

## MOSS, FUNGUS, CAULIFLOWER: SARTRE'S CRITIQUE OF "HUMAN NATURE"

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*I argue that Sartre's understanding of needs is not inconsistent with his conception of the human condition. I will demonstrate that his use of the term "needs" signals a change of focus, not a rejection of his earlier views. Sartre's later "dialectical" account of human needs should be read, in light of his phenomenological account in Being and Nothingness, as aspects of our facticity and situation.<sup>1</sup> Satisfying needs is compatible with a range of choices about how to satisfy those needs and what they mean for us. I contend that Sartre remains true to the phenomenological roots of his work and avoids a commitment to a human nature or essence. Finally, I will address some of the questions that arise from Sartre's focus on needs in his dialectical ethics. I will begin by examining Sartre's early account of the human condition, and then consider his focus on needs in relation to this account.*

Sartre famously argues in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* that since existence precedes essence there is no human nature, although it makes sense to speak of the human condition. He says that humanity "is indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower."<sup>2</sup> And in spite of Mark Twain referring to a cauliflower as a cabbage with a college education,<sup>3</sup> I believe that

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, (tr.) H. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BN. Sartre also refers to need as inspiration for seeking justice and freedom in *Notebooks for an Ethics*, (tr.) D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 472. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as NE.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 30; tr. by C. Macomber as *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, (ed.) John Kulka (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 23. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as EH. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the French, then to the English text.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (New York: Signet, 1964), 46.

Sartre is right, that we are beings whose subjective life implies that attributions of a nature, or an essence, do not apply to us. Yet in his later work, such as *Critique of Dialectical Reason I*, he bases morality on the idea of fundamental human needs that must be satisfied.<sup>4</sup> Sartre's introduction of this concept seems to indicate a conception of human nature. The idea that there are universal human needs that must be fulfilled appears to imply that there are essential human characteristics that impose a determinate structure on human lives. Commentators have found this shift to be awkward and possibly in contradiction with his earlier phenomenological account of the human condition. Thomas Anderson, for example, believes that Sartre is insufficiently clear about the ontological status of universal human needs and thus that "the basis of his second ethics, universal human needs that are part of our common existential structure as human beings, remains somewhat problematic."<sup>5</sup> The implication is that, by introducing needs, Sartre is at the least approaching a commitment to human nature. Is the idea of "need," as he employs it, compatible with his view that there is no human nature?

The answer to this question partly depends on how we interpret Sartre's original contention. I argue that Sartre's understanding of needs is not inconsistent with his conception of the human condition. I will demonstrate that his use of the term "needs" signals a change of focus, not a rejection of his earlier views. Sartre's later "dialectical" account of human needs should be read, in light of his phenomenological account in *Being and Nothingness*, as aspects of our facticity and situation.<sup>6</sup> Satisfying needs is compatible with a range of choices about how to satisfy those needs and what they mean for us. I contend that Sartre remains true

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<sup>4</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (ed. and tr.) A. Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CDR I.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), 164. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as STE.

<sup>6</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, (tr.) H. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BN. Sartre also refers to need as inspiration for seeking justice and freedom in *Notebooks for an Ethics*, (tr.) D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 472. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as NE.

to the phenomenological roots of his work and avoids a commitment to a human nature or essence. Finally, I will address some of the questions that arise from Sartre's focus on needs in his dialectical ethics. I will begin by examining Sartre's early account of the human condition, and then consider his focus on needs in relation to this account.

### **Human Nature and the Human Condition**

What does Sartre mean by his original contention that there is no human nature? *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, originally given as a lecture, summarises and popularises Sartre's phenomenological ontology in *Being and Nothingness*, thus furnishing a very succinct presentation of his views on human nature. First, Sartre begins by stating that existentialists maintain that existence precedes essence.<sup>7</sup> His well-known examples of the book and the paperknife are used to distinguish between artefacts, which are made according to a plan and for a certain purpose, and human beings, who are not made by design and have no particular purpose. Rather, we are forced to work out our own plan of life. Sartre goes on to say that the conception of God as an artisan bequeathed the legacy of a conception of human nature to atheism:

Eighteenth-century atheistic philosophers suppressed the idea of God, but not, for all that, the idea that essence precedes existence. We encounter this idea nearly everywhere: in the works of Diderot, Voltaire and even Kant. Man possesses a human nature; this "human nature," which is the concept of that which is human, is found in all men, which means that each man is a particular example of a universal concept—man. In Kant's works, this universality extends so far as to encompass forest dwellers—man in a state of nature—and the bourgeois, meaning that they all possess the same basic qualities. Here again, the essence of man precedes his historically primitive existence in nature. (EH, 29/22)

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<sup>7</sup> Sartre also makes this point in *Being and Nothingness*: "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible." (BN, 49)

Human nature here is the idea of a universal human essence instantiated in each individual human being. Sartre claims that atheistic existentialists are more consistent than eighteenth-century atheists in arguing that if God does not exist, then existence must precede essence. He clarifies this point by saying: "We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself.... Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it." (EH, 29/22)<sup>8</sup> So far, Sartre is distancing himself from the idea that there is anything essential and universal that human beings share, regardless of their class, their place in history and their culture. He is also critical of the view that there can be any pre-given conception of what, exactly, human beings are.

What Sartre says next is quite complex. He appears to make an even stronger point: "Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself." (EH, 30/22) Sartre seems to be suggesting that we can both *conceive* what we will be and will or choose to become what we conceive ourselves to be. The next point stresses that it is what we will to be *after* existence that matters. That is how we create our essence.

Surprisingly, Sartre distinguishes particular, conscious wishes from previous and spontaneous decisions that make us what we are before we have such wishes. (EH, 30/23) I believe what he means here is that we create ourselves through these unplanned decisions rather than, or in a more fundamental way than, through our deliberate wishes. For example, our current wish to write a book is made on the basis of a prior decision to be a writer. What follows from this understanding of our existence is first that we are responsible for who we are, because we have chosen this project.

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<sup>8</sup> Glenn Braddock, "Sartre on Atheism, Freedom, and Morality," in *Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics*, (ed.) C. Daigle (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 91–104. Braddock argues that the fundamentals of Sartre's position are not dependent on atheism, but on our unique ability to interpret the facts of our situation. I believe he is right, given Sartre's suggestion that even if there was a God, we are still responsible for how we interpret our lives. (EH, 77/53)

Second, Sartre believes that we are also responsible for all of humanity. (EH, 32/24)<sup>9</sup> He argues that when we make choices, we create images of humanity as we think it ought to be since we confirm the value of what we choose. Sartre's claim here seems rather hyperbolic, for while my choices affirm the value of what I choose, it is perfectly compatible with this view that others can make different choices, the value of which are not denied by my own choice. To take Sartre's own example, when someone chooses to marry, they certainly affirm that marriage is a good thing, but they could also allow that, for another, differently placed, marriage may not be the best choice. This is implied by his comparison between Maggie Tulliver's choice in *The Mill on the Floss* to give up her lover and la Sanseverina's choice in *La Chartreuse de Parme* to pursue her passion, both choices that he approves because they are focussed on freedom. (EH, 72/50) Yet what remains valuable in Sartre's assertion is that we should consider the implications for others of affirming our choices.

Further on in the lecture, Sartre connects the idea of human nature with determinism: "For if it is true that existence precedes essence, we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable human nature. In other words, there is no determinism—man is free, man *is* freedom." (EH, 39/29) The thought here is that conceptions of human nature furnish a plan of life that simply unfolds deterministically. Of course, many versions of human nature would not imply determinism *per se*, but simply a framework within which different lives emerge. Thus, this criticism only applies to a limited set of theories of human nature and does not entirely explain his opposition to them.

Sartre gives several examples of what he means by human nature. One is his claim, mentioned earlier, that Kant believed that universal human nature extends to "encompass forest dwellers—man in a state of nature—and the bourgeois, meaning that they all possess the same basic qualities." (EH, 29/22) He refers to other examples in his statement that, "But I cannot count on men whom I do not know based on faith in the goodness of humanity or in man's interest in society's welfare, given that man is free and there is no human nature in which I can place my trust." (EH, 49/36) This statement can imply two different conceptions of

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<sup>9</sup> As Barnes notes, Sartre uses the term "human reality"—*réalité humain*—for humanity and for the individual For-itself. (BN, 652)

human nature: one as captured by a definition expressing a set of qualities, the other as providing a single foundation that human life builds on.<sup>10</sup> In the interview appended to his talk, Sartre expresses his point differently again. He says that "human nature does not exist; in other words, every era evolves according to its own dialectical laws, and men are defined by their era, not by human nature." (EH, 106/70) Here, Sartre is pointing to his concept of situation; all human beings live in historically various situations and that is what shapes who we become. I will elaborate on this point below. For now it is important to note that Sartre rejects conceptions of human nature that are deterministic, essentialist or foundationalist.

Nevertheless, while Sartre denies there is any universal human nature, he affirms that there is a universal human condition. He defines the human condition thus: "By condition they [contemporary thinkers] refer, more or less clearly, to all *limitations* that *a priori* define man's fundamental situation in the universe. Historical situations vary: a man may be born a slave in a pagan society or a feudal lord or a member of the proletariat. What never varies is the necessity for him to be in the world, to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and eventually, to die in it." (EH, 60/42) He adds that this condition is objective because it exists everywhere and can be recognised, and at the same time, it is subjective because we have to live it. Thus there is something universal that human beings share, but it is not a concept of what or who we will be; rather, it consists in the features of human existence. These features are lived or experienced differently by each person.

Furthermore, Sartre notes, there is universality in every purpose because such purposes are a response to these limitations of the human condition and can be understood by everyone. He says "as diverse as man's projects may be, at least none of them seem wholly foreign to me since each presents itself as an attempt to surpass such limitations, to postpone, deny, or come to terms with them. Consequently, every project, however individual, has a universal value. Every project—even one belonging to a Chinese, an Indian, or an African—can be understood by

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<sup>10</sup> Kant also provides an example of this second conception of human nature, if you consider his account of our predisposition to the good in "Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone," *Religion and Rational Theology*, (tr.) A. Wood and G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

a European.” (EH, 60/42) The thought is that, although our choices are individual, because they are a response to the human condition, they can be understood by others.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Sartre ends his lecture by asserting that it is only by transcending ourselves “that man will realise himself as truly human.” (EH, 77/53) This self-transcendence is not meant to be a nature that we have, but an activity that we pursue. One can also see freedom as an aspect of the universal human condition. We are all free and have to make decisions in light of that freedom. However, that seems to me to be quite consistent with the idea that there is no human nature, because through freedom we make ourselves.

How does this “popular” account fit with Sartre’s phenomenological account in *Being and Nothingness*? In that work, he sets out in much more detail his account of the human condition and makes several important distinctions that shed light on his rejection of a concept of human nature. The human condition involves a number of constraints or limits on freedom. For Sartre, freedom is always experienced in situation and in relation to facticity. These concepts enable us to understand in what sense we are constrained. He discusses facticity in a number of sections in *Being and Nothingness*.

Mary Warnock claims that Sartre introduces a deterministic account of human nature in *Being and Nothingness* with the idea that “we form the projects we do because of our commitment to possess others and the world.”<sup>12</sup> She also contends that Sartre’s later works are in conflict with his earlier ones in that “Marxism can be seen to have swallowed up existentialism” and that this would seem to be a deeper problem for Sartre. (PS, 176) David Rose responds, primarily to the first point, that Sartre provides a description of human existence and that his concept of freedom, if properly understood as self-determination, is con-

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<sup>11</sup> Michèle Le Dœuff takes Sartre’s point, here, to be one that assumes the domination of the European over people from other cultures. See her *Hipparchia’s Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (tr.) T. Selous, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 74. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HC. While Sartre may be defended against this charge on the grounds that he took the claim to be reciprocal, at the very least, he underestimated the difficulty of understanding others’ projects when they are not shared or overlapping.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Warnock, *The Philosophy of Sartre* (London: Hutchinson, 1965), 126. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PS.

sistent across his writing career.<sup>13</sup> He also notes that more argument is needed in relation to his later sociological work for this view "to be fully convincing." I agree with Rose on this basic point concerning the consistency of Sartre's account, and wish to show in detail how Sartre's conception of the human condition develops from his earlier to later work.

In *Being and Nothingness*, the facticity of the For-itself refers to things about ourselves that we cannot choose, for example, that we are born into a certain class at a certain time in a certain place. (BN, 103) Sartre characterises facticity as "this perpetually evanescent contingency of the in-itself which, without ever allowing itself to be apprehended, haunts the for-itself and reattaches it to being-in-itself." (BN, 107) The For-itself is consciousness and the In-itself is that which consciousness transcends or goes beyond. For instance, Sartre could not choose otherwise than to be a bourgeois Frenchman born in 1905.

Elsewhere, Sartre connects facticity with the body, saying it is my birth, my race, my class, my nationality, my physiological structure, my character, my past; in other words, my body is "the necessary condition of the existence of a world and the contingent realisation of this condition." (BN, 352) He observes that, in "existing one's body," "certain original structures are invariable and in each For-itself constitute human-reality." (BN, 478)<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, we are not our facticity. Thus, Sartre's projects of writing philosophy, literature and drama, of travel, of relationships, and of political interventions are his own way of dealing with facticity. For Sartre, we choose to understand our facticity as we will, but our facticity means that we have to make these kinds of choices. Our facticity and the way in which we respond to it constitute our situation. Sartre defines "situation" in this way: "We shall use the term *situation* for the contingency of freedom in the *plenum* of being of the world inasmuch as this *datum*, which is there only *in order not to constrain* freedom, is revealed to this freedom only as *already illuminated* by the end which freedom chooses." (BN, 509) The situation is the concrete totality of facticity in relation to freedom. What he means is that the world reveals itself to us in certain ways—as threatening, difficult, fascinating or peaceful—but it always does so in light of our own ends or projects.

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<sup>13</sup> David Rose, "Sartre and the Problem of Universal Human Nature Revisited," *Sartre Studies International*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2003), 16.

<sup>14</sup> See also Sartre, BN, 533–34.

Sartre uses the term, borrowed from Gaston Bachelard, “coefficient of adversity” for the way in which objects resist our projects. (BN, 348, 503) An example he uses is the difficulty of climbing a crag on a mountain, which he sees as revealed in the light of our end to climb it. (BN, 504) We may also experience some things as useful, given the projects that we choose to undertake. The situation is an ambiguous phenomenon because we cannot discern which aspects of a situation are the result of our projects and which aspects are those of brute or raw being. In this section, Sartre discusses our place, our past, our environment, our neighbour and our death. (BN, 511–73) In each case, he finds that the facticity of these aspects of our existence only appears in the light of the ends that we set.

The emphasis Sartre places on the specificities of our situation, as well as the role freedom plays in understanding that situation, clarifies his rejection of the concept of human nature in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Since we are always in a particular place, an environment, with a unique past that is, moreover, transformed by our projects, the concept of human nature can make no sense of our situation. Thus, Sartre is quite willing to accept that there is a universal human condition, and that facticity and situation influence and shape our choices. Yet none of these seeming constraints on freedom constitute an essentialising, deterministic or foundational human nature.<sup>15</sup> Does Sartre change his mind on this issue when he introduces the idea of human needs into his philosophy?

### **Human Needs**

In his later work, Sartre develops an account of social groups, as well as what is known as his dialectical ethics, with a much stronger focus on history and history’s influence on our capacity for freedom. He shifts from the idea of an abstract freedom to a concrete freedom that is tied to the satisfaction of needs. The question is whether “need,” as he conceives it, can be understood as part of the human condition, or must belong to a

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<sup>15</sup> In *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Sartre says: “Nature would be the historical fact that human beings have a nature, that humanity in choosing oppression chose to begin with nature.” (NE 6). By this he means that we choose inauthenticity and treat ourselves as if we have a nature.

conception of human nature.<sup>16</sup> Thomas Anderson, for example, although a sympathetic reader of Sartre, argues that Sartre is not clear enough concerning the ontological standing of these structures of the human condition. He also claims, as I noted above, that, "As a result, the basis of his second ethics, universal human needs that are part of our common existential structure as human beings, remains somewhat problematic." (STE, 164)<sup>17</sup> I think that this is a reasonable comment in the sense that Sartre does not discuss this issue in detail. However, it is more interesting to ask whether some further clarification can be given on Sartre's behalf, which will be my task in the remainder of this paper.

There is also disagreement amongst Sartre scholars concerning the extent to which needs limit freedom. For example, Anderson says that "the needs in question do set conditions, for they specify, and thus limit, the *kinds* of objects or action that satisfy them. Humans do not have total, unconditional freedom to satisfy their needs in just any way they please." (STE, 165) His reading of *Critique I* is that needs are best satisfied in the pledged group (STE, 100), as Sartre concludes that "the group is both the most effective *means* of controlling the surrounding materiality in the context of scarcity and the *absolute end* as pure freedom liberating men from alterity" (CDR I, 673), and needs are the basis of all praxis, including group formation. Anderson's view is in contrast to that of Elizabeth Bowman and Robert Stone, who claim that "we can-

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<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, in *The German Ideology*, explain the evolution of consciousness from non-conscious factors, the first of which is need. See Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, (tr.) S. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964). See also Marx's discussion of need in his "Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*," in his *Early Writings*, (tr.) R. Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), 276–78.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson canvasses Sartre's concept of singular or individualised universal (Sartre, CDR II, 22–34) or incarnation—the concrete manifestation of universal structures (Sartre, BN, 540)—as a way of resolving this problem. However, Anderson does not believe it is clear how common "existential structures" differ from a human nature or essence. (STE, 162–63) In a later article, he suggests that the question remains unresolved in Sartre's work and that his ethics is closer to a natural-law ethics than Sartre would accept. Thomas C. Anderson, "Sartre and Human Nature," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. LXX, no.4, 1996, 585–95.

not specify a priori which objects are and are not needed.”<sup>18</sup> Here, all three authors put the point very strongly. On the one hand is the view that needs limit what can satisfy them and, on the other hand, the contention that needs set up imperatives to be satisfied but that we determine how to satisfy them—what means to use, and what would count as satisfaction.

Sartre’s discussions of need occur in *Critique of Dialectical Reason I* and *II*, in his unpublished Rome lecture notes, and in other essays and interviews of that period, including “*Morale et histoire*.”<sup>19</sup> He insists that these works are taken up against the background of *Being and Nothingness* rather than constituting a rejection of it.<sup>20</sup> *Critique of Dialectical Reason I* provides a phenomenology of group formation and the Rome lectures explore moral experience. Sartre introduces the idea of need in book I of *Critique I*, in the section entitled “Individual Praxis as Totalization.”<sup>21</sup> His question here is how the operation of the dialectic (the play between freedom and the practico-inert or settled structures that resist our freedom) through individuals can be explained. He answers “Everything is to be explained through need (*le besoin*); need is the first totalizing relation between the material being, man, and the material ensemble of which he is part.” (CDR I, 80) Totalisation, for Sartre, is understand-

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Bowman and Robert V. Stone, “‘Making the Human’ in Sartre’s Unpublished Dialectical Ethics,” in *Writing the Politics of Difference*, (ed.) H. Silverman (New York: SUNY, 1991), 121–22. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as UDE.

<sup>19</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason II*, (tr.) Q. Hoare (London: Verso, 2006), and “*Morale et Histoire*,” *Les Temps Modernes* [I can’t sort out what the following numbers, parenthetical and otherwise, refer to. Please clarify.] 60 (632–34), (2005), 268–414. This latter text is also known as the “Cornell Lectures.” Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CDR II and MH, respectively.

<sup>20</sup> P. Schilpp, ed. *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle: Open Court, 1981), 14. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PJPS.

<sup>21</sup> *Critique of Dialectical Reason (I and II)* is generally seen as Sartre’s attempt to combine Existentialism and Marxism. Interestingly, in later years, Sartre said that it was not a Marxist philosophy, although it is linked to Marxism. His view is that a few Marxist notions, such as surplus value and class, are worthwhile retaining and reworking. (PJPS, 20)

ing and making history through praxis or action. An ensemble is a collection of individuals, whatever kind of group they form.

Need is experienced as a lack, but it is also positive in the sense that we are preserved by responding to need. As he claims, "Organic functioning, need, and *praxis* are strictly linked in a dialectical manner; dialectical time came into being, in fact, with the organism; for the living being can survive only by renewing itself." (CDR I, 82) Through need we react to the environment as a source of means to satisfaction of our needs. These needs reveal goals to us: "need...is in fact the lived revelation of a goal to aim at." (CDR I, 90) In *Search for a Method*, Sartre refers to need as a "rudimentary project," saying, "There is no question of denying the fundamental priority of need.... In its full development, need is a transcendence and a negativity (negation of negation inasmuch as it is produced as a lack seeking to be denied), hence a *surpassing-toward...*"<sup>22</sup> This comment occurs in the context of a renewed rejection of a common human nature. In *Critique of Dialectical Reason II*, needs are presented as providing motives for action: "The most abstract, autonomous end ultimately derives its content and its urgency from needs." (CDR II, 390) Sartre here understands art, for example, as a means of satisfying needs.

Sartre's initial examples of needs are our biological needs for oxygen and food. Nature is revealed to us through our need as either abundant or scant. However, as Anderson notes, Sartre also includes cultural and abstract needs in his Rome lectures. He characterises these as needs for freedom, knowledge, love, for a meaningful life and communication. (STE, 133, 161) Furthermore, in an interview concerning writing, Sartre said that

people everywhere wish their own life, with its dark places that they sense, to be an experience not only lived, but *presented*. They would like to see it disengaged from all the elements that crush it; and rendered essential by an *expression* that reduces what crushes them to inessential conditions of their person. Everyone wants to write because everyone has a need to be

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<sup>22</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, (tr.) H. Barnes (New York: Vintage, 1968), 171. As Hubert L. Dreyfus and Piotr Hoffman note, "the fundamental goal of transcendence (praxis) is the satisfaction of basic needs." (PJPS, 236)

*meaningful*—to signify what they *experience*.... Writing is a need felt by everyone. It's the highest form of the basic need to communicate.<sup>23</sup>

Sartre may be exaggerating a little here in his conviction that everyone needs to write, but it is more reasonable to say that we have a basic need to communicate. What he says suggests a distinction between the needs that are basic and the more complex forms they may take. These basic needs are universal and true as opposed to the variable and false needs created by consumerist society. This distinction does not correspond to a distinction between physical needs and intellectual or cultural ones. It cuts across this distinction by including love and communication as basic needs.

In a late interview, Sartre argued that capitalism satisfies the basic needs of the majority in society, while ignoring minorities and the Third World. At the same time, it creates artificial needs such as the need for a car.<sup>24</sup> Anderson suggests that we may be able to work out what our true needs are by abstracting from needs specific to, for example, a particular class (STE, 161), whereas Elizabeth Butterfield argues that Sartre deliberately leaves open the question of how to distinguish between true and false needs, as we only understand our true needs when we become integral humans or when we overcome forms of oppression.<sup>25</sup> I will return to this point. However, she also suggests that a sense of unfulfilment shows that our most fundamental needs are not being satisfied. This is an ingenious way of determining that we have some knowledge of ethics, yet it could not be ruled out that the sense of a lack of fulfilment might yet be based on artificial needs.

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<sup>23</sup> Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, (tr.) J. Matthews (London: NLB, 1974), 30–31. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BEM.

<sup>24</sup> In “*Morale et Histoire*,” Sartre distinguishes between need and desire. Need involves satisfaction and restoration, whereas desire concerns the production of my being. (MH, 403–07)

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Butterfield, “Sartre and Marcuse on the Relation between Needs and Normativity: A Step beyond Postmodernism in Moral Theory,” *Sartre Studies International*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2004), 39–40. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as SM.

In relation to capitalism, Sartre argues that needs "partly become, under the control of that system, an instrument of integration of the proletariat engendered and directed by profit. The worker exhausts himself in producing a car and in earning enough to buy one; this acquisition gives him the impression of having satisfied a 'need'." (BEM, 125–26) Capitalism creates needs and then satisfies them. This observation concerning the functioning of capitalism leads Sartre to shift away from the problem of satisfying basic needs to a concern with alienation and meaninglessness.<sup>26</sup> However, in his writings on Algeria, he focussed on the French colonists' super-exploitation of native Algerians, who could not get enough to eat.<sup>27</sup>

While need can be understood as the source of ethics, because need creates an imperative, Sartre also understands need as the source of conflict. In the context of scarcity or perceived need, people see others as depriving them of what is needed to satisfy their own needs: "the appearance of strangers... makes them see man as an alien species. The strength of their aggressiveness and hatred *resides in need*, and it makes very little difference if this need has just been satisfied: its constant renewal and everyone's anxiety mean that whenever a tribe appears, its members are constituted as famine being brought to the other group in the form of a human *praxis*." (CDR I, 133) Scarcity can appear in a lack of products, tools, producers and consumers (CDR I, 137–38) and in relation to both needs and desires of many kinds, such as that for ideas and knowledge. (PJPS, 31) For Sartre, even this conflict is the perversion of an ethics, where it takes a destructive rather than an affirmative form.

In *Critique I*, Sartre still refers scathingly to ideas of human nature, such as the view that conflicts of interest between humans are natural. Here, he identifies such views with notions that human beings cannot change. (CDR I, 56, 217) For example, he says that "a friendship in

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<sup>26</sup> By shifting away from an exclusive concentration on basic needs, Sartre avoids the problems pointed out by Hannah Arendt in relation to such a focus, that is, that politics then becomes governed by necessity, rather than freedom. See Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 155. In *Critique I*, Sartre asks whether eliminating capitalist forms of alienation will mean that there will be no forms of alienation. (CDR I, 308)

<sup>27</sup> Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, (tr.) A. Haddour, S. Brewer, and T. McWilliams (London: Routledge, 2001).

Socrates' time has neither the same meaning nor the same functions as a friendship today." (CDR I, 56) In other work, he turns to the problem of the distortion of our needs away from those that will bring about integral humanity or a humanity whose needs are satisfied. For example, in his 1964 Rome lecture, also known as "Morality and History," Sartre maintains that morality is based in human need, which "carries within itself its own reason for being satisfied."<sup>28</sup> This satisfaction would mean our becoming fully human, or "integral humans." The end of unconditional morality is this integral humanity. In a Kantian vein, Sartre argues that unconditional norms reveal how we are able to choose the ways in which we act.<sup>29</sup> We will be integral humans when systems of oppression and hierarchies are overcome. The idea of the "integral man" (*homme total*) or the "integral human" is one that Sartre held dear from the 1940s onwards.<sup>30</sup> In such a future, needs would be satisfied without conflict and we would act autonomously. He says "history has no reality except as the unconditional possibility for man to realize himself in his full autonomy."<sup>31</sup> (UDE, 115) These two ideas are linked in that our autonomous praxis is directed towards the fulfilment of needs. Needs create imperatives that must be satisfied, and satisfying those needs will also bring about autonomous action because we will not be constrained by oppressive hierarchies. This follows since oppressive hierarchies are linked with the exploitation and deprivation of oppressed groups. These hierarchies must be overthrown in order for human needs to be satisfied. Thus we arrive at the question as to whether the introduction of needs into Sartre's account brings with it a conception of human nature.

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<sup>28</sup> Bowman and Stone, "The End as Present in the Means in Sartre's Morality and History: Birth and Reinventions of an Existential Moral Standard," *Sartre Studies International*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2004), 3. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as EPM.

<sup>29</sup> Sartre, "Determinism and Freedom," in *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, vol. 2, (ed.) M. Contat and M. Rybalka (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 244. This essay is an extract from the Rome lectures.

<sup>30</sup> Sartre refers to "integral man" as "Totally committed and totally free." See his *What Is Literature? and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 265.

<sup>31</sup> In *Critique II*, Sartre says, similarly, "The most abstract, autonomous end ultimately derives its content and its urgency from needs. It would vanish along with them, and its autonomy would vanish with it." (CDR II, 390)

## Needs and Human Nature

The use of the language "integral human" may seem to suggest that Sartre has adopted an image of the human to which everyone should aspire or of a nature that would be revealed. This idea of the integral human is neither a definite image nor a nature, but what Sartre calls an "orientation," according to which we define ourselves by praxis. (135/112, quoted in EPM, 3)<sup>32</sup> Thus he avoids the problem of defining human nature by focussing on action and by considering how we would interpret these needs.

So can Sartre's concept of need be understood as an aspect of a situation, along with such features as class, nationality and personal past? To say that human beings have needs for things such as air, food, shelter—and even cultural needs—is not to say that these needs cannot be denied, and it is also not to say what meanings those needs can have for us or how they are lived phenomenologically and culturally. Even though the idea that needs will take us toward an unconditional morality sounds universal and essentialist, Sartre does not say what form the satisfaction of needs would take or that it would be a permanent form. The Marxist phenomenologist Enzo Paci notes that "The precategorical structure of needs and satisfactions remains perpetually valid: it is a permanent structure of the life-world. However this permanence does not entail the permanence of the ways through which I can satisfy my needs in order to live. Relations of production and social relations are alterable."<sup>33</sup> Clearly, Sartre accepts that needs are universal, but he does not mean they constitute an unchanging essence or that they determine our character or the way we live, nor do they provide a settled foundation. In this sense, the existence of needs is compatible with the concept of the human condition and does not imply a commitment to the senses of "human nature" that he criticises in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*.

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<sup>32</sup> Butterfield also defends Sartre against anticipated postmodernist criticisms that he has come too close to a theory of human nature by noting how he acknowledges the individual's unique experience of needs. (SM, 40–42)

<sup>33</sup> Enzo Paci, "Practico-Inert Praxis and Irreversibility," *Existentialist Politics and Political Theory*, (ed.) W. McBride (New York: Garland, 1997), 175.

For instance, can we say that we still “define ourselves afterwards,” as Sartre remarks in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*—after existence, that is—even though we have needs that must be satisfied? I argue that we can, because we do not define ourselves in terms of our needs but in terms of our means of satisfying them, which are undetermined and can change.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, can we see needs as the *a priori* limitations of the human condition Sartre refers to in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*? They are not *a priori* in the sense of being prior to or beyond experience, as it is precisely in experience that we find needs. Each individual will also experience these needs differently, and respond to them differently. In this sense, Sartre remains true to the phenomenological roots of his work.<sup>35</sup> Needs are simply part of our situation. While a cauliflower also needs air and nutrients, the cauliflower does not experience these needs subjectively, live them, or find imperatives in them. If we compare the idea of needs with Sartre’s comments about the spirit of seriousness in *Being and Nothingness*, the point is the same. He says that the spirit of seriousness considers “values as transcendent givens independent of human subjectivity, and it transfers the quality of ‘desirable’ from the ontological structure of things to their simple material constitution.... *Bread* is desirable because it is *necessary* to live (a value written in an intelli-

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<sup>34</sup> C. B. Macpherson argues that a historical understanding of need takes the human essence to be change or development, in contrast to an ontological view of a human essence. See his “Needs and Wants: An Ontological or Historical Problem?” in *Human Needs and Politics*, (ed.) R. Fitzgerald (Sydney: Pergamon Press, 1977), 26–27. My argument is that Sartre does not take an ontological view of needs in this sense as he is focussed on our response to needs. Detmer makes this point about the importance and variability of our responses to “distinctively human” needs. See David Detmer, *Freedom as a Value: A Critique of the Ethical Theory of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle: Open Court, 1986), 185. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FV.

<sup>35</sup> In a 1975 interview, Sartre insisted that he had never abandoned phenomenology. (PJPS, 24) See also Paul Crittenden, *Sartre in Search of an Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 102. Crittenden suggests that the “praxis for satisfying needs is indicated in general by the type of need in question, not so much by choice.” However, choice is central to how we conceive our needs and how we satisfy them.

gible heaven) and because bread is nourishing." (BN, 646)<sup>36</sup> Even with a focus on needs, bread itself as a material thing does not have a value independent of its relation to human needs and desires.

Even in his final interviews, published in *Hope Now*, Sartre does not retract his views concerning human nature, although some comments may at first sight appear to indicate such a change. In this work, he still insists that we do not have a definition of what is human, saying "as you know, for me there is no a priori essence; and so what a human being is has not yet been established."<sup>37</sup> Sartre maintains that we search for what is human and, in doing so, become more human, although we may never reach the final point of integral humanity. Yet it is here that he refers to an essential relationship of fraternity between human beings, an original "relationship of being born of the same mother." (HN, 87) Sartre does not mean this literally or biologically, but as a way of describing the relationship of fraternity that exists between human beings. He says it is a feeling that people have, which is explained through myths of a single origin.

Benny Lévy, his interviewer, is scandalised and questions the reference to a common origin. Sartre modifies his claim by saying that this feeling will not come about until humanity is achieved: "At that moment it will be possible to say that men are all the products of a common origin, derived not from their father's seed or their mother's womb but from a total series of measures taken over thousands of years that finally result in humanity. Then there will be true fraternity." (HN, 90) Thus, he transforms fraternity from a feeling and origin to a future goal. At this point, Sartre also reaffirms the importance of needs for understanding our struggle to be ethical: "And men have precise needs that their outward situation does not allow them to satisfy." (HN, 91) Thus, the interviews

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph S. Catalano, in *Reading Sartre*, says that "We all need food to live. In the concrete, however, this need *almost always* arises within the milieu of human practices." See Catalano, *Reading Sartre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 53–54. I am not sure why Catalano makes the qualification "almost always" here, as my understanding of Sartre is that need will always be experienced and interpreted within human practices.

<sup>37</sup> *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*, (tr.) A. van den Hoven (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 67. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HN.

do not represent a radical change of views, as is often thought, at least not on these points.<sup>38</sup>

However, does Sartre's open-ended approach to the integral human raise a different problem—that of being too unclear? In confirmation of this way of understanding Sartre's view of the end of "humanity," Bowman and Stone admit that the end of humanity is rather vague. They say it "combines various Sartrean themes: freedom, pledged group, satisfaction of basic needs, group autonomy and individual sovereignty, and socialism and communism. But how does it combine them? How, for example, does it distinguish itself from Enlightenment notions of humanity with their masculinist and Eurocentric prejudices?" However, they then defend Sartre from this charge of vagueness by saying that at least one can distinguish between what would and would not be conducive to the end of humanity. (EPM, 11) They do not elaborate on this point, although they suggest that *Notebooks for an Ethics* is a place to begin reflecting on this question. Here, Sartre is concerned primarily with the relation between means and ends, and he says we must "treat man as an end to the same extent that I consider him as a means, that is, to help him think of himself and freely want to be a means in the moment when and to the extent that I treat him as end, as well as to make manifest to him that he is the absolute end in that very decision by which he treats himself as a means." (NE, 207) This point suggests how to come closer to the end of humanity, but not what the end of humanity is.

There might be a lingering suspicion that the integral human is really a man. Sartre is philosophically against hierarchies of sex, race and class, at least in his later work, so if his view of humanity is masculinist and Eurocentric, it must be so in a more subtle way, perhaps through the ideal of autonomy that he shares with many Enlightenment thinkers.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The difference between Sartre's stress on needs and a theory that does accept there is a human nature can be clarified through a comparison with Martha Nussbaum's list of "Central Human Functional Capabilities." While revisable, Nussbaum's idea, which is based on an Aristotelian concept of proper human functioning, is thought to be specifiable under current conditions, and linked to agreement between different cultures. See Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 70–85.

<sup>39</sup> In the second notebook of *Hipparchia's Choice*, Le Dœuff criticises Sartre's use of masculinist imagery in *Being and Nothingness*.

Critiques of such ideals usually focus on the neglect of relational and dependent aspects of human existence, yet Sartre's emphasis on autonomy through collective action and the satisfaction of needs avoid these most obvious criticisms.

However, Sartre does not defend an explicitly feminist approach to human liberation. Both his earlier and later views can be turned to feminist purposes, but this takes explicit work that Sartre himself never carried out. In the case of other liberation movements, such as the Algerian independence movement, he did argue extensively for the way in which his views could be applied to assist in the struggles. Talk of needs may be more helpful in political argument than talk of individual responsibility to choose, as talk of needs appeals to an imperative that other people should take seriously. Sonia Kruks, for example, has argued that there are greater insights for feminism to be gained from *Critique of Dialectical Reason* than from Sartre's earlier work, although this latter work neglects the topic of reproduction. These insights concern the way in which a reciprocal understanding of praxis exists even in situations of conflict.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, Naomi Zack finds Sartre's account of both individual projects and group organisation useful for thinking about how we can see that political life does not have to continue as it exists in the present. She notes that Sartre refers to an island where there are substantially fewer women than men as a situation of material scarcity, and tends to use men as examples of resisting and creative subjects.<sup>41</sup> Still, she does not hold that to be as problematic as his ideas of need and scarcity. This is partly because Zack understands Sartre's view of needs as material objects only, rather than more broadly as including love, freedom and other intangible needs. Importantly, Zack discerns the complexity of needs, describing how we may not be able to distinguish between needs and desires, or even be clear about whether there is genuine scarcity. She argues that an alternative vision of society in which women take a much greater role in decision-making is necessary before judgements about need and scarcity can be made. Furthermore, Zack argues that "affective, creative, and aesthetic motivations" should be taken as seriously as mate-

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<sup>40</sup> J. S. Murphy, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 229–52.

<sup>41</sup> Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 72–74.

rialist ones.<sup>42</sup> On this particular point, Sartre is in agreement. Moreover, Sartre's argument for the overcoming of hierarchies includes that of sexism, although his examples tend to stress male subjects. The end of humanity is something we move toward, and though it would involve the liberation of women, it is not entirely clear what it would be to arrive at it. Instead, it is something we discover through action and as we realise which methods and ideas do and do not work to overturn oppression.

Another very interesting and important question that Bowman and Stone ask is whether Sartre's morality will be needed after the conditions for it have arrived. (EPM, 27, XX n. 55) This is a question that can be asked of many ethics, but it seems more relevant here, as one might believe that once everyone's needs are fulfilled, then there is no requirement for an ethics. Detmer points out that our more complex needs can never be entirely fulfilled, because they are continually developing and expanding. (FV, 185) I think this is right—the idea that our cultural needs or needs for friendship could be *completely* satisfied does not make sense. They would just have to have optimal conditions for being fulfilled. In the case of our basic needs, they should be fulfilled in ways that enable the fulfilling of the others. For example, to take Sartre's own case of counter-finality from *Critique I*, where systematic deforestation leads to serious problems such as flooding (CDR I, 161–65), needs for fuel and agriculture were satisfied without regard for the future effect on needs. There would always be a scarcity of some sort, even if it were only of ideas and cultural products.

A number of other factors would also mean that integral humanity would not be a static state. Any culture would have to continually monitor the effects of satisfying particular needs on other needs and on human freedom. There would also be the danger of backsliding, of falling away from the moral state. Furthermore, people still have to live within an unpredictable natural environment of floods, tornadoes and volcanoes. Moreover, Sartre does not suppose that human beings can be made perfect by having their needs satisfied. Instead, we would just have the right conditions for leading an ethical life. If we were to live in such a state, it would be still up to us to choose to be ethical and to live according to unconditional imperatives.

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<sup>42</sup> Naomi Zack, *Inclusive Feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 130–47.

## **Conclusion**

Sartre's conception of needs is compatible with an acceptance of the existence of a human condition rather than a human nature. His shift to the language of human needs appears to be more a question of emphasis than a complete reworking of his position. Need, even though universal, can be understood as a feature of the human condition rather than constituting a theory of human nature. The person with needs still has to define their own plan of life. Furthermore, we are not determined to lead a particular kind of life. Needs provide imperatives rather than a foundation or determining essence, and do not imply that human beings have essential or inescapable moral traits, such as selfishness or altruism. How we live our situation and facticity will always be variable, even if the goal of integral humanity is achieved. Sartre expands the concept of the human condition to include needs, which makes his initial conception of freedom more concrete, but not essentialising.

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