Notes on Sartre

**"Existentialism is nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences
of a coherent atheistic position."**

Sartre's point-of-departure in "What is Existentialism?"

In this 1946 essay, Sartre attempts to answer four (then-current) criticisms of Existentialism:

1. Existentialism is a form of "desperate quietism" that allows no room for solutions to the problems of human existence.

2. Existentialism is a form of pessimism (a philosophy of despair), preoccupied with the dark and negative aspects of human existence.

3. Existentialism propagates a doctrine of atomistic individualism and extreme subjectivism while ignoring the communal aspects of human existence.

4. The atheism of Existentialism leads to value-nihilism, the doctrine that "anything goes" in the moral sphere.

The first three criticisms were levied against Existentialism by both Marxist and Christian critics, while the fourth was made by the Christian critics alone (the Marxists being atheists themselves).

Sartre's description of human existence: the distinction between human existence and non-human modes of being

1. The distinction between "essence" and "existence"

The central doctrine of Existentialism is "that existence precedes essence or . . . that subjectivity [rather than objectivity] must be the starting point [in the project of understanding human existence]."

The human individual is a subject rather than an object, a person rather than a thing. Human existence is prior to the human essence in the sense that the human individual is a being-in-the-world before he defines himself, before he is defined by others, before he takes on an "essence." Man begins as nothing (no-thing), and makes himself through his choices and actions. Thus, a person's "essence" is a product of his mode of "existence" and not the other way around.

Another way of putting this is to say that a person's objectivity (character, identity, profession, social role, etc.) is a product of and therefore is dependent on his subjectivity. Indeed, if by "essence" we mean a fixed, basically unchangeable nature or identity, then, in an important sense, man is never and "essence;" for, in Sartre's view, the individual is always free to alter his objective standing in the world, to change himself and his existential situation. Thus, the nature or identity of the existing individual is never fixed and unchangeable; the existing individual may always become more (or less) than his is.

[See Sartre's discussion of the paper-knife, the God-as-creator theory of man and existence, and the 18th century idea of a universal human nature shared by all individuals.]

2. The distinction between "being-in-itself" (*l'etre-en-soi*) and "being-for-itself" (*l'etre-pour-soi*) (in *Being and Nothingness* [1943])

Being-in-itself (*l'etre-en-soi*) is the principle of objectivity (facticity) and refers to the being of things (essences); whereas being-for-itself (*l'etre-pour-soi*) is the principle of subjectivity (consciousness) and

refs to the being of persons (existences). Human existence is rooted in both of these modes of being; man is both a thing and a conscious subject (person). Sartre describes this as the duality of human existence, and this duality is the basis of the ambiguity of life (and thus of the ambivalence of human action). Man has a choice between living as a thing and living as a person. But the fact that he has this choice proves, in Sartre's view, that, on the human level, the *pour-soi* is prior to the *en-soi* (i.e., existence is prior to essence). Choice is the primary reality of human existence, and it is choice that determines the essence of the individual. Moreover, the fundamental choice, the most basic of our "existential decisions," is the choice between "thing-hood" and "personhood." Shall I choose to be a thing or a person? Either way, since it is a matter of choice, my subjectivity (*le pour-soi*) will remain the antecedent ground of by objectivity *l'en-soi*).

3. Human subjectivity, freedom, and responsibility: the nature of personhood

The priority of subjectivity entails that man is a conscious being, "a plan which is aware of itself." This subjective consciousness — which is the foundation of my choices, actions, and "essence" — is also the ground of human freedom. And freedom entails responsibility. If existence precedes essence, then each person is responsible for what he makes of his life; and it is the task of Existentialism to make every human being aware of this truth. Sartre is a radical libertarian (or "hard indeterminist") on the question of the reality and scope of human freedom. That is, he argues that no morally relevant choices or actions are the necessary effects of either natural or supernatural causes. Human consciousness is entirely other than the realm of *objective* reality and is therefore not governed by any forces outside itself. The "will" is radically free, and every person is completely responsible for himself, for his choices and actions, *and* for his *world* (i.e., his "project"). My world is my construction, and it is what it is as a result of my choices and actions; my character or identity is also my construction. To deny this truth is, according to Sartre, "bad faith" (*mauvais foi*).

Sartre's "postulatory atheism": the existential significance of "the death of god"

1. The nonexistence of God and man's "condemnation" to freedom

The great burden of human freedom and responsibility becomes virtually overwhelming within the context of Sartre's atheism. Sartre has written that his version of Existentialism is "nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position." Thus, his analysis of the human condition presupposes (postulates) the nonexistence of God).

Sartre's atheism is significantly different from other forms of atheistic thought. Sartre is critical of certain secular humanists who try to trivialize the human significance of the "death of God." For Sartre, the nonexistence of God is of the greatest tragic import for humanity; for if God does not exist, then there is no ultimate foundation for the ideas of value or meaning. Without God, there are no definable moral boundaries, no apparent ground of universal purpose, nothing for man to cling to. "We are alone, with no excuses."

Sartre quotes Dostoevsky's statement that "If God did not exist, then everything would be permissible." The point of this statement, according to Sartre, is that, without God, there is no way to define the distinction between the morally permissible and the morally impermissible. There are no fixed boundaries within which my life might take on definable shape; there are no absolute guidelines to fall back on. If God does not exist, then we can "find no values or commands to turn to which [might] legitimize our conduct;" there are no excuses and no ultimate justifications for our lives. And it is in this sense that we experience our freedom as "condemnation": it is a "dizzying" freedom, a freedom without absolute moral boundaries, an unguided and inescapable "openness" toward being that can never be closed. Man's "openness" points toward God, the transcendent absolute; but since there is no God, and since man (perhaps in spite of himself) cannot become God, we are "condemned" to the unclosable openness of freedom. Only death, therefore, can release us from the "condemnation" of freedom, of the human condition; but death is no solution, according to Sartre, since the individual can have no experience of the "closedness" (or the "resolution") of death. Thus, "unhappy consciousness" is an ineradicable dimension of the human

situation, and the acceptance of this situation is "good faith" (while its denial is self-deception or "bad faith").

On the basis of his "postulatory atheism," Sartre concludes that a full and "authentic" recognition of the burden of human freedom and responsibility will lead to an ongoing experience of *anguish*, *forlornness*, and *despair* (see below).

2. The existential consequences of the nonexistence of God: anguish, forlornness, and despair

Existential anguish is the result of an awareness of one's "total and deep responsibility" for oneself and for others; it is based on the fact that one must choose and act without proof of the correctness or value of one's choices and actions.

This agony of decision follows from the non-existence of God. As indicated above, if God does not exist, then there can be no absolute standards or moral guidelines which might give shape to our freedom. In the absence of God and God's moral law, the individual is thrown back on himself; he is faced with the awful necessity of inventing his own values and of action on the basis of his own evaluation of himself and of the world in which he lives.

"Every man ought to say to himself, 'Am I really the kind of man who has the right to act in such a way that humanity might guide itself by my actions?'" This question must, after all, be answered by the questioner himself and by no one else, and, given the human tendency toward self-deception (which is greatly emphasized by Sartre), it is highly likely that this Sartrean version of Kant's categorical imperative will be used to justify almost any value or action.

Recognition of this instability in the human project of valuing, choosing, and acting is the ground of anguish — the experience of being left on one's own to define for oneself the nature of the good and the right.

Existential forlornness is closely related to existential anguish. It is a result of "facing up" to the full consequences of the nonexistence of God. Forlornness is an awareness of being left on one's own, of having been abandoned; it is the experience of utter aloneness. Man experiences "the death of God" as abandonment. Without God, human freedom is experienced as an intolerable burden: "man is condemned to be free." If God is dead, then there can be no objective standards of life. There is therefore no basis for making excuses for oneself; there is no escaping one's freedom and grave responsibility. There is "no exit." Man is "thrown" into this situation; he is faced with the necessity of defining himself without set standards, in "fear and trembling." This is what Sartre means when he says that "man is condemned to be free/" Man must not only make himself — invent himself! — through his choices and actions; but he must do so in the absence of any *ontologically real* standards. This is a necessary consequence of our existential forlornness, our experience of having been abandoned by God, of having been "thrown" into being without any objective indication as to what we are to *be* or to *do*.

Existential despair is a consequence of anguish and forlornness. Despair is the realization that one cannot ultimately count on anyone or anything outside of one's own will and one's own field of action. Since there is no God, there can be no ultimate confidence, no ultimate hope, that all is well. Without God, we cannot realistically hope for anything beyond the finite possibilities of our own individual existential situations. Existential despair, then, is the giving up of all hope in standards and realities outside of those which we ourselves define and create through our own concrete lives and actions; it is acceptance of one's full and awful responsibility for one's choices and actions, for one's own life, and for one's world.

Comments on Sartre's version of Existentialism

Existentialism is a modern philosophical attempt to define and interpret the nature and meaning of *human existence*. It is, in general, an intellectual and passionate response to modern humanity's doubts

concerning the meaning and direction of life. Existentialist thought is predominantly concerned with the life of the *individual*, the concretely existing human *person* or *subject*, and with the meaning of the individual's doubts, anxieties, hopes, and fears. Beginning with an analysis of *individual existence*, of the basic structures of *subjective experience*, Existentialist thinkers have attempted to construct a general description and interpretation of the human condition as such. In so proceeding, Existentialists have argued that no other philosophical or scientific theory has taken sufficient account of the realities of *individual* human existence, that no generally adequate philosophy of life has ever been developed, and that Existentialism is therefore the first philosophical attempt to describe the full and concrete reality and meaning of the human situation.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is one of the major Existentialist thinkers of the 20th century. Sartre was influenced by Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Karl Marx (1818-1883) and studied with Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Sartre's Existentialism is based on the conviction that God does not exist and that, therefore, man is "on his own," thrown into and abandoned in a purposeless world where he must create his own meanings and values, or learn to live without meanings and values, or, if he chooses, commit suicide.

According to Sartre, the nonexistence of God is a great tragedy for mankind. Man is a being who reaches beyond himself and his world toward God. In fact, "the best way to conceive of the *fundamental project* of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God" (*Being and Nothingness*, 566). The object of man's passion is the obliteration of his freedom in a fusion with God, in whom freedom and absolute truth are united. Thus, the religious resort to God marks a form of escapism, an attempt to avoid one's freedom and responsibility, a futile effort to resolve the dialectical tension between being-in-itself and being-for-itself (since God is the "synthetic fusion of the in-itself with the for-itself" [*Being and Nothingness*, 626]). But since this project is "doomed to failure," man is "condemned to despair" (*Being and Nothingness*, 627). Belief in God is not only a falsifying rationalization for one's existence, but also a form of futile hope: there can be no ultimate fulfillment, no final escape from the human condition. Human existence points toward ("intends") God; but since God does not exist, the project of human existence is futile. "Man is a useless passion" (*Being and Nothingness*, 615).

Belief in God is one of many forms of "bad faith" (*mauvais foi*). Bad faith, according to Sartre, is the human attempt to escape from freedom and responsibility — and from the anguish, forlornness, and despair that are the existential consequences of freedom and responsibility in a world without God. This escape of evasion may take place through the vain attempt of theistic religion to *synthesize* the in-itself with the for-itself in the concept of God, or by way of so-called "scientific" theories that deny the reality of human freedom and thereby seek to *reduce* the for-itself to the in-itself. When the religious strategy fails, men turn to reductionist and deterministic strategies that define man as an object or thing, as a purely "natural" being, as a being-in-itself. But both the strategies of "transcendence" and "reduction" are expressions of bad faith — i.e., forms of self-deception and escapism that seek to deny the realities of the human existential situation.

Sartre argues that man's existential freedom is inescapable (as are the consequences of that freedom). It is man — and not God, nature, or society — who is the source of values (and Sartre means that *each individual person* is the source of his own values). Thus, man is inescapably responsible for himself and for his world. The ethical ideal of Sartre's philosophy is "a freedom which wills itself freedom" — the free choice of the human situation, the recognition of one's responsibility for oneself and for one's world. The person who renounces bad faith and who lives in "good faith" fully recognizes and accepts the truth that man is "a being-which-is-not-what-it-is and which-is-what-it-is-not, and which chooses the ideal of being, being-what-it-is-not and not-being-what-it-is" (*Being and Nothingness*, 627).

In Sartre's view, the recognition and acceptance of one's freedom and responsibility — and of the consequent experiences of anguish, forlornness, and despair — is good faith. And the refusal to recognize and accept the reality and consequences of human freedom and responsibility is bad faith or self-deception. The man of good faith will thus take charge of his own existence, defining its meaning, value, and direction for himself, and he will act courageously and with a "tragic sense of life" face the fact

of his own ultimate finitude and contingency. Good faith, then, is the decision to live on the basis of reality and in light of the fact that God does not exist.