# Existentialism Is a Humanism

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris, where he would go on to live most of his life. He studied philosophy at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure until 1929, the same year he met the existentialist feminist philosopher and his eventual lifelong partner Simone de Beauvoir. Sartre spent most of the 1930s teaching in the northern French port city of Le Havre, returned to Paris in 1937 and then was drafted into the French army at the outbreak of World War II in 1939. He served as a meteorologist in the eastern border region of Alsace (where his mother's family had roots) but was captured and held as a prisoner of war until 1941. After returning to German-occupied Paris, he participated to a limited extent in the underground resistance to the occupation and wrote many of his best-known works, including his philosophical magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, the plays *No Exit* and *The Files*, and the novel *The Age of Reason*. In 1946—at the apex of his fame—he quit teaching and moved back in with his mother. From this period onward, Sartre's work and public image turned far more political and especially anti-colonial in tone. He became an avowed Marxist, although he lost sympathy for the Soviet Union after 1956, and spent much of the 1950s striving to combine his existentialism with Marxism in works like the 1957 *Search for a Method* and the 1960 *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. During Algeria's War of Independence from France, Sartre openly supported the National Liberation Front and cultivated a friendship with the renowned psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon. He was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature, but he became the first to turn it down, citing the Prize's bias against intellectuals from outside Western Europe and declaring that a writer should "refuse to let himself be transformed into an institution." He spent most of the 1960s writing a monumental biography of the 19th century French novelist Gustave Flaubert, but abruptly retired in 1971 to focus on political organizing and never finished the last volume. Around the same time, Sartre's health began to deteriorate, worsened by his lifetime of chain smoking and heavy drinking. He was almost completely blind by 1973 and died of pulmonary edema in April of 1980.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Sartre became a global celebrity in the shadow of World War II; he delivered this lecture barely a year after Paris was liberated from German occupation. The time he spent in the French army and then as a prisoner of war in Germany was transformative, both personally and philosophically: seeing the conflict firsthand led Sartre to the sense of political urgency that pervaded his later work, and he began writing his existentialist manifesto *Being and Nothingness* while imprisoned. He considered existentialism a crucial and powerful antidote to the systematized control of the Nazi regime and believed that, if individuals realized their absolute power over their choices and moral responsibility for those choices, atrocities of the sort that transpired during World War II might be harder for states to impose. In his later life, Sartre was often criticized for portraying the fighters of the French Resistance (in which he played a more intellectual than practical role) as experiencing an authentic freedom in their absolute commitment to fighting the occupation.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The ideas Sartre explains in *Existentialism is a Humanism* are also reflected in his other works of fiction and nonfiction, such as *Being and Nothingness*, *Nausea*, and his plays *No Exit*, *The Flies* and *Dirty Hands*. Sartre's thought was also deeply intertwined with his partner, Simone de Beauvoir's. Her best-known book is the feminist history *The Second Sex*, and her second most famous work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, attempts to develop an ethical system based on her and Sartre's existentialism. Sartre's other close intellectual friends included Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* has widely influenced the way philosophers think about the body; Jacques Lacan, to whom Sartre briefly went for psychoanalysis and whose *Seminars* are essential to the history of that discipline; Raymond Aron, whose book *The Opium of the Intellectuals* was largely dedicated to attacking Sartre; and Albert Camus, the fellow existentialist best known for his novels *The Stranger* and *The Rebel* and his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sartre's existentialism is also indebted to the work of earlier philosophers, such as Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. Sartre was also an obsessive reader of the 19th century French realist writer Gustave Flaubert, who is best remembered today for his debut novel *Madame Bovary*. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre explicitly mentions several writers, including the naturalist novels of Émile Zola (specifically *The Earth*) and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Sartre's examples of authentic morality near the end of his lecture borrow from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and Stendahl's *The Charterhouse of Parma*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Existentialism Is a Humanism (L'Existentialisme est un humanisme)

- **When Written:** Lecture delivered and transcribed on October 29, 1945
- **Where Written:** The Club Maintenant [literally "Now Club"] in Paris
- **When Published:** 1946
- **Literary Period:** Existentialism
- **Genre:** Philosophical lecture
- **Setting:** The Club Maintenant, Paris
- **Climax:** Sartre declares that, contrary to popular belief, existentialism actually is a humanism.
- **Antagonist:** The critics who act in "bad faith," including members of Sartre's audience
- **Point of View:** First-person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Sartre's Appearance.** Sartre was well-known for his peculiar appearance, mannerisms and sense of style. He was barely five feet (1.5m) tall, wore ill-fitting clothes, had a lazy eye from childhood, and was often the first to proclaim his own ugliness.

**Simone de Beauvoir.** Sartre and de Beauvoir were famous for their aversion to bourgeois relationship norms. They never married and continued to pursue other relationships in parallel with their own throughout their lives. They even worked together to seduce younger women and exchanged thousands of letters recounting their relationships.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Sartre's lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism* seeks to accomplish two aims: first, it tries to offer an accessible (although incomplete) introduction to his existentialist philosophy, and secondly, it tries to address some of the wide-ranging and often vicious criticism he received from other philosophers, as well as from the French public and media.

Sartre opens by briefly outlining some of the principal criticisms his doctrine has received, from the denigration of "existentialists" by laypeople who have not tried to understand his philosophy, to the Communist complaints that existentialism refuses to take action and focuses too closely on the individual at the expense of others, to the Christian accusations that existentialism is pessimistic and destroys all standards for moral judgment. Rather, Sartre says, existentialism is an optimistic, action-oriented philosophy that centers moral responsibility and people's interconnections with others.

Sartre then defines "existentialism" for his audience: its core is the idea that "existence precedes essence." Unlike a manufactured object, like a **paper knife**, that is designed before it is created, he argues, humans come into the world before they have definite values, purposes or characters. Whereas the paper knife's essence precedes its existence, a human's existence precedes its essence. The consequence of this fact is subjectivity, or one's freedom to define oneself through action; since there is no preexisting human nature, goal for human life, or divine mandate to act in particular ways, "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself." A person is a human project, just the sum of their actions, but they can also imagine what they will and should become in the future. In other words, human life is a *project* (in the noun sense) and people *project* (in the verb sense) an image of themselves in order to define their essence. This universal human predicament, which Sartre calls the human condition, contrasts with the notion of an essential human nature that earlier atheists espoused to preserve the moral codes of religion while dispensing with God as a figurehead. Because the human condition is universal, the way any individual addresses it through their actions expresses a set of values about what is "good" for humanity as a whole; each person becomes "responsible for all men," the creator and exemplar of a unique moral code for humankind.

After finishing the basic sketch of his core existentialist arguments, Sartre turns to three central and often-misunderstood concepts in existentialism: anguish, abandonment and despair. The freedom to define one's values is also at the same time the *obligation* to define oneself in some way, and *anguish* is the painful realization of moral responsibility that accompanies choice. Whereas Christians see existentialism as painful and pessimistic because of its relationship to anguish, Sartre argues that anguish is actually a consistent feature of all decision-making; rather, he says, people have a tendency to make themselves believe that they are not in control of their own actions so that they can avoid feeling responsible for what they have chosen to do. This evasion of moral responsibility is called bad faith.

*Abandonment* is the fact that, as Sartre puts it, people are "condemned to be free." Because for Sartre belief in God is no longer viable in modernity, people are left without a predetermined moral compass and *forced* to answer for their choices. He gives examples of a student and a Jesuit he met in a prison camp to demonstrate that even people's "passions" and the "signs" that people see in the world, when they influence actions, do not alleviate responsibility for those actions. *Despair* (in French, literally *non-hope*) means that people should think about circumstances rationally, based on the available information, instead of having faith that their actions will be rewarded or that forces they cannot see will resolve circumstances in their favor.

Sartre returns to the criticisms others have leveled against existentialism, now addressing them explicitly. He first responds to the notion that existentialism confines people to their individual subjectivity. He argues that recognizing one's subjectivity is always already recognizing the existence of

others with parallel subjectivities who are also confronting the human condition. Then, he responds to the accusation that existentialism makes values meaningless. He compares the human project to a work of art: while there is no predetermined measure for a good or bad artwork or life (and, if there were, artists and subjects would not truly be free), an artwork can still clearly be valuable because it expresses its own value structure and offers a distinct perspective on the world. Similarly, the existentialist subject can express values even though they are the one who determines those values.

Next, Sartre responds to the Christian accusation that existentialists cannot morally judge others. He argues that that judgment should properly consist not in judging another by one's own moral code but rather by recognizing the inconsistencies in another's moral paradigm: in other words, recognizing bad faith. Usually, this bad faith consists of a person's insistence that they have no choice but to follow a moral code that they have indeed chosen. This constitutes a denial of the freedom that, for Sartre, is the foundation of all values. He gives examples of two literary characters who, despite their opposite attitudes toward sex, he takes as morally equivalent because they both choose their paths for the sake of their freedom; these contrast with instances where people would make the same choices because they feel that they have no power to deny the passions or social expectations that encourage those choices. The final objection is that existentialist values "need not be taken very seriously" because they are up to individuals. Sartre responds that subjective value is, in fact, all the value that there is; in fact, people's professions, hobbies and political causes, among other things, are deeply valuable to them *precisely because* they choose them of their own free will.

To conclude his lecture, Sartre explains the sense in which, contrary to popular belief, existentialism *is* a humanism. He differentiates his humanism from that of thinkers like sociologist Auguste Comte, who believe that every person has intrinsic value by virtue of their humanity. Sartre finds this illogical and wonders what the source of this value could possibly be when, in fact, "man is constantly in the making"—people are not born inherently valuable, but rather constantly create the value in their own lives. Rather, Sartre argues, his existentialism is humanist in the sense that it refuses to appeal to God to make sense of the human condition and grounds the moral aims and truths of human life in humans themselves.

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Jean-Paul Sartre** – The renowned French existentialist philosopher who gave the 1945 lecture transcribed in this book. Sartre gave the lecture to address his concern that, as his fame grew throughout France and the world, the term "existentialist" became increasingly maligned through characterizations of the philosophy that was actually divorced from (and in some cases opposed to) the specifics of Sartre's thought. He delivers the lecture in order to explain the basic tenets of existentialism to those ignorant of it, as well as to address the most common objections to existentialism from popular Communist and Christian critics who, he believed, fundamentally misunderstood his philosophy. Sartre values intellectual honesty, taking moral responsibility for one's actions, and thinking deeply about the nature of his life.

**Sartre's Audience at the Club Maintenant** – Sartre's unexpectedly large audience comprised a mix of laypeople interested in his philosophy and specialists (philosophers, other academics, and writers) who may have studied his work in more depth. Sartre carefully details the common misconceptions about his thought that his audience may share before explaining his core beliefs in depth.

**The Christian Critics** – One of the groups whose disapproval of existentialism Sartre was trying to address. These Christian critics worry that existentialism is a pessimistic doctrine that excludes the possibility of condemning people for evil. Sartre responds that existentialism is actually optimistic and allows people to condemn others for living in bad faith, which fulfills the same purpose as moral condemnation (although is more honest in its foundation).

**The Communist Critics** – Sartre's other main group of critics. According to Sartre, they condemn his subjectivist philosophy's aversion to action and its inability to create political solidarity. Sartre argues that, on the contrary, existentialism is actually an action-centered philosophy that is entirely compatible with politics because it starts from the recognition of people's shared interests and interdependence.

**The Christian Existentialists** – One group of existentialists Sartre discusses, which includes Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Since Christian existentialists believe (in Dostoyevsky's words) that, "if God does not exist, everything is permissible," they decide to believe in God even if they lack concrete evidence for their beliefs just so that there are moral parameters for human life. Sartre is critical of this attitude, since he does not understand how Christian existentialists could decide that the Christian God deserves true faith while other improvable belief systems do not; Sartre expresses this concern when he addresses the story of Abraham and Isaac as Kierkegaard retells it in his book *Fear and Trembling*.

**The Atheist Existentialists** – Another group of existentialists, which includes Sartre and his groundbreaking German predecessor Martin Heidegger. Sartre argues that atheistic existentialism is defined by the belief that, for humans,

"existence precedes essence." While Sartre rejects the existence of God, at the end of his lecture he suggests that "even if God were to exist, it would make no difference." Rather, atheist existentialists believe that humans are morally responsible for their actions and beliefs regardless of God's existence and still need to "rediscover" themselves either way.

**Early Atheists** – Sartre carefully differentiates himself from eighteenth-century atheists like "Diderot, Voltaire, and even Kant" who reject the existence of God but replace religious moral codes with moral codes based on particular views of human nature. For Sartre, these atheists are not existentialists because they do not take the obsolescence of belief in God seriously enough to rethink their moral beliefs. The early atheist belief in "human nature" would still leave morality outside individuals' control.

**Sartre's Student** – Sartre uses the anecdote of a former student's moral dilemma during World War II to illustrate both the limits of making decisions based on a defined moral code and the erroneousness of blaming "passions" for people's actions. The French student's brother was killed in 1940 by the Germans, but his father nonetheless later abandoned the family to collaborate with the Germans. The student had to choose between staying in France with his mother, who "found her only comfort in him," and leaving to fight with the Free French against the German occupation. After realizing he was caught between moral principles—family and nation, or the obligation to care for his mother and the obligation to avenge his brother's death—he came to Sartre for advice. The philosopher told his student that there was no correct or incorrect decision. Neither moral codes nor the strength of his affections for one or the other party could determine what to do; rather, the student had to "invent" his own solution to the problem.

**The Jesuit in the Prison Camp** – Sartre uses the anecdote of a man he met in a German prison camp to demonstrate that people are responsible for the way they read "signs" in their environments and lives. The man went to Jesuit school, failed in a number of secular endeavors, and decided that those failures were proof that he ought to live as a Jesuit. Sartre asks why the man decided his failures signaled a religious calling; he could have seen these events as signaling anything at all, or as pointing to another path altogether, such as being a revolutionary or a carpenter. Therefore, interpreting a sign is a choice, not proof of fate.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**God** – For Sartre, God does not exist, and nobody could ever have probable evidence of God's existence. Therefore, the belief that God sets moral codes for humans is a form of bad faith, because it prevents people from choosing their actions freely and on their own terms.

## TERMS

Existentialism – The philosophical movement **Sartre** espouses. Its fundamental proposition is the notion that existence precedes essence, which means that people are born without a fixed identity or purpose, and they form themselves and their lives through their actions alone. As a result of what Sartre calls the human condition—that people act as a subject within the constraints of an environment—Sartre argues that there are no absolute moral truths, and indeed that human life is only possible insofar as people recognize their freedom over their own choices and their responsibility for the outcome of those choices. While scholars have offered various definitions of existentialism with various historical scopes, the narrowest definition includes Sartre, as well as fellow French philosophers Albert Camus, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gabriel Marcel, and Simone de Beauvoir (who was Sartre's partner in the later part of their lives). Most commentators (including Sartre here) also include philosophers Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers, as well as novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, as either early existentialists or precursors to existentialism.

Humanism – Conventionally, a belief system is considered "humanistic" if its worldview and theory of value focus on humans, rather than **God**(s). **Sartre's** existentialism is humanist in the sense that he believes that "the only universe that exists is the human one." He argues that people's existence depends on their "pursuing transcendent goals"—working to improve themselves or achieve things beyond their current abilities by transforming what they are into what they will be—and that, in this sense, anyone's human existence involves a humanist pursuit of the person they wish to be. He contrasts his own humanism with a kind of doctrine that declares that "man is amazing!" and he worships humanity as containing an inherent and infinite value.

Anguish – The first of the three concepts that **Sartre** clarifies in the middle portion of his lecture, *anguish* refers to the emotional pain that comes from the necessity to act under the condition of moral responsibility.

Abandonment – "Abandonment" is **Sartre's** term describing the fact that people are "condemned to be free." Without objective moral laws from **God** or another authoritative source, people cannot avoid moral responsibility for all their choices, including the choice to do nothing.

Despair – In **Sartre's** usage, "despair" (*désespoir* or literally *dis-hope* in French) does not carry the connotations of darkness and resignation that it generally carries. Rather, Sartre literally means that people should not hope for miracles they cannot reasonably predict: "I must confine myself to what I can see." He views the universe as probabilistic and, therefore, he considers human predictive ability to be inherently limited, but he

suggests that hope is actually detrimental to action rather than action-enabling because it leads people to wait for invisible others to act in their place.

Human Condition – Instead of seeking a constant human nature that could form the basis of human morality (like **earlier atheists** during the Enlightenment), **Sartre** rejects the notion of a universal human nature and instead focuses on the universal human condition, which simply means that each person has no choice but "to be in the world, to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and, eventually, to die in it."

Human Project – **Sartre** conceives each individual as a "project" because everyone must actively work to build their identity through their actions and commitments throughout their life. The best analogy is a work of art: artists and human subjects start with no predetermined meaning or mission, but rather they develop meaning by creatively constructing a coherent project (a life or a work of art) that expresses that meaning. There is also the second sense of "project"—as a verb, not a noun—in which human life includes a projection of self. People are constantly imagining what they are and will become, and this projection forms each person's image of their personal human project.

Subjectivity – Broadly, subjectivity means the fact of being a subject—someone who experiences the world and acts from their own distinct, individual perspective. It contrasts with objectivity, which suggests a universal and impartial perspective on the world. **Sartre** argues that every person is a moral subject and, therefore, all human experience is subjective. A person's subjectivity involves their projection of self, or their image of themselves, as well as the consciously-chosen actions and concerns that make them who they are. For Sartre, subjectivity is one of the defining characteristics of the human condition; it results directly from the fact that existence precedes essence because people's lack of a predetermined essence means they must conceive themselves as subjects constantly building toward their essences.

Intersubjectivity – **Sartre** argues that all subjectivity is *intersubjectivity*. Whenever a person comes to understand their own existence, in the process they must see that "the other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself." Everyone's individuality—the qualities that make them who they are—is only developed in social relationships with others and it's only meaningful because others can recognize those qualities. Therefore, Sartre argues, grounding existentialist philosophy in self-awareness does not mean ignoring others' existence. This allows him to answer the **Communist** objection that existentialism traps people in their individual consciousness and prevents them from realizing others' roles in their lives or interests in society.

Will – **Sartre** says that will is usually conceived as a "conscious decision that most of us take after we have made ourselves what we are." Under this conventional picture, identity precedes action—someone is something in particular and acts in accordance with their identity by willing some particular action. However, Sartre inverts this picture by arguing that will is actually constitutive of identity rather than the other way around—it is through decisions to act that a person becomes what they are and gains meaning in their life.

Essence – The essence of humanity would be the set of traits that make people distinctively human, setting them apart from other things in the world. **Sartre**, however, argues that there is no predefined human essence; rather, each person develops their own essence through their actions and commitments.

Bad Faith – Bad faith, the cardinal sin for **Sartre**, is choosing one's values in a way that denies human freedom. Generally, this happens as a means to hide anguish; a person refuses to accept the fact that they are morally responsible for their mistakes and instead chooses to believe in a higher power or deterministic universe that relieves them of their moral responsibility. Faith in **God**, human progress, and a world without free will are all versions of bad faith for Sartre because each allows people to disavow responsibility for their actions and prevents them from authentically reflecting on what they would like to be.

Authenticity – Authenticity is the opposite of bad faith: it requires deliberately choosing one's moral commitments and actions in order to transform oneself into a coherent moral subject. It also requires honesty about the correspondence between one's projection of oneself and one's actual self. For **Sartre**, the best human life is an authentic one because it demonstrates that a person has developed a unique, freely-chosen human project.

A Priori – When **Sartre** talks about "a priori morality," he means a morality that is purely intellectual and could be determined without looking at any concrete evidence or experience from the world. An a priori morality would be unchanging and absolute, set in stone before people's births, and obligatory regardless of one's actual circumstances or particular interpretation of the world. This is largely a reference to the German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, who spent years searching for such "a priori" rules of morality. Sartre believes such a morality does not and cannot exist.

Optimism – **Sartre** responds to his critics, who accuse existentialism of being pessimistic, by declaring that it is actually the most optimistic philosophy for humankind. He calls it optimistic in the sense that it demonstrates people's control over their own lives and their ability to become what they would like to be. Whereas "people would prefer to be born a coward or be born a hero," Sartre argues that, in fact, people make themselves into cowards or heroes, which is optimistic because it suggests that people can become what they would like to be (rather than their character and life course being

determined by inherent characteristics at birth).

Freedom – Sartre believes that freedom is the "foundation of all values" because it is what makes human moral choice and responsibility possible. Moral freedom means that there is no predetermined "correct" or "incorrect" course of action, no outside force compelling them to pick one course of action rather than another. Therefore, Sartre argues, people must choose their own path, but also be held responsible for what they choose to do. Sartre argues that an existentialist can morally condemn those whose actions do not respect the inescapable freedom inherent to the human condition.

## THEMES

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### EXISTENCE, ESSENCE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

The driving observation behind Sartre's existentialism is his notion that "existence precedes essence." For Sartre, there is no preexisting human essence, set by God or nature, that determines what people should or will do. As a result, each individual must define their own essence, and their essence is merely the sum of their actions.

Essence, broadly, refers to the necessary properties that make a thing what it is. For at least two thousand years before Sartre, philosophers looked for a human essence by asking about characteristics common to all people. Generally, debates over the human essence concentrated on a problem inherited from Plato and Aristotle: did humans' distinctive nature come from their form (an immaterial soul or mind) or their substance (biological matter)? Either way, determining the "essence" of humankind meant defining human nature in terms of its relationship to historical, biological, divine, and/or social forces. The resulting picture of the human essence promised not only to define humanity and predict human behavior, but also allow a framework for human morality to emerge. Sartre gives two examples of normal cases where essence would precede existence: the **paper knife** and the conventional picture of God. The paper knife's essence is present in the mind of its human creator (who designs it for the particular purpose of cutting paper) before the knife actually exists. Similarly, under the conventional Christian picture, God creates humans from the mental blueprint of his own image. In this view, the "idea" of someone exists before that person is born, and the person's life consists of growing to fulfill the destiny already set out for them in that idea.

Sartre responds to the problem of determining the human essence by throwing out the accepted wisdom that such an essence is universal at all. Although he was not the first to do so, and although he by no means denies the biological or behavioral similarities among people, Sartre nevertheless thinks that the essence of who any individual really is has nothing to do with humans' universal traits. He argues that people do not live out predefined lives, but rather define themselves by living; people are not born with a readymade essence that determines who they are, but rather they choose their own essence through their commitments and actions. This is what he means when he says that, for humans, "existence precedes essence."

Because existence precedes essence, Sartre argues that living a human life means having a *projection* and a *project*. These are the defining features of human subjectivity. Human life includes a *projection* in the sense that everyone imagines themselves: what they are like, what they will be like, and what they want to be like. This conscious projection of the self into the future constitutes each person's developing sense of their own identity, meaning, or essence. The human project is acting to become what one projects oneself to be. Sartre compares a human life to an art project: both are capable of creating meaning through creativity and circumstance, even though there is no preset goal for either at the outset and there are no objective criteria for making the "best" piece of art or living the "best" human life. Instead, Sartre says that the measure of success in life is authenticity, or whether a person "is what he projects himself to be"—whether that person's beliefs, actions, and self-image are consistent, or—in other words—whether their *project* matches their *projection*.

Sartre calls this state of living as a subject in the world the human condition. He argues that the true human universal is not a shared human nature, but rather this shared human condition. In other words, he thinks that there is no collective set of inherent traits that "define" human beings, besides the fact that each person necessarily has "to be in the world, to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and, eventually, to die in it." Existentialism, then, is a "humanism" in the sense that it starts from this universal human condition, but not in the sense that it believes human beings all share an inherent nature or value.

### ABANDONMENT AND ATHEISM

Sartre's search for a new way to think about human life's value is largely a response to the decline of religion in the modern world. Sartre is explicit about his atheism and believes that humans create morality for their own purposes, rather than receiving it from some supernatural source. Because of this, he suggests that people are "abandoned" in the world, and he thinks that, whether people choose to recognize it or hide from it, the human

condition is structured by this abandonment. Whereas Dostoyevsky declares that "if God does not exist, everything is permissible" in order to suggest that people have to believe in God in order to have morals, Sartre simply accepts that there is no God and everything is permissible. Accepting abandonment in this way does not mean that every action should be allowed, but rather that, without an omnipotent being to pass judgment on people, morality is revealed as an entirely human construct.

This idea of abandonment is, in large part, a product of history, both philosophical and political. In the late 18th century, early atheist thinkers of the Enlightenment like "Diderot, Voltaire, and even Kant" sought to find a basis for morality in people themselves rather than in the commands of God. However, they did so by searching for a universal human nature that could replace God's role as the source of morality and behavior, which Sartre believes is just as arbitrary as worshipping an invisible, improvable deity. Around the turn of the 20th century, thinkers like Marx, Freud, and especially Nietzsche started to suggest that morality was historical rather than absolute. Once philosophers began to clearly see the way moral norms have arbitrarily changed (often serving the interests of the powerful throughout time), it became harder and harder to think about morality as a set of absolute rules about right and wrong conduct. Nietzsche famously announced that religious morality was obsolete by declaring that "God is dead," and this "death" is the background to Sartre's entire philosophy.

More precisely, the death of religion is the *starting* point Sartre's ethics: he thinks people are free precisely because there is no preordained moral code. His concept of abandonment reflects this growing sense of a moral vacuum in philosophy, but also the moral vacuum that grew during and after World War II. When Sartre delivered this lecture, Paris had recently been liberated from Nazi occupation and the public had recently begun to see the full extent of the Nazis' war crimes, as well as the crimes that French collaborators had committed against their fellow citizens. The pressing need to explain the presence of such human evil also led the public to question traditional forms of morality. Sartre no doubt included the story about his student (who found himself unable to choose between loyalty to his mother and loyalty to the French Resistance during the war) in order to demonstrate the connection between the moral dilemmas of war and the philosophy of moral responsibility he was advocating. For the student in that situation, there are no right answers about which path he should choose, but he is nevertheless responsible for what he chooses. Similarly, Sartre argued that one of Nazism's root causes was people's blind obedience to authority, which he interpreted as people doubling down on traditional morality in order to avoid facing the fact of abandonment. This decision is a textbook case of what Sartre calls bad faith, in which people freely choose to believe in moral principles that tell them they are not free. Of course, the horrors of Nazi Germany also influenced Sartre's critics, who worried that his animosity toward traditional morality might further the erosion of values that they saw in Nazi war crimes.

The last important consequence of abandonment is that the existentialist outlook on life must include "despair," or the refusal of irrational hope. Because, in Sartre's view, there is no rational basis for believing that one will be saved by God or the inherently good will of human nature, Sartre argues that it makes little sense to speculate about the qualities or effects of things about which one has no knowledge. Rather, he says that "I must confine myself to what I can see." This does not mean that one should not want or try to succeed in one's actions, but rather that one must always take account of the fact that no amount of effort will guarantee success; nobody ever has complete control over any scenario or can know for certain what is to come in the future. This is why Sartre agrees with Descartes's invocation to "conquer yourself rather than the world." In Sartre's view, this despair is actually what makes existentialism an optimistic doctrine: by seeing the potential for human action to change the world's problems instead of waiting for intangible or divine forces to fix them, existentialism would give people practical clarity, rather than false hope in times of crisis.

Near the end of his lecture, Sartre sums up his existentialism as "an attempt to draw all of the conclusions inferred by a consistently atheistic point of view." His critique of Enlightenment atheists makes it clear that, for Sartre, simply rejecting God does not mean one has truly recognized human freedom. The difference between the Enlightenment atheists and Sartre's "consistently atheistic" standpoint is that he refuses irrational hope of *any* sort. Instead, Sartre insists on viewing everything probabilistically—in the same way as people "assume that the train will arrive on time" without knowing for sure—and acting without certainty that one's actions will produce the intended effect. Therefore, a "consistently atheistic" philosophy (the only sort that Sartre believes is adequate to the realities people experience) cannot promise what is right and wrong, but merely that people are free to act as they will and are responsible for the outcomes of their actions. Indeed, he thinks he need not even rule out the possibility of God for his atheist existentialism to make sense for people; even if God exists, he thinks, the fact that people have the ability to choose what they do is enough reason to believe that everyone should act freely, based on their own consciences and assessments of their circumstances, rather than following a predetermined moral code in bad faith.

## RADICAL FREEDOM, CHOICE, AND RESPONSIBILITY

Based on Sartre's argument that there is no fixed morality or human nature to determine human action, he believes that humans have radical freedom. This

means that people have the absolute power to choose how they will act in any given situation and in their lives as a whole. Tomorrow morning, anyone could choose to become a vegan or take up snowboarding, quit school to become a farmer, or go on a crime spree. These choices are not individual in the sense that they don't affect other people, but rather in the sense that nobody else can override one's own conscience.

In fact, it is precisely because of this radical freedom that people are wholly responsible for the choices they make and for the people they become, even if their control over their choices does not imply control over every outcome. Since nothing outside a person forces them to act in any particular way, people are *completely* responsible for the outcomes of their actions (although not for the circumstances in which they act, unless those are circumstances are of their own making). This radical freedom has both positive and negative components. The positive component is that people get to decide how they want to live; the negative component is that people are always forced to make some decision—even if that's the decision to do nothing—and take responsibility for it. This is why Sartre argues that people are "condemned to be free"; the one thing nobody can choose is to not have choices. Anguish, as Sartre defines it, is the feeling of moral responsibility that accompanies the necessity to choose and the recognition that one will never receive a final judgment about the correctness of one's choice. Whereas Sartre's critics argue that existentialism causes anguish, he replies that anguish is an inescapable fact of life. Turning away from anguish, according to Sartre, does not mean overcoming it, but rather hiding from it in bad faith: it means choosing to do nothing and pretending one is not morally responsible for oneself. In Sartre's mind, people's choices are all that matter: what a person chooses to do makes up the entirety of their life, character, and essence. Mere beliefs do not matter because all beliefs are either expressed in action or bad faith. Unfulfilled plans and fantasies, likewise, do not matter because they never come to fruition.

However, a person's actions do not only express their own character; they also reflect that person's view of what is good for humanity as a whole. Sartre argues that "there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be." Put another way, Sartre believes that people are responsible for their choices to *all of humanity* (this is part of how he answers the objection that, without objective morality, there is nobody to hold anyone else responsible). Sartre argues that nobody would choose an evil over a good, so choosing any particular end means taking that end to be good. Every action expresses a good that "concerns all mankind." This makes every actor a moral "legislator" for humankind as a whole, and it means that everyone should always ask, "what if everyone acted that way?"

Although Sartre is not terribly clear on this point, there are a few interpretations of his reasoning here. One interpretation is his argument that "nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all"—the very concept of a moral good implies that it is universal. A second is that every actor responds to the common human condition through their actions, so those actions reflect a belief about how people should navigate that common condition. Sartre gives the example of choosing between Christian and Communist union membership; this choice would express one's belief about the value of struggle in the real world versus resignation in this world for the sake of rewards in the afterlife. The sense in which an individual fashions humankind in their image through any particular action they take functions, in a way, as a substitute for the sense in which God is said to have fashioned humankind in his image. This does not mean that each action expresses a view of the human good, but rather that the totality of a person's actions across their life—the totality of their human project—in turn reflects a total value system.

There is one overridingly important factor in determining which values to choose. That factor is simply the fact of radical freedom. Sartre argues that freedom is "the foundation of all values," since nobody would be able to develop a value system through their actions unless they were free to begin with. This means that one important measure of a person is the extent to which their actions reflect and respect "the quest of freedom in itself." Near the end of his lecture, Sartre offers two examples from literature: Maggie (from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*) and La Sanseverina (from Stendahl's *The Charterhouse of Parma*). The two women espouse opposite moralities with regards to sex and relationships but Sartre says they are morally equivalent because they both act for the sake of their own freedom. He invents counterexamples, characters who act in the same way but only do so because they believe they have no power to consciously affect their situations, which he uses to demonstrate that living authentically is less about what one chooses than the consistency of those choices with the freedom of all people. In fact, he says that "one can choose anything, so long as it involves free commitment." Conversely, choices that deny human freedom—whether they are forms of bad faith that deny one's own freedom, forms of violence that hinder another's freedom, or impulsive decisions made out of hasty judgment—are inconsistent with the absolute character of that freedom. And a crucial part of existentialism's purpose (and especially this lecture's purpose) is to offer people a way to understand and act with respect for their own freedom by dispelling forms of bad faith and confronting the anguish that is an inherent part of any moral decision, whether people choose to recognize it or not.

## EXISTENTIALISM AND ITS CRITICS

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre has two central motives: responding to his critics, and explaining his philosophy for a broader audience

that has begun using the term "existentialism" without understanding what it really means. Sartre is stuck in the difficult position of answering critics from two opposite sides. On the first side are Christians who think existentialism has no hope for humanity, makes values too relative, and remains too focused on the material world at the expense of the spiritual one. On the other hand are Communists who think his philosophy is too focused on individual subjectivity to make political solidarity possible and too contemplative to support concrete action. In both cases, Sartre responds by inverting the critics' accusations and suggesting that the critics' doctrines are, in fact, the ones deserving of their own critiques.

Sartre's Christian critics argued, first, that his philosophy was too pessimistic and, secondly, that it precluded moral condemnation of evil. Each accusation is, more broadly, an argument that existentialism is incompatible with Christian doctrine because of Christianity's emphasis on redemption in the afterlife, as well as the public expression of moral judgments in the present life. The accusation of pessimism fits closely with the public perception that existentialism lacks hope and contrasts with a Christian doctrine that sees everyday beauty as evidence of a divine will. Sartre's responds that existentialism is actually a realistic optimism, which contrasts with Christianity's bad faith. He sees Christianity as denying the reality of despair and moral responsibility in human life, choosing instead to imagine a fantasy universe where everything always turns out right in the afterlife and everyone ends up where they belong because of God's providence. Conversely, existentialists believe people have control over their own moral character and, therefore, are capable of change. To Sartre, this is more optimistic because it means people aren't stuck in the morality they currently have; someone evil can learn to improve themselves and someone good can get even better.

But the Christian critics also say that Sartre can never call anyone evil because, on the existentialist view of morality, "everyone can do whatever he pleases and is incapable, from his own small vantage point, of finding fault with the points of view or actions of others." When he addresses this criticism, Sartre says it is true in two ways, yet false in the crucial way. First, it is true insofar that an existentialist life lived with authenticity—in which a person "chooses his commitment and his project in a totally sincere and lucid way"—prevents that person from deciding that another person is morally *superior*. And it is true insofar as existentialists reject the notion of moral progress, believing the human condition to be constant and people's moral character tested in similar ways throughout the ages. However, Sartre says that the criticism is ultimately *false* because existentialists can judge people who act in bad faith. This is not moral criticism in the sense Christians seek (people cannot judge others for violating divine Commandments, which Sartre believes do not exist), but it is criticism of another's moral beliefs. When someone acts in bad faith by choosing to believe that they are forced to take some course of action that they actually choose of their own free will, they are acting in a morally *inconsistent* way and therefore can be judged for negating their own freedom.

The Communist criticisms say, first, that existentialism prevents anyone from acting and, secondly, that it prevents people from working together. Each criticism suggests that existentialism is inadequate to politics because it is shortsightedly focused on the individual. Sartre argues that existentialism is actually all about action—indeed, he thinks that "reality exists only in action" and the purpose of confronting anguish through existentialism is to learn to act in more informed and conscientious ways. While it is true that existentialist subjects (like anyone else) can choose to do nothing, Sartre argues that it is, in fact, harder for them to do so in good faith because choosing nothing is still a choice for which one must be held morally accountable. The second criticism is that existentialism prevents individuals from working in solidarity with others, which is necessary for the Communist class struggle to be successful. Sartre argues, however, that such communal commitments can and absolutely should form part of an existentialist life (as they do in his own), as long as the person limits themselves to a realistic appraisal of the conditions in which they are acting. Sartre argues that believing in political movements is just like "counting on the fact that the train will arrive on time"—he would act with people he trusted in service of causes he cared about, but he suggests that it is illogical to believe one's party will prevail due to "faith in the goodness of humanity." Sartre believes in politics, in other words, but not blind political allegiance.

Not only does Sartre refute his Communist and Christian critics, but he also makes it clear that one can be a Communist or a Christian (or maybe even both) and also an existentialist. Although he is a staunch atheist himself, Sartre is clear that, first, there are Christian varieties of existentialism and, second, one need not *disprove* God in order to be an atheist existentialist. He discusses the Christian existentialisms of thinkers like Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky, who argued that the only real solution to the meaninglessness of a life without God was to accept that one must believe in God even if it is irrational. For Sartre, human freedom and responsibility are facts of the world that determine the meanings of our lives, even if some higher power also exists. And there is little question that existentialism is compatible with Communism, especially because Sartre would identify publicly as a Marxist soon after delivering this lecture and then spend most of the 1950s trying to develop a Marxist theory of class struggle that still made space for individual moral responsibility. In fact, he critiqued certain forms of Marxism for arguing that, if people are just the products of material and historical conditions, they behave deterministically. Sartre believed his own doctrine was

the only way to accurately understand history without reducing its participants to cogs in a machine.

In addition to responding to explicit arguments his critics have offered against existentialism, Sartre's other goal in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* is to dispel his audience's misconceptions about his philosophy. Sartre attributes much of the broad condemnation of existentialism to the fact that it has now begun to circulate beyond the community of specialists who understand it, and he laments the fact that "those who thrive on the latest scandal or fad" have latched onto the term as a form of social currency. Sartre cites an anecdote about a woman who exclaims "I think I'm becoming an existentialist" whenever she says something vulgar, which suggests that the general public views existentialists as nihilistic, angry pessimists who believe in nothing and accordingly refuse to act—an image that endures to the present day. But Sartre argues that this public image couldn't contrast more with the true existentialism, which is a pragmatic, reflective, and creative doctrine focused on embracing human freedom. However, he chose to defend his philosophy in this lecture at the Club Maintenant not only to set the record straight, but also because it was an opportunity to develop his audience's awareness of the human moral predicament.

Throughout his lecture, Sartre hints at why he thinks so many readers speak against existentialism without understanding it; by the end, he explicitly states that they are acting in bad faith. For instance, he argues that Christians have failed to distinguish between, on the one hand, the existentialist concepts of anguish, abandonment, and despair and, on the other, the concepts these words represent in Christianity. He sees this as intellectual laziness, which is bad faith because it looks for the easiest possible way to avoid existentialism's conclusions. Similarly, he argues that people who improperly adopt the label "existentialist" are exhibiting bad faith by willfully misrepresenting (and encouraging others to misinterpret) the term, rather than actually studying existentialism and investigating the human condition it seeks to illuminate. Because existentialism encourages people to critically reflect on their own circumstances, lives, and values, it may not be surprising that enormous movements like Christianity and Communism, which require a certain amount of ideological consensus to function, might be wary of Sartre's philosophy. Sartre concludes that the main criticisms against existentialism have been leveled not out of a sincere engagement with its ideas, but rather through a self-interested desire to escape the implications of those ideas. Of course, by choosing to address his critics in a public lecture, Sartre inverts their strategy just like he inverts their criticisms: by forcing them to confront the facts about the human condition and, hopefully, turning them into existentialists too.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### PAPER KNIFE

Sartre uses the manufacture of a paper knife (or letter opener) to explain the difference between objects whose essence precedes their existence and the human subject whose existence precedes its essence. The knife is designed with a particular purpose in mind (to cut paper), and therefore it exists in essence before someone creates it physically. To Sartre, the human who makes a paper knife because they need to open a letter is analogous to the traditional picture of a God who creates people according to the blueprint he has imagined for them. Sartre believes that, in reality, humans find themselves existing in the world without any blueprint for how to live their lives; humans have no predetermined essence until they decide on their own purposes and create their own meanings through action.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Yale University Press edition of *Existentialism Is a Humanism* published in 2007.

### Existentialism Is a Humanism Quotes

❝ Many will be surprised by what I have to say here about humanism. We shall attempt to discover in what sense we understand it. In any case, let us begin by saying that what we mean by "existentialism" is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker), Sartre's Audience at the Club Maintenant

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 18

**Explanation and Analysis**

After outlining some of the principal criticisms of existentialism, Sartre addresses his audience's relation to those criticisms head-on: he openly notes the conventional idea that existentialism is anti-humanist because humanism sees human beings as inherently valuable and good, whereas existentialism believes there are no inherent

values. Here, Sartre is foreshadowing his argument at the end of the lecture that existentialism is a *new* kind of humanism, one grounded in the universal condition of "an environment and a human subjectivity" and oriented toward facilitating the universal human striving for moral authenticity—the striving that "makes human life possible"—rather than some speculative theory of human nature.

> It makes me wonder if what they are really annoyed about is not its pessimism, but rather its optimism. For when all is said and done, could it be that what frightens them about the doctrine that I shall try to present to you here is that it offers man the possibility of individual choice?

**Related Characters:** Sartre's Audience at the Club Maintenant (speaker), The Christian Critics, Sartre's Audience at the Club Maintenant

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 19-20

**Explanation and Analysis**

This is Sartre's initial response to the public's belief, influenced most of all by the Christian critics, that existentialism is a pessimistic doctrine obsessed with humanity's moral failings and reluctant to commit itself to any positive picture of the human good. Sartre's response is to invert the accusation by suggesting that what really makes a moral system optimistic is the space it leaves for people to take control over their own destinies. He foreshadows his later suggestion that his critics are acting in bad faith out of fear, in order to avoid the confrontation with their own subjectivity that existentialism would create. For Sartre, the "gloomy" parts of existentialism—the inherent meaninglessness of life and the ultimate subjectivity of all values—are mere facts of the world that people can either confront or ignore, much like the horrors of World War II. He argues that the more prescriptive a moral theory is (the more it tells people what to do and how to do it), the less space it leaves for individual choice and therefore the more pessimistic it is about people's capacity to be self-sufficient moral actors rather than blind followers of a morality designed to subjugate them.

> The truth is that of all doctrines, this is the least scandalous and the most austere: it is strictly intended for specialists and philosophers.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker), Sartre's Audience at the Club Maintenant

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 20

**Explanation and Analysis**

There is a certain irony to this statement, since Sartre knows his work and personality were already considered scandalous and indulgent in the public eye. But existentialism also literally is the "least scandalous" and "most austere" mode of thought in terms of its fundamental beliefs: whereas other philosophies have (according to Sartre, bad) faith in invisible metaphysical claims, Sartre sees atheist existentialists as especially resistant to believing anything people cannot reasonably believe based on their experience. This refusal to speculate beyond demonstrable truths is the *despair* that helps existentialists make more honest and practical decisions. Sartre is also careful to remind his audience that their understanding of his philosophy is largely based on hearsay and media misinterpretation; while he does not explicitly mention his over 600-page tome *Being and Nothingness*, he is clearly thinking about the enormous distance between, on the one hand, the intensive energy he and other philosophers have put into developing existentialism and, on the other, the snap judgments the public makes about the doctrine. But, to some extent, he is also qualifying the differences between this lecture and the earlier work, which developed a distinct and complicated terminology that is not present here.

> When God creates he knows exactly what he is creating. The concept of man, in the mind of God, is comparable to the concept of the paper knife in the mind of the manufacturer: God produces man following certain techniques and a conception, just as the craftsman, following a definition and a technique, produces a paper knife. Thus each individual man is the realization of a certain concept within this divine intelligence.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker), The Christian Critics, God

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 21

**Explanation and Analysis**

Sartre offers this explanation to demonstrate what it would mean for essence to precede existence. According to him, if human essence preceded existence, human beings would be like manmade objects: the paper knife's essence precedes its existence because its essential traits—the concept of what it is and the formula for its production—are available to its creator before it is made. If people are the same way, then they do not determine their own essences; rather, they are "realization[s]" of God's concept, and accordingly they have no power to fashion themselves. Sartre demonstrates that this view deprives people of their freedom and, by comparing humans in God's eyes to a manmade object, he suggests that there is something dehumanizing about conceiving of the human species as a product rather than a producer of its essence.

> What do we mean here by "existence precedes essence"? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, 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.

N/A

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 22

**Explanation and Analysis**

Sartre now gives an "inside" explanation of the statement that "existence precedes essence"—he means simply that every individual has to figure things out for themselves in the world, that nobody is born with a full concept of themselves, and that people gain a full concept of themselves not by waiting for knowledge, but rather through action that develops their identity. This description is deeply indebted to the phenomenology that was prominent in the decades before this lecture, and it's remarkably similar to Martin Heidegger's account of being-in-the-world in his *Being and Time*. This description's intention is to demonstrate the obvious truth of the existentialist claim that existence precedes essence: it is necessary to live before developing a concept of oneself. One accessible version of Sartre's self-realization process is the way children are asked what they "want to be when they grow up" and then either pursue or revise those goals.

> Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower. Prior to that projection of the self, nothing exists, not even in divine intelligence, and man shall attain existence only when he is what he projects himself to be—not what he would like to be.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 23

**Explanation and Analysis**

This set of peculiar comparisons distinguishes living things with a subjective, intentional consciousness (like people) from living things that seem to lack such subjectivity. A human being is a project because it has some control over where it goes and why, whereas a patch of moss would grow outward in all directions, however possible under environmental constraints. It is possible to imagine being "inside" another person, but not a moss or fungus (or, in other words, it's possible to see another person as a *subject*, yet a moss or fungus is only ever an *object*). This sense of subjectivity is closely tied to the feeling that the future has not been decided yet, and that a person has some limited but substantial control over what will happen in the future. When Sartre says that "nothing exists [...] in divine intelligence" he is denying the notion that people's essence or character is fixed by a creator.

In the curious final portion of this quote, Sartre first suggests that action is all that matters; hopes, dreams, and unrealized intentions count for nothing. When he says that a person can "attain existence," he is not talking about the general sense of existence as a person in the world, but rather attaining the existence of a specific essence. Effectively, what matters is that someone is who they think they are—that their essence (projection) and their existence (actual self) align—rather than that someone is who they *want* to be, which can never be achieved and reflects one's desires rather than one's actions.

In choosing myself, I choose man.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 24

**Explanation and Analysis**

Sartre is arguing that making a moral choice in any particular situation means expressing a view about what is morally right for humanity as a whole, since nobody would willfully choose a bad thing over a good thing. Therefore, the sum of anyone's choices—the identity, essence, or project they develop over their lifetime—reflects a total value system for humanity. This is why every moral choice is in some sense a moral "legislation" for humanity as a whole; each choice becomes part of the actor's self and can never be taken back. This fact contributes to the anguish of decision making under the condition of moral responsibility, but it also allows Sartre to respond to the critics who say his philosophy is self-serving because it lets people choose their own values.

If a voice speaks to me, it is always I who must decide whether or not this is the voice of an angel; if I regard a certain course of action as good, it is I who will choose to say that it is good, rather than bad.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker), God

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 26

**Explanation and Analysis**

This is how Sartre concludes his interpretation of the story of Abraham, with specific reference to Kierkegaard's presentation of the story in *Fear and Trembling*. An angel addresses Abraham and demands that he sacrifice his son Isaac to demonstrate his faith; it is only once Abraham proves his loyalty by agreeing to kill Isaac that God stops the sacrifice and saves Isaac. Whereas Kierkegaard sees Abraham's fulfillment of the angel's demand as demonstrating his radical faith in God despite his inability to understand why this sacrifice would be demanded of him, Sartre argues that, were he in Abraham's position, he could not help but doubt whether the voice were really an angel and not a hallucination. Sartre argues that even a leap of faith never truly puts a believer beyond personal responsibility for the consequences of their faith, because they still have to choose to believe in the first place. However, Sartre says that on one level the analogy between Abraham and moral choice holds: just as Abraham is asked to undergo the ultimate sacrifice to prove his exemplary loyalty to God and save his descendants, for Sartre every person is constantly forced to act as though they are the exemplar of morality for all humans. But there is no divine intervention that saves the day and assures people that they have picked the right actions; rather, people feel this exemplariness because of the anguish that comes with moral responsibility, and anguish is a component of all decisions precisely because there is nobody and nothing else that can legitimately tell anyone they have chosen the right or wrong path.

All leaders have experienced that anguish, but it does not prevent them from acting. To the contrary it is the very condition of their action, for they first contemplate several options, and, in choosing one of them, realize that its only value lies in the fact that it was chosen.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 27

**Explanation and Analysis**

Sartre is explaining why his example of the military man—who is ordered to attack the enemy but also must decide how to undertake the attack—demonstrates the anguish that he believes is a fundamental component of all decision-making. He argues that living authentically means fully experiencing the anguish of one's decisions, rather than avoiding anguish by pretending one is not actually responsible for one's actions. This is why the existentialist view of anguish encourages people to act, rather than leading people into a state of resignation where they choose not to act, as the Communist critics have suggested. In other words, the anguish of decision making reflects the necessity to do something and take responsibility for what one chooses as much as it does the pain of each possible decision. The person who truly experiences the anguish of their decisions recognizes that refusing to act is still a choice for which they would be morally culpable, and therefore there is no easy way out. There is neither a formula for the right action nor a moral prohibition against taking the wrong action, so long as one acts in what Sartre

calls "a totally sincere and lucid way." The most curious part of this quote is the notion that the action's "only value lies in the fact that it was chosen"—this is because, even after acting, the anguish remains because there is no way to know after the fact that one took the best or right action. One is fully responsible for the consequences of one's actions and cannot see what other possible paths would have yielded.

> Dostoyevsky once wrote: "If God does not exist, everything is permissible." This is the starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and man is consequently abandoned, for he cannot find anything to rely on—neither within nor without.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker), God, The Christian Existentialists

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 28-9

**Explanation and Analysis**

Dostoyevsky's statement provides a clear and concise statement of what Sartre calls "abandonment." It may seem confusing that Sartre calls this abandonment the "starting point of existentialism," since he has already explained his doctrine by starting from the idea that, for humans, existence precedes essence. However, these two statements amount to one and the same thing: there is no preexisting formula for living human life "correctly" (nothing from "without" to rely on) and no preexisting human nature that determines what a person will or should do in any given instance (nothing "within" to rely on). Whereas the Christian existentialist Dostoyevsky used this statement to suggest that one *had* to believe in God for life to make any sense, Sartre uses it to argue that life simply does not make sense until people make their own sense of it. This reflects his picture of morality, which is not about things being preordained as permissible and necessary, but rather about what people decide to do and why they decide to do it.

> Man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 29

**Explanation and Analysis**

Sartre is notorious for his provocative notion that "man is condemned to be free." The one thing people have no choice over is the fact that they are radically free to act however they would like and, accordingly, they are responsible for the consequences of the actions they choose. Because people have no control over the circumstances in which they find themselves, they are condemned to those circumstances; because people can do whatever they want within those circumstances, however, they are fundamentally free. This is another expression of the fact that existence precedes essence: people discover themselves in circumstances they did not choose (they are condemned to existence) but they are free to try to escape or work with those circumstances to build a life (in other words, they're free to determine their essence).

> People would prefer to be born a coward or be born a hero.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 39

**Explanation and Analysis**

Sartre distinguishes his view from the comfortable one he thinks people tend to pick: that their nature is determined from birth and they will become what they are destined to be, regardless of whether they try to fulfill or fight that destiny. He argues, in effect, for the primacy of nurture over nature and choice over nurture still: even though people have no control over the circumstances they are born into, they still have the capacity to act within and overcome those circumstances, and their response to circumstance builds and determines their character. He is also specifically contrasting his own literary works with those of "naturalist" writers like Zola, who see behavior as predetermined by biology or "temperament." Whereas, Sartre suggests, many readers criticize his antiheroic protagonists, in fact they should be a source of optimism because they actively choose and assume responsibility for their own actions. Later, Sartre defines cowardice as refusing to confront one's total freedom, which suggests that his lecture's purpose is

to help his audience choose heroism over cowardice.

Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, or of Kant, when we say "I think," we each attain ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. Therefore, the man who becomes aware of himself directly in the *cogito* also perceives all others, and he does so as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which we say someone is spiritual, or cruel, or jealous) unless others acknowledge him as such.

**Related Characters:** Jean-Paul Sartre (speaker), Sartre's Audience at the Club Maintenant

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 41

**Explanation and Analysis**

Descartes's famous *cogito* argument ("I think, therefore I am") plays two important roles for Sartre. The first is that it establishes the existence of the thinker, which must be realized in order for the thinker to learn that existence precedes essence and accept moral responsibility over their choices. The second is that it establishes intersubjectivity. Sartre disagrees with Descartes and Kant here because, whereas for his two predecessors the *cogito* merely proves that the self exists, and for Sartre this proof is also proof of others' existence and the universality of the human condition. Saying "I think"—as Sartre does to his audience here—means acknowledging the existence of things besides the self and recognizing that, more importantly, one only develops a distinct identity through differentiation from others. The idea that all subjectivity is intersubjectivity allows Sartre to dismiss the Communist criticism that the existentialist subject need not recognize other humans as also having subjectivity.

Historical situations vary; a man may be born a slave in a pagan society or a feudal lord or a member of the proletariat. What never varies is the necessity for him to be in the world, to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and, eventually, to die in it. These limitations are neither subjective nor objective; rather they have an objective as well as a subjective dimension: objective, because they affect everyone and are evident everywhere; subjective because they are experienced and are meaningless if man does not experience them—that is to say, if man does not freely determine himself and his existence in relation to them. And, as diverse as man's projects may be, at least none of them seem wholly foreign to me since each presents itself as an attempt to surpass such limitations, to postpone, deny, or come to terms with them.

**Related Characters:** Sartre's Audience at the Club Maintenant (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 42

**Explanation and Analysis**

Sartre is explaining how his circumstance-dependent view of human morality can translate across wildly different environments. No matter what "historical situation" one is born into, the core features of the human condition stay constant. They are subjective because each individual must confront them in their own way, but objective because they affect everyone (and everyone realizes that they affect everyone). It is crucial that Sartre connect the subjective and objective perspectives here. He critiques abstract moral laws by arguing that, as in the example of the student who must pick between his mother and his country, they are often useless in real-life situations where one has to negotiate between competing moral commitments or even theories. These abstract kinds of morality are too "objective" to be useful for subjects living under unique circumstances—it is easy to imagine circumstances where even the most clear-cut moral laws would not apply. For instance, an objective moral rule says "do not kill," but is it right to kill an attacker to save numerous others? Whereas Sartre is skeptical of objective moral principles, his critics worry that his theory is too subjective and therefore his morality could not "translate" from person to person. By showing that the human condition is both subjective and objective, he shows that respect for freedom is both achievable in every subjective decision and objectively meaningful to all human beings.

If someone were to ask me: "What if I want to be in bad faith?" I would reply, "There is no reason why you should not be, but I declare that you are, and that a strictly consistent attitude alone demonstrates good faith." What is more, I am able to bring a moral judgment to bear. When I affirm that freedom, under any concrete circumstance, can have no other aim than itself, and once a man realizes, in his state of abandonment, that it is he who imposes values, he can will but one thing: freedom as the foundation of all values.

That does not mean that he wills it in the abstract; it simply means that the ultimate significance of the actions of men of good faith is the quest of freedom in itself.

**Related Characters:** Sartre's Audience at the Club Maintenant (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 48

**Explanation and Analysis**

Sartre offers his reason for condemning people whose moralities are grounded in bad faith. While he agrees with the Christian critics that he cannot condemn another for failing to live up to his own personal moral standards, Sartre argues that an existentialist *can* condemn someone for failing to develop a consistent moral outlook by failing to will their own freedom—in other words, for being in bad faith. Because all values are constructed or "imposed" by humans, no values would be possible unless humans were free to create them. Therefore, it would be inconsistent for one to act in a way that denied one's freedom to create their values—usually, this means refusing to decide and letting another person or an abstract value system determine what one should do because one does not want to face the straightforward fact that freedom to act means responsibility for consequences.

There is another meaning to the word "humanism." It is basically this: man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized; and, on the other hand, it is in pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist. Since man is this transcendence, and grasps objects only in relation to such transcendence, he is himself the core and focus of this transcendence. The only universe that exists is the human one—the universe of human subjectivity.

**Related Characters:** Sartre's Audience at the Club Maintenant (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 52

**Explanation and Analysis**

This is Sartre's ultimate explanation for why existentialism truly counts as a humanism. Although the talk of "transcendence" seems new, all Sartre is trying to say is that people are constantly pursuing versions of themselves that do not yet exist; they are pushing beyond themselves. That push is the will that helps create the identity or essence of the self, the actions that try to bring the human project and human projection together into one. If the goal is to achieve one's authentic human essence, then existentialism is a humanism in the sense that it fashions a human essence from the standpoint of a human subjectivity that always wants to become something more than it already is.

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## EXISTENTIALISM IS A HUMANISM

Sartre opens his lecture by declaring his goal: "to defend existentialism against some charges that have been brought against it." He names four charges: two from Communists and two from Christians. The Communist accusations are that, first, existentialism is an action-averse, merely contemplative philosophy, and secondly, that it remains caught in the "pure subjectivity" of Descartes—in other words, that existentialism's focus on the meaning of the individual self leads it to ignore the interconnections among people and their projects. The Chrstians' accusations are, first, the suggestion that existentialism focuses disproportionately on the negative aspects of life and, secondly, that its individualism would destroy any means by which people could condemn others' actions.

*From the start, Sartre confronts his public image head-on, focusing on the misunderstandings that lead his critics to dismiss existentialism outright. His framing of the objections also foreshadows some of the central arguments he later makes for existentialism: that it is the only intellectually honest framework for human action because it forces people to take responsibility for their moral actions and judgments, that it is therefore an optimistic rather than pessimistic philosophy, and that it recognizes the intersubjectivity of the human world—the fact that each person's understanding of their existence depends on the existence and contributions of other people. .*

Sartre briefly elaborates on the lecture's title by acknowledging that his audience might be surprised that Sartre sees existentialism as a kind of humanism. This is largely because the public mistakenly views existentialism as pessimistic. He suggests that, in fact, existentialism's critics are the true pessimists: the public fears Sartre's aversion to traditional concepts of morality only because they are so afraid of the evil they see that they resign themselves to the repressive status quo and refuse the "possibility of individual choice" that existentialism offers.

*Sartre believes that his critics willfully misunderstand his theory in order to avoid confronting the existentialist conclusion that they are morally responsible for their actions and beliefs. He later defines this kind of avoidance as bad faith: blaming external factors for one's moral errors in order to pretend that one did not freely choose to make them.*

Sartre then tries to more explicitly define "existentialism." He suggests that the public uses the term as a fashionable insult rather than actually understanding what it means and he reminds the audience that existentialism is "strictly intended for specialists and philosophers." Sartre distinguishes Christian existentialists from atheist existentialists like himself, but he declares that their commonality is the concept that "existence precedes essence." What he means is that human existence is the opposite of the existence of a manufactured product, such as a **paper knife**, whose essence precedes its existence because its manufacturer creates it to fulfill a particular purpose.

*Sartre is suggesting that the source of his notoriety might be the inadequate explanation of his specialist theories to the public, rather than the content of that philosophy itself. "Existence precedes essence" is the foundational proposition of Sartre's philosophy, but it was also important for earlier existentialists like Kierkegaard and Heidegger, although they did not express it in the same words. He introduces the paper knife to draw a distinction between things that have a definite purpose – and therefore are not free – and humans, who are free because they define their own purposes in living.*

Sartre likens the **knife**'s manufacturer to the traditional idea of God as creator: under this view, humans are the material forms of God's ideas. Sartre suggests that early atheist philosophers, despite dispensing with the idea of God, nevertheless maintained the traditional view that essence precedes existence by trying to explain people through a primordial "human nature" that defines people's essence in advance. These atheists' views contrast with Sartre's atheistic existentialism, which maintains that for humans *existence precedes essence*. In other words, one finds oneself in the world before one becomes anything—people have the power to define themselves through acts of their own will, rather than their essence being determined by some nebulous "human nature." He calls this power to define the self 'subjectivity.'

*Sartre's concept of subjectivity builds directly from his notion that existence precedes essence and it allows him to carefully differentiate his views from other forms of atheism. He introduces the traditional Christian idea of God to contrast existentialism, which sees humans as lacking an inherent purpose and therefore free to determine their own purpose. In his view, the Christian notion that humans are designed for a particular destiny is restrictive. For Sartre, Christianity and atheistic notions of fixed "human nature" deprive people of their characteristic freedom.*

Sartre turns to the concept of subjectivity and argues that a human subject is a "project"—both in the sense of a continuous undertaking, and in the sense that a person *projects* into their own future, imagining what they will become and forming an idea of themselves. This makes everyone responsible for their own person, but also "responsible for all men" because people express *values* through their actions. When someone chooses to do something, they are affirming that they believe what they choose to be good—otherwise, they would not have chosen it. But, since the human "good" should be the same for everyone, whenever anyone chooses something "good" for themselves, they reflect a view of what is "good" for humanity as a whole. Sartre argues that existentialism's "fundamental meaning" lies in the fact that people cannot overcome this condition of subjectivity. Sartre says that he will next clarify three concepts: anguish, abandonment, and despair.

*The basic outline of Sartre's argument is now complete: existence precedes essence, so human life should be viewed as a project of creating purpose. Furthermore, every person is just a sum of their actions, and therefore those actions determine that person's moral character. Each human project is a response to the shared human condition and so every action expresses a set of values common to all people. Although he does not say so explicitly (in part to avoid biasing or confusing the nonspecialists in his audience), Sartre's explanation is already deeply indebted to earlier philosophers. For example, Heidegger famously championed the notion that people "project" into their futures by imagining their future selves.*

Sartre turns to anguish, which describes a person's pain at realizing that they are morally responsible for their actions because those actions project an ideal for humanity as a whole: the individual becomes a moral "legislator" for humankind. Sartre says that people can either confront or choose to ignore their anguish. Confronting anguish means asking "what if everyone acted that way?" and realizing one's responsibility to answer morally for one's actions. Anyone who fails to interrogate their decisions is therefore acting in "bad faith."

*Now that Sartre has explained the basic tenets of existentialism to his audience, he turns to an in-depth explanation of some of his most misunderstood conclusions. Anguish, abandonment and despair, for Sartre, are simply facts about the universe, and existentialism's purpose is to help people confront these facts rather than conceal them through bad faith. The public's notion that existentialism* causes *anguish, despair and moral abandonment reveals their own bad faith; for Sartre, people must recognize the fundamental facts of anguish, abandonment and despair, rather than running from them, in order to actually live freely and morally. Sartre also continues to engage his philosophical predecessors. Here, for instance, he borrows Kant's notion that each person acts as a "legislator" when they act because their actions express underlying principles about good and bad.*

Sartre says that anguish does not prevent action but is rather a "condition of action." He gives the example of a general who feels anguish at his responsibility for sending his troops into battle and cites the Biblical story of Abraham, who is said to have sacrificed his son at God's request. Sartre imagines that, in Abraham's position, he could not know he was speaking to an angel rather than the devil or a hallucination; he uses this to demonstrate how, in the absence of a dedicated belief in God, "it is always I who must decide whether or not this is the voice of an angel."

*Sartre's argument that anguish has nothing to do with inaction is meant to respond to the Communist objection that existentialism prevents people from taking moral action because existentialists believe there are no definite values in the world. In fact, Sartre argues, believing in predetermined values is lying to oneself about the true source of values: our actions. The version of the Abraham story Sartre is referencing comes from Kierkegaard, who in his book Fear and Trembling imagined how Abraham could take the "leap of faith" required to sacrifice Isaac. Sartre reveals his suspicion of such faith when he argues that he could not have known whether it was truly the "voice of an angel" and not a hallucination.*

Sartre moves on to abandonment, by which he means simply the fact "that God does not exist, and that we must bear the full consequences of that assertion." Whereas earlier French secularists believed that society still needed a moral code to hold together without organized religion, Sartre says that existentialists must confront the horror of the moral void humans enter after losing faith in God, or, in Dostoyevsky's words, the fact that "if God does not exist, everything is permissible." Without a fixed human nature to blame for mistakes, nor a God to say what is right, people are "condemned to be free." Sartre argues that we are responsible for all our choices, even those that seem to be the results of "passion" or supernatural "signs."

*The notion that God has "abandoned" people—that in the modern world it is no longer viable for people to believe in an all-powerful, benevolent God—is deeply indebted to the Enlightenment, during which philosophers tried to reground morality in humans rather than in received doctrine. However, Sartre is also critical of the Enlightenment's search for a "human nature" to replace the fixed values provided by religion; this criticism is closely indebted to the work of Nietzsche.*

To illustrate his point about "passion," Sartre tells the story of a student who was forced during World War II to choose between staying with his mother in France and leaving to fight for the liberation of his country. Sartre argues that this moral dilemma cannot be resolved through received doctrine—either choice would violate an apparent moral obligation, and the choice of which doctrine to follow or how to measure his feelings for his mother would itself be a moral choice. Sartre says that the only way the student could prove he loves his mother enough that he *ought* to stay with her would be to actually prove his love by choosing to stay; at the end of the day, principles reflect rather than determine actions. For Sartre, there is no right answer to moral dilemmas of this sort; he tells the student to "invent" his own solution.

*Attributing mistakes to "passion" is, for Sartre, one prominent way people display bad faith: they say there is some uncontrollable force within them that caused them to act, rather than taking responsibility for their actions and the consequences thereof. The example of the student demonstrates that, although moral codes often seem like consistent guides to action, they fail to provide guidance in many real-world situations where people have no choice but to violate a moral rule. In a sense, the student is "abandoned" by morality. In making a difficult choice, he first tries to find a doctrine that will tell him which to choose, then tries to measure his passions in order to determine which he loves more, but he ultimately realizes that there is no preexisting formula for his moral choice; rather, he must "invent" a moral code through his own choice. This fact of free choice allows people to build their individual moral compasses but it also makes them wholly responsible for the outcomes of their actions.*

To illustrate his point about "signs," Sartre tells the story of a man he met when he was detained in a German prison camp. The man was given a scholarship to a religious school but found little success in any of his subsequent endeavors and decided that his failures in the secular world must have been a sign from God telling him to join the Jesuit order. Sartre suggests that there are myriad ways to interpret this sign—the man could have decided "to be a carpenter or a revolutionary." The man, Sartre says, is fully responsible for his own interpretation of the sign.

*This example is designed to refute the (generally Christian) notion that the world contains messages about people's destinies, aptitudes, and nature. Sartre shows that the selection and interpretation of such "signs" are still subject to people's free choice, and his accusation of bad faith toward his critics is always in the background. Here, he is suggesting that it is their fault for misinterpreting him. In saying that the Jesuit could have chosen carpentry or revolution, Sartre slyly criticizes his Christian and Communist critics' deep faith in Jesus and proletarian revolution, respectively.*

Sartre explains "despair" as the fact that people, upon looking realistically at the probabilistic conditions surrounding their ability to act, "should act without hope" that things will somehow work out in their favor. He then addresses the Communist objection that this means that existentialism cannot accommodate solidarity, since, to be effective in their actions, people have to rely on others. Sartre argues that he would rely on people he knows reasonably well and trusts to support his goals, but merely that he "cannot count on men whom I do not know based on faith in the goodness of humanity or in man's interest in society's welfare." In our estimations of circumstances that affect our ability to act, Sartre says, "I must confine myself to what I can see." He argues that his is not a quietist doctrine that resigns oneself to inaction while letting others do all the work, but rather precisely the opposite: one that believes "reality exists only in action."

*Again, Sartre argues that one of the attitudes the public associates with existentialism—despair at the world's inherent meaninglessness—is not a result of his philosophy, but rather a condition it seeks to address. He argues here for a close attention to circumstances and a practical attitude toward action, rather than an idealistic faith that things will work out if one has the right goal in mind. Sartre is also seeking to demonstrate the connection between his philosophy and his early political activities, including his participation in resistance groups during the German occupation and his decision to found a journal of "engaged letters" the same month he gave this lecture.*

Sartre sums up his core belief that "reality alone counts" and recapitulates his contention that existentialism's critics are actually attacking its optimism rather than its pessimism. This is because existentialism blames people for their own moral shortcomings rather than explaining them by recourse to environment or temperament. He suggests that his critics are horrified because they do not want to admit that, for instance, "the coward, as we present him, is guilty of his cowardice." He reinforces that existentialism is "a morality of action and commitment" and turns to the next objection: the notion that existentialists "imprison" people in their subjectivity.

*For Sartre, existentialism is a deeply optimistic doctrine: it argues that people are capable of moral improvement because they freely choose their actions and are responsible for their choices. This contrasts with opposing doctrines that lay the blame for wrong actions on forces outside peoples control, thereby suggesting that people are powerless to overcome their weaknesses and moral failings.*

Sartre agrees that existentialism *starts* with individual subjectivity and specifies that its foundational truth is Descartes's famous *I think, therefore I am*. He proceeds to argue that existentialism alone recognizes people's dignity, whereas deterministic and materialistic theories that see people's behavior as predictable and predetermined turn them into objects incapable of action. Sartre argues that starting with individual subjectivity does not mean sacrificing a consideration of others, because to speak "I think" is to address an audience and therefore acknowledge the existence of the other. Declaring one's own existence means entering intersubjectivity, a state in which one recognizes that one's existence is only confirmed by the presence of others.

*Sartre argues that his interpretation of "I think, therefore I am" actually disagrees with how Descartes and Kant understand the foundational truth of subjectivity. For them, one can only discover oneself in this way, but for Sartre, discovering oneself is also discovering others. His notion of intersubjectivity is deeply indebted to earlier thinkers, most of all Hegel and Heidegger, who argue in various ways that the individual human is a fundamental product of interpersonal life because people require the recognition of others to realize that they themselves are moral actors. The fact that an individual is always already intertwined with collective life is part of the reason that every individual action expresses a moral code for humanity as a whole and it also gives Sartre's later work its political urgency.*

Although Sartre does not believe in a universal human nature, he argues that there *is* a universal human condition. This condition consists for every person of the "necessity for him to be in the world, to work in it, to live out his life in it among others, and, eventually, to die in it." Every human project is a response to these universal conditions and, therefore, everyone can potentially be understood by every other human being.

*Sartre's differentiation between human* nature *(a fixed human essence by which people are defined, whether they like it or not) and the human* condition *(a common set of circumstances in which people find themselves, but to which they respond in various ways) is designed to demonstrate that, for existentialists, there is still something universal about human life—and therefore that people can still be held morally accountable to others. This also clarifies the difference between Sartre's atheist existentialism and earlier atheists, who believed that some things are inherently right and wrong even if God does not exist.*

Sartre turns to the three remaining criticisms of existentialism, which also center on its subjectivism. The next objection is that existentialism makes all values meaningless and would therefore let people choose to do whatever they like. Sartre replies that, even though one must choose what to do, doing nothing is still a choice—people are forced to make a choice. He compares moral choice to art: while there is no "correct" artwork to make, the artwork an artist makes still expresses their moral values and therefore is not meaningless or gratuitous.

*Although Sartre has already made all the necessary arguments to refute his critics' worries about his philosophy, he explicitly returns to their remaining objections one-by-one. He compares human life to art in order to emphasize that both are governed by complete freedom—they have no* predetermined *meaning, but they nevertheless both* create *meaning.*

The next criticism is that, under existentialism, people would not have a way to judge others. Sartre responds that the existentialist subject can, indeed, judge others by recognizing that their choices are based in false judgments or bad faith. Bad faith is not a moral "wrong" but rather an *error*—acting in bad faith means lying to oneself about the fact that one freely chooses one's values. Bad faith is the error of blindly believing that one is *necessarily bound* to moral values that one has, in fact, *freely* chosen. Once people realize the fact of abandonment, Sartre suggests, there is only one path: recognizing "freedom as the foundation of all values." Because freedom is a self-explanatory fact that is essential to the universal human condition, people can validly pass judgment on those acting in bad faith. In fact, because everyone's freedom is interdependent with everyone else's, acting in a way that denies others' freedom also constitutes bad faith.

*Because Sartre denies the existence of predetermined moral good and evil, he cannot say that bad faith is an evil—rather, it is the* logical error *of freely choosing to believe that one is not free. Therefore, to some extent, Sartre agrees with the objection; existentialists have no right to judge people who have thoughtfully and conscientiously pursued their own personal moralities. For Sartre, judging others should not be about whether they fulfill specific moral principles, but rather whether their mode of action respects the absolute freedom of morality in the first place.*

Sartre takes up two literary examples: a character from George Eliot, Maggie, who chooses to leave the man she loves because he is already engaged; and a character from Stendahl, La Sanseverina, who will sacrifice anything to pursue her passionate relationships. Sartre says these are "equivalent" moralities because both characters act for the sake of freedom. He contrasts these characters with versions that act out of bad faith: a woman who gives up the man she loves (like Maggie) but only because she believes she cannot have him and then a woman who pursues a passionate relationship (like La Sanseverina) but merely to satisfy her sex drive. Sartre concludes that the objection that existentialism disallows judgment of others is "both true and false. One can choose anything, so long as it involves free commitment."

*Even though Eliot and Stendahl's characters appear to have opposite moral feelings about sex and relationships, for Sartre they are morally equivalent because they both act for the sake of freedom. While they choose the same ends as the characters Sartre invents, Sartre's modified examples do not choose freedom—rather, they choose their paths because they feel powerless. This demonstrates that the central concern of Sartre's existentialism is whether one acts authentically, with respect for one's freedom, rather than* what *exactly one chooses.*

Sartre takes up the final objection: that, since people choose their own values, those values "need not be taken very seriously." Sartre responds that, because there are no preexisting values in the world, actions in fact determine all the value there is; he says that "life is nothing until it is lived." People's lives matter only insofar as their actions give their lives value.

*Ultimately, Sartre closes his responses to his objectors by emphasizing that, if there is no God, subjective value is the realest value there is: life is full of the meanings people create through their choices. In fact, this means that people's active investment in their relationships, accomplishments, and goals is precisely what makes their lives meaningful.*

Sartre finally turns to the lecture's title by addressing existentialism's relationship to humanism. He says there are two things "humanism" can mean. The first is taking humans as inherently valuable. Sartre finds it illogical that all can be inherently valuable because of the accomplishments of a few, and he also suggests that it would take a standpoint outside humanity—that of "a dog or a horse"—to pass judgment on humanity overall. He declares any attempt to do so cultish and absurd because "man is constantly in the making"—there is no defined "humankind" with fixed abilities, accomplishments, or purposes.

*Sartre is careful to distance himself from the dominant humanism of his day, that espoused by sociologist Auguste Comte. Again, the difference is between human nature and the human condition—Comte's sort of humanism worships human nature but denies people the freedom to live outside a narrow picture of human accomplishment.*

The second meaning of "humanism" is Sartre's universal human condition, in which people act in the pursuit of goals and values outside themselves in order to make something meaningful out of their existence in relation to the world. This is "humanism" in the sense that "the only universe that exists is [...] the universe of human subjectivity."

*Sartre answers the title question of his lecture: existentialism is a humanism grounded in the shared human condition—humanist not because it worships humans, but because it is designed for humans and recognizes that everyone is constantly trying to become the people they imagine they should be.*

Sartre concludes by portraying existentialism as "an attempt to draw all of the conclusions inferred by a consistently atheistic point of view." Sartre's thought is not atheistic because it seeks to disprove God's existence, but rather because it refuses to think that believing in God would change anything or rescue anyone from the human condition. He closes by reasserting that "existentialism is optimistic" and his critics act in bad faith, "confusing their own despair with ours."

*Sartre distinguishes his atheism—in which God's existence is irrelevant—from forms of atheism that focus on disproving particular religious beliefs. By the end, Sartre has inverted the conventional religious critique of atheism: for him, atheism is not the denial of religious truths about morality (that God demands this or that, for instance); rather, religion is the denial of atheist truths about morality (that we are in control of and responsible for our own moral decisions).*

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To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Jennings, Rohan. "*Existentialism Is a Humanism*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 27 Apr 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Jennings, Rohan. "*Existentialism Is a Humanism*." LitCharts LLC, April 27, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/existentialism-is-a-humanism.

To cite any of the quotes from *Existentialism Is a Humanism* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

### MLA

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Existentialism Is a Humanism. Yale University Press. 2007.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

Sartre, Jean-Paul. Existentialism Is a Humanism. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2007.