This article is about why moral praxis matters, and how it matters. My textual focus is Sartre’s unpublished and undelivered 1965 Cornell Lectures on ‘Morality and History’. In these Lectures, Sartre presents his mature understanding of moral praxis with a degree of systemativity not found elsewhere in his writings on the topic. Staying close to the idiom of the lectures, then, I discuss the materiality of the ‘ethical normative,’ and the historical efficacy of ‘moral conducts’. The discussion moves from a phenomenological account of normativity, temporality, and creativity, to a dialectical account of their generative interaction, which Sartre names, somewhat ambiguously, ‘ethos’. Sartre’s descriptions and analyses paint a picture of ethos as manifest through moral praxis. Moral praxis exists where ethical exigencies are taken up across time through creative invention, and ethos, as manifest moral praxis, results (for good or ill) in a transformation of the practical field.¹

An Irregular at a Regular Place . . .

Sartre opens the Cornell Lectures by drawing attention to the level of lived-morality. ‘In every society’, he writes,

there exist objectively discernible behaviors which we can call moral conducts, and which we can grasp as easily from the outside when a social agent carries them out before us, as from the inside when we carry them out ourselves. There is, therefore, an ethical experience: it is this which must be interrogated. Our first task is phenomenological’. (MS/23/TS/9).²

In keeping with this familiar Sartrean methodological first principle, I begin with a brief description of a specific event.
It is a cold winter morning. The setting is Tony’s Diner. A man enters, unkempt and apparently homeless. He sits at a table, and orders a sandwich. The waiter says, ‘You gotta’ take it to go’. ‘Why the hell can’t I eat here?’ the man demands, ‘I’m not homeless, I live around the corner. I’m an artist! My father was a World War I veteran! I’m American!’ He looks customers in the eye as he speaks, and they, in turn, look away. ‘What you just did was deeply offensive! Disrespectful! I’m calling the police! I’m filing a report!’ He stands and leaves. In a few minutes, he returns and sits at the same table. ‘I called the police. I’m filing a report’.

Customers come and go. In about ten minutes, two squad cars pull up. Two officers enter the diner and approach the man. He tells them what happened. The officers are polite. ‘You can come down to the station and file a report’. They give him the address. The owner comes out of the kitchen. ‘Let him eat,’ he says. The officers leave. The waiter hands the man a paper bag, and the man hands the waiter a dollar bill. ‘It’s two dollars,’ the waiter says. ‘That’s what I’m paying! One dollar! I’m going down to the station to file a report’. He leaves. The waiter looks at the owner, who says, ‘Let him go’. It’s over.

Examination of this event will afford philosophical purchase on four notions which provide the critical contours of this article. They are: ‘normative inertia,’ ‘historical momentum,’ ‘moral invention,’ and ‘dialectics of ethos’.3

Normative Inertia

With the waiter’s command we enter the sphere of normativity, and particularly the offended man’s experience of it. He encounters an ‘ethical object,’ as Sartre puts it, in this case, an imperative. ‘You gotta’ take it to go’. The man must leave. He confronts a command which is intended to alter the course of his chosen undertaking. ‘Thus, in this first bursting forth of the ethical,’ Sartre writes, ‘we recognize immediately its reality, at least as a determination of language’ (26: 4, emphasis added). ‘You gotta’ take it to go’. It is a familiar sort of obstacle, static, immovable, inert, pushing against this man’s present practical comportment. He should be prevented, as if by a wall, from sitting and eating in this diner. Sartre writes, ‘inert and rigid, directions for use are the very essence of worked matter in that this forged essence imposes its rigidity on my conducts’ (34: 16). Just as our doctor expects us to heed his or her instructions as they are reproduced by
the pharmacist – ‘take one pill, three times a day’ – so the waiter’s command conveys the prescription for use of this diner. Tony’s Diner is to be used by a specific sort of person. The waiter, through his command, presents himself as the label on the bottle.

It is worth recalling that *norma*, the Latin word from which our term, ‘norm,’ derives, names the carpenter’s square. It is not an idea, but a thing. Norms are things, too, though not in the same sense as, for instance, a chair is a thing. We seem to bump into them all the time. ‘Beware of the dog’, ‘yield’, ‘take a number’, ‘don’t walk’; these are just so many examples of norms in the imperative mode. In the language of the Cornell Lectures, a norm has ‘a certain objective being – one can accurately determine and assess its particular function, consider the function of others in relation to it – but it is a being beyond being’ (204: 123). We encounter these things in their peculiar objectivity as ‘beings beyond being,’ sometimes pulling us, sometimes pushing.

Of the ‘ethical task,’ Sartre writes,

> It appears as an unconditional: transmitting a demand to a historical subject, it presents itself as a demand which cannot be changed . . . a certain mechanical rigidity which characterizes its being prevents it from adapting itself to situations: the demand remains inert whatever the conditions may be’. (208:126, original emphasis)

Like so many other ‘things’, a norm does not change in relation to circumstances. Ethical normative propositions objectively presuppose the possibility of perfect conformity to their demands. Whoever you are, whatever the present circumstances, if you intend to eat in Tony’s Diner, you had better bathe and look like you have a home. Thus, Sartre writes, ‘In any case, the fundamental structure [of a norm] remains unconditional rigour’. (40: 20, my gloss) The waiter is concerned with what the man must do, not with why it might or might not be a good idea to do it.

So what are these things called ethical norms for? What are they like and what do we do with them? Sartre puts it this way:

> it is clear that all ethical determinations – in any case, those that we have encountered [e.g. the waiter’s command] – aim at regulating human relationships . . .

Undoubtedly, in certain cases, the norm pertains to worked objects: but only to the extent that relations between humans pass through these objects. (71: 41)

Norms are material things, or at least quasi-material things, for only something ‘material’ can mediate human relations. Many of them may be ‘stuff and nonsense’, but whether they are nonsense or not, they are ‘stuff’, so to speak, alongside all the other stuff in our world. Indeed, our world is cluttered with them. Bumping into ‘you gotta’
take it to go’ is a material experience not entirely unlike stubbing your
toe on a chair, even if the two experiences are distinguished by
significant qualitative differences. The offended man encountered
something quite substantial.

This focus on the imperative form of normativity, then, serves to
highlight a general characteristic of norms as such, namely, their
appearance as of an immovable edifice. Again, in their peculiar
objectivity as beings beyond being, norms are rigid and inflexible.
‘You gotta’ take it to go’. Period.

**Historical Momentum**

Where is the momentum of history in this brief event? After all, the
word ‘history’ tends to connote the passage of time in units larger
than seconds and minutes. I will focus on the offended man’s act of
waiting after he called the police.

Waiting is an experience of the passage of time, the lived
constitution of time’s passage. Something may happen; nothing
may happen. The police may come; they may not. Whatever is to
happen, the offended man knows that it is coming, that he is waiting
for something that can only be described as that which will be next.
‘This pure future is not indeterminate,’ Sartre notes, ‘but this pure
future is unforeseeable’ (167: 100) and this purity and
unforeseeability of the subsequent evidence our continual living of
historical momentum. ‘In the ethical act,’ Sartre writes, ‘the
unconditional unveils its true temporal dimension: it is my possible
future, whatever my past may have been, or, if you prefer, it is the
conditioning of the past by the future through the present.’ (165:
99, emphasis added)

This conditioning is lived continually, toward a possible future,
whatever the past may have been, whatever the present may be. As
Sartre puts it in the Critique, ‘nothing is settled except past being’.4
Experience moves forward toward the unsettled with the settled as its
backdrop and the agent as settler. ‘I called the police. I’m filing a
report’. Now he must wait. He has placed himself under a new
imperative.

Sartre demonstrates a specific sensitivity to waiting in the Cornell
Lectures, under the rubric of ‘historical irreversibility’. He writes of
torture victims: ‘in the concrete moment, when they were taken to
the torture chamber, they lived pure irreversibility, knowing that they
could not take back their “confessions” ’ (202: 122, emphasis added).
Similarly, the offended man at the diner cannot take back his call to the police. Thus, ‘to the extent that it has actual efficacy, ethical action . . . cannot escape historical irreversibility: the obtained result is inscribed in the course of things.’ (202: 122) – inscribed, though unknown. The owner, the waiter, the customers, depend ‘on the course of things,’ that is, on a contingent regularity at Tony’s Diner. And yet the momentum of history, even in a patch of day as brief as a morning coffee, cannot guarantee freedom from the unexpected, from the inordinate invasion of the unpredictable. On this particular morning at Tony’s Diner, the regulars encounter the face of poverty and exclusion in confrontation with convention.

Waiting is a lived and open-ended temporalization toward the possible. In principle and in fact, waiting is never a waiting for the necessary. Indeed, ‘praxis cannot elicit itself except by positing itself a priori as radical and temporalized totalization’ (186–187: 113, emphasis added). This temporal and temporalizing aspect of praxis is just its concrete openness toward a future, pure or impure, radical or not. The momentum of history carries with it only prospects, never promises.

Will the police come? Will Tony intervene? Will the man say or do more? These questions do, by the end, receive definitive answers, but these answers are given in and through the means, one of which is waiting. The answers are definitive only in the sense that ‘the course of things’, as lived temporalization, admits of orientations and velocities and vectors which permit us, and which force us at times, to live momentary stopping points. History admits of way stations, as it were, but only in so far as we punctuate it by our concrete actions. Waiting, too, is such a momentary stopping point, not unlike a comma, or, in the case of the offended man, perhaps more like a semicolon.

By the term ‘historical momentum,’ then, I mean simply, though nontrivially, to point to this lived experience of the continual movement of history. We do not step into and out of this movement. It is made from within and lived continually. As long as the materiality of the world includes among its constituents the ‘thing’ called human praxis, the movement of history does not and cannot stop. This waiting man, that waiter, these customers, have abandoned themselves to the unknown as to the familiar. How else can the waiter take another order, the customer another sip of coffee, the owner another egg from the carton, the offended man another bated breath? All good things to those who wait? Perhaps. But something, surely, to those who wait.
Moral Invention

The notion of moral invention immediately invites the question of practical agency. For the minimal condition for invention is an inventor. However, there is more to it. Invention, as such, carries with it also, and in a way that the term agency does not, an implication of instances of agency that beget novelty. It is no different with moral invention.

Sartre considers the occasion of a person who leans out of a train window despite the sign on the window which forbids leaning out. That person invents disobedience.

If I lean out, I disobey. It [disobedience] is an objective reality which can be bestowed upon me by the silent disapproval of the other travellers; it is a subjective determination: I must assume disobedience by an ethical option. For example, by opposing the supple adaptation of a free human conduct . . . to the stupid inertia of an imperative, the universality of which conceals unadaptive rigidity.’ (33: 16, emphasis added)

Objective disobedience is subjectively determined. I may know, after all, that leaning out at just this moment poses no danger. Or I may not care. In the same way, through a free praxis rooted in the ethical assumption of an alternative normative ensemble, the offended man at Tony’s Diner opposes the inherent flexibility of his conduct to the inherent inflexibility of the waiter’s command. He knows that he can sit and eat without adversely affecting this diner, and this, despite the stupid inertia of the imperative which forbids it.

The idea of moral invention logically entails making possible what is given as impossible.

Invention begins as the refusal of factual impossibility: present (and past) structures of the practical field, in their actual arrangement, do not condition the realisation of the undertaking; invention presupposes, in itself, the permanent possibility of reshaping them and of integrating them, with new meanings, into the hierarchy of means: it [invention] is praxis affirming itself. (145: 87)

Our hero has taken up the means at his disposal, in a given situation, in light of an alternative normative ensemble, in order to generate the impossible out of the possible, the unconditional out of the conditional.

Moreover, the significance of the conditional given must not be underestimated. This present impossibility that is to be made a future actuality is to be made out of present possibilities, a present which includes among its basic constituents the invoked absence of this man’s freedom to sit in this diner. This man’s moral invention is
precisely to fashion his future freedom out of his present un-freedom, situated on the surface of a settled past. In Sartre’s words,

in invention the end appears as the unconditional conditioning its own conditions. But, in this very aspect, the unconditional flows through its dependence on the factual given, since invention, however ingenious it may be, can fall apart in an instant for want of support by actual determinations of the practical field.’ (186:112, emphasis added)

Moral invention is to take up the given, to find the means in this concrete environment (cf. 160:96).

Perhaps the police will help, doubtful though this may seem. In any case, What is invented is a new unity of the practical field, that is to say, a hierarchical and temporalizing linkage of means which afford the possibility of attaining the desired end and which were not given in the previous state of the practical field.’ (143/87, first emphasis added)

The man calls the police. He demands that an already existing institutional authority come to enforce presumably existing laws which require restaurants to serve qualified customers, and so on. In this case, at least, they do come. Though they make no demands on the man or Tony or the waiter, the result is a transformation of the practical field. ‘You can come down to the station and file a report’, says the officer. ‘Let him eat’, says Tony. He eats.

Dialectics of Ethos

‘The ambiguity of popular consciousness’, Sartre writes, ‘has its origin in the very structure of ethos (practice inseparable from its object) which is a knot of contradictions’ (197:119, emphasis added). For Sartre, this knot of contradictions is self-evident, given the failure of history to perfectly mimic morality, and conversely, the failure of morality to completely determine history. Key to Sartre’s understanding of ethos is his sense of the ubiquity of invention.

Thus human action has its ethical moment . . . And this ethical moment, even if totally contradicted by the result, is not in the least illusion, but is an indispensable structure of praxis: in fact, there is no action, even a repetitive action (the practical field is transformed, all repetition is, in part, adaptation), which does not define itself by invention (the end commanding the agent to invent the means of attainment). (150:91, emphasis added)

Even in repetitive or retrograde projects, even when our projects fail, even when they are bound to fail, both the moment of invention and the unconditional possibility that the necessary means can be found
are real. Conditional creativity and conditioned possibility are concretely experienced by the inventor – whether reflectively or not – as unconditional insofar as there are means, any means.

Thus we might well look to the offended man’s actions as examples of moral invention, but this in no way denies invention to the more repetitive and retrograde actions of the other persons involved. Even those who ‘re-invent the wheel’ are inventors in so far as their end, this new wheel, if it is to be attained, involves these new means. The customers look away. It is not the first time, nor will it be the last. This limited and limiting act is a moment of invention, however egregious.

[That]hrough this moment, the agent posits the vocation of praxis for unconditionality: that is to say, he [or she] discovers the meaning of action, which is the subjection of the world to man [l’homme] without reciprocity. (186/112–113)

This is surely true for the waiter. However we may judge his actions, he invents the means to carry out his project, and at the moment of invention it is unconditionally possible that these means – the command in the presence of witnesses, coupled to a real, if limited authority commensurate with his position in the hierarchy of the establishment – will suffice for success. His moral success will be to subject that irregular man to this regular world. There is moral invention, whether the inventor seeks reprehensible ends or not. At the level of lived experience, it is not simply a question of morality opposing immorality. Moralities collide, and things happen.

In the Cornell Lectures, as elsewhere, Sartre sees freedom at work toward an indeterminate but determinable future. Despite the oft-voiced criticism that he believed that freedom is unconstrained, as any careful reader knows Sartre admits a significant degree of determination. (Indeed, some worry that, by the end, he admitted too much of it!) He writes at one point of circumstances wherein ‘The historical future . . . is already sketched by the past, the present environment, the situation, etc.’ (116: 69) If praxis and the practico-inert are reciprocally constitutive – sometimes symmetrically, more often not – and mediated by need, material circumstance must determine our actions to some degree. It cannot just appear to do so.

Sartre knows this. Determinism is not either absolute or merely apparent. Determinations are real and they are built on freedom. Determinism, if it is anything, is ‘determinism freely created,’ as he once put it. In the Cornell lectures, he puts it this way:
When the practical field and its practico-inert structures favor the realization of the unconditionally possible, this latter retains its normative appearance, but becomes a conditioned unconditional: there remains an exigency which must be realized, whatever the historical conditions; nonetheless, \textit{from the exterior}, and not their interiorization, historical conditions are found to be exactly \textit{prefigured} (116: 69, emphasis added)

The practical field and its practico-inert structures may or may not favor the realization of a goal. There are degrees and varieties of determinations freely constituted, not a mere absence or presence of determining factors. A sketch, this exact prefiguration \textit{in exteriority}, is not the finished product. The passage from a sketch to a finished product requires invention across time through the ethical assumption of normative exigencies, whatever the goal. Even repetition must be \textit{made}. The movement from prefiguration to figure is, in every instance, a movement through interiority, not a mere discovery in exteriority. This ‘sketch’ in exteriority, to be manifest through praxis – which is the only way it can be manifest – requires what Sartre calls a process of ‘interiorisation-reexteriorisation’. The essential structure of this process logically entails the addition of something novel, something that cannot have been part of the prefiguration itself, something that cannot be but \textit{as} temporal, that cannot be apart from contingent linkages to norms which come to the inventor, through the inventor, to be taken up as pure futures, toward futures that are unforeseeable, in relation to the means at hand. Tony, after all, has given permission to an unkempt and apparently homeless man to eat in his diner. This is not something he ordinarily does.

There is nothing magical about this development. As Sartre says, ethos ‘defines itself as the union of a definite undertaking and a definite goal.’ (192: 116) And the ‘course of things’, our lived temporalisation, with all its contingencies, ‘fills’ the ‘gap’ between this undertaking and that definite goal, even as the next gap appears. As Sartre says without qualification: ‘Ethics is absorbed by history’ (186: 112). Did the offended man ever file a report? Has he washed his clothes? Does he have a home? We don’t know. Whether he does or not, ‘ethos itself is structured as unsurpassable inertia of a being beyond being getting taken up [across time] as the rule of a free practice’ (208: 126, my gloss). The man takes up a new rule. ‘That’s all I’m paying! One dollar’. This time, at least, Tony yields to the inertia. ‘Let him go’.

Invention can succeed or fail. It can be ‘world-historical’ or mundane. It is, in any case, invention. And in every case, concrete action ‘becomes the means of history just to the extent that history
is made the means of manifesting ethos’ (171: 103). Ethos is manifest as *moral* praxis, and the practical and temporalised totalisation this manifestation necessarily entails, whether retrograde or liberative, is an instance of ethos.

Perhaps most importantly for present purposes, ‘The principal character of ethos (whatever the ethical end may be) is, above all, the refusal of the historical traps which oblige the purely historical agent to realise a destiny’ (153: 92). The essential dialectical meaning of ethos, in other words, is the rejection of determinism and the *affirmation of freedom*, for now and for the future, the inordinate frequency of alienated freedoms notwithstanding. ‘I’m going to file a report!’ These are the man’s last words. He has been offended today. The ‘report’ is a demand he promises to place on future offenders. They should be prevented by this demand, as if by a wall, from committing the same offence, and so on . . .

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have asked why moral praxis matters, and how it matters. I have addressed the central question of the Cornell Lectures concerning the dialectics of morality and history by focusing on Sartre’s preparatory question concerning the materiality of the ethical normative and the historical efficacy of moral praxis. The event at Tony’s Diner provides a snapshot of historical ethos manifest in local moral conduct. The waiter’s command instantiates the materiality of the ethical normative. It persevered through time as a buttress to change in Tony’s Diner, like a chair placed in the doorway. The offended man’s actions reveal the historical efficacy of moral praxis. His refusal of the imperative transformed the practical field, even if only long enough for him to sit and eat in a warm diner on a cold morning.

**Notes**

1. Many thanks to Elizabeth Bowman and Bob Stone for giving me the opportunity to study their copies of these lectures while working as their research assistant. I must also thank them, and Joe Catalano, Bill McBride, Ken Estey, Tom Flynn, Tim and Barry Nugent-Head, George Shiber, and Biljana M. Ally for helpful comments on this paper. Also, I must express my sincerest gratitude to Arlette Elkaim-Sartre for authorising publication of the passages quoted herein.
2. All translations are my own. Citations are given with manuscript page preceding
typescript page, e.g., MS 23: TS 19. TS has been verified against MS. Further thanks to Elizabeth Bowman and Bob Stone for sharing their working translation of the Lectures.

3. The first and third are Sartre’s terms, the second and fourth my own extrapolations.