

Existentialism Is a Humanism

Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris in 1905. At the age of 19 he began studying philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. After receiving his graduate degree in 1929, he served in the military for a little over a year. He then began teaching philosophy at Le Havre. Sartre spent the 1933–1934 academic year doing research at the Institut Français in Berlin. Upon returning to France, he taught at Le Havre and other French schools until 1939, when he was drafted by the army to fight in World War II. He was captured by the Germans in 1940, but escaped the following year. Sartre then went to Paris, where he resumed teaching and participated in the resistance movement against the Nazi occupation of France. During the occupation he wrote his main philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*. When the war ended, he gave up teaching to devote himself entirely to writing. He was sympathetic to Marxism, and he traveled to a number of Communist countries, often meeting with heads of state. Sartre died in Paris in 1980; his funeral was attended by 25,000 people.

Sartre's major works, in addition to *Being and Nothingness* (1943), include *Nausea* (a novel, 1938), *The Psychology of Imagination* (1940), *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946), *The Ways of Freedom* (a three-volume novel, 1945–1949), *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960; only the first volume of a projected longer work was completed), *The Words* (his autobiography, 1964), and *The Family Idiot* (a three-volume biography of Gustave Flaubert, 1971–1972).

Our reading is from *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, which was delivered as a public lecture in Paris in 1945 and published the following year. By 1945 Sartre had become known as an “existentialist” thinker, and the purpose of his lecture was to explain, in an accessible way, some basic tenets of his version of existentialism. He makes clear that the basic concept in his existentialist philosophy is human freedom. We are radically free, and through our choices we create our own “essence,” making ourselves into the kind of person we are. No preexistent pattern of human nature can guide us in making choices and no God with a plan for us to follow (Sartre is an atheist); each of us is free to fashion our essence in any way we wish. This freedom brings with it burdensome responsibility: We alone are responsible for who we are—not our genetic inheritance, our psychological makeup, or environmental influences.

What should we choose? We would all like to know the “right” thing to choose, but unfortunately there is no objective basis for determining what is “right”: We cannot base our choices either on human nature or on God's will, for there is no human nature and there is no God. Ironically, things receive value simply from the fact that we choose them. The only ethical guideline Sartre offers is that we should value freedom above all else. He argues that to value our own freedom requires that we also value the freedom of others.

[WHAT EXISTENTIALISM IS]

... What, then, is “existentialism”?

Most people who use this word would be at a loss to explain what it means. For now that it has become fashionable, people like to call this musician or that painter an “existentialist.” A columnist in *Clartés* goes by the pen name “The

Existentialist.” Indeed, the word is being so loosely applied to so many things that it has come to mean nothing at all. It would appear that, for lack of an avant-garde doctrine analogous to surrealism, those who thrive on the latest scandal or fad have seized upon a philosophy that hardly suits their purpose. The truth is that of all doctrines, this is the least scandalous and the most austere: It is strictly intended for specialists and philosophers. Yet it can be easily defined. What complicates the matter is that there are two kinds of existentialists: on one hand, the Christians, among whom I would include Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel,¹ both professed Catholics; and, on the other, the atheistic existentialists, among whom we should place Heidegger,² as well as the French existentialists and myself. What they have in common is simply their belief that existence precedes essence; or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be our point of departure. What exactly do we mean by that?

If we consider a manufactured object, such as a book or a paper-knife,³ we note that this object was produced by a craftsman who drew his inspiration from a concept: He referred both to the concept of what a paper-knife is, and to a known production technique that is a part of that concept and is, by and large, a formula. The paper-knife is thus both an object produced in a certain way and one that, on the other hand, serves a definite purpose. We cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper-knife without knowing what purpose it would serve. Let us say, therefore, that the essence of the paper-knife—that is, the sum of formulas and properties that enable it to be produced and defined—precedes its existence. Thus the presence before my eyes of that paper-knife or book is determined. Here, then, we are viewing the world from a technical standpoint, whereby we can say “production precedes essence.”

When we think of God the Creator, we usually conceive of him as a superlative artisan. Whatever doctrine we may be considering, say Descartes' or Leibniz's,⁴ we always agree that the will more or less follows understanding, or at the very least accompanies it, so that when God creates he knows exactly what he is creating. Thus the concept of man, in the mind of God, is comparable to the concept of the paper-knife in the mind of the manufacturer: God produces man following certain techniques and a conception, just as the craftsman, following a definition and a technique, produces a paper-knife. Thus each individual man is the realization of a certain concept within the divine intelligence. . . .

Atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more consistent. It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence

¹Karl Jaspers (1883–1968) was a German philosopher; Marcel (1889–1973) was a French philosopher. [D. C. ABEL]

²Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was a German philosopher. In a 1946 work he stated that his philosophy is neither theistic nor atheistic (“Letter on Humanism,” trans. Frank A. Cappuzi and J. Glenn Gray, in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell [New York: Harper & Row, 1977]), pp. 229–30. [D. C. ABEL]

³paper-knife: a flat knife used mainly to cut apart pages of books (pages of some French books are folded together but not pre-cut). [D. C. ABEL]

⁴René Descartes (1596–1650) was a French philosopher and mathematician; for a biography, see p. 144. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) was a German philosopher and mathematician. [D. C. ABEL]