

24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy

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VII. Sartre

Lecture 23. Existentialism and Humanism

1. *Biographical remarks.* Sartre (1905-1980) was a teacher, novelist, and playwright, as well as one of the central figures of Existentialist philosophy. He studied German philosophy (especially Heidegger) as a prisoner of war, having been captured while serving in the French army in WW II. Together with his fellow-Existentialist de Beauvoir (also his partner), he founded and helped to run a political journal, *Les Temps Modernes*. Like Russell, he was politically active, and was deeply sympathetic to, though not a member of, the French Communist Party. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, but turned it down, as a bourgeois honor with which he did not wish to be associated.

2. *'What is meant by the term existentialism?'* Sartre begins his essay by saying that what all existentialists have in common is that 'they think that *existence must precede essence*, or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be the starting point' (1220). Sartre wants to draw a contrast between the realm of things, such as artifacts or natural objects, and the realm of human beings. The former he calls *being in itself*, the latter, *being for itself*. (This 'ontology' is the theme of his major work, *Being and Nothingness*.) What is distinctive about things is that their essence precedes their existence; what is distinctive about human beings is that our existence precedes our essence.

3. *Essence and existence, for things.* For artifacts and natural objects, their essence precedes—and governs—their existence. Sartre thinks of an essence as something like a blue-print, which specifies what the thing in question must be, and how it must be produced.

Artifacts. The essence of a paper-knife (i) is a *concept* in the mind of the artisan, that (ii) specifies a particular *function*—the ability to cut paper; it (iii) determines, *causally*, the production of the paper-cutter, and (iii) specifies the *norms* about what counts as a good paper-cutter.

Natural objects. Something similar applies to natural objects, except that here the blue-print need not be a concept in anyone's mind. An acorn contains, somehow, the essence of the oak tree: just as for the paper-cutter, it (i) specifies the *functions* necessary for making an oak tree, (ii) determines, *causally*, the development of the oak tree, given adequate rain and water; and (iii) it specifies the norms appropriate for oak trees.

4. *Essence and existence for human beings.* For human beings, by contrast, there is no blue-print, no essence. Sartre takes this to be a consequence of the denial of a God, who might have had a plan for human creatures.

If God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and...this being is man....Man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards defines himself...Only

afterwards he will be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. (1220)

To say that we arrive in the world without a pre-ordained essence implies that we arrive without any blue-print that (i) specifies the *functions* we are to fulfil; or (ii) *causally determines* our behaviour, so that we *have* to act a certain way; or (iii) *supplies norms* which tell us what counts as a good human being.

5. *Freedom*. This lack of an essence is precisely what constitutes human freedom. We are, as Sartre puts it, ‘condemned to be free’ — condemned because we didn’t ask to come into existence, but free because, once thrown into the world, we are responsible for what we do. With no essence or blue-print to help us, we must invent ourselves, create ourselves, through our actions.

6. *Anguish*. The awareness of this absence of essence, this freedom, this ‘nothingness’, is terrifying: Sartre compares it to the feeling of vertigo. But anguish is the only honest response to our freedom.

7. *Example*. Sartre’s student, who needed to decide between staying at home and looking after his mother, or joining the Free French Forces. How could he choose? Sartre argues that even if there were a priori rules, as Kant thought, they would be too imprecise to specify a particular course of action. Sartre says to the boy that he is free, and he must invent.

8. *Responsibility*. Choosing to act is choosing what sort of human being to be. I literally create myself through my own actions. In making choices I am also deciding what has value: my choice confers value on the things I choose—deciding that something is worth doing for you is deciding that it is worth doing, has value. This, or so Sartre claims, involves a commitment to its being not just good for you, but good simpliciter—‘nothing can be good for us without being good for all’ (1221).

9. *The role of God*. Sartre premises his version of existentialism on the absence of God: but why? Plato argued, in the Euthyphro, that the existence of the gods would make no difference to moral norms. He raised the question: is the good good because the gods love it, or do they love the good because it is good? If we take the first option, then goodness seems arbitrary—what if the gods had loved something else, e.g. lying? If we take the second option, then goodness is independent of the gods—it is good whether or not the gods love it.

Sartre himself notes the Christian existentialists, who face exactly the same anguish of choice. He cites Kierkegaard on the story of Abraham:

An angel has ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son; if it really were an angel who has come and said, ‘You are Abraham, you shall sacrifice your son’, everything would be all right. But everyone might first wonder, ‘Is it really an angel, and am I really Abraham? What proof do I have?’ (1222)

Sartre’s point seems to be that freedom comes in even in the choice of whether to take something as an authority—freedom comes in even in our *beliefs*.