

Sartre I

Existentialism is a Humanism

Please be aware that these lecture notes provide only a schematic summary of a complex theory and must be read in conjunction with Sartre's essay.

(1) For human beings, *Existence* comes before *Essence*

Things that are *en-soi* (a being-in-itself) have an essence that is predetermined. For example, an acorn develops into an oak tree by virtue of the biological features (DNA, etc.) that make up its essence. What makes the oak tree an oak tree – its essence – precedes its existence. The same goes for artifacts. The essence of a paper knife is determined by its designer.

But in the case of a thing that is *pour-soi* (a being-for-itself), like ourselves, existence precedes essence. This is because we determine what we are through our choices and actions. We create ourselves.

(2) This claim depends on the assumption that there is no God

If God exists as he traditionally conceived, then the whole world is a kind of divine artifact, and essence *would* precede existence for mankind. Moreover, we are free *if and only if*

God does not exist. (If God did exist, then we would not have free will.)

(3) Having been ‘thrown’ into the world, I must create my own essence

(4) So I am Free and Responsible

If human beings have no essence that sets limits on what they can be, they must choose what to make of themselves.

(5) ‘I am thus responsible for myself and for all men’.
Here Sartre is making the Kantian point that in making a moral decision I must will it to the status of a moral law valid for all.

(6) Freedom and Responsibility bring Anguish – especially when confronted with moral dilemmas.

Example:

The Student torn between joining the Resistance and looking after his mother. Neither Christian doctrine, Kantianism nor trust in instincts provides any answer to the dilemma.

(7) So Freedom brings a sense of Abandonment, with nothing to guide us.

Trying to avoid the choice, to escape our freedom, results in:

(8) Inauthenticity, Bad Faith and Self-Deception

We attempt to deceive ourselves and act as if we weren't free, as if we were really determined by our nature, our body, or the expectations of other people.

Example:

Pierre is in the French Resistance, and is captured by the Gestapo. He is tortured to reveal the names of collaborators and he breaks. Any excuse he might give involves identifying himself with the notion of himself that *others* have imposed upon him. So (according to Sartre), if Pierre betrays the Resistance under torture he is wholly responsible for doing so.

Objections to Sartre

(a) Does Sartre offer false dilemmas?

Possibly. Does the case of the student show that traditional moral theories are useless, that all he can do is commit himself, or are there other alternatives? For example, he

could stay with his mother and help the Resistance in other ways. Pierre could lie to the Gestapo to avoid torture....

(b) Can I freely and authentically choose to do evil?

No. At first sight nothing seems to prevent me choosing the life of an authentic Nazi, as long as I accept responsibility for my choices and live with the consequences without bad faith. This is why Sartre says that ethical principles are universalisable, applying to everyone in similar circumstances, but how does this fit in with the claim that what is judged as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is a matter of individual choice?

(c) Would Existentialism recommend quietism?

No: knowing that we are ultimately doomed to the frustration of our desires does not entail that we shouldn’t attempt to attain them.

(d) Does Sartre’s Existentialism treat human beings in isolation from each other?

Yes, to some extent. It starts from the view of the Cartesian *cogito*, the individual consciousness viewing other people from outside.

(e) Existentialism is morally relativistic?

Sartre's response would again be that ethical principles are universalisable.

NB Sartre does concede that we do not have absolute freedom:

Although we are *ontologically* free, we are not *actually* free.

There are constraints on freedom.

- (i) The freedom of others. 'My freedom is inscribed within the freedom of others'.
- (ii) I am not free *not* to choose and am *not* responsible for the fact that I am responsible.
- (iii) I cannot choose where I start from.

Reading

Essential:

Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Freely accessible online.

Recommended:

Wardle, L., Logan, C., Warnock, M., Rée, J., Lévy, B.-H., & Gwynne, H. (1999). *Human, all too human. Sartre : the road to freedom*. Monarda Arts. BBC documentary.

Further:

Santoni, R. E. (2008). Camus on Sartre's "Freedom": Another "Misunderstanding." *The Review of Metaphysics*, 61(4), 785–813.