

Sartre, Existentialism and the Human Emotions

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Chapter 1: Existentialism (pages 9-51)

There Is No Human Nature; We Choose Our Purpose, Meaning, and Value

Central claim: “Existence precedes essence” (13).

Question: What does that mean?

Response: Consider an object for which its essence precedes its existence: a paper-cutter.

- What the object is “for” is determined by the concept ‘paper-cutter’ (13).

Argument:

1. For those who think there is a God: God created man like men create paper-cutters; we have a human nature, a function, that tells us what we are for.
2. If there is no God, man has no function.
3. There is no God.
4. Man has no function, there is nothing he is “for.”
 - Nothing in concept of ‘man’ determines his function (15). (Cf. Aristotle and Butler).

Claim: Man creates a purpose, value, meaning, for himself and by himself.

- “Man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist defines him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be” (15).

What this entails: Man is responsible for himself, that is, responsible for what is to be done with his life.

What Man Is

We are what we *do*.

- “[A] man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble, of the relationships which make up these undertakings” (33).
- “Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life” (32).
- Those who don’t live by this are self-deceived (32).

What we do is the result of what we *choose* to do.

- People like to think people are just born a certain way; “what people would like is that a coward or a hero be born that way.” But it is otherwise: we choose what sort of person to be (34).
- “There’s always a possibility for the coward not to be cowardly any more and for the hero to stop being heroic. What counts is total involvement; some one particular action or set of circumstances is not total involvement” (35).
- There is no universal human nature but there is a universal human condition: the condition of being given a certain environment and range of choices and of being in a position to choose what to do and make of himself (38).

Choosing How to Live: An Example

Example of a choice: Join the French resistance or stay with one’s mother?

- The latter is definite, immediate, though it helps only one person, the former uncertain, distant, but it helps many. He must choose between an ethics of sympathy or personal devotion, or a “broader” ethics.

Question: How to choose which to do?

Response by the boy: “I ought to choose whichever pushes in one direction. If I feel that I love my mother enough to sacrifice everything else for her...then I’ll stay with her. If, on the contrary, I feel that my love for my mother isn’t enough, I’ll leave” (26).

Sartre’s response to the boy:

- “But how is the value of a feeling determined? What gives his feeling for his mother value? Precisely the fact that he remained with her...The only way to determine the value of this affection is, precisely, to perform an act which confirms and defines it” (26-7).
- Sartre’s response to the boy: “You’re free, choose, that is, invent.” No general ethics can show you what is to be done; there are no omens in the world” (28).

Objections

Objection 1: “[V]alues aren’t serious, since you choose them” (48).

Response: Why think they are not serious just because we choose them? Someone has to choose them, after all, even God.

Objection 2: “You’re able to do anything, no matter what!” Aren’t all your choices, at bottom, *arbitrary*?

Response: Creating a life without pre-set values is no more arbitrary than creating a work of art (42-3).

Objection 3: ““You’re unable to pass judgment on others, because there’s no reason to prefer one configuration to another...Everything is arbitrary in this choosing of yours.””

Response:

- We can judge “that certain choices are based on error and others on truth” (44).
- [E]very man who takes refuge behind the excuse of his passions, every man who sets up a determinism, is a dishonest man” (45).

Objection to response: But why not choose to be dishonest?

Reply: I define his dishonesty as an error. “Dishonesty is obviously a falsehood because it belies the complete freedom of involvement...[T]he strictly coherent attitude is that of honesty” (45).

Man’s Responsibility for All Men

Claim: One is not only responsible for one’s own (individual) self, but “for all men” (16).

1. To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose; we always choose the good.
2. Nothing can be good for us without being good for all.
3. Thus, when we choose the good for ourselves we choose the good for all.
4. Thus, we are each deeply responsible for how mankind lives (17-18).

Claim: Man “cannot escape the deep feeling of responsibility he has for all mankind” → anguish & anxiety

- Those who claim not to be anxious are self-deceived (18-19).
- Were there a God, there would be no anxiety because we would not be responsible.
 - But there is no God, and so it is we who are responsible; we don’t have the excuse for failing to choose ‘God is the chooser anyway’ (22).