

## **Existentialist Voluntarism as a Source of Normativity**<sup>1</sup>

My thesis here is an ambitious one; I will limit it at various points, but I should state it baldly at the outset: I defend a neo-Kantian view wherein we are capable of being completely autonomous (in a technical sense to be explained) and impartial and I argue that this ability provides a grounding of normativity. The view includes an existentialist conception of the self (in the classic sense), so I begin by arguing that such a view is viable. In the first section, I defend radical choice, one of the primary components of classical existentialist thought, against arguments many take to be definitive. I call the ability to use this radical choice 'existentialist voluntarism' and, in the second section, I bring it into a current debate in moral and political philosophy and argue that, in comparison to a popular competing model, it allows that we can be distanced from all of our ends at once so as to be completely impartial.<sup>2</sup> In the third section, I indicate how use of existentialist voluntarism might be the source of normativity by arguing that if radical choice is possible we can assume it would be used to choose rationality. In that section, I also deal with objections and offer some comments regarding the language I use throughout.

### **I. Radical Choice**

Radical choice, as I conceive it, is indeterministically free choice ultimately based on nothing at all. Having said that, my goal in this section bears repeating: it is my intention to show that the arguments against radical choice are not conclusive. This is a modest and negative thesis. I will not yet argue that we do have the sort of freedom I discuss; I seek only to show that it has not been thoroughly discredited. Perhaps this modest thesis will not be unpalatable. After all, the last thirty years has seen a resurgence of interest in freedom—beginning with Harry Frankfurt's (et al) resuscitation of compatibilist views of freedom and culminating, perhaps, with the brilliant defense of incompatibilist freedom offered by Robert Kane. Still, my view may be somewhat harder to swallow. On Kane's view, indeterministically free choices are made using *plural rationality*, so that faced with two options, A and B, one is indeterministically free if one has reasons for A and reasons for B such that the reasons influence but do not necessitate (see, e.g., 108; see also O'Connor, 25-30 and Nozick, 294-299). After one uses plural rationality, one can rightfully claim to have acted for a reason, though the reason did not necessitate the act. By contrast, when we use radical choice, we cannot correctly say one acted for (because of) a

reason; at most, one could say only that faced with equally compelling reasons for two different options, a choice was required and one occurred.

Plural rationality is less helpful than one might think. Its true that, after the fact, we can say that the plurally rational person was rational as he had a reason, but if the winning reason was no more compelling than the opposing reason, we can not say this reason brought about the decision or act. We can only say that though there is a reason that would explain the choice if we subscribed to a different (deterministic) theory, that reason did not (on this theory) bring about the choice. The choice was, in fact, ultimately based on nothing (though the possible options were themselves based on reasons).<sup>3</sup>

When in a genuinely dilemmatic situation—one wherein we have two options and, typically, reasons in favor of each, but where the reasons are equally compelling—we will deliberate with intensity. We will think 'I should do X ... No, I should not ... Yes I should,' etc. When we decide, it will seem to us as though the decision 'came upon us'—as if, we might say, 'from nowhere.' That is the phenomenology behind the view I defend. Of course, though it *seems* to us as though the volition comes from nowhere (perhaps from 'nothingness'), many will say it was caused—likely claiming there was a subconscious weighty reason (or a subconscious weighting of one conscious reason over another)—perhaps a second order desire, as it were. Of course, this *may* be the case. There is, though, no proof that it *must* be the case. As Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser indicate 'there is no evidence, either conceptual or empirical, to challenge the thesis that people have the ability to pick' (773) where 'picking' is selecting from two (or more) alternatives when 'one is strongly indifferent with regard to the alternatives' (757, see also 758). Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser suggest, moreover, that 'at the very deepest level of selection, involving the ultimate and most significant alternatives confronted by man, there can only be picking, there being no possibility of a reasoned choice' (783).

Many have insisted, though, that radical choice is chimerical. David Velleman, for example, tells us that the sort of existentialist view I shall defend is 'just a mischaracterization of ourselves' that 'would be to take our own pretense of detachment too seriously' (167). He believes that 'a feeling of radical freedom ... is the result of a failure to engage in genuine self-inquiry' (169). Harry Frankfurt tells us that 'Someone free of ... such restrictions [as provided by some definite set of ends] is so vacant of identifiable and stable volitional tendencies and

constraints that he cannot deliberate or make decisions in any conscientious way. If he nonetheless does remain in some way capable of choice, the decisions and choices he makes will be altogether arbitrary' (1999, 110; see also 114-115). I will defend the antecedent: distanced from all ends, the agent can still choose (indeed, the agent is conceived of as a being of impartial volition). I will admit that such a choice is arbitrary in a straightforward sense.

The view Velleman and Frankfurt express is, I take it, prevailing wisdom: choice requires antecedently possessed ends as a grounding. I think, nonetheless, that it is wrong—at least in one particular and important case—where we choose rationality itself as an end. In the third section of this paper, I will defend the view that the moral project (via the norms of rationality) can be grounded in an 'arbitrary' (and arational) choice—radical choice—made possible by existentialist voluntarism.<sup>4</sup> Here I defend that voluntarism.

Perhaps the most lucid argument against existentialist voluntarism is one waged by Charles Taylor directly against Jean Paul Sartre's account of freedom. While looking at that argument, we should remember that both Sartre and Taylor belong to a tradition in philosophy that concentrates its efforts on hermeneutics. Thus, they both take themselves to be giving an *interpretation* of what it is to be a human agent. In the end, then, the question is about which offers the most plausible interpretation (or descriptive account) of the self and its position in the world.

According to Taylor (1985, 29 ff; see also MacIntyre, 31-32.), if Sartre's account of freedom (see esp. Sartre 1956a, 708-9) were accurate, a young man trying to decide whether to go to war or to stay with his ailing mother could not have a real dilemma, for he could just as easily decide it wasn't a dilemma. If it is a dilemma, it is

only because the [competing] claims themselves are not created by radical choice. If they were, the grievous nature of the predicament would dissolve, for that would mean that the young man could do away with the dilemma at any moment by simply declaring one of the rival claims as dead and inoperative. Indeed, if serious moral claims were created by radical choice, the young man could have a grievous dilemma about whether to go and get an ice cream cone, and then again he could decide not to ... moral dilemmas become inconceivable on the theory of radical choice (Taylor 1985, 30).

On Taylor's view, the young man can only have a dilemma because he is *not* isolated from the world—is not capable of Sartrean transcendence (see Sartre 1956b, 295-8).<sup>5</sup> That sort of transcendence is, I will suggest, similar to the freedom necessary for taking on a Rawlsian veil of ignorance.

Taylor claims that the Sartrean can only 'resolve the matter by radical choice [which is 'not supposed to be ... the registration of preferences' that would 'ground' the choice]. He simply has to plump for the Resistance or for staying home with his mother. ... He simply throws himself one way' or the other (Taylor 1985, 30; internal quotation from 32). If this were not the case, if the student were to decide because of his preferences to go one way rather than the other, his decision would not be radically free but would be 'grounded' in those preferences. A radically free decision is not 'grounded in' or 'based on' anything (if the radical chooser can be properly said to *judge*, that judgment cannot ground her choice). The problem, according to Taylor, is that the 'agent of radical choice has to choose, if he chooses at all, like a simple weigher' even though the theory of radical choice attempts to maintain a 'semblance of plausibility by surreptitiously assuming strong evaluation beyond the reach of radical choice' (Taylor 1985, 31, 33). (In Taylor's language, 'strong evaluators' judge their lower order desires in light of those values they most identify with; 'simple weighers' do not distinguish between the value of their various desires.) Thus, Taylor believes that because the theory of radical choice embodied in Sartre's work 'wants to maintain both strong evaluation and radical choice,' 'to have strong evaluations and yet deny their status as judgements,' the entire theory crumbles under close examination (Taylor 1985, 32).

In response to Taylor, a Sartrean could argue that Taylor begs the question by assuming that there is a substantial self which is the source of actions for each individual—something Sartre denies. On his view, the self *is* its choices. He claims that man is 'what he wills,' that 'man *is* freedom' (1956b, 291 and 295). It is an important element of Sartre's theory that he equates self with volitional ability. Because 'existence precedes essence' there can be no person 'until later'—i.e., until there is a choice (1956b, 290). I would suggest, then, that it is Taylor rather than Sartre who assumes that the radically free agent must somehow be a strong evaluator. He assumes that there is a substantial (and relatively enduring) self present to evaluate the options before the choice is made. In other words, he assumes precisely what the existentialist denies—that essence is prior to existence. Put another way, Taylor is assuming that an essentially embedded (i.e., *substantial*) self is present before the choice and remains after the choice. Sartre would deny this and insist that the only 'self' present prior to the choice is a volitional ability (what I will call the 'bare moral agent')—not essentially attached to anything. Thus, a Sartrean

can readily admit that if it were true that essence preceded existence, Taylor's criticism would be valid, but quickly deny the antecedent.<sup>6</sup>

For the Sartrean, 'each person is an absolute choice' and the person who correctly understands his existence 'is no longer anything but a freedom which perfectly reveals itself and whose being resides in this very revelation' (Sartre 1956a, 709 and 711). The agent is only volitional ability. Thus, she would continue, 'there is no reality [of the self] except in action. ... Man is nothing else but what he purposes' (Sartre 1956b, 300). Not only would Sartre deny that he 'surreptitiously assumed strong evaluation,' he would insist that a radically free agent cannot *possibly* be a strong evaluator. Rather, the radically free agent *is* his action (or better, volitional ability to act)—'the one thing which permits him to have life is the deed' (1956b, 302). 'Life is nothing until it is lived' (really, chosen) (1956b, 309). While Taylor assumes that there is an essentially embedded self that evaluates when making decisions, Sartre's radical freedom deems this impossible. For Taylor, a substantial self exists before choice and continues to exist after choosing; for Sartre, there is no substantial self—there is only a bare agent that exists with volition and the person the agent consequently (conceptually, not necessarily temporally) creates.<sup>7</sup>

So where are we left? Taylor's hermeneutical task is to show that Sartre's interpretation of the self is neither intuitively accurate nor acceptable, but the dedicated Sartrean need not be moved. She can retain her belief in radical freedom and recognize that there is no—*can be no*—substantial self 'behind' radical freedom. For her, the freedom is the self, i.e., the self is volitional ability (with no ends). Which account provides a more accurate description of our selves?

To a large extent, the question just posed is one we must each answer individually. Still, suggestions as to why one view is more plausible than the other are certainly possible and it is significant that Taylor's argument against Sartre fails. And there is more. Consider Joseph Raz's comments on the matter:

The completely autonomous person is an impossibility. The ideal of the perfect existentialist with no fixed biological and social nature who creates himself as he goes along is an incoherent dream. An autonomous personality can only develop and flourish against a background of biological and social constructs which fix some of its human needs. Some choices are inevitably determined by those needs (1982, 112).<sup>8</sup>

Raz discusses how autonomy 'develops and flourishes;' following Susan Mendus, I suggest that this *developing and flourishing of autonomy* is distinct from *autonomy*. Mendus tells us of 'the distinction between the condition of autonomy, which implies distance from the surrounding world, and the development and maintenance of autonomy, which requires proximity to the surrounding world' (98). What is important to note is that the 'background of biological and social constructs' may be necessary for the development (and, perhaps, maintenance) of autonomy without interfering with the 'condition of autonomy' when that condition is present. The existentialist can readily admit that there are biological and social needs for autonomy's development. She needs only for the agent to be able to distance herself from these (and all ends) once autonomous. Mendus' distinction is, I think, on target.

It is significant that a 'background of biological and social constructs' may be necessary to the development (and, perhaps, maintenance) of autonomy without interfering with the 'condition of autonomy' once that condition is present. Still, Mendus herself doubts there is such a thing as full autonomy (101). She notes that the 'notion of distance is ... central to the characterisation of autonomy. However, it has also been problematic, for when taken to its limit it implies that such a thing as complete autonomy can be attained and that such autonomy consists in being completely detached from one's moral and social environment' (96). The worry focuses on 'an impossible ideal of self-creation ex nihilo' (Arneson, 57). But Mendus's distinction is helpful here.

On the view espoused here, the detachment necessary for full autonomy is not an enduring feature of the self but rather something we can attain at times. This view is thus consistent with the claim that the background conditions must be present when we are not fully autonomous. We are not always, but can sometimes be, 'completely detached.' That detachment (or 'full distancing') matter for autonomy as autonomy requires not having one's will determined 'from the outside'—i.e., heteronomously. Ends 'connect' us to 'the outside' and thus allow the outside to affect (even determine) the will. Distanced from ends, though, the agent is non-heteronomous—i.e., autonomous.

It is important to emphasize that existentialist autonomy—that is, the ability to fully detach oneself from all of one's ends at once and still choose—does not require constant use. Given that, it seems less problematic to think that there are times when some of us choose with the sort of radical freedom Sartre discusses and which I call existentialist voluntarism. This

means that even if Taylor's claim that radical choice and a deep sense of morality are inconsistent (Taylor 1985, 31-32)<sup>9</sup> had purchase against Sartre who (at times) seems to think we *always* act from radical choice, my theory does not have that flaw. For on my view, much—most!—of life is not spent distanced from our ends. The existentialist can easily admit that it 'would be mistaken to insist that the autonomous person must exercise critical reason continuously' (Arneson, 48). When we have moral dilemmas, then, we have them specifically because we face competing claims (presumably involving deep moral convictions) that were not created by radical choice and we may even initially face them in such a way that we seem to be Taylorean strong evaluators. Such dilemmas, I am arguing, can nevertheless be resolved using radical choice—perhaps rejecting the deepest of convictions. Sartre's student, choosing between going to war and staying with his ailing mother, is in a dilemma because he does not choose the two ends at all but must (and *can*) now choose to reject one. Recognizing that the occasions of radical choice are thus limited, I think, dispels much of the seeming lack of fit with our self interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

It might be objected that the view defended here has a fatal flaw in requiring radical choice, whether it be used occasionally or regularly. The problem, apparently, is that the sort of indeterministic choice I discuss is random, unrelated to any enduring traits of the person choosing, and thus can not be an adequate foundation for responsibility and, in turn, can not support any sustained traits or commitments of the person. As difficult as this objection is, I find myself taken with the simplest of replies: though the choice is not caused by the person, it is somehow *from* the person and however it is that the choice is from the person is enough to keep responsibility intact. I should explain.

Assume that in situations where radical choice is used there are two opposing options, A and B. For radical choice to be invoked it must either be the case that the person has no reasons for A or for B or has equally weighty reasons for both. He then deliberates but can come to no conclusion: he is in the situation of Buridan's famous ass. There is nothing acting on his will such that he will opt either for A or for B. Yet, he opts for one. How can this *groundless opting* be of significance? I suggest it can be of significance (at least when we are dealing with a moral agent) simply because the volition was issued by one's will. Though the will was not determined by anything to issue forth the volition, it did. That is enough.

It will be asked how we can hold the person responsible when the choice was not arrived at because of any reason, desire, or, indeed, any factor of the person. After all, for the person it simply feels as though the volition 'came upon' him and was not from him. That feeling, though, is clearly inaccurate. The volition does not come from somewhere else (where would that be?) or someone else (who would that be?). It comes from his will.<sup>11</sup> The groundless opting—the 'plumping,' as Taylor (derisively?) calls it—is an opting by the agent. As it is by the agent, it has some value for the agent—not because what was opted for has value for the agent but *because it was opted for*.<sup>12</sup>

I might now face a further challenge: why does opting for X provide some value? Not everything an agent does, it may be claimed, has value for the agent. I think this latter claim is mistaken. When I act, I value my acting. If the act worked well, I am happy. If the act worked poorly, I am disappointed, embarrassed, or ashamed. I do not remain neutral—which is what would be required if no value was involved. The sorts of things I can remain neutral about are things that just happen, not things that I do. Actions, unlike things that just happen, require intentions.<sup>13</sup> If I grab a brown sock and a black sock in the morning, I remain neutral because I did not intend to do so. I intended to grab socks, but I am not the type of person that has intentions about colors of socks (my wife might criticize me for this). So I laugh at the silliness. There is no value in the taking of the mismatched socks to be lauded or regretted, though there may be value in the (humorous) result—at least in the right sorts of situations. If, by contrast, I was the sort of person who formed intentions of the sort 'make sure to have properly matched socks,' I would be embarrassed—because I failed to do as I willed: here there is a clear disvalue in the taking of the mismatched socks. The point here is simply that opting for X has a value because it is my opting; it is not like my actually taking the mismatched socks because that is not *my doing* (or, if it is preferred, it is not my doing with intent).<sup>14</sup>

It might be thought that my opting for any X, like my taking the mismatched socks, is unrelated to me since no reason or desire of mine led to the act. There is, though, an important difference: the taking of the mismatched socks was not merely uncaused by a desire or reason of mine, but was caused by factors external to me; the opting for X in cases of radical choice, by contrast, is neither caused by a desire or reason of mine nor by any factor external to me. Given the latter, we can rightly say the opting (somehow) comes from me. We can only assume that it does so in a way that is compatible with responsibility.<sup>15</sup>



Finally, I should point out that it is no part of the view defended here that we start out in total arbitrariness, with no ends whatsoever. As an empirical matter of fact, we all begin our lives as infants—with the desires that infants have. As we grow, we develop more desires. At some point in our development into adulthood, we attain the ability to go past these given desires (assuming we are allowed what we need to develop). We can consider them and, eventually, get to a point where we can reject them. More importantly, we can attain a point whereby we can by our very own commitment take something as a reason for ourselves even though it serves no instrumental purpose.<sup>16</sup> At this point, if I am right, we can also choose to reject any commitment we happen to have—whether it is ours because given to us by our animal nature or because of our own rational commitment, instrumental or not. This is the point at which we can plump. This will be explained further in the next section.

## **II. Rawlsianism and Existentialist Voluntarism**

The arguments against existentialist voluntarism are inconclusive, but is there reason to believe existentialist voluntarism accurately describes persons? Let's consider this by looking at some recent political philosophy, which of course begins with Rawls, who tells us that 'the self is prior to the ends which are affirmed by it; even a dominant end must be chosen from among numerous possibilities' (1971, 560). Rawls is Kantian and so insists not only that one must choose one's ends, but also that moral requirements precede, and may require or prohibit, the choice of certain ends. He offers us, in his now familiar 'veil of ignorance,' a method of universalization that mirrors Kant's categorical imperative. That method requires that we distance ourselves from our ends to determine what is right from an impartial point of view; while so distanced, we are not committed to our ends so they do not force partiality upon us. This view of the self, I've said, has been challenged; MacIntyre puts the challenge nicely:

It is in this capacity of the self to evade any necessary identification with any particular contingent state of affairs that some modern philosophers, both analytic and existentialist, have seen the essence of moral agency. To be a moral agent is, on this view, precisely to be able to stand back from any and every situation in which one is involved, from any and every characteristic that one may possess, and to pass judgement on it from a purely universal and abstract point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity (1984, 31-32).

MacIntyre would prefer an Aristotelean-Thomistic (sometimes Hegelian) view in which some ends are constitutive of persons so that we can not distance ourselves from them.

Though existentialists and Kantians both view persons as capable of distancing themselves from their ends, only the former claims we can adopt ends with radical choice. As Korsgaard says, 'the heroic existentialist ... must ultimately define his will through acts of ... commitment that have no further ground' (1997, 253). Few now think existentialism, with its reliance on radical choice, is a real possibility and so it is unsurprising that existentialists have been absent from political philosophical debates. Nonetheless, the view I defend goes a step beyond Kantian rationalism, toward existentialism; it might be called 'existentialist neo-Kantianism.'<sup>17</sup>

Rawls's 'veil of ignorance,' remember, makes it such that one is not influenced by morally arbitrary facts about the world when considering political institutions. Though Rawls did not (initially) intend for the veil to be used for other moral purposes, various thinkers have talked of the veil as a device for making ordinary moral judgments (see, e.g., Darwall, 9; also see Rawls 1999, 86). In such uses, the veil makes it such that one is (phenomenologically and causally) isolated from all facts irrelevant to the judgment being sought. At the extreme, we might say the veil isolates our moral agency from all else—putting us as if in a moral cocoon. If such metaphors are at all accurate, it is far from 'meaningless,' as some think, 'to talk of people 'stepping outside' or 'transcending' their culture' (Haste, 51). By taking on the veil, one is separated from her culture and all other morally irrelevant factors. She is free from all influences. We can talk of her, while in this situation, as nothing more than a bare moral agent and we can then think of this agent as something within each of us.

As I shall use the phrase, 'taking on the veil' is readying oneself to make a judgment shorn of one's partialities. The veil separates a moral agent from the ends that are ordinarily attached to it and that make it a person. I am, thus, using the terms 'agent' and 'person' in a technical manner such that a decision made wearing the veil is a decision made by the agent distanced from the ends that would make it a person (the agent is merely a locus of volition). Of course, the claim that we can make decisions in this way has been criticized since Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. Sandel, for example, condemningly tells us that the liberal self is 'an antecedently individuated subject, standing always at a certain distance from the interests it has. One consequence of this is to put the self beyond the reach of experience, to make it invulnerable, to fix its identity once and for all' (1982, 62). On his view, this is an unviable conception of the self, but his arguments for this are not persuasive (see my 1999, 2000a, 2000b,

and 2004). Indeed, I think this is the correct view of the self. On my view, though, the completely distanced being—the 'antecedently individuated subject'—is distinct from the person, normally understood.

In defending Rawls, Will Kymlicka has claimed that what is necessary for liberal theory is only that 'we can always envisage our self without its *present* ends ... [not] that we can ever perceive a self totally unencumbered by any ends—the process of ethical reasoning is always one of comparing one 'encumbered' potential self with another.' Kymlicka accepts that there 'must always be some ends given with the self,' but insists that 'it doesn't follow that any *particular* ends must always be taken as given with the self' (1988, 190; see also 1989, 52-53). I call this view that we can distance ourselves from any of our ends though not all at once, 'strong voluntarism' (the view that there are some ends from which we cannot distance ourselves but others from which we can is 'weak voluntarism'; see my 1998). For a person to be strongly voluntaristic is to be such that although the world limits that person's options, she (more properly, her agency) is always able to choose which of those options to accept.<sup>18</sup> This is substantial for it means that none of her ends are essential to what she is. Existentialist voluntarism, however, goes further.

The liberal conception of the self requires that the agent can reject any of its ends, that none are non-revisable, where 'non-revisable ends' would be ends without which the agent ceases to be what it is.<sup>19</sup> According to Kymlicka, the agent *can* reject any of its ends, but can do this only because she always provisionally retains some ends that ground her rationality—she is never devoid of all ends at once. But this, I suggest, is not quite right. Though Kymlicka's view has intuitive appeal, implicit in the ability to revise any of our ends is a view of the self as devoid of all 'encumbrances'—even *all at once*. This is what I have been calling 'existentialist voluntarism.' The 'existentially' voluntaristic person can (conceptually and psychologically) be distanced from all her ends at once so that she can engage in radical choice. Whereas strong voluntarism allows that there are always reasons grounding volition (as the agent always has ends), existentialist voluntarism does not. There is reason to hope the latter is possible.

Remember that the motivation for taking on the veil is to gain impartiality.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, it is important that we may have some ends that do not function in isolation from one another, but that function through several or even many ends. For example, an end of self-aggrandizement may pervade many other ends (encouraging one to try to write well, for

example), so that if one does not shed all of *those* ends, one never fully sheds the end of self-aggrandizement. If that were the case, one would fail to be truly impartial unless one made a decision shorn of all the partialities related to those ends. If the end is pervasive enough (self-aggrandizement may be a prime candidate for such an end), one would fail to be truly impartial unless shorn of *all* ends.<sup>21</sup> That is, if ends can be mutually supporting, true impartiality is a chimera unless existentialist voluntarism is possible. This is one reason to hope existentialist voluntarism is possible. A second reason can be seen by considering further what the Kymlickan model requires.

If judgments resulting from the moral choice situation are to be impartial, one's ends must be subject to scrutiny before they are allowed to affect that process. If, as on the Kymlicka line, we aren't to be distanced from all ends at once, then, the process must require going through the ends—either singly or in groups—in, as it were, 'rounds.' In that way, all ends could be evaluated and only allowed to influence the judgment process if deemed impartial. This strikes me as an attempt to, as it were, clean one possibly dirty sponge with another—for we would be checking the supposed impartiality of certain ends against other ends not yet themselves checked for impartiality. Even if this were possible, it is subject to a further problem: there is no reason to believe that there is only one possible sequence of such 'rounds' and if the iterations take place in a different sequence, there is no guarantee that the same judgment would result. If different judgments could result from different sequences of evaluations of ends though the different sequences begin with the same set of ends to be evaluated, it would at least be questionable whether the resulting judgments were genuinely impartial. By contrast, with existentialist voluntarism, this problem never arises. This, again, is reason to hope existentialist voluntarism is possible. True impartiality requires it.

Though Kymlicka's view is problematic, it is useful. It indicates that the agent can look at all of her relevant ends and desires as separate from her self (i.e., 'with some distance') so that there is no particular end she need accept as 'constitutive' of her being.<sup>22</sup> For example, if I am choosing which car to buy, I thereby choose and accept one end as more 'constitutive' of my being than other ends. In this way, my choice (qua agent) partially determines what I am (qua person). I buy the family car, say, because I accept (choose) family stability as more defining of my character than 'speed.' My desire for stability thus becomes defining of my person (though this may be temporary). By choosing the Volvo over the Porsche, I make known what I value—

what I take as important, as definitive of *me* (as a person). 'The choice itself is crucial for the content of the personality' (Kierkegaard 1987, 163). The agential choice forms my person. Such choices are what Kane calls 'self-forming actions'—acts that form the person (Kane, 124 ff). They determine the character the person is to have (however temporarily).<sup>23</sup>

To the Kymlickan (strong voluntarist) account, I would add that I can not only distance myself from all of my *relevant* ends (so that I choose which shall be defining of me) but can also distance myself from all of my *non-relevant* ends—and all *at once*. I would then seem to myself entirely unencumbered. Neither the relevant ends (cf. my desire for family stability or my opposing desire for speed and 'fast times') nor any non-relevant ends (cf. my love of music) would encumber me in any way I would appreciate while so distanced. In such cases I seem to choose from a position of radical freedom—by plumping.

It will be immediately suggested that although I may be able to distance myself from the ends relevant to a particular choice (i.e., ends that incline me in one way rather than another), I could not distance myself from *all* of my ends—even if I 'feel' unencumbered, some ends *must* influence me. This, however, is mere assertion, not argument. There is no denying that the project is extremely difficult,<sup>24</sup> but difficulty is not impossibility and, as Okin points out, 'there is nothing implausible or inconsistent about requiring us to distance ourselves from our particular aims and attachments for the purpose of arriving at principles of justice [or moral judgments], while acknowledging that we may to some extent identify with them as we go about living our lives' (1989, 245-6). So, perhaps the moral agent can sometimes choose ends with radical freedom.

If I can distance myself from all of my ends—if in principle none is immune to revision—I am, phenomenologically, something devoid of all of them. None is essentially what I am. This means not only that no *one* end is what I am, but also that even *all* of my ends put together is not what I (qua agent) am and—now disagreeing with Kymlicka—that the agent can be devoid of all ends at once. The agent is volitional ability. Given no ends, if the agent chooses, it chooses by plumping or groundlessly opting—existentialist voluntarism looks like a real possibility. Importantly, if it is possible, its possibility is owed to rationality. A being that has never been rational (i.e., a *non-rational* being)<sup>25</sup> can not distance itself from its ends. To put the point paradoxically: it is our very rationality that ultimately allows for the arational (existentialist) choice; while rationality involves constraints on our thinking and willing, it also

allows us to reject those constraints in favor of arationality. (As will be further explained in section III, the arational choice will be is a choice *for rationality*.)

The point here is that a person's ends may explain the way she is (and why she makes most of the choices she does), but they are *not* what make her a moral being. *That* is a thing that can, in principle, choose to accept or reject any end it has—even all at once. That the fully embedded person (in contrast to the bare agent) can only choose because she has some ends that she accepts as her own for the sake of making a decision regarding other ends, is quite beside the point. That it has ends is what makes the agent a person; that it can be separated from those ends is what allows it to engage in (or *be*) impartial moral volition.

If the above arguments are correct, there is no reason not to accept that a person can be 'existentially voluntaristic,' such that her agent can be distanced from all ends at once. Of course, no person can lead a life constantly exercising existentialist (or even strong) voluntarism, and the theory being suggested here does not require that they do so. The conceptions of persons as strongly and 'existentially' voluntaristic are ideals that we should strive for and descriptive of our capabilities, not of our every day life.<sup>26</sup>

It should be stressed that on this account, the moral agent is not the person, but something metaphorically thought of as *within* the person—persons *have* moral agency. That agency is gotten to—made possible—by voluntarism.<sup>27</sup> Strong voluntarism allows us to engage in moral reasoning (behind the veil of ignorance, as we might say). Existentialist voluntarism 'clinches it,' as it were, allowing that we can distance ourselves even from rationality and morality. In the next section, I will show how it thereby explains how we can give morality to ourselves and thus why moral law has normative force.

### **III. Existentialist Voluntarism, Normativity, and Two Moral Principles**

It is my contention, in this section, that we can understand ourselves as being able, as bare moral agents, to give ourselves, as persons, law. To use Kantian language, we can understand *Wille* as giving *Willkür* the moral law (or, at least, the norms of reason) in an uncaused way. This account will be *singularist*, where that means the arational choice for rationality 'is first and foremost a relation between particular events, and the holding of that relation in ... [this] instance has no implications (strict or probabilistic) for what happens

elsewhere or elsewhen' (O'Connor, 72). The existentialist agent chooses rationality (and the moral law), but not because he is nomologically bound.<sup>28</sup>

When a person uses existentialist voluntarism, the agent is revealed as distanced from all ends. The question we must now address is how such an agent can make a choice with no grounding. This is especially important as I want to suggest that that choice can be a source of normativity.

Recall, once again, that behind the veil (I shall use the familiar language of the veil for simplicity), the agent does not know what particularities adhere to the person it is in. Of course, a moral agent completely ignorant would have nothing to deliberate about or to will and the agent need not be so ignorant. Even when the person uses existentialist voluntarism and the agent is thus distanced from all ends,<sup>29</sup> it knows that there are particularities—some morally relevant, some not—and that these adhere to certain individuals and the world those individuals live in. What it does not know is which of those individuals it is in. As Nagel indicates, 'What really happens in the pursuit of objectivity is that a certain element of oneself, the impersonal or objective self, which can escape from the specific contingencies of one's creaturely point of view, is allowed to predominate' (Nagel 1986, 9, see also 62 and 1997, 110).

Given that the agent knows there are various individuals with various sets of particularities, the veil can be used for far more than Rawls originally intended; it can be used for making any moral judgment—its use is not limited to the construction of principles of justice. Indeed, people seem to use something like the veil to make impartial judgments in daily life when voting or when faced with moral dilemmas. John may ask how the agent would react, for example, when he (John) sees someone trying to open a car without a key: 'would the agent judge that I should approach the person to see if he is trying to steal the car or if he needs help because he locked his keys in it?' When Martin Luther King, Jr. claims (in a letter from a Birmingham jail) that he would have helped Jews in Nazi Germany, he does something similar. If he were raised in Nazi Germany, he would have different ends (he would be a different person), so for his claim to be accurate, it must be that (a) because he is (or has) a moral agent he knows that a person in Nazi Germany would be obligated to help and (b) because the person he would have been had he lived in Nazi Germany would be (or have) a moral agent, *that* person could know that he must help.<sup>30</sup>

Distanced from its ends, of course, the agent does not know what person it is in; more to the point, it is not connected to the ends of the person. *It* is not a person that is black, white, old, young, male, female, etc. It does not know what particularities adhere to the person it is in. It has no more connection to that person than to any other person. The idea, again, is that given the lack of knowledge or connection, the agent will not prejudicially favor the person it is in when making a judgment. Its judgments are impartial. Moreover, since anyone who distances themselves from all their ends is in the same position—because there are no particularities to identify individual agents—there is no reason to think they would make any judgment (or accept any principle) different than anyone else would in that situation. The judgment is thus universal in the Kantian sense. 'The pure will has no individuality at all. It is identical in everyone, and its volitions are everywhere exactly the same' (Frankfurt 1999, 132).

Some might now object: 'how do we, who are partial (i.e., who are connected and know our particularities), know what decision a being wearing the veil (i.e., who doesn't know its particularities) would make? Indeed, if the agent wearing the veil is not committed to *anything* (including morality and rationality)—that is, after all what it means to be distanced from all of one's ends, isn't it?—how can we say that any decision it makes is rational?' The latter question, I take it, encapsulates the strongest argument against the use of (rather than the *ability* to use) existentialist voluntarism. Given my defense above against the Taylorian and Kymlickan arguments, I am now assuming that at least some of us are *capable* of using existentialist voluntarism—capable of distancing ourselves from all of our ends at once. The problem I now address is whether any judgment can be made doing so. Assuming, then, that we are accurately described by existentialist voluntarism, what do we gain? If I am right, we find an arational source of normativity that is a practical presupposition of reason, but not *merely* a presupposition.<sup>31</sup> It is something we are (conceptually and psychologically) capable of. We can 'climb outside of reason itself to test it from above,' and thereby 'climb outside of morality to judge it,' as Dworkin suggests we cannot (Dworkin, 128). Perhaps we do not 'test' or 'judge,' so much as plump or groundlessly opt.

Consider what an agent (distanced from all ends) would think about the claim that killing a person is *prima facie* wrong. The agent can't think to itself 'well, the person I am in has much to offer so shouldn't be killed.' *Ex hypothesi*, the agent is isolated from such information. Indeed, for the same reason, I submit that the agent can't even think '*some* persons have much to



offer so shouldn't be killed.' If it can, then, endorse the 'killing is wrong' claim, its choice would be a *source* of normativity (because absent any supporting ground).

It would simplify matters if we could assume that because the person the agent is in is rational and autonomous (as she must be in order to use existentialist voluntarism to reveal her moral agency), the agent has reason to want to protect rationality and autonomy (as its own existence is dependent on them and it would want to survive).<sup>32</sup> Indeed, though suicide may be rational for some fully-embodied person, it can not be rational for the agent distanced from all its ends—for it doesn't know if it has good or bad ends or if the person it is in leads a good or bad life (contrast this with Gewirth, 60). For suicide to be rational for such an agent, something about the very concept of rational or autonomous being would have to invoke the desire for non-being.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, it is irrelevant that it is not *rational* for the agent to suicide for the agent thus far and *ex hypothesi* has no commitment to rationality. An existentialist account like that on offer here must take this seriously. To insist the agent even has a commitment to some minimalist form of consistency (perhaps the principle of non-contradiction) would be to 'smuggle in' rationality.

The problem here is that without *any ground whatsoever* the agent has to make a choice (or a 'plumping'). It is as if the agent is in a state of complete existential angst. It looks out at the world and has no feeling toward it. It does not recognize the world as something of which it is part. It is like Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych on his 'deathbed.' Ivan is physically alive, but 'in death,' as Heidegger would say.<sup>34</sup> He is completely unrelated to the world and must choose whether to re-enter it—as if from 'nothingness,' as Sartre would say (Ivan looks at the world 'in perplexity, not realizing who and what he was' (Tolstoy, 140)). The option of rejecting the world—which is rejecting one's own existence—is as real as the option of accepting it and as the decision cannot be rationally made, the agent must just plump one way or the other and we can not say that the agent would plump one way (say, for existence) just because it has no reason to choose the other way (say, for non-existence). That would be to mistakenly assume that 'having no reason for non-X' is equivalent to 'having a reason for X.' Nonetheless, we will see that though 'plumping' for its continued existence is baseless (i.e., it is *groundless* opting), we can assume it plumps this way.

The problem is that the agent's choice for its survival cannot be a grounded choice without the agent's assuming in advance that (its own) existence is more valuable or preferable

than (its own) non-existence and that would be to have a commitment to an end—which, *ex hypothesi*, it does not have. Yet, without this assumption the agent is at worst left with an arational decision, not an irrational one. If there is no preference for or against (its own) existence, it cannot be irrational for the agent to choose existence; at worst, it is arational.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, as rationality is itself up for grabs, this decision must be made without rational ground. This is a bullet I think the existentialist can bite.

This is the existentialist choice: no grounds, exist or not? If the agent chooses against rationality and autonomy and its own existence, the moral project as construed here dies with the agent—there is no fully impartial moral point of view. This is a possibility. *Ex hypothesi*, the agent has no reason to choose either its own existence or its own non-existence. The choice (plumping) for existence must be arational. We can, though, justifiably assume the agent makes that choice. Any person (where a person is necessarily rational and autonomous) who went through the arational choosing process must have chosen for rationality (i.e., the agent must have chosen for its existence). If that were not the case, the agent would have opted out of the moral project and sacrificed her personhood; as personhood requires rationality, plumping against rationality results in insanity or death for the person. The choice to continue its existence thus can be assumed as a practical presupposition of reason. It is an arational existentialist choice—groundless, arbitrary, and arational. Though groundless, it is *for* rationality and autonomy and thus provides normativity. Rationality and autonomy are chosen—plumped for. In this act, the agent gives itself (or the person it is in) a grounding: rationality and autonomy. With these, morality is possible as the norms of reason are the foundation for moral law. That though, is an additional step.

The conclusion here is that because the person exists, we can assume that the agent endorses the principles:

P1. Prima facie, rationality is to be protected and its cessation to be avoided.

P2. Prima facie, autonomy is to be protected and its cessation to be avoided.<sup>36</sup>

P1 and P2 are principles that we can assume would have been accepted by anyone who was distanced themselves from all their ends but is no longer so distanced. They are, that is, impartial and universal. (They also will constrain the agent's later choices.)

It might be objected that despite my care not to smuggle in a commitment to rationality, I'm building in an unwarranted assumption that the agent is risk-averse. The objector might

insist that the agent already knows that the person it is in is rational and autonomous and that given that it has no special reason to believe that person would be made non-rational or non-autonomous if it fails to endorse P1 or P2, it might be willing to take the risk. There are two responses here, the second more persuasive than the first.

First, whatever bearing this objection might have on the original Rawlsian (i.e., 1971) project, I do not think it bears significantly on the current project as risk is generally accepted only if there is some possible reward for its acceptance and as there is none here—remember we are talking about the agent, not the person—its implausible to think the agent would willingly taking the risk. Secondly, the argument here is that we can fairly assume that the initial agential choice (or plumping) is for rationality and autonomy as otherwise the person the agent is in would soon be insane or dead (in either case, no longer a person). The force of the argument is the force of *modus tollens* and stands regardless of risk factors; its soundness depends on the truth of the major premise—that if the person chose against rationality, they must not be sane. If the person is sane, then (i) if they did go through the process of choosing for or against rationality, they must have chosen rationality and (ii) if they didn't, but could have gone through the process, we can assume they would have chosen rationality. More formally:  $-R \rightarrow -S$ , if chose against rationality, now not sane;  $S$ , now sane (or *not* not sane); therefore,  $R$ , they chose rationality (or its not the case that they chose against rationality).

If it is insisted that the agent could withhold judgment regarding P1 and P2, the interlocutor must explain how a being that does so can choose anything. If it chooses with no basis, the interlocutor concedes existentialist voluntarism is possible; if it chooses with some basis, then it seems to have chosen for rationality. In withholding judgment, the agent is failing to 'reenter the world;' the 'person' the agent is in would then have no reason (having no rationality) to eat or drink, or anything else. If the agent chooses against rationality, the person is either in the same state or in a state wherein why X counts as a reason for the person is incomprehensible to us. (Of course, none of this addresses the further criticism that my ' $-R \rightarrow -S$ ' is either false or meaningless, so that even if the argument is valid, it is unsound. This sort of criticism, I take it, thinks the sort of existentialist choice I defend is impossible. I hope I have provided some reason earlier in the paper for at least doubting that impossibility.)

That a *person* must be rational and autonomous for her agent to exist,<sup>37</sup> means that the *strongly* voluntaristic agent (not distanced from all ends at once but capable of being distanced

from any end) has strong *prima facie* reason to want to protect these things (we might say, to treat persons as ends in themselves and not merely as means). If, though, the agent is distanced even from the ends that are commitments to rationality and autonomy—i.e., if the person is using *existentialist* voluntarism—we can *assume* the agent would endorse P1 and P2. This is to say that the agent takes P1 and P2 as ends. Willing ends, Korsgaard suggests, is ‘*committing* yourself to realizing the end[s].’ ‘Willing an end, in other words, is an essentially first personal and normative act. To will an end is to give oneself a law, hence to govern oneself’ (1997, 245). Adopting P1 and P2 is taking rationality and autonomy as values; once adopted, the agent can use them to ground moral decisions.<sup>38</sup> It can have grounded judgments, for example, that war which results in more loss of rational life than its absence is *prima facie* unjustified and that the mythical pool-side sunbather should, *prima facie*, reach down and pull the drowning child to safety—as doing so protects rationality and autonomy (in the child). Faced with a question, for a different sort of example, of how a civil society should be set up, the agent knows that a society should protect, where possible, rationality and autonomy. Far more would be needed for a complete moral theory, but importantly we now have normativity—grounded only in an *arational* opting for rationality and autonomy that we can justifiably assume would be made by any rational being.

An important objection now emerges: although we can assume that the bare moral agent plumped for rationality and autonomy, we can not also assume that it plumped for, or is for any other reason also committed to, beneficence. In opting for rationality and autonomy, the objection continues, the bare moral agent could have opted for malevolence (becoming a Kantian rational devil).<sup>39</sup>

Once the veil is removed and the agent recognizes itself as rational and autonomous it would have a concept of rational autonomy. It would, following Kant (see, for example, *Grounding* Ak 446 and *Religion* 30), take itself to act for a specific type of reason: an unchanging rule rather than the fleeting sorts of influences which cause a purely phenomenal being to act. But it might seem that there could be both a benevolent and a malevolent unchanging rule.

It is important to remember that the person is not the bare moral agent. Recognizing this, we can follow Kant and admit that human beings have predispositions toward their *animality*, *humanity*, and *personality* (see *Religion* 21-23). Given these predispositions, human persons

could not endorse a principle of malevolence even if the bare moral agent could. As human persons—necessarily physically embodied agents—we would have an interest in self-preservation, species survival, and community (see *Religion* 22). From the latter, it would also seem that we would have an interest in gaining and maintaining a good reputation with others and thus as being responsible agents that allow the moral law to command us (see *Grounding*, Ak 401n and, on the 'moral feeling,' *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 399-400).<sup>40</sup> If this is right, then we should think of the bare moral agent only as choosing rationality and autonomy and not as choosing either benevolence or malevolence; one of these—benevolence—would be chosen by the agent with other ends attached (using strong, not existentialist, voluntarism). The answer to the objection is, then: the bare moral agent has no prior commitment to benevolence over malevolence, but the embodied human person it is in does.

This may seem to be a rejection of the line of argument I have presented above. Throughout, I have been saying that we are capable of exercising radical choice to choose without any prior commitment but now, if I follow Kant, I admit a prior commitment to morality. This is not quite right. I have not denied that human persons have prior commitments. I have merely tried to defend the view that we are capable of fully distancing ourselves from those commitments (so that we are detached from them and do not care about them) to reveal the bare moral agent within us. Distanced from all commitments, the bare moral agent can reject morality and what makes it possible: rationality and autonomy. Once it endorses these and removes the veil, it finds itself with many commitments, including—if Kant is right—(limited) beneficence.<sup>41</sup>

I should admit that I am somewhat hesitant to endorse the Kantian view described in the previous two paragraphs;<sup>42</sup> it involves a commitment to a view of human nature that I am not opposed to, but that I have no argument for. Importantly, I think, it leaves the move from endorsement of rationality and autonomy to a full morality rather unclear. Even if human nature does include a predisposition toward morality or a 'moral feeling,' it also would seem to include a predisposition toward egoism and selfishness. It may be, then, that it could be that the rational and autonomous person adopts a less-than-benevolent principle. Indeed, those that have found what I've said thus far persuasive and who were not concerned about the bare moral agent's possible pre-commitment to benevolence may nonetheless be wondering why they should accept that the bare moral agent would choose the two principles I've specified. They may wonder why

it would not choose a more egoistic principle of the sort, 'whatever ends the person I am in happens to have (i.e., whatever ends I have when the veil is lifted) should be protected.'<sup>43</sup> This gets all the more force as talk of the bare moral agent as within the person is metaphorical. If the talk were not metaphorical, it would be easy to respond: 'as the agent is not the person, it has no more concern for the person it is in than for any other person.'

The current objection requires that the veil of ignorance provides a contract situation. Only if there is a contract situation, could the agent be egoistic in the normal sense. As has been argued, this is implausible (see Hampton, 1980). There is no real contract situation as all agents are identical—it is *as if* there is only one agent. Given this, an endorsement of any sort of principle by the agent could be egoistic only in an attenuated sense: since all agents are identical, what is in the interest of one is in the interest of all. As the objection assumes there is a choice the agent can make that would benefit only the person it is in, it makes an untenable assumption. The agent would not choose the egoistic sort of principle envisioned.

The critic may not be satisfied, suggesting that the contract language must be taken more seriously. We must, though, recognize that while the talk of a bare moral agent within each of us is metaphorical, the objection assumes a view of the self wherein there is a purely rational and volitional homunculus *actually* within each of us. I will not discuss the problems with these sorts of views, but I do take them to be highly suspect. Rejecting them, as we should, is accepting that the talk throughout this paper is metaphorical—as was intended.

Recognizing that the homuncular language is metaphorical begs for an explanation of the metaphor. It is this: the bare moral agent is a metaphorical device that allows us to represent an (existentially) autonomous, impartial, and universal point of view accessible to anyone capable of existentialist voluntarism. This volitional ability to be completely (i.e., existentially) autonomous and impartial allows us to ground normativity. That ability is, I think, a real element of our existence. This is why I said above that while the arational source of normativity is a practical presupposition of reason, it is not *merely* a presupposition.<sup>44</sup>

Importantly, even if a person would endorse a less-than-benevolent principle, she would have reason to protect rationality and autonomy. I am inclined to think this can go quite some distance in defending a plausible morality, but defending existentialist voluntarism as a source of normativity is one thing and defending the full moral view that would come from such a source

of normativity is another. I can not offer such a defense—or even the full view to be defended—here.

### **Conclusion**

Much of the above tracks the Kantian rationalist approach. The primary difference is in the explicit recognition that the agent *can* reject rationality and autonomy. For Kant, this is impossible: 'To conceive of oneself as a freely acting being and yet as exempt from the law which is appropriate to such a being (the moral law) would be tantamount to conceiving a cause operating without any laws whatsoever ... this is a self-contradiction' (*Religion*, 30; elsewhere in *Religion*, he says it is 'inscrutable' (e.g., 38)). Kant's claim, though, is too strong. Consider a statement from Barbara Herman: 'Ends ... that are necessary to sustain oneself as a rational being cannot (on rational grounds) be given up. Insofar as one has ends at all, one has already willed the continued exercise of one's agency as a rational being' (Herman, 55).<sup>45</sup> This is, I believe, the better Kantian position. For Kant, it is irrational to give up rationality and it would be irrational not to want one's rationality sustained.<sup>46</sup> Herman's inserted parenthetical, though, is important: rationality cannot be given up 'on rational grounds.' It is not *rational* to give up rationality. This is not a claim that we *cannot* give up rationality. The claim is, rather, that it is not possible to do so *on rational grounds* and *that*, I think, is actually a normative claim: rationally, one *should* not give up rationality.<sup>47</sup> If it is a normative claim, though, it smuggles normativity into the Kantian picture. By contrast, on my existentialist view, it is clear where the normativity enters: with the initial agential choice.

Kant claims that 'Whoever ... holds morality to be something real, and not a chimerical idea without any truth, must also admit the principle put forward' 'that autonomy of the will is unavoidably bound up with' morality (*Grounding*, ak 445). On his view, rationality and autonomy are simply *assumed* too valuable to sacrifice. Still, it is possible. Korsgaard tells us:

I suppose that through some heroic existentialist act, one might just take one's will at a certain moment to be normative, and commit oneself forever to the end selected at that moment, without thinking that the end is in any way good, and perhaps for no other reason than that some such commitment is essential if one is to have a *will* at all ... However that may be, even the heroic existentialist is committed to the view that an act of his own will is the source of a reason (1997, 251).

With a 'heroic existentialist act' any end could be adopted and adopted without a grounding reason—even an end of sacrificing rationality. Rationality can be given up. It is not *rational* to

give up rationality, but it is possible to do so. The giving up of rationality, of course, would prevent morality from having normative force for the person the agent is in. For such a being, no reason can be given in answer to the question 'Why should I be moral?' Indeed, no reason could be given it for anything (cf. Becker, 26; Gewirth, 194; and Korsgaard 1997, 248).<sup>48</sup>

Its worth pointing out here that the agent's groundless opting for P1 and P2 is what Kierkegaard would call an 'either/or;' he claims that 'rather than designating the choice between good and evil, my Either/Or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out' (1987, 169).<sup>49</sup> It is a plumping that allows for (at least minimal) normativity (cf. Kant, *Religion*, 40).

The view I am propounding is, in a contingent but important sense, foundationalist. It is foundationalist in that I am—as state of nature theorists did—grounding morality in the nature of personhood, which I take to be rationality.<sup>50</sup> Rationality is necessary for personhood and is the basis for the ability to use existentialist voluntarism. As I've argued, this also allows that rationality can be rejected. If it is rejected, though, the moral enterprise is sacrificed; thus rationality remains foundational to that enterprise even though it is only contingently accepted.<sup>51</sup> It is not, then, a completely firm foundation—it can be rejected. Its rejection by the moral agent, though, means the moral agent's annihilation. As such, a human being that has (previously) used rationality and autonomy to reject rationality no longer has moral agency and is thus no longer a moral being, no longer a person. A person that claims to reject rationality either is mistaken about what they accept or is no longer a person.

When Aristotle said that trying to persuade someone of the principle of non-contradiction is like trying to argue with a vegetable, he was not just being abusive. A person who denies the principle of non-contradiction [and rationality] asserts that anything may follow from anything, and that therefore he is committed to nothing. And if he commits himself to nothing there is nothing he believes, and so no point from which to start the [any] argument. ... A person who rejects the principle of non-contradiction [and rationality] does not reject a particular restriction on his beliefs. Since he commits himself to nothing, he rejects the very project of having beliefs (Korsgaard 1997, 248; see also 1996a, esp. 121).

Accepting the principle of non-contradiction and rationality is necessary for the moral project to get off the ground; still, they can be rejected.<sup>52</sup> Rationality can be accepted (chosen, opted for, plumped for) using existentialist voluntarism. Existentialist voluntarism is not only possible, but also a source of normativity.



We have, then, a way to answer the question, 'why—or how—am I obligated to be moral?' The response answers claims like Foot's, that 'To ask for a reason for acting rationally is to ask for a reason where reasons must a priori have come to an end' (Foot, 65). That response can not be given to the agent that chooses against rationality (no reason can), but can be given to the agent that chooses for rationality. It is simply 'you chose it!' (or, more likely, 'it is as if you chose it').

### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Following custom, I use 'ends' as a place holder for such commitments as relationships, loyalties, projects, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Kane comes close to addressing this sort of objection on 175ff.

<sup>4</sup> Though this paper is meant to be about the source of normativity and not free will per se, what I defend requires that there is incompatibilist freedom within a narrow area. I do not deny, though, that most freely chosen human activity is determined activity. (See Kane 119 for a statement that his account may be similar.) Given this, I shall not be responding to arguments in defense of compatibilist freedom.

<sup>5</sup> Where 1956a and 1956b differ, I take 1956a to be definitive of Sartre's view (there are significant difficulties with 1956b, which was likely written in haste, and which Sartre 'regretted having published' (Flynn, 33)).

<sup>6</sup> On the understanding of Sartre I am presenting, what conceptually precedes radical choice is pure volition. Pure volition, being non-substantial, is not *an essence*, though it is something (some) persons are *essentially* capable of. (It does not matter for my project whether this is an accurate understanding of Sartre's thought; I make use of his writing only to support my own view.)

<sup>7</sup> The Sartrean view thus understood invites worries about personal identity enduring over time. When the Sartrean says the agent chooses his person anew, though, she is not insisting that he *must* reject all his prior ends for new ones. She is only insisting that he can choose to reject any end and that he can do so without that choice being based on others. The more the agent rejects (at once) the less inclined we might be to say the same *person* endures, but this seems accurate rather than problematic. A closest continuer theory of personal identity like that Nozick offers fits nicely with this view.

<sup>8</sup> Drawing on developmental psychology, Norton provides an interesting and related argument against Sartre. Though his account is different than those discussed here, it fares no better.

<sup>9</sup> Although Taylor downplays this in later work, here he discusses not only 'strong evaluation' (which many people have since discussed) but also 'radical re-evaluation' (which few have). He says the latter 'will be radical ... in the sense that our looking again can be so undertaken that in principle no formulations are considered unrevisable' (40).

<sup>10</sup> I cannot here defend my view that self-interpretations should have epistemic weight (for Campbell's defense, see his 1958, 50-51). Moreover, I take that weight to be limited. The point in this section is that no solid argument that the existentialist self-interpretation is mistaken has been provided.

<sup>11</sup> This commits me to a form of agent causalism with regard to radical choice.

<sup>12</sup> This is a 'voluntarist reason'—a reason only because chosen. Its motivational force does not come from a previously existing desire or reason. For help in getting clear on my own view about this, I am grateful to Ruth Chang for her correspondence. Though there are significant and substantial differences, my view here parallels her view about what she calls a 'feeling like it.' See her 2004 and forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> Obviously, I cannot engage in a full defense of this claim. Such would take me far afield into action theory.

<sup>14</sup> I might, of course, regret not having formed an intention (value is created, on my view, in more than one way). This would be the case, for example, if my neglect causes a harm. For more on how choice can create value, see my 1998, 255-257.

<sup>15</sup> A full defense of this view would be a full defense of agent causalism. I cannot offer that here. For the best defense of that view, see O'Connor.

<sup>16</sup> For the ideas in the beginning of this paragraph, I am indebted to David Schmidtz' 'On Being Overcome By Reason.'

<sup>17</sup> Korsgaard thinks there are three positions: (i) the Kantian position, which entails that autonomy commits us to substantive principles, (ii) the heroic existentialist position, and (iii) complete practical normative skepticism (1997, 253). I agree that (iii) is unacceptable, but I am not convinced the first and second should be separated. In large part, this paper is meant to provide a view that merges them.

<sup>18</sup> Strong voluntarism and, *a fortiori*, existentialist voluntarism, allow that the agent can choose from the entire array of options that it is presented with; neither makes it such that more options will be provided.

<sup>19</sup> Ends which individuals merely do not *want* to distance themselves from are not non-revisable. Only the weak voluntarist claims there are non-revisable ends. On revisability of ends, see Buchanan.

<sup>20</sup> This may be an end we, as persons, have and which encourages us to begin the process of impartial reasoning (taking on the veil). It is not, I think, an end of the bare moral agent.

<sup>21</sup> I am thankful to Christopher Gauker for pointing this out to me.

<sup>22</sup> This and the next 3 paragraphs are adapted from my 1998.

<sup>23</sup> As no end can become essential to the person on this view, choice may only set the character of the person for some limited duration.

<sup>24</sup> Marilyn Friedman claims 'extraordinary cognitive feats' are involved (1989, 650). While I would not think the 'extraordinary' was impossible, in her 1990, she claims that the sort of 'equidistant detachment' (504) discussed here is an 'unrealizable ideal' (507) or at least 'humanly unrealizable' (509).

<sup>25</sup> When 'rational' is opposed to 'non-rational,' I take both to be capacity ideals (and thus descriptive terms). When 'rational' is opposed to 'arational,' I take both (and 'irrational') to be evaluative terms. While non-rational beings make only non-rational choices, rational beings make either rational, arational, or irrational choices (see footnote 48 below and Gewirth, 9).

<sup>26</sup> As stated, I hold only that at least some persons *can* and at times *should*, make choices in the way here discussed, not that they *will*. I should note that my view requires that there are three types of choice: normal reflective choices, what I call 'de facto choices' wherein when one doesn't actually will a choice but wherein that inaction is functionally equivalent to having done so, and 'plumping.'

<sup>27</sup> On this view, persons are moral agents (derivatively) because they have agents 'within.' In the following, I shall talk of the '(moral) agent' and the 'person the agent is in.'

<sup>28</sup> This also means, though, that the standard psychological picture wherein belief and desire jointly cause a willing, is inaccurate here (though it may hold in all other cases). For an insightful discussion, see Michael Smith, 1994,

especially Chapter 4. For a sophisticated account of Kant on freedom and self-government, see Allison 1990 (esp. 35-41) and 1996 (esp. 109-114 and 129-142). See also Korsgaard 1996b, 202 ff.

<sup>29</sup> I use 'it' and 'itself' as personal neuters as the agent is sexless. Again, I use '(moral) agent' as a technical term for the being distanced from all ends.

<sup>30</sup> My view has similarities to ideal observer theories. I conceive of it as a deontological 'common standpoint theory' (see Nagel 1987, 219) that adopts an 'advise model' of the fully rational agent's relation to the person (see Smith, 304-305).

<sup>31</sup> Tom Beauchamp thought I was discussing a practical presupposition of reason in my 1998. I believe my current line accords with Kant's insistence that 'the ultimate subjective ground of the adoption of maxims ... must have been adopted by free choice' and that as 'we are unable to derive ... [this] ultimate ground from any original act of will in time, we call it a property of the will which belongs to it by nature' (*Religion*, 20 and 21; see also Korsgaard 1996b, 164 and 208).

<sup>32</sup> I am not prepared to offer fully developed definitions of rationality or autonomy. I take autonomy to combine 'voluntarism,' or the ability to choose one's ends (see my 1998), with independence, such that the autonomous agent chooses for herself, without dependence on others (see my 1999). I take rationality to require independence.

<sup>33</sup> This, I think, gets to truth in Kant's problematic treatment of suicide as violating the categorical imperative. The agent cannot have immediate reason to end its own existence. Nonetheless, whereas 'Kant thinks that the one thing that a purely rational being would will or choose for its own sake is *rational agency*' (Brink, 274, relying on *Grounding*, Ak 427-429), I think the agent can look at a particular person and make an unbiased judgment that that person should commit suicide—even if that person is the person the agent is in.

<sup>34</sup> 'With death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. This is a possibility in which the issue is nothing less than Dasein's Being-in-the-world. Its death is the possibility of no-longer being-able-to-be-there ... [wherein] all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone ... Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein' (Heidegger, 294; see also Sartre 1956a, 65).

<sup>35</sup> To 'choose irrationally,' I think, is to choose against what is rational. By contrast, to 'choose arationally' is to choose without reason (whether for or against what is rational). I am thus making two assumptions: (i) it is not irrational to choose X when one has no reason not to, and (ii) if choosing X is not irrational it is either rational or arational. See footnote 25 above and 48 below.

<sup>36</sup> As an alternative to the move to P1 and P2, one might try to move to a Principle of Generic Consistency as Gewirth does; see, for example, 138-147.

<sup>37</sup> I am not saying that every human is or must be rational and autonomous, but that only a being with those qualities can have moral agency in the sense I discuss here.

<sup>38</sup> Moreover, in adopting autonomy as an end, the agent has reason to believe persons should be able to pursue their own ends and that, ordinarily, their doing so must be tolerated.

<sup>39</sup> It might be thought that there is a third option: opting for quasi-rationality and/or quasi-autonomy, becoming something like a simpleton. As I have tried not to build much into 'rationality' or 'autonomy,' I am not sure what to make of this idea.

<sup>40</sup> I am grateful Tim Crews-Anderson for discussion about his work on Kant in helping me understand this.

<sup>41</sup> Perhaps there could be a being capable of existentialist voluntarism that plumps for rationality and autonomy but then endorses a principle of malevolence. Such is not a human being; it may become a rational devil.

<sup>42</sup> Importantly, I do not take myself to be reconstructing Kant's argument anywhere in this paper. I think the view I am putting forth is Kantian, but certainly not Kant's. Hence it is *Existentialist neo-Kantian*.

<sup>43</sup> The objection here was forcefully made by Matt Zwolinski. The response and discussion of the metaphorical nature of the language was suggested by Kay Mathiesen.

<sup>44</sup> Another response to the objection would utilize Korsgaard's 'Argument from Spontaneity' (see esp. 1996b, 164-167), arguing that accepting the egoistic principle is more limiting on one's freedom than accepting P1 and P2.

<sup>45</sup> This explains why the choice for rationality is the *first* choice (or plumping) an agent must make.

<sup>46</sup> Herman finds this view in the *Groundwork*. Whereas I do not think it is obviously *there*, it is obviously in the *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, where Kant says: 'When it is said of the perfection that belongs to man in general (properly speaking, humanity) that to make this perfection one's end is in itself a duty, such perfection ... can be nothing but the cultivation of one's capacities ... The highest of these is the understanding' (Ak 386-387). This view goes back to Plato (see *Republic*, 411c-e and 527d-e; see also Locke's *Second Treatise*, section 11 and Mill's *On Liberty*, esp. 56-58),

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, we can imagine cases where one should give up rationality. For example, if one knows one will die in six months and will be in severe pain until then, and is offered ten million dollars for one's otherwise impoverished family by a (evil?) scientist to remove one's brain.

<sup>48</sup> As per note 35 above, I take 'irrational' to mean '*against* what rationality requires' (i.e., against reason). By contrast, the 'arational,' need not be *against* rationality or reason; it is neither intentionally in accord with nor intentionally opposed to reason. Arational choices are choices made without reason. Persons may *act* arationally (or *non*-rationally) on instinct or physiological impulse. Arational *choices* made by the agent are 'plumpings' or groundless optings. One could plump for or against rationality. A plumping for rationality is accepting the norms of reason; a plumping for irrationality is a choice against the norms of reason—not a choice for some alternative set of norms. I take it that so long as the agent chooses rationality, the person would feel the motivational force of moral reasons. Mine is, thus, an internalist position wherein (unsurprisingly) those who have opted out of rationality are not motivated by moral reasons (cf. Korsgaard 1997, 226).

<sup>49</sup> Kierkegaard also endorses existentialist freedom.

<sup>50</sup> Some may object that my 'rational beings' are actually 'reasonable persons' rather than just 'persons'—that I build too much into rationality so that no person could fail to feel the force of impartial reasons. There may, though, be (weakly voluntaristic) persons who cannot use strong or existentialist voluntarism so who would not feel the force of impartial reasons. Persons that can use strong or existentialist voluntarism (i.e., autonomous persons) would be reasonable (or at least capable of being reasonable).

<sup>51</sup> Surely X need not be ontologically necessary to serve as a firm foundation for Y. Here we see that 'unconditional reasons as well as hypothetical ones must be grounded in autonomy' (Korsgaard 1997, 253).

<sup>52</sup> I take commitment to the principle of non-contradiction to be necessary for rationality (not sufficient). Asked why persons should accept rationality, I think the best one can do is offer a description of what a being capable of rationality would be upon rejection of rationality: either insane or soon to die. The former is a lunatic, the latter is Ivan Ilych.

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