

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. “Existentialism” translated by Bernard Frechtman. Remaining selections from *Being and Nothingness* translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: 1985.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a French existentialist philosopher. Sartre’s body of fiction and plays won him the Nobel Prize in Literature, which he refused.

Existentialism.

This essay answers charges brought against Sartre’s existentialism. The main charges are that existentialism promotes ethical quietism and that existentialism emphasizes human degradation to the neglect of human joys. In this latter regard, critics charge that existentialism conceives man as isolated, not bound in community with others, and that the existential ethic permits all actions and condemns none.

Sartre responds that existentialism implies that all truth and action occur in human settings perceived within human subjectivity. One source from which derives the allegation that existentialism focuses upon human misery is raw conservatism; the critics believe that one should never confront the status quo, but should excuse ill circumstances as unavoidable. Existentialism emphasizes human choice. Circumstances are not immutable; they are frequently a product of human election.

Existentialism takes human subjectivity as its starting point. Existence precedes essence, that is, the individual human consciousness logically precedes the reality of the world. The individual comes first, defines himself, and then examines the world, his context. There is no god, no objective viewpoint outside the individual’s perspective. Man invents himself. Therefore, man is wholly responsible for his circumstance and that of others. What we choose, we call good. By the term “good,” we imply that our choice is good for all others.

Critics focus on core words in existentialism: anguish, forlornness, and despair. By “anguish,” Sartre means the feeling that arises when one recognizes that her choices legislate for all mankind, and she is responsible. By “forlornness,” Sartre asserts that god does not exist, and one must face up to the many implications of this fact. Morality lacks force, and man loses his way. There is nothing within or without stable enough to grasp. People are free, utterly. Ethical principles are too generalized; one must trust his instincts. One’s feelings follow the train of one’s acts. By “despair,” Sartre means that prayer doesn’t work. One must confine oneself to what one can do and the probabilities that make those actions possible. God will not be intervening to assist.

Sartre says of the charge that existentialism promotes ethical quietism that existentialism entails realistic action. Man is his actions and life becomes what men make it. What critics take for pessimism in existentialists is at bottom a gritty optimism.

Sartre answers the charge that existentialism distorts man by considering him in isolation from others. Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* is the rudimentary truth of human life; we come to exist as we recognize subjectively that we are existing. When we realize that we exist, we are positioned to recognize the existence of others. While there is no fixed human nature, there is a universal human condition: all humans are born, work in the world with others, and die. So, every individual has value, that is, every individual implies the existence of other individuals. As such, all human experience may be understood by others.

Sartre answers the criticism that existentialism authorizes every person to do whatever he chooses, and offers no yardstick by which to judge human actions. To be free is to be absolute. Even not choosing is choice. Moral choice is akin to creating art, and an individual is an artwork of his own making. Man’s ethical choices define the individual; the world is so structured that one cannot fail to choose an ethical stance. As to moral yardsticks, Sartre asserts he does not believe in progress. Mankind does not change. Circumstances change, but human choice endures. The choices of others may not be morally condemned, but they may be identified as errors. A person who makes excuses is dishonest; he denies his absolute freedom. And wanting absolute freedom for oneself, one can only want it for others as well. Sartre asserts that since he has rejected God as purveyor of values, someone has to make them up. Human life has no essential meaning. Human meaning is chosen by humans.

Sartre concludes that existentialism is nothing more than consistent atheism. If God exists, it would not matter.

Freedom and Responsibility.

This fragment from *Being and Nothingness* explains the implications of the freedom of the for-itself (which is consciousness without god). Absolute freedom means that the individual is absolutely responsible. Whatever happens to me or others is something of the individual's creation. There are no accidents. If one elects not to commit suicide in the face of unwanted outcomes, then one has chosen the outcome. Human existence stands therefore without excuses. Though it appears that some facts are outside the individual's control (for example, one's birth), the individual nevertheless knows nothing of such facts. He becomes an individual by adopting such "facts" into his choices. The individual lives and exists only in the present. Anguish arises when the individual recognizes that her choices touch the world, which is a peopled world. She sees that her existence affects everything outside herself. Most individuals "flee anguish in bad faith."

The Desire to Be God.

These two fragments from *Being and Nothingness* describe the existentialist view of the psychological origin of god myths. Every individual is a unique project of creating himself. That project is a motivation to self-define, which involves himself, the physical world, the Other, and a striving toward unification of these aspects.

Every individual's project (which constitutes that individual) is to be God. The idea of god describes the limit of the individual self-constituting project. To undertake the person-forming project, oddly, involves nihilation, because desire empties being. The free man empties himself in favor of choice. Desire for being, however, is that self-contradictory movement that establishes individuals. The person is self-contained, creating herself for herself alone.

Existentialist Psychoanalysis.

This essay describes how existentialism should amend Freudian psychoanalysis. Sartre begins with similarities between existential and Freudian psychoanalysis. Each seeks to decipher human behavior by observation. The meaning of an individual's behaviors is unknown to the individual. Behaviors are symbols of one's relations to the structures that define himself. Freud, however, sees in these symbols hidden and static sexual fixations. This unconscious complex escapes the person and remains an enigma. Existential psychoanalysis sees the approach to meaning of the individual. Individuals become individuals not at birth, but later, when the individual makes the primal choices. This initial choice precedes consciousness and constitutes the individual. It is not encrypted, but remains hidden in the open, available, with the proper examination, to the individual. The individual must learn to see this mystery objectively, from the point of view outside himself, of the Other. This primordial individual choice should reveal that creating oneself leads to sympathy and action for others. Freud seeks the initial state. Existentialists seek the initial choice. Existential psychoanalysis shows the individual his self-generated existence. Such a view of psychoanalysis has not yet been explained by a psychologist of Freud's stature.