



# Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

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# Learning Objects

- Define Existentialism
- Explain Sartre's basic theory of Existentialism
- Enumerate the two types of Existentialism
- Explain his concepts of 'anguish', 'forlornness', and 'despair' and what causes them

# Existentialism

Existentialism – (Dictionary definition) A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, Regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts

# Existentialism - Sartre

*"a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity"*

*(Existentialism is a Humanism)*

# Philosophical Works

- *Being and Nothingness* (1943)
- *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946)

# *Existentialism is a Humanism*

- Answering four charges brought against Existentialism
  - Inviting people to remain in a kind of desperate quietism because, since no solutions are possible, we should have to consider action in this world as quite impossible
  - Dwelling on human degradation
  - Considering man as an isolated being
  - Denying the reality and seriousness of human undertakings

# Existentialism

- Sartre sees existentialism as:
  - Optimistic – many possibilities of choice
  - Most austere of doctrine
  - Intended strictly for specialists and philosophers
  - Two kinds of existentialism
    - Christian
    - Atheistic

# Prior Philosophers

“Essence precedes existence”

- Before anything comes to exist there is an idea of the thing to be created (paper knife example)
- Its “essence” is whatever will make it in fact a paper knife and not a kite or a computer etc
- God’s mind contained the essences of all created things including mankind and that by the creative activity of God, all essences were translated into existing things
- Maintained the concept of human is found in all men
- 18<sup>th</sup> century, the atheism of the *philosophes* discarded the idea of God



# Atheistic Existentialism

*"If God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man, or, as Heidegger says, human reality."*

*(Existentialism is a Humanism)*

# Existentialism

“existence preceded essence”

- There is no way for an essence or nature of mankind to precede its existence therefore existence precedes essence
- There is no human nature
- We arrive w/o any pre-established nature – we determine later what our essence shall be
- First principle of existentialism - A person creates himself, defines his own essence or nature

# Two modes of Being

- Being-in-itself – the being any natural object has (a piece of granite)
- Being of a person – he is a conscious subject who stands constantly before his own future and is responsible for what he make of himself in that future
  - Individual is responsible for himself – no god to blame

# Man is Responsible For what he is

- The full responsibility of his existence rests on the individual
- Subjectivity – two meanings
  - That an individual chooses and makes himself
  - It is impossible for man to transcend human subjectivity
    - When a person chooses his own essence, he chooses for all people
    - He chooses what he is convinced is the best for himself as a human being – what would be best for any human being

# Anguish

- Experience **anguish** when we recognize that we are responsible for ourselves

*"... the man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a lawmaker who is , at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, cannot help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility"*

*(Existentialism is a Humanism)*

# Anguish

- Must Choose
- No one can choose for us – Not even God
- Avoiding making a choice – is a choice

“And 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?” And if he does not say that to himself, he is masking his anguish.”

# Forlornness

- **Forlornness** – by this existentialists mean that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this
- “The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it.”

# Forlornness

- We know what it is to be “abandoned” – by God and everyone else
- We are alone
- Existentialism has been defined as the study of the “unique experience of the alone individual”
- There is no “good” or “right” already established in the nature of things, no cosmic order or morality



# Forlornness – We are Alone

- Everything is permitted, and each one of us must create his own value
- Does no good to decide to take the values determined by someone else- to do so is our decisions and in that we are totally responsible
- This means that the system of nature and the human body and mind do not determine our choices either
- All choices are wholly undetermined – wholly our own
- People are condemned to be free

# Despair

- Despair means that we shall confine ourselves to reckoning only with what depends upon our will, or on the ensemble of probabilities which make our action possible
- In other words you can only count on what you can do

# Actions are the measure of man

- Man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationship which make up these undertakings
- I should involve myself and act
- Actions are how we measure a man
- Reality alone is what counts
- No Human Nature
  - A man is a coward by his acts
  - Can change essence by taking alternative actions

# Existentialism

- Existentialism is not quietism – defines a man in terms of his actions
  - Optimist because a man's destiny is within himself
  - Tells him his only hope is in his acting
  - Action is the only thing that enables man to live
- Descartes' *I think; therefore, I am* – basis for existentialism subjectivity

# Universal Human Condition

- Universal human condition – a priori limits which outline man's fundamental situation in the universe
  - What does not vary is the necessity for him to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal there
  - What is not possible is not to choose (I can always choose, but I do not choose, I am still choosing)
  - Though his choice, he involves all mankind, and he cannot avoid making a choice

# Existential is Humanism

- There is no universe other than a human universe, the universe of human subjectivity
- Reminds man that there is no law-maker other than himself

# Summary - Existentialism

- Existentialism is a doctrine which makes human life possible and declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and human subjectivity
- Man is responsible for his own actions and our choices effect all of mankind this causes anguish
- Forlornness occurs when we realize that God does not exist and we are alone
- Despair occurs when we realize that we can only count on what we do

# Summary cont

- Actions are how we measure a man
- No Human Nature
- Shared Human Condition
- Existentialism is Humanism – ours is the only universe