

Humanist Masterpieces No 44

# Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946)

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**A**FTER the Second World War a new type of Humanism surfaced in Europe, especially in France. The seminal text was a published lecture by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) in 1946, entitled *Existentialism is a Humanism* (sometimes called *Existentialism and Humanism*). What was existentialism and why was it a type of Humanism?

Its immediate forerunner was the philosophy of phenomenology developed by the Moravian philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), with its call for the direct study of human experience. But it can be traced back at least to the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55), who is generally considered as the first existential philosopher. He rejected the abstract rationalism of thinkers such as Hegel and maintained that thinking begins with the acting, feeling individual, who is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and for living it passionately and sincerely.

This led to the accusation that such a philosophy was quietistic, pessimistic, individualistic, anarchic and even amoral. Christians argued that if there was no God and no objective understanding of the universe and our place in it, then anything was permissible. It was to counter these charges that Sartre wrote his lecture.

The term 'existentialism' was coined by the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the early 1940s. He called Sartre an existentialist and, although at first Sartre rejected the label, he later changed his mind. In the lecture he asserts that there are no such things as objective moral laws. Moral judgments are therefore a matter of personal choice and commitment. Moreover, "there is no human nature, as there is no God to conceive it".

As he had made clear in his other writings, notably in his first novel *La Nausée* (1938), we are 'trapped

in existence', living in an absurd, meaningless world. But we are also free agents in this hostile, indifferent universe. The phrase 'existence precedes essence' became a maxim of existentialism. The point is that there is nothing to dictate a person's character, goals in life, and so on. Only the individual can define his or her essence. According to Sartre, "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards". To be more precise, "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realises himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is".

**He is condemned to be 'free', and to face the consequences of his choices**

Of course, if there are no objective moral laws and humans define themselves, then each individual is responsible, both for adhering to his own moral principles, and for deciding what those principles should be. In doing so, each individual suffers 'existential anguish' because he realises he is ultimately 'on his own' and must freely make his own decisions. He is condemned to be 'free', and to face the consequences of his choices. To flee from and disown this inevitable freedom and responsibility and adopt false values is an act of inauthenticity or 'bad faith'. To face up to the burden of freedom is to realise that in fashioning ourselves, we are fashioning humanity.

Now, in a general sense this is the Humanist position. It begins from the same assumptions that there is no God and that humankind is essentially alone. Sartre rejects the notion of a Freudian unconscious because every human subject is implicitly aware of itself and must therefore retain conscious control

over its activities. And since there can be no hidden desires, we cannot dodge our moral responsibilities by appealing to psychological determinism. To say that we are compelled by our situation, our nature, or our role in life to act in a certain way is self-deception, or 'bad faith'.

The idea that we are 'condemned to be free' and create our own actions and invent our own identities is once again essentially Humanist and echoes that famous Renaissance treatise of 1486, *De Hominis dignitate oratio* ('Oration on the Dignity of Man') by Pico della Mirandola, with the difference that for the 15th century Italian God had given man this freedom:

*"Thus spake the Lord... you will determine your nature according to your own free will to which I have entrusted you. I have put you into the world so that from there you can better see all that is in the world...you can carve yourself into the shape you choose".*

Pico is merely stating what Sartre calls 'the first principle of existentialism': that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (*Existentialism is a Humanism*). Pico is also agreeing with those who say it is not necessary to be an atheist to be an existentialist. Thus the Christian existentialist argues that god gave man the free will to carve himself into the shape he chooses, whereas, as we have said, for Sartre human nature is non-existent, because there is no God to create it.

Sartre writes:

*"We have now, I think, dealt with a certain number of the reproaches against existentialism. You have seen that it cannot be regarded as a philosophy of quietism since it defines man by his action; nor as a pessimistic description of man, for no doctrine is more optimistic; the destiny of man is placed within himself. Nor is it an attempt to discourage man from action since it tells him that there is no hope —>*

except in his action, and that the one thing which permits him to have life is the deed. Upon this level, therefore, what we are considering is an ethic of action and self-commitment. However, we are still reproached, upon these few data, for confining man within his individual subjectivity” (ibid).

Is morality, then, purely subjective? Is everything permitted without God? And how do we choose between helping a relative or friend and helping the whole community?

Here Sartre claims that we cannot obtain any truth about ourselves except through the mediation of another: “The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself” (ibid). Thus we find ourselves in a world which is that of ‘intersubjectivity’ and in this world we have to decide what we are and what others are.

Later, he says that when we recognise that man is a being whose existence precedes his essence, and that he is a free being who cannot, in any circumstances, but will his freedom, at the same time we realise that we cannot not will the freedom of others. Although he does not say so, Sartre is moving in the direction of the arch-liberal principle of believing in allowing individuals that measure of freedom which is compatible with a like amount of freedom for others.

In the essay Sartre also insists that his existentialism is a form of secular humanism because: “we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realisation, that man can realise himself as truly human” (ibid).

Again, as is the case with Humanism itself, he is concerned to emphasise that existentialism is not merely atheism, though rejection of a God is the starting point of our liberation. His concluding note of optimism in *Existentialism is a Humanism* is worth serious consideration by all secularists:

“Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action, and it is only by self-deception, by confounding their own despair with ours that Christians can describe us as without hope”.

As well as trying to demonstrate existentialism’s similarity to humanism, Sartre (below) also tried to reconcile it with Marxism, notably in *The Search for a Method* (1957)



and *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). It might seem strange that, having rejected the kind of psychological or biological determinism we find in Freud or Skinner, he should embrace the economic determinism of Marx, but Sartre, following Marx, argues that freedom in practice is limited by economic scarcity. Only when scarcity is overcome can man be truly free, for scarcity deprives people of the ability to make choices and diminishes their humanity.

Communism will restore the freedom of the individual and his ability to recognise the freedom of others. How it would achieve this admirable goal is not at all clear, especially as existing communist societies were guilty of denial of freedom and flagrant human rights abuses. The shift from existentialism

to Marxism becomes a gigantic leap of faith in which the worth of the individual – the position from which Humanism starts – is assumed to be guaranteed by a collective social structure.

Sartre also offers justifications for violence. For example, as bad faith lurks so close to the surface of the individual, anyone who reneges on the ‘group-in-fusion’ loses his rights. Again, violence is inevitable in a world of scarcity in relation to human wants:

“The ethical reveals itself as a destructive imperative: evil must be destroyed ...violence claims always to be counter violence, that is, retaliation for the violence of the Other” (*Critique*: Introduction).

Like much of his philosophy, Sartre’s defence of violence is not at all convincing, being obscure and contradictory. This is not the same as saying that he is generally wrong. On the contrary, many of his insights are surely correct, particularly his focus on individual freedom and responsibility, which remains the central moral dilemma.

Sartre consistently threw his support behind causes he believed in. He was an admirer of the Soviet Union until 1956 and the entry of Russian tanks into Budapest. In *Les Temps Modernes*, the magazine he helped to found, he condemned both the Soviet intervention and the submission of the French Communist Party to the dictates of Moscow.

He supported Algerian independence and opposed America in Vietnam. In 1964 he was offered the Nobel Prize for Literature but refused it on the grounds that such honours would interfere with a writer’s responsibilities to his readers. When Soviet tanks and troops put a stop to the Prague Spring in 1968, it led “Sartre and Beauvoir definitely to reject the Soviet model – only to praise people like Mao Tse-tung and Pol Pot instead” (Sarah Bakewell: *At the Existential Café* (Chatto and Windus, 2016, p293).

Despite such errors of political judgment, Sartre in his lecture provides invaluable insights into the nature of Humanism and its existentialist foundations. □