

EXISTENTIALISM AS A WAY OF LIFE

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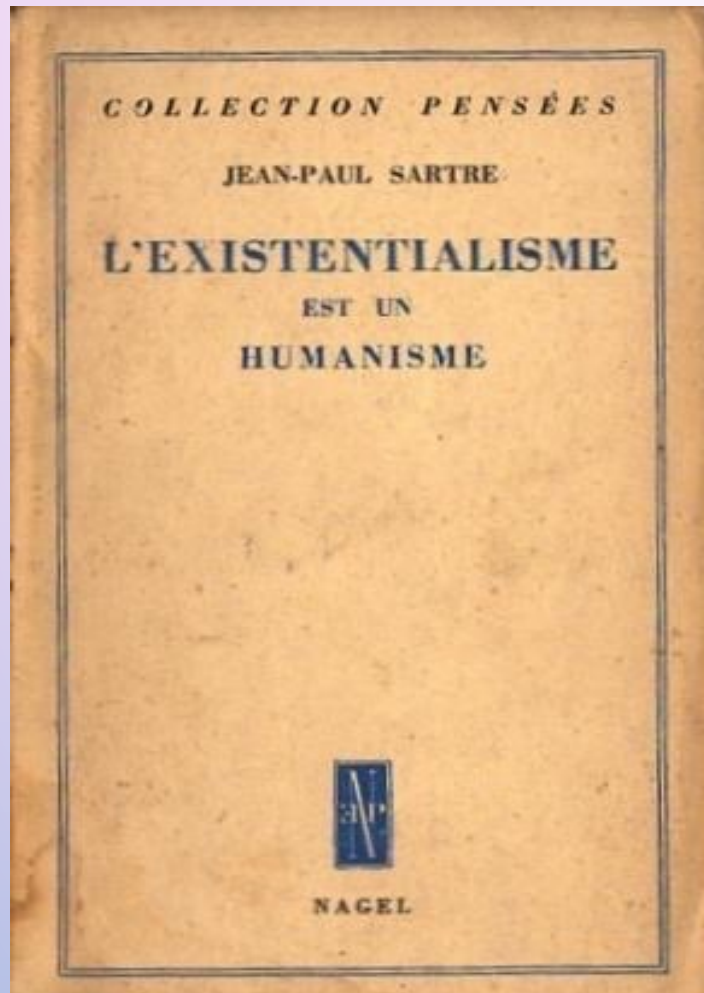
NOVEMBER 29, 2021

“Existentialism Is a Humanism”

Lecture given by Jean-Paul Sartre in Paris
At Club Maintenant

October 29, 1945





Published in 1946

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

1905-1980

- Born and died in Paris
- Existentialist philosopher
- Partner of the famous feminist and existentialist author Simone de Beauvoir
- Embraced leftist activism and “engaged literature”
- Major literary works: *Nausea*, *No Exit*, *The Flies*
- Major philosophical works: *Being and Nothingness*, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*



1. “EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE”

**“EXISTENCE
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ESSENCE”**



Traditional Conceptions – Essence Precedes Existence:

“If one considers an article of manufacture as, for example, a book or a paper-knife – one sees that it has been made by an artisan who had a conception of it.... Thus the paper-knife is at the same time an article producible in a certain manner and one which, on the other hand, serves a definite purpose.... **Let us say, then, of the paperknife that its essence** – that is to say the sum of the formulae and the qualities which made its production and its definition possible – **precedes its existence.**”

Traditional Conceptions – Essence Precedes Existence:

“When we think of god as the creator, we are thinking of him, most of the time, as a supernal artisan....Thus, **the conception of man in the mind of god is comparable to that of the paper-knife in the mind of the artisan:** god makes man according to a procedure and a conception, exactly as the artisan manufactures a paper-knife, following a definition and a formula.”

Traditional Conceptions – Essence Precedes Existence:

“In the philosophic atheism of the eighteenth century, the notion of god is suppressed, but not, for all that, the idea that essence is prior to existence.... **Man possesses a human nature**; that “human nature,” which is the conception of human being, is found in every man; which means that each man is a particular example of a universal conception, the conception of man.”

Traditional Conceptions – Essence Precedes Existence:

What are examples of traditional conceptions of human being?

(That is, what are illustrations of the idea that the human essence precedes human existence?)



Human Nature



The Creation of Adam - Michelangelo

Existentialism – Existence Precedes Essence (for Human Beings)!

“Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency 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.**”

Existentialism – Existence Precedes Essence (for Human Beings)!

Implications:

“If...it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders.”

Responsibility:

1. What's an example of someone taking responsibility for who they are?
2. What's an example of someone NOT taking responsibility for who they are?



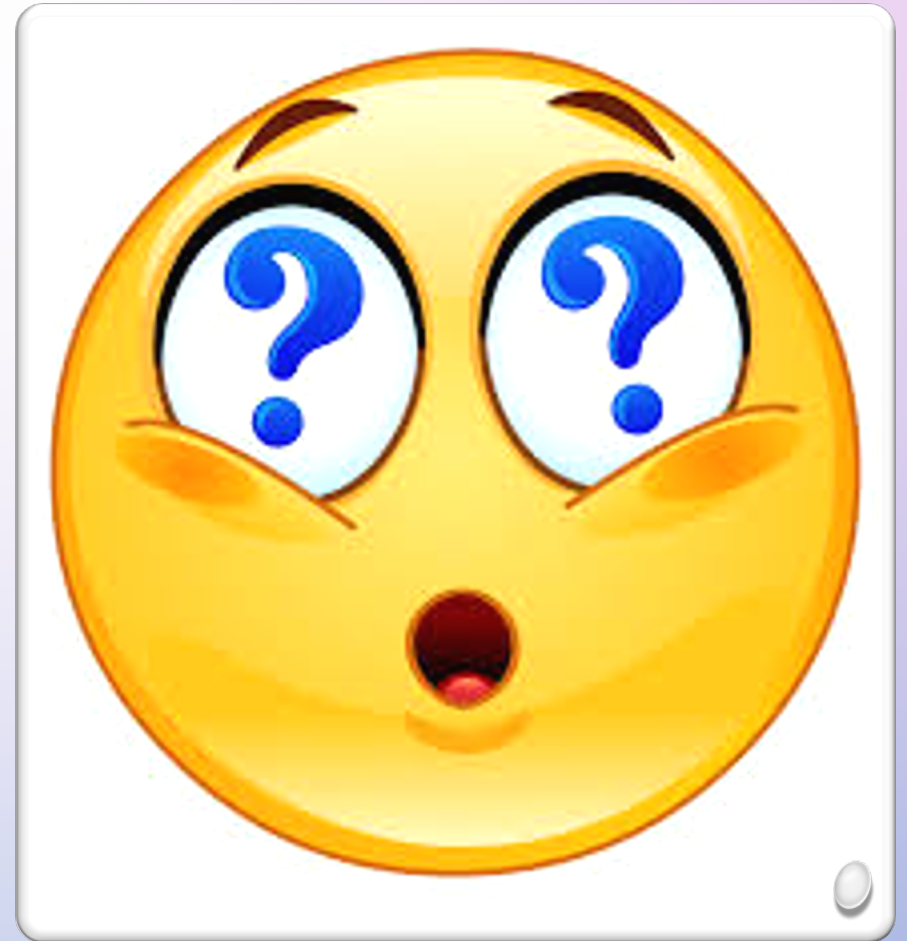
2. FREEDOM

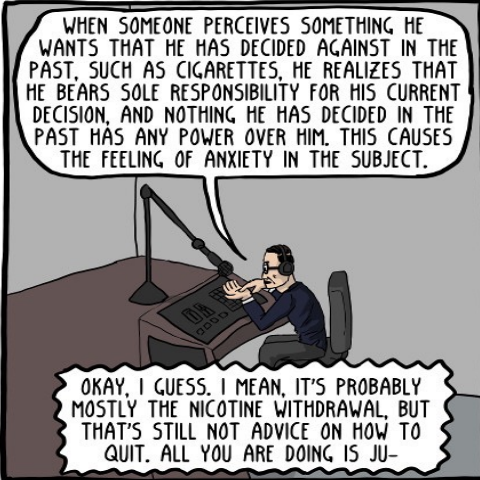
“Condemned to Be Free”:

“We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that **man is condemned to be free**. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does.”

Condemned to be free?!

1. What is paradoxical about Sartre's statement?
2. Why does Sartre think that we're "condemned to be free"?





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3. RESPONSIBILITY FOR OTHERS

From Individual to Responsibility for Others:

“If...it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, **when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.”**

Responsibility For Others:

“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...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.... **Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole.**”

Responsibility for others:

Sartre claims that individual responsibility also implies responsibility for others.

What's an illustration of this claim?



Responsibility For Others – Anguish:

“The existentialist frankly states that man is **in anguish**. His meaning is as follows: When a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind – in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. There are many, indeed, who show no such anxiety. But we affirm that they are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it.”

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4. SARTRE'S HUMANISM

Traditional Humanism:

“In reality, the word humanism has two very different meanings. **One may understand by humanism a theory which upholds man as the end-in-itself and as the supreme value.** Humanism in this sense appears, for instance, in Cocteau’s story *Round the World in 80 hours*, in which one of the characters declares, because he is flying over mountains in an airplane, “man is magnificent!” This signifies that although I personally have not built aeroplanes...I...can consider myself responsible for, and honoured by, achievements that are peculiar to some men. **It is to assume that we can ascribe value to man according to the most distinguished deeds of certain men.**”

Sartre's Humanism:

“Existentialism dispenses with any judgment of this sort: an existentialist will never take man as the end, since man is still to be determined. . . .This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realisation, that man can realize himself as truly human.”

Sartre's Humanism:

1. How would you summarize the conception of humanism Sartre opposes?
2. What's an illustration of the type of humanism Sartre endorses?



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5. EXISTENTIALISM AS A WAY OF LIFE

Discussion:

What can Sartre's ideas teach us about living a good life?

Possible Subtopics:

1. Do you think that Sartre has a conception of human flourishing? What would it mean to live a good life according to him?
2. If “anguish” comes with living freely, can we say that Sartre’s existentialism is compatible with a conception of happiness?



6. PARTING HUMOR!

WELCOME BACK TO EXISTENTIAL COOKING. TODAY WE ARE MAKING ANGST MUFFINS.



SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR
EXISTENTIAL COOKING

FIRST, BREAK FOUR EGGS INTO A LARGE MIXING BOWL. AS YOU BREAK THE SHELL OF EACH EGG, REFLECT ON THE TEMPORARY, FRAGILE NATURE OF LIFE.

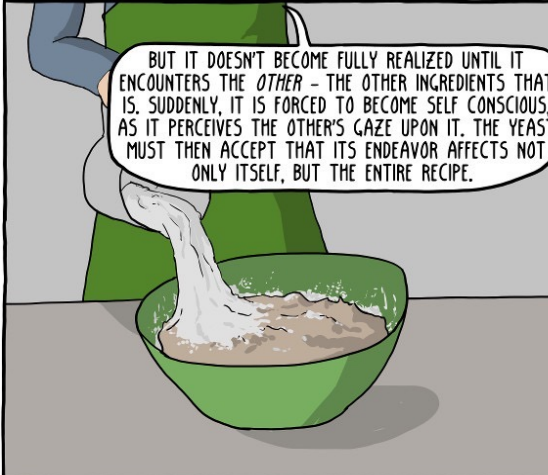


AT ANY MOMENT, IT CAN BE WRESTED FROM YOU, LEAVING YOU WITH ONLY AN ETERNITY OF NOTHINGNESS.

PUT ONE PACKET OF YEAST INTO WARM WATER. THERE THE YEAST FINDS ITSELF THROWN INTO THE WORLD, AND ABANDONED. ONLY THE YEAST CAN DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT TO RISE.



BUT IT DOESN'T BECOME FULLY REALIZED UNTIL IT ENCOUNTERS THE OTHER - THE OTHER INGREDIENTS THAT IS. SUDDENLY, IT IS FORCED TO BECOME SELF CONSCIOUS, AS IT PERCEIVES THE OTHER'S GAZE UPON IT. THE YEAST MUST THEN ACCEPT THAT ITS ENDEAVOR AFFECTS NOT ONLY ITSELF, BUT THE ENTIRE RECIPE.



WHILE IT HAS ABSOLUTE FREEDOM, IT IS NOT ALONE. IT MUST DEPEND ON THE OTHER INGREDIENTS TO FULLY REALIZE ITS PROJECT: TO CREATE THE DOUGH.



FORM THE DOUGH INTO BALLS AND PLACE THEM INTO YOUR MUFFIN PAN, AND PREHEAT THE OVEN TO 350 DEGREES.



NOW THROW THE MUFFIN PAN IN THE TRASH, AND REMEMBER THAT AS TIME STRETCHES OUT ALL HUMAN PROJECTS WILL DISSOLVE AND FAIL. THE STRIVING TOWARDS THE MUFFINS MUST, IN THE END, BE ENOUGH.

THANK YOU!