

LECTURE 10.1: Sartre (S)

Note #1: Be sure to read the Sartre reading from your Cahn/Markie text (pp. 698-704) titled “The Existentialism of Humanism.” This e-lecture is intended only **to supplement** that reading or to provide some background on Sartre. It is not a substitute for not reading the Sartre reading.

Note #2: The philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is often referred to as **existentialism**. In this philosophy we will find his conception of reality, particularly about human nature and human freedom.

RE: Existence Precedes Essence:

- This is the basic principle of existentialism. But what does it mean to say that **existence precedes essence**, and how does this statement bear upon our understanding of human nature? For S, we cannot explain human nature in the same way that we describe a manufactured thing.
- When we consider, for example, a **paper cutter or paperknife**, we know that it has been made by someone who had in his mind a conception of it, including what it would be used for and how it would be made. Thus, even before the knife is made, the knife maker already conceives it as having a definite purpose and as being the product of a definite process. If by **essence** of the knife we mean the procedure by which it was made and the purpose for which it was produced, we can say that the knife’s essence precedes its existence. To look upon the knife is to understand exactly what its useful purpose is.
- When we think about human nature, we tend to describe ourselves also as a product of a maker, a creator of God (Recall St. Anselm, St. Thomas, Descartes). For S, we think of God most of the time as a heavenly artisan, implying that when God creates, God knows precisely what he is creating. This would imply that in the mind of God the conception of human nature is comparable to the conception of the knife in the mind of its maker. Each human individual, in this view, is the fulfillment of a definite conception of human nature, which resides in God’s understanding or mind.
- It is important to note that there are **2 groups of existentialists**: the **Christian existentialists** and the **atheistic existentialists**. **Sartre** includes himself to the group of atheistic existentialists.
- S is an **atheist** (that is, S denies the existence). For S, if there is no God, then there is **no given** human nature precisely because there is no God to have a conception of it. Human nature cannot be defined in advance because it is not completely thought out in advance. So, people merely exist and only later on do we become our essential selves.
- For S, to say that existence precedes essence means that people first of all exist, confront themselves, emerge in the world, and define themselves afterward. At first, a person

simply is, and then we are simply that which we make of ourselves in the course of living our life.

- Perhaps, our reaction to this formulation of S's first principle of existentialism is that it is highly **subjective** – that we can presumably set out to make of ourselves anything we wish. However, the main point of S here is that a person has a **greater dignity** than a stone or a table. What gives me dignity is the possession of a subjective life, which means that I am something which moves myself toward a future and am conscious that I am doing so. For S, the most important consequence of placing existence before essence in human nature is not only that we create ourselves, but that the responsibility for our existence rests squarely upon each individual person. A stone cannot be responsible for its being a stone. We (as humans) are responsible for what we make of our existence. And if human nature was already given and fixed, we could not be responsible for what we become in the course of living our life.

RE: Freedom and Responsibility:

- What began in S's analysis of human nature as an **amoral subjectivity** now turns out to be an **ethics of strict accountability** based upon individual responsibility. If we are what we make of ourselves, we have no one to blame for what we become, except ourselves. Also, for S, when I **choose** in the process of making myself, I choose not only for myself but for all of human kind [precisely because there is no given, universal human nature to start with – since there is no God to conceive such human nature or essence]. For S, I am therefore responsible not only for my own individuality but I am also responsible for all people [since the essence I choose for myself becomes a possibility I open for others as well or, as S says, “in choosing for myself, I choose for all of human kind.” -- Why so? – Because by choosing it I confer a value on it. Prior to my choosing it, it has no value].
- This last point may seem to contradict the line of reasoning that S has so far been developing. For, before I can choose a way of action, I must ask what would happen if everyone else acted so. This assumes a general human essence that makes **my** type of action relevant to **all** people. S does in fact say that even though we create our own values and thereby create ourselves, nevertheless we create at the same time an image of our human nature as we believe it ought to be. When we choose this or that way of acting, we affirm the value of what we have chosen, and nothing can be better for any one of us unless it is better for all. S does not want to make any universal law to guide moral choice. Instead, S is calling attention to one of the clearest experiences of human beings, that is, all people must choose and make decisions, and although we have no authoritative guide, we **must** still choose and at the same time ask whether we would be willing for others to choose the same action. In fact, for S, we **cannot “not-choose,”** because “to not-choose is itself a choice.”
- We cannot escape the disturbing thought that I would not want others to act as I do. To say that others will not so act is a case of **self-deception**. The act of choice, then, is one that all people must accomplish with a deep sense of **anguish**, for in this acct we are responsible not only for ourselves but also for each other. **Anguish** for S is the realization of the tremendous responsibility we carry on our own shoulder because there

no God to be responsible for the world [a world that is not of our making, yet a world we are thrown into to make sense of] and because whenever we choose we are not only choosing for our own self but for all of human kind. For S, if I evade my responsibility through self-deception, I will not be at ease in my conscience.

- Although S's language sounds at times very much like traditional moral discourse, his intention is to carry out the rigorous implications of **atheism**. In a godless world, our psychological condition is one of **abandonment**. For S, **abandonment** means that with the dismissal of God, there also disappears every possibility of finding value in some sort of intelligible heaven. Again, there cannot now be any "good" prior to my choice since there is no infinite or perfect consciousness to think it. Our sense of abandonment is a curious consequence of the fact that everything is indeed permitted, and as a consequence we are **forlorned** (abandoned), for there cannot find anything on which we can rely either within or outside of ourselves. We are without any excuse. Our existence preceded our essence. Apart from our existence there is nothing. There is only the present. The true nature of the present was revealed as what exists, that what is not present does not exist. Things are entirely what they appear to be, and apart from that there is nothing.
- For S, to say there is nothing besides the existing individual means that there is no God, everything we do.
- S rejects the notion that we are swept up by a torrent of passion and that such a passion could be regarded as an excuse for our actions. S also rejects the view that human behavior is mechanically determined by unconscious and irrational desires -- this provides us an excuse to avoid responsibility. For S, we are responsible even for our passions, because even our feelings are formed by our deeds. For S, freedom is appalling no objective system of value, no built-in essence, and, most importantly, **no determinism**. For S, an individual is free; a person is freedom. S says that people are **condemned to be free**. We are condemned because **we find ourselves thrown into the world**, yet free, because as soon as we are conscious of ourselves, we are responsible for because there is nothing forcing us from behind to behave in any given way, nor is there a precise pattern luring us into the future. We are nothing (i.e., have no essence) at birth; we are only something that exists (at birth, that is). We are all free, therefore, we must choose to be anything we want to be, that is, we can **invent who want to be**, because no rule of general morality can show us what we ought to do. There are no guidelines guaranteed to us in the world.

Re: Nothingness and Bad Faith:

- For S, there is an element of **despair** in human existence, which comes from the realization that we are limited to what is within the scope of our own wills. We cannot expect more from our existence other than the finite probabilities it possesses. Here S is touching on the genuine theme of personal existence by emphasizing our finitude and our relation to **nothingness**.
- For S, "nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being, like a worm." **Human finitude** is therefore not simply a matter of temporary ignorance or some shortcoming or even error. Finitude is the very structure of the human mind, and words such as **guilt, loneliness**, and

despair describe the consequences of human finitude. The ultimate principle of being is will. For S, **only in action is there any reality**. We are only a sum of our actions and purposes; besides our actual daily lives we are nothing. If I am a coward, I **make** myself a coward. It is not the result of my cowardly heart or lungs or cerebrum, or because of my physiological organism. **I am a coward because I made myself into a coward by my actions**. The same thing is true of being a **hero**. If I am a hero, it is not because I am predetermined to be a hero; rather I am a hero because I choose (when called upon by my circumstances or what S calls “**facticities**”), I choose to do the heroic act.

- Although there is no prior essence in all people; no given human nature; there is nevertheless a universal human condition. By discovering myself in the act of conscious thought, I discover the condition of all people. We are in a world of **inter-subjectivity**. This is the kind of world in which I must live, choose, and decide.
- For this reason, no purpose that I chose is ever wholly foreign to another person. This does not mean that every purpose defines me forever but only that we all may be striving against the same limitations in the same way. For this reason S would not agree that it does not matter what do or how we choose. I am obliged to act in a **situation**, that is, in relation to other people, and consequently my actions must not be capricious, since I must take responsibility for all my actions.
- Also, to say that I must make my essence, or invent my values, does not mean that I cannot judge human actions. It is still possible to say that my action was based on either error or upon self-deception, for if I hide behind the excuse of my passions, or espoused some theory of determinism, I deceive myself.
- For S, to invent values means only that there are no meanings or sense to life prior to acts of will. Life cannot be anything until it is lived, but each individual must make sense of it. The value of life is nothing else but the meaning that each person fashions into it. To argue that we are the **victims of fate**, of mysterious forces within us, or some grand passion, or heredity, is to be guilty of **bad faith** (*mauvaise foi*) or self-deception, of **inauthenticity**.
- For example, suppose that a woman who consents to go out with a particular man knows very well what the man’s cherished intentions are, and she knows that sooner or later she will have to make a decision. She does not want to admit the urgency of the matter, preferring rather to interpret all his actions as discreet and respectful. For S, she is in self-deception: her actions are inauthentic.
- All human beings are guilty, in principle, of similar inauthenticity. Of bad faith, of playing roles, and of trying to disguise their actual personality behind a façade. The conclusion of S’s existentialism therefore is that if I express my genuine humanity in all my behavior, I will never deceive myself, and honesty will then become not my ideal but rather **my very being**. Only in doing that can I have a genuine or **authentic** self.

RE: Human Consciousness:

- Underlying S's existentialism is his technical analysis of existence. For S, there are **2 different ways of existing** or **2 different kinds of being**: (1st) - **being-in-itself (*l'être-en-soi*)**, which is the way a paperknife exists: **it merely exists** or **simply being there**. In the case of the **en-soi**, their **essence precedes their existence**. The maker of the paperknife must already have conceived of the essence of the paperknife even before the maker makes the paperknife.
- There is a **2nd** way of existing. There is **being-for-itself (*l'être-pour-soi*)** which involves existing as a **conscious subject**, which is what people do, and which things like stones or paperknives cannot do. It is **only** in the case of the **pour-soi** that **their existence precedes their essence**. As a conscious subject, I can relate to both the world of things and people in a variety of ways. At one level, I am conscious of "the world," which is everything that is beyond me or other than myself and which therefore transcends me. For S, since there is no god to conceive of our essence as human beings, we must first exist, and then as we exist, through the choices we make in the course of living our life, we make our essence.
- At this level, I experience the world simply as a solid, massive, undifferentiated, single something that is not yet separated into individual things. For S, without consciousness, the world simply is (exists), and as such it is without meaning. Consciousness constitutes the meaning of things in the world, though it does not constitute their being.
- The activity of consciousness is at this point is **2-fold**. **First**, consciousness defines specific things in the world and invests them with meaning. **Second**, consciousness puts distance between itself and objects and, in that way, attains freedom from these objects. Because the **conscious self** has this freedom from the things in the world, it is within the power of consciousness to confer different or alternative meanings on the things in the world. For S, the activity of consciousness is what is called "**choice**." We choose to undertake this project or that project, and the meaning of things in the world will depend to a considerable extent upon what project we choose.

RE: What does Sartre mean by the statement "Existence precedes essence"? When Sartre says "Existence precedes essence" he is referring to the fact that an idea of something can't exist before the object actually exists. He is only talking about humans and he states that humans are not born with essence it has to develop and gain essence through experiences. Sartre believes that a human being is what s/he believes to be and what s/he consciously decides to be. This statement (i.e., **existence precedes essence**) Sartre does not apply to en-soi (or to things like the paperknife).

RE: Human beings are not ready-made:

Sartre states that if we are what we make of ourselves, we have no one to blame for what we become, except ourselves. Also, when we choose in the process of making ourselves, we choose not only for ourselves but for all of human kind, precisely because there is no given, universal human nature to start with, since there is no God to conceive such human nature or essence. For Sartre we are responsible not only for my own individuality but also responsible for all people.

Sartre says that even though we create our own values and thereby create ourselves, nevertheless we create at the same time an image of our human nature as we believe it ought to be.

RE: Human beings are in anguish.

We cannot escape the disturbing thought that we would not want others to act as we do. To say that others will not so act is a case of self-deception. The act of choice, then, is one that all people must accomplish with a deep sense of anguish, for in this act we are responsible not only for ourselves but also for each other. Anguish for Sartre is the realization of the tremendous responsibility we carry on our own shoulder because there no God to be responsible for the world, a world that is not of our making, yet a world we are thrown into to make sense of, and because whenever we choose we are not only choosing for our own self but for all of human kind. For Sartre if we evade our responsibility through self-deception, we will not be at ease in our conscience.

RE: Human beings are abandoned (forlorned):

In a godless world, our psychological condition is one of abandonment. For Sartre abandonment means that with the dismissal of God, there also disappears every possibility of finding value in some sort of intelligible heaven. Again, there cannot now be any “good” prior to our choice since there is no infinite or perfect consciousness to think it. Our sense of abandonment is a curious consequence of the fact that everything is indeed permitted, and as a consequence we are forlorn (abandoned), for there cannot find anything on which we can rely either within or outside of ourselves. We are without any excuse. Our existence preceded our essence. Apart from our existence there is nothing. There is only the present. The true nature of the present was revealed as what exists, that what is not present does not exist. Things are entirely what they appear to be, and apart from that there is nothing.

RE: Human beings should act as if in despair (or without hope):

For Sartre there is an element of despair in human existence, which comes from the realization that we are limited to what is within the scope of our own wills. We cannot expect more from our existence other than the finite probabilities it possesses. Sartre believes that the genuine theme of personal existence by emphasizing our finitude and our relation to nothingness. For Sartre “nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being, like a worm.” Human finitude is therefore not simply a matter of temporary ignorance or some shortcoming or even error. Finitude is the very structure of the human mind, and words such as guilt, loneliness, and despair describe the consequences of human finitude. The ultimate principle of being is will. For Sartre only in action is there any reality. We are only a sum of our actions and purposes; besides our actual daily lives we are nothing

RE: One objection to Sartre’s Existentialism:

One charge made against existentialism is that existentialism denies or trivializes human undertakings since it rejects transcendent standards without which man has no basis for willing, acting, and judging. As such, existentialism is a type of irrational voluntarism, pure caprice and relativistic moral anarchy. Sartre states that existentialism is characterized by the phrase ‘existence comes before essence’ – and he continues, ‘or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective’. Here he is directly and comprehensively confronting the third reproach against

existentialism and is seeking to show that the reproach is based upon a misunderstanding of existentialism – one perhaps generated by the over-exposure of pseudo-existentialist notions in the mainstream media of the time.

RE: Existentialism is a humanism:

Sartre characterizes existentialism as a humanism in that it renders human life possible. It is therefore not quietist, but is a doctrine in which truth and action have an environment and a human subjectivity. The use Sartre makes of the term ‘humanism’ is the concern of the final reproach against his contention that existentialism is a humanism. But, once again, the reproach and the response to it depends upon a question of meaning and of the misunderstandings that arise when meanings are casually transposed from one context to another. Sartre states that humanism has two different meanings. On the one hand, there is the humanism as a theory of the human as an ‘end-in-itself and as the supreme value’. This is a humanism of a generic humankind, the meaning of which is considered fixed, and which is a general concept, essence, of which particular men/women are the derived existences. Sartre states, humankind is not an end as he/she him/herself is ceaselessly in a state of re-invention and self-attainment (self-realization). In this sense, humanism is an ideology that will no longer allow humanity to overcome itself. The meaning of an existential humanism, on the other hand, concerns humankind as self-surpassing, self-creating, that humankind of a deeper human subjectivity. There is no human nature, for Sartre, there is no essence before our existence. There is nothing before we exist, and our only essence comes from our own commitment, our own acts, our own invention of ourselves – in other words, from our own freedom. And, it is in this sense that Sartre answers the Christian and the Communist with the contention that it is not God or the Revolution that gives us grounds for hope, but simply our own freedom which simply calls us to awaken to the truth of our fate.