

Existentialism is a Humanism- A Commentary

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Many interpreters believe that the slogan of existentialism, "Existence precedes essence", expresses the essentials of Sartre's philosophy. Others wonder what Sartre could have meant by this slogan. In retrospect, Sartre was dissatisfied with the book *Existentialism is a Humanism*, from which this motto comes. One expert writes:

Although he later distanced himself from this lecture, which was oversimplified to reach a wide audience, it remains a revealing record of the development of Sartre's thought between Being and Nothingness and the Drafts. (Outlines for a Moral Philosophy, Preface, p. 12)

Sartre even believed that he was decisively misunderstood with regard to his basic statements:

What does it mean to say "We are condemned to be free." This has never been properly understood. Yet it is the basis of my morality. (Sartre, Outlines for a Moral Philosophy, p. 753)

As catchy as the aforementioned slogans of existentialism may be: they are obviously not unproblematic. They are creative, popular formulations, which, however, can lead to simplifications and erroneous views.

It also remains unclear at what point and in what sense these popular formulations have been misunderstood. In the same way, the reasons for these misunderstandings lie in the dark. Is it Sartre's inability to express himself clearly, for which there are indications, or are they rather be sought in the subtlety of the text, for which there is also some evidence?

Furthermore, the possibility must be taken into account that these are not misunderstandings but "misconceptions" that is, intentional insinuations and distortions. To clarify such questions, a video will be examined here, which thematizes the slogan "Existence precedes essence":

[Sartre and Subjectivity - YouTube](#)

Analysis of the video

According to the video, Sartre's philosophy is characterized by the following features:

- Subjectivism
- nihilism
- atheism

Sartre stands thereby in the tradition of Nietzsche, and his thinking corresponds to a slogan of Dostoyevsky:

If God does not exist, everything is permitted.

In fact, Sartre himself writes:

Dostoevsky wrote, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." This is the starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is allowed when God does not exist, and, consequently, man is abandoned, for he finds no support either within himself or outside himself. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

The individual aspects - subjectivism, nihilism and atheism - will now be discussed.

Atheism

The facts seem clear: subjectivism, nihilism and atheism are appropriate terms to characterize Sartre's philosophy. It follows from his atheism that God does not exist, which in turn results in his nihilism. Consequently, man is dependent on his subjectivity because he can find nowhere any support outside of this subjectivity. And subjectivity also provides a foothold only insofar as it provides the basis for man's self-invention.

There is no doubt that this summary reflects essential aspects of Sartre's philosophy. And yet, I believe that it is misleading. Why?

According to this interpretation, one might suppose, for example, that the slogan "existence precedes essence" is tied to Sartre's atheism. According to this, a theological statement, namely the non-existence of God, and an ontological statement, namely the being in advance of existence with respect to essence, would be on the same level. However, this is clearly contradicted by the following passage:

Existentialism is not so much atheism in the sense that it exhausts itself in the proof that God does not exist. Rather, it declares that even if God existed, it would not change anything; that is our point of view. Not that we believe God exists, but we think the problem is not his existence; man must find himself again and convince himself that nothing can save him from himself, even if it is a valid proof of the existence of God. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

While the video gives the impression that Sartre's atheism and the slogan "existence precedes essence" are basically equivalent, Sartre says something different here: Even in the case that God exists, the being in advance of existence remains valid.

One has now two possibilities to interpret this contradiction. First, one could say that Sartre's philosophy is not consistent, that Sartre himself does not know what he actually wants to say. But one can also state that it is to be interpreted dialectically, as an apparent contradiction, the cancellation of which leads to a higher insight.

Thus, when reading Sartre's works, one would basically have to take into account a dialectical method, which consists in revealing contradictory facts as apparent contradictions and bringing them to a better understanding. In other words, to cancel out the supposed contradiction.

Contradictions, or rather apparent contradictions, are omnipresent in Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism". The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has written somewhere that only death could have prevented Sartre from contradicting himself. The problem with this is that any reasonably attentive reader will stumble across these so-called contradictions. Sartre placed them on purpose and had a specific goal with this procedure: The reader should become aware of them, think about the problem, and expose the contradictions as apparent contradictions.

In fact: The statement "If God does not exist, everything is allowed" does not contradict the assertion "God exists, and man is free". This is true, for example, of the case that God created man as a free being or of the assumption of the Fall, apostasy from God that severed man from his original bond with God.

Sartre illustrates the problem with the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham hears the voice of God commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham must decide: Does he follow God's authority and sacrifice his son, or does he follow his love for his son and distance himself from God. He must continue to decide whether it was really the voice of God that he heard or whether he has become the victim of a delusion.

In short: Whether God exists or not: It is a human who has to decide about it. A human being first exists and then has to decide what this existence has to mean in relation to God. Man is condemned to freedom because the things and facts in the world are like signs for him, which have to be interpreted.

So it is not at all the case that the existentialist slogan "existence precedes essence" is a mere consequence of the non-existence of God. To put it differently: The non-existence of God may be a sufficient, but not a necessary, condition for the validity of the existentialist motto.

Sartre also expresses this complicated relationship between theology and ontology in his play *The Flies*:

Jupiter: I gave you your freedom so that you might serve me.

Orest: Possibly, but it has turned against you, and we can't help it, either one or the other.

...

Jupiter: Really? Do you know that it is very much like an excuse, this freedom of which you call yourself a slave?

Orest: I am neither master nor servant, Jupiter, I am my freedom! As soon as you created me, I ceased to be your own.

The existentialist slogan "existence precedes essence" is primarily not the result of Sartre's theology but has its roots in Sartre's phenomenological ontology. While the slogan is related to Sartre's atheism, the relationship is complicated and requires separate investigation.

In no way is it appropriate to classify Sartre primarily as an anti-Christian thinker in the sense of Nietzsche, as is done in the video. While it is true that Sartre denies the existence of God, he does acknowledge a fundamental problem of God for human existence. In this sense, the video's message of reducing Sartre to his atheism, while not wrong in all respects, is nonetheless misleading in some respects.

Nor would it be correct to identify Sartre's existentialism with philosophical trends that want to get rid of God in a cheap way.

The existentialist stands in sharp contrast to a specific type of secular morality that wants to eliminate God as cheaply as possible. When French professors tried to set up a secular morality around 1880, they said something like the following: God is a useless and costly hypothesis, we do away with it, but certain values must nevertheless be taken seriously and regarded as existing a priori, in order that there may be a morality, a society, an ordered world... (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism, p. 154)

Accordingly, "cheap atheism" fails because of the connection that obviously exists between the problem of God and the problem of the justification of ethical values.

It is now possible to specify for the case of atheism the misunderstandings, insinuations or distortions: It is above all a simplification of Sartre's philosophy. The complicated relationship between Sartre's phenomenological ontology and his theology is condensed into an equivalence between his atheism and his existentialism. The fine dialectical distinctions that distinguish his thought disappear and make way for crude atheism. Thus one has then constructed a puppet with which one is quickly finished.

The recipient is clearly to blame for this "misunderstanding". He should have noticed the supposed contradiction between the two following passages and dealt with it. He should have recognised that this contradiction is to be resolved dialectically and that the cancellation of supposedly contradictory statements is to be reckoned with Sartre's style of thinking:

Dostoevsky wrote: "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." This is the starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permitted if God does not exist, and, consequently, man is abandoned, for he finds no hold either within himself or outside himself. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

Existentialism is not so much atheism in the sense that it exhausts itself in the proof that God does not exist. Rather, it declares that even if God existed, it would not change anything; that is our point of view. Not that we believe God exists, but we think the problem is not his existence; man must find himself again and convince himself that nothing can save him from himself,

even if it is a valid proof of God's existence. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

Obviously, this is a relativisation of Sartre's atheism. It is not constitutive of his existentialism. Instead, these pillars of his thought are a referential unit, two aspects that support each other without being mutually dependent. With Sartre, one should perhaps speak of problematic atheism, not of militant atheism as with Nietzsche or of cheap atheism in the sense of the 19th-century philosophers mentioned by Sartre.

The problematic nature of Sartre's atheism can also be seen in the following quotation:

To be human is to aspire to be God, or, if one prefers, man is a fundamental aspiration to be God. (Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 972)

Even if God does not exist, there is a problem of God within the framework of human existence. In other words, God is indeed an invention of man, but this invention is not groundless. The fact itself stands firm for Sartre and argues against problem-free atheism.

Sartre's philosophy can perhaps be better characterised as follows: He contradicts theism with atheism and in this respect is in the tradition of Nietzsche's "God-is-dead philosophy". This approach supports the existentialist motto "existence precedes essence", which is rooted in Sartre's phenomenological ontology. The aforementioned motto, however, reveals a profound problem of God in human beings: their lack of identity and their search for identity.

That the problem of God has not disappeared with the abolition of God is also admitted by Nietzsche. This difficulty of atheism includes, above all, the invention of prosthetic gods, which seem to be necessary when it comes to unifying human collectives by means of moral norms. Prosthetic gods: the state, the empire, the nation, the ideology, the emperor, the leader, the Great Chairman.

The structure of the relationship between man and his gods remains, both in theism and atheism. This is the problem of God in Sartre's philosophy, which characterises his thinking at least as much as his atheism.

Nihilism

The following keyword to characterise Sartre's philosophy is nihilism. What is meant by this? Wikipedia has the following to say:

In the philosophical sense, nihilism refers to doctrines that deny either the existence of reality (metaphysical nihilism), the validity of moral law (ethical nihilism) or the fact of any truth (logical nihilism).

Obviously, 'nihilism' is an ambiguous word and, in this respect, a misnomer from the outset in terms of categorising Sartre's philosophy, perhaps even a mistake. The very title of his book *Existentialism is a Humanism* points in a different direction.

That the labelling of Sartre's philosophy as nihilism is misleading can be seen immediately from the Wikipedia text, according to which the following should apply to the nihilists:

...and [they] therefore reject any form of commitment.

Sartre, in particular, is known as a philosopher of practical engagement, so he stands for the opposite. His thinking aims at a humanism of commitment and thus guaranteed not nihilism.

In my opinion, the word "nihilism" is more of an ideological fighting term than a philosophical term. In this respect, as far as this point is concerned, I would like to speak of a "misunderstanding" rather than a misunderstanding in the video contribution.

The Wikipedia text distinguishes the following types of nihilism:

- Metaphysical nihilism
- Ethical Nihilism
- Logical Nihilism

I would like to concentrate here on logical nihilism so that the scope of this essay is kept within bounds. Does Sartre deny truth and logic? The opposite is true! The problem of truth - like the problem of God - is even at the centre of his reflections.

Sartre emphasises that existentialism is a strict philosophical doctrine, and he thus distances himself from a certain fashion in the social life of his time. Furthermore, he explains that it is possible to judge decisions, that certain decisions are based on error, others on truth. He also says that one cannot escape the problem of truth. All this does not sound like "nihilism":

First of all, one can judge (and this may not be a value judgement, but a logical judgement) that certain decisions are based on error, others on truth. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism, p. 171)

For Sartre, it is a matter of course that one must be able to distinguish between truth and error. If this were not the case, one could not formulate any statements with a claim to validity at all. Even the existentialist slogan "Existence precedes essence" could not claim validity if logical nihilism were assumed. Everything would be equally right or equally wrong; everything would be equally valid in terms of validity and thus also indifferent. This, however, would be an anti-philosophical position, which Sartre sharply rejects.

The facts are clear in this respect. For example, Sartre would say that existentialism is true and naturalism is false. This is the reason why he defends existentialism and opposes naturalism. What sense would there be in advocating one philosophy or another if everything were equally valid and indifferent?

Sartre even starts from absolute truth, the Cartesian cogito:

There can be no other truth as a starting point than this: I think, therefore I am, this is the absolute truth, of self-attaining consciousness. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

All interpreters who would like to make Sartre into a second Nietzsche should be countered with this quotation. For Sartre, there is an absolute truth, namely Descartes' cogito, and this Cartesian cogito, albeit in an expanded form, is for Sartre a bulwark against a nonsensical scepticism and thus also an argument against epistemological nihilism. One cannot escape the problem of truth, Sartre says. One must take a stand in this regard.

For him, there are other philosophical truths, for example, the statement that man is freedom. This truth opens up for Sartre on the basis of his phenomenological ontology and on the basis of his theory of dialectical reason. Freedom can be equated here with temporality, which gives us the proposition: Man is temporality. He is a design of his future. It is true and undoubted for Sartre that man exists in the form of temporality, as an ecstatic unity of past, present and future. It would border on madness to deny this fact.

Sartre also assumes the existence of scientific truths, which for him, however, have the status of hypotheses. That is, they are relative truths that must be verifiable and debatable. See in this regard Sartre's discussion with the Marxist Naville following his lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism".

Sartre emphasises that the relative truths of the sciences are founded in the absolute truth of the cogito, that without the evidence of the cogito, that without the self-certainty of consciousness, they would be without foundation.

In principle, Sartre distinguishes between the Analytical Reason of the sciences and the Dialectical Reason of practice. Both types of reason have their own truths, but they are connected to each other. Sartre discusses the difference between Analytical Reason and Dialectical Reason in detail in his work Critique of Dialectical Reason.

From all this, it is clear that it is impossible to call Sartre a logical nihilist. But it can also be seen that behind this problem of unjustified attribution lies another, deeper, problem: Sartre's relationship to the concept of truth.

He recognises truth and rejects nihilism. That is clear. But there is a problem of truth, and it cannot be resolved conclusively. In this respect, one can also say that the problem of logical nihilism does not completely disappear with Sartre, just as the problem of God does not disappear just because he takes the position of atheism.

In summary, Sartre's philosophy can perhaps be characterised as follows: He recognises both a problem of God and a problem of truth. Both problems hover over his head like Damocles' swords, forcing him to eliminate the apparent contradictions that accompany them. His thinking thus comes close to Hegelian and Marxist dialectics, and the concept of dialectical suspension must be recognised in this sense as a central concept for interpreting Sartre's philosophy:

In order to explain the concept of dialectical neutralization, the problem of truth will be examined a little more closely in the next chapter.

The problem of truth

While it is clear that Sartre's philosophy is not nihilism, there remains the problem of whether or not his existentialist maxim is compatible with the absolute truth of the "cogito":

Existence precedes essence. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism).

There can be no other truth as a starting point than this: I think, therefore I am, this is the absolute truth, of self-attaining consciousness. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

Some will be inclined to see a contradiction here: If existence precedes essence, one might argue, then there can be no absolute truth. After all, existence being prior to any essence means that the human being is present in the world, without it being possible to ascribe to him a truth that would go beyond mere existence. Man is, that is all. How can Descartes' "cogito" be justified on this minimal premise?

If one looks at the matter in this way, however, one is confronted with the problem of truth: If the existentialist motto is to be valid, this means that it is true. Consequently, the very formulation of this sentence is connected with the problem of truth. Sartre assumes that the proposition is true, so he must presuppose the existence of truth in the formulation of this proposition. Otherwise, one could stop any philosophical discussion from the outset.

Accordingly, it can be seen that a completely presuppositionless discussion is not possible. The problem of truth is immediately there as soon as one formulates a sentence with a claim to validity. In other words: The problem of truth is - as the problem of God - a constant companion of human existence.

In this sense, it is easy to understand that the problem of truth is central to existentialism. If this does not seem to be the case with other philosophies, for example, the dialectical materialism of the Marxists, then this is based on a kind of insincerity of the Marxists, who do not want to see what is evident. It is a flight from the problem of truth on their part.

However, if there is a truth, there must be an absolute truth, which cannot be doubted. Every relative truth is helplessly at the mercy of scepticism, which claims that you can question everything. Sartre rejects scepticism by acknowledging the absolute truth of the "cogito." For Sartre, Descartes' cogito is the only possible justification for absolute truth, for a truth that cannot be doubted. Consequently, the formulation of the existentialist maxim is closely related to the recognition of the Cartesian cogito.

One must see these two tenets of Sartre's philosophy together. Otherwise, one runs into logical difficulties. Accordingly, the existentialist motto must be interpreted as being compatible with Descartes' cogito.

These two truths are two sides of the same coin. The Cartesian cogito is the truth-theoretical basis of the existentialist motto. The existentialist motto is the ontological basis of the Cartesian cogito. Consciousness certain of itself needs both an epistemological basis, the Cartesian cogito, and an ontological basis, the existence of consciousness.

The formulation of the existentialist slogan is thus bound to presuppositions, one of which is the Cartesian cogito. Consequently, the slogan must not be interpreted to mean that human existence is presuppositionless. Rather, there are conditions of human existence, which, however, must not be confused with human nature or the essence of man:

Even if it is impossible to find in every human being a general being that would be human nature, there is nevertheless a human generality of the conditio. It is not accidental that today's thinkers prefer to speak of the conditio of man rather than of his nature. By condition - conditio - they understand more or less clearly the totality of the limits a priori, which outline his entire situation in the universe. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism).

Thus, one must distinguish between the general conditions of human existence and the essence of the human individual. The conditions come to all human beings, and the essence distinguishes the individual. The draft as a life plan comes to all human beings thus belongs to the conditions. On the other hand, the concrete shaping of the draft, together with the realization of the concrete draft, distinguishes the individual and determines the essence of this concrete human being. In this sense, the existentialist motto is to be understood: The existence of the human individual precedes its essence. By essence is understood here the totality of the deeds of this human being.

In this sense, you can say that Sartre starts from subjectivity. He starts from subjectivity because only in this way can the problem of truth, which is related to the problem of God, be satisfactorily solved:

Our starting point is indeed the subjectivity of the individual for purely philosophical reasons. Not because we are bourgeois, but because we want a doctrine based on truth and not a collection of beautiful theories, full of hope but without real foundations. There can be no other truth as a starting point than this: I think, therefore I am, this is the absolute truth of self-attaining consciousness. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

However, it must be admitted that the problem of truth is so involved that there is little prospect of solving it conclusively. It is clear that there is an absolute truth, but the connection of this absolute truth with the many other kinds of truths, for example, with the hypothetical truths of the empirical sciences, is thus not yet clarified. Another significant truth-theoretical difficulty lies in the problem of self-reference.

The problem of self-reference

The problem of self-reference is evident, among other things, in the relation between the universality and individuality of man. One might be inclined to see the universality and individuality of man as mere opposites. However, Sartre's existentialism assumes that they are aspects of a referential unity, an individual universality.

When Sartre formulates the existentialist motto, he speaks as a human being about the universality of man. He makes humanity the object of his thought. But humanity cannot be a mere object of his thinking, for he is himself a part of this humanity. So, when he speaks about humanity, he speaks about himself at the same time. He is the object and the subject of his thinking at the same time.

Consequently, the formulation of the existentialist motto is directly connected with the problem of self-reference. This self-reference appears here in the form of an inescapable subject-object dialectic. For this reason, Sartre's self-reflections are at the mercy of a supposed contradictoriness from the outset, and it is necessary to escape this danger of contradictoriness by appropriate means. One needs a subject-object dialectic.

There is a standard method by which one tries to escape the danger of this contradiction: One takes the perspective of nowhere and looks at the universe and all of humanity from this exquisite point of view. In short: One splits his self into two parts: Into an Objective World Eye and an existing human being. One part of the self transforms theistically speaking into God and atheistically speaking into a theoretical subject. The other part remains a human being and thus becomes a part of humanity, which in turn becomes the object of the theoretical subject. In other words, one separates the theoretical subject from the existence of the associated human being in the hope of achieving objective truth through this extreme act of abstraction.

Thus, the seemingly innocuous desire for "objectivity" with respect to the concept of man is actually a highly problematic enterprise of the human mind. The question is to what extent the perspective of looking from nowhere is possible and to what extent it is not. One is dealing here with a dialectic of the theoretical subject and the existing human being.

This problem is of outstanding philosophical and scientific theoretical importance. The dispute between Einstein and Bohr concerning the interpretation of quantum physics was exactly about this contradiction. Einstein took the standpoint of the theoretical subject and demanded a physics of absolute objectivity. He saw in the physicist a kind of the objective world-eye, which looks at nature godlike as it is. Bohr, on the other hand, emphasized that man, even in the form of the physicist, remains an existing man, that he is therefore always observer and actor at the same time, and that therefore the perspective of the view from nowhere must remain denied to him. One can perhaps summarize this dispute in this way: For Einstein, the concept of objectivity is decisive. For Bohr, the concept of complementarity.

In terms of the history of philosophy, Descartes' radical doubt is the standard example. To reach absolute certainty, Descartes suspends everything that can be doubted in any way, including the existence of the external world. In the end, he arrives at the undeniable certainty of the cogito. However, he had to pay the price for it: He had to separate the sure knowledge of the cogito from the existence of the concrete man. Descartes later confirms that this radical doubt is worthy of laughter and that the reality of the external world is a matter of course for him. Descartes does carry out the radical doubt but later retracts it.

Sartre's criticism of the metaphysical materialism of the Marxists refers above all to the truth-theoretical groundlessness of this thinking, which consists in particular in an unrecognized or denied ambiguity of the word "objectivity."

He [Engels] plays with the word "objectivity," which sometimes means passive property of the object under consideration, sometimes the absolute value of a gaze freed from subjective weaknesses. (Sartre, Materialism and Revolution)

For Sartre, metaphysical materialism is aberrant because, on the one hand, it makes man a speck of dust in the universe, but, on the other hand, ascribes to him the ability to grasp the totality of nature spiritually. Accordingly, man is supposed to be a piece of matter endowed with the omniscience of God. It is clear that this truth-theoretical nonsense of dialectical materialism takes place against the background of the separation of the theoretical subject from existing man.

Sartre's answer to this problem is that while it is possible for man to simulate such a perspective of nowhere, it is not given to him to realize it. The difference between a simulation and a realization lies in the difference between mere contemplative cognition and practical cognition. Practical cognition includes both contemplation and realization. For Sartre, practical cognition enjoys primacy over contemplative cognition. However, he is not willing to deny the value of contemplative cognition in every respect.

For example, if Stalin establishes the theory of socialism in a country, that is one thing; if, in addition, he tries to realize this theory, that is another thing. For Sartre, any full-fledged cognition must involve both contemplation and realization; otherwise, it is incomplete. For Sartre, man is always both observer and agent. The pure observer is, for him, an abstraction. Thus, he adopts a dialectical position in this respect as well:

We have, I think, thus answered a number of accusations concerning existentialism. As you see, it cannot be considered a philosophy of quietism because it defines man by his action; ...Consequently, at this level, we are dealing with morality of action and commitment. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism).

Accordingly, existentialism is a philosophy of action and commitment. It, therefore, involves an epistemology of pragmatism. Observer and actor form a referential unit—observation conditions action, action conditions observation. The pure observer, pure cognition, the theoretical subject, mere contemplation are abstractions.

However, one cannot completely abandon the standpoint of the Objective World Eye because it is a particular variant of the human aspiration to be God. It is an example of the problem of God. On the other hand, it is also clear that man can never realize this standpoint. His striving to be God is ultimately doomed to failure. Man is condemned to oscillate between the possibility of simulating the divine eye of the world and the impossibility of realizing this perspective.

Sartre illustrates this fact with the example of understanding human situations in other times and other cultures. Sartre says that it is possible to understand the life plan of any human being, even if that person has lived in a different time and in a different culture. In this sense, then, there is something like the universality of humanity and the possibility of understanding this universality of humanity:

Every design, even that of a Chinese, Indian or Black, can be understood by a European. It can be understood, that is, the European of the year 1945 can design himself from his situation, which he understands, in the same way towards its borders, and he can comprehend in himself the design of the Chinese, the Indian or the African. There is the universality of every design in the sense that every design is comprehensible to every human being. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism).

Accordingly, the European can transcend his own perspective, put himself in the situation of a Chinese of the year 1000, and try to understand his situation and his actions to comprehend them. But he is obviously not able to realize the situation of the Chinese in the year 1000. He remains a European of the year 1945.

This difference between "comprehending" and "realizing" shows that the word "understanding" is not so easy to understand here, that it is a problem when a European try to understand the Chinese "objectively" from his point of view. In this sense, according to Sartre, one must distinguish between the simulation of the Objective World Eye and its realization.

This is an example of the dialectic of facticity and transcendence. Sartre writes about this:

Let us start with the fact that man is-in-the-world. That means, at the same time, a facticity surrounded by the world and a draft transcending it. As a draft, he takes upon himself his situation in order to transcend it. Here we approach Hegel and Marx: to lift up, that is to preserve in transgressing. Every transgression that does not preserve is an escape into the abstract. (Sartre, Outlines for a Moral Philosophy)

It is part of my facticity to be European of 1945. Nevertheless, I can understand Chinese of the year 1000 by trying to transcend my particular situation. However, this cannot mean that I transform myself into an Objective World Eye. I remain European of the year 1945 while I am in the process of trying to understand Chinese of the year 1000.

Obviously, we are once again dealing with a contradiction that must be resolved dialectically: the contradiction between individuality and the universality of the human being. As an individual, I am thrown into a concrete situation: I am European of the year 1945. At the same time, I have an intuition of the universality of humanity and of the fact that Chinese are human beings like me, which I can understand even though I remain European of the year 1945. In other words, human existence is like hovering between individuality and universality. Instead of the objective world-eye, we must assume complementarity between individuality and universality. One can only understand oneself and humanity if one tries to mediate these two concepts dialectically with each other.

Design and understanding

The video claims that Sartre starts from uncompromising individuality and excludes any universality. However, the reflections above show that this claim is false. In reality, every

individual situation is connected to the universality of humanity. For every self-design is also world-design:

I create the universal by choosing myself; I create it by understanding the design of every other human being, from whatever time he comes. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

"I create the universal by choosing myself," says Sartre. How is this to be understood? If, for example, I choose to be a communist in the sense of Lenin, then I see the world through the eyes of a communist. I thus create the general sense of this world on the basis of my choice. The capitalist becomes the enemy for me, the communist the friend, the proletariat the subject of history. History is a history of class struggle. The goal of history is the realm of freedom for all people, and so on and so forth. In this way, I bind all other people to my individual design. My individual design becomes the general sense of the world and the instruction for action for all other people.

If I choose to be a liberal who desires the freedom of other people, then I also create a general sense of the world and bind all other people to my design. If the other is a communist in Lenin's sense, I must regard him as my enemy, for he seeks to put an end to my liberal existence. In this sense, I bear the responsibility for the whole of humanity with my individual design. I am responsible for how the Other appears to me.

Accordingly, there is a direct connection between individual design and understanding of the world. One's own life design engages all other people and binds them to this design. I engage the other by designing myself.

Individual responsibility for all humanity refers not only to my contemporaries but also to the people of the past and the future. Rousseau sees in the natural man a "noble savage" who has not yet been corrupted by European civilisation. Kant sees in him a "primitive" who has not yet benefited from the advances of European civilisation. It is clear that these different contemplative attitudes must have enormous consequences in the practice of colonialism and imperialism.

The communist fights for future humanity and is even prepared to sacrifice the welfare of present people. For him, the purpose of the world lies in the future, not in the present.

It should not be overlooked, however, that the two statements in the above quotation seem to contradict each other. They read:

- I create the general by choosing myself.

- I create the general by understanding the design of every other human being.

Obviously, there is a dialectic of design and understanding. I understand the other on the basis of my design. Is there not then a danger that I misunderstand him? Indeed: this danger is real and omnipresent. That is why Sartre recognises in conflict a crucial structure between me and the Other. For not only do I understand the world on the basis of my design, but the Other also understands the world on the basis of his design. The design-understanding relationship is thus reciprocal, and conflict is pre-programmed. This is where another slogan of existentialism comes from:

Hell, that is the others. (Sartre, Closed Society)

If the video describes Sartre's philosophy as a strict individualism without seeing the dialectical connection to the universality of human beings, then this stands in grotesque contradiction to the central concept of Sartre's theory of freedom: responsibility.

According to Sartre, there are various ways of taking a stand on this conflict situation of human beings. These include above all the following possibilities:

- Cynicism
- insincerity
- authenticity

The next chapter will deal with these terms.

Cynicism, insincerity and authenticity

As has been shown, one must see in Sartre's philosophy a dialectic of individuality and universality of human beings. This includes the fact that there are universally valid truths about human existence: the existentialist guiding principles, for example, but also the Cartesian cogito.

The contradiction between individuality and universality is reflected in the contradiction between universally valid truths and the fact that human beings are condemned to freedom. In other words, there is a problem of truth which consists in the fact that man can and must take a stand on the problem of truth. He must decide how he wants to behave towards the truth. In this respect, the problem of truth and the problem of God is similar.

Without a doubt, it is possible for man to adopt a negative attitude towards truth, for example, in cynicism: one knows the truth exactly, but keeps it to oneself and presents the other with a supposed truth of which one knows that it is a lie. This is proof that freedom is more fundamental than truth. Sartre writes:

The foundation of truth is freedom (Sartre, Truth and Existence).

There is no doubt that the cynical liar is a widespread subspecies of the human species. Entire professions make a living out of it, for example, professional fraudsters or politicians, for whom public relations largely consist of telling stories that are at least not entirely true. An important employee of the American intelligence agency, the CIA, is reported to have once said that you have only done a good job when everything people think or believe is false. It is clear that such people must have a fundamentally corrupt relationship to the truth in order to do their job.

But there are also forms of existence that have a depraved relationship to the truth without being pronounced cynics because of it. They can be, for example, people who have to deal with serious life problems that hardly allow them to face a pure truth.

For example, one can imagine a wife whose husband is cheating, who is also aware of this, but who at the same time is aware that she cannot leave her husband with her five children. She thus gets into a contradiction that she cannot resolve, and to which she reacts by obscuring the facts from herself, no longer recognising pieces of evidence as such and putting pieces of non-evidence in their place. She deludes herself, but all this with a veil of grey between herself and herself. Psychoanalysts speak here of "repression", while Sartre prefers the word "insincerity" to describe this state of consciousness.

Insincerity can consist, for example, in seeing oneself as a victim of circumstances and denying to oneself that one is condemned to freedom. Of course, the betrayed wife can leave her husband. She just shies away from the consequences and excuses herself by bringing the circumstances to the fore and letting freedom disappear in the background. All this happens pre-reflexively, of course, and does not reach the brightness of reflexive consciousness. It rather leads to a shadowy existence, for example, as a hazy suspicion that something is wrong.

Insincerity occurs at all levels of human existence. The Church Father Tertullian is reported to have said, *mutatis mutandis*: "I believe because it is absurd." That is, Tertullian refuses to allow the distinction between "evident" and "non-evident" to apply, unlike the cynic who both knows and acknowledges this distinction. However, for the insincere, this difference disappears in the opacity of the self-generated fog of consciousness.

Sartre believes that many interpersonal conflicts are caused by cynicism and insincerity, that is, by people's corrupted relationship to truth. Sartre's main work, *Being and Nothingness*, and his play *Closed Society* focus above all on man in a state of insincerity.

Authenticity in Sartre's sense means recognising the general structures of human existence and the attempt to live according to these structures. This includes, for example, the recognition of one's own freedom, but also the freedom of others. Sartre assumes that every human being can understand every other human being. Consequently, with the understanding of one's own freedom, the understanding of the freedom of the other is also given.

The recognition of the existence and freedom of the other fundamentally distinguishes Sartre's Cogito conception from Descartes'. For with Sartre's cogito, not only one's own existence is secured, but also the existence of the Other. In this sense, Sartre's is an extended cogito:

*The subjectivity that we thus make out as truth is not, however, a strictly individual one, for we have demonstrated that in the cogito, one discovers not only oneself but also the others. In the "I think", in contrast to Descartes' philosophy, in contrast to Kant's philosophy, we reach ourselves in the face of the other, and the other is as certain for us as we are ourselves. (Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*)*

Here Sartre alludes in no uncertain terms to his philosophy of the extended cogito, which he develops in *Being and Nothingness* and in which he shows that in his case, one must start from a dialectic of subjectivity and intersubjectivity:

Under these conditions, the discovery of my innermost at the same time also discovers the other for me, as freedom facing me, which only thinks and wills for or against me. Thus we immediately discover a world that we will call inter-subjectivity, and in this world, the human being decides what he is and what the others are. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

One accusation against Sartre is that he cannot judge others because he lacks ethical standards. He says that cynicism and insincerity exist and that this form of existence has a choice as its basis. Since man is freedom, there is also the freedom to choose to be insincere. Consequently, there is no reason to condemn this choice and thus no reason to prefer authenticity.

Sartre says this is true on the one hand and false on the other. One can look at the problem on different levels, on the level of ontological freedom and on the level of authentic freedom.

Ontologically, cynicism, insincerity and authenticity are of equal rank. All three modes of existence are based on different attitudes to the problem of truth, and they cannot be evaluated at this level. They exist; that is all. It should be recognised, however, that this way of looking at things presupposes the Objective World Eye and is thus purely contemplative.

From the standpoint of practice, however, and Sartre clearly prefers practice to pure contemplation, Sartre is both observer and agent, which means that he himself must take a stand with regard to the problem of truth. As a human being, he cannot live with allowing all three possibilities of existence to apply equally. Sartre is also condemned to freedom.

Sartre must therefore choose, and his choice is clear: as a philosopher, he chooses authenticity, the recognition of truth, the recognition of the fact that a difference exists between "evident" and "non-evident". And in this moment of recognising evidence as to the criterion of truth, he is very much in a position to judge insincerity:

One might object: why should he not choose to be insincere? I answer: I do not have to judge him morally, but I define his insincerity as an error. Here one cannot escape a judgement of truth. Insincerity is, of course, a lie, for it veils the total freedom of commitment. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

Sartre interprets contemporary history as a dialectic of cynicism, insincerity and authenticity. He sees the ethical task as transforming the world of insincerity into a world of authenticity. For in a cynical and insincere world, the realm of freedom will not be realised.

Before elaborating on political morality, the recognition of existential psychoanalysis is necessary. The basis of the desired realm of freedom must be the authentic individual. A kingdom of freedom made up of nothing but cynical and insincere people is not possible. Friedrich Schiller started from a similar thought when he wrote his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

Sartre's humanism

Sartre understands his existentialism as humanism. The terms "subjectivism", "nihilism", and "atheism", on the other hand, are not particularly well suited to characterising Sartre's thinking.

These terms unilaterally emphasise certain aspects but fail to grasp his philosophy because they ignore the concept of dialectical suspension, which is essential to Sartre's thought. Subjectivity plays a role but is relativised by the concept of objectivity. Accordingly, it is not justified to speak of "subjectivism" in Sartre. Nihilism has a remote justification in that ontological freedom actually precludes a preference for certain values and behaviours. It misses Sartre's philosophy, however, because the concept of ontological freedom is relativised in Sartre by the concept of authentic freedom. Ontological freedom, in fact, underlies all existence; authentic freedom, according to Sartre, *should* underlie all existence. Sartre's ontology, in a sense, affirms nihilism, but Sartre's theory of truth and his moral theory reject nihilism. This is because Sartre's existentialism is an invitation to all human beings to choose authentic freedom.

Authenticity means the recognition of the universal structures of human reality. This includes, in particular, one's own freedom and the freedom of others. This is an important aspect of Sartre's concept of humanism. This concept also implies generosity in relation to the Other. What is meant by this is that it is not one's own ego that should be the focus of interest, but the discovery of the world, for example, the unveiling of the other's life plan. I extend my hand to the other person so that he can realise his design. In doing so, I contribute to the illumination of being.

However, the concept of generosity stands in a dialectical relationship to the idea of conflict, which is also central to Sartre's philosophy. Practice must show to what extent the concept of generosity and the concept of conflict can be reconciled. Here, the problem of the fact that the human being is not only an observer but also an actor becomes apparent once again. The mere contemplation of generosity could prove illusory if practical proof of its viability cannot be provided.

Sartre's humanism, however, refers not only to the Other but to the whole universe. He writes:

There is no universe other than a human one, the universe of human subjectivity. This connection between human transcendence ... and subjectivity, in the sense that the human being is not enclosed in himself but is always present in his human universe, is what we call existential humanism. Humanism because we remind man that there is no other lawgiver than himself and that in abandonment he decides on himself; and because we show that man realises himself humanly not by turning back on himself but by constantly seeking a goal outside himself - like this liberation or that concrete achievement. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism).

In short, man realises himself by means of a self-design which is at the same time a world design. In this sense, he bears responsibility for the entire universe because only as a result

of the individual's self-design can something like a general sense of the world come into being. As a result of this sense-making and in the course of the realisation of this sense, it is revealing itself within the framework of practical fields, which, as units of sense-making, reveal the structures of the world. In this sense, there is no other lawgiver than the human being.