

Ethics in Sartre's Existentialist Drama : A Study of The Flies and Men Without Shadows

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Abstract: In today's diverse and rapidly changing society, traditional values and ethical perspectives are under challenge. The pressure of social competition has led many to experience a sense of emptiness and a loss of meaning in life. Sartre's existentialist philosophy, particularly the ethical views presented in his drama, provides a new perspective for exploring human freedom, responsibility, and the meaning of life. Based on an overview of the philosophical foundation of Sartre's existentialist ethics, this paper analyzes his two plays *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows* in-depth. It explores the dimensions of freedom, responsibility, death, and the relationship between individual and others, revealing how Sartre portrays his core existentialist ethical ideas through the choices and conflicts of the characters. At the same time, the paper discusses the social and historical significance of Sartre's existentialist drama and its implications for modern ethics. It points out that Sartre's ethical views challenge traditional ethics and offer new insights into modern ethical dilemmas, particularly in the relationship between individual freedom and social responsibility, providing guidance for moral judgment and choice in contemporary society.

Keywords: Sartre, existentialism, ethics, drama

1. Introduction

Throughout the long history of human thought, ethics has always been a core topic in philosophy and literature. It not only concerns the moral principles of individual behavior but also touches on the fundamental meaning of human existence. In the mid-20th century, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy injected new vitality into ethical thinking. Sartre's existentialist ethics, with its profound insights into individual freedom, responsibility, and subjective choice, opened new paths for modern ethical theory. His plays, particularly *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows*, are the most vivid and concrete expressions of this philosophical thought.

Sartre's dramatic works are not only classics in literature but also profound interpretations of existentialist ethics. By placing characters in extreme situations, these works show the struggles and choices individuals face when confronting moral dilemmas, thus provoking deep reflections on freedom, responsibility, and the meaning of life from the audience and readers. For Sartre, drama is no longer just a tool for entertainment or moral teaching, but a vehicle for philosophical reflection, offering a deep analysis of human nature and social reality.

In today's world, as society rapidly changes and traditional values continue to be challenged, we are once again confronted with numerous ethical dilemmas. Sartre's existentialist ethics and his plays

provide a unique perspective that helps us reassess the complex relationship between the individual and society, as well as between freedom and responsibility. By deeply analyzing Sartre's dramatic works, we not only gain a better understanding of his philosophical ideas but also find a new ethical framework in modern society, offering valuable insights for individuals' moral choices and the ethical reconstruction of society.

This paper will outline the philosophical foundations of Sartre's existentialist ethics, explore the ethical themes in *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows*, and discuss how Sartre uses dramatic characters' choices and conflicts to challenge traditional ethics and redefine modern ethical theory. Furthermore, the paper will examine the contemporary relevance of Sartre's dramas, providing a new perspective for moral direction in today's complex and ever-changing world.

2. Overview of Sartre's Existentialist Ethics

2.1. The Philosophical Foundation of Sartre's Existentialist Ethics

Atheistic existentialism, represented by thinkers like Sartre, asserts that "existence precedes essence." This foundational principle is also the bedrock of Sartre's existentialist ethics. Sartre contends that humans do not possess an inherent, predetermined essence. There is no God to define a universal human nature, meaning there is no such thing as an essential "human nature." Man exists first, then defines himself through his actions and choices. Existence is not determined by any prior essence but is instead defined in practice through individual action and decision. This highlights the subjectivity inherent in existentialist philosophy.[1]

Existence preceding essence implies human freedom—an absolute freedom. This freedom means that no universal standards exist for humans to rely on; instead, individuals must create their essence through their own choices and actions. Moreover, individuals are responsible for all their actions. Every time a choice is made, one affirms the value of that choice's outcome, which is also a call to all of humanity. Thus, humans are not only responsible for themselves but for all of humanity.

Furthermore, Sartre differentiates between two types of being: "being in-itself" and "being for-itself". Being in-itself is the objective existence of things, independent of consciousness, static, and incapable of being truly known—"it is what it is." In contrast, being for-itself refers to the conscious existence of humans, which is constantly in flux and negation, transcending its own conditions—"it is what it is not, and it is not what it is." [2] This distinction underscores human creativity and transcendence, emphasizing the free nature of human existence and providing the philosophical foundation for Sartre's existentialist ethics.

2.2. Core Ideas of Sartre's Existentialist Ethics

At the heart of Sartre's existentialist ethics is the concept of freedom, which is realized through individual choice. Humans are born free, and through each successive choice, they create their essence according to their subjective will, without any external forces determining or limiting them. Sartre emphasizes the absolute nature of human freedom, asserting that this freedom is "condemned"—humans cannot escape it. Therefore, individuals are continually called upon to make choices that shape their identity, a process that is unavoidable. Even when one chooses not to make a decision, that in itself is a choice, and through this, one still exercises their freedom.

Sartre's existential ethics maintains an inseparable connection between freedom and responsibility. He argues that human freedom, at its core, is a matter of personal autonomous action, and thus one must bear the corresponding responsibility. This responsibility encompasses accountability for one's own actions, as well as the broader responsibility toward others and society. Sartre further emphasizes that, when faced with choices, individuals should prioritize their self-defined values, but they must

also consider the interests of others and society as a whole, making these considerations a crucial factor in their decision-making.[3]

Sartre contends that morality is concrete, based on the specific context of an individual's existence. The concrete nature of personal existence determines the concrete nature of moral actions. In his unfinished manuscript *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Sartre defines existentialist morality as "a concrete morality." He rejects universal, abstract moral principles and argues that moral judgment should be based on the specific problems faced by individuals in particular contexts.[4] To Sartre, morality is not a universal norm or standard; it is the individual's choice made in a given situation, which must be adapted to their actual survival circumstances and needs. As such, Sartre's existentialist ethics stresses the flexibility and dynamism of moral practice, opposing rigid dogmatism and traditional morality rooted in universal human nature.

Morality is also subjective. Moral judgment depends entirely on the individual's subjective consciousness, without any absolute moral standard. Sartre asserts that, in the absence of God or any transcendental moral framework, individuals must rely on their own free will to legislate for themselves, making moral decisions based on their understanding and judgment. In doing so, individuals also take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. When making choices, the only measure of value is whether one has realized their own freedom. This process of self-legislation not only embodies individual freedom but also serves as the source of moral responsibility, as the individual, in choosing for themselves, is also setting an example for others. This perspective grants individuals tremendous freedom but also imposes significant responsibility, highlighting the active and creative nature of moral choices.

2.3. Existentialist Drama as a Medium for Sartre's Philosophical Ethics

Sartre integrated his existentialist philosophy into the creation of dramatic literature, developing a distinctive genre of "situation plays." These situation plays are not only highly artistic and engaging but also deeply reflect Sartre's unique insights into human nature, society, and morality, making them an essential vehicle for conveying his existentialist ethics.[5]

Unlike traditional drama, which often emphasizes character development, Sartre's existentialist drama centers on the situations characters face. He frequently places his characters in extreme situations, forcing them to make self-defining choices through intense conflict and struggle. This approach allows Sartre to explore the core ethical issues of his philosophy.

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre pointed out that while universal human nature does not exist, human beings' situations do share commonalities—people are inevitably bound by various limitations. However, it is precisely within such constrained situations that individuals must make free choices. As Sartre observed, "great tragedies make human freedom their central force," and "situation (or predicament) is a call." It demands that people make choices, and this act of choosing is not only a way out of a dilemma but also a decision about one's own life.

In Sartre's existentialist situation plays, although the dilemmas characters face are unique to their circumstances, the existential conflicts and obstacles they encounter often have universal significance. These struggles not only reflect the personal dilemmas of characters in specific contexts but also reveal the common existential and ethical problems faced by all humans. Sartre's classic plays, *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows*, place the main characters in extreme situations, such as dictatorial regimes and violent oppression, forcing them to use their freedom to make choices and act. The characters' painful struggles and difficult decisions not only evoke deep empathy from the audience but also encourage them to turn their gaze inward, reflecting on their own existence and moral choices.

3. Ethics in *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows*

3.1. Ethics in *The Flies*

Sartre's 1943 play *The Flies*, based on ancient Greek mythology, explores themes of free choice, the weight of responsibility, and human subjectivity. It embodies existentialism's deep reflection on traditional ethics and serves as a powerful cry during the war.

3.1.1. The Struggle for Freedom

Existentialism emphasizes freedom as the freedom to choose and act.[6] In *The Flies*, this idea is vividly embodied in the experiences of the protagonist, Orestes. Having been in exile since his childhood, Orestes is free from the constraints of people, rules, and beliefs. Faced with limitless possibilities, Orestes finds his freedom as delicate as a spider's thread—both beautiful and hollow. While he treasures this unrestrained freedom, he secretly envies those whose lives have meaning and direction. He longs to form a deeper connection with his homeland of Argos and its people, hoping to find a path uniquely his own among the thousands of possible routes. Orestes' freedom can only find its true meaning through his choices and actions.

At the same time, Orestes begins to question the deception and restraint imposed by the gods, power, and norms. He sees that under the rule of Jupiter and the tyrants, people live in confusion, wallowing in their past and regrets. His sister Electra, burning with a desire for revenge and contempt for authority, strives to overthrow the tyranny, which deeply affects him. Orestes no longer fears Jupiter's commands or threats because the gods created him and gave him freedom, freeing him from servitude to them. He ultimately decides to avenge his father by killing his mother and the brutal usurper, thereby proving the freedom and value of his existence. Through revenge, Orestes not only practices his freedom of choice but also demonstrates the power of individual consciousness that existentialism emphasizes.

3.1.2. The Weight of Responsibility

Orestes' choices and actions give his life weight—this is the weight of responsibility. From then on, his freedom is no longer light and airy but rooted in reality. It is the personal choices and the responsibility they entail that shape the value and meaning of our lives. By committing regicide, Orestes chooses a clear path for his life, a path of his own choosing. Thus, in the face of the pressures from the past, family, and society, he must uphold his decision and bear the consequences of his actions, even if it means the betrayal of his sister Electra or being scorned and cast out by the people of Argos. The weight of responsibility follows him like a shadow, permeating every decision and choice he makes. Yet, even the temptations of the Furies cannot make him abandon his will and descend into remorse and fear, because he knows that his responsibility is unavoidable.

On the other hand, Orestes' act of vengeance profoundly affects those around him and changes his relationships with others. He not only bears the regrets of the entire city but also exposes their falsehoods and pretensions regarding freedom, forcing them to confront the truth. Orestes' responsibility is not just personal; it connects him to his people. This kind of responsibility, though heavy, is also invaluable. Through the development of Orestes' character, Sartre explores the close connection between individual freedom and responsibility, revealing the ethical significance hidden behind responsibility.

3.1.3. Subjective Initiative

Orestes' free choice transcends the traditional moral dichotomy of good and evil. His actions are not a blind adherence to the ancient justice of family revenge but a conscious, active choice made after his awakening of self-awareness. It is an exploration and affirmation of freedom and self-worth amid the encirclement of family, society, and authoritarianism. Orestes' character challenges traditional ethical concepts, sparking deep reflections on moral subjectivity in readers and audiences. In existentialist ethics, individual choice is no longer bound by any external norms or regulations; moral judgment depends entirely on the individual's free will and choice, and therefore, each person must bear the consequences of their actions. This interdependent relationship between freedom and responsibility is firmly built on personal subjective initiative.

After avenging his father, Orestes does not retreat or fall into despair; instead, he faces the consequences of his choices with courage. Though burdened with the weight of his fate, he feels neither fear nor regret. On the contrary, each choice he makes is both a reckoning with the past and a shaping of the future. From this perspective, Sartre's existentialism is optimistic and future-oriented.[7] While existentialism acknowledges the absurdity and uncertainty of life, it simultaneously empowers individuals, emphasizing personal agency, and helping people find meaning in existence amidst the randomness of fate.

3.2. Ethics in Men Without Shadows

Sartre's postwar play *Men Without Shadows* shifts its focus to modern society, depicting the intense conflicts and struggles of members of a resistance group facing death. Through a realist lens, it presents reflections on the paradoxes of freedom and death, the relationships between individuals and others, and other ethical issues, further enriching the content of existentialist drama.

3.2.1. Death and Freedom

Death is the ultimate absurdity. It is the end of life, the negation of existence and hope. Death is inherent to humanity, and in *Men Without Shadows*, the resistance fighters face this inevitable, brutal fate. In truth, whether they confess or not, the Nazis are determined to end their lives. At the play's conclusion, the resistance fighters endure severe mental and physical torture, eventually deciding to offer false information in exchange for a chance at survival. Despite this, Sartre still gives them an absurd ending—unprepared, they are met by the arrival of bullets. This not only reveals the impermanence of life but also mocks humanity's desperate yearning for hope in extreme circumstances.

Although death is unavoidable, people do not want their lives to be meaningless. Life is finite, but humans possess absolute freedom. People pursue meaningful lives and aim to create value through their free choices, fighting against the absurdity of death. When the resistance fighters are first captured, they have no useful information to give. They cannot accept the idea of dying without purpose, and they feel immense pain, despair, even as though they are “superfluous.” However, they must continue to resist, because surrendering would mean fully accepting and recognizing the course of fate, denying the freedom and potential they carry.

The arrival of Jean lends meaning to their sacrifice. They no longer die without reason but do so in order to protect Jean's secret and to ensure the continuation of the resistance. In such extreme circumstances, the resistance fighters realize that the meaning of survival also becomes the reason for their death. Resistance and unwavering defiance give their lives value, but they also lead them toward death, as the Nazis will not spare those who oppose them.

As the enemy's torture intensifies, the resistance fighters must rely on their own will and make difficult, life-or-death decisions. Sorbier, unable to endure the brutal interrogation, refuses to betray

his comrades and jumps to his death. This is his final and most decisive choice, asserting his freedom while also revealing his deep despair. François follows his survival instinct, and the other fighters quickly make their choice—to strangle a young boy to prevent him from revealing Jean's information.

Free individuals struggle desperately between life and death. One cannot escape the absurdity of death, but through their freedom and the accompanying choices and actions, individuals create meaning for their lives. The desire for freedom and the fear of death intertwine, creating a complex ethical dilemma. *Men Without Shadows* presents both the resistance to death and the affirmation of the value of life, embodying existentialist ethics' profound understanding of freedom and death.

3.2.2. The Individual and Others

In *Men Without Shadows*, Sartre not only explores the individual's relationship with death but also delves into the interaction and complex relationship between the individual and others.

Human existence is inherently lonely, as Sartre expresses in another play, *No Exit*, with the famous line "Hell is other people." In the extreme situation of being imprisoned by the enemy, each resistance fighter must face their own isolation. Their pain and fear cannot be fully shared with others, and this loneliness intensifies their inner despair. The torture and even the death of the resistance fighters deepen the suffering of the survivors, even though this was not their initial purpose in choosing self-sacrifice. This series of contradictions reveals the complex relationship between individual fate and others. Several resistance fighters were originally close comrades, but when Jean needs protection and others are brutally tortured, inevitably facing death, this stark contrast creates a rift among them. Jean is caught in a dilemma: for the sake of the organization and to ensure her comrades die with meaning, she can only watch them suffer. The moral dilemma she faces brings her spiritual pain, which is no less than that of the others, but their different circumstances prevent mutual understanding.[8]

Though individual existence is solitary, there is also a need to connect with others. There is a subtle tension between the individual and others: on one hand, the individual must take responsibility for their choices; on the other hand, their choices profoundly affect the fate of others and the collective, thus they must bear collective responsibility. It is within this tension that the characters experience the struggle of existence—fighting for individual freedom while paying the price for others. When the resistance fighters must make life-or-death choices, their decisions are not only for themselves but also for the collective that struggles, for the entire resistance movement, and for their shared battle against the absurd. Their actions reflect both individual free will and the acknowledgment of collective responsibility.

Sorbier and François's choices highlight the connection and conflict between personal will and collective interests. Sorbier's suicide is his final declaration of personal freedom; on the other hand, by sacrificing himself, he protects the organization's secret, uniting individual choice with collective responsibility. François's instinct to survive, though driven by primal urges, also reflects his moral struggle within the collective; the survival of the individual and the survival of the collective are not always aligned and must be weighed carefully in decision-making. When the other fighters decide to strangle François, they are protecting the collective secret, but this brutal act forces them to confront moral scrutiny. Although there are no absolute moral standards, each person faces intense inner conflict.

3.3. Comparative Analysis of *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows*

As dramatic vehicles for Sartre's ethical philosophy, *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows* explore the nature of morality, freedom, responsibility, and other ethical issues and concepts through the depiction of human struggles and choices in specific situations. At the same time, both works reveal

existentialist reflections on the delicate relationship between freedom and responsibility, and between the individual and the collective, from different perspectives.

3.3.1. Concrete, Subjective Morality

In Sartre's plays, morality is no longer an abstract code of law but is rooted in specific situations and the subjective judgments arising from the individual's internal needs. In *The Flies*, Orestes' struggle, faced with the complex intertwining of personal vendettas and national grievances, does not arise from external moral norms or authority but from personal reflection and self-chosen actions after the awakening of his consciousness. Traditional dogmas of good and evil no longer bind Orestes. He must rely solely on his own strength to recognize what truly matters to him and, from there, make a choice that holds personal significance.

Similarly, in *Men Without Shadows*, the characters' life-or-death decisions also show the subjectivity of morality—whether choosing to die to protect a secret or divulge information to survive, their decisions are grounded in the extreme situations they face and their internal experiences, rather than being based on external, generalized definitions of right and wrong, good and evil. Through the characters' inner struggles and outward actions, existentialist drama presents the complexity of morality and the diversity of individual choices, emphasizing the subjectivity and situational nature of moral judgment and decisions.

3.3.2. Freedom

Sartre's plays embody the fundamental existentialist claim about freedom: this freedom is not relative but an absolute, inescapable burden that humans must carry from birth.

In *The Flies*, the people of Argos refuse to bear their freedom and would rather immerse themselves in the guilt and regret of the past. Complete autonomy and infinite possibilities frighten them, so they must submit to some illusory authority to find inner peace. However, whether it is the gods or the tyrants, they are merely facades to cover up the true nature of freedom. Orestes acknowledges his freedom, and in doing so, all forms of power before him appear empty and powerless. His choices and actions not only affirm his personal freedom but also liberate the people of Argos from their self-deceptive ignorance. As Orestes leaves, accompanied by the swarming flies, he takes with him their remorse and worries, leaving behind freedom and a new life.

In *Men Without Shadows*, after the resistance fighters are captured, they begin to reflect on their past actions. They obeyed their superiors' orders, continued to fight, and caused the pointless deaths of civilians, even children and women, yet in the end, they could not escape failure and capture. While others still blame their superiors' unbreakable commands, Sorbier and Henri expose the truth they refuse to face—the reality is that this was entirely their own fault, because humans can and must make decisions based on their own free will. Since humans are absolutely free, all external demands and norms are insufficient to rely on or become barriers. It is the individual who determines their destiny, not the destiny that determines the individual.

The protagonist Orestes in *The Flies* enters the city of Argos as a foreigner, and he was never meant to become entangled in the power struggles and family vendettas; the resistance fighters in *Men Without Shadows*, however, are trapped from the beginning. The former, at least, can move freely, while the latter is confined and faces imminent death. Despite this, Sartre argues that both are equally free. Regardless of external threats and pressures, a person has absolute agency over their choices and acts according to their own will. In extreme circumstances, the importance of freedom of choice is even more pronounced, as life and death hinge on a single decision.

3.3.3. Responsibility and Action

The value of freedom is concretely realized through human action and responsibility. Both *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows* explore the topic of responsibility, examining it from both individual and collective perspectives.

The Flies mainly focuses on individual responsibility. In this play, Sartre uses the metaphor of a "path" to highlight the importance of choice and responsibility. At the beginning of the play, Orestes demonstrates a purposeless, weightless freedom that does not give meaning to his life. It is not until he embarks on the irreversible path of vengeance, turning his freedom into action and bearing the weight of responsibility, that he truly realizes the value of freedom. Orestes is willing to confront both his inner conflict and external pressures, gradually realizing that his actions will directly affect those around him, deeply linking him to the people of Argos. Through Orestes' struggle, Sartre illustrates the close relationship between freedom and responsibility, showing that the consequences of individual choices and actions are unavoidable.

In *Men Without Shadows*, the exploration of responsibility goes deeper, addressing broader collective concerns. The resistance fighters face not only their personal life-or-death test but also a profound reflection and consideration of collective responsibility. Freedom enables individuals to make choices, while responsibility is the commitment and accountability for those choices. In the prison cell, facing cruel interrogation, the resistance fighters' choices impact not only their own survival but also Jean's life, the future of the entire resistance movement, and even the fate of all humanity. Responsibility is not just about personal accountability; it concerns the collective, society, and even the mission of all humanity. Only by confronting it can the true value of existence be realized.

4. The Significance of Sartre's Existentialist Drama

4.1. The Impact of Sartre's Drama on Society at the Time

Sartre's dramas not only serve as an artistic expression of his existential philosophy but also had a significant impact on society during his time. During and after World War II in France, the country was in a state of social turmoil, with people facing a psychological crisis. Sartre's plays, through their literary form, reflected the sharp social issues of the time, prompting deep reflection on themes of freedom, action, responsibility, and morality.

4.1.1. Historical Significance

Sartre's plays are deeply rooted in their historical context. *The Flies* was written during World War II, when France was under Nazi occupation, and its people lived in fear and regret, with the Vichy government exploiting this psychological state to enslave the French. In this play, Sartre creates a version of Orestes that is vastly different from the classical Greek myth, presenting him as a brave and "self-determined" hero, calling upon the people to rise up against the Nazi oppression. During the war, *The Flies* provoked thoughts about freedom: if people always have the freedom to choose, then did surrender and submission represent a collective freedom chosen by the French people? Should they be held accountable for the tyranny they endured? After the war, the play prompted further reflections on how people should reckon with their past after the fall of an authoritarian regime. How should they confront their humiliating history—through guilt, regret, revenge, or forgiveness?[9]

Men Without Shadows was written shortly after the end of World War II. The play directly draws from reality, recreating scenes from the resistance movement to respond to the spiritual confusion and unrest in post-war French society. It is closely tied to Sartre's personal experiences—having served in the military and been captured by the German forces, he integrates his feelings and experiences from the battlefield and concentration camps, which adds to its emotional impact. The

trauma caused by the war placed Western society in numerous ethical and moral dilemmas, with a new order and value system urgently needing to be constructed. As a work from the era of post-war reconstruction, this play touches on the pain and loss of French society, presenting a profound existential reflection on human freedom, responsibility, and dignity, offering new perspectives and inspiration for modern ethics.

4.1.2. Engaged Literature

Sartre was not only a philosopher but also a writer and social activist. His plays were not merely artistic displays; they were profound reflections and critiques of the social realities of the time. In 1945, Sartre founded the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, where, in the editorial of its first issue, he advocated for the concept of engaged literature. Later, in his 1948 essay *What is Literature?*, he further explained this idea, arguing that literature should engage with life and authentically reflect the times. Writers, by exposing reality, act in the process of revealing it and thus transcend it. Sartre elaborates on the principles of engaged literature in his works: "Literature throws you into battle; writing is a way of demanding freedom; once you begin writing, whether you like it or not, you have already intervened."

Sartre's theory of engaged literature emphasized the importance of the writer's social responsibility and action. He believed that prose, as a literary form, achieves its purpose of action by exposing reality, thus assuming responsibility for action. Sartre's literary works, including *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows*, embodied his theory of engaged literature. These plays often revealed societal injustice and oppression, reflecting the social realities of the time. They not only questioned political systems but also provided reflections on the human condition.

Through drama, Sartre merged existential philosophy with contemporary issues, creating a strong sense of social critique. This awareness encouraged audiences to reflect on their own actions and social responsibilities, raising new questions about freedom, morality, and responsibility, and sparking a re-examination of ethical viewpoints. The struggles and conflicts on stage became microcosms of the social conditions of the time, elevating Sartre's plays beyond mere artistic works to become reflections and interventions in the era.

4.2. The Ethical Implications of Sartre's Drama for Modern Ethics

Sartre's existentialist drama not only mirrored the political and social situation of the time but also had a profound impact on modern ethics, sparking widespread reflection in 20th-century French society. Through plays like *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows*, Sartre challenged traditional ethical concepts, offering an existentialist perspective that provided valuable insights into contemporary ethical thought.

4.2.1. Traditional Ethical Concepts

Traditional ethical concepts have emerged through history and have gradually solidified through generations of transmission. These ideas are often based on universal principles or religious doctrines, emphasizing the absoluteness of moral norms. In this view, morality is abstracted into pairs of opposing concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, with a strict binary opposition. Certain actions are seen as inherently good or evil, and an individual's moral judgments and choices are fixed within these absolute standards.

Moreover, traditional ethics often rely on a universal conception of human nature, assuming a fixed, unchanging essence of humanity. It holds that all people should adhere to the same moral standards, and deviations from these standards are considered moral transgressions. This view places

individuals under universal, a priori authority, disregarding personal agency and failing to consider the individual's differences or the influence of their social context on their moral judgments.

Under the influence of universal authority, traditional ethics tends to treat freedom as relative. The mainstream ethical views in traditional societies often regard freedom as a restricted right, bound by societal norms and moral principles. People are expected to exercise their freedom within the constraints of established moral rules and behavioral codes. Therefore, freedom in traditional ethics is not an unrestricted right but must find its expression within the framework of social constraints. In traditional ethics, freedom thus carries the characteristics of discipline and definition.

When facing complex social realities or moral dilemmas, such an absolute ethical perspective can appear rigid and lacks a nuanced understanding of individual situations. In specific circumstances, individuals may need to make difficult choices outside the conventional moral framework, but traditional ethics may fail to provide appropriate guidance. In the 20th century, the two World Wars forced people to confront brutal moral dilemmas, and the universal notions of human nature and good-evil morality were severely challenged.

4.2.2. Sartre's Existentialist Ethical Breakthrough and Innovation

Sartre's existentialist ethics posed a profound challenge to traditional ethical views. He argued that "existence precedes essence," rejecting the idea that human nature is inherently given. Sartre emphasized that humans possess absolute freedom, which manifests as the ability to make autonomous choices and create themselves. He advocated that humans must confront their freedom resolutely. In various aspects of life—values, ways of living, etc.—people can make choices based on personal will, creating a life that is truly their own through action.

In Sartre's existentialist ethics, human freedom is the core, and responsibility is the inevitable consequence of that freedom of choice. Sartre argued that while individuals enjoy freedom, they must also have the courage to bear the responsibility that comes with it. He highlighted two aspects of responsibility: responsibility to oneself and responsibility to others and society. In contemporary society, technological and media developments have brought people closer together, making individual relationships with others and society more intricate and complex. The importance of social responsibility has become increasingly apparent. Understanding the dialectical relationship between freedom and responsibility is crucial for fostering individual growth and societal progress.

Sartre challenged the universal principles of traditional ethics. He denied any a priori authority and the existence of a universal human nature, opposing the abstraction of moral principles. In his existentialist ethics, moral judgment and choice are seen as dynamic, context-specific processes that focus on personal strength and the impact of specific circumstances on the individual, rather than relying on fixed, absolute standards.

Sartre's existentialist ethics provides a new perspective for modern ethical dilemmas, allowing individuals to approach complex moral decisions from the standpoint of personal differences and environmental factors, thereby understanding the relativity of morality. He encouraged people to consider their personal circumstances and the consequences of their actions when making choices, seeking a moral approach that is consistent with their experiences. By emphasizing human freedom, Sartre tightly connected personal choice with responsibility, advancing a more comprehensive understanding of morality and responsibility.

Additionally, Sartre's existentialist ethics explored the complex relationship between individuals and others, providing a deeper framework for modern ethical thinking. His famous dictum from *No Exit*, "Hell is other people," highlights the profound contradiction between personal freedom and the freedom of others under their gaze. On the other hand, the relationship between individuals and the collective is not a simple opposition but an interdependent and mutually constrained one. Sartre

stressed that when making choices, individuals must consider the impact on others and the collective, while respecting the freedom and choices of others.

Thus, Sartre's ethics not only broke through the limitations of traditional ethical concepts but also offered flexible and diverse insights for modern ethics. His thinking made ethical reflection more practical, emphasizing individual agency and dignity in the moral system of modern society.

5. Conclusion

Sartre's plays represent a deep integration of philosophy and art, vividly reflecting his existentialist ethical views. This paper explores the fundamental content of Sartre's existentialist ethics through the examples of *The Flies* and *Men Without Shadows*. Sartre argued that "existence precedes essence," rejecting a priori values and fixed moral codes, emphasizing that human choices arise from freedom and are based on specific contexts. In his plays, Sartre focuses on situations rather than character traits; the characters are in desperate circumstances but possess freedom and face dilemmas that reveal the profound connection between freedom and responsibility, as well as the complex contradictions between individuals and others. The freedom Sartre portrays is a lonely one—opposing authority, relying on the self, but through choice and action, the self becomes tightly interwoven with others and society. His plays reflect the distinctive features of the era, addressing themes like war and oppression, and highlighting the tension between power and freedom, and between individuals and the collective in modern society. Sartre's dramas offer flexible possibilities for modern ethics, emphasizing human agency and dignity. However, this study has only analyzed two works, and a more comprehensive exploration of existentialist ethics could include a wider range of Sartre's works and contemporary issues, providing new solutions to real-world ethical dilemmas.

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