

## Notes: Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946)

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### Existentialism: Sources and Influences

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55)  
Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)  
Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936)  
Martin Buber (1878-1965)  
José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955)  
Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973)  
Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)  
Albert Camus (1913-1960)

Man becomes a stranger to God, nature, and the social world due to a breakdown of religious belief, a displacement to urban environs, and the industrialization and rationalization of life. Finally, by identifying with one's function in life, man becomes a stranger to himself.

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### Objections to Existentialism [1]

1. It embodies a "quietism of despair." No hope of changing the world and human relations. (Communist)
2. It overemphasizes evil and is too negative and pessimistic. (Christian)
3. It is too subjective ("phenomenological"). It lacks potential for solidarity. (Communist & Christian)
4. It is nihilistic (denies moral values) and anarchistic. (Christian)

(Sustained rebuttals begin on p. 7.)

### "Humanist" Defence of Atheistic Existentialism

In what sense is it "humanist"?

"[E]xistentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity." [1]

Freedom, as understood by the existentialist, is opposed to a conservative resignation and acceptance of the status quo. [2]

Two varieties of existentialism—Christian and atheist. Both hold that subjectivity is primary and that, for human beings, "existence precedes essence".

"Atheistic existentialism...declares...that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality." [3]

### Tool Analogy

- Paper-knife: essence precedes existence.
- The concept determines the being and nature of the tool.
- Concept = "the sum of the formulae and the qualities which made its production and definition possible".

There is no concept, purpose, or *a priori* plan that determines "human nature" or the character of individual human lives.

**1st Principle:** "[M]an first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is

because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing—as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.” [3]

Cf. Heidegger’s **Da-sein** — a being that takes a stand on itself; for which its own being is an issue for it. This is a source for Sartre’s “Man” or “human reality”, but Heidegger distances his own thinking from Sartre’s “atheistic existentialism”. (See Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”, 1945.)

Much of this could be interpreted with respect to Sartre’s concept of **consciousness**.

1. Man is the first thing (creature) for whom existence precedes essence due to the fact that man is not **created** but merely “appears on the scene”.
2. Then, can’t it be said that all living creatures, indeed all natural objects, since they are not created either, share in this feature that existence precedes essence? How is human reality distinct in this respect?
3. Perhaps we should distinguish **plant** and **animal** life, which human beings qua animals take part in, from **human life** which is unique in that it is characterized by **consciousness** which extends beyond the present moment into the past and future. This consciousness is what allows humans to make **plans**, develop projects **for themselves** and conceive of their individual existences as autonomous lives which each one of us is **free** to determine.

What are we to make of the concluding claim that “even if God did exist, that would change nothing”? [Parallels: theistic soul-building argument and the withdrawal of God (Deism). Cf. passage in which Sartre contradicts this claim.]

### **Responsibility and Anguish** (“condemned to choose”)

1. Human beings are **nothing but** what they make of themselves.
2. Thus, all are **responsible** for what they are.
3. But each individual is also responsible for **all** human beings.

How can we make sense of this last claim? We might interpret Sartre’s argument as follows:

1. My essence is given subjectively, i.e. from **within**. (free choice)
2. My life is a pro-ject based on the capacity for thinking of myself as different than I am now. (This is an important fact of **consciousness** for Sartre: I can think of myself as different and in doing so I **negate the present**.)
3. Thus, I am always more than the current sum of the facts about me.
4. This **negation** is a condition of **freedom**. (Free to choose—“condemned to be free”.)
5. But I choose for all human beings. What can this mean?
  - a. Image of oneself is “built up” by one’s project.
  - b. Our choices **constitute** our values.
  - c. What we value **prescribes** a way we think things ought to be.
  - d. But to value something (in the sense of choosing it) is to think of it as good. (Cf. Socrates’ argument that no one knowingly chooses evil.)

- e. What is good for me **in the present circumstances** would be good for anyone **in the same circumstances**.
- f. Thus, "in choosing myself", **I choose for all**.

#### Sartre's comment on the concept of **subjectivism**

"The word "subjectivism" is to be understood in two senses, and our adversaries play upon only one of them. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism. When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole." [3]

In this sense, the human being is analogous to a **work of art**. [See remarks on 11]

Cf. Kant's categorical imperative. To what extent is Sartre's principle similar?

"[O]ne ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing; nor can one escape from that disturbing thought except by a kind of self-deception. The man who lies in self-excuse, by saying "Everyone will not do it" must be ill at ease in his conscience, for the act of lying implies the universal value which it denies. By its very disguise his anguish reveals itself....

"Everything happens to every man as though the whole human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing and regulated its conduct accordingly. So every man ought to say, 'Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do.' If a man does not say that, he is dissembling his anguish." [4]

**Question:** Does Sartre assume we're able to choose **independent of desire**? [cf. 4]

#### **Abandonment**

- Facing the world without a dependence on God.
- We recognize that **we create values**; they have no *a priori* existence.
- Feeling of being alone in the universe with no spiritual guidance from outside.
- "If God did not exist, everything would be possible." (Dostoyevsky) This is the starting point of atheistic existentialism.

"[W]hen we speak of 'abandonment'...we only mean to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end.... Dostoevsky once wrote 'If God did not exist, everything would be permitted'; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism — man is free, man *is* freedom. Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that

could legitimise our behaviour. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. — We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free.” [5]

With reference to what do we justify our values? How are we to make choices?

Example: Should I go to war or stay with my sick mother?

- "Only thing left is to trust our instincts." [Act Nonconsequentialism]
- Is dishonesty wrong? Not necessarily, but it is false and denies freedom.
- "...[T]he ultimate meaning of the acts of honest men is the quest for freedom as such."

## Bad Faith

"Faith" in the sense of both

- something that one **keeps** (as between people), and
- something one **has**.

Misuse of the capacity of human being to project itself.

For the sake of escape from the moment, seeking the mode of **being-in-itself** (stable, solid) rather than projecting one's life (plan) into the future. [Cf. Ivan Ilych. Cf. also the seduction/flirtation scene from *Being and Nothingness*:

- facticity of words = literal meaning
- transcendence of words = what they point to. [intentionality]
- denial of the latter constitutes "bad faith".

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## Heidegger's Response—"Letter on Humanism" (1947)

Heidegger rejects Sartre's basic principle, as well as his humanism, values, and characterization of human being.

"...Sartre expresses the basic tenet of existentialism in this way: Existence precedes essence. In this statement he is taking *existentia* and *essentia* according to their **metaphysical** meaning, which from Plato's time on has said that *essentia* precedes *existentia*. Sartre reverses this statement. But the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement. With it he stays with metaphysics in oblivion of the truth of Being." [*Basic Writings*, 232; emphases added.]

"Ek-sistence...does not coincide with *existentia* in either form or content. In terms of content ek-sistence means standing out into the truth of Being ... As ek-sisting, man sustains Da-sein in that he takes the Da, the clearing of Being, into 'care'. But Da-sein itself occurs essentially as 'thrown'. It unfolds essentially in the throw of Being as the fateful sending." [BW 230-31]

"The highest determinations of the sense of man in humanism still do not realize the proper dignity of man." [BW 233]

"Man is rather 'thrown' from Being itself into the truth of Being, so that ek-sisting in this fashion he might guard the truth of Being, in order that beings might appear in the light of Being as the beings they are. Man does not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the clearing of Being, come to presence and depart. The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being. But for man it is ever a question of finding what is fitting in his essence that corresponds to such destiny; for in accord with this

destiny man as ek-sisting has to guard the truth of Being. Man is the shepherd of Being." [BW 234]

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Timothy Quigley, 8 Oct 09