

# Sartre and Free Will

- Last time, we raised questions about whether or not we have a free will.
- Sartre does not (here) directly *argue* that we are free, but examines closely the nature of our own experience of ourselves.
  - “Phenomenology”: the study experience *as* experienced.
- For Sartre, we experience ourselves as free, and so a belief in determinism could only be an attempt to avoid responsibility for ourselves.
  - If we are free, we have no “excuses.”



## Jean-Paul Sartre

- ◆ Part of group of French intellectuals deeply influenced by WWII
- ◆ The term “existentialism” originally applied to his work
- ◆ Wrote massive *Being and Nothingness* during war
- ◆ “E is H” a public lecture after the war, defending against charges that his views lead only to despair.

“Existentialism is a Humanism”

“*Man is condemned to be free.*”

--What *I* think Sartre means by this:

- We have no choice except to choose.
  - This is the “human condition.”
  - We exist in a perpetual state of “what should I do next?”
    - “... man is free, man is freedom.”
  - But we cannot *justify* our choices.
    - To be free means that we choose things *because we choose them.* No other justification is possible.
    - “We are left alone, without excuse.”

*“Existence Precedes Essence”*

*“What then, is this that we call existentialism?”*

- Sartre distinguishes theistic from atheistic existentialism. He advocates atheistic existentialism.
- But what both varieties have in common “is simply the fact that they believe that *existence comes before essence*—or if you will, that we must begin with the subjective. What exactly do we mean by that?”

# Existence before or after essence?

- If something is *created* (“an article of manufacture”) then it it was made according to some plan or design. In this case we would say that it’s essence precedes its existence.
- To say that something’s existence precedes its essence is to say that it was not designed or manufactured, and so that it has no “essential nature” given to it by its designer or creator.

# The Distinction

## Essence Precedes Existence

- “Created” or *manufactured* things
  - If something is *manufactured*, there is a “design” from which it follows.
  - For something that is manufactured, its “essence,” i.e., its “nature” precedes its existence.
  - It is created *in order to be* a certain kind of thing.

## Existence Precedes Essence

- For Sartre, “Man” is a being whose existence precedes its essence.
  - Sartre is starting from an atheist view.
  - If there is no God, then humans were not “designed.”
  - But he is saying more than that.
  - He is denying there is any “human nature.”



# “Atheistic existentialism ...

- “... declares ... that if God does not exist there is least one being whose existence precedes its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it....”
- *We* are such beings.
- “Man first of all exists, surges up in the world —and defines himself afterwards.”

# “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.”

- Since we are not created, we are not born with an essence or intrinsic individual nature.
- We simply *discover* that we exist, and we create ourselves by our own free choices.
- We are *nothing* except what we make our of ourselves through our actions.
  - Our “essence” is what we “will have been” once we no longer exist, i.e., once we’re dead.
  - Until then, we are “pure becoming.”

*“What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence?”*

- *“We mean that man first of all exists, ... and defines himself afterwards. ... Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no 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 ... after already existing. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.”*

# How do we know this?

- This is simply how we experience ourselves.
- It is what it means to experience ourselves as free.
- To experience myself as having a free will is to experience myself as being nothing other

# “Existence Precedes Essence”

- “We must begin from the subjective.”
  - i.e., we must start with our own experience of ourselves.
- This is Sartre’s own summary of his view of human life—
  - “[Man] ... is a being whose existence comes before its essence.”
- This is what distinguishes us (i.e., “Men,” i.e., “persons”) from every other kind of being.

# I think therefore I am

- *“Our point of departure is, indeed, the subjectivity of the individual.... And at the point of departure 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. [This absolute truth is simple and is] ... easily attained and within the reach of everybody; it consists in one’s immediate sense of one’s self.”*

What is “Man?”

# Man is Subjectivity

- *“... 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. ... What do we mean to say by this, but that man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table.”*



# “*Man is Freedom*”

- What Sartre is really describing (when he talks about “Man”) is a being with a free will.
- If we had an “essence” or a “nature,” we could not really be free.
- If we are free, we have no essence, no human or individual “nature.”
- We are *nothing but* our choices.

# No Human Nature?

- Why does one act cowardly?
  - If I say that I acted in a certain way *because I am a coward*, I am saying that it is simply my nature (my essence) to act that way.
    - This relieves me of responsibility for my acts (“I couldn’t help it: that’s just the way I am.”)
    - But it denies my own free will.
- For Sartre, I am coward *because I act cowardly*,
  - Not, I act cowardly *because I am a coward*.
  - “Being a coward” is the *result* of my actions, not the *cause* of them.
  - *Essence* comes after *existence*.

# Responsibility

- *“If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. The, 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.”*

# I am Responsible for all Mankind

- By making certain choices, we affirm certain values as being appropriate for everyone.
- *“And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we ... mean ... that he is responsible for all men. ... [In making a choice] I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him be. In fashioning myself I fashion man.”*

# Abandonment

- *“If indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s actions by reference to a specific and given human nature. .... 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 forever at liberty, and from the moment he is thrown into the world he is responsible for everything he does ...”*

An “Existential Crisis”

# Existential Choice

- Sartre considers a man who must choose between joining the Resistance (to fight the Nazi's occupying France), or stay and take care of his widowed mother.
- No “ethics” of right and wrong can tell him what he should do.
- In seeking “advice,” the man must choose those he seeks advice from, and then must choose whether or not to follow that advice.

# “Follow My Feelings?”

- Sartre rejects the claim that the man should simply “follow his feelings.”
  - These “feelings” would be a kind of “nature” or “essence.”
  - Simply following one’s feelings (“going with my gut”) implies that those feelings *determine* what will do.
  - But it is up to *me* to choose which feeling to “follow,” and whether or not to “follow” them.



# The Choice

- Watch a short clip from the movie, “Sophie’s Choice.” How would you decide which choice to make?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZ9bht5H2p4>

No “Excuses”

# No God ... No Objective Value

- *“... if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature. Nor ... are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behavior. Thus, ...we are left alone, without excuse. ... Condemned to be free, ... [because we do not create ourselves], yet responsible for everything [we do].”*

# No Justification

- Having a free will means that there can never be any (external) “justification” for my choices.
- If do something freely, then *I did it because I chose to*. Period. There is no other justification.
  - Anything else is not acting freely.
- There can be no justification other than “because I chose to.”

# Choosing Values

- If we are free, then we must freely *choose* our values.
  - If we are free, we don't choose things *because* of our (natural or “God given”) personal values.
  - Rather, what things we (really) value is determined by (is the sum total of) the choices we actually make.
  - But how *can* we “freely choose” our *deepest values*?

*“You are free. Choose. That is to say, invent.”*

- *“Even if my choice is determined by no a priori value, it has nothing to do with ‘caprice’ [mere whim].... Rather, let us say that the moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art.”*
- *If I am free, I create my values (the way an artist creates beauty) out of nothing.*

# Subjectivity and Divinity

- Subjectivity involves recognizing that there is no cause of and no possible explanation for my free choices.
- In freely choosing, I *create* the value of or reason for what I am doing.
- So, in a free choice, we participate in something normally attributed only to God: creation (of something) *out of nothing*.

**Conclusions:**



# Responsibility

- *“If ... existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus ... existentialism ... puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders.”*
- Being free means accepting responsibility for one's choices.
- This is both our burden, and the source of our dignity.

# Responsible For “All Men”

- “*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 ....*”
- All choice involves committing oneself to a conception of how *anyone* should act.
  - Values, even though they are subjectively created, are created as *universal*.

# Quietism and Despair?

*“Existentialism ... declares ... that even if God existed that would make no difference .... [W]e think that the real problem is ... [t]hat man needs ... 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 ....”*

# Authenticity

- For Sartre, “man is pure subjectivity.”
  - Nothing but an awareness of making choices.
- In “*bad faith*,” we deny our own freedom to avoid taking responsibility for our actions.
- In the end, being free (being “authentic”) means accepting responsibility for creating the *meaning* of our own lives.