

Jean-Paul Sartre

“Existentialism is a Humanism”

Existence Precedes Essence

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 - 1980)



Our reading is a transcript of a lecture that Sartre gave in 1946, three years after publishing *Being and Nothingness* (his first major work, in which he espouses his existentialist philosophy).

This lecture is a defense against two accusations. The first accusation is coming from the Communists, who find Sartre's Existentialism too abstract, and therefore too "bourgeois". The other charge is coming from the Catholics, who find Sartre's philosophy not abstract *enough*, and therefore devoid of higher, or transcendental, values (it forgets the "smile of the child"). It makes life devoid of meaning and is a philosophy of despair.

So what exactly *is* Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism?

Phenomenology

First and foremost, Sartre is a phenomenologist. His work, *Being and Nothingness*, is a work of phenomenology. It is subtitled "A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology"

Ontology - philosophical examination of "being"

Phenomenology - philosophical examination of "phenomena" (broadly defined--qualities/data/matter/emotions, in short: all material of experience)

So how does "being" arise in "phenomena"?

Phenomenology

Sartre has a "dualistic ontology" and discerns two types of beings that are a part of phenomena:

1. being-in-itself (*en soi*) - objects that "are" (e.g. tables, chairs, trees, tools, even ideas)
2. being-for-itself (*pour soi*) - "is" what it "is not" and "is not" what it "is"

While the first type of being may be easier to comprehend, the second form is obviously more complicated. What exactly is Sartre talking about?

When he says that the for-itself "is not what it is", he is referring to the "self" that is known by negating all content of experience (I "am not" my experience, but am rather having an experience: the experience is "for-me"). When he states that the for-itself "is what it is not", he is referring to the self as understood through projects (see below for more on this).

Radical Freedom

Sartre believes in the radical freedom of the *for-itself*. The *for-itself* is always capable, in all cases, of redefining its project, thus radically transforming the meaning of objects (the *in-itself*) and the values of actions and consequences in light of this freely-chosen project.



Bad Faith



In **bad faith** (*mauvaise fois*), we try to define ourselves as an *in-itself*. We often lie to ourselves, telling ourselves that one day our existence will come to a standstill and we can just "be". We are lying, thinks Sartre, when we tell ourselves that we "are" (in the sense that this chair, this table, or this computer "is"). We often try to define ourselves in terms of certain roles we play ("I am a waiter", "I am a student", etc.), and, for Sartre, we only *are* these things insofar as we "do" these things (wait tables, study, etc.). In reality, we are a *for-itself*, which is constantly defining (and re-defining) itself and its actions--always in respect of a freely-chosen project that can fail, change, or be altered at any time.

Bad Faith

When we deny our radical freedom, when we trick ourselves into believing that we are a clearly defined *in-itself*, this is bad faith. Of course, there are more or less extreme cases of bad faith (extreme cases exhibiting delusional behavior, for instance), but Sartre seems to imply that we are all, in most cases, guilty of this.

"Man is a useless passion", as Sartre says. This sounds so negative, so pessimistic, but what is Sartre trying to say? Why is man a "useless passion"?

He says that, given our condition of radical freedom, we inevitably set up ideals/goals/projects which can ultimately never be fulfilled. We want to be radically free on the one hand (the master of our universe) and yet fully determined on the other (we want our path to be unambiguously set before us).

Freedom Has Its Limits

There are, however, certain limits to our radical freedom that Sartre acknowledges.

1. facticity - brute facts (e.g. I cannot walk through walls, regardless of which project I choose.)
2. other "freedoms" - other people can stand in the way of my freedom, and also hold sway over me emotionally (e.g. when I feel "ashamed")

The Look of the Other

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explains how "the Look" of "the Other" is felt in times of shame (and when feeling other emotions, such as pride). When we realize that "the Other" (not just an *in-itself*, an object, but another *for-itself*) has come on the scene, this is a limit to my freedom: my possibilities are limited and transformed.



The Problem

In reaction, we often try to make an object of the Other. They are "someone who doesn't understand", "someone who is ignorant of the circumstances"--not a radical freedom, a *for-itself*, that is forever out of reach, impenetrable (e.g. I can never see the world through the eyes of the Other; I can never see myself as the Other sees me).

At other times, we make ourselves into an *in-itself*. "I am just that type", "I couldn't have done otherwise", "I couldn't help myself" or "I have just been misinterpreted/misunderstood."

Either way, we objectify the Other or our self, we are denying the radical freedom of the *for-itself*, and we are in bad faith.

The Charges Against....

So back to the two charges against Sartre:

- the Communist charge: Sartre's doctrine is too abstract, too bourgeois (esp. given the *dialectical materialism* of Marxism).
- the Catholic charge: Sartre is not abstract enough (no higher, transcendental values; this leads to a quiet despair, a life without meaning or value where no one can be held accountable (whether in condemnation or praise); "man is a useless passion.")

Sartre wants to show that all of this is not necessarily true, and that his doctrine is being misrepresented. He aims to defend himself against the charges by trying to show that "Existentialism is a Humanism." The Communist charge entails that Existentialism is a philosophy of inaction, of contemplation, which offers little hope: "no possibility". The Catholics see Existentialism as a philosophy of "pure caprice" where "everything is permitted." If Sartre can show that Existentialism is a Humanism, then he thinks that these charges will dissolve.

In this lecture, Sartre unfortunately "dumbs down" his philosophy, subsequently making this a fairly weak philosophical defense of his doctrine. He regretted giving the lecture almost immediately afterward, and continued to criticize it for the rest of his days. Ironically, it is the most widely anthologized of any of his works.

Existentialism

So what is Existentialism?

Sartre's first contention is that Existentialism is "a doctrine which makes human life possible."

Existentialism declares that every truth, every action, implies a human setting and a human subjectivity. (Is this perhaps what makes it a "Humanism"?)

Sartre distinguishes between a Christian Existentialism and an atheistic Existentialism.

But what do they have in common? For Sartre, they all agree that "existence precedes essence."

For Sartre, this is another way of saying that "subjectivity is the starting point."

Existence Precedes Essence

So what exactly does Sartre mean when he says "existence precedes essence"?

On pg. 226, he describes some man-made objects and explains how their "essence" precedes their "existence", but explains that this account won't work for human existence. We first exist before and start to define ourselves in terms of an "essence". Sartre says:

...first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence. (pg. 227)

So "man is what he makes of himself."

Not only does Existentialism give humans a special dignity, according to Sartre (they are the only beings for whom existence precedes essence), but this doctrine also holds us absolutely accountable.

The existentialist claims that the full responsibility of existence rests on each individual.

But is this Relativism? Is Existentialism a form of Subjectivism?

Subjectivism and Responsibility

Sartre explains that the term "Subjectivism" has at least two senses:

1. the belief that individuals "choose" and "make" themselves (all on their own, without any necessary appeal to other "subjects").
2. the assertion that it is impossible for individuals to "transcend" human subjectivity.

Sartre claims that this second sense of Subjectivism *is* the essential meaning of Existentialism.

Sartre also claims that nothing can be "good" for us without being "good" for all. What does he mean by this? Doesn't this claim seem questionable? Does my "good" have to be seen by me as the "good" for all?

If Sartre is right about this--if our ideal is the ideal for all and of our "existence precedes [our] essence."--then our responsibility is even greater than we might have supposed: it involves all mankind.

If I choose a life of piety or a monogamous married life, then I am involving humanity in my act. I am creating an image of mankind in my choosing. "In choosing myself, I choose man." (pg.227)

These are pretty strong claims by Sartre, and it is difficult to understand what he really means when he speaks of my responsibility to all others.

But, according to Sartre, this overwhelming responsibility is what explains, or helps us understand, the actual content of words like **anguish**, **forlornness**, and **despair**.

Anguish



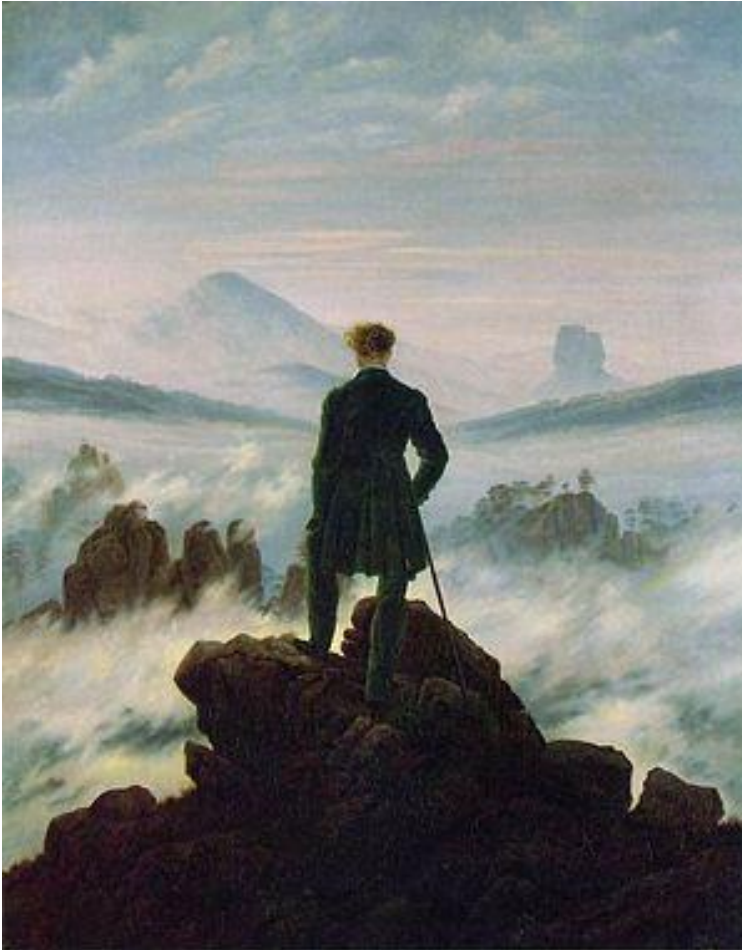
Anguish is the realization that not only am I what I choose to be, but I am also a law-maker who chooses all mankind as well as myself. It is a feeling of total and deep responsibility. Sartre provides several examples to explain this phenomenon of **anguish**: the story of Abraham (from the book of Genesis), the woman who keeps getting "phone calls from God", and the military officer who is in charge of a regiment of troops.

Many of us, according to Sartre, try to hide this anxiety and try to pretend that we do not hold this deep responsibility. Sartre contends that the fact we have to lie to ourselves like this reveals a guilty conscience. But this is not anguish that leads to inaction or quietism (the Communist charge). Anyone with responsibility is privy to anguish.

Anguish does not prevent one from acting, rather, it is the *condition for* the action. We must envisage a number of possibilities, choose one, and then realize that our choice only has value *because it is chosen*. This kind of anguish is explained by a direct responsibility to other individuals whom our actions involve.



Forlornness



Sartre describes **forlornness** as the realization that God does not exist and that we must face the consequences of this (as opposed to other secular ethicists who dismiss the profound consequences of this).

The existentialist finds it very significant that God does not exist. This means that there can no longer be an *a priori* "Good" without an infinite and perfect consciousness to think it.

Neither within him, nor without, does man find anything to cling to--he is forlorn (and subsequently cannot start making excuses for himself). As Sartre puts it, man is "condemned to be free":

Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never agree that a sweeping passion is a ravaging torrent which fatally leads a man to certain acts and is therefore an excuse. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion. (pg. 229)

Sartre provides a few examples to explain this phenomenon. Perhaps the most famous is the one of the student who comes to ask Sartre for advice (pg. 230). Sartre tells him that it is up to him to decide, and that a Christian, Kantian, or any other ethical system won't help him deliberate. It is ultimately up to the student to decide. No general ethics can show what must be done.

My choice, my decision, my act, confirms and defines what I value. Sartre also makes the claim that when one goes to seek advice, one has already decided what to do. We are often just looking for some outside confirmation and are often mindful of who we seek advice from.

Despair



Despair, for Sartre, "means that we shall confine ourselves to reckoning only with that which depends upon our will, or on the ensemble of probabilities which make our actions possible..."

Not the clearest explanation, admittedly, but Sartre offers the example of waiting for a friend at the train station to illustrate his point.

When we involve ourselves in group efforts, join political movements, etc. we are in a similar situation as when we wait on a friend. We trust that all will work out, but there is always the possibility of failure.

So does this mean that we should resign ourselves to quietism or inaction?

For Sartre, Existentialism is the opposite of quietism: "There is no reality except in action...Man is nothing else except his plan. He exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself, he is nothing but an ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life." (pg. 232)

A Response To The Charges

Sartre thinks that, at bottom, Existentialism is being criticized not for its pessimism, but for its "optimistic toughness."

"A constitution is not an act": there are no excuses and we have an absolute responsibility for ourselves and our actions (despite heredity, despite environment, despite upbringing). One is not born a hero or a coward, and then can lay the issue to rest. No—one must act a coward or act like a hero—only in action is man a hero or a coward.

This pronouncement is what makes Existentialism so hard to swallow, thinks Sartre; some like to make excuses for their lack of accomplishments.

A man is involved in life, leaves his impress on it, and outside of that there is nothing...Man is nothing else than a series of undertakings. (pg. 232-33)

So Existentialism is not a doctrine of quietism (the Communist charge); it defines man in terms of action.

And Existentialism is not a doctrine of pessimism (the Catholic charge); it is optimistic: man's destiny is within himself (and this is not some "pre-determined future", but a wide open future of possibilities).

Existentialism, claims Sartre, is an ethic of action and involvement.

But he still needs to address charges of subjectivism, solipsism, and extreme individualism...

"Intersubjectivity"

Sartre admits that Existentialism is "subjective" in a sense. Subjectivity *is* the point of departure for Existentialism.

But the subjectivity that Sartre speaks of is not a strictly *individual* subjectivity, it involves the "subjectivities" of others.

In order to get at truths about myself, I need contact with others.

Thus, the man who becomes aware of himself through the *cogito* [the "I think", or ego] also perceives all others, and he perceives them as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he can not be anything (in the sense that we say that someone is witty or nasty or jealous) unless others recognize it as such. In order to get at any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person. The other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself. This being so, in discovering my inner being I discover the other person at the same time, like a freedom placed in front of me which thinks and wills only for me or against me. Hence, let us at once announce the discovery of a world which we shall call intersubjectivity; this is the world in which man decides what he is and what others are. (pg.234)

Notice that Sartre avoids speaking of "objectivity". This would be to assume a world of objective, *a priori* values that exist independent of human existence. For Sartre, such a world does not exist, yet we inhabit a world populated by other freedoms, other subjectivities.

Although there may not be a universal human *nature*, there is a universal human *condition*, or *a priori* limits which outline man's fundamental situation in the universe. Historical situations vary, but what does not vary is our necessity to exist in the world, be at work there, to be there in the midst of people, and to be mortal there.

So there is a "universality" to man, but it is not given: it is perpetually being made.

But this does not completely settle the charges of subjectivism. ("So you are able to do anything, no matter what!?" "Anything is permitted!")

Abitrariness?



Sartre insists that choice is always possible. What is not possible is not to choose (even if I let someone choose for me, this is itself a choice). But the choice that I make is never arbitrary, thinks Sartre.

If I, in any way, assume responsibility for a choice which involves all mankind, then this has nothing to do with caprice (even if no *a priori* value determines my choice).

A work of art is never arbitrary, and neither are our moral acts. There is creation and invention in both cases.

Man is defined in relation to involvement, therefore (Sartre thinks) the charge of arbitrariness is absurd.

But still, where does condemnation come in? If there are no "objective" standards, then how can we judge anyone for their actions?

Sartre replies, that yes, when one sanely and sincerely involves oneself in a choice, when one faces up to one's responsibility (not just to oneself but to "all mankind"), then condemnation is not possible.

On the other hand, if the choice is made in denial of—or flight from—one's absolute freedom and responsibility, then we can at least say that this choice is based on an error.

Also, existentialists do declare one positive moral value: freedom.

If we admit our *forlornness*, our absolute freedom, that we are "condemned to be free", then we can no longer want but one thing: freedom as a basis for all values.

Freedom As A Value

Sartre is not just speaking of some abstract freedom, but a real, concrete freedom. He makes the bold (and rather controversial) claim that the meaning of my acts, if I am honest about my freedom, is a quest for the freedom of all men. Our abstract desire for freedom is wanted in something concrete, freedom for freedom's sake in every particular circumstance.

In wanting freedom, claims Sartre, we see that it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and the freedom of others depends on ours ("abstract" freedom does not depend on others, but "concrete" freedom does).

As soon as there is involvement with the "human world", then one is obliged to want freedom for others. Once I realize my full responsibility for my actions—my freedom—then I am obliged to promote freedom in others.

Why is this the case? Why am I obliged to promote the freedom of others if I am honest about mine (and the responsibility tied to it)? And how does my freedom depend on the freedom of others (and vice versa)? In what sense is this true?

Sartre is not very clear about this in his lecture. Perhaps we will get a better answer to these questions when we turn to the readings from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Is Existentialism a Humanism?

So in what sense is Existentialism a Humanism?

The historical movement known as Humanism (with roots as far back as the early Italian Renaissance), is not what Sartre wishes to align himself with here. He speaks of two meanings for the term Humanism:

1. takes man as an "end" and as a higher value (ascribes a value to man based on the highest deeds and works of certain men).
2. no universe other than the human universe; man is constantly outside himself, projecting himself, losing himself; it is through pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist.

Sartre finds the first form of Humanism absurd, and sees Existentialism as aligned with the second sense of Humanism, which declares that there is no lawmaker other than man himself.

Brainstorm: Has Sartre really responded to the critics--the Communists who says his philosophy leads to quietism and inaction--and the Catholics who find his philosophy pessimistic due to its lack of higher values?

Also, do we have to recognize the freedom of others if we recognize our own?

And finally, are we all really as radically free as Sartre contends?