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"And yet your duty is to hope": The positive psychology of Jean-Paul Sartre

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Abstract
In this article, we consider the potential relevance of the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre to the positive psychology movement. Specifically, we argue that Sartre's consideration of freedom as the "foundation of all values" can be read as a defense of generosity as the cardinal psychosocial virtue. For Sartre, authentic existence is not simply a quest to realize subjective well-being or to acquire a collection of conventional virtues and character strengths. Rather, authenticity is most appropriately understood as a *life* (holistically conceived) offering itself as a *gift* to the Other—a *freedom* realizing its humanity by *nurturing other freedoms*. Practical implications of Sartrean thought are considered, with special attention given to "gratitude" as an erstwhile character strength that potentially undermines the quest for freedom.

Keywords
existentialism, gratitude, moral development, positive psychology

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) had a special talent for illuminating the darker side of human existence. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1943/2005)

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documents the sadism and masochism implicit in our closest relationships. Indeed, so horrific is human social life that a central character in Sartre's (1989) play *No Exit* bluntly declares that "hell is other people" (p. 45). Martin Seligman (2011), a leading figure in the contemporary positive psychology movement, recently dubbed the philosophy articulated by Sartre in *No Exit* as "wrongheaded" and "almost meaningless" (p. 17). According to Seligman (2011), "today it is accepted without dissent that connections to other people and relationships are what give meaning and purpose to life" (p. 17). Yet, the revelation that "hell is other people" may not be the final word in Sartrean social thought. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1943/2005) follows the most pessimistic account of human relationships imaginable with a footnote that offers a glimmer of hope: "these considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation" (p. 434). However, "this can be achieved only after a *radical conversion* [emphasis added] which we cannot discuss here" (p. 434).

In spite of his pessimism regarding the possibility of achieving authentic happiness (cf. Seligman, 2002) or genuine well-being (cf. Seligman, 2011), Sartre shares common cause with psychologists wholeheartedly committed to the project of ethical enlightenment. Nevertheless, deep tensions remain between Sartre's own ethical project and the moral thinking that informs the contemporary positive psychology movement. Whereas Sartrean virtue emerges as the unifying theme of a holistic personal narrative, many positive psychologists have implicitly embraced a "bag of virtues" approach to ethics (see Kohlberg, 1981). Martin Seligman (2002), for example, considers psychological well-being in relation to a collection of logically distinct virtues and character strengths (e.g., honesty, self-control, gratitude). This fragmentation of virtue—symptomatic, perhaps, of the scientific need to reduce the psychosocial universe to a constellation of distinct, individually manageable "variables" (see Richardson & Guignon, 2008)—obscures, and potentially compromises, the ethical project as a holistic enterprise.

A related concern regards the positive psychologist's interest in helping individuals better their own lives (by enhancing coping skills, resilience, etc.). While ostensibly a noble pursuit, this emphasis on strategies that can be applied at the level of the individual effectively turns attention away from the social conditions that must be met in order for any individual to live a meaningful life. Psychosocial well-being, Sartre (1971/1981) suggests, is never a personal accomplishment. Rather, "the meaning of a life comes to the living person through the human society that sustains him and through the parents who engender him" (p. 134). Far from denying the value of happiness, Sartre empathizes with our collective longing for self-affirmation and self-fulfillment. However, well-being cannot be achieved by tinkering with psychosocial variables considered in isolation. Rather, authentic happiness requires a holistic transformation in the way we understand ourselves and our communities.

In this essay, we consider the potential relevance of Sartrean philosophy to the positive psychology movement. In the first section, we offer a brief account of Sartre's ontology, with a special focus on freedom as "the foundation of all values" (Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 48). We then shift attention from Sartre the moral philosopher to Sartre the developmental psychologist. Sartre's account of human development, we argue, presages a central insight of contemporary attachment theory: a secure relationship with a primary caregiver plays a critical role in the development of a healthy sense of self (Bowlby, 1973; Bylsma, Cozzarelli, & Sumer, 1997; Foster, Kernis, & Goldman, 2007; Hepper &

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Carnelley, 2012). As such, Sartrean thought opens up a new vista for positive psychology: *parental care* as the foundation (if not the guarantee) of authentic happiness.

Nevertheless, there remain substantive tensions between Sartre's philosophical vision and certain tendencies observed in the contemporary positive psychology literature. For Sartre, our fundamental task is not to realize some abstract set of virtues or character strengths. Rather, our challenge is to *meet people's needs* (see Anderson, 1993; Crittenden, 2009). This means that we ought to exercise considerable caution when considering virtues in isolation, as if they were goals worthy of pursuit in their own right. To demonstrate this point vividly, we offer a Sartrean critique of a character strength actively promoted in the positive psychology literature: gratitude. While common sentiment appears to align here with the intuitions of the positive psychologists, Sartrean philosophy cautions us that classifying gratitude as a character strength (see Seligman, 2002) may actually compromise our well-being. The value of gratitude is not inherent; it is very much contingent upon the nature of the relationship in which the "grateful" stance is maintained. Thus, it is the *relationship*—and not the *person*—that ought to be the focus of our ethical inquiry.

The ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre

In *Being and Nothingness*, first published in 1943, Sartre (1943/2005) argues that human reality is most appropriately characterized as *lack*. Succinctly stated, we are not complete beings. What, specifically, is lacking? For Sartre (1943/2005), human reality exists as a lack of self-identical Being. We long to be united with our "true self," to become the person we believe we were always meant to be, but we can never achieve this ideal state of identity or self-equivalence. In Sartre's (1943/2005) words, I "am what I am not and am not what I am" (p. 287).

The most obvious corollary of this claim is that I can never be identified with any given set of roles, virtues, or character traits. I am, at most, a disposition toward future action of a certain type and this disposition, once recognized, can be altered. There is, to be sure, a sense in which I can say that "I am what I have done" and "I am what I will do." For this reason, it is always possible for me to "tell my own story." Nevertheless, my projected future is itself contingent upon my present values and, insofar as these values can change, my personal narrative remains open to substantive revision. At the limit, I recognize the perpetual possibility of a radical transformation of my original manner of being-in-the-world—a transformation that might even take the form of a dramatic, life-altering conversion experience. For Sartre (1943/2005), such episodes are revelatory of freedom as a defining feature of the human condition:

> These extraordinary and marvelous instants when the prior project collapses into the past in the light of a new project which rises on its ruins and which as yet exists only in outline, in which humiliation, anguish, joy, [and] hope are delicately blended, in which we let go in order to grasp and grasp in order to let go—these have often appeared to furnish the clearest and most moving image of our freedom. (pp. 497–498)

From a Sartrean point of view, it matters less that these conversions are probable than that they are possible. In order to tell my story, I must identify myself with a projected

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future that will never necessarily come into being—a future that I might someday reject as something that I even want for myself. Thus, what I *am* cannot be definitively determined. While I might claim to *be* a real estate broker (and behave at all times *as if* I were a real estate broker), I am not one in the same sort of way that a chair *is* a chair. I am always free to adopt life projects that involve the abandonment of my responsibilities as a broker (e.g., I can become a journalist).

According to Sartre (1943/2005), human reality "is *effectively* a perpetual project of founding itself qua being and a perpetual failure of this project" (p. 640). In other words, our passion to *be* in some definitive sense is doomed to perpetual frustration.[1] Given this existential predicament, our most profound temptation is to adopt projects that allow us to sustain the illusion of progress toward substantiality. For example, I may masochistically submit to an Other who promises to illuminate my true Being—to reveal to me my core motives and personality traits, as when my friend affirms that I am indeed a kind-hearted person "despite what anyone else might say." Alternatively, insofar as others have the freedom to place in question everything I stand for and thereby threaten my illusion of progress, my quest for Being may become a sadistic effort to deny or destroy their very freedom. Here I might remind my friend, who freely judges me harshly, that he's just an angry person—"full of venomous rage"—that nobody will ever take seriously.

Even so, in his posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics* (written in 1947–1948), Sartre (1992) suggests that it may be possible to wholeheartedly embrace non-identity as the truth of the human condition, to live our story as if its meaning were perpetually in suspense, and to draw ethical inspiration from both. Upon this "radical conversion," freedom replaces self-identical Being as the source of all value. No longer do I seek to suppress freedom, mine or that of another. Rather, I positively embrace the fact that I am (and, by extension, others are) always beyond what I am (or they are):

> "We are condemned to be free." This has never really been understood. However, it is the basis of my ethics. … I cannot get rid of my situation as bourgeois, Jew, etc. except by assuming it *in order to change it.* And conversely I can preserve in myself certain "states" or "qualities" of which I am proud only by surpassing them in order to preserve them, that is, not by preserving them as such (dead virtues) but by making of them perpetually new hypotheses aiming at a new future. I can preserve what I am only by that movement by which I invent what I am going to be… (Sartre, 1992, p. 431)

It should be understood that the ontological freedom described by Sartre is never the power to create a personal narrative *ex nihilo*. Quite the contrary, my actually lived personal history is the original foundation of each and every one of my acts of self-interpretation, even if I choose to live this history in the mode of flight. As Sartre (1943/2005) comments, "the past cannot be possessed by a present being which remains strictly external to it as I remain, for example, external to my fountain pen" (p. 136). Regardless of how I interpret my past, I remain united with it in a bond of being: "A remark made by someone concerning an act which I performed yesterday or a mood which I had does not leave me indifferent; I am hurt or flattered, I protest or I let it pass; I am touched to the quick" (Sartre, 1943/2005, p. 138).

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As such, there is always a sense in which I *am* my past, regardless of how I interpret it. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1943/2005) acknowledges "the past's immense importance as a platform and a point of view" (p. 517). This remains true, moreover, even after the most radical transformation of an individual's manner of being-in-the-world: "A converted atheist is not simply a believer; he is a believer who has for himself rejected atheism" (Sartre; 1943/2005, p. 488). My past haunts me—indeed, it *must* haunt me—even as I enter each new chapter of my personal narrative. As Sartre (1960/1968) puts the matter: "a life develops in spirals, it passes again and again by the same points but at different levels of integration and complexity" (p. 106).

However, if "I *am* my past" (Sartre, 1943/2005, p. 137), it can never be "in the mode of identity" (p. 138). That is, I am not my past in the same way that this desk *is* a desk. Rather, I am what I was in the mode of *being a surpassed totality*. The future totality that I project myself toward defines the meaning of the past which "I have to be without any possibility of not being it" (Sartre, 1943/2005, p. 141). In other words, the story that I have lived, though the only aspect of me that has become actual, is always open to reinterpretation in light of the story I will live. Much as new notes can alter the essence of a melody as it unfolds, actions not yet "played out" can alter the character and the meaning of the whole that is my life (see Charme, 1984).

In Sartre's view, a developing person can never claim to *be* virtuous in any substantive sense, as there is always the possibility that the virtues and character strengths recognized as good at one point in time may be revealed as ethically problematic or even deficient as the individual's life story continues to unfold. Qualities that once defined my essence (e.g., humility) can become obstacles to self-realization. For this reason, Sartre (1992) is dismissive of the notion that authenticity can be achieved by the cultivation of positive personality traits:

> Authenticity … leads to renouncing every project of being courageous (cowardly), noble (vile), etc. … Authenticity reveals that the only meaningful project is that of *doing* (not that of being). … The one meaningful project is that of acting on a concrete situation and modifying it in some way. (p. 475)

For Sartre, my chief moral challenge is not to develop nascent virtues, but to respond appropriately to the concrete demands of my present circumstances. Of course, there may be good reason to develop skills (e.g., leadership) that might be useful across a broad range of situations. However, these talents are never valuable in their own right. Rather, they are worthy of cultivation and praise only to the extent that they advance the project of freedom.

What, though, does it mean to embrace freedom as an ethical ideal? On an ontological plane, freedom is simply the failure of the self to fully coincide with itself: I "am what I am not and am not what I am" (Sartre, 1943/2005, p. 287). For Sartre, this failure to achieve self-coincidence defines the human condition regardless of how we set our goals or how we behave. However, such ontological freedom is not always appropriately managed. For example, it is possible to act *as if* human beings did not enjoy this freedom—as if we were Platonic forms condemned to forever radiate our enduring essence.

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In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1943/2005) draws attention to our perpetual temptation to live a life of "bad faith," a condition in which we refuse to accept responsibility for our lives, holistically conceived. Significantly, such self-deception might be especially tempting in relationships that deny or devalue freedom, perhaps by offering definitive (essentialist) interpretations of a partner's core personality traits. Sartre (1952/1963), for example, describes a man who tells his wife that she is "irascible":

> If this young woman adopts the social and objective datum as if it were the absolute truth about her, if she accuses herself of having an *irascible nature*, if she projects behind her, into the darkness of the unconscious, a permanent predisposition to anger of which each particular outburst is an emanation, then she subordinates her reality as a conscious subject to the Other that she is for Others. … She endows that which had no meaning other than social with a metaphysical meaning, a meaning prior to any relationship with society. … This type of alienation is widespread. (pp. 33–34)

There are many paths to self-deception in Sartrean thought, and the flight from freedom that Sartre (1943/2005) dubs "bad faith" remains an "immediate, permanent threat to every project of the human being" (p. 94). Nevertheless, many common life experiences offer glimpses of what it means to realize an ontology of freedom. We can experience moments of authentic freedom in spontaneous play and in creative work. Wholehearted devotion to the project of freedom, however, implies that the spirit of play and creation is subsumed by the project of generosity (Sartre, 1992).

For Sartre, the quest for freedom is never a narcissistic venture. Quite the contrary, Sartre's golden rule can be formulated as follows: "I cannot set my own freedom as a goal without also setting the freedom of others as a goal" (Sartre 1946/2007, p. 49). Once I have embraced an authentic ontology of freedom, there is no longer anything especially important about *my* freedom. Rather, it is freedom itself, in all of its manifestations, in myself and in every other person, that must be valued "as the foundation of all values":

> The ultimate significance of the actions of men of good faith is the quest of freedom in itself. … We will freedom for freedom's sake through our individual circumstances. And in thus willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that the freedom of others depends on our own. (Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 48)

The implications of Sartre's golden rule are striking: the Sartrean freedom project, whatever else it might do, exemplifies Erik Erikson's (1963) "generativity"—a genuine concern for one's fellow human beings and for posterity. In its most mature—and most extreme—form, Sartrean generosity becomes a *life* offering itself as a gift to the Other, a *freedom* realizing its humanity by *nurturing other freedoms*.

Of course, not everyone is fortunate enough to have been so nurtured. Although Sartre considered freedom as consubstantial with the human condition, he was well aware that practical freedom—the power to substantively transform our lives and make something out of what has been made of us (see Sartre, 1974b, pp. 34–35)—requires much more than a commitment to a cogent philosophical program.

In the decades following the publication of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre became increasingly concerned with the political challenge of meeting basic human needs.

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Such needs include the physiological conditions necessary to sustain life as well as various psychological imperatives. For example, "the need for love is present from birth, even before the child can recognize the Other" (Sartre, 1971/1981, p. 129). On Crittenden's (2009) account, the basic needs envisioned by Sartre

> run across biological, psychological, and social domains—such things as the need for food, drink, and shelter, care and support … a sense of self-esteem, love and friendship … the opportunity to be part of a culture, access to knowledge, emotional well-being, … and freedom in a wide range of activities. (pp. 101–102)

Sartre uses the term "integral humanity" in reference to an ideal state of affairs in which all human needs can be met (see Anderson, 1993; Crittenden, 2009). For the present, our existence can be described as a *lack* of integral humanity. In theological language, we are fallen creatures seeking to become whole, and this wholeness involves much more than freedom.

In the first volume of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre (1960/1985) seemingly distanced himself from some of his more radical claims about human freedom:

> It would be quite wrong to interpret me as saying that men are free under every circumstance, as the stoics claimed. I mean the precise opposite. All men are slaves insofar as their lives unfold in a *practico-inert field* [emphasis added] conditioned by scarcity. (p. 332)

Sartre's notion of the "practico-inert" is a reference to relatively inert cultural artifacts and institutions (e.g., pencils, the American education system) that are the products of previous praxis (e.g., "No Child Left Behind" legislation). In a milieu "conditioned by scarcity," the practico-inert field plays a role in determining which individuals will be granted access to scarce resources (as when a college degree increases the likelihood of acquiring a high-paying job). Our cultural challenge is to transform the practico-inert in such a manner as to achieve a more just distribution of cultural resources.

Still, even as his thinking was enriched by a consideration of organic and psychological needs, Sartre remained committed to an ethical vision unified around the theme of freedom. In a 1974 interview, Sartre reaffirmed that "the Good is that which is useful to human freedom. … Evil is that which is harmful to human freedom" (de Beauvoir, 1984, p. 439). The frustration of basic needs (or the threat of future frustration) can be considered Evil precisely because it *undermines freedom*—restricting both the range and the quality of available options. Commenting on this aspect of Sartre's thought, Detmer (1988) cites the example of impoverished Chicago families "who must choose between spending their money on food or on heating" (p. 183) in the winter. These families confront a "*qualitatively poor* range of options, especially in comparison with their wealthier neighbors who can have both food *and* heating" (p. 183).

The frustration of physical needs has clear implications for the freedom project. The role played by psychological needs is less obvious. Here it is helpful to consider how the problem of freedom is implied in any given psychological need. For example, the need for love is intimately tied to a child's emerging capacity to experience life as an unfinished story and to participate in an open and meaningful future. A brief consideration of relevant themes in Sartre's account of child development may thus help to clarify his moral vision.

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Sartre as developmental psychologist

In the course of his multi-volume psychobiography of the French novelist Gustave Flaubert, Sartre (1971/1981) offered an idealized account of the psychosocial development of the "loved" and the "unloved" child. Considering love to be among the most fundamental of psychological needs, Sartre shares with contemporary attachment theorists a recognition that early relationships with primary caregivers shape a child's emerging sense of self (Bowlby, 1973; Bylsma et al., 1997; Foster et al., 2007; Hepper & Carnelley, 2012). For Sartre, however, parental love does not merely influence the content of a child's self-image at a given moment. It also shapes the *very form* of the child's temporal experience.

The unloved child, according to Sartre (1971/1981), is essentially a fatalist. Time is experienced as a "House of Nauseating Reoccurrence" (p. 143), with the future offering little more than a replay of the past. The loved child, in contrast, is invited to "cross the barrier of the moment" (p. 133) and participate in an open and meaningful future. According to Sartre (1971/1981), "if later on, with a little luck he can say: 'my life has a purpose, I have found a purpose in my life,' it is because the parents' love, their creation and expectation … has revealed his existence to him as a movement toward an end" (p. 133). As with the adult, the child's subjective experience of time as unfolding toward a meaningful future is contingent upon the fact that his/her existence was *already meaningful to someone else*. When love is present, "the dough of the spirits rises" (Sartre, 1971/1981, p. 141) and the child "will preserve even in misfortune a kind of religious optimism based on the … calm certainty of his own value" (pp. 129–130).

How can such optimism be reconciled with Sartre's more familiar discussions of anguish, absurdity, and abandonment (in a Godless universe)? Though unbounded parental love can neither hide forever the painful truths of the human condition nor offer an absolute justification for a child's existence, the loved child is far better positioned than the unloved child. Whereas the former embraces life in a spirit of hopefulness, the latter confronts only the most debilitating part of the truth. "In fact, … [the unloved child] is a hundred times farther from his real condition than the privileged child who is perceived as justified in advance" (Sartre, 1971/1981, p. 136). The unloved child "perceives in himself only a diffuse and purely subjective flow" and "is deprived, *from the start*, of the cardinal categories of praxis" (p. 136). Indeed, the fate of this child appears to have already been written, and very darkly: "everything is past, even the future – everything is immutable in advance; concerted human effort will never be more than a futile ripple on the surface of a dead world" (pp. 136–137). For Sartre, "the true malaise begins on the threshold of the human, when unloved children – the great majority – are staggered by a senseless existence" (p. 135).

The loved child, in contrast, experiences time as a *project* that "departs from past love … and goes toward future love" (Sartre, 1971/1981, p. 134). Significantly, parental love is not forgotten as the child discovers the less palatable truths regarding the human condition. Rather, it continues to serve as the actually lived backdrop against which the very story of the self unfolds. According to Sartre (1971/1981), if the child

> has truly received the fullness of early parental attentions, consecrated by the scattered smiles of the world. … living will be the *passion* – in the religious sense – that will

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> transform self-centeredness into a gift; experience will be felt as the *free exercise of generosity*. (pp. 133–134)

In effect, the loved child comes to embrace a generative mode of being-in-the-world in which the Other is recognized as an absolute value. An empirical condition for this way of life is the child's awareness that he or she was already of absolute value to someone else. From a Sartrean perspective, we can thus say that the child's most primordial psychological need is to experience life as a *loved freedom*. Given this self-affirmation, practical freedom—the power to make something meaningful out of what has been made out of us—emerges as a value in its own right.

In Sartre's universe, hell may indeed be other people, particularly in the absence of a collective recognition of freedom as "the foundation of all values" (Sartre, 1947/2007, p. 48). Nevertheless, Sartre also recognizes the possibility of an authentic love that takes us out of hell, a love that values and nurtures the Other as a free being. In his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Sartre (1992) observes that such love desires

> to unveil the Other's being-within-the-world, to take up this unveiling, and to set this Being within the absolute; to *rejoice* in it without appropriating it; to give it safety in terms of my freedom, and to surpass it only in the direction of the Other's ends. (p. 508)

Though the greater part of Sartre's work directs our attention to less savory aspects of human relationships (sadism, masochism, etc.), it also illuminates the conditions that must be met in order for *any relationship* to be worth having and for *any life* to be experienced as meaningful. But this, it seems, is just what the positive psychologists are looking for. As Seligman (2002) observes, "the time has finally arrived for a science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for finding what Aristotle called the 'good life.'" (p. ix). Thus, it bears considering how Sartre's account of human flourishing stands in relation to the contemporary positive psychology movement.

Sartrean humanism and positive psychology: A critical encounter

Positive psychology is more appropriately characterized as a collection of loosely affiliated schools than as a unified perspective (see Lambert, Passmore, & Holder, 2015). Still, Aristotle is frequently cited as an important influence (e.g., Waterman, 2013) and his consideration of human flourishing—or *eudaimonia*—as "a lifelong pattern of activity devoted to choiceworthy ends and pursued in accordance with virtue" (Fowers, 2012, p. 14) can appropriately be considered as the movement's point of departure.

In *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman (2002) affirmed that "*happiness and well-being are the desired outcomes of Positive Psychology*" (p. 261). Yet, following Aristotle, Seligman (2002) reminds us that these outcomes can take multiple forms, including (a) *the pleasant life*, or the pursuit of such emotionally charged experiences as contentment, pride, hope, and trust; (b) *the good life*, or wholehearted engagement in gratifying activities (e.g., rock climbing, debating); and (c) *the meaningful life*, which involves using

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character strengths and virtues "in the service of something much larger" than ourselves (Seligman, 2002, p. 263).

While Seligman (2002) acknowledges that a "full life" includes elements from each of these domains, the accent is clearly on the dimension of meaning, and he characterizes his work as "a preface to the meaningful life" (p. 263). To this end, Seligman offers an account of six virtues that appear as ubiquitous in human culture (i.e., wisdom/knowledge, courage, love/humanity, justice, temperance, spirituality/transcendence) and 24 character strengths that exemplify these virtues (e.g., open-mindedness, bravery, kindness, fairness, generosity, gratitude, humility).

Concerned that the positive psychology movement might be equated with the single-minded pursuit of happiness, Seligman (2011) has recently declared that "well-being, not happiness, is the topic of positive psychology" (p. 24) and well-being includes many positive states of affairs. To the three elements of well-being considered in his previous work (i.e., positive emotion, engagement, and meaning), Seligman adds (a) *accomplishment*, including the need for achievement and the pursuit of mastery and (b) *positive relationships*, "hence my snide comment about Sartre's 'hell is other people.'" (p. 20). Seligman insists that each of these five elements is *exclusive* ("defined and measured independently of the other elements") and can be considered *valuable in its own right* (insofar as "many people pursue it for its own sake, not merely to get any of the other elements"; Seligman, 2011, p. 16). Once we have identified the various elements of well-being, our next challenge is to specify the conditions that allow for the successful realization of these values. For example, empirical research presumably supports the thesis that "if we want to maximize the achievement of children, we need to promote self-discipline" (Seligman, 2011, p. 118). Here, self-discipline is presented as a means to the end of accomplishment.

As a simple description of our cultural life, there is little to question in Seligman's account. We are not always seeking to maximize positive emotions (or happiness, narrowly conceived). We also long for meaning, a sense of achievement, mutually supportive relationships, and the like. Moreover, we may indeed be able to identify activities or character traits (e.g., self-discipline) that facilitate the realization of certain ends (e.g., achievement) in specific cultural contexts.

Still, critical accounts of the positive psychology movement have drawn attention to a constellation of interrelated assumptions that render it ill-suited to promote our collective well-being. Chief among these are (a) abstractionism, (b) instrumentalism, and (c) individualism. As these concerns are given added resonance when considered from a Sartrean point of view, they are worth discussing briefly in turn.

According to Slife and Richardson (2008), *abstractionism* can be defined as "the assumption that *all* things, including the self, are the most real and best understood when they are abstracted or separated from the situations in which they occur" (p. 701). A consideration of the self in terms of a constellation of distinct character strengths or virtues is one example of such abstractionism. Of special relevance here is Seligman's (2002) declaration that character strengths are *traits* "that can be seen across different situations and over time" (p. 137).

One problem with Seligman's (2002) understanding of character strengths is that human behavior loses its *moral* significance when abstracted from its context. As Richardson and Guignon (2008) observe:

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> when such thick ethical concepts [e.g., courage, gratitude] are abstracted out of contexts that provide their home and are treated as relatively isolated, externally related "variables" to be manipulated and tested in relation to other variables, they are stripped of the mesh of connections that determines their meaning. (p. 608)

Significantly, such abstractionism creates the illusion that virtues and other aspects of well-being can be sharply distinguished from each other, as if the failure to acquire one character strength (e.g., forgiveness) has no bearing on the essence of other so-called strengths (e.g., love).

For his part, Sartre (1948/1995) is critical of an "analytic spirit" in which "we look upon persons and characters as mosaics in which each stone coexists with the other without that coexistence affecting the nature of the whole" (p. 8). There is something profoundly disturbing in the description of a man as "a good father and a good husband, a conscientious citizen, highly cultivated, philanthropic, *and* in addition an anti-Semite" (p. 8). The presence of anti-Semitism changes the meaning of every other facet of this man's life-story, and this remains true even as we highlight abstract character traits that a conventional moralist might consider positive (e.g., conscientiousness).

A related concern is the salience in positive psychology of an *instrumentalism* that considers human action "as consisting mainly in manipulative or instrumental efforts to gain control over natural and social processes in order to produce desired results or enhance human welfare" (Richardson & Guignon, 2008, p. 606). Such reasoning might appear as little more than a pragmatic concern with the identification of efficient means (e.g., diet and exercise) to established ends (e.g., physical health). However, such reasoning is often employed by positive psychologists to provide external justifications for behaviors that were already intrinsically ethical (as when prosocial behavior is justified by reference to the fact that it improves subjective well-being). The problem here, of course, is that such a defense undermines the original meaning of the justified behavior, at least insofar as the behavior never needed this justification in the first place (Slife & Richardson, 2008).

If, on the other hand, valued states are considered as ends, there is a very real danger that the identified means may devalue these very ends. The popular image of a "love potion" amply demonstrates the absurdity of a love that would seek to negate the freedom of the lover (Sartre, 1983). Guided by this image, we can recognize that a certain respect for freedom lies at the foundation of our most meaningful social relationships. This freedom is compromised when these relationships are treated as conceptually distinct ends (uncontaminated by the moral status of various means) or as means to other ends (without concern for how the consequent means–end gestalt—e.g., love for the sake of longevity—transforms the essence of the means).

This same image of a love potion should also help clarify the communal nature of Sartrean freedom. My freedom *to love* is contingent upon the Other's freedom. Here, we catch a glimpse of the third significant limitation of the positive psychology movement. Even as positive psychologists speak highly of relationships, families, and communities, there is an implicit commitment to an ontological individualism whereby meanings are intrinsic to—and solely determined by—autonomous individuals. This is reflected, for example, in the strong tendency to rely on self-report measures to assess human

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meaning, as if the meaningful life were simply a matter of personal judgment (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008).

Significantly, Aristotle had a broader conception of human well-being. For example, he drew attention to the importance of *shared goods* (such as friendship or democracy) that are communal in nature and that can only be enjoyed *with others* (Fowers, 2012). Commenting on Aristotle, Fowers (2012) observes that such shared goods "are among the most meaningful and valued ends people pursue, and they are always collective achievements" (p. 15). It is not enough to value these goods as autonomous individuals, for their very meaning implies that others participate in our lives and share in our projects.

Considered in this light, practical freedom and all of its corollaries—including friendship and love—can appropriately be considered as shared goods. Our experience of freedom, and our corresponding sense of meaning, is an emergent property of relationships and not yet another attribute of the mythological self-contained individual (see Sampson, 1989).

Our problem would be merely academic if not for the fact that abstractionism, instrumentalism, and a general neglect of the relational dimension of human existence (or what Sartre calls our being-for-others) compromises our capacity to make meaningful commitments and experience authentic happiness. For example, the cultivation of gratitude as a distinct character strength may give rise to the very "hell" that Seligman (2011) insists he is leaving behind. Thus, as a final exercise in Sartrean ethics, we offer a reconsideration of gratitude in light of the freedom project.

The problem of gratitude

On Seligman's (2002) account, gratitude is a character strength that allows us to realize the virtue of *transcendence* (i.e., our capacity to reach beyond ourselves and embrace "something larger and more permanent," p. 154). Seligman describes gratitude in various ways:

> You are aware of the good things that happen to you, and you never take them for granted. You always take the time to express your thanks. Gratitude is an appreciation of someone else's excellence in moral character. As an emotion, it is a sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life itself. We are grateful when people do well by us, but we can also be more generally grateful for good acts and good people ("How wonderful life is while you're in the world"). Gratitude can also be directed toward impersonal and nonhuman sources—God, nature, and animals—but it cannot be directed toward the self. (p. 155)

Implicit in gratitude, as Emmons (2007) observes, is an awareness that I am not wholly responsible for my fate; that others have contributed to making me what I am. In other words, in the state of gratitude, I recognize that I have been given a gift of some sort (e.g., money, emotional support). In Sartrean terms, gratitude implies acknowledgment of the freedom of the Other who, after all, was under no obligation to give me anything.

It follows that this very freedom, even as it bestows its blessings, can be experienced as a substantive threat to my own freedom. This is true not because the gift itself deprives me of my autonomy, but because it realizes a relationship in which my own free projects are transcended by the gift-giving Other. In other words, gratitude may be experienced as a kind

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of ontological slavery in which the gift-giving Other assumes authority over certain aspects of my life, if not my very existence. Considered as an imposition on the donee's freedom, Sartre (1943/2005) observes that gratitude bears a close family resemblance to hatred:

> Hate does not necessarily appear on the occasion of my being subjected to something evil. On the contrary, it can arise when one would theoretically expect gratitude—that is, on the occasion of kindness. The occasion which arouses hate is simply an act by the Other which puts me in the state of *being subject* to his freedom. (p. 433)

To be sure, the act of giving need not always subjugate freedom. Our previous analysis of generosity leaves open the possibility of embracing the freedom of the Other as a personal project. Still, we see no reason to value gratitude as an abstract character strength. The appropriateness of gratitude depends entirely on the nature of the relationship. The young adult who feels—and is expected to feel—"grateful" for everything her family has done for her is not necessarily on the path to virtue, even if she is also happy on precisely this account. Rather, she may implicitly be adopting a submissive posture in relation to a particular or generalized Other, with the consequent sacrifice of her own longer-term freedom.

Given Seligman's (2002) claim that a character strength is "valued in its own right" (p. 137), it is somewhat puzzling to observe positive psychologists defending gratitude as a means to other ends. For example, the very subtitle of Emmons' (2007) book on the subject suggests that he intends to document "how practicing gratitude can make you happier." Nelson (2009) goes so far as to suggest that

> gratitude research can provide counselling psychology with ideas for interventions with a range of client groups, from those experiencing depression, bereavement or substance abuse, to individuals who are not experiencing clinical issues but are seeking simply to enhance their state of well-being. (p. 38)

Even Seligman (2011) seems willing to consider gratitude as an instrumental value: "gratitude can make your life happier and more satisfying. When we feel gratitude, we benefit from the pleasant memory of a positive event in our life" (p. 30). We have no reason to doubt these claims. However, the observation that happiness is linked to gratitude is itself a cause for concern. If happiness is a goal worthy of pursuit, it might be *worth less* if I end up adopting an inauthentically grateful pose in order to achieve it.

Reminded of research suggesting that gratitude also fosters prosocial behavior (e.g., Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Emmons, 2007), we reply that this too is ethically problematic. Perhaps I should give because *others are in need*, not because I myself have been so fortunate as to have received a gift. As such, interventions designed to foster gratitude (including the prescription of so-called "gratitude journals"; see Seligman, 2011) risk perpetuating a state of affairs in which generosity is *contingent* upon my belief that "good things" have come my way.

Why indeed should I be grateful? I am certainly free to acknowledge the positive role that others have played in my life, but I am no less obliged to reflect upon the negative aspects of my past. Gratitude, we submit, is no more revelatory of our transcendence than is hatred, nor is it any more ethical. There is nothing intrinsically good about gratitude.

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It may motivate positive behavior, but so too should righteous indignation. Indeed, generosity (as a forward-looking virtue) is as appropriate a response to anger as it is to gratefulness. Where I have reason to hate, I ought to give something positive in return.

If gratitude as a character strength lacks a solid moral foundation, it might be said that it remains an appropriate attitude in the context of genuinely positive relationships. But even here, caution is in order. While I may rightfully acknowledge the positive role that another person has played in my life, I have no concomitant obligation to adopt a grateful pose. Rather, my gratitude should *take the form of* generosity (and not just to the donor). Gratitude, as conceived here, is not a distinct, individually manageable variable that somehow "causes" generosity. Rather, it *should be* generosity, and nothing more.

Coda

In his first play, Sartre (1974a) tells the story of a Jewish leader named Bariona living at the time of the birth of Christ. He finds himself overwhelmed by his own suffering and the suffering of his people. Far from displaying gratitude as a character strength, he bluntly declares that "I shall put all my dignity in my hatred" (p. 104):

> I shall ask no favors and I shall give no thanks. … I shall keep a precise account of all my sufferings and the sufferings of all other men. I want to be the witness and the judge of all men's sorrow. (p. 104)

Lucidly aware of the worst that life has to offer, Bariona calls on his people to renounce, once and for all, the desire to bring new children into the world:

> We no longer want to perpetuate life or prolong the suffering of our race. We shall beget no more. We shall consummate our lives in meditation on evil, injustice, and suffering. And then, in a quarter of a century, the last of us will be dead. (Sartre, 1974a, p. 86)

Fortunately, a series of events—including his wife's pregnancy—encourages Bariona to reconsider his priorities. A wise man on his way to visit the baby Jesus puts the matter as succinctly as possible: "You are suffering, *and yet your duty is to hope* [emphasis added]" (Sartre, 1974a, p. 109).

Eventually, Bariona comes to accept his responsibility for the next generation and he adopts an ethics of generosity. At the end of the play, a converted Bariona—realizing that he is virtually certain to die in a battle against Herod's army—offers his wife final instructions regarding their unborn son:

> Raise him without hiding any of the world's miseries from him, and arm him against them. … Later, when he has grown up, not right away. … not the first time he's disappointed, but much later, when he knows how immensely left alone and lonely he is. … Tell him "Your father suffered everything you're suffering and he died joyfully." (Sartre, 1974a, p. 135)

Bariona's instructions are aimed at meeting the psychosocial needs of a son he will never live to see. Significantly, this generous act does not require that he let go of his rage

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against the social and political forces that caused his misery in the first place. Quite the contrary, anger is woven into the very fabric of his personal project. However, this rage is superseded—not by abstract virtues or character strengths—but by the concrete project of meeting the very real needs of his family and his people. Bariona, we suggest, can be considered as the mythological embodiment of *Jean-Paul Sartre, the positive psychologist*.[2]

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Notes

1. Sartre (1992) describes “Hell” as “the region of existence where existence means using every trick in order to be, and to fail at all these tricks and to be conscious of this failure” (p. 472).
2. Adopting Waterman’s (2013) nomenclature, Sartre is more appropriately classified as a humanist than as a positive psychologist. Still, we find it unfortunate that a label as inspiring as “positive psychology” excludes large segments of the humanistic psychology tradition and we believe that Sartrean thought has a place in a broader conception of the movement (cf. Lambert et al., 2015; Wong, 2011).

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