

## Article

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## Can Existentialists be Happy? Authentic Life, Authentic Happiness

Jennifer Mei Sze Ang

*Associate Professor and Director Centre for University Core, Singapore University of Social Sciences.*

**Abstract** | This paper aims to fill a gap in today's literature on well-being studies from the existentialist tradition, through a selection of the early works of the father of French existentialism Jean-Paul Sartre. It questions whether existentialists can be considered "happy" by first discussing the supposed incompatibility between an authentic life filled with dread and despair and a life filled with generally more positive emotions. It starts with outlining Sartrean existentialism – the ontological freedom we are born into experienced as feelings of anxiety and angst, and experiences of hostility as we encounter others through their gaze and objectification. From this framework, it examines and reflects on both the empirical models of well-being focused on desire/satisfaction/positive emotions and the eudaimonic strands of well-being studies emphasizing autonomy. It shows that the strand of well-being which places good mood and satisfaction as central goals of a happy life are projects of bad faith, and that authenticity promotes a more fundamental notion of freedom than the conceptualization of a meaningful life based on autonomy. Finally, it argues that existentialists can be happy by showing that negative emotions play an essential role in how we apprehend and respond to the world positively and meaningfully.

**Editor** | Gregg D. Caruso, Corning Community College, SUNY (USA)/Owen Flanagan, Duke University, USA.

**Correspondence** | Jennifer Mei Sze Ang, Associate Professor and Director Centre for University Core, Singapore University of Social Sciences; Email: [jenniferangms@suss.edu.sg](mailto:jenniferangms@suss.edu.sg)

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### Angst, Flight and Bad Faith

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre approaches the question to the meaning of existence using phenomenological descriptions of the human experience. He tells us that we are born free – free to invent and confer meanings to a world that holds only contingent values. In our everyday experience, we grasp what ontological freedom means when we become conscious that we alone are responsible for creating values for the world; for how we grasp our past, present and future; and for our responses to being objectified by others and living for others. We experience our ontological freedom often in anguish – anguish at the fact that we are not free to choose not to be free, and

along with this freedom, the realisation that we are completely responsible for all our choices and actions, which are meanings not only for ourselves but also for constituting the world. This describes the ontological structure of our human reality that is experienced in concrete human reality as anguish in the face of the dreadful freedom that we have.

In his example of the gambler, Sartre described the anguish the gambler experiences in the face of the freedom he has in overriding his past resolutions and recreating his future. Having decided to quit his nasty habit, the gambler realizes at the sight of a gambling table that his past resolution is now inefficacious, contingent upon the decision he has to make at this

present moment (Sartre 1956, 69-70). He also experiences anguish as he faces the contingency of his future – as possibilities he needs to recreate while at the same time, also realizing the possibility of not being it (Sartre 1956, 186). To overcome his anguish, the gambler attempts to flee from his freedom. He can choose to deny his ontological freedom so as to escape from having to bear the responsibility of choosing and making decisions in the present moment by seeing himself as pathologically determined. Alternatively, he can deny his facticity as a habitual gambler and assumes complete freedom to choose to play a new game; as if he freely makes a choice he is in full control of.

Through this example, it is clear that anguish refers to the emotion we experience when we grasp our ontological freedom – when we apprehend that we alone are the permanent source of how we appear and what our possibilities are, and also the permanent source for negating how we appear and nihilating these possibilities. (Sartre 1956, 66-7). In other words, we realise that our ontological freedom in reality consists of both Being (facticity) and Nothingness (transcendence). And to escape from our anguish, we embark on projects of flight by denying that our human reality is made up of both Being (facticity) and Nothingness (transcendence).

Sartre further tells us that in a project of flight, we realise that fleeing from anguish is futile because to flee in order not to know, we cannot avoid knowing what we are fleeing. Thus, in a project of flight, the liar is both “in complete possession of the truth” and hides from the truth (Sartre 1956, 87). There is only a single consciousness at work because the deceived and the deceiver are one and the same person – a mode of self-deception. It is a project that reflective consciousness creates while being fully aware that it deceives itself of the ontological reality that consists of facticity and transcendence by reducing to either pure facticity or absolute freedom. Sartre described this as a state of bad faith – the flight from anguish that is only a mode of becoming conscious of our anguish (Sartre 1956, 83).

More often, we act in bad faith with regards to the meaning we give to our existence as being in a world-with-others. Sartre uses the example of the homosexual to demonstrate how the homosexual lived his life under an intolerable feeling of guilt because he chose

to consider himself as a person with an unacceptable nature; a pederast as judged by his society. By doing so, he has chosen to determine the meaning of his existence as his fault. But at the same time, he also refuses to admit that his mistakes constitute for him a destiny, by constantly finding excuses that his homosexuality is “something of a game, of chance, of bad luck” and that these “mistakes are all in the past,” “explained by a certain conception of the beautiful which women cannot satisfy” (Sartre 1956, 107). The homosexual thus first assumes the identity of a ‘pederast’ in order to reject, and thereafter, slides into bad faith by denying his facticity and instead, assumes to be pure freedom. He would be in good faith if he recognizes that he is considered a pederast only to the extent that he has adopted a pattern of conduct (that has been defined as pederast by his society) because he also recognizes that patterns of conduct alone do not solely and fully define his human reality (Sartre 1956, 108).

The opposite example is the waiter who identified completely with his given social role. The waiter plays “at *being* a waiter in a café”, in full realization that he is this person he has to be while knowing fully well that this is only a role he is playing that does not reflect or define who he is (Sartre 1956, 102). In fact, in trying to be the person he has to be and realizing the traits of what is expected of a waiter, he is in reality, being what he is not because all that he is is only a representation of what a waiter should be. As a result, his attempt at playing the role and carrying out the duties of a waiter is an act of bad faith since he is in full realization that he is not what he is trying to be.

Through these examples, we see that bad faith is “a constant and particular style of life” in which they put in place mental and behavioral mechanisms to flee from anguish in their situations (Sartre 1956, 90). It is a project of flight of self-deception over their human reality – to lie to themselves that they are either pure facticity or absolute freedom. In the first instance, one overcomes anguish by assuming what is expected of them – an identity with a single set of attributes and characteristics. They have turned themselves into a mere thing by reducing themselves to their facticity (based on biological make-up, character traits, circumstances, etc.) as their “nature” and let objective forces determine what they can and will do (Sartre 1956, 82). Alternatively, they can escape from their past and future by denying and distancing themselves from the real condition of freedom by acknowledging

that there are several possibilities in the future, but choose to see them as belonging to others in the same situations but not possibilities for themselves (Sartre 1956, 80-2). Lastly, they can also be in bad faith if they deceive themselves that they are pure freedom unlimited by their facticities and externalities. They deny that they have physical limitations, and also refuse to acknowledge that their choices and possibilities are shaped by their past decisions and limited by their situations.

From these examples, it is clear that bad faith is when one recognizes oneself to be free and chooses not to be free in order to escape from their responsibility to choose and make decisions. One is also in bad faith when one recognizes their facticities and surroundings and still chooses to deny that their situations present limitations to their possibilities. Authentic decisions on the other hand, are those made with a clear realization of our human reality “as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is” (Sartre 1956, 98-100). And authentic living is when we embrace this human reality of our situated freedom, and assume responsibilities for the choices we make and do not make. This is because, if Sartre’s conceptualization of the human reality is correct, we are fundamentally beings whose existence precedes essence (Sartre 2001, 43).

### A Happy Life as a Project of Bad Faith

What Sartre’s existentialism has shown us is that in living an authentic life, we will frequently experience our ontological freedom over the meanings and decisions made in our past, present and future possibilities in anguish, and our encounters with others in conflict and hostility as we exist as being-in-the-world-with-others. Psychologists from the subjective well-being (SWB) tradition would suggest that living such a life would mean that one experiences more frequent negative than positive emotions and will likely lead one to have an overall lower subjective assessment of the level of life satisfaction. To escape this, SWB psychologists tell us that there are quantifiable sources of positive emotions such as those derived from material comfort, health, friends and social relations, and a religion that will lead to us having better health, better work performance, have a richer social life, cope better with adversity, and even become more ethical. SWB also prescribes intervention strategies to re-evaluate our life experiences in a positive light.

What this means, at a fundamental level, is that when we value and measure our satisfaction levels of our lives by these indicators, we believe that the sources of happiness or unhappiness lie in our circumstances, and that we need to pursue those sources that we lack in order to increase positive emotions and live satisfactory lives. From a Sartrean viewpoint, SWB is a project of bad faith in form and in substance. First, we deceive ourselves that these indicators are valuable as sources of happiness and as a given fact rather than contingent values. Second, we deceive ourselves that our external circumstances confer feelings and values on our lives instead of us conferring meanings and values through our perspectives about our circumstances. In other words, similar to Sartre’s example of the homosexual who accepts the society’s definition of him as a pederast, we accept the predefined indicators of happiness and see that we need to pursue them to attain happiness. In doing so, we allow essence (of what is a happy life defined by overall positive affects having successfully achieved these indicators) to precede existence (with ontological freedom situated in the world of contingent values). This is because, by focusing on what we have in our lives that gives us positive affects and what constitutes a satisfied life, we do not fully realize our freedom in deciding and inventing these factors or what they mean to us.

In addition, intervention strategies that work to help us re-evaluate our negative affects and low life satisfaction also function like mental behavior mechanism of bad faith – they help in reinforcing the contingent definition and list of indicators of what SWB considers as sources of happiness. In other words, when we evaluate our lives positively, we are firstly reducing ourselves to objects as seen by others’ meaning for us, and secondly, we pursue a life based on others’ expectations of us. We adopt a project of bad faith by accepting and internalising the objective list of factors for happiness maintained by psychologists of SWB.

Other psychologists identify certain character strengths that we can make ourselves to be in order to live a happy life, taking for instance, the Big-Five traits of extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, and low neuroticism suggested by Big-Five theorists such as Robert McCrae and Oliver John (McCrae, 1992). Accordingly, being extroverted for instance makes us happier people because we are likely to have richer social lives.

Others such as Martin Seligman tells us that we can learn to be optimistic by having positive emotions, by being engaged or absorbed in our daily lives, by seeking out and maintaining positive relationships, by having meaning in our lives through developing a sense of belonging and serving something bigger than ourselves, and by being motivated to seek personal accomplishment and by being motivated to seek personal accomplishment. According to these arguments, to be “happy” means to learn to be a “happy” person – reducing ourselves into certain character types or adopting certain patterns of behavior, or in the common way of speaking, we should learn to be optimistic.

Sartre would see little difference between one who tries to be a “happy” person and one who tries to be a waiter. Just like the waiter who plays at his role of being a waiter, we can also play certain character types or undertake certain behaviors to be optimistic and happy. These projects of acquiring traits of a happy person are projects of bad faith because we are precisely trying to be who we are not, while deceiving ourselves that we are not who we are. In this way, what Seligman considers “authentic happiness” leads us to an inauthentic life – one where we do not embrace our responsibility for our free choice because we want to avoid the feeling of angst, where we serve a cause to give meaning to our lives instead of creating one, and where we conform to social expectations and play the roles and lead the lives expected of us in order to maintain positive relationships rather than choose a way of living for ourselves. In fact, what Seligman’s authentic happiness suggests is that the more inauthentic our lives are in the Sartrean sense, the more likely we are to have higher levels of happiness.

It is interesting to note that “authenticity” that Sartre stressed as essential to good faith is also the focus for psychologists who embraced a eudaimonic view of a happy life for they too emphasized the need for consistency between authenticity and well-being. Kennon Sheldon et. al. in “Trait Self and True Self” suggests that there is a dynamic relationship between the Big-Five personality traits and the feeling of being authentic in one’s life. He explains that people are systematically inconsistent in the Big-Five personality traits when they are in different life roles and in different situations, but there is correlational support to suggest that when a person feels a higher degree of authenticity within a particular role, the person has a

higher degree of manifestation of the Big-Five traits (reversing neuroticism) in that role (Sheldon 1997, 1391).

Psychologists who embraced Aristotle’s eudaimonia also stressed that subjective happiness cannot be equated with well-being because it lacks personal expressiveness for authenticity. Alan Waterman for example, casts doubts on measuring positive affect as an indicator of well-being as he stresses that the realisation of one’s goals or purpose in life requires effort and discipline, which may at times conflict with short-term happiness. For instance, Waterman maintains that people’s life activities should be congruent with their deeply held values to be fully engaged. In doing so, people will feel alive and authentic, achieving their personal expressiveness (Waterman, 1993).

Carol Ryff and Burton Singer, in their self-determination theory, also considered the realisation of one’s true potential as paramount, and presented six distinct aspects of human actualization which SWB has failed to consider in their conceptualization of life-satisfaction: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery and positive relatedness. Ryff has also argued that SWB is uninformed by theory and only measured short-term feelings of happiness instead of an enduring idea of well-being characterised by having a sense of purpose and direction, achieving satisfying relationships with others, and gaining a sense of self-realization (Ryff, 1989). Richard Ryan and Edward Deci too, understand well-being to mean the actualization of the self by first fulfilling psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to achieve psychological growth, integrity and well-being, and experiences of vitality and self-congruence (Ryan, 2001).

At this juncture, we can conclude that the three dominant empirical well-being models that placed good mood (SWB), subjective pleasure and satisfaction (desire/satisfaction theories), and objective sources of happiness (WB theories) at the centre of well-being do not reflect our human reality as conceptualized by Sartrean existentialism. The eudaimonic views on well-being identified the value of autonomy to achieve self-actualization as essential to our overall sense of well-being. For Waterman, autonomy is regarded as ‘personal expressiveness’, Ryff sees it as ‘self-determination’, and Ryan and Deci understood it as ‘self-actualization’. They recognise that not all desires, while producing pleasures, produce outcomes that promote

wellness. Their theories focus on living a life in accordance with one's true self, so that happiness and life satisfaction may follow as a result.

The eudaimonic strand of well-being theories is a welcomed shift towards more enduring values that contribute to meaningful lives that may not immediately bring about positive affect. They also help us see how a consistent conceptualization of our idea of 'self' is essential to our well-being. At first glance, the discussion on Sartrean existentialist conception of well-being seems to be similar to eudaimonic theories in its emphasis on authenticity by showing us how the desire/pleasure and satisfaction models of well-being are projects of bad faith. However, not only is existentialist authentic living incompatible with all dominant models of well-being, authenticity also has a more fundamental understanding of freedom for meaningful human existence which eudaimonic theories of well-being lack.

### Autonomy is not Authenticity

We must understand that even when we autonomously choose our life projects, these can still be projects of bad faith if we do not invent our own values and goals but choose within given models of "well-lived lives" instead. As Sartre emphasized, we need to be sceptical of all established value systems. He demonstrated the distinction between authenticity and autonomy with his example of an ethical situation his student faced in his essay, *"Existentialism is a Humanism"*. Torn between his patriotic desire to join the Free French Forces to avenge the death of his brother and his obligation to stay with his mother to help her to live, the student is confronted with two different moralities in this particular concrete situation where no "rule of general morality can show [him] what [he] ought to do." (Sartre 2001, 34). An abstract moral system, such as the deontological theory, will not be able to guide him in making a choice between his patriotism and his personal obligation and devotion. And even if he sought advice, his choice of counsel would have been based on the choice he has already made between these options. Sartre thus argues that we have to always invent a value in each particular situation, and this act of invention first stems from the responsibility we take for our freedom in situations. And what matters is that "the invention is made in the name of freedom" given that there can be "no other end and aim" but freedom itself as "the foundation of all val-

ues" (Sartre 2001, 43).

If freedom is indeed accepted as more fundamental than any other values, then Sartre may be right to argue that living authentically means to continuously invent life projects and take the responsibility to act in situations – or which he calls, living with an "ethic of action and self-commitment" (Sartre 2001, 38). Authenticity does not involve adopting and applying a pre-defined ethical system to situations because ethical systems do not tell us how we should behave since they are "conceived of in terms of some status quo" of an ideal goal of what man and values ought-to-be (Sartre 1992, 103). True ethics on the other hand, is a confrontation of each situation that leaves us with the question of what to do under such-and-such circumstances. In fact, he argues that "[t]here would be no ethics if man was not a question in his being, if existence did not precede essence" (Sartre 1992, 33). For Sartre's student, he can only make a choice in his circumstances by inventing a value to help him decide since "[n]o rule of general morality can show [him] what [he] ought to do" (Sartre 2001, 34).

Given that we must always invent values to live authentically, then we must also invent what a flourishing life means for us individually as well. Ryff's Psychological Well-Being (PWB) for instance specifies that there are six distinctive aspects of human actualization: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, and positive relatedness. But if we did not invent and define what well-being means for us freely, how authentic will our lives be if we were to live by these measurements? We may agree that we have freely chosen to adopt these established standards (in fact, we may be more persuaded by psychological findings that shows high correlation), but Sartre emphasized that being autonomous means to invent values, standards and criteria for ourselves, and not simply to choose freely within some pre-established framework of values, standards and criteria. This is because the act of invention is what puts freedom into action, but if we were to choose within the given, we are not truly free.

Sartre's notion of freedom to invent makes a crucial contribution to our understanding of how freely choosing a particular flourishing life is not the same as inventing what a flourishing life is for us. Autonomy emphasized in eudaimonic psychology cannot be understood in the same way as authenticity. A clos-

er look shows us that autonomy is typically understood in two ways: *freedom from* and *freedom to*. In the first sense, we are free to act on a set of given choices in some aspects of our lives when we are free from interferences. In the second sense, we are free to be our own master when we act on our choices. But on both accounts, we can be our own master without necessarily having the *freedom of choice*. To chart my personal growth and to set my own life purpose require that I have the freedom from interference in my choices of what these goals constitute and perhaps also enabling factors that a society can provide to help me achieve them. However, for Sartre, there is a more fundamental level of freedom, that is, the *freedom of creating one's own choices* and not only to choose freely within given choices. True freedom is concerned with defining our possibilities and choices, and not the freedom to exercise our choices within predefined possibilities. Authenticity means to define by inventing our own set of values in morality and life choices that we would consider as flourishing, or even to choose other goals besides flourishing or happiness as more valuable.

What Sartre's more fundamental idea of freedom shows us is that we should not be satisfied with having autonomy within circumscribed contexts. More importantly, we should reject any essence that we define ourselves by, such as Waterman's idea that we all have deeply held values that need personal expressiveness, or an idea of true potential that Ryff and Singer believe in their self-determination theory. If it is true that human existence is only authentic when we invent and reinvent what our existence means, then following our 'true self' as described by the psychologists isn't sufficient to qualify for authenticity.

### Negative Emotions and Authentic Life

Given that authenticity is fundamental for the existentialist, can existentialists living a life of anguish be happy? In *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions*, Sartre explains that our emotions are revelations of our human reality and not an effect of human reality (Sartre 2006, 12). Emotions are unreflected consciousness because the object it intends is the transcendent object in the world. The 'I' only emerges through reflecting on unreflected consciousness. In this mode, the 'I' is a state of self-consciousness. In Sartre's example of 'hate' and 'disgust', he explains that we can be aware of our hate, but we are not our hate because the 'I' that is hating

only emerges upon reflection on our feelings of disgust. Our feeling of disgust is thus an unmediated and unreflected consciousness that aims only at revealing the properties and substances of the object-in-the-world. Our hatred on the other hand, is a reflected consciousness, a transcendent object to be grasped (Sartre 1956, 473).

If we were to understand emotions as modes of apprehension and not mere feelings, Sartre thinks that we can transform our world. Apprehension has two features – intentionality, which refers to directing at (the world); and organisation, where the world is arranged as background to the object of intention. Sartre gives us an example to illustrate how our emotions reveal our apprehension of the world around us: I feel discouraged by the boulder before me because it fixes limits to my desire to climb the mountain. I am disappointed with myself because it reveals facts about my physical limits (my short limbs, my lack of skill and techniques, my lack of upper body strength). I feel disappointed because I have made the object of intention the transcendence of the situation (that is, the hiking route which is now being presented with an obstacle) with the whole forest including my physical body, organised as background to this boulder-as-obstacle. In other words, the boulder as obstacle reveals to me "the way I stand in relation to the ends which I assign myself" (Sartre 1956, 628). Yet, from this perspective, I also realize that the boulder is a limitation only within this project, and if I was to transform my choice of possible (example, to enjoy nature), the way the forest is organised is also transformed for me. In fact, my success at transforming the object of intention and organization of the world may be experienced as delight instead.

Through this example, we see that emotions are not physiological responses to some perceived state of affairs (Sartre 2006, 58-60). Instead, our emotions reveal how we experience our world as modified by our consciousness. Furthermore, Sartre argues that emotions have a transformative quality. We have the ability to transform the world by transforming our intended projects, and this includes the negative emotions that we reveal about the world, our situations, and our relations with others. This is because we have freedom in inventing meanings of the situations, and freedom in choosing new ends and new possibilities in achieving these projects.

Emotions are not instincts or habits, and they are also not calculated actions. Rather, they are our responses to situations modified by consciousness. Sartre uses the example of anger to illustrate how it signifies an escape from difficult situations such as resorting to inferior alternatives (for example, insulting or threatening) towards someone who mocks us when we fail to respond with wit. Another example Sartre gave was the patient escaping from the unbearable tension in her therapy session by breaking down and exaggerating her weakness to distract the therapist from the task at hand. In these examples, the intentional character of emotions is understood in terms of their aim of transcending situations. Our emotions are accompanied by belief and not mere behavior either. Behavior that is unaccompanied by any belief is play-acting, for example, the pretense of being happy is to manifest certain outward display of delight – whistling, laughing, dancing. This behavior according to Sartre is merely signification since it is behavior without belief and merely addresses the real world with false qualities. For emotions to have the ability to transform our relationship with the world, they need to be also in a state of belief and not manifest behavior only (Sartre 2006, 49).

Whether we transform the world by transforming our choice of what our possibilities are, or transform ourselves in the way we relate to the world, it is clear according to Sartre, that our emotions reflect how we apprehend and respond to our world and our world-with-others-like-us. This means that we can choose to respond with optimism to create and invent meanings and values to redefine our world when we experience our abandonment in a value-contingent world in despair. And our anger at situations of injustice has the potential to provoke us to overthrow exploitative systems to protect others-who-are-like-us. We may also respond through actions to improve lives because we experience sadness or shame when we realise our apathetic reaction towards the ills in the world. Lastly, we may respond in anger, determined to remake a world with joy and love when we experience fear in the face of violence to our ordinary lives today.

Thus, if Sartre was correct regarding the transformative qualities of our emotions, then it is possible that our negative emotions can reveal to us what, in each situation we encounter, needs to be challenged, changed and improved. Our negative emotions can also reveal to us that the authentic mode of life can

enhance our well-being compared to a continuous pursuit of a transitory state of positive emotions. In fact, embracing these negative emotions should be the first step in acknowledging our ontological freedom and recognizing the need to take responsibility for our responses to world by moving us to apprehend and respond to world positively. And it is this experience of our abandonment in a value-contingent world in despair and our ontological freedom in angst that we are able to respond with optimism to create and invent meanings and values in our world. In short, embracing our negative emotions can move us to create what we consider to be a “happier” world.

## Conclusion

From the perspective of Sartre’s existentialist philosophy, this paper has shown that the ideas of “happiness” pursued by the empirical models of well-being are projects of bad faith, and those subscribing to models of a “happy person” understood autonomy within the freedom to pursue predefined values and goals instead of the freedom of inventing afresh. Authentic living, according to Sartre, is about existing responsibly – inventing and giving values and meanings in our every encounter with others, in every decision we make and the projects we undertake. Thus, existentialists too, can embrace their experiences of dread and despair, transform their emotions of angst and anxiety and create new meanings and values for the world.

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