

Sartre: *Existentialism is a Humanism*  
(1946)



# What is “Existentialism”?

- Existentialism involves two main ideas:
  1. That with respect to persons that “existence precedes essence”
  2. That “subjectivity must be our point of departure” (20)

# The Traditional View: Plato

The traditional view says that *essence precedes existence*.

- There are several versions of this:
  - Plato
  - Christianity

Sartre does not argue against Plato but against Christianity. Christianity thinks of God as a 'superior artisan': God designs and creates the world like a carpenter designs and creates a cabinet.

# The Traditional View: Christianity

- Consider a manufactured object, a paper-knife. Its maker has:
  - A conception of its properties
  - A technique of production
- The essence of the thing is in the mind of an artisan before it is brought into existence. “Let us say...that the essence of the paper-knife—that is, sum of formulae and properties that enable it to be produced and defined—precedes its existence” (21).

# Traditional View of Persons

- God makes *us* like the artisan makes the paper knife: “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...Each individual man is the realization of a certain concept within the divine understanding” (21).
- God makes us in light of our essential purpose, function, or nature.
- But this means that our essence is *given* to us, not something that we ourselves define and make. According to Sartre, this makes us *an object* rather than a *subject*.

# Existentialism's view of Persons:

## *Existence Precedes Essence*

“There is at least one being...whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man...What do we mean here by ‘existence precedes essence’? We mean that man first exists, he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself...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 conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be...Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism” (22).

# Subjectivity

Human subject's are free to determine:

1. Their specific actions
2. Their being or *way of existing*

What does it mean to say that we are free to determine our being?

Our projection of ourselves into the world as this or that kind of person depends on our conception of ourselves as this or that kind of person. Nothing determines what conception we have of ourselves nor what conception we project and act on.

# Modes of Being

## Subjects

- The for-itself
- AGENTS, do-ers
- Transcendent, can go beyond what they are
- Active: always becoming
- Self-legislating, self-defining
- *Authentic* existence

## Objects

- The in-itself
- PATIENTS, done to
- Immanent, can't go beyond what they are
- Static, not becoming
- Defines itself in relation to another
- *Inauthentic* existence: lives through others, makes oneself like an object.



# Freedom

- It is our nature to be free: “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” (23).
- For Sartre, a subject is not determined by their passions (29), nor even by their temperament (39).
- “Man, with no support and no aid, is condemned at every moment to invent man” (23)

# Existentialism and Responsibility

- If humans are free to determine their actions and their being, then “our responsibility is... much greater than we have supposed” (24).
- “The first effect of existentialism is to make man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence” (23).

# 'Choosing for All Mankind'

- In choosing our being we are also choosing for 'all mankind'. What does this mean?
- "Each of us must choose himself, but...in choosing himself, he is choosing for all man...In creating the man each of us wills ourselves to be, there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. Choosing to be this or that is to affirm...the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all" (24).

# A Test

- This is like a test: Ask your self for any action whether you are comfortable holding it up as an image for all mankind. If not you do not stand behind the action, are not willing to take full responsibility for it, and you should not do it. If you are comfortable with it, then you do stand behind it.

# The Human Situation

- Human existence is characterized by three modes of being:
  1. Anguish
  2. Abandonment
  3. Despair

# Anguish

- When we realize that we are responsible not only for our being but for all mankind we become anguished. We become aware of the *weight* of our responsibility.
- Most people hide or 'mask their anguish' (27), i.e., try to evade their deep responsibility by making themselves into an object.

# Abandonment

To say that we have been abandoned is to say that God does not exist. What are the consequences of that?

1. 'If God does not exist everything is permissible'.
2. Man cannot rely on anything outside of himself to guide his action, God, a given human nature, or a pre-existing moral system.
3. Our values are our actions are the product of our free and inventive choice.

# The Young Man

- The young man vacillates between two moral systems:  
1) a morality motivated by individual devotion, and 2)  
a morality of larger scope, of care for the nation.
- How can the young man decide what to do?
  - No ‘general code of ethics’ (Christianity or Kant) can say, for any code must be interpreted and accepted by the young man.
  - No given state of himself (a feeling) can decide, for he has to act on that state for it to be real.
- We have to choose or *invent* our values and actions.



# Criticism

- Sartre says that our values and our actions are a product of free choice.
- But are the *horns of the young man's dilemma* a product of free choice? Is devotion to his mother and to country a product of free-choice?
- Do they not make a *claim* upon the young man, a claim that determines the identity of the young man?

# Despair and Quietism

- Despair says that we must limit ourselves to being concerned with what we can potentially control through our action.
- We must give up the view that everything will work out because of inevitable progress, or providence, or because of the revolution, etc.
- This does not lead to *quietism*, but to activism.