

Sartre's existentialism

1. Introduction.

From the initial premise, 'existence precedes essence,' Sartre insists that the human being does not have any intrinsic properties that can define him. Therefore, man can only define himself through the act of existing. Existentialism is attacked on the grounds of quietism, pessimism, and subjectivism. Sartre's defence rests on his definition of three key terms. These terms - forlornness, anguish, and despair - have a specific technical meaning. Sartre holds that man is free, he is forlorn, and because of this he must create himself. A state of despair and anguish arises when he realises this freedom. However, for Sartre, this freedom becomes the very reason for action. We cannot sink into quietism, nor can we be pessimistic, because man's destiny is within himself. I will begin this essay by discussing the initial premise existence precedes essence. I will analyse Sartre's defence, and then go through the attacks in order. I will conclude with a brief assessment of Sartre's arguments.

2. Existence precedes essence.

For Sartre, there are two kinds of existentialism.¹ This paper will focus on atheistic existentialism, the initial premise of which is "existence precedes essence."² 'Existence precedes essence' refers to the idea that "no general, non-formal account of what it means to be human can be given."³ The essential properties of the human being are not fixed or pre-ordained. Rather, the identity of an individual is discovered through the act of existing. Existence precedes essence in the sense that "man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards, defines himself."⁴ The Western tradition historically places essence before existence, and as Sartre points out, "this idea is found everywhere."⁵

1 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism*.' In *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 343.

2 Ibid., pg 344.

3 Steven Crowell, '*Existentialism*.' The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2016: Accessed June 9, 2017. url: plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/

4 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism*.' In *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 345.

5 Ibid., pg 344.

Having an essence meant that human beings could be placed within a larger whole, a kosmos, that provided the standard for human flourishing. Modern philosophy retained this framework even as it abandoned the idea of a “natural place” for man.⁶

For Plato, man is born into a cave, and it is only through philosophy that he comes to see the world right. Through the mind, he can perceive the beautiful, the good, and the true in their purity. This triad of Forms exist in a realm that is separate from the mundane reality of human life. For Plato, human life should be a pursuit of this triad of Forms. That is, a man does not create himself because there is a preconceived notion of what the essence of the human animal is or should be. In the context of modern philosophy, it is true that “Descartes rejected the traditional essential definitions of man.”⁷ However, by insisting that the act of 'thinking' is the essential property of the human, Descartes “quickly reinstated the old model.”⁸ He does this by “characterising his existence as that of a substance determined by an essential property, thinking.”⁹ Thus, the idea of 'essence precedes existence,' albeit in a mutated form, survived through the Cartesian revolution.

In the eighteenth century...man has a human nature; this human nature, which is the concept of the human, is found in all men.¹⁰

That is, modern philosophy did not discard of God, but accepted an altered character in the form of human nature. In the absence of God, the concept 'human nature' attempted to provide the benchmark by which a human being is measured. Thus, there still exists a universal quality, a universal essence, and each human being can in part be defined by this essence. However, for the existentialist, “there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive it;”¹¹ and because of this, “not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is...only what he wills himself to be.”¹² As Sartre advises, the first principle of existentialism is “man is nothing but what he makes of himself”¹³ because “man is responsible for what he is.”¹⁴ The essence of an individual is what this individual makes of himself, as discovered through the act of existing.

6 Steven Crowell, '*Existentialism.*' The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2016: Accessed June 9, 2017. url: plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism.*' In Basic Writings of Existentialism, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 344-345.

11 Ibid., pg 345.

12 Ibid., pg 345.

13 Ibid., pg 345.

14 Ibid., pg 346.

3. Forlornness, anguish, despair.

For Sartre, forlornness means “God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences.”¹⁵ However, Sartre's God is not the omnipotent first cause that overlooks human affairs. Rather, Sartre's God refers to the notion of a transcendental essence which formerly placed value upon human life. Forlornness follows from a rejection of any intrinsic human essence. The result is that the human being must guide himself into the future. The consequences of this are twofold.

The first is “man is condemned to be free.”¹⁶ Man is condemned because “he did not create himself, yet...once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.”¹⁷ For Sartre, freedom is both a burden and gift. Freedom is a burden because “peace of mind and even death are dearer to man than free choice.”¹⁸ However, freedom allows one to create their own future. Whilst God has lost authority over human society, God can no longer be called upon to offer guidance and safety as bestowed by the heavens. Furthermore, a man cannot reject his responsibility. “He can't start making excuses for himself,”¹⁹ and “there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature.”²⁰ The existentialist does not think that man is going to help himself by finding in the world some ideology or system or omen because “that man will interpret the omen to suit himself.”²¹ God does not guide the future of human society. The responsibility is now in the hands of man himself.

The second outcome of forlornness is “there can no longer be an a-priori good.”²² Traditionally, the word of God has been the moral arbiter. However, for the existentialist, “God does not exist...all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him.”²³ Human nature is also rejected as a basis of values. “Before you come alive, life is nothing; it's up to you to give it a meaning.”²⁴ This holds for existence itself and also for ethical claims. “Nowhere is it written that the good exists,”²⁵ and because of this, ethics becomes an act of creation. There is no longer an

15 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism.*' In Basic Writings of Existentialism, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 349.

16 Ibid., pg 350.

17 Ibid., pg 350.

18 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pg 332.

19 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism.*' In Basic Writings of Existentialism, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 349.

20 Ibid., pg 349.

21 Ibid., pg 350.

22 Ibid., pg 349.

23 Ibid., pg 349.

24 Ibid., pg 365.

25 Ibid., pg 349.

objective measurement by which to measure the legitimacy of values. Rather, the legitimacy of a value is created by man himself.

This forlornness leads to a state of anguish, and for Sartre, “forlornness and anguish go together.”²⁶ Anguish arises when we realise our freedom and subsequently our lack of guidance. Realising the free and arbitrary nature of human affairs leads to anguish over the responsibility that each individual has. As we have seen, there is no a-priori good by which specific conduct can be judged. The individual must then face the reality of their situation. He must choose how to act, and this choice is his alone. A religious man may say that our talents are the gift of God, but “if a voice addresses me, it is always for me to decide that this is the angel's voice.”²⁷ Again, there can be no rejection of responsibility. “The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion”²⁸ because “he thinks that man is responsible for his passion.”²⁹ Finally, in our anguish, we discover our despair. Existentialist despair means:

We shall confine ourselves to reckoning only with what depends upon our will, or the ensemble of probabilities which make our action possible.³⁰

In other words, we cannot control the future, nor can we control the actions of others. Nothing is certain, despite our “impetuous demand for certainty.”³¹ Consequently, Sartre advises that “I've got to limit myself to what I see.”³² An individual may wish to join the environmental movement. He may oppose the destruction of forests and oceans. However, as only one individual, the fact is he will have very little affect. The ultimate outcome will depend on the collective action of many. Despite his optimism, “given that man is free and there is no human nature,”³³ the environmentalist cannot depend on men who he does not know. He can depend on himself, and can do everything within his power to protect nature, however beyond himself, he “can't count on anything.”³⁴ We will now look at the attacks made on existentialism.

26 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism.*' In Basic Writings of Existentialism, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 353.

27 Ibid., pg 348.

28 Ibid., pg 350.

29 Ibid., pg 350.

30 Ibid., pg 353.

31 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pg 205.

32 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism.*' In Basic Writings of Existentialism, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 354.

33 Ibid., pg 354.

34 Ibid., pg 355.

4. Subjectivism.

Sartre takes the “Cartesian I think”³⁵ as his starting point. However, this is “for strictly philosophic reasons.”³⁶ Recall that the atheistic existentialist rejects the existence of any transcendental realm where God reigns supreme. Subsequently, “there is no universe other than a human universe,”³⁷ and because of this “it is impossible for man to transcend human subjectivity.”³⁸ Existentialism is a doctrine which “declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity.”³⁹ The subjective view of the individual then becomes a necessary starting point if we are to discover “a doctrine based on truth.”⁴⁰ However, this subjectivism does not isolate the individual from the community, as Sartre emphasises the inter-subjective nature of human affairs.

The man who becomes aware of himself through the cogito also perceives all others, and he perceives them as the condition of his own existence. He realises that he can not be anything ...unless others recognise it as such.⁴¹

In other words, the subjective individual does not look entirely within himself for value. Quite the contrary. The perception he has of himself is dependent on others, and he cannot make sense of his own experiences without the assistance of others. That is, “the other is indispensable to my own existence as well as to my knowledge.”⁴² From this, Sartre emphasises the inter-subjective nature of human life.⁴³ We are subjective, but we are also inter-subjective, and because of this inter-subjectivity, our very existence is dependent upon our fellow man.

If I've discarded God the Father, there has to be someone to invent values...In that way, you see, there is a possibility of creating a human community.⁴⁴

Note that Sartre uses the phrase 'human community' when referring to value creation. Life has no meaning a-priori. Therefore, invention becomes necessary and the only moral arbiter is man

35 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism*.' In Basic Writings of Existentialism, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 342.

36 Ibid., pg 357.

37 Ibid., pg 366.

38 Ibid., pg 346.

39 Ibid., pg 342.

40 Ibid., pg 357.

41 Ibid., pg 358.

42 Ibid., pg 358.

43 Ibid., pg 358.

44 Ibid., pg 365.

himself. Sartre accepts that there is no universal normative account of ethics. The only universal value that Sartre accepts is freedom. Thus, whilst there is no human essence, there is a universal human condition. This condition is the “complete arbitrariness and...complete freedom of...existence.”⁴⁵

If man has once become aware that in his forlornness he imposes values, he can no longer want but one thing, and that is freedom, as the basis of all values.⁴⁶

However, as Sartre points out, “in wanting freedom we discover that it depends entirely on the freedom of others.”⁴⁷ In this way, my freedom is dependent upon your freedom. By accepting that the only universal characteristic of human existence is freedom, then Sartre accepts the paradoxical scenario of human life. We are free to choose, but our freedom is dependent upon others. We each experience the world subjectively, but this subjectivity is universal. Therefore, we share one characteristic, and in this way we are united beyond our subjective reality.

5. Quietism.

The existentialist is accused of “inviting people to remain in a kind of desperate quietism,”⁴⁸ and we end up with “a philosophy of contemplation.”⁴⁹ However, for Sartre, the freedom resulting from the human condition becomes the very reason for action. Our despair means that our actions today do not guarantee a better tomorrow. Furthermore, there is no a-priori good. However, despite this lack of certainty, by not acting, and remaining in a state of quietism, we are choosing to ignore our despair. If we are forlorn, if we have been abandoned by God, and in his anguish, man realises that he must create himself, then action is the only reasonable response. One can either sit in fear of the arbitrary nature of human life or can accept this freedom and act accordingly.

Crucially, as Sartre points out, one “cannot avoid making a choice.”⁵⁰ If one chooses to follow a pre-ordained path, this is still a choice that the individual makes. Whether one accepts or rejects the burden of freedom, the choice must be made because of the universal condition of human existence. Thus, the existential doctrine, which stresses the freedom of man, becomes a philosophy of action.

45 Jean-Paul Sartre. *'Existentialism.'* In Basic Writings of Existentialism, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 363.

46 Ibid., pg 363.

47 Ibid., pg 363.

48 Ibid., pg 341.

49 Ibid., pg 341.

50 Ibid., pg 361.

Man *must* define himself because God no longer can. From this, it follows that the existentialist necessarily “defines man in terms of action.”⁵¹

There is no reality except in action...and that action is the only thing that enables a man to live. Consequently, we are dealing here with an ethics of action and involvement.⁵²

This statement comes from the initial premise 'existence precedes essence.' A person must exist, and existence is an action which must be undertaken before essence can arise. Much like the words laugh and talk, existence is a verb which refers to an activity. This implies the involvement of an individual. So for a person to exist, they necessarily need to act. A person may want to laugh, but a person can only be said to be laughing if the action laughing takes place. Prior to the act of laughter, there is nothing. Much the same can be said for existence. Before the person exists, that is before he acts, there is nothing. “A man is involved in life, leaves his impress on it, and outside of that there is nothing.”⁵³ This is because there is no God or human nature which can define what or who an individual is. A man can create his essence only through the act of existing.

6. Pessimism.

By committing to a subjective starting point, namely 'I think,' Sartre demonstrates the optimistic view existentialism has of human affairs, insisting that “there is no doctrine more optimistic.”⁵⁴ There is no omnipotent being to guide human affairs, and subsequently “man's destiny is within himself.”⁵⁵ In his “optimistic toughness,”⁵⁶ Sartre insists that man is free. He rejects any form of determinism, and on the basis of this freedom, he sees the possibility of a “human community.”⁵⁷ In this way, the existentialist is more optimistic than the Catholic critic simply because he trusts the individual to guide his own life.

Furthermore, existentialism returns dignity to man, and Sartre refuses to reduce man to an object.⁵⁸ If we accept that the only universal characteristic of the human is to be found in the human

51 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism*.' In Basic Writings of Existentialism, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 357.

52 Ibid., pg 355-357.

53 Ibid., pg 355.

54 Ibid., pg 357.

55 Ibid., pg 357.

56 Ibid., pg 356.

57 Ibid., pg 365.

58 Ibid., pg 358.

condition of freedom, then ethical dilemmas are now resolved by the individual in an idiosyncratic way. That is, “no general ethics can show you what is to be done.”⁵⁹ By insisting that a man can create himself, and indeed *must* create himself because of his freedom, then the individual becomes valuable once again. Rather than serving an omnipotent being in heaven, or resigning to quietism because our fate is determined, the individual is free to create himself and free to serve ideals that he believes in himself. There is the danger that this freedom will result in tyranny and horror, and this seems to be the unspoken view that the Catholic critic holds. He assumes that without a strong hand to stop him, man will sink into sin. However, the existentialist differs, holding that the goodness of man is contingent upon himself, not God. This view is the very opposite of pessimism, and requires a steady confidence in the human animal.

7. Assessment and conclusion.

Philosophically, Sartre is not fully consistent. Sartre seems to evade a large problem that is a consequence of his rejection of normative ethics. Sartre insists on placing the onus of moral claims upon the individual. Sartre then claims that any form of determinism is a way to ignore this responsibility and evade the universal condition of freedom. However, early in the lecture Sartre asserts the following:

We can never choose evil. We always choose the good.⁶⁰

In this phrase, Sartre makes clear the unspoken assumption that he holds. Namely, the human being is inherently good. We will always choose the good so we are inherently good. The phrase 'inherent goodness' is close to 'human nature.' However, Sartre consistently rejects the existence of human nature. In its place, he assumes inherent goodness. Furthermore, how is the good measured if there is no a-priori good? For Sartre, the human being chooses what is good. However, just because someone chooses something does not mean that it is in their best interest. The fact is, universal freedom *can* result in anarchy. Sartre evades this possibility through an assumption, however does not argue *why* we are inherently good. He then claims:

Nothing can be good for us without being good for all.⁶¹

59 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism.*' In Basic Writings of Existentialism, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 352.

60 Ibid., pg 346.

61 Ibid., pg 346.

Sartre holds that the individual is responsible for his own existence, but then says “he is responsible for all men.”⁶² In one move, Sartre goes from the individual to the universal. An individual chooses what he values, and when this individual makes his own choice, he is choosing for all men. This implies a uniformity of tastes and values. Thus, not only is the human being inherently good, but we all choose to act in the same way. This is questionable to say the least.

62 Jean-Paul Sartre. '*Existentialism.*' In *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Random House, 2004), pg 346.

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