

Bartleby: An Existential Reflection

AJ Olson

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Kimberly DeFazio, English Department

ABSTRACT

Herman Melville's short novel *Bartleby* was written in 1856 and has been the subject of much analysis, due in no small part to the seeming peculiarity of the title character, Bartleby. However, when examined through Existential terms, particularly those of Jean-Paul Sartre, it becomes apparent that the "odd" character of Bartleby is actually living a life of pure authenticity that many of us would envy, and even more of us could learn something from. Bartleby, through his repeated mantra of "I would prefer not to," stands as a pillar of freedom amidst the backdrop of a rapidly industrializing world and an alienated population.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has experienced "existential dread" will find the actions of Bartleby in Herman Melville's story, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, familiar. He does not work, says very little, and refuses to elaborate why. However, in doing so, Bartleby is living a life of pure authenticity, as might be said by existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre. What is interesting about the character, and a point that will be revisited, is the fact that we never actually learn why Bartleby will not do any of his work. We could take the superficial route and assume that Bartleby is being difficult or insubordinate. However, in doing so we would only be avoiding our artistic and intellectual responsibility. What Bartleby actually is, is a shining example of an individual living authentically and to the fullest extent that he is able. By contrast, the narrator of the story is an example of one living inauthentically, and thus exhibiting what Sartre would call "bad faith."

OVERVIEW OF *BARTLEBY*

Bartleby is a novella written by Melville in 1856. The story is narrated by a nameless lawyer who has a small law office with 4 employees, one of whom is named Bartleby. Bartleby, who is employed to copy legal documents, is a very interesting case as he excels at his work early on. The narrator says of Bartleby, "At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candlelight" (Melville 11). Very clearly, the narrator is at first quite pleased by Bartleby's work, even astounded. Then one day without warning, we turn to the crux of the conflict.

It is a day like any other (Bartleby's third day, to be exact). The lawyer is in the office, working alongside his employees. He makes a request of Bartleby to examine a document, to which Bartleby replies, "I would prefer not to." The lawyer was certain that "my ears had deceived me, or Bartleby had entirely misunderstood my meaning" (Melville 12). So, he made the request again to which Bartleby gave the same answer. Bartleby continues to give this answer and ones like it to every question or request that is asked or made of him. The lawyer pleads with Bartleby to resume working or find another workplace, but he relocates, and Bartleby remains in the empty office he refused to leave. After his relocation, another lawyer from the building he vacated comes to the narrator, insisting, "You are responsible for the man you left there. He refuses to do any copying; he refuses to do anything; he says he prefers not to; and he refuses to quit the premises" (Melville 41). Eventually, due to his refusal to vacate the premises, Bartleby is taken to prison where he meets his end.

It may be asked, in what sense could Bartleby's abstinence from action be considered a manifestation of freedom? After all, it seems straightforward that Bartleby was simply asked to do something, and he repeatedly said that he would prefer not to; however, his "active inaction" absolutely is a manifestation of freedom. This is made evident by the simple fact that this is simply not something that we see or hear happening very often in a workplace, even now. Generally, when a person is employed, it is expected that they will simply do whatever is asked or requested of them. However, Bartleby subverts this expectation with his simple, but concise: "I would prefer not to." By doing this, Bartleby is embracing the freedom that he has not as a worker, but as a human being and as an

individual. In doing so, he also offers the reader the opportunity to consider taken for granted expectations and what it means to resist.

SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism is a Humanism is a work in which the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre defends his concept of existentialism to critics, while outlining many of the central tenets of the philosophy. First presented as a lecture in 1945, Sartre himself gave the best definition of one of the primary tenets of existentialism when he said that man is someone who, “first exists; he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself...he will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself” (Sartre 10). But what does this mean, exactly? What Sartre is saying here is the fundamental tenet of the philosophy, and it can be summarized as such: mankind is not born with an inherent meaning, or “essence.” Humanity is born into the world, devoid of meaning, and forges it only after a life has been lived and explored. Sartre’s philosophy combats that of the consensus of the time, which was that all humanity was endowed with a certain meaning (this may be via divine, natural, or historical determination), which it was our job to “discover.” However, Sartre, in this speech responding to some of his critics and the critics of his philosophy, outlined and reaffirmed his argument that this was not the case. Existentialist philosophy was important to Sartre because he believed that other philosophies had deprived humanity of its ability to live authentically and act of their own accord. Sartre believed that by uncritically accepting as predetermined all their social codes, conventions, traditions, and expectations, individuals impair their human authenticity and thus, their ability to live a fulfilling life. Against what he calls the “materialism” that “treat[s] all men—including oneself—as object, which is to say as a set of predetermined reactions” (41), he aims to show that such “limitations” as social codes and expectations are “meaningless if man...does not freely determine himself and his experience in relation to them” (42). This also implies that humans can act differently, that they can resist.

ANALYSIS OF EXISTENTIAL ELEMENTS OF *BARTLEBY*

Bartleby’s mannerisms are striking in how “unusual” they are, something that the narrator mentions to the reader as indicative of his “enigmatic” character. He almost exclusively keeps to himself in a corner of the office, never seems to eat, will not speak unless spoken to, and will only speak of his “preferences,” which the narrator says are “his own peculiar business there” (Melville 16). Although Bartleby’s character seems strange to the narrator and a little bit to us, he is living a life that many of us would envy, a truly authentic and honest life. As Sartre said, “man shall attain existence only when he is what he projects himself to be; not what he would like to be” (Sartre 23). In the story, we can see that Bartleby is doing precisely that. He is not bogged down by social conventions or expectations in the same way that the lawyer is (which will be returned to later). When he responds to the requests made of him by the narrator with “I would prefer not to,” he is simply stating the truth, that he would prefer not to do what is asked of him.

Though Jean-Paul Sartre would not explore the idea of existentialism for another 100 years, many of the concepts that he explored can be applied to the novella. For instance, the concept of “subjectivity” is an interesting one to consider. An idea that Sartre developed early in his work goes as follows: “the freedom of the individual subject to choose what he will be” (Sartre 23). By doing what he is doing (or rather, what he is not doing) Bartleby is choosing not only what he wishes to be, but also what he believes all humanity should be, according to Sartre. This is made clear when Sartre says, “In truth, however, one should always ask oneself, “What would happen if everyone did what I am doing?” (Sartre 25). However, it is interesting to reflect on this for the simple fact that Bartleby never quite articulates what he believes this is.

Additionally, the narrator’s character is worth exploring, and we can apply the same concepts to him. Yet, in this case, we have a lot more insight into the narrator, for we know all of his thoughts and motivations throughout the story. It may be asked whether or not we should consider the thoughts and feelings of the narrator when analyzing him through this existentialist lens. An argument could be made against doing so; existentialists, after all, claim that “reality exists only in action” (37), as Sartre puts it, which might imply that such things as thoughts, feelings and intentions behind actions should not be considered in evaluating an action and that only the action itself should be considered. However, it seems counter-intuitive to ignore the extensive amount of insight that the author provided into the character.

When considering the question of the narrator through this lens, we must observe and conclude that he is acting rather inauthentically and, quite frankly, cowardly. Throughout the story, the narrator deals with his inner conflict of not knowing how to handle Bartleby’s preferences. He is constantly conflicted between taking some action and taking none. Ultimately, almost without exception, he chooses the latter in every scenario. The closest times that he comes to acting were, first, when he offered Bartleby the money that he had owed him for Bartleby’s work.

However, we could plainly see that this was a feeble gesture. Bartleby showed no sign of ever being interested in the money, and for the narrator to take this route with him was simply lazy and an attempt at deferring the problem. The second time that the narrator takes any action is when he chooses to relocate himself, but, once again, this is simply an example of him avoiding the problem and choosing not to take any action towards what he wanted.

He could have contacted law enforcement, had Bartleby removed, or had some conversation with him where he treats Bartleby as a human being, as opposed to a mere obstacle. Even when the lawyer asks Bartleby about his family, he does so only to write to them for the purpose of “urging their taking the poor fellow away to some convenient retreat” (Melville 30).

The narrator himself says, “I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best” (Melville 2). By his own admission, he is a man who goes to “extra lengths” to avoid acting which is precisely what he did by relocating the office.

Furthermore, by refusing to take any legitimate action the narrator inadvertently contributed to Bartleby’s later incarceration. Sartre addressed this indirectly actually, in his work, when he said, “If we define man’s situation as one of free choice, in which he has no recourse to excuses or outside aid, then any man who takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, is operating in bad faith” (Sartre 47).

But what does Sartre mean by “bad faith?” “Bad faith” is what one acts in when they refuse to realize their own freedom. Anyone acts in bad faith when they are presented with a situation and then invent a reason that compels them not to act on it. This is exactly what the narrator is doing for the duration of the story. Ironically, he had said to himself, “Then something severe, something unusual must be done. What! Surely you will not have him collared by constable, and commit his innocent pallor to the common jail?” (Melville 39). However, we know that this is exactly what ends up happening. Of course, it could not be said completely confidently that the narrator *caused* Bartleby’s incarceration. However, the question has to be pondered of what level he contributed to it because, by the same token, it cannot be confidently said that he played no part.

It would be very difficult to write an essay exploring existentialism without discussing the mantra that all existentialists know: “existence precedes essence.” So, how does Bartleby manifest his existence? Bartleby is a figure of resistance in that he “passively resists” (as the narrator puts it) what is expected and “usual” of him. Why is Bartleby resisting exactly? Is it to express dissatisfaction with his office, his boss, or the American system of government and industry? Regardless of *why*, Bartleby is, on a surface level, resisting his work. To what end could be ruminated on, but Bartleby is, without a doubt, resisting his work. Furthermore, we must wonder if Bartleby had given the existential thought to his action of “What would happen if everyone did what I am doing?” (Sartre 25). Seemingly, he did not ask himself that question and was being honest about his preference to not do his work. However, we cannot know for sure. Additionally, it is worth noting the language of Bartleby’s response. He does not simply say “no” or “I won’t do that”, instead saying “I would prefer not to.” Had he said something more along the lines of “no” it would have been easy to chalk up to insubordination and have him terminated from his position, as the narrator himself reflects, when he tries to convince Bartleby to leave the office; however, by saying “I would prefer not to” he’s simply being honest about what he would and wouldn’t like to do. Critically thinking, what is so wrong about saying that you would prefer not to do something? We can do so in any other area of our lives, so why not do so at work? Furthermore, by saying “I would prefer not to,” Bartleby is living authentically, as he is speaking in the purest of terms to express himself. Many times, people will say things such as “no” or “I won’t do that” when they might mean to say, “I would prefer not to.” Especially in contemporary culture, it is very common to resist things simply because we do not want to do them. However, we end up devising a reason besides the truth.

Furthermore, there is a larger question of what exactly separates the lawyer from Bartleby in ethical consideration. What differentiates Bartleby’s act of inaction from the narrator’s inaction? We have established that they are certainly distinct from one another, in that the lawyer shows signs of inaction throughout the novel, despite his clear desire to act. But what exactly separates the two? Why is the lawyer morally bereft while Bartleby is a beacon of existentialism in practice? Fundamentally it has to do with the direction of their actions. The lawyer did everything he could to not interact with Bartleby directly, going as far as relocating his office when Bartleby would not leave. In fact, the lawyer goes so far as to say to Bartleby, “After you have removed your things from these offices, Bartleby, you will of course lock the door...” (Melville 31). Therein lies the distinction to be made between Bartleby and the lawyer. When the lawyer takes some action, he tries to put it on Bartleby to take a final step. He takes some sort of action but then relies on Bartleby to act to carry out *his* desire. By saying this, he is acting in bad faith. Merely putting the choice on the other person is not wrong; in fact, it is probably the best course of action. However, the lawyer has not put the choice in another’s hands; he merely appears to have done so. By assuming the other will take one course of action, the lawyer is only removing responsibility from himself.

One of the things that Sartre would come back to in one way or another throughout his writing is the idea that mankind is “condemned to be free,” since this is at the heart of his philosophy. People do not “create” themselves,

but “once cast into the world,” they are responsible for what they do (29). This is the freedom central to Bartleby’s character. Bartleby realizes he has the freedom to do as he wishes and does not have to do things he does not want to do, such as his work under certain conditions.

So, by saying “I would prefer not to,” Bartleby is taking his freedom to the highest degree possible. Despite people’s thoughts and concerns, Bartleby persists. Even though, in the context of the story, “everybody is concerned; clients are leaving offices” (Melville 42), still Bartleby persists.

CONCLUSION

The character of Bartleby is certainly an interesting one, and it is easy to see why the novella itself has persisted for as long as it has. Herman Melville’s ability to create such a captivating and mysterious character is unparalleled. There are many different perspectives that could be taken when looking at this story, but the existential lens is especially provocative. We do not know why Bartleby did not “prefer” to do his work, but we know that he did not. In a way, Bartleby’s character indicates how we are forced to look at all members of humanity; not based off their intentions or their thoughts, but off of their actions.

REFERENCES

- Melville, Herman. *Bartleby*, Independently Published, **2024**
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism.*, Yale University Press, **2007**