Sartre
"Existentialism is a Humanism," *Being and Nothingness* (excerpts)
PHIL101
Prof. Oakes

<u>Section IV: What is it worth?</u>
Reading IV.6

Jean-Paul Sartre[1] (1905-1980) was a French philosopher and writer generally known as the primary exponent of existentialism. His philosophical work focused on the nature of human being, which he distinguished from the form of being of non-conscious objects (such as trees and tables, e.g.). Human conscious being, Sartre held, consists of a perpetual struggle of self-definition, wherein the objective terms of self-conception are ever at odds with our subjective experience. Because our self-conception effectively includes the terms of the whole world about us, Sartre found that our ultimate self-expression lies in our moral decisions. Rejecting an objective understanding of moral value, Sartre maintained that it is by our very choosing that value is created in the world.

Sartre's non-philosophical writings were also extensive. He wrote plays, novels, biographies, literary studies, and political treatises. In 1964, Sartre turned down the Nobel Prize for Literature, stating that a writer should avoid the influence of institutions. Consistent with his ethical principles, Sartre was active politically: during the Nazi occupation of France, Sartre was for a time active in *La Resistance*; his advocacy of Marxism and his international stature entailed relationships with the leaders of the Soviet Union and of Cuba.

Essence Precedes Existence

Like Nietzsche before him, Sartre rejects the existence of God and develops his views as consequences of that rejection. As did Nietzsche, Sartre sees God's existence as implying certain limitations on human nature and activity. Sartre expresses this idea by means of the ideas of a thing's *essence* and its *existence*. The essence of a thing is the conceptual expression of its nature; it is the idea or concept defining a thing. The existence of a thing, as Sartre uses the term, is the nature of the thing given that it does in fact exist in the world. Thus, we have the idea of a thing, and then the thing itself as a being in the world. In the following, Sartre compares the notion of God as our creator to the idea of a craftsman who first imagines and then constructs what he imagines.

> When we think of God as the creator, we are thinking of him, most of the time, as a supernal artisan.
> Whatever doctrine we may be considering, whether it be a doctrine like that of Descartes, or of
> Leibnitz himself, we always imply that the will follows, more or less, from the understanding or at

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[1] The French surname 'Sartre' isn't easy for English-speakers to pronounce. But if you say 'Sart', accenting that syllable, and then add a "ruh" (rhymes with 'the') to make SART-ruh, you'll be close.

least accompanies it, so that when God creates he knows precisely what he is creating. 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 realization of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding. … 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.

Sartre here alludes to a doctrine formulated by St. Aquinas according to which the "essence" of humanity precedes its "existence", inasmuch as God, as our creator, may be understood first to have conceived and then to have created us.[2] Sartre suggests, however, that if we reject the notion of a divine author of our being, then this relationship is reversed: our existence precedes our essence.

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…

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 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.

On Sartre's view, we humans have the unique capacity to create ourselves. Our actions define us, as we undertake them over time. By studying, you become a student; by teaching, I become a teacher. Prior to studying or teaching, there may of course be a hope or aspiration, but these ideas don't make us anything but hopers and aspirers. It is true, too, that we have a biological nature, but it is not this that defines us, on Sartre's view. We share our biological nature with other animals. What sets us apart is our capacity for choice and our very concern with the question of what we will choose to be. It is this concern, and the responsibility that we have for defining ourselves, that gives us our dignity, on this view.

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

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[2] See Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, Chapter 4, available here: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/aquinas-esse.asp. Aquinas himself is developing views originating in Aristotle, who distinguished the "form" of a thing from the matter composing it. This view is itself a modification of that of Plato, who regarded the form of a thing as distinct from and prior to its material existence. Sartre also refers here to the 17th Century German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, who upheld specifically a doctrine of "individual substances," particular ideas that God conceives of each of us, such that the living of our lives represents the expression of that idea in every detail: "… the nature of an individual substance or of a complete being is to have a notion so complete that it is sufficient to contain and to allow us to deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed." *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §8.

nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he proposes to be.

Freedom and Responsibility

While the human freedom to define its own nature may be cause for joy, Sartre observes that we may also regard this freedom with nothing short of terror.[3] Everything that we encounter in our worlds – what Sartre calls our *facticity* – presents us with the necessity of making a decision. One's sex and gender, one's race, one's age, one's social standing; the city in which one lives, one's country, the geo-political situation of the entire globe; today's weather, one's clothing, one's job and co-workers, one's pets, one's family members, one's needs and desires and hopes; in short, everything that one is aware of – all of these things require of one a response, a choice, a decision as to how to think of and react to these things.[4] Even the means by which one might make a decision are themselves a matter of choice. Our state is, for Sartre, as beings "abandoned" in a world of choices without any objective guide for our decision-making.

> Yet this responsibility is of a very particular type. Someone will say, "I did not ask to be born." This is a naïve way of throwing greater emphasis on our facticity. I am responsible for everything, in fact, except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being. Therefore everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible. I am *abandoned* in the world, not in the sense that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe like a board floating on the water, but rather in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant. For I am responsible for my very desire of fleeing responsibilities. To make myself passive in the world, to refuse to act upon things and upon Others is still to choose myself, and suicide is one mode among others of being-in-the-world. Yet I find an absolute responsibility for the fact that my facticity (here the fact of my birth) is directly inapprehensible and even inconceivable, for this fact of my birth never appears as a brute fact but always across a projective reconstruction of [myself]. I am ashamed of being born or I am astonished at it or I rejoice over it, or in attempting to get rid of my life I affirm that I live and I assume this life as bad. Thus in a certain sense I *choose* being born. … That is why I cannot ask, "*Why* was I born?" or curse the day of my birth or declare that I did not ask to be born, for these various attitudes toward my *birth* – i.e., toward the *fact* that I realize a presence in the world – are absolutely nothing else but ways of assuming this birth in full responsibility and of making it *mine*. Here again I encounter only myself and my projects so that finally my abandonment – i.e*.,* my facticity – consists simply in the fact that I am condemned to be wholly responsible for myself. I am the being which *is* in such a way that in its being its being is in question. …
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> Under these conditions since every event in the world can be revealed to me only as an *opportunity* (an opportunity made use of, lacked, neglected, etc.), … the responsibility of the [human] extends to the entire world as a peopled-world. It is precisely thus that the [human] apprehends itself in anguish; that is, as a being … which is compelled to decide the meaning of being – within it and everywhere outside of it. The one who realizes in anguish his condition as *being* thrown into a responsibility which extends to his very abandonment has no longer either remorse or regret or excuse; he is no longer anything but a freedom which perfectly reveals itself and whose being resides in this very revelation. But as we pointed out at the beginning of this work, most of the time we flee anguish in bad faith.

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[3] Compare Nietzsche's account of two different reactions to the basic terms of human being: joy on the one hand and resentment, on the other.

[4] Recall Nietzsche's exhortation to make for oneself a style, using all of the resources at one's disposal. The resources turn out to be quite extensive, comprising, in a sense, the whole of existence.

Existentialists of Sartre's sort are notorious for the apparent gloominess of their outlook.[5] Sartre might however prefer "serious" or "sober", for on this account one's responsibilities as a human appear to be weighty indeed. There is no aspect of one's "facticity", of the myriad conditions of one's life and surrounding world, about which one does not face the question of how to respond. For Sartre, terms such as 'abandonment', 'condemnation', and 'anguish' are entirely appropriate to our situation.

Value

This view has significant consequences for Sartre's view of value and morality. As did Nietzsche before him, Sartre interprets God's non-existence as entailing the lack of an objective moral order. Among our responsibilities, then, is the responsibility for determining, indeed, creating, such value as there may be, in the world. For Sartre, there are no objective rules or standards that might guide our decision. We may of course appeal to a principle or rule, or seek advice. But the decision of which principle to accept or whose advice to seek will always be ours alone. In the following, Sartre refers to the case of a man who has failed a military entrance exam and is left with the decision of what then to do with his life.

> 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. … 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. …
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> 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. …
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> 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 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.

There are no objective rules for human life; there are only the rules of our own choosing. In positive terms, Sartre thinks then that the only values that exist are those that we create, implicitly, by making our choices. To choose the life of the cloth is to confer value upon that form of living.

A further, important feature of Sartre's thinking perhaps explains his own active involvement in the political affairs of his time. The terms of our decision-making are also the general terms by means of which we describe ourselves, and these terms themselves are thus descriptive of humanity in general. Sartre thinks then that the choices that we make for ourselves are representative of an image of man as a whole. To choose, then, is to identify as valuable a certain vision of humanity.

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[5] For a parody of this attitude, see Henri, the existentialist cat: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0M7ibPk37_U.

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… 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.

Ask Yourself:

1. How does one become a philosopher, on Sartre's view?
2. What are the consequences of atheism, as Sartre understands them, for human freedom and responsibility?
3. Why is it, exactly, for Sartre, that one cannot ask, "Why was I born?"?
4. What are the consequences of Sartre's atheism for morality, as he understands the matter?
5. How does Sartre's conception of humanity and of morality compare with that of Kant?
6. What has value, for Sartre, exactly, and what imperative follows from Sartre's understanding of value?