

## Human Nature?

But this brings us to a new set of questions. Given Aristotle's understanding of human nature, we can see the role of organized society and the human being. We can see what counts as an excellent person.

But what if there's *no such thing* as human nature? Could this foundational idea be mistaken? And does this change the whole notion of humanity as we discussed in chapter 11? Jean Paul Sartre thinks so. So we enter the next reading, which means it's time for another Critical Question.

Read the selection from Sartre carefully, especially as he's going to come across bewilderingly depressing if you're not careful. He's actually not depressing at all, but very practical. His terms that are all emotionally charged are deliberately chosen to shake us from our preconceived notions.

Read each key term carefully and, as you read, prepare Task 63. For this Task, define (in standard form) the terms *anguish*, *abandonment*, and *despair* as Sartre uses them. They don't mean what you think, so read him carefully and do your best to get those definitions out. Then prepare your CQ, taking care to follow all the criteria of a Critical Question assignment.

## EXISTENTIALISM IS A HUMANISM

Jean-Paul Sartre\*

Those who appeal to the wisdom of the people – which is a sad wisdom – find ours sadder still. And yet, what could be more disillusioned than such sayings as “Charity begins at home” or “Promote a rogue and he’ll sue you for damage, knock him down and he’ll do you homage”? We all know how many common sayings can be quoted to this effect, and they all mean much the same – that you must not oppose the powers that be; that you must not fight against superior force; must not meddle in matters that are above your station. Or that any action not in accordance with some tradition is mere romanticism; or that any undertaking which has not the support of proven experience is foredoomed to frustration; and that since experience has shown men to be invariably inclined to evil, there must be firm rules to restrain them, otherwise we shall have anarchy.

It is, however, the people who are forever mouthing these dismal proverbs and, whenever they are told of some more or less repulsive action, say “How like human nature!”—it is these very people, always harping upon realism, who complain that existentialism is too gloomy a view of things. Indeed their excessive protests make me suspect that what is annoying them is not so much our pessimism, but, much more likely, our optimism. For at bottom, what is alarming in the doctrine that I am about to try to explain to you is—is it not?—that it confronts man with a possibility of choice. To verify this, let us review the whole question upon the strictly philosophic level. What, then, is this that we call existentialism? [...]

The question is only complicated because there are two kinds of existentialists. There are, on the one hand, the Christians, amongst whom I shall name Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both professed Catholics; and on the other the existential atheists, amongst whom we must place Heidegger as well as the French existentialists and myself. What they have in common is simply the fact that they believe that *existence* comes before *essence*—or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective. What exactly do we mean by that?

### Existence Precedes Essence.

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

\* From a 1946 lecture. Available online at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>. Transl. Philip Mairet. Edited for brevity by BJ Kurler.

conception of it; and he has paid attention, equally, to the conception of a paper-knife and to the pre-existent technique of production which is a part of that conception and is, at bottom, a formula. 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, for one cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper-knife without knowing what it was for. 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. The presence of such-and-such a paper-knife or book is thus determined before my eyes. Here, then, we are viewing the world from a technical standpoint, and we can say that production 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. Thus each individual man is the realisation of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding. 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; something of that idea we still find everywhere, in Diderot, in Voltaire and even in Kant. 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. [...]

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 or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man 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



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*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.*

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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.

### Subjectivity.

And this is what people call its “subjectivity,” using the word as a reproach against us. But what do we mean to say by this, but that man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table? For we mean to say that man primarily exists—that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a



future and is aware that it is doing so. Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. Before that projection of the self, nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be. Not, however, what he may wish to be. For what we usually understand by wishing or willing is a conscious decision taken—much more often than not—after we have made ourselves what we are. I may wish to join a party, to write a book or to marry—but in such a case what is usually called my will is probably a manifestation of a prior and more spontaneous decision. If, however, 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. 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. If I am a worker, for instance, I may choose to join a Christian rather than a Communist trade union. And if, by that membership, I choose to signify that resignation is, after all, the attitude that best becomes a man, that man's kingdom is not upon this earth, I do not commit myself alone to that view. Resignation is my will for everyone, and my action is, in consequence, a commitment on behalf of all mankind. Or if, to take a more personal case, I decide to marry and to have children, even though this decision proceeds simply from my situation, from my passion or my desire, I am thereby committing not only myself, but humanity as a whole, to the practice of monogamy. I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man.

### Anguish.

This may enable us to understand what is meant by such terms—perhaps a little grandiloquent—as anguish, abandonment and despair. As you will soon see, it is very simple. First, what do we mean by 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



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they are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it. Certainly, many people think that in what they are doing they commit no one but themselves to anything; and if you ask them, "What would happen if everyone did so?" they shrug their shoulders and reply, "Everyone does not do so." But in truth, one 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.

This is the anguish that Kierkegaard called "the anguish of Abraham." You know the story: An angel commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son; and obedience was obligatory, if it really was an angel who had appeared and said, "Thou, Abraham, shalt sacrifice thy son." But anyone in such a case would wonder, first, whether it was indeed an angel and secondly, whether I am really Abraham. Where are the proofs? A certain mad woman who suffered from hallucinations said that people were telephoning to her, and giving her orders. The doctor asked, "But who is it that speaks to you?" She replied: "He says it is God." And what, indeed, could prove to her that it was God? If an angel appears to me, what is the proof that it is an angel; or, if I hear voices, who can prove that they proceed from heaven and not from hell, or from my own subconsciousness or some pathological condition? Who can prove that they are really addressed to me?

Who, then, can prove that I am the proper person to impose, by my own choice, my conception of man upon mankind? I shall never find any proof whatever; there will be no sign to convince me of it. If a voice speaks to me, it is still I myself who must decide whether the voice is or is not that of an angel. If I regard a certain course of action as good, it is only I who choose to say that it is good and not bad. There is nothing to show that I am Abraham: nevertheless I also am obliged at every instant to perform actions which are examples.

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.

Clearly, the anguish with which we are concerned here is not one that could lead to quietism or inaction.\* It is anguish pure and simple, of the kind well known to all those who have borne responsibilities. When, for instance, a military leader takes upon himself the responsibility for an attack and sends a number of men to their death, he chooses to do it and at bottom he alone chooses. No doubt under a higher command, but its orders, which are more general, require interpretation by him and upon that interpretation depends



the life of ten, fourteen or twenty men. In making the decision, he cannot but feel a certain anguish. All leaders know that anguish. It does not prevent their acting, on the contrary it is the very condition of their action, for the action presupposes that there is a plurality of possibilities, and in choosing one of these, they realize that it has value only because it is chosen.

Now it is anguish of that kind which existentialism describes, and moreover, as we shall see, makes explicit through direct responsibility towards other men who are concerned. Far from being a screen which could separate us from action, it is a condition of action itself.

### Abandonment.

And when we speak of "abandonment"—a favorite word of Heidegger—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. The existentialist is strongly opposed to a certain type of secular moralism which seeks to suppress God at the least possible expense. Towards 1880, when the French professors endeavoured to formulate a secular morality, they said something like this: God is a useless and costly hypothesis, so we will do without it. However, if we are to have morality, a society and a law-abiding world, it is essential that certain values should be taken seriously; they must have an *a priori* existence ascribed to them. It must be

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\* Sartre uses the term "quietism" to refer to inaction, total passivity, or nihilism. His repeated question can be understood two ways: 1) *does this painful truth make any activity meaningless (hence, I should do nothing)?* or 2) *should my response to this painful reality be resigned inactivity?* His answer is invariably, *no way! Quite the opposite!*

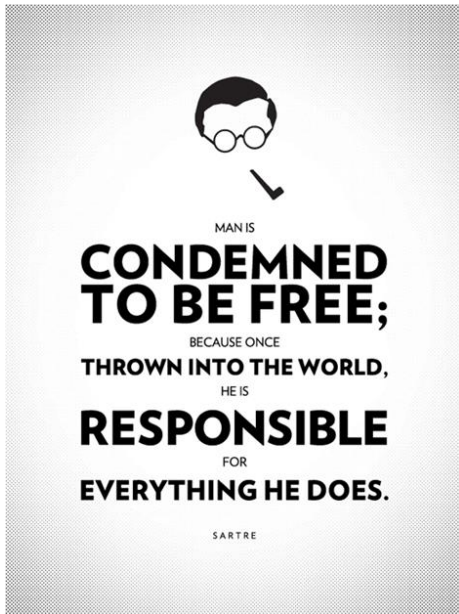
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considered obligatory *a priori* to be honest, not to lie, not to beat one's wife, to bring up children and so forth; so we are going to do a little work on this subject, which will enable us to show that these values exist all the same, inscribed in an intelligible heaven although, of course, there is no God. In other words—and this is, I believe, the purport of all that we in France call radicalism—nothing will be changed if God does not exist; we shall rediscover the same norms of honesty, progress and humanity, and we shall have disposed of God as an out-of-date hypothesis which will die away quietly of itself.

The existentialist, on the contrary, finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is nowhere written that “the good” exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. 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. 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. The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never regard a grand passion as a



destructive torrent upon which a man is swept into certain actions as by fate, and which, therefore, is an excuse for them. He thinks that man is responsible for his passion. Neither will an existentialist think that a man can find help through some sign being vouchsafed upon earth for his orientation: for he thinks that the man himself interprets the sign as he chooses. He thinks that every man, without any support or help whatever, is

condemned at every instant to invent man. As Ponge has written in a very fine article, "Man is the future of man." That is exactly true. Only, if one took this to mean that the future is laid up in Heaven, that God knows what it is, it would be false, for then it would no longer even be a future. If, however, it means that, whatever man may now appear to be, there is a future to be fashioned, a virgin future that awaits him—then it is a true saying. But in the present one is forsaken.

As an example by which you may the better understand this state of abandonment, I will refer to the case of a pupil of mine, who sought me out in the following circumstances. His father was quarrelling with his mother and was also inclined to be a "collaborator"; his elder brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940 and this young man, with a sentiment somewhat primitive but generous, burned to avenge him. His mother was living alone with him, deeply afflicted by the semi-treason of his father and by the death of her eldest son, and her one consolation was in this young man. But he, at this moment, had the choice between going to England to join the Free French Forces or of staying near his mother and helping her to live. He fully realised that this woman lived only for him and that his disappearance—or perhaps his death—would plunge her into despair. He also realised that, concretely and in fact, every action he performed on his mother's behalf would be sure of effect in the sense of aiding her to live, whereas anything he did in order to go and fight would be an ambiguous action which might vanish like water into sand and serve no purpose. For instance, to set out for England he would have to wait indefinitely in a Spanish camp on the way through Spain; or, on arriving in England or in Algiers he might be put into an office to fill up forms. Consequently, he found himself confronted by two very different modes of action; the one concrete, immediate, but directed towards only one

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individual; and the other an action addressed to an end infinitely greater, a national collectivity, but for that very reason ambiguous—and it might be frustrated on the way. At the same time, he was hesitating between two kinds of morality; on the one side the morality of sympathy, of personal devotion and, on the other side, a morality of wider scope but of more debatable validity. He had to choose between those two.

What could help him to choose? Could the Christian doctrine? No. Christian doctrine says: Act with charity, love your neighbour, deny yourself for others, choose the way which is hardest, and so forth. But which is the harder road? To whom does one owe the more brotherly love, the patriot or the mother? Which is the more useful aim, the general one of fighting in and for the whole community, or the precise aim of helping one particular person to live? Who can give an answer to that *a priori*? No one. Nor is it given in any ethical scripture.

The Kantian ethic says, Never regard another as a means, but always as an end. Very well; if I remain with my mother, I shall be regarding her as the end and not as a means: but by the same token I am in danger of treating as means those who are fighting on my behalf; and the converse is also true, that if I go to the aid of the combatants I shall be treating them as the end at the risk of treating my mother as a means. If values are uncertain, if they are still too abstract to determine the particular, concrete case under consideration, nothing remains but to trust in our instincts.

That is what this young man tried to do; and when I saw him he said, "In the end, it is feeling that counts; the direction in which it is really pushing me is the one I ought to choose. If I feel that I love my mother enough to sacrifice everything else for her—my will to be avenged, all my longings for action and adventure then I stay with her. If, on the contrary, I feel that my love for her is not enough, I go." But how does one estimate the strength of a feeling? The value of his feeling for his mother was determined precisely by the fact that he was standing by her. I may say that I love a certain friend enough to sacrifice such or such a sum of money for him, but I cannot prove that unless I have done it. I may say, "I love my mother enough to remain with her," if actually I have remained with her. I can only estimate the strength of this affection if I have performed an action by which it is defined and ratified. But if I then appeal to this affection to justify my action, I find myself drawn into a vicious circle.

Moreover, as Gide has very well said, a sentiment which is play-acting and one which is vital are two things that are hardly distinguishable one from another. To decide that I love my mother by staying beside her, and to play a comedy the upshot of which is that I do so—these are nearly the same thing. In other words, feeling is formed by the deeds that one does;



therefore I cannot consult it as a guide to action. And that is to say that I can neither seek within myself for an authentic impulse to action, nor can I expect, from some ethic, formulae that will enable me to act.

You may say that the youth did, at least, go to a professor to ask for advice. But if you seek counsel—from a priest, for example you

have selected that priest; and at bottom you already knew, more or less, what he would advise. In other words, to choose an adviser is nevertheless to commit oneself by that choice. If you are a Christian, you will say, consult a priest; but there are collaborationists, priests who are resisters and priests who wait for the tide to turn: which will you choose? Had this young man chosen a priest of the resistance, or one of the collaboration, he would have decided beforehand the kind of advice he was to receive. Similarly, in coming to me, he knew what advice I should give him, and I had but one reply to make. You are free, therefore choose, that is to say, invent.

No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world. The Catholics will reply, "Oh, but they are!" Very well; still, it is I myself, in every case, who have to interpret the signs. While I was imprisoned, I made the acquaintance of a somewhat remarkable man, a Jesuit, who had become a member of that order in the following manner. In his life he had suffered a succession of rather severe setbacks. His father had died when he was a child, leaving him in poverty, and he had been awarded a free scholarship in a religious institution, where he had been made continually to feel that he was accepted for charity's sake, and, in consequence, he had been denied several of those distinctions and honours which gratify children. Later, about the age of eighteen, he came to grief in a sentimental affair; and finally, at twenty-two—this was a trifle in itself, but it was the last drop that overflowed his cup—he failed in his military examination. This young man, then, could regard himself as a total failure: it was a sign—but a sign of what? He might have taken refuge in bitterness or despair. But he took it—very cleverly for him—as a sign that he was not intended for secular success, and that only the attainments of religion, those of sanctity and of faith, were accessible to him. He interpreted his record as a message from God, and became a member of the Order. Who can doubt but that this decision as to the meaning of the sign was his, and his alone? One could have drawn quite different conclusions from such a series of reverses—as, for

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example, that he had better become a carpenter or a revolutionary. For the decipherment of the sign, however, he bears the entire responsibility.

That is what “abandonment” implies, that we ourselves decide our being. And with this abandonment goes anguish.

### Despair.

As for “despair,” the meaning of this expression is extremely simple. It merely means that we limit ourselves to a reliance upon that which is within our wills, or within the sum of the probabilities which render our action feasible.

Whenever one wills anything, there are always these elements of probability. If I am counting upon a visit from a friend, who may be coming by train or by tram, I presuppose that the train will arrive at the appointed time, or that the tram will not be derailed. I remain in the realm of possibilities; but one does not rely upon any possibilities beyond those that are strictly concerned in one’s action. Beyond the point at which the possibilities under consideration cease to affect my action, I ought to disinterest myself. For there is no God and no preventient design, which can adapt the world and all its possibilities to my will. When Descartes said, “Conquer yourself rather than the world,” what he meant was, at bottom, the same—that we should act without hope.

Marxists, to whom I have said this, have answered: “Your action is limited, obviously, by your death; but you can rely upon the help of others. That is, you can count both upon what the others are doing to help you elsewhere, as in China and in Russia, and upon what they will do later, after your death, to take up your action and carry it forward to its final accomplishment which will be the revolution. Moreover you must rely upon this; not to do so is immoral.” To this I rejoin, first, that I shall always count upon my comrades-in-arms in the struggle, in so far as they are committed, as I am, to a definite, common cause; and in the unity of a



party or a group which I can more or less control—that is, in which I am enrolled as a militant and whose movements at every moment are known to me. In that respect, to rely upon the unity and the will of the party is exactly like my reckoning that the train will run to time or that the tram will not be derailed. But I cannot count upon men whom I do not know, I cannot base my confidence upon human goodness or upon man's interest in the good of society, seeing that man is free and that there is no human nature which I can take as foundational.

I do not know where the Russian revolution will lead. I can admire it and take it as an example in so far as it is evident, today, that the proletariat plays a part in Russia which it has attained in no other nation. But I cannot affirm that this will necessarily lead to the triumph of the proletariat: I must confine myself to what I can see. Nor can I be sure that comrades-in-arms will take up my work after my death and carry it to the maximum perfection, seeing that those men are free agents and will freely decide, tomorrow, what man is then to be. Tomorrow, after my death, some men may decide to establish Fascism, and the others may be so cowardly or so slack as to let them do so. If so, Fascism will then be the truth of man, and so much the worse for us.

In reality, things will be such as men have decided they shall be. Does that mean that I should abandon myself to quietism? No. First I ought to commit myself and then act my commitment, according to the time-honoured formula that "one need not hope in order to undertake one's work." Nor does this mean that I should not belong to a party, but only that I should be without illusion and that I should do what I can. For instance, if I ask myself "Will the social ideal as such, ever become a reality?" I cannot tell, I only know that whatever may be in my power to make it so, I shall do; beyond that, I can count upon nothing.

Quietism is the attitude of people who say, "let others do what I cannot do." The doctrine I am presenting before you is precisely the opposite of this, since it declares that there is no reality except in action. It goes further, indeed, and adds, "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realises himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is."

Hence we can well understand why some people are horrified by our teaching. For many have but one resource to sustain them in their misery, and that is to think, "Circumstances have been against me, I was worthy to be something much better than I have been. I admit I have never had a great love or a great friendship; but that is because I never met a man or a woman who were worthy of it; if I have not written any very good books, it is because I had not the leisure to do so; or, if I have had no children to whom I could devote myself it is because I did not find the man I could

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have lived with. So there remains within me a wide range of abilities, inclinations and potentialities, unused but perfectly viable, which endow me with a worthiness that could never be inferred from the mere history of my actions." But in reality and for the existentialist, there is no love apart from the deeds of love; no potentiality of love other than that which is manifested in loving; there is no genius other than that which is expressed in works of art. The genius of Proust is the totality of the works of Proust; the genius of Racine is the series of his tragedies, outside of which there is nothing. Why should we attribute to Racine the capacity to write yet another tragedy when that is precisely what he did not write? In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait.

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*There is only one day left, always starting over: it is given to us at dawn and taken away from us at dusk.*

*(Jean-Paul Sartre)*

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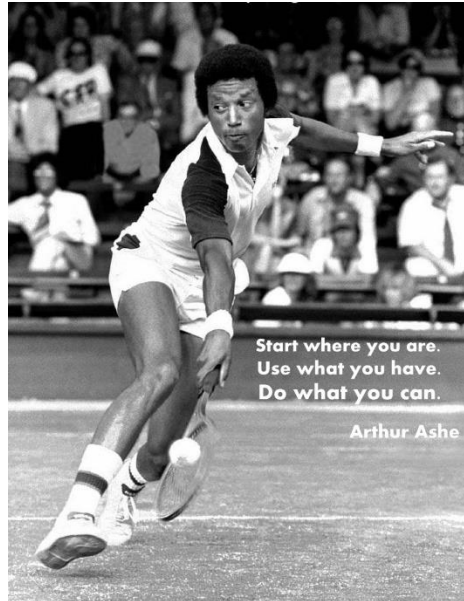
No doubt this thought may seem comfortless to one who has not made a success of his life. On the other hand, it puts everyone in a position to understand that reality alone is reliable; that dreams, expectations and hopes serve to define a man only as deceptive dreams, abortive hopes, expectations unfulfilled; that is to say, they define him negatively, not positively. Nevertheless, when one says, "You are nothing else but what you live," it does not imply that an artist is to be judged solely by his works of art, for a thousand other things contribute no less to his definition as a man. What we mean to say is that a man is no other than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organisation, the set of relations that constitute these undertakings.

In the light of all this, what people reproach us with is not, after all, our pessimism, but the sternness of our optimism. If people condemn our works of fiction, in which we describe characters that are base, weak, cowardly and sometimes even frankly evil, it is not only because those characters are base, weak, cowardly or evil. For suppose that, like Zola, we showed that the behaviour of these characters was caused by their heredity, or by the action of their environment upon them, or by determining factors, psychic or organic. People would be reassured, they would say, "You see, that is what we are like, no one can do anything about it." But the existentialist, when he portrays a coward, shows him as responsible for his cowardice. He is not like that on account of a cowardly heart or lungs or cerebrum, he has not become like that through his



physiological organism; he is like that because he has made himself into a coward by actions. There is no such thing as a cowardly temperament. [...]

A coward is defined by the deed that he has done. What people feel obscurely, and with horror, is that the coward as we present him is guilty of being a coward. What people would prefer would be to be born either a coward or a hero. [...] If you are born cowards, you can be quite content, you can do nothing about it and you will be cowards all your lives whatever you do; and if you are born heroes you can again be



quite content; you will be heroes all your lives eating and drinking heroically. Whereas the existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and that there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero. What counts is the total commitment, and it is not by a particular case or particular action that you are committed altogether.

We have now, I think, dealt with a certain number of the reproaches against existentialism. You have seen that it cannot be regarded as a philosophy of quietism since it defines man by his action; nor as a pessimistic description of man, for no doctrine is more optimistic, the destiny of man is placed within himself. Nor is it an attempt to discourage man from action since it tells him that there is no hope except in his action, and that the one thing which permits him to have life is the deed. Upon this level therefore, what we are considering is an ethic of action and self-commitment. [...]

Our point of departure is, indeed, the subjectivity of the individual, [...where] there cannot be any other truth than this, *I think, therefore I am*, which is the absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself. Every theory which begins with man, outside of this moment of self-attainment, is a theory which thereby suppresses the truth, for outside of the Cartesian *cogito*, all objects are no more than probable, and any doctrine of probabilities which is not attached to a truth will crumble into nothing. In order to define the probable one must possess the true. Before there can be any truth whatever, then, there must be an absolute truth, and

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there is such a truth which is simple, easily attained and within the reach of everybody; it consists in one's immediate sense of one's self.

In the second place, this theory alone is compatible with the dignity of man, it is the only one which does not make man into an object. All kinds of materialism lead one to treat every man including oneself as an object—that is, as a set of pre-determined reactions, in no way

different from the patterns of qualities and phenomena which constitute a table, or a chair or a stone. Our aim is precisely to establish the human kingdom as a pattern of values in distinction from the material world. But the subjectivity which we thus postulate as the standard of truth is no narrowly individual subjectivism, for as we have demonstrated, it is not only one's own self that one discovers in the *cogito*, but those of others too. Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, contrary to that of Kant, when we say "I think" we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. Thus the man who discovers himself directly in the *cogito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence. He recognises that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which one says one is spiritual, or that one is wicked or jealous) unless others recognise him as such. I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself. Under these conditions, the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other as a freedom which confronts mine, and which cannot think or will without doing so either for or against me. Thus, at once, we find ourselves in a world which is, let us say, that of "inter-subjectivity". It is in this world that man has to decide what he is and what others are.

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*Although it is impossible to find a universal human nature, there is a universality of human condition: all humans are limited by the necessities of being in the world, having to labor, and having to die.*

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## The Human Condition.

Furthermore, although it is impossible to find in each and every man a universal essence that can be called human nature, there is nevertheless a human universality of *condition*: [...] all the *limitations* which *a priori* define man's fundamental situation in the universe. His historical situations are variable: man may be born a slave in a pagan society or may be a feudal baron, or a proletarian. But what never vary are the necessities of being in the world, of having to labor and to die there. These limitations are neither subjective nor objective, or rather there is both a subjective and an objective aspect of them. Objective, because we meet with them everywhere and they are everywhere recognisable: and subjective because they are *lived* and are nothing if man does not live them—if, that is to say, he does not freely determine himself and his existence in relation to them. And, diverse though man's purpose may be, at least none of them is wholly foreign to me, since every human purpose presents itself as an attempt either to surpass these limitations, or to widen them, or else to deny or to accommodate oneself to them. Consequently every purpose, however individual it may be, is of universal value. [...] The European of 1945 may be striving out of a certain situation towards the same limitations in the same way, and that he may reconceive in himself the purpose of the Chinese, of the Indian or the African. In every purpose there is universality, in this sense that every purpose is comprehensible to every man. Not that this or that purpose defines man for ever, but that it may be entertained again and again. [...] In this sense we may say that there is a human universality, but it is not something given; it is being perpetually made. I make this universality in choosing myself; I also make it by understanding the purpose of any other man, of whatever epoch. This absoluteness of the act of choice does not alter the relativity of each epoch.

What is at the very heart and center of existentialism, is the absolute character of the free commitment, by which every man realises himself in realising a type of humanity—a commitment always understandable, to no matter whom in no matter what epoch—and its bearing upon the relativity of the cultural pattern which may result from such absolute commitment. One must observe equally the relativity of Cartesianism and the absolute character of the Cartesian commitment. In this sense you may say, if you like, that every one of us makes the absolute by breathing, by eating, by sleeping or by behaving in any fashion whatsoever. There is no difference between free being—being as self-committal, as existence choosing its essence—and absolute being. And there is no difference whatever between being as an absolute, temporarily localised that is, localised in history—and universally intelligible being.

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*Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. We think that the real problem is that what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. Existentialism is a doctrine of action.*

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### Why Choices Matter.

[...] People say to us, "Then it does not matter what you do," and they say this in various ways.

First they tax us with anarchy; then they say, "You cannot judge others, for there is no reason for preferring one purpose to another"; finally, they may say, "Everything being merely voluntary in this choice of yours, you give away with one hand what you pretend to gain with the other." These three are not very serious objections.

As to the first, to say that it does not matter what you choose is not correct. In one sense choice is possible, but what is not possible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I must know that if I do not choose, that is still a choice. This, although it may appear merely formal, is of great importance as a limit to fantasy and caprice. For, when I confront a real situation—for example, that I am a sexual being, able to have relations with a being of the other sex and able to have children—I am obliged to choose my attitude to it, and in every respect I bear the responsibility of the choice which, in committing myself, also commits the whole of humanity. Even if my choice is determined by no *a priori* value whatever, it can have nothing to do with caprice: [...] In our view, on the contrary, man finds himself in an organised situation in which he is himself involved: his choice involves mankind in its entirety, and he cannot avoid choosing. Either he must remain single, or he must marry without having children, or he must marry and have children. In any case, and whichever he may choose, it is impossible for him, in respect of this situation, not to take complete responsibility. Doubtless he chooses without reference to any pre-established value, but it is unjust to tax him with caprice. Rather let us say that the moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art.

[...] Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other

hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and center of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity. This relation of transcendence as constitutive of man (not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense of self-surpassing) with subjectivity (in such a sense that man is not shut up in himself but forever present in a human universe)—it is this that we call existential humanism. 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.

You can see from these few reflections that nothing could be more unjust than the objections people raise against us. Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position. Its intention is not in the least that of plunging men into despair. And if by despair one means as the Christians do—any attitude of unbelief, the despair of the existentialists is something different. Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action, and it is only by self-deception, by confining their own despair with ours that Christians can describe us as without hope.



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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF WESTERN THOUGHT

### The Problem with Categorization

As I noted in the introduction to this textbook, there are a number of 'rooms' in our philosophy lab. To extend that metaphor, one can say that these rooms are arranged by methodology or foundational axioms or worldviews. Just looking to Western philosophy (which is the thrust of this particular text), these areas are often divided by historical period or competing groups within a period. As long as we realize that there is, ultimately, huge overlap between these groups and that these groupings are only helpful insofar as they enable us to roughly categorize thinkers, this is all well and good.

Aristotle warns us that we should only cut up a chicken at its joints.

By this, he references the way one divides people into groups, and reminds us that sometimes the divisions we make are unnatural, arbitrary, or otherwise unhelpful. Sometimes the divisions we create are *ad hoc*—made only to support some assumption we already have—rather than at the joints where groups naturally come apart. With this warning tightly in our grip, we'll look briefly at some of the traditional groupings and how we came to see them that way. This will set us up to understand what Existentialism might be and what on earth Sartre is doing.

### The Ancients and Medievales

Western philosophy traces itself back to this guy named Thales. He was the first to attempt to understand the nature of reality

without reference to the gods or mythology. The question was rather what is the *nature* of reality, and what can *humans* know? Thus philosophy is truly the foundation of the **Humanities**. The ancient Greek thinkers are nowadays thought of in some *ad hoc* divisions. Anyone who did thought before Plato is called a *Pre-Socratic* thinker. We could divide them up more, since it's the case that they came from different key cities in Greece, and each group focused on different questions and methodologies (just like nowadays), so there are the Eleatics, the Milesians, and the Sophists of Athens, among others. But calling them *Presocratics* is really wrong, since some thinkers who were contemporaries with Socrates (like Anaxagoras, who was teaching in Athens when Socrates was a young man) and Democritus (who was a competitor to Plato in Athens) are lumped into this Presocratic mold. Basically, it means "anyone but Plato."

Plato taught Aristotle, who wound up disowning Plato's *top-down* metaphysics for a *bottom-up* approach. You might say Plato saw the world mathematically, whereas Aristotle saw it scientifically. Anyway, the next division we have are those who follow in Plato's footsteps versus those who follow Aristotle's, and this division somewhat influences all the divisions we see throughout western thought ever since. Thinkers who come after Aristotle are nonetheless lumped together like the Presocratics into a glob

called the Post-Aristotelian thinkers. Not so much with the helpfulness, given that they are as widely divergent in their understanding of reality, ethics, and knowledge as anyone. Interestingly, the Bishop of Hippo, one Augustine, who was a citizen of the Roman Empire and strongly influenced by Plato, is not considered a Post-Aristotelian but a Medieval Scholastic, simply because his work strongly influenced those who came centuries later in Christian thought.

The Middle Ages are a wash of messy divisions. So much thinking, so many views, but mostly they're divided by religion, not at all by philosophy, which is truly bizarre, when you think about it, given that the start of philosophy is the attempt to understand reality *without reference to religion*. Anyway, the next *thousand* years in Western (yes, I said western) thought are divided as Muslim, Christian, and Jewish thought, with thinkers like Averroes and Avicenna in the first camp, Aquinas and Abelard in the second, and Maimonides and Hillel ben Samuel in the third, even though there are strong philosophical similarities across religious lines and stark religious differences between religious traditions. So it goes.

### Modern Philosophy

The first huge divide comes when thinkers change methodology. Francis Bacon introduces us to what has since become the Scientific Method, but for some reason it isn't he but Rene

Descartes (who was a younger contemporary of Bacon) who is called the Father of Modern Philosophy. In fact, most historians mark the Renaissance with Descartes, despite the fact that it would taste much better with Bacon. (I couldn't resist.) Regardless, in the late 1500s, things jumped back to the ancient questions, but with a new scientific approach. Descartes began by doubting absolutely everything doubtable, in an attempt to find that one sure thing. His attempt was to refute the strongly influential *Skeptic* philosophy, which traced its history back to ancient Greece.

The difference between Bacon and Descartes is that Bacon approached everything from a sensible starting place, like a scientist, and Descartes started from a mathematical place. Like I said—Aristotle vs. Plato. But in this period, the division between western thinkers followed from this worldview, not from time periods or religion. Those who say that all knowledge begins with the senses (like Bacon) are called Empiricists, and they include Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume, and many others. Those who say all knowledge begins with concepts are called the Rationalists, and they include Descartes, Antoine Arnauld, Nicolas Malebranche, Gottfried Leibniz, and many others. It's the battle of science and math in philosophy all the way to the Enlightenment, when this guy Immanuel Kant came on the scene in Prussia.

### Enlightenment Thinking

Kant wanted to reconcile Hume's extreme empiricism and

Descartes' demand for absolute certainty in everything. Kant was like the divorce mediator of Western thought. He posited a brilliant theory that so changed the world of Western thinking that we're still reeling. In fact, all philosophers who have worked since Kant and who are writing today (even yours truly) have to respond to Kant. He's basically in a category all his own, much like Plato and Aristotle are their own categories.

One aspect of Kant's thinking can be called Idealism, and a number of German philosophers took this aspect up and ran with it. J. G. Fichte, Friedrich Schleiermacher, G. W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, Arthur Schopenhauer—these guys and many who followed are called the German Idealists, and Hegel's work in particular shaped how both methodology and emphasis of those who followed down this road of inquiry would go. Among those so influenced are Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud.

Another aspect of his thinking can be called Logical, and a different set of thinkers (Franz Brentano, Gottlob Frege) followed this trail. And from these two aspects comes the major division of thought that is just as badly named as the Presocratics and Post-Aristotelians.

### Contemporary Philosophy

Contemporary thinkers are bizarrely divided into two camps called Analytics and Continentals, which makes it seem that one group analyzes (and the other doesn't) and the other group is based on the European continent

(where the first isn't). Neither is the case. There's a lot of overlap, but basically we can better understand contemporary approaches to philosophy by looking at group focus.

Around about the end of the Nineteenth Century, a philosopher named Edmund Husserl took German Idealism in a new direction and considered knowledge based on the *phenomena* we encounter. His philosophy strongly influenced thinkers in both Germany and France, who determined that it was more important to look at what we experience here and now, not what we can posit in some abstract metaphysical theory. Kant's ethics (which we'll look at later in this textbook) holds that there is some Categorical Imperative that all humans are obligated to follow. Descartes argues that we begin with the Self, the *I* that is logically required for one to know anything at all. These two key ideas were important to this same group of thinkers, who were dubbed the *Existentialists* by Jean-Paul Sartre.

But actually, we could call Blaise Pascal, a mathematician and philosopher who wrote hundreds of years earlier, an Existentialist, if we look at the focus. And Søren Kierkegaard, who lived fifty years before Husserl, is called the Father of Existentialism. In fact, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Friedrich Nietzsche are also widely understood as Existential philosophers. Why? Let me get back to that.

First, we need to round out our contemporary philosophical field. In Austria, Poland, and England in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a number of

philosophers started working on logic and science. One group attempted to reduce all philosophical problems to brute science or language. This was an exciting and new view, and it seemed to refute the Idealism that had taken Germany and England by storm. Another group argued (like the Existentialists, it turned out) that we couldn't know anything outside of our experiences, and to posit grand metaphysical schemes was nonsensical. These two groups (the Logical Atomists—Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and G.E. Moore—and the Vienna Circle—Rudolph Carnap, Otto

Neurath, and Max Schlick, among others) worked closely with the brilliant Polish logicians (Jan Łukasiewicz, Stanisław Leśniewski, Leon Chwistek, among others) and together created what became philosophy of language, and modern logic. Of course, they were also strongly influenced by their contemporary Existentialists over in France, Germany, and Algeria.

World War II sent a number of the Vienna Circle into flight. Albert Einstein, Rudolph Carnap and others fled to the US, and they worked together with American

thinkers like W.V.O Quine to solidify an already strong American philosophy, that found its roots in the 1800s with the Pragmatic school of thought founded by Charles Sanders Peirce and strengthened by John Dewey and William James.

Today we have just as much of a mishmash as ever. You can see why the divides are sometimes unhelpful. Still, it is useful to talk about a single approach at a time to get clarity, and such is what we'll do with Existentialism and the one who is perhaps its loudest proponent, Jean Paul Sartre.\*

## EXISTENTIALISM, FAMILY RESEMBLANCE, AND PHILOSOPHICAL MOVEMENTS

Like Rationalism, Empiricism, and other categorizations, 'Existentialism' is really only useful in getting a historical period. The name was created by Sartre, and adopted only by Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus, even though it applies more generally also to thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, José Ortega y Gasset, Lev Shestov, the aforementioned Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and writers like Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, and Flannery O'Connor.

How in the world? Existentialism isn't a strict school of thought. Rather, it's a movement, a worldview that has been expressed by painters like Jackson Pollock, filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman, psychologists like Viktor Frankl, theologians like Karl Barth, and playwrights like Samuel Beckett. Existentialism is thus not something that can be strictly defined in a nice neat little conceptual analysis, but is rather best understood as a family of questions that are explored.



It wasn't the pep talk I was hoping for after getting called ugly at prom.

## Vagueness and Family Resemblance

Some things are necessarily vague. And recall (from chapter 2), that

\* Such a list of illustrious names! So many left out! You'll notice in particular the absence of female names. Not to worry, we show up in fits and starts. For example, Hypatia of Alexandria was a brilliant mathematician and philosopher in ancient Rome, and Mary Wollstonecraft makes her thinking known in the 1800s. And let's not forget the work of Marie Curie. Still, it seems to be Existentialism that brings the first explosion of long-remembered feminist thought in the shape of Simone de Beauvoir.

*Statement or phrase x is **vague** iff the meaning of x contains borderline cases.*

We can expand this to include ideas. In fact, we can say that what makes the difference between a *notion* and a *concept* is that concepts are not vague (they can be conceptually analyzed: i.e., given analytic definitions).

Notions and concepts are *both* ideas, but the former remain vague. If a notion is to be understood—and some turn out to be such that we cannot ever understand them at all—then we need to find some tool that is more useful than any attempt to craft an analytic definition, given that necessarily vague things cannot be captured by the stark boundaries of conceptual analysis. And the idea of Existentialism is just such a notion.

To understand whether somebody is an existentialist, it is perhaps best to use Wittgenstein's idea of **family resemblance**. Think for example, about the idea "game." What counts as a game? Maybe you decide to set up a table to determine which things meet the criteria and those which don't.

Say you're trying to make a conceptual analysis, and you say that *x is a **game** iff x is a physical activity undergone by teams solely for amusement*. But then you realise that professional sports aren't solely for amusement, but also for income.

So you revise your definition to say that *x is a **game** iff x is a physical activity undergone by teams...*and before you can finish you realize that four square, hopscotch, and other playground games are not made up by teams.

So you think, well, *x is a **game** iff x is a physical activity...*and then you remember that chess and Exploding Kittens and WoW aren't physical at all, but they're certainly games. So you think, well, one thing's for sure, *games are played against others...*and then you remember that solitaire and Minecraft are games, too.

And then you realize that the word *game* is used in phrases like 'word games,' 'mind games,' 'war games,' and *Game of Thrones* and...oh, dear.



You can see how they're certainly all *games*, but to find that magic conceptual analysis eludes you.\*

Enter family resemblance. Wittgenstein writes,

Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? — Don't say: "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games,'" but look and see whether there is anything common to all. — For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! [...We] can see how similarities crop up and disappear. And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities.

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. — And I shall say: 'games' form a family. [...]

What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can draw one; for none has so far been drawn. [...]

How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe games to him, and we might add: "This and similar things are called "games"". And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is? — But this is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary — for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special purpose.) No more than it took the definition: 1 pace = 75 cm. to make the measure of length 'one pace' usable. And if you want to say "But still, before that it

\* Much like when trying to define chairs and stools!



wasn't an exact measure", then I reply: very well, it was an inexact one. — Though you still owe me a definition of exactness.\*

Even the notion of *family resemblance* eludes conceptual analysis. But I'm pretty sure by now you know what I'm talking about. This all in mind, then, we'll use the notion of family resemblance to discuss the movement called Existentialist Philosophy (or Existentialism). And by the way—keep family resemblance. Stash that puppy in your pocket, and be prepared to use it in other philosophical pursuits when you find conceptual analysis evasive. In fact, you might sometimes find out that looking at an idea through the filter of family resemblance might actually push you towards an epiphany of conceptual analysis.

### EXISTENTIALISM & KANT

Most existentialists respond to and build upon Kantian philosophy, so it is important that we've got a basic understanding of Kantian epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics on the table.

René Descartes argued that all knowledge built upon the intuition that *cogito ergo sum*—"I think, therefore I am." That is, in order for there to be thinking activity, there has to be something *doing* the thinking activity. If I'm aware of thinking—whether it be worrying, doubting, daydreaming, or hallucinating—I cannot reasonably doubt that there's *something* there doing the thinking. And *that* is me. I'm a thinking thing, a *res cogitans*.

David Hume argued that ultimately, anything at all that we think we know via our senses is only probable, thus uncertain. This makes sense, given our distinction in chapter 1 of the four kinds of conclusions. In fact, if I only know what I perceive through my senses, then, for example, I can't know much about the tree that stands outside my window. I only perceive it with my eyes right now, and I only perceive one side of it. I am just *assuming* the other side of the tree is also there.

*continued...*

## EXISTENTIALIST THEMES

So we'll think of Existentialism as a family of thinkers, who share resemblances. Sartre, we know, is an atheist, as are Camus, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. But Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, and Walker Percy are Christians, and Lev Shestov, Franz Rosenzweig, and Viktor Frankl are Jews.\* So atheism isn't universal. What they all share, though, is that they emphasize the role of human responsibility, of human knowledge and human action. Whatever we might or might not be able to say about the hereafter, the divine, or even anything else in metaphysics, turns out, for the existentialist, to be worth little. *Set that aside*, they all say. *We don't really know*, they say. Rather, focus on what we do know, what we can affect. Focus on human experience.

Another important theme in Existentialist thought is that the precision of conceptual analysis is itself something that falls in the *set that aside* category—especially when it comes to defining human nature, or the essence of human beings. What is the *essential* part of a human being? Who knows!?

More likely, we've found something useful and said *that* is what we mean. *That* is the essential part of a human being. But how do we ensure that this special *that* is the right elemental thing? It all turns back in on itself, needing further proof and justification, and eventually lands on something we cannot ultimately prove, they say. So set it aside, they say.

*continued...*

\* Some contend that the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who is a powerful voice in Jewish philosophy, is also an Existentialist. And of course, this list does not at all exhaust all the thinkers who can legitimately be considered Existentialist.

\* From Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §65-69.



## EXISTENTIALISM &amp; KANT,

*continued.*

How can I check that? By going outside and looking, maybe feeling. How do I know the tree remains when I don't directly sense it? I don't. Say I go teach a class. Can I be sure the tree is still where I left it? Maybe the wind blew it over; maybe there was a fire or somebody chopped it down. I don't know. I *can't* know.

Whatever I know about the outside world, the Empiricists like Locke (and later Hume) argued, I know via sense data. But these data have to move somehow from my physical organs to my mind. My mind doesn't physically sense trees, rather has *ideas* of trees. So (as we'll see in chapter 15), I—my *mind* (I am a thinking thing)—is separated from the physical world by a veil of ideas. I can't ever quite get there.

Kant wanted the certainty of the *Cogito* and the humble practicality of Empiricism. I am a thinking thing. But I impose order on the world via categorization. In fact, I cannot *but* understand the world through these categories. They are the filter through which I understand anything at all. And of course, what do we then know? What can we be certain of? Well, *concepts* are knowable, since concepts are mental things. Physical things aren't concepts, so they aren't knowable. We can know the concepts *about* those physical things. We can know what we experience about those things. But the things themselves are forever just out of our reach—sort of like Hume says.

Kant uses the terms **phenomenal** and **noumenal** to express this difference. Things-in-themselves do have the power to cause ideas and experiences in us. For example, my bedroom's cedar chest has the power to cause great pain when I bark my shin against it in the middle of the night. I can experience the phenomenon of pain. All my sensory experiences are phenomenal. But the thing itself—that which causes my sensory experiences—I can't ever know.

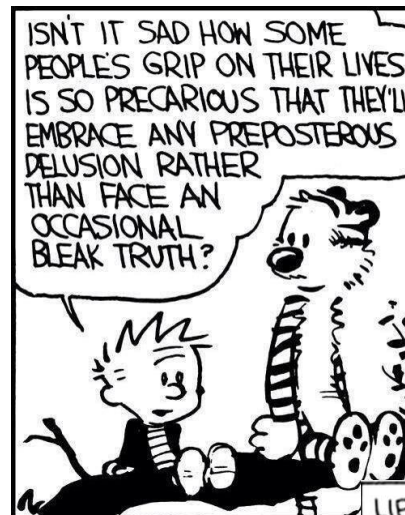
*continued...*

## EXISTENTIALIST THEMES,

*continued.*

Existentialism is about human nature and human action. What are we, then? How can we know? And what should we do? How can we make life meaningful, since it seems this is of immeasurable value to us? Starting with these questions, Existentialists do, in fact, undertake metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. They begin with human experience; they start *in media res* and base their conclusions on a very limited set of sure things: we're here; we're limited; we want significance; and we die.

IS OUR QUICK EXPERIENCE  
HERE POINTLESS? DOES  
ANYTHING WE SAY OR DO IN  
HERE REALLY MATTER? HAVE  
WE DONE ANYTHING IMPORTANT?  
HAVE WE BEEN HAPPY? HAVE  
WE MADE THE MOST OF THESE  
PRECIOUS FEW FOOTSTEPS??



*Calvin the  
Existentialist*



## EXISTENTIALISM &amp; KANT,

*continued.*

The *noumenal* chest I can't know. Just the hardness, the redness, the bigness, the cedar smell, and so on. But I can know that *something* caused these phenomena, these experiences. So I can have a *notion* of 'cedar chest' there in my room, because it causes the phenomena.

I can't ever *know* noumenal things. I can infer them, and have a vague idea about them. All I can know are phenomena. And here's a kicker (hearkening back to chapter 10 for a sec): God is noumenal, if God exists. All I can ever get are phenomena. In fact (hearkening forward to chapter 14), other persons are noumenal, too. If we are minds, then our experience of each other, since strictly through sensory data, is merely and always phenomenal. We can only *infer* that there are others of us out there. But infer we must.

Finally, if we realize we are rational persons who categorize reality to understand it, we will see that we are necessarily rational. It's hard-wired in us. So how should we treat each other? Well, we should *always* treat each other as intrinsically valuable, never using each other as tools to our own ends, always treating each other as moral legislators, as co-rulers of a sort in a moral universe.

This moral law is called the **Categorical Imperative**. And (as we'll see in part 3), it applies universally, to anything that falls into the category *person*. Nobody is exempt. We can't escape it. When we ignore it, we are in fact legislating morality anyway, because we are *by our very rationality* incapable of not reasoning. We can't *but* reason, even when we're reasoning badly.

This is enough to see how Sartre's Existentialism works, by understanding a bit of what he's using and responding to.

## SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM

Jean Paul Sartre was a French thinker and public intellectual who lived during World War II, and was actively involved in the French Resistance in Paris. He is a fantastic example, along with earlier thinkers like Thomas Jefferson or Vladimir Lenin, of how one's philosophy will directly inform how one lives one's life, including how one acts in social and political events. For Sartre, philosophy was both intellectually and pragmatically vital. The essay you read is a very useful overview of Existentialist thought, including both metaphysics and practical value theory—both ethics and political philosophy. His approach is not unlike that of many philosophers, presenting both negative and positive philosophy. In brief, here's the difference:

*X is **negative philosophy** iff x is philosophy that dismantles, refutes, objects to, or otherwise points out problems with philosophical arguments, theories, or claims.*

*X is **positive philosophy** iff x is philosophy that either posits new claims, arguments, or theories or defends existing ones against the arguments of negative philosophy.*

Don't make the mistake of thinking that negative philosophy is a downer and positive philosophy is upbeat. It has nothing to do with the emotional thrust of the current work, but the intention. When Aristotle points out his predecessors' metaphysics, and argues that each misses something important in their analyses, he's doing negative philosophy. When Hsün Tzu argues that Mencius is wrong about human nature, he's doing negative philosophy. And when Aristotle and Hsün Tzu present and argue for their own positions, they are doing positive philosophy. Thus, you might think of it in terms of denial and affirmation—of pros and cons.

## The Argument for a Human Nature

Sartre's essay strongly argues against the understanding of human nature that we saw in *all* of the Western thinkers we've read so far on the matter. Medieval thinkers had argued for a human nature following Aristotle's thinking, but they had infused it with a theologically-informed set of assumptions. The argument that there was such a thing as human nature or essence went something like this:

### THERE IS A HUMAN ESSENCE (HE)

1. Something P is a *purpose* iff p is a function for which some object x is designed, and that some designer or craftsman can conceive of before the designer or craftsman makes x.
2. The essence of some object x is determined by the purpose of x.
3. So x has a purpose (*telos*) only if x was designed by some intelligence that can give x that purpose.
4. God is the designer of the world and all its members.
5. So the world and all its members have a purpose.
6. So the world and all its members have individual essences.
7. Humanity is a set of members in the world.
8. So humanity is the kind of thing that has an essence. (There is a human essence, or a human nature.)

This argument **HE** is clearly valid. The definition of a purpose is certainly different than the ancient Greek understanding of *telos*, but it is plausible and not bizarrely unlike how we understand and use the term nowadays. In fact, the idea that things *without* designers having some purpose seems foreign to us. Premise 2 simply posits a logical relation. If something has an essence, then this essence will be determined by its purpose. This certainly harkens back to Aristotle's idea of the four causes, and it is also a common understanding today. Premise 3 simply distills the inference from 1 and 2. It's premise 4 that makes this argument vastly different from the Greek understanding of reality; but again, this premise is widely accepted. On the assumption that it's true, 5 follows, and then 6 from 5. Premise 7 is called an *instantiation*. It's just noting that what is true of all member sets would be true of *each* member set, and by golly, here's a member set. Thus the conclusion that there is a human essence. Like I said, the argument is valid.

## SARTRE'S NEGATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Sartre begins by analyzing the argument to the left. Sure it's valid. But is it sound?

If we accept the definitions in 1 and 2—and we still do—then we have only logical inferences and the claim about God in premise 4. So the only premise we can question is 4. And in fact, Enlightenment philosophers like Locke and Rousseau began to argue about human nature without reference to God. It's not that they exactly *denied* God's existence, rather, they just decided that God wasn't necessary in the logical inference. We could continue on without relying on God as a part of our metaphysical framework.

So now we have two arguments. The Enlightenment thinkers omitted premise 4, in what I'll call **HE\***, we can see the unstated, but assumed thinking that Sartre attacks:

### HE\*

1. Something P is a *purpose* iff p is a function for which some object x is designed, and that some designer or craftsman can conceive of before the designer or craftsman makes x.
2. The essence of some object x is determined by the purpose of x.
3. So x has a purpose (*telos*) only if x was designed by some intelligence that can give x that purpose.
4. So the world and all its members have a purpose.
5. So the world and all its members have individual essences.
6. Humanity is a set of members in the world.
7. So humanity is the kind of thing that has an essence. (There is a human essence, or a human nature.)

Let's analyze HE and HE\* together.

*continued...*

## SARTRE'S POSITIVE PHILOSOPHY

So what sort of world are we in, then? If God doesn't exist, then what? Let's go back to **HE** and see what must be the case without God.

### Sartre's Existentialist Argument (SEA)

1. Something P is a *purpose* iff p is a function for which some object x is designed, and that some designer or craftsman can conceive of before the designer or craftsman makes x.
  2. The essence of some object x is determined by the purpose of x.
  3. If there is no purpose, then there is no essence.
  4. Something x has a purpose (*telos*) only if x was designed by some intelligence that can give x that purpose.
  5. So if there is no intelligence (no designer) to give x a purpose, x has no purpose (and no essence).
  6. If there is no God (no designer) then there is at least one (kind of) being (the human being) that has no essence upon its coming into existence.
  7. If x has no essence upon its coming into existence, then x, so far as x is volitional, is free.
  8. So if there is no God, then humans are free.
  9. There is no God.
- 
10. So humans have no essence, and are free.

Everything starts out basically the same. Sartre doesn't question the definition of a purpose or essence, since this is the mindset to which he's speaking. Rather, he points out the logical alternative to **HE**, if God doesn't exist. Thus, we begin with the same two premises, but Sartre makes explicit the negative entailment of 1 and 2. If it is *necessary* for x to have an essence in order to have a purpose, then if there is no purpose, there cannot be an essence. This is simply a *modus ponens* argument.\* 3 logically follows from 1 and 2. Premise 4 of **SEA** is the same as premise 3 of **HE**.

Premise 5 simply concludes what follows from 1 and 4. There must be a designer or craftsman to determine a purpose. So if there is no such designer, then it logically follows that there's no pre-determined purpose. X thus comes into existence purposeless. And, following 3, x is also without essence upon its coming into existence.

The thing that **HE** notes determines the human purpose and thus the human essence (human nature) is God. But,

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\* See chapter 6.

## SARTRE'S NEGATIVE PHILOSOPHY

*continued.*

We can see that 3 follows from 1 and 2, but from there, we've got a problem, Houston. Premise 4 of **HE** gave a designer (God), so all the logical inferences thereafter were justified. By omitting this designer in **HE\***, the following inferences (premises 4-6) are unjustified. The argument is not even valid.

Sartre not only rejects premise 4 of **HE**, but he argues that the philosophers (like Locke and Rousseau) who omit 4 in their remake cannot justify their conclusions. You can't just *pretend* that God is no longer necessary for certain metaphysical conclusions. One can't simply omit a premise in an argument and think the conclusion follows. More to the point, one can't just omit God and think everything in the worldview, all assumptions and beliefs about reality and humanity, will be able to persist unscathed. If God doesn't exist, if premise 4 of **HE** is false, then our whole understanding of reality is mistaken. The history of Western metaphysics, especially as it relates to us, is wrong. And that, writes Sartre, is no small thing. We can't just pretend it's all good. It's truly embarrassing.

If one is going to reject the idea of God, then one has to be consistent. And one consequence of this is that we cannot any longer presume there's a human nature, determined by a designer or craftsman God who conceived of what humans would be before they were made. This is huge.

There need to be drastic changes in our worldview. There need to be honest, gut-wrenchingly honest and humble conclusions. The world without God is *dramatically* different than the world with God. If God doesn't exist, things are a lot different than if God does exist. To fail to acknowledge this is to fail at being intellectually honest.



given 5, if there is no God, then there's no human function, no human purpose, so no human essence. There is *no such thing as human nature*. That's the consequence. Now of course, this is simply a conditional statement so far, considering the logical entailments of what it means to be something with an essence.

Premise 7 sticks with what it means for something to come into existence purposeless. If something *x* comes into existence without a pre-designed purpose, it logically follows that *x* is purposeless, and—at least so far as *x* has the capacity to direct itself—is self-directed. *X* can make its own purpose. Whatever freedom is, it at least has to do with not being pre-determined.\* If a thing is not designed to be such and such and it can pursue activities on its own volition, then *x* is free. Sartre's idea of freedom is not carefully defined here, but let's move on, since we've got the gist.

If premise 7 is right, then it follows that without a designer, without God, humans would be purposeless and therefore free. Premise 9 is the kicker. Sartre takes the atheist stance, and on this hangs his version of Existentialism. Until now it's all been hypothetical, looking at logical entailments. But now—now it gets real. There is no God. So we must be things that exist without purpose.

Actually, more carefully, we are things that come into existence before we have an essence. We are born without any pre-determined function or purpose. This is a radical change from the previous view. And though many philosophers argued before Sartre that we are free, that we have free will, Sartre gives us a radical freedom that is almost heady with possibilities. There is *nothing* standing in our way, because there is nothing that determined what sorts of things we should, as persons, be. We have no function. So far as one is to be had, we ourselves will be the ones to make it.

Thus, the famous Existentialist summary: **existence precedes essence**. It is the logical conclusion of the non-involvement of God.

## The Madman

In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote the parable of the madman in his book *The Gay Science* (§125).

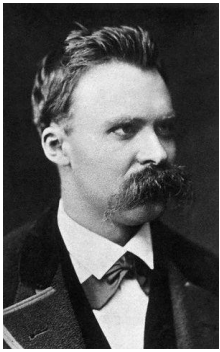
Imagine a madman who runs through the streets of a city in the middle of the day, holding a lit lantern. The madman runs through town crying nonstop, "I seek God! I seek God!" Imagine further the madman comes upon a bunch of atheists, who all tease him, asking things like "Is he lost?" or "What, is God hiding behind the couch?" or "Has God gone on vacation somewhere far away?" or "Maybe God emigrated!" Suddenly, the madman jumps into the middle of their laughing midst and glares at them piercingly, silencing their fun.

"Where's God?" he cries. "I'll tell you where God is. We killed him—you and I. We're all God's murderers." Imagine the uncomfortable silence as he continues. "How did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? And where's the world going now? Where are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we forever plunging, backwards, sideways, forward—in all directions? Is there even any up and down any more?" And the silence grows even more awkward as he continues. "Aren't we just wandering, straying, as if through infinite nothingness? Don't we feel the breath of empty space? Hasn't it gotten colder? Isn't night continually closing in on us? And don't we thus need lanterns in the morning?" You see them looking nervously at his lamp, but he doesn't stop his questions. "Do we still not hear the noise of the gravediggers burying God? Do we still not smell the divine decomposition? Gods decompose, too. God is dead. And we killed him."

*continued...*

\* We will look more carefully at the nature and definition of free will and determinism in chapter 13.





Like Nietzsche (left), Sartre mourns the loss of God. One might say that Nietzsche's madman was confronting the Enlightenment scientists and philosophers, who thought they could explain everything without reference to God, not recognizing the consequences of this radical new direction. Sartre follows the madman by carefully unpacking the argument.

### Anguish & Abandonment

Now if you really feel this absence of God, if you really understand the abyss that the madman is talking about, you understand what Sartre means by **abandonment**. There's nobody but us here, and more specifically, the individual—you—are on your own. The full weight of abandonment, however, needs some Kantian influence.

Remember Kant's idea of the Categorical Imperative? He argued that when we act, we make moral decisions. We decide, when we do something, that it is good. Nobody does stuff they think is flat out bad. No, really. We do things that maybe people say are bad, but we do them because we think that somehow they're good for us, or that the benefit is missed, or something like that. We do things because we think they're good. Kant argues (and we'll seriously explore his ethical theory in chapter 18) that because we can make moral judgments, we are like a realm of legislators, a world of moral arbiters. Our judgment determines what is correct, what is good for human beings to do. And the test for determining whether one is making a reasonable judgment—whether one is reasoning well or making excuses to act poorly—is to see whether it sees all other people as fellow legislators, fellow moral lawmakers. Every action we undertake is, whether we want to acknowledge it or not,

## God is...dead?

How could humans kill God? Nietzsche uses his madman to make a philosophical point. God explained everything mysterious and magnificent in the world. As we noted above, the concept of God could explain and justify the concept of human nature. God explained morality. God explained justice. God explained the diversity of plant and animal species, and God explained the very existence of the world. But in the Seventeenth Century, Galileo argued that the earth-centric notion of the world that was foundational to the understanding of the human role in this God-designed universe. If the Earth isn't the center, then it might not be the object of God's constant attention. A universe that isn't centered on the Earth makes God just a little bit less important.

Then came Isaac Newton barely a century later, who presented us with laws of nature that do not rely on a divine will, but on fixed physical relations and mathematical precision. Miracles and magic began to fade. We were able to come to understand the world around us without reference to God. Then came the physical scientists, including Darwin, who presented us with a universe that is ever getting more complex and varied, a world that is adapting to challenges and ever changing to maintain survival and flourishing. No longer is the universe a pre-designed and complete whole, but a constantly expanding and changing process. And thus, there cannot have been an original state of human perfection from which we fell.

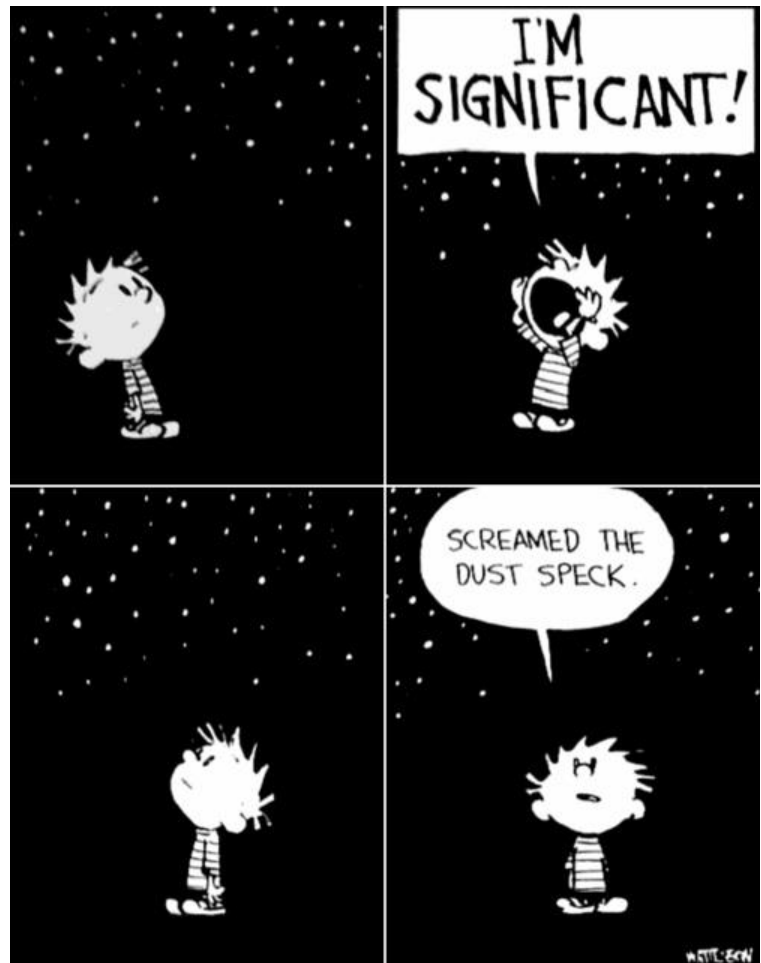
Nietzsche looked at the role of the concept 'God' in our thinking, and he notes that our learning, our increasing understanding of the universe killed the usefulness of that concept. We don't need God, but still we do. Without God, we become unmoored. As we've learned since the time of Nietzsche, the universe is ever expanding—backwards, sideways, forwards—and there really isn't any center. Where we once felt a certainty, we are left now without it, and there is a painful loss.

an affirmation that *this action* is morally acceptable for humanity. And when we're wrong, we're actually doing a grave injustice to our whole species.

Sartre is certainly using this idea, but he extends it to the free, essence-less person. If there is no designer to define us, then every moral legislation we determine, every action we take, we are not only affirming such as *good-for-humanity* but we're actually *defining the essence* of human beings as things that do whatever it is we're doing. We aren't *betraying* human nature when we do bad things, since there isn't human nature beyond what we actually do. Instead, we're *defining* all of humanity. We're the ones who design human nature. Our actions establish the essence of humanity.

Actually, I need to quit with the 'us' and 'we' stuff, since really, Existentialism is very personal. If I cannot know there's a human nature outside of my own actions, and if I cannot control your actions—which I really can't—then I have to come to grips with the fact that my every choice, every action, every decision is defining humanity. And if I really understood the weight of this human-nature-defining responsibility, I would be in **anguish**. Every decision would be felt as the huge responsibility it is. Before I eat at certain places, before I buy certain products, before I shop at certain stores, before I vote for certain persons—before I do anything, I would be in anguish if I really understood that my every action defined humanity as a whole. Everything I do affects not only me, but also every other single human being. Not just the effects of the action as I could see them, but also on the metaphysical level. Do I want humanity to be defined forever as 'beings who....' do what I'm about to do? No take backs.

And if I really understand the anguish of each decision, and if I see that I cannot expect God



### DESPAIR

We can't depend on God. But we can't depend on other people, either. Think about it for a minute. If you're being 100% honest, clear-eyed, and otherwise not trying to psyche yourself into pipe dream land, you can't control anyone but you. To assume others will pick up your slack or finish your dreams for you is completely absurd. To realize that what Gandhi said—be the change you seek—entails also that you cannot expect others to do it for you is to be in that place Sartre calls despair.

Again, he's using a strong word to communicate finality. There are no take backs here, either. The opposite of despair is hope. But to hope that somebody will do what you want is to spend time and energy on feelings instead of on doing it yourself.

*continued...*

to get me out of this responsibility, I can begin to understand better the sense of abandonment. In fact, we are so abandoned, we are *doomed* to act. By not acting, we act. We are, as he writes, *condemned* to be free. There are no miracles to make things better, only the consequences of human actions. The *condemn* part is meant to give us the sense of finality involved. There are no take backs here, either. We're free, and we can't *not* be free.

### Bad Faith and the Human Condition

To deny my limitations is to deny the human condition. To deny my unabridged, radical freedom is to deny reality.

And to pretend the human condition does not entail anguish, abandonment, and despair is to live in what Sartre calls **bad faith**. There is no reality about humanity outside of human actions. Thus, any time spent in the mindset of *shoulda*, *coulda*, *woulda* is wasted time, engaging in nothingness.

These situations don't exist. Here's an example. When I was nineteen, I went to a small liberal arts college on a music scholarship. I was a pretty darn good instrumentalist in many different kinds of ensembles, and I thought my life would be one full of musical performance. Stuff happened, and my life of music ended rather abruptly. I then spent some years noodling on my instruments, and daydreaming about what could have been—fretting over what I should have done—imagining what I would have become. *Shoulda*, *coulda*, *woulda*. Where was I those years? What was I doing to define humanity? I was sitting around in a crappy job frittering my life away in thinking that did nothing to affect the world. I was nowhere. Instead of acknowledging that my actions now were defining reality, I put myself in a make-believe, utterly nonexistent place. My actions denied reality, and I was thus in bad faith.

### DESPAIR, *continued*.

Well, suppose you can't yourself do it. Say there's something you want done but it's outside of your power to enact. Despair means also that you quit wasting your time hoping for the change. Act with what you've got, or, as my mom used to say to me all the time—*bloom where you're planted*. Don't pine for a different garden, bloom in this one.

Sartre reminds us that time spent in wishful thinking is time wasted. Without any God, without any human nature to predetermine oneself, there is only me and what I create, what I do. Sartre uses the word 'project' to express what I'm getting at here. I am a project. I project myself like a projectile from project to project. Another Existentialist, Martin Heidegger, uses the term *thrownness* to express this idea. I come into existence in a set of circumstances over which I have no control. My ethnicity, assigned gender, socioeconomic status, nationality, birth order—none of these do I get to choose. I am thrown into that situation. But I *do* have the power to pick myself up from this state of affairs and throw myself into a project. I act. I define myself and humanity. And then I land and see that the state of affairs has changed. Maybe I don't like all of it. But I can't change it. Instead, I throw myself again. And again. And again. It is *my* actions that define me, that create human nature. My resources may be limited or unfair, but I still have the power to throw myself. To be that projectile.



Sartre gives another example. Say there's this guy, Pierre,\* who is trying to determine whether he should go fight the Nazis. But Pierre's mom is unwell, and he can't reasonably rely on anyone else to care for her. If he goes to fight, she could suffer terribly. On the other hand, if he stays to care for her, he can't be sure anyone will adequately fight the Nazis in his place. What should Pierre do? The anguish of his decision is clear. No matter *what* he does, he's determining the fate of his mother, of France. Furthermore, no matter what he chooses, he's forced to "use" somebody as a means to an end—which is another way to violate the Categorical Imperative.

But suppose Pierre decides he cannot make the choice himself, so he seeks advice. To do this is to suppose that *somebody else* is making your decision; it is pushing the anguish on another. It is bad faith. In fact, when one goes to seek advice, one has chosen already, because one chooses *who* will advise. We don't go to random individuals for advice: we go to people we know enough about to know something of what sort of advice they will offer. And then if we take that advice, we can say that we're only following the advice, not acting on our own utterly alone decision. We deny anguish and despair. But by choosing to go to *that* person, we have made the decision already, and to pretend this isn't so is bad faith.

We are, after all, condemned to be free.

There are four basic ways one can act in bad faith.† First, as with Pierre, we can defer our moment of decision. We can put it off until later, not realizing that putting it off is *itself* a decision. Second, we can defer our responsibility for deciding. We refuse accountability. Like Pierre, we can say that

## AUTHENTICITY & THE OTHER

The opposite of bad faith is **authenticity**. To acknowledge my limitations and my freedom, to recognize and project myself into responsibility, this is authenticity. Clear-eyed awareness of the reality of me and my role in humanity. And in fact, another part of authenticity is the recognition of what Sartre calls **intersubjectivity**. I come into existence in a community. As a tiny child, I define myself only through the eyes and values of the Other. That Other includes family, community, and state. But as I become aware of myself, my first authentic stab at identity is to say *no, I'm not you!* We call this the 'terrible twos.' In fact, the authentic self recognizes that to best understand oneself requires also seeing oneself through the eyes of the Other. Who am I subjectively (inside my own skin), *and* who am I objectively (from others' view)? The authentic self grapples with this tension. I am both an individual and irretrievably a member of a community.

The authentic person becomes so by this process of projection.

First, one becomes authentic through and in that struggle to reconstruct the social fabric that is not conducive to authenticity. One struggles to define oneself, but also to change the parts of the world that frustrate authenticity, including institutions that squash creativity, individuality, and free expression and systems that inhibit or reject the human condition of anguish, abandonment, despair—in short, that deny the utter freedom of the human person.

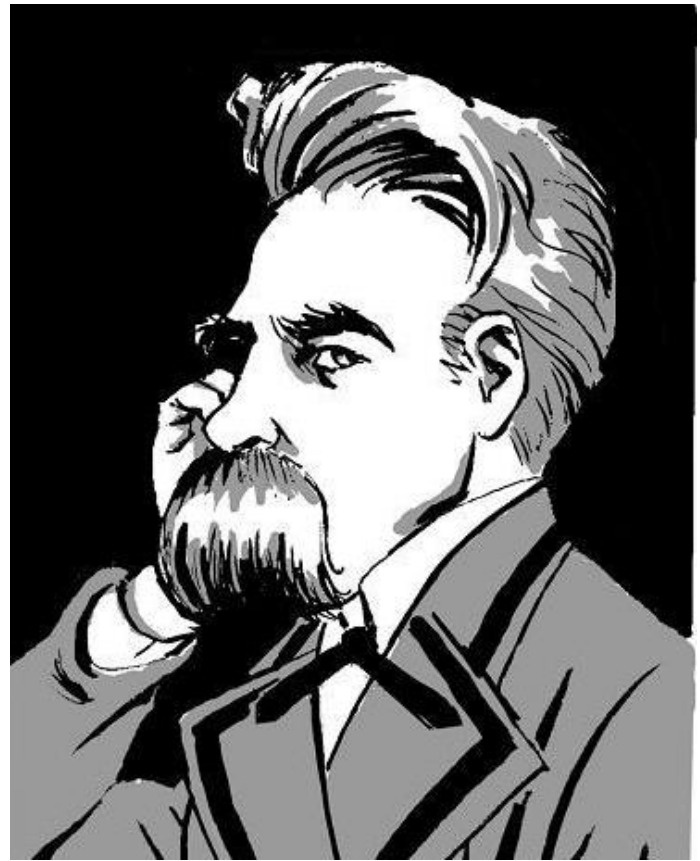
And second, one becomes authentic when one establishes relations of real brotherhood based on this shared freedom, in this authentically reconstituted society. Because oddly enough, we are all abandoned in this together.

\* Sartre repeatedly uses Pierre as his example in his book *Being and Nothingness*, and it is hard for me to imagine that he's not thinking of the same fellow in this essay.

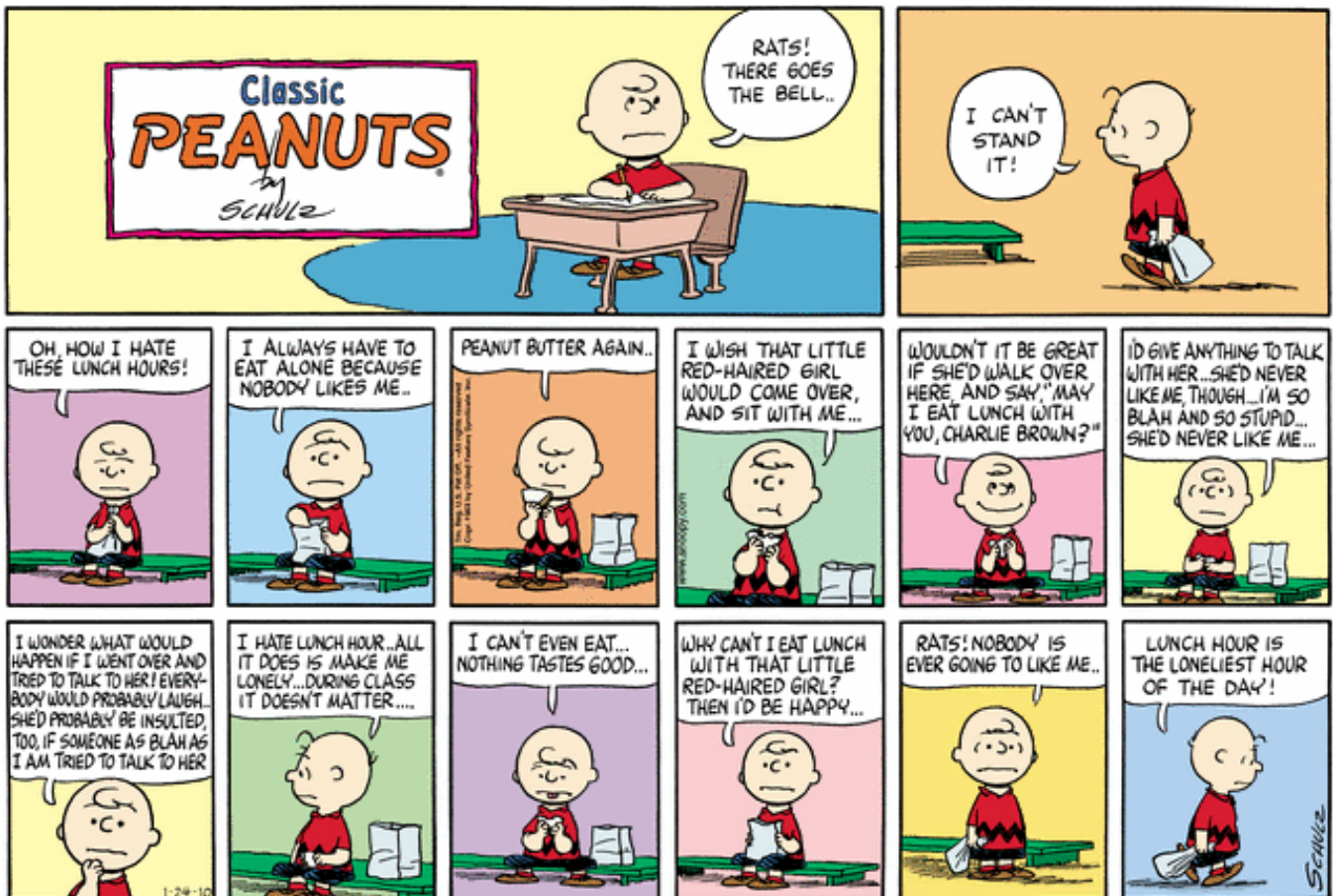
† Sartre discusses these in *Being and Nothingness*.



we did something x because we were *told* to do x. Third, we can do what I did by failing to acknowledge myself for what I am at the present moment, rather pretending to be something at a nonexistent or former time. Sartre writes that such a person "deliberately arrests himself at one period in his life and refuses to take into consideration the later changes." And finally, one can be in bad faith when one limits oneself to a particular role, rather than acknowledging and embracing the whole of what one as a person is. I'm a writer. But if I were to center the whole of my life on this identity, on this role, to the overshadowing of all other roles I play (sister, stepmom, teacher, neighbor, friend, cook, etc.), I would be denying my own humanity. And thus I would be in bad faith.



No one can construct for you the bridge upon which precisely you must cross the stream of life, no one but you yourself alone.  
(Friedrich Nietzsche)





## TEAM PROJECT: EXISTENTIALISM

## THEISTIC EXISTENTIALISM

For this project, your team needs to act on the premise that you all endorse Existentialism. As I noted, not all Existentialists are atheists. How might a theist argue for the conclusion that we are radically free and therefore radically responsible in the same sense that Sartre argues? Sartre's argument relies on a conditional statement: *if there is no God, then we are radically free and responsible to define ourselves*. It is still logically possible that we are radically free and responsible to define ourselves if there is a God.\*

As a team, attempt to build an argument that includes the existence of God as a premise, but validly concludes that humans have the kind of radical freedom and responsibility Sartre wants, even if we do have a God-defined essence. Your argument

must preserve the definitions given for *purpose* and *essence*, stated in **HE** and **SEA**. Make sure your argument is valid and does not omit any necessary premises. Make sure also that the freedom you conclude we have involves radical responsibility, self-direction, and the possibility of bad faith. Can your team make an existentialist argument that comes to much the same conclusion as Sartre's, without needing to reject God's existence?

You will need to turn in your team's argument *in standard form*. Make sure every team member agrees on the argument and its presentation. Your instructor will set the due date for this project. Write that date on the assignment, along with the names of all your participating team members. Turn in one paper for the whole team. Please write legibly..



