**Inauthenticity and Violence: a Critique of Sartre’s Portrait of the Anti-Semite**

Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive[[1]](#footnote-1)* was well received for its manifest solidarity and good intentions towards Jews yet criticized for its analysis of the Jew’s situation and its ignorance of any positive content of Jewish history, culture and religion. This aspect of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, only met a growing criticism ever since its publication to the point of arguing that Sartre himself fell prey to the anti-Semitic portrayal of the Jews that he had put so much effort to denounce.[[2]](#footnote-2) The portrait of the anti-Semite, however, was praised almost unanimously and except for setting its historical and ideological context was not being critically examined as was done in the case of Sartre’s phenomenological description of Jews and Judaism. In his 1999 bibliographical review of the publication and reception of Sartre’s *Réflexions*, Michel Ryblaka wrote that “Whereas Sartre's attack against anti-Semites was well received, his main thesis (stated in reductionist form as: It is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew) was viewed as paradoxical”.[[3]](#footnote-3) Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre wrote in her presentation of the essay’s 2004 edition, that “written with a mordant pen, the portrait of the anti-Semite was unanimously saluted by its readers Jews and non-Jews alike”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Elkaïm-Sartre’s assertion is almost true, yet criticism of Sartre’s treatment of antisemitism, even if not widespread, does exist: thus, Enzo Traverso noted how striking it is that Auschwitz is not mentioned in the essay (echoing a comment already made by Georges Bataille in his review of Sartre’s essay in 1947) and argued that Sartre’s analysis of antisemitism is limited to its Dreyfus affair and Third Republic version; Pierre Birnbaum pointed at Sartre’s failure to mention Vichy thus ignoring the political aspect of antisemitism as a state’s official policy as was the case with Vichy, a completely different phenomenon than the individualistic one that Sartre’s portrayal is focused upon.[[5]](#footnote-5) Yet, these criticisms bring up what is absent from Sartre’s treatment of the issue and do not discuss the actual structure of the portrait itself. Even Susan Rubin Suleiman, maybe the most damning critique of the essay, that upon her first encounter with the portrait of the anti-Semite saw it “for a while, my [=her] bible”, still considered the first chapter as “magnificent” *after* her rereading of the third chapter, a rereading that led her to view the text as suffering from an “anti-Semitic effect”. Thus, it seems that the portrait of the anti-Semite is quite solid or as Michael Walzer wrote in his preface to the 1995 edition of *Anti-Semite and Jew* “commonly and rightly taken to be the strongest part of the book” (ASJ, viii-ix). It is exactly this strength that I would like to probe into, namely, to examine the force of Sartre’s attack on antisemitism, a force which is dependent upon the force of Sartre’s analysis of the anti-Semite. [[6]](#footnote-6)

In what follows I will examine the first chapter of Sartre’s essay in which he offers a detailed portrait of the anti-Semite. My focus will be on the existential-ontological aspect of the portrait (rather than on the more sociological observations), that is, I will focus on the centrality of inauthenticity for the characterization of the anti-Semite and question its adequacy. Finally, I will offer a different direction, one that Sartre himself developed soon after the publication of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, in his unfinished work *Notebooks for an Ethics*,[[7]](#footnote-7) that was only posthumously published, and which allows, I shall argue, a richer and deeper conceptual framework for an existential analysis of the anti-Semite. I will argue that this latter analysis has the advantage of introducing a moral perspective necessary for grasping the anti-Semite’s existential make-up that is altogether absent from the former.

There are two important reasons, in my mind, for a critical examination of the portrait of the anti-Semite. The first is the practical function of the essay as a public intervention. Sartre’s essay is not only a gesture of solidarity towards Jews in the post-war period when survivors, even then, had to deal with antisemitism; it is a text with a practical purpose which is clearly stated by Sartre when he writes that “The Jewish problem is born of anti‐Semitism; thus, it is anti‐Semitism that we must suppress in order to resolve the problem” (ASJ, p. 106). An essay’s practical purposes can be fulfilled only if its arguments are persuasive in the eyes of its readers. Now, according to Sartre the anti-Semite disparages the value of arguments, even of words in general. If Sartre is right, and I believe he is, then such a text could neither offend nor enlighten the anti-Semite. In other words, it is not intended to convince the anti-Semite that he should change his ways. Thus, if this essay addresses anyone, it can’t be the anti-Semite but rather everyone else who is supposed to be engaged in the constant fight against antisemitism. In fact, Sartre writes as much when he asserts that “Anti‐Semitism is a problem that affects us all directly” (ASJ, p. 109). As such, it must provide those who are supposed to fight antisemitism with a clear view of the phenomenon, a view from which they could draw the form of action that might be effective. And what is equally important, it must offer them a motivation to do so. One such motivation is Sartre’s agonizing yet confirmed by now observation that the phenomenon of antisemitism is not a ghost haunting Europe’s past but a phenomenon that is part and parcel of the then present (post-WWII) and future western societies, being a constant problematic feature of liberal-democratic societies.[[8]](#footnote-8) Yet it is not only by virtue of being a constant problem within liberal democracy that motivation to engage against it will be planted. After all, there are many problems within political frameworks. Thus, to the fact that it is problematic should be added the urgency of the problem, the necessity to fight against it.

The second reason for such an examination is the question of the ethical effectiveness of existentialism in matters that go beyond the individual’s relation to itself or it’s private relations with others to the social level where the individual’s public political attitudes toward others are involved. Sartre’s essay, besides being an exercise in a phenomenological-existential explication of a social phenomenon, should be viewed, more than anything else, as a test to existentialism’s ability to be morally pertinent; in the closing lines of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre leaves the project of the ethics implied in the ontological structure of freedom to a future work, and antisemitism is not a bad case to start with.[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus, it is the nature of the essay as an intervention in public life, and the validity of existentialism’s ethical pretensions that calls for such an examination.

In the essay, Sartre rules out from the start the possibility that psychological, historical or sociological factors could provide more than detailed descriptions of what should be explained. Such an explanation requires an existential framework: “It has become evident that no external factor can induce anti‐Semitism in the anti‐Semite. Anti‐Semitism is a free and total choice of oneself, a comprehensive attitude that one adopts not only toward Jews, but toward men in general, toward history and society; it is at one and the same time a passion and a conception of the world” (ASJ, p. 11). Sartre then analyzes the case of the anti-Semite, as a case of bad faith, of inauthenticity: being an anti-Semite is a certain choice, the motives and character of which reveal the anti-Semite’s attitude towards the human condition. It is a choice that reflects an escape from the burden of choosing and the responsibility that comes with it. As Sartre concludes the first chapter: “Anti‐Semitism, in short, is fear of the human condition. The anti‐Semite is a man who wishes to be a pitiless stone, a furious torrent, a devastating thunderbolt – anything except a man” (ASJ, p. 38).

The ground that nourishes the anti-Semite’s attitude and behavior, then, is inauthenticity. Sartrean inauthenticity is an effort to ignore what one sees or should clearly see, that is, the human condition of being forced to choose and to assume responsibility for these choices. And indeed, Sartre’s depiction of the existential deep structure of the anti-Semite, his portrait, is one that is focused on his attitude towards reason and reasoning. Thus, the anti-Semite does not shape his understanding of his time and place upon experience and evidence; it is rather the idea that he has of the Jew that shapes the way he experiences the world, reflects upon history, selects the kind of evidence he searches for, and those he ignores. Another aspect of the anti-Semite’s attitude towards reason is his choice of being passionate, but not in the sense of being passionate about something but being passionate about being passionate. In other words, the main characteristic of the anti-Semite is that he rejects the possibility of being reasonable and acting upon reasons, as Sartre writes: “How can one choose to reason falsely? It is because of a longing for impenetrability. The rational man groans as he gropes for the truth; he knows that his reasoning is no more than tentative, that other considerations may supervene to cast doubt on it. He never sees very clearly where he is going; he is "open"; he may even appear to be hesitant. But there are people who are attracted by the durability of a stone. They wish to be massive and impenetrable; they wish not to change. Where, indeed, would change take them? We have here a basic fear of oneself and of truth… Since they are afraid of reasoning, they wish to wad the kind of life wherein reasoning and research play only a subordinate role, wherein one seeks only what he has already found, wherein one becomes only what he already was. This is nothing but passion. Only a strong emotional bias can give a lightning‐like certainty; it alone can hold reason in leash; it alone can remain impervious to experience and last for a whole lifetime” (ASJ, pp. 12-13). Sartre’s description of the deep structure of the anti-Semite touches upon the root of the phenomenon of bad faith: a denial of the human condition that is grounded in the ambiguity of belief, the ‘faith’ in ‘bad faith’: “…bad faith in its primitive project and in its coming into the world decides on the exact nature of its requirements. It stands forth in the firm resolution *not* to demand too *much,* to count itself satisfied when it is barely persuaded, to force itself in decisions to adhere to uncertain truths. This original project of bad faith is a decision in bad faith on the nature of faith.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This is exactly what the anti-Semite does: adheres to an idea that colors the world in advance and allows him to ignore the uncertainty of evidence, the requirement for cautious reasoning and the necessity of questioning.

However, even if this analysis is correct, I will argue that its insufficiency is revealed in light of the following two objections: first, Sartre’s analysis is too general, hence it does not capture that which makes the anti-Semite different from other cases of bad faith. Second, it lacks moral content. It does contain an ethical content in the sense of the individual’s concern for his self-conception, but it does not imply, at least directly, any moral precepts with regard to intersubjective relations and the attitudes and actions which form them.

In order to see the manner in which the notion of authenticity and its counterpart, inauthenticity, is not sufficient for the purposes of the essay we should go back to the way Sartre formulates it in *Anti-Semite and Jew*: "If it is agreed that man may be defined as a being having freedom within the limits of a situation, then it is easy to see that the exercise of this freedom may be considered as *authentic* or *inauthentic* according to the choices made in the situation. Authenticity, it is almost needless to say, consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate" (ASJ, pp. 64-65). What distinguishes authenticity from inauthenticity is the manner in which one’s freedom is dealt with. Sartre points at two requirements for authenticity: the first is that of having a clear view of the situation, “a true and lucid consciousness” of one’s situation and the other is taking responsibility for one’s choices and decisions. He does not specify, though, in what way inauthenticity is opposed exactly to authenticity: should inauthenticity be understood as failing to meet one of these requirements, that is, having lucidity while refraining from assuming responsibility or assuming responsibility yet lacking lucidity? It seems that the right answer is that what appears as a double requirement is actually one requirement or two inseparable ones. One requirement cannot be realized without the other. Thus, inauthenticity is the negation, or rejection, of lucidity *and* responsibility, that is, having a consciousness that conceals the situation frim itself and avoiding responsibility. Yet, it is even more radical than that. We saw above that the anti-Semite wants to be “anything – except a man”, which means that inauthenticity involves not only the denial of lucid consciousness and responsibility but rather a rejection of the very possibility of attributing responsibility and consciousness to the inauthentic individual. In other words, it is the hopeless project of denying one’s own being-for-self, hopeless as it is itself a decision, the very act that defines a being-for-self or consciousness.

Inauthenticity, or, bad faith, has according to Jonathan Webber, a general sense and two species of it: ‘sincerity’ and ‘bad faith’ in a strict sense. The general sense as we just saw is when we “we tend to think of ourselves as having fixed and unchangeable characters that determine these things” in order “to deny our responsibility for the ways in which the world is articulated for us and the ways in which we behave in response to that articulation.” This self-ascription comes in two possible variations: “sincerity is taking one’s actual character to be fixed, whereas bad faith in the narrow sense is ascribing to oneself a fixed nature that is different from one’s actual character.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Does the anti-Semite correspond to one of the two kinds? In order to take one’s actual character as fixed or ascribe a fixed character different from that which one already has, there has to be a specific character to fixate or to ignore. Sartre describe attitudes, gestures and the world view of the anti-Semite but not with relation to an actual character in relation to which he can be judged as falling under sincerity or bad faith in the narrow sense. Sartre himself views the anti-Semite as directly concerned with the most fundamental issue which is the human condition, hence his claim that the anti-Semite fears the human condition. I might add that as opposed to the famous café waiter Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness* who tries to *be* a café waiter as if it were a mode of being-in-itself, the anti-Semite tries to be a force of nature, a thing, rather than identify with a human role understood as a thing, or rather as an essence.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This short discussion is important because Sartre actually uses two senses of inauthenticity or bad faith throughout the essay but not along the same lines that appear in his classical account of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness*. In *Anti-Semite and Jew* Sartre uses the general sense of bad faith when he discusses the anti-Semite, and a new phenomenon of a group-relative inauthenticity where one attempts to escape his identification by others with a certain group of people. This is, however, a peculiar case of inauthenticity. For first, all cases of inauthenticity are cases of inauthentic individuals as analyzed through their particular cases. Thus, the waiter is an inauthentic individual not an “inauthentic waiter”, an expression that makes no sense in Sartre’s system. In this new group-relative authenticity, one can be inauthentic or authentic as a Jew not just as an individual. Second, Sartre, in a sense, turns the café waiter example on its head: while the waiter’s inauthenticity is due to his sincerity in taking his role to be a fixed nature, an essence (or, according to Webber, taking his character to be fixed), the inauthentic Jew is inauthentic for not trying to be sincere, in the sense used in the waiter’s case, with regard to his externally imposed “Jewishness”. Waiters are not a persecuted minority, so it might be argued that the situation of the Jew is different, but homosexuals were a persecuted minority at the time of Sartre’s writing and when he analyzes the case of a homosexual that does not want to be identified as such by a friend, the homosexual is not considered inauthentic homosexual but an inauthentic individual, another example that shows the complex manner in which human beings are constituted such that they can know and conceal the truth from themselves at one and the same time.[[13]](#footnote-13) But the problem runs even deeper: for Sartre, “Jew” is a bogus idea invented by the anti-Semite, while there is no Jew as a determinate social role or common character as there is an ideal waiter. And yet the Jew, or anyone else who is externally identified with a certain group, must not avoid his identification although it is not clear with what exactly he should identify himself.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In spite of all these difficulties, our purpose here is not the critique of the various senses of authenticity or inauthenticity that Sartre analyzes, but rather whether inauthenticity is a useful concept in capturing the phenomenon of antisemitism in a way that implies its morally alarming character.

First, let’s turn shortly to a possibility not discussed by Sartre – the possibility of the anti-Semite being authentic. This, as we saw, can have two senses: authenticity directly related to the human condition, and group-relative authenticity. With regard to the

more fundamental notion of authenticity, it seems that Sartre does not even bother to argue against the theoretical possibility of an anti-Semite who is an authentic individual. Sartre nowhere discusses the question whether antisemitism can be an authentic choice. A lucid consciousness of the human condition as being forced to choose freely within a situation and being responsible for these choices, does not necessarily rule out the choice of being an anti-Semite. In order to do that, Sartre would have to have argued that any modern antisemitism (rather than the particular culturally conditioned version he describes), or the very choice of racial hatred, is necessarily grounded in bad faith and is inauthentic; in other words, the argument would have to show that holding and supporting hostile and even murderous attitudes and actions on a racial basis cannot be done with lucidity in relation to the human condition and assuming responsibility for this position, is impossible. Yet Sartre did not put forth such an argument. Such a claim, had it been made, would have had significant consequences with regard to the notion of authenticity. It would mean that there is a necessary relation between endorsing specific positions and worldviews and being authentic or inauthentic. For example, those which contain hatred towards others, are a-priori excluded from the possibility of being chosen by authentic individuals. If this would have been a part of Sartre’s notion of authenticity, he could have developed existential ethics quite easily out of the ontology elaborated in *Being and Nothingness*. Yet, this would weaken the radical freedom that characterizes the human condition. It would put constraints on what one can choose freely and lucidly, while it seems that the only constraints Sartre is interested in are lucidity and responsibility. The morale of the point here is that authenticity, or for that matter, inauthenticity, are about the mode in which we live our choices not about their content. This sows the seeds for what I will argue to be Sartre’s problem in his essay, but for now, it could be put aside, claiming that Sartre offers an analysis of a real social phenomenon and is not occupied with theoretical possibilities and the rigor of his account of inauthenticity; that as a matter of fact it is rare to find an example of an individual who’s both anti-Semitic and authentic, and the attribution of inauthenticity fits virtually all those engaged in antisemitism. I’ll come back later to the point of the relation between authenticity as a mode of choice and the content of the choice or its actual consequences in the world.

Sartre’s group-relative kind of authenticity opens up another path to examine whether the anti-Semite might be authentic in the sense of not escaping his own externally imposed group identification. This is less strange from what it might seem initially: we can imagine a society in which antisemitism and racism in general are denounced to a degree that many social disadvantages are the lot of an individual who is identified with a minority group that holds a worldview and a way of life in which explicit antisemitism plays central role. Let’s also imagine for the sake of the example that this group, let’s say they call themselves “bigotarians,” is localized geographically such that if an individual comes originally from that place, it is certain that he was born and raised bigotarian. Let’s also add to our example, that due to a specific and easily discernible accent it is easy to recognize an individual originating from this community. Thus, there is no need of having knowledge of the biographical details of that individual, his origin is clear from the way he talks. Our bigotarian, then, is immediately identified as one by the rest of society, the consequences of which are a serious social disadvantage. Now, according to Sartre, a refusal on the part of this individual to accept being determined by others as a bigotarian, by working hard to change his accent and concealing his biographical details would be a dishonest escape from facing the situation. Such an individual would be an inauthentic bigotarian, even though he does not see himself as a part of that group and does not subscribe to their views and practices. But let’s now say that another individual realizes that no matter what he will do to get an equal opportunity he will still be identified as a bigotarian and get treated unfairly. He still has a close family or distant relatives of committed bigotarians and he might experience the social situation as unjust to the whole group. Thus, he decides to own the determination imposed upon him, identify himself with it and set out to publicly fight the social injustice from which the bigotarians feel they suffer. In this case we would get an authentic bigotarian, or what is the same, an authentic anti-Semite.

The question with regard to the individual in the group-relative authenticity example is not whether he is authentic with relation to the human condition but whether he is authentic with regard to the way he is perceived by others. Facing the situation of being uncontrollably socially determined in a demeaning manner, the group-relative authentic individual fights to correct what he sees as an injustice. Thus, just as we have inauthentic and authentic Jews, we might have, inauthentic and authentic anti-Semites. This example was not designed to draw, of course, any equivalence between Jews and anti-Semites, or for that matter, actual persecuted minorities in the present or in the past, and racists in a relatively rare situation, from a historical point of view, where they are ostracized by the general society; its point is to demonstrate the weakness of the notion Sartre uses with regard to its conceptual clarity and its normative consequences.

These theoretical exercises demonstrate a well-known problem that is inherent in Sartre’s position: authenticity serves to distinguish between opposing states of consciousness, and the subject’s relation to itself, but it cannot serve as a ground for morally evaluating the content and purpose of the act taken by that subject. This can be shown in Sartre’s famous lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*, which is from the same period of *Anti-Semite and Jew*.[[15]](#footnote-15) In this lecture Sartre claims, against his critics, that the existentialist position can provide a moral basis upon which others can be judged because it teaches us that acknowledging the human condition leads us to will freedom as the foundation of all values.[[16]](#footnote-16) Moreover, Sartre claims that contrary to the manner freedom functions as defining the individual where the question of the freedom of others does not arise, “as soon as there is commitment [*engagement*], I am obliged to will the freedom of others at the same time I will my own. I cannot set my own freedom as a goal without also setting the freedom of others as a goal. Consequently, when, operating on the level complete authenticity… I must will the freedom of the others.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Hence, the possibility of an existential moral judgment: whoever denies this fundamental freedom are either cowards or bustards depending on the excuse they use to deny it. I will not examine here whether Sartre’s claim that authenticity implies willing of the freedom of others, can be defended. What is more important to us is that immediately after that declaration, Sartre brings an example that is supposed to demonstrate the existentialist point of view according to which the morality of an action is a function of freedom being its end. In this example, Sartre examines the choice of two female literary figures: Maggie Tulliver from George Elliot’s novel *The Mill on the Floss* and La Sanseverina from Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma*. Both are faced with a situation where the man they love is engaged to another woman. Maggie Tulliver chooses to sacrifice her happiness and avoid destructing the happiness of the other already engaged woman, in the name of human solidarity; La Saseverina would choose to sacrifice the other woman’s happiness for the sake of great love. This pair of cases, Sartre argues, although seemingly represent opposite moralities are actually equivalent “as the ultimate aim on both cases is freedom”.[[18]](#footnote-18) Sartre then adds a second pair of cases which is the counterpart of the first: the outcomes are the same but the decisions taken are based on a different motivational structure – resignation in the case corresponding to that of Maggie Tulliver, and plain sexual desire in the case corresponding to La Sanseverina. In this second pair of cases, claims Sartre, freedom does not play any role, hence both would have been reproached. This claim, however, might seem puzzling because of the relation between willing my own freedom as implying the willing of freedom for the sake of others as well; yet, La Sanseverina prefers her own happiness in the name of great love, not of freedom, and deprives without hesitation the other woman of her happiness. This does not seem to imply willing the freedom of others, so we could have expected that this act would not be considered praiseworthy. Yet, what is crucial for Sartre, what makes an act one that posits freedom as its end, is the fact that it was not taken by a consciousness that sees itself as passive (“he is engaged, so there’s nothing I can do”, or, “I’m dominated by my desire, hence I find myself trying to seduce him”), but rather by a consciousness deliberating reasons explicitly and fully understanding and embracing the consequences. In sum, the point is that the choice is taken actively and freely. Hence, Sartre concludes: “One can choose anything, so long as it involves free commitment”.[[19]](#footnote-19) Well, if explicit deliberation, the weighing of options, and a full understanding of the consequences turns freedom to be the end of a choice, then it seems impossible to deny its applicability to whatever action, as reprehensible as it may be.

The problem, however, is even deeper. Sartre himself brings up frankly the weakness of authenticity as a moral criterion when he admits that he cannot pass a moral judgment against one who is in bad faith, that is, who’s inauthentic; then, he immediately tries to compensate for this by arguing that we can say that being in bad faith is an error and a lie.[[20]](#footnote-20) Thus, in order to clarify the radicality of the freedom of choice and lucidity of consciousness required for authenticity, Sartre is led to ignore any other moral criterion, and cannot provide a notion of authenticity that would really imply a concern for the freedom of the others. Such a concern can only be chosen freely, like in the case of Maggie Tulliver, who decides to abstain from intervention on another couple’s happiness in the name of human solidarity.

We find ourselves, then, limited within the confines of the “epistemological” ethics suggested by Sartre: the only question is whether a decision was taken, or a way of life was chosen, with a lucid consciousness and on the basis of a deliberation and an understanding of the consequences. If these requirements are fulfilled, whatever is chosen, expresses freedom as its end.

Returning now to the anti-Semite, the problem should be evident: the anti-Semite might be inauthentic, because he avoids reasoning, clouds his consciousness to avoid lucidity and does not assume responsibility for his choices. Yet, all this is not sufficient for passing a moral judgment on him. From the point of view of authenticity, the kind of moral judgment that he deserves is not different from the kind moral judgment that the café waiter deserves; both wish to escape the human condition. This result should not surprise us: inauthenticity is the common ground of almost every project of human beings. Being authentic is surely possible, but it is a rare achievement for individual actions and even more so regarding the whole of one’s behavior, or in Sartre’s own words: “it [=bad faith] can even be the normal aspect of life for a very great number of people. A person can *live* in bad faith, which does not mean that he does not have abrupt awakenings to cynicism or to good faith, but which implies a constant and particular style of life.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In fact, one can say with certainty that according to Sartre, traditional observant Jews can be seen as inauthentic (with relation to the universal human condition), just as he sees practicing Christians as mostly inauthentic, for reasons which are partly very close to those that make the anti-Semite inauthentic.

Seen as inauthentic, the anti-Semite’s problem is fundamentally his problem with himself and this cannot really explain the urgency of fighting antisemitism. Sartre’s essay, then, might have been an effective intervention in the public discourse at the time – which is already more than can be said of most texts that attempt to intervene in the public discourse – but its examination as a lasting text for the analysis of the anti-Semite reveals its weakness and fails to demonstrate existentialism’s moral import.

An authenticity-based analysis does not advance our understanding of the anti-Semite because the problem posed by the anti-Semite is a moral rather than an ontological one. Another possible way to put it is that the problem of antisemitism reveals the need for a moral element as an integral part of the phenomenological-ontological analysis. We might benefit, then, from turning to *Notebooks for an Ethics* Sartre’s unfinished ethical project from 1947-48, where I believe lies the grain for the existential moral account that could provide the distinctive colors with which the anti-Semite can be portrayed.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Violence is a central and a recurring theme throughout the *Notebooks*, but it contains a long section dedicated to the analysis of violence in a systematic way.[[23]](#footnote-23) One of the basic distinctions Sartre offers in this section is between instrumental violence, violence that is used in order to achieve a certain end, and pure violence, the kind of violence where the supposedly maxim of violence – that the end justifies the means – turns out to be a case where the means justify the end and confers upon it an absolute value due to the use of violence. In such cases, Sartre argues, “the end of the violence is to bring about the universe of violence.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Now, antisemitism is only briefly mentioned in the *Notebooks* but it appears in the context of pure violence. Now, I will not discuss here at length Sartre’s rich and complex phenomenology of pure violence but will only point at the different perception of the anti-Semite that it might offer. Thus, the anti-Semite is described in *Anti-Semite and Jew* as an individual that fears the human condition and “wishes to be a pitiless stone, a furious torrent, a devastating thunderbolt – anything except a man.” In the *Notebooks*, however, Sartre views such a wish in a more sophisticated manner: “Expressions about pitylessness, inexorability are often used in violent oaths. As much as being frightening, they are warnings against oneself and ceremonies meant to give the self a fitting image before others. Even a physical force cannot be inexorable. One can struggle against it, throw it off course. However, analytic necessity is inexorability itself. The violent man is therefore pure freedom for himself. Seen by others, he acts as the pure being to whom nothing can come from the outside, that nothing can change, who rests in pure identity, and whose acts are the pure analytic consequences of his essence. Two equivalent ways of negating time. The whole of being in order to destroy man, that is, the whole world as hostile to man. Pure man in order to destroy being.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Sartre’s mistaken description of the anti-Semite as it appears in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, can be corrected with this observation: the anti-Semite who appears from the outside as avoiding freedom turns out to be a freedom that knows no constraints. Seen through the analysis of pure violence the anti-Semite is actually the opposite of ‘pitylessness’ and is disclosed as pure freedom: “The violent man is therefore pure freedom for himself. Seen by others, he acts as the pure being to whom nothing can come from the outside, that nothing can change, who rests in pure identity, and whose acts are the pure analytic consequences of his essence.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Violence, then, is grounded in freedom as a project of destroying all freedom but that of the violent subject. Thus, examining the motives of the violent subject Sartre writes: “I want to be pure nonbeing. But to be pure non-being is not not to be. It is to be a pure nihilating power, pure freedom. Violence is unconditioned affirmation of freedom”.[[27]](#footnote-27) Having a project of bringing about a universe of violence emerges from taking the notion of freedom to its extreme, that is where “pure violence and pure right are one and the same.”[[28]](#footnote-28) And the central goal of this pure right which is an unconditioned affirmation of freedom is the annihilation of other freedoms: “Violence is not just the refusal of making use of something, it is the destruction of the possibility of such use for everyone, the refusal of all lawfulness. Finally, radical nihilation of the freedom of others…”.[[29]](#footnote-29) Thus, pure violence is an active project of a freedom that sets out to annihilate the very possibility of freedom; seen in that way, violence should be taken as the most pressing problem of any morality that places freedom at its basis. It shouldn’t be considered as an external assault on the possibility of morality, but as a perverse possibility grounded in freedom – the most fundamental notion of morality.

The discussion of pure violence is the context in which Sartre mentions antisemitism. As he already remarked in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, antisemitism is Manichaean, that is, “It believes in an order of the world that is given yet concealed by bad wills. It suffices to destroy the obstacle for this order to appear, and this applies to the anti-Semitism that would liberate the order of the world by destroying the Jew…”.[[30]](#footnote-30) The importance, then, of analyzing antisemitism in terms of the notion of pure violence is that it places antisemitism in the framework of fundamental intersubjective relations and not, as is the case in *Anti-Semite and Jew* as an intra-subjective problem of a consciousness that suffers from bad faith. Moreover, the kind of danger that antisemitism involves becomes much clearer on the phenomenological level.

Both authenticity and evading it, are focused exclusively on the relation to the self. This relation might be manifested in a relation towards others like in the case of antisemitism but upon ontological-existential analysis it turns out to be only the effect on the surface of a much more fundamental yet non-moral problem. In fact, the whole relation to the other, is secondary in inauthenticity; it only serves to mask the real problem which is the anti-Semite’s care of the self, his own self. Seen through the perspective of violence, however, the anti-Semite’s project is made clearer and its moral significance takes center stage: the anti-Semite is engaged in violence as a worldview where his actions are made meaningful as actions directed towards others, rather than actions directed obliquely at himself disguised as being towards others.

Finally, what is most important, is that violence is disclosed as the most comprehensive attack on the possibility of morality as such, as it is a project of destruction of freedom altogether – the most significant part of which is the destruction of others as freedoms – replacing it with being, that is, with unchangeable reality. Once the anti-Semite’s project is understood as a violent worldview, as an engagement in the annihilation of freedom, it becomes clear why another freedom might not stay indifferent and choose resistance to it as its own urgent project. This would be an engagement in morality as Sartre himself imagined it when he wrote in the first page of the *Notebooks*: “It must be a choice of a world, not of a self.”

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Paris : Gallimard 2004. References are to the the English translation *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Translated by George J. Becker, New York: Schocken Books 1995 (hereafter ASJ). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For historical analyses of the cultural environment before and at the time of Sartre’s essay see: Jonathan Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual*, University of Nebraska Press 2006, Ch. 4; Maurice Samuels, *The Right to Difference: French Universalism and the Jews*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016, Ch. 6.

For the examination of the effects of Sartre’s essay upon Jews and the figure of the Jew in French culture see Sarah Hammerschlag, *The figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 68-93 and Judith Klein, “L’événement précède la critique. Les *réflexions sur la question juive* lues, vécues et revues par quelques intellectuels juifs”, *Sartre et les juifs*, Ingrid Galster (dir.), Paris: La Découverte 2005, pp. 111-117. For the claim that Sartre was caught up in anti-Semitic propaganda against his own intentions thus reproducing an anti-Semitic representation of Jews, especially in the chapter on the inauthentic Jew, see Susan Rubin Suleiman, “The Jew in Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive*: An Exercise in Historical Reading,” in: *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, Linda Nochlin, Tamar Garb (eds.), New York: Thames and Hudson 1995, pp. 201-218. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michel Rybalka, “Publication and Reception of "Anti-Semite and Jew"”, *October*, Vol. 87, (1999), p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Réflexions sur la question juive*, p. iv (my translation). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Enzo Traverso, “The Blindness of the Intellectuals: Historicizing Sartre's "Anti-Semite and Jew"”, *October*, Vol. 87, (1999), pp. 73- 88; Pierre Birnbaum, “Sorry Afterthoughts on "Anti-Semite and Jew"”, *October*, Vol. 87, (1999), pp. 89- 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Suleiman, “The Jew in Sartre’s *Réflexions*”, p. 202; See also the Samuels, *The Right to Difference*, p. 140 especially footnotes 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Cahiers pour une morale*, Paris: Gallimard 1983; *Notebooks for an Ethics*, David Pellauer (trans.), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thinking of *Anti-Semite and Jew* from this perspective might provide at least a partial reply to the criticism that Sartre’s text is awkwardly silent about Auschwitz on the one hand and regimes like Vichy on the other: Sartre sets to tackle the antisemitism that lays ahead rather than to provide an account of what already happened. This of course does not justify the complete absence of the political form of antisemitism as a legalized and institutionalized state policy as Birnbaum argues. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Heter takes *Anti-Semite and Jew* as a work of the utmost importance in existentialist ethics. He suggests the Hegelian theme of recognition (mutual and non-mutual) as articulated in the master-slave dialectic as the framework of an ethics of authenticity. This interpretation has two difficulties: first, the master-slave dialectic does not seem to play any role in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. It is mentioned only once marginally and the kind of attitude of the anti-Semite towards the Jew and vice versa does not correspond to the Hegelian master-slave one. Second, *Anti-Semite and Jew* is not preceded by a theoretical treatise that presents the principles of such an ethics of authenticity. Thus, the question whether there is such an ethics is unsettled yet. *Anti-Semite and Jew* cannot be taken, then, as an example of an already existing ethical framework; that there could be such an ethics is exactly what needs to be shown through Sartre’s analysis of antisemitism. See T. Storm Heter, *Sartre’s Ethics of Engagement: Authenticity and Civic Virtue*, London: Continuum 2006, pp. 45, 47-48.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel Barnes (translator), London: Methuen & Co. 1958, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jonathan Webber, *The existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre*, London: Routledge 2009, pp. 74-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Although Webber insists on the distinction between the general sense and the particular senses he does not identify the anti-Semite with one of the two particular senses of bad faith but with bad faith in general, see ibid., pp. 50, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For the discussion of the homosexual’s case see *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 63-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I will not discuss it in this paper, but the idea of the authentic Jew shows precisely this: an authentic Jew is one who commits himself to engage in activity against injustice including, of course, racism and antisemitism. This is exactly, however, what anyone else who is not Jewish should commit themselves to. The reason for this, or at least one reason, is that there is nothing that one can identify himself with as a Jew in the sense of the idea imposed by the anti-Semite. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris: Nagel 1970 [1946]; references are to the English translation, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Carol Macomber (trans.) New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., pp. 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p. 51. The translation does not render the exact meaning of Sartre’s claim: “On peut tout choisir si c’est sur le plan de l’engagement libre”. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Being and Nothingness*, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Cahiers pour une morale*, Paris: Gallimard 1983; *Notebooks for an Ethics*, David Pellauer (trans.), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1992. Sartre mentions antisemitism few times in the *Notebooks* and views it as one of the manifestations of extreme violence, the bringing about of a universe of violence where violence is taken as an end, see ibid., p. 174, 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., pp. 170-215. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., pp. 176-177. Another example of Sartre’s claim pure freedom that appears as pure being is in the [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., p. 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p. 174. For Sartre’s discussion of Manichaeism in *Anti-Semite and Jew* see, ASJ, pp. 28-32. This discussion, however, does not involve any reference to the internal connection between violence and freedom as is the case in the *Notebooks*. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)