed in theoretical treatises that attempt to grasp the objective, absolute, timeless essence of reality, and sometimes in fiction that explores its subjective, relative, historical aspect, because it is 'an effort to reconcile' these aspects of metaphysical thought (LM: 274). However, it is difficult to see how such a reconciliation could be achieved by presenting these aspects of reality in different works. Moreover, the distinction Beauvoir has drawn in this essay is between two styles of writing, not two types of book, and she has already given examples of philosophers who have combined the two kinds of writing in their philosophical treatises. It seems that Beauvoir has here missed an opportunity to elucidate the existentialist use of literary prose within philosophical treatises.⁴

For example, *Being and Nothingness*, published two years before this lecture was given, regularly employs fiction in developing its systematized theory of the essential structures of reality. It is replete with carefully described characters and scenes that are intended not merely to illustrate its main claims or to make them more memorable, but rather to provide substance to the arguments and terminology being developed. They play the same roles that are granted to mere abstract definitions in classical philosophical prose and are thereby deeply integrated into the theory the treatise articulates, which cannot be fully understood without them. In the light of Beauvoir's essay, this feature of *Being and Nothingness* itself looks like an effort to reconcile the abstract and the concrete, the objective and the subjective, the absolute and the relative, timeless essences and historical existence.

Should we understand Beauvoir's own book *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, published just one year before this lecture, in a similar way? It is true that Beauvoir does not attempt to develop an abstract terminology or a systematized theory, in this book or anywhere else, that could compare with Sartre's baroque conceptual architecture. Even so, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* draws conclusions about the nature of freedom, meaning, and value from reflection on brief original stories, famous novels, and historical narratives. Its abstract reflections on

⁴ I suspect this occurs because Beauvoir's aim in this essay is to show that fiction can provide a more nuanced and contoured image of reality than can be captured in classical philosophical prose and that it can do this without failing to achieve the virtues of great literature. The scope for philosophical treatises to incorporate literary techniques is not central to these claims.

timeless objective truths about reality are grounded in concrete examples of subjective experience and historical particularity.

This perspective on *Pyrrhus and Cineas* indicates a second limitation of Beauvoir's essay on literary and philosophical writing. If novels can paint metaphysical pictures of the nature of human existence, then what other kinds of writing or other forms of storytelling can do so? Can sustained biographical or historical narratives articulate features of an author's metaphysical vision that cannot be fully captured in other ways? Can sociological or political analyses have distinctive metaphysical dimensions? What about plays or movies? To what extent can literary analyses contribute to presenting metaphysical ideas? The subsequent development of existentialism, especially through *The Second Sex* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, is partly grounded in explorations of the metaphysical potential of these genres.⁵

Once we see that existentialist authors are drawing on a wide range of writing and storytelling in order to fully present their accounts of human existence, we might wonder whether the whole endeavour of our scholarly studies of their writings is just misguided. Why are we trying to capture their original metaphysical visions with our own brief and skeletal abstract descriptions, when they themselves thought their ideas could only be properly expressed in the nuanced contours and rich textures afforded by the range of genres they employed? How could we measure the success of our attempts, given that we must always be omitting an enormous amount of information?

These questions seem inextricably entangled with another: Why do we read these old books at all? If it is purely out of curiosity or for enjoyment, then there seems little point in publishing our own sketches of their ideas, except perhaps to introduce other readers to them. However, if we are reading them to help us in answering questions that we are facing, then we do need to delineate specific aspects of their theories in

⁵ As with the absence of consideration of the role of literary prose in philosophical treatises later than Kierkegaard, this limitation of Beauvoir's essay seems a result of her focus on the scope and powers of the metaphysical novel.

language that clearly relates to our questions as we understand them. In doing this, we are not aiming to summarise their own writings. We are aiming to capture some aspect of the metaphysical picture that their work aims to present in much greater detail.

In this way, two or more delineations of the same region of the same metaphysical vision might differ from one another without either being mistaken, just as two perfectly good maps of the same terrain can look very different. It is a map's purpose that determines, or at least strongly constrains, the features it represents and the ways it represents them. This is not to say that all maps are equal, of course. Some are badly drawn. Others are just plain wrong. However, even though differences between two maps can indicate problems with at least one of them, the mere fact that two maps look different is compatible with them both being accurate representations of the same terrain.

My primary aim in *Rethinking Existentialism* was to draw a set of maps of the metaphysical landscape that, it seems to me, is envisioned by Sartre, Beauvoir, and Fanon in the works I focused on, in order that we might use their philosophical vision to help address certain questions that face us today. My responses to Eshleman, Kirkpatrick, and Romdenh-Romluc over the rest of this paper are intended in the spirit of this cartographical understanding of the nature and purposes of philosophical scholarship. I begin with responses to Eshleman and Kirkpatrick on the metaphysics of value, then respond to Romdenh-Romluc on Fanon's therapeutic aims and their relation to sedimentation, before returning to Kirkpatrick on sedimentation, then to Eshleman on the role of other people in our projects.

2. The Bridge Problem and the Project of Bad Faith

How can there be any universally binding ethical requirements? Kant identified this as the fundamental metaphysical question about ethics.⁶ Without an answer to that question, it seems that ethical thought is

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Christopher Bennett, Joe Saunders, and Robert Stern (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 4-6, 57-8 (4:389-90, 4:444-5).

nothing more than a complicated expression of our preferences, at an individual or social level. In terms that were most immediately pressing for the existentialist authors we are considering, this would mean that there is no deep reason why the defeat of the Nazis is preferable to their success, or why equality of the sexes is preferable to their systematic inequality, or why an end to colonialism and racism is preferable to their continuation. We would simply have clashes of differing systems of preference, with no system being better or worse than any other.

One of my purposes in *Rethinking Existentialism* was to show that the existentialist picture of the metaphysics of value can help us to address this fundamental ethical question. I wanted to show this by delineating specific aspects of the existentialist metaphysical landscape in precise language that draws on the decades of philosophical reflection since these texts were written. I distinguished two existentialist reasons for the virtue of authenticity being the foundation of ethics: the eudaimonist idea that authenticity is a precondition of our own flourishing; and the Kantian idea that the structure of our own existence entails the categorical imperative to respect human agency as supremely valuable and the foundation of all other value. Eshleman's contribution to this symposium questions my formulation and critique of Sartre's eudaimonism. Kirkpatrick's contribution questions my interpretation of Beauvoir as offering an argument for the Kantian idea. I respond to Eshleman's critique in this section, Kirkpatrick's in the next.

Eshleman identifies what he calls 'the normative bridge problem' as the centre of my critical analysis of Sartrean eudaimonism. He defines this problem with a question: 'What justifies the move from an agent's explicitly recognizing her freedom to an obligation to respect the freedom of others?' (p. ##).⁷ This suggests that the sides of the gulf to be bridged differ in two ways: the near side is *recognition of my own* freedom; the far side is *respect for the freedom of others*. Respect for my own freedom is not on the map. One way to rectify this would be to define the far side of the gulf as respect for the freedom of anyone and everyone, or more simply respect for freedom. This would have the added advantage of ensuring that bridging the gulf would not leave us permitted to respect some people's freedom while oppressing other people.

⁷ All citations in the text that only give a page reference are referring to this volume of *Sartre Studies International*.

However, even this does not entirely capture the problem. For the near side of the bridge is not recognition of one's own freedom, but recognition of everyone's freedom, or more simply recognition of freedom. The project of bad faith involves not only the denial of one's own freedom and the pretence of having a fixed nature. It involves the denial of human freedom and the pretence that people have fixed natures. This view of people in general is essential to the denial of one's own freedom, which would not make sense without it (ES: 10, 78-9, 83-4; RE: 9-10, 107-9, 161-3).⁸ Eshleman is right to notice that the structure of my critique of eudaimonist arguments for authenticity in *Rethinking Existentialism* follows the structure of my critique of the grounding of authenticity in my earlier book, but is mistaken about that structure. What I intended to say is that these arguments can establish at most that we ought to recognise human freedom. They cannot establish that we ought to respect or value human freedom.⁹

A new map of the project of bad faith can show why. One aspect of this project is an assertion that people have fixed natures. However, this assertion is not the content of a belief. When I believe that the children are at school, the sun is shining, and there is beer in the fridge, these assertions are sensitive to evidence. If I open the fridge door and see no beer, or I feel the temperature drop, or I hear the children come home, then the relevant belief changes. In the project of bad faith, the attitude I have towards the assertion that people have fixed natures is not belief, because it is not sensitive to the evidence. It is instead an attitude that Sartre calls 'faith'. This attitude is held in place by my positively valuing the assertion that people have fixed natures (ES: 93-5; RE: 47-9, 84-7).

⁸ ES: Jonathan Webber, *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009). RE: Jonathan Webber, *Rethinking Existentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). On this point about the relation between bad faith and other people, see also: Jonathan Webber, 'Bad Faith and the Other', in *Reading Sartre: on Phenomenology and Existentialism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 180-194.

⁹ This is why my consideration of the virtue of authenticity in chapter 10 of *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* concludes that the question of why we ought to respect other people's freedom is beyond the scope of that book (ES: 145), a conclusion that Eshleman finds surprising (p. ##). It seems to me that neither *Being and Nothingness* nor Sartre's works preceding it contain any grounds for the claim that we ought to respect freedom, rather than merely recognise it, and my book was an analysis of those texts (ES: xiii).

The eudaimonist arguments outlined in *Rethinking Existentialism* are all intended to show that the project of bad faith necessarily frustrates our other projects, and that it does so because the assertion that people have fixed natures is false. There are deep structural reasons why we cannot flourish as agents while maintaining this false view of ourselves and everyone else. Given our new map of the project of bad faith, we can see that rejecting the false assertion requires escaping the attitude of faith in that assertion, which in turn requires positively valuing truth itself more than positively valuing any particular assertion. Only this value can ensure that one's outlook is informed by evidence-sensitive belief rather than evidence-insensitive faith.¹⁰

This is the origin of the bridge problem. Eudaimonist arguments for authenticity can at best show that we should value the truth and believe that people are free to change their outlook and motivations. Those arguments cannot show us that we should positively value this freedom. They cannot even show us that we should positively value our own freedom. If the problem for flourishing comes only from the false assertion of fixed natures, then it seems that someone can negate that assertion without having any particular values beyond the importance of the truth.

Eshleman proposes a solution to the bridge problem that can be formulated in these terms, which we will consider in the final section of this paper. But first we need to turn to Beauvoir's argument for authenticity.

3. The Metaphysics of Value

Beauvoir's argument, as I understand it, is not an attempt to build a bridge from recognition of freedom to respect for freedom, but an attempt to establish directly an imperative to respect human freedom as

¹⁰ Note that overcoming the project of bad faith, therefore, does not require ceasing to value the assertion that people have fixed natures. Someone might continue to value that assertion, perhaps in the form of nostalgia for the days when they had faith in it, while fully believing in the negation of that assertion.

supremely valuable and the foundation of all value. More precisely, one feature of the metaphysical vision that Beauvoir articulates in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is that the values we experience in the world depend on the structure of human agency in two ways. Ontologically, the values we encounter in the world are expressions of human freedom. Axiologically, the value of anything in the world is derived from the more fundamental value of human freedom.

My presentation of this in *Rethinking Existentialism* is a sequence of ten steps leading from a premise that all human agents do accept, according to existentialism, to the conclusion that human agency is objectively valuable. If the argument is correct, then we ought to accept that conclusion. This version draws together some of the central themes of *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, showing how they contribute to the development of this view across that book. However, this sequence itself does not attempt to map Beauvoir's metaphysics of value. It is intended purely as an epistemic device to establish its conclusion. I now think that this aspect of Beauvoir's philosophy can be better formulated as a transcendental argument, which serves both the epistemic and the cartographical functions simultaneously.

A transcendental argument begins with a premise that describes some aspect of experience from the perspective of the person having that experience and draws a conclusion that is claimed to state a factually necessary condition of the truth of that premise. This is one way to understand Descartes's famous cogito argument: the premise 'there are thoughts' articulates an aspect of my experience; for that premise to be true, it must be that I exist. There is no logical necessity here. There is no formal contradiction between accepting 'there are thoughts' and denying 'I exist'. Even so, the proposition 'there are thoughts' could not accurately describe my current experience if I did not currently exist.¹¹

Formulated in this way, Beauvoir's argument begins from the premise 'some ends are valuable'. This statement describes an inescapable feature of our experience. Beauvoir explicitly accepts Sartre's view that

¹¹ For this characterisation of transcendental arguments in general, including the cogito as an example, see: Mark Sacks, 'The Nature of Transcendental Arguments', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 13 (2005): 439–60.

human existence is essentially structured by ‘projects’: we aim at specific ends, which we value, and we experience these values as features of the world (P&C: 115).¹² The premise describes this aspect of our experience.

Beauvoir also explicitly accepts Sartre’s view that the values we encounter in the world are not features of being itself, but are reflections of our free pursuit of projects (P&C: 115; see also 107, 128). The conclusion of the argument is that this capacity of human agency is itself supremely valuable and explains the truth of the premise. That is, the value of human freedom explains why some ends are valuable. The values we experience in the world are axiologically dependent on the value of human freedom.

On this reading, much of the discussion of possible sources of value in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is intended, at least in part, as a process of elimination. The fundamental value of human freedom is shown to be factually necessary for the value of ends simply by showing that no other candidate explanation for the value of ends can be right. A detailed exploration of this argument and its implications is a task for another paper.¹³ Even so, this new map of one aspect of Beauvoir’s metaphysical vision enables a response to Kirkpatrick’s critique of my previous presentation of Beauvoir’s argument for authenticity.

Kirkpatrick’s critique is based on her rather different reading of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* as presenting an ethical exploration of values as features of our world, manifest in our feelings, and realised in our actions. We are aware that our values change over time and that other people hold different values. This gives rise to anxiety, which can only be addressed by integrating two aspects of human agency: that we each make ourselves through our projects; and that what we are depends on how other people understand us to be. In this brief

¹² P&C: *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, translated by Marybeth Timmerman, in *Philosophical Writings*, by Simone de Beauvoir, edited by Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmerman, and Mary Beth Mader (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 89–149.

¹³ Working title: Existentialism is a Kantian Humanism.

sketch, Kirkpatrick does not explain how these are to be integrated or why doing so addresses the anxiety of value.¹⁴

Why should this reading of *Pyrrhus and Cineas* present a problem for mine? At one point, Kirkpatrick seems to suggest that an imperative to respect freedom arises from the need to integrate other people's recognition of myself into my project. 'If the other is not free to hear my call, both of our freedoms are frustrated' (p. ##). However, this reasoning would not ground an imperative to respect human freedom. The most it could require is that I respect the freedom of the subset of people that I rely on for recognition. That is compatible with a group of us respecting one another's freedom while together oppressing people who are outside our group. If this is all that ethics amounts to, then there is nothing wrong with Nazism, patriarchy, or colonialism.

Kirkpatrick points out that any imperative to value freedom is purely formal unless it gains content from our experience of dealing with specific other people (p. ##). This echoes her earlier suggestion that Beauvoir considers the moral tradition of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel to offer only abstract formalism that fails to recognise the ethical significance of each individual's unique experience (p. ##). However, these points are compatible with my reading of the text. They are merely rejections of the further Kantian idea that a detailed and universally applicable set of moral rules can be derived a priori from the categorical imperative.¹⁵

This allows us to make sense of Beauvoir's puzzling claim, which Kirkpatrick quotes, that existentialism does not imply an ethics but *Pyrrhus and Cineas* aims to extract an ethics from it. What is this process of extraction if it does not involve drawing out implications? On my reading, Beauvoir's existentialism holds

¹⁴ Kirkpatrick develops this reading through comparison with the philosophy of Max Scheler, whose work is cited approvingly by both Beauvoir and Sartre in various places, but whose name does not appear anywhere in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*.

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

that our experience of value in the world is grounded in rational agency in a way that entails the categorical imperative to respect human freedom. That imperative sets a moral boundary to behaviour. It rules out, for example, oppression. But within that boundary there remains plenty of scope for differing views on how to live well. Many questions in sexual ethics, for example, are left unanswered by the injunction to respect freedom. Beauvoir has aimed to develop a more general ethical perspective within that boundary by reflecting on features of the human condition emphasised by existentialism, especially the relations between projects, sociality, and temporality.

Kirkpatrick's map of the metaphysical features of the human condition that she takes to ground Beauvoir's ethical outlook in *Pyrrhus and Cineas* is therefore compatible with my map of the axiological dependency of experienced value on the supreme value of freedom, which I take to ground Beauvoir's imperative to respect freedom. The two maps can be read as representing different features of Beauvoir's view of the metaphysics of value.¹⁶

Kirkpatrick also critiques my map of Beauvoir's theory of freedom. She objects to it making no reference to ontological ambiguity. There are two dimensions to this critique: the claim that I have overlooked Beauvoir's view that patriarchy analyses our ontological ambiguity into a series of binary oppositions; and the point that human temporality means that authenticity cannot simply be achieved but requires a constant tension. We will return to these concerns in the penultimate section, having first considered Romdenh-Romluc's critique of my reading of Fanon.

¹⁶ Hence I disagree with Kirkpatrick's description of the argument for the categorical imperative of authenticity as merely 'Beauvoirian' (p. ##). Whether formulated as a transcendental argument or as a sequence of steps, it seems to me that represents part of the metaphysical vision she articulates in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*. It is therefore appropriate to call it Beauvoir's argument, even though she did not formulate it in these terms. I would rather reserve the term 'Beauvoirian' for ideas and arguments that are grounded in Beauvoir's own thought, but which diverge from her own position. In this sense, the first section of this paper is a Beauvoirian reflection on the nature of this symposium.

4. Odysseus, Orpheus, and the Underworld

The purpose of my map of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* in *Rethinking Existentialism* is to demonstrate that there is a single coherent metaphysical vision underlying the whole book and that this is a form of existentialism. In her contribution to this symposium, Romdenh-Romluc provides substantial textual evidence that *Black Skin, White Masks* is written as a therapeutic text. Romdenh-Romluc reads Fanon's book as following the structure of Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* in enacting a form of therapy that Carl Jung called 'nekyia' — a descent into the unconscious to confront its most terrible contents.

Romdenh-Romluc presents this as an alternative to my reading of the same book (p. ##), but I think the two are compatible. Indeed, the map of Fanon's theory that I drew in *Rethinking Existentialism* is intended to describe the underlying theoretical perspective within which Fanon pursues his psychiatric ambition and to show that this is a form of existentialism (RE: 133-4, 148-50). My aim across this section and the next is to demonstrate that my existentialist reading can be enriched by Romdenh-Romluc's therapeutic reading and, reciprocally, the therapeutic reading can gain from this integration.

The word 'nekyia' is the title of Book 11 of *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus digs a trench in the ground, pours libations to the dead into it, then descends through it to the underworld. His mission is to seek advice from the ghost of Teiresias for his voyage home. But his libations summon many other ghosts too, including his own mother whom he had thought was still alive. Many of these ghosts provide Odysseus with useful information. Eventually, he becomes overwhelmed by the increasing crowd of ghosts and so leaves the underworld and returns to his ship.

This story is unique in the extant ancient Greek literature in that Odysseus descends into the underworld to hold a conversation. Every other visit to the underworld — which in Greek is called 'katabasis' — is undertaken to bring something back. This is usually a person, though in one case it is a three-headed dog. Orpheus visits the underworld to rescue his wife Eurydice, which he is allowed to do on condition that he

does not look at her on the way back up. He almost succeeds. But near to the exit, he turns around to check that she is still with him, with the result that she slips back into the underworld.

Sartre uses this myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to frame his analysis of negritude poetry. He sees negritude as evidenced in a qualitative dissonance these poets feel deep in the structures of their experience. This is ultimately a dissonance between the aspects of African cultures they have inherited and the French infrastructures, institutions, and language they inhabit. It cannot be articulated directly in French prose, precisely because the French language is one of the dissonant items. But it can be brought to the surface through French poetry that temporarily breaks down some of the alienating features of the language to portray this dissonance in images. The poets are thus like Orpheus bringing the Eurydice of negritude out into public view without looking directly at it.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is particularly important to Sartre here because it encapsulates the fundamental challenge to his own philosophical methodology that he sees posed by negritude poetry. His method had been one of transcendental argumentation from phenomenological premises describing experiences in clear prose to conclusions established as factually necessary for the truth of those premises. He had assumed, in line with his European philosophical tradition, that this would be an adequate guide to reality. Negritude poetry has shown him not only that there are experiences that he cannot replicate for himself, but also that some experiences cannot be described adequately in French prose. For this reason, he revises his method and takes negritude poetry itself as phenomenological description.

This leads him to abandon the theory of 'radical freedom' that *Being and Nothingness* argues for. That theory describes each person's affective and evaluative outlook as wholly determined by the complex set of projects that they have chosen and can change simply by choosing differently. He now sees that the experiences described by the negritude poets cannot be explained unless we accept two revisions to his theory: projects can be inherited through upbringing; and projects become engrained over time, so they can be eroded but not simply abandoned. His recognition of negritude poetry as profoundly challenging the white European

presumption of epistemic adequacy led him to realise that he needed to accept a sedimentation theory of freedom.¹⁷

Fanon's katabasis is different. He begins from phenomenological description of a particularly salient experience that indicates a deeper problem. Fanon relates an incident of being pointed out as '*un nègre*' in metropolitan France, which triggered a distressing cascade of associations: 'I cast an objective gaze over myself' and was 'deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders' and the pidgin refrain of a grinning cartoon character in adverts for a banana-flavoured breakfast cereal (BSWM: 92).¹⁸ Fanon has no trouble describing this experience in prose. His katabasis is not designed to bring out some deep structure of the experience. Rather, he is interested in why his own psyche has produced this episode of identification in response to that provocation.

First he explores the ways in which these same images pervade his surrounding culture. He describes their influences on everyday interactions and considers possible strategies for rejecting them. It is this discussion that brings him to negritude poetry, with its alternative positive image of black people, and then to Sartre's essay 'Black Orpheus', which ends by describing negritude poetry as part of a wider dialectical class struggle. In this survey, Fanon crystallises themes from the preceding four chapters of his book and prepares the ground for his descent into the underlying structure of his distressing experience.

It is because these images are part of a shared culture that Fanon's katabasis aims to explore the collective unconscious, rather than anything specific to his own mind (BSWM: 123). He sees the collective unconscious not as a cerebral structure inherited biologically, but as encoded in the cultural fabric and acquired by each individual through experience (BSWM: 165, 167-8). Ultimately, he finds at the heart of

¹⁷ For the full version of this reading of Sartre's 'Black Orpheus', see my paper 'Transcendental Phenomenology Meets Negritude Poetry', in *Creolizing Sartre*, edited by T Storm Heter and Kris F. Sealey (Lanham MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), pp. 209-231.

¹⁸ BSWM: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

this collective unconscious ‘an archetype’ which crystallises the white colonising culture’s collective catharsis into a single phobogenic object (BSWM: 124-5, 129-30, 132-3, 170-1). This is ‘an expression of bad instincts, of the darkness inherent in every ego, of the uncivilized savage and the black man who slumbers in every white man’ (BSWM: 164); it is an ‘archetype of inferior values’ (BSWM: 166) which ‘symbolizes evil, sin, wretchedness, death, war, and famine’ (BSWM: 167).

In the strict sense of the term, *nekyia* involves conversation with the dead. The retrieval of this phobogenic archetype from the collective unconscious is not itself a *nekyia*. However, the way Fanon undertakes this journey into the depths of the mind does include a kind of *nekyia*. He consults with Jung, Césaire, Sartre, and many others, using their writings to chart his course. Although these authors were alive at the time, we can see publications generally as the lingering spirits of the people their authors were at the time of writing. Indeed, we might see our own scholarly analyses of the works of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Fanon too as a form of *nekyia*, as consulting their ghosts to help us find our own ways forward.

5. Black Agency and the Collective Unconscious

We are now in a position to consider Romdenh-Romluc’s critique of what she helpfully terms my ‘black agency’ reading of Fanon’s analysis of the dilemma of white masks. This is the dilemma that Fanon identifies through his initial responses to the distressing experience of identification, before beginning his *katabasis* to explore the collective unconscious. It arises because the dominant culture frames society through two sets of images, which comprise behavioural expectations and so, metaphorically, are masks to be worn. Black people are expected to be inferior to white people in intellect, civilisation, and creativity. To behave in ways that accede to these expectations is alienating, not only because the mask is false but also because it is tightly constraining. To wear instead a mask designed for white people is also alienating, because the contents of these masks are determined entirely by the behaviour of white people. Either way, black people are denied the agency over their own behaviour that Fanon sees as essential to human flourishing.

On this reading, Fanon's initial consideration of the negritude movement is concerned with whether it offers a route out of this dilemma by enabling black people to take control of the image of black people. This does not mean that he sees the negritude movement as an appeal to the dominant white culture, a request to graciously grant recognition to black people's achievements. Rather, it is an attempt to shape directly this aspect of the collective unconscious, to change the power structure so that these masks come to be determined by the behaviour of black people, just as the masks for white people are determined by white people's behaviour.

There are two aspects to the negritude movement that could contribute to changing the image of black people in the collective unconscious. One is the content of the movement. Through the recovery of black history and artistic cultures, the wider cultural fabric can be enriched with more accurate and more sophisticated images of black people than have been presented by the dominant white culture. The other is the activity of the movement itself. By producing high quality academic scholarship, literary writing, fine arts, and musical innovation, members of the negritude movement demonstrate abilities that challenge the idea of inferiority. These activities themselves contribute to positive images of black people in the collective unconscious, as do their products.¹⁹

Fanon's conclusion, however, is that the negritude movement cannot itself take control of the image of black people. There are two reasons for this. One concerns the content of black history and black artistic forms. The dominant white culture can continue to assert its superiority without trying to prevent these histories and arts entering the collective unconscious. It only has to frame them as an earlier stage in human development (BSWM: 111). The other reason concerns the demonstration of intellectual and creative

¹⁹ Romdenh-Romluc criticises this aspect of my reading of Fanon by arguing that 'colonisers have seen the colonised exercise their agency in many ways' and this has not 'substantially affected the colonisers' views of the colonised' (p. ##). However, I did not intend to imply that just any action could be effective. No action that is consistent with the colonisers' image of black people could challenge that image. The point is rather that the sophisticated intellectual and creative work of the negritude movement is inconsistent with that image. Moreover, the point would not be to convince the colonisers, but rather to change the collective unconscious and thereby reshape everyone's perceptions.

agency in recovering these histories and arts. The effect of that on the images of black people in the collective unconscious could be undermined by framing these activities as fundamentally derivative of aspects of white culture, or as the mere interplay of historical forces.

This why Fanon found Sartre's comments towards the end of 'Black Orpheus' so shocking. Having written eloquently throughout the essay about what white people can learn from listening to the voices of these poets, Sartre then describes the negritude movement as merely a negative phase in a broad dialectical class struggle. Right there in the preface to a landmark text of the negritude movement, Sartre effectively relegates black agency to a minor role in producing this very work. Sartre was the pre-eminent cultural figure in France at the time and his comments exemplify Marxism more broadly, which was also a major influence on the culture. Fanon could see the potential for these comments to constrain the impact of the negritude movement, and perhaps black agency more broadly, on the collective unconscious.²⁰

It is unfortunate that scholarly consideration of Sartre's 'Black Orpheus' has focused almost exclusively on its closing comments about dialectical history. Most of the essay develops a critique of Eurocentric epistemology grounded in a careful analysis of the experiences that he finds expressed in the poetry. But even his positive account of negritude poetry misses an important dimension. 'Jean-Paul Sartre forgets that the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man', as Fanon puts it (BSWM: 117). Sartre's analysis of negritude poetry has missed any sense of inferiority, so indicates only part of black experience. Fanon does indeed mean 'forgets' here. He immediately illustrates this feeling of inferiority with

²⁰ Romdenh-Romluc presents two objections to my reading of Fanon's response to Sartre on this point. One is that Sartre's dialectical account of history does not preclude black agency. History merely shapes facticity, leaving untouched the individual's freedom to respond to that facticity (p. ##). The other is that Sartre's comments could not undermine the aim of convincing the white colonisers of black agency unless the colonisers shared this dialectical view of history (p. ##). However, if we read Fanon as concerned with whether the presence of sophisticated intellectual and creative black agency can reshape the image of black people encoded in the shared cultural fabric, then these objections do not apply. Sartre has turned the spotlight away from black agency and downplayed its creativity and sophistication.

a passage from Sartre's own play *The Respectful Prostitute*, which was first staged two years before 'Black Orpheus' was published (BSWM: 117-8).

This is what motivates Fanon's distinctive katabasis, his analysis of the cultural fabric aimed at identifying the underlying cause of this sense of inferiority. Ultimately, he finds this in the archetype of the black man as embodiment of evil, an archetype created through the cathartic projection of the white colonisers' worst desires and behaviour. This aspect of the black francophone experience is not rooted in inherited African cultures or manifested in dissonance with European infrastructure, institutions, and language. It is created by the colonisers, encoded in the shared cultural fabric, and from there assimilated into the minds of coloniser and colonised alike. This is the profound cause of the dilemma of white masks and the deep reason why the negritude movement cannot be used to resolve that dilemma.

The therapeutic reading emphasises the personal importance of identifying this archetype as the root of distressing experiences. Indeed, we can see this aspect of the text as participative. Fanon intends his readers to work through the process with him, to confront the archetype for themselves. If he is right that it is at the heart of the shared collective unconscious, then we should all find it there, through a process that will resonate with the lived experience of black readers while being merely intellectually understood by white readers. This therapeutic process should therefore have social and political consequences. It should motivate us to dismantle that archetype.

The negritude movement helps to prepare the ground for this katabasis by presenting an image of black people that contrasts with the image in the collective unconscious, but does not go deep enough into that unconscious to uncover the archetype of evil. Although it contributes to reshaping the collective unconscious, this does not itself offer a route out of the dilemma of white masks, which is held in place by that archetype of evil. An individual can respond to the dilemma by rejecting the inauthenticity of identifying with characteristics drawn from the past, instead embracing their freedom to determine the projects that actually drive their behaviour (BSWM: 202-4). The archetype of evil can only be dismantled by our collectively embracing human freedom in this way (BSWM: 205-6).

Fanon's position is therefore compatible with Sartre's analysis of the negritude movement in 'Black Orpheus', so long as we exclude Sartre's comments about dialectical history, which anyway do not fit with the rest of his essay.²¹ Fanon's emphasis is on the collective unconscious shaped by the white coloniser, whereas Sartre's is on inheritance of aspects of African culture. Fanon's focus is on the encoding and transmission of ideas in shared cultural media, whereas Sartre's is on the meaning of a particular kind of felt dissonance. Fanon understands human agency to incorporate ideas from the surrounding culture that are then difficult to erode away again (BSWM: 205-6). Sartre too holds this sedimentation theory of freedom from 'Black Orpheus' onwards.²² Fanon thinks that alienation generated by the archetype of evil can only be overcome by embracing Sartrean authenticity (BSWM: 202).

6. Ambiguity, Gender, and Sedimentation

It is often pointed out that there are important parallels between Fanon's analysis of racialisation in *Black Skin, White Masks* and Beauvoir's theory of gender in *The Second Sex*, even though Fanon does not cite Beauvoir in his work. However, within these parallels there are important differences. Beauvoir and Fanon both hold that the individual's outlook is profoundly shaped by the sedimentation of ideas from their surrounding culture. Even so, Beauvoir's theory distinguishes two dimensions of this sedimentation that Fanon does not clearly separate out: the assimilation of representations encoded in the social fabric is one

²¹ On the fracture between the Marxist perspective on history and the rest of 'Black Orpheus', see the final section of my paper 'Transcendental Philosophy Meets Negritude Poetry'.

²² It is not clear whether Fanon realised that Sartre had adopted a sedimentation theory of freedom in 'Black Orpheus', thereby rejecting the 'radical freedom' espoused in *Being and Nothingness*. It is only in *Saint Genet*, published in 1952, the the same year as *Black Skin, White Masks*, that Sartre's sedimentation theory becomes prominent in his writing. This later text helps us to make sense of 'Black Orpheus' as the first text where Sartre accepts the sedimentation theory. Romdenh-Romluc reads 'Black Orpheus' as ascribing to the negritude movement a strategy of talking as though there is a shared fixed essence of black people while knowing all along that this is a fiction, which suggests that she reads this essay as operating within the confines of Sartre's earlier theory of radical freedom (p. ##).

dimension of this sedimentation; the constraints on goals and values imposed by social expectation is another.

My presentation, in *Rethinking Existentialism*, of Beauvoir's theory of gender focuses on the latter dimension. Kirkpatrick objects that it makes no reference to Beauvoir's theory of the myth of the Other and its relation to the nebulous and inconsistent myths of femininity found across folk tales and modern literary fiction. Beauvoir sees this basic myth as grounded in a fundamental tragedy: patriarchy refuses to accept the irreducible ambiguity of human existence, instead analysing its tensions into a series of binary oppositions. Each individual is indissolubly both consciousness and matter, for example, but patriarchy classifies these as distinct and opposed.

Kirkpatrick reads Beauvoir as claiming that patriarchy then classifies the more highly valued member of each opposing pair as masculine, the devalued term as feminine (p. ##). It is because Beauvoir sees patriarchy as driven by this basic tragedy, Kirkpatrick argues, that my characterisation of Beauvoir's theory of gender as the sedimentation of the social expectation that women should make good wives and mothers — or, for short, should be pleasing to men — is mistaken. However, it seems to me that there is no contradiction here and that my characterisation of this process can be deepened and enriched by further consideration of Beauvoir's theory of these myths.

To see why, we must first reconsider the myth of the Other as Beauvoir presents it. The myth is grounded in patriarchy's analysis of ontological ambiguity into binary oppositions. This is aimed at identifying masculinity with the more highly valued item in each pair, so that men see themselves as essentially transcendent minds conquering mere nature through their willed activity. Man sees himself as 'a fallen god' trapped in 'his carnal condition', 'enclosed in a limited body', imprisoned in 'the mud of the earth' (SS:

169).²³ But woman is not seen as essentially defined by the devalued item in each opposition. Rather, that is how patriarchy understands the natural world.

Woman is presented as essentially belonging to the natural world while sharing man's characteristics, even though nature and man have been defined in opposition to one another. It is this incoherent hybrid that Beauvoir calls 'the Other'. 'Man seeks the Other in woman as Nature and as his peer' (SS: 167); 'she is the perfect intermediary between nature that is foreign to man and the peer who is too identical to him' (SS: 164). This incoherence is the reason why the various models of femininity, each of which is represented as woman in her entirety, contradict one another (SS: 275-6). Woman is both healer and witch, for example, both prey and predator in relation to man, both 'the elementary silence of truth' and 'artifice, gossip and lies' (SS: 166). The incoherence of the fundamental myth of the Other explains why 'woman has a double and deceptive image' (SS: 219) and thereby can never actually be what is expected of her (SS: 220).

My comments in *Rethinking Existentialism* on Beauvoir's theory of gender are not intended to sketch out her account of patriarchy's origins and perpetuation. They are aspects of a map of the metaphysical vision of human agency articulated across *She Came To Stay*, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, and *The Second Sex*. The purpose of the map is to show Beauvoir's sedimentation theory of freedom clearly and distinctly.²⁴ Even so, this can

²³ SS: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009).

²⁴ Kirkpatrick makes three objections to my use of Beauvoir's novel *She Came To Stay* in this connection. First, she argues that the novel represents an early stage in the evolution of Beauvoir's ethical views, which had been superseded by the time *Pyrrhus and Cineas* was written (p. ##). However, I do not claim to find Beauvoir's ethical views in this novel, only her sedimentation theory of freedom. Indeed, I have subsequently argued that the same theory can be found in her even earlier collection of intertwined short stories *When Things of the Spirit Come First* (see my 'Rethinking Existentialism: From Radical Freedom to Project Sedimentation', in *Freedom After Kant: From German Idealism to Ethics and the Self* (Bloomsbury, 2023), ed Joe Saunders, pp. 191-204). Second, Kirkpatrick points out that Beauvoir considers literary fiction capable of representing nuances and textures of a metaphysical vision that are irreducible to the brief and precise formulas of philosophical definition (p. ##). As the opening section of this paper makes clear, I think Beauvoir's theory of metaphysical literature does not preclude describing the same vision in philosophical terminology, which does indeed sacrifice detail but has the benefit

be deepened and enriched by considering the sedimentation theory's relation to the myth of the Other in Beauvoir's overall philosophy.

For the sedimentation of gender occurs through the encouragement of certain kinds of behaviour and discouragement of others, especially during childhood. While it may be true that boys are encouraged to develop the godlike transcendence and domination of nature that characterises the basic myth of masculinity, it seems implausible to suggest that parents and teachers positively encourage girls to develop all the aspects of the incoherent myth of the Other. Patriarchy encourages girls to be caring, helpful, pleasant, and quiet, according to Beauvoir, essentially to make good wives and mothers. Such an upbringing does not encourage girls to become wicked stepmothers or evil witches. Beauvoir does think that women are 'taught from adolescence to lie to men', but this is because it is a necessary tactic for surviving oppression rather than something seen as valuable in itself (SS: 280). The myth of the Other that is assimilated by men and women alike from the cultural fabric — from what Fanon calls 'the collective unconscious' — is not itself wholly present in the image of womanhood to which girls are taught to aspire.

The sedimentation theory of freedom holds that projects, not simply ideas, become increasingly sedimented with repetition. At the heart of a project is some value being pursued. When girls are encouraged to be caring, helpful, pleasant, and quiet, these values are sedimented into their outlook. But projects also incorporate information required for navigating the world in pursuit of their values. More precisely, they include assertions about the material and social world that are relevant to their values (RE: 71-2).²⁵ Since the social world includes women, many projects incorporate assertions about women. These are influenced

of isolating what would be useful for some specific purpose. Finally, Kirkpatrick claims that each major character in a novel has their own metaphysical vision, so we cannot ascribe a single metaphysical vision to the novel. This overlooks the authorial vision that underpins the narrative which unfolds when these particular characters are brought together in these specific situations. Kierkegaard's 'indirect communication', to which Kirkpatrick refers as a model, is likewise intended to communicate Kierkegaard's own ideas through the interplay of his pseudonyms and the reactions that he expects from his readers.

²⁵ For a succinct explanation of the conception of projects employed by Beauvoir and Sartre, as I understand it, see: Jonathan Webber, 'Sociality, Seriousness, and Cynicism: A Response to Ronald Santoni on Bad Faith', *Sartre Studies International* 26 (2020): 61-67, pp. 62-3.

not only by our interactions with women, but also by representations of women in the cultural media. This is how the myth of the Other and its resulting models of femininity become sedimented into the outlooks of boys and girls alike, despite the differences between the values they are encouraged to pursue. It is also how they are continually reinforced in the outlooks of men and women.

This more sophisticated map of Beauvoir's theory of sedimentation shows why she sees the human condition as tragic. Our lives are founded on a denial of the ambiguity of human existence, which alienates both men and women from their true ontological structures. There are deep tensions between the values that are fostered in women and the images of women that become incorporated into everyone's outlooks. And because all of this is deeply imbued through childhood and reinforced in adult life, rejecting it entirely would be a 'mutilation' of the people we have become (SS: 739-40).

The same map shows us why Beauvoir thinks that authenticity 'has to be made ceaselessly' and 'demands constant effort' (SS: 164). One reason is that sedimented projects cannot simply be abandoned on a whim. They can only be eroded by continuous action.²⁶ Their status as sedimented projects mitigates against that activity, precisely because they incline us towards behaviour that affirms them. A second reason is that our culture is founded on a denial of ambiguity. The very structure of our existence as indissolubly both transcendence and immanence is occluded by a mythology that pervades our cultural fabric. Affirmation of our true existence requires continuously resisting assimilation of this false picture. This erosion and resistance are projects that we can undertake. They cannot become fixed features of ourselves that require

²⁶ Kirkpatrick suggests that 'duration' or 'becoming' might be better terms than 'sedimentation' for Beauvoir's theory of freedom (p. ##). It is true that Beauvoir used both of the terms Kirkpatrick suggests and did not use 'sedimentation'. However, neither term denotes precisely the aspect of her theory that I wanted to focus on. After all, Sartre's opposing theory of radical freedom is a theory of becoming and is consistent with understanding the metaphysics of time in terms of duration. What distinguishes Beauvoir's theory is that projects increase in inertia as they are pursued, becoming more influential and more difficult to overcome. That the term 'sedimentation' captures this well is indicated by how naturally its antonym 'erosion' describes the gradual removal of a project by action contrary to it. Moreover, erosion is also a form of becoming and is also consistent with duration as a theory of the metaphysics of time.

no further endorsement or effort, since no motivations can have that ontological status. In this sense, authenticity requires ‘a constant tension’ simply because it is project (P&C: 214).

7. Authenticity and Classical Existentialism

We can now return to Eshleman’s proposed solution to the bridge problem. Eshleman argues that in Sartre’s ontology the person I become is dependent on other people in at least two ways. First, my social environment structures the field of meanings and thereby determines the range of possibilities that I experience, and these prior social meanings become internalised in the structures of my projects. We have already seen that this same idea is central to Fanon’s theory of racialisation and Beauvoir’s theory of gender. Second, the meanings of my actions are freely constituted by other people, so in aiming to act meaningfully I am implicitly affirming their freedom. Eshleman’s point is not that these thoughts bridge the gulf between my own freedom and the freedom of other people. Rather, he thinks there is no gulf to be bridged: because my own freedom is ontologically dependent on the freedom of others, I cannot will my own freedom without thereby willing the freedom of others (p. ##).

As it stands, this argument needs further clarification. Eshleman’s first point does not seem to require the recognition of other people’s freedom, since even the person in bad faith could accept that their own projects internalise meanings that have been encoded into the social fabric by other people. Moreover, as Eshleman points out, Sartre does not describe such internalised meanings as limitations to freedom, since they can be internalised only by being freely upheld, modified, or rejected (p. ##; compare RE: 88). Our freedom over how we respond to those meanings is prior to their internalisation.

Eshleman’s second point does seem to offer a profound reason why we should recognise other people’s freedom. Indeed, this is more philosophically interesting than my own simpler observation that the recognition or denial of one’s own freedom would not make sense without the same attitude towards the freedom of people in general (ES: 10, 78-9, 83-4; RE: 9-10, 107-9, 161-3). Even so, it does not show that I cannot respect (or, in Eshleman’s preferred term, will) my own freedom without respecting (willing) the

freedom of others. Rather, it shows that I cannot respect my own freedom without *recognising* the freedom of others. A version of the bridge problem remains. On the near side of the gulf, we have recognition of human freedom, perhaps joined by some argument for respecting my own freedom. On the far side, we have respect for other people's freedom, or for human freedom in general.

One way to clarify Eshleman's thought here might be to formulate it as a transcendental argument. The idea would be that the value of human freedom is factually necessary for the value of my freedom, with this axiological dependence following the structure of the ontological dependence that Eshleman has sketched.²⁷ Such an argument would need to show why it is the freedom of everyone that is required, ontologically and axiologically, for my own freedom. Otherwise we could be left with the conclusion that we ought to respect the freedom of enough people to secure our own projects, which would be compatible with Nazism, patriarchy, and colonialism. It would also need to avoid the conclusion that the freedom of other people to encode oppressive meanings into the social fabric is a necessary condition of the freedom of people those meanings oppress. Otherwise the argument would not show that oppression of human freedom is morally wrong.

It might well be interesting to see whether an argument of this kind can be developed without it concluding either too little or too much. Until such an argument is developed, however, it is not at all clear whether it would be preferable to the argument for the imperative of authenticity that I think Beauvoir offers, or indeed to eudaimonist considerations in favour of authenticity. Moreover, we should not think of these arguments as rivals. There might be a range of good reasons for authenticity. Perhaps not all of those reasons show that we ought to respect everyone's freedom in a way that rules transgressions of this imperative as immoral. But we only need one reason for that. Further reasons for authenticity might still be enlightening about its content and its value.

²⁷ Given the structure of transcendental arguments outlined in the third section of this paper, the premise would have to describe some aspect of experience from the perspective of the person having that experience. It would therefore need to be something like 'my freedom is valuable'. We would need good reasons to accept that this is an experience that we already have, or that we ought to bring ourselves to have. The argument would then need to show that this experience is veridical only if human freedom itself is valuable.

Indeed, some of those reasons, like the eudaimonist ones I discuss in *Rethinking Existentialism*, might only conclude that we ought to *recognise* human freedom. Eshleman questions whether this would really count as authenticity, without the further demand to value freedom. To put it another way, given that recognition of the true structures of human agency can make one all the more effective as an oppressor, is authenticity compatible with oppressing people? Eshleman rightly detects some unclarity in my work over this question.

It now seems to me that we should simply distinguish two senses of the word ‘authenticity’ in Sartre’s work. Believing the truth about human freedom is sufficient for authenticity in the thin sense, which is purely descriptive. As we saw in the second section of this paper, this recognition of human freedom needs to be grounded in a commitment to valuing truth itself. Sartre’s description of ‘authentic’ Jewish responses to anti-Semitism use the word in this thin sense. ‘Authenticity’, he writes, ‘consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves’ (ASJ: 90).²⁸ The thick and fully normative sense of the term includes everything that is already encompassed by the thin sense, but additionally requires positively valuing human freedom.

This outline map of authenticity allows us to answer Eshleman’s questions of whether authenticity precludes oppressing people and whether one can oppress people playfully, given Sartre’s idea that playfulness itself manifests human freedom. Authenticity in the thin sense does not rule out oppression, but authenticity in the thick sense does. That is, the core recognition of freedom is consistent with oppressing people and indeed might make one’s oppression more effective, but such oppression is inconsistent with respecting human freedom. For the same reason, authenticity in the thin sense allows for playful oppression.

However, we should bear in mind that bad faith too allows for playfulness, so long as the person in bad faith does not notice the contradiction between this attitude to values and their faith that people have fixed

²⁸ ASJ: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, translated by George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1948).

natures. Playfulness might even be motivated by projects that enshrine the idea that people have fixed natures. ‘The anti-Semites’, Sartre writes, ‘like to play with discourse, for, by giving ridiculous reasons, they discredit the seriousness of their interlocutors’ (ASJ: 20). Sartre’s underlying thought about playfulness is that authenticity in the thin sense (and therefore the thick sense) commits us to playfulness about our values beyond the value of freedom itself. It is not the converse idea that playfulness requires authenticity.

The full virtue of authenticity therefore has a similar structure to classical existentialism itself, as I have defined that (RE: 1-2, 14). The descriptive content of classical existentialism is a theory of human freedom. This is the theory that our outlooks and behaviour are ultimately explained by our projects, which are built on values that we have chosen and can change, and which incorporate meanings that have been internalised from the social environment. If we disvalue any such social meaning, we can pursue a project of attempting to change the social world or at least of resisting the incorporation of that meaning into our projects. Normatively, existentialism is the theory that human freedom so understood is supremely valuable and the foundation of all other value. Sartre, Beauvoir, and Fanon are all existentialist philosophers. They hold to this normative claim and, therefore, to the descriptive claim it incorporates.

Two of my central aims in *Rethinking Existentialism* were to show that Beauvoir’s version of the descriptive claim is better than Sartre’s initial version of it, which explains why he eventually adopted her version, and that Beauvoir has an argument for the imperative of authenticity in the thick sense where Sartre’s arguments seem at best to conclude that we should become authentic in the thin sense. Kirkpatrick asks why I have defined existentialism as the view that Beauvoir and Sartre held in common in 1945, given that I also argue for the superiority of Beauvoir’s versions of the descriptive and normative dimensions of existentialism (p. ##). Why not just define it by Beauvoir’s writings?

One answer is textual. The word is first defined by Sartre in a short article in 1944, then more importantly by a flurry of activity from both authors in late 1945. These texts define existentialism by the claims that

Beauvoir and Sartre have in common at that point.²⁹ What is more, Beauvoir's theory cannot be cleanly separated from Sartre's. Her initial philosophical formulation of her theory of freedom, in the short book that contains her argument for authenticity, explicitly deploys his conception of a project (P&C: 107, 115, 128). The other answer is philosophical. Defining classical existentialism in a way that leaves open disagreement about exactly how projects operate and allowing for a variety of reasons for seeing authenticity as the fundamental ethical virtue facilitates the kind of comparative analysis of these works of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Fanon that can enrich and deepen our understanding of all three philosophers, as I hope my book and this symposium have both demonstrated.

²⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'A More Precise Characterisation of Existentialism', in *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre: volume 2: Selected Prose*, edited by Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, translated by Richard McCleary (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 155-160. Simone de Beauvoir, 'Existentialism and Popular Wisdom', translated by Marybeth Timmerman, in *Philosophical Writings*, by Simone de Beauvoir, edited by Margaret A. Simons, Marybeth Timmerman, and Mary Beth Mader (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 203–20. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber (Yale University Press, 2007).