

## Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*: A Critical Reading

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### Introduction

It may seem unfair to read *Existentialism is a Humanism* as a canonical example of Sartrean philosophy – although it is always the first thing anyone reads by him, and it thus holds a decisive sociological status. And, he did choose to present the text in the form of an address. Indeed, much later, he disavowed this text. Yet, the text was performed in public in 1946 and constituted the first post-War international philosophical event. This novel and international character became explicit with Heidegger's response to Sartre in 'Letter on Humanism' later that year. In this way, regardless of Sartre's later disavowal, it is important that the text be understood, since, if for no other reason, this is the text, or something similar, with which Heidegger engaged. Yet, the text is important in itself, especially if read in tandem with *Being and Nothingness*.

In the following, I would like to undertake a critical reading of Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* against the background of the persistent question of subjectivism. Indeed, this is one of the primary charges against his philosophy with which he begins his address. To this extent, *Existentialism is a Humanism* could be seen as an attempt to clarify and address criticisms of *Being and Nothingness* (1943), which had found many enemies amongst the public. It could be argued that this attempt was obviously a failure and served to distort rather than clarify Sartre's philosophy as presented in *Being and Nothingness*. The dissemination of a philosophy is often fraught with misunderstanding, as it, as Nietzsche writes, wanders the earth as a fear inspiring grotesque.

Yet, it is clear that Sartre's text is susceptible of an ambiguity in the treatment of Descartes. This of course consists in the relationship between the absolute certainty of the 'I think' and its fundamental relationship with the public (Offenbark) human reality. The question is how we are to read this 'dialectic' or perhaps identity between the 'I think' and human Dasein. The recourse to Descartes, Sartre alludes, consists in a concern for human dignity, of certainty, and surprisingly enough, optimism.

Yet, as Heidegger contends in his criticisms of Sartre – not to mention his own radical criticism of Descartes in *Being and Time* (an allegedly fundamental text for Sartrean philosophy), the Cartesian starting point gives us no authentic access to the finite human self as this self is primordially being in the world, a worldliness that is *de facto* excluded by the Cartesian 'I think'. This question emerges of the phenomenological and indeed existential character Sartre's philosophy in light of his reliance on Descartes. Of course, it could be argued that 'dignity' coheres well with Husserl's valorisation of questioning, of the *epoche*, in the *Cartesian Meditations*, to the exclusion of the content of Cartesian philosophy. Yet, it would seem that the 'I think', as used by both Husserl and Sartre,

entails more than just the spirit of Descartes' questioning, but is explicitly an item of content, with its own paradoxes and historical baggage.

Sartre has said that his concern is that of dignity. Yet, is his dignity of decision in fact nothing more than a bracketing of the world and the other, an act of subjective violence, a decisionism expressing some collectivist *zeitgeist*? Does this *moral* or *ethical* assertion of dignity (*dignitas*) betray an essence, at least one that is historical, of the status of the human?

Moreover, is the notion that existence precedes essence the same as beginning with the subjective? Is this not already an essence, and one that has been determined by a historically established philosophy (Descartes)? If we begin in this way, are we not already proceeding in the manner of production, as with a formula or technique? These are some of the questions we should keep in mind during the following exploration of Sartre's attempts at clarification.

### **Reproaches Against Existentialism, and Sartre's Provisional Responses**

Sartre, the new Cato, uses rhetoric to make a case to the public that evening in 1946. He begins by listing the charges with which he has been reproached.

These charges and their authors are:

1. *Quietism*, contemplative, incapable of action (Communist)
2. *Pessimism*, without 'hope' (Christian)
3. a. *Subjectivism*, as it is based upon the Cartesian *Cogito*, or 'I think' (Communist and Christian)
- b. *Voluntarism*, corollary of subjectivism; lack of moral objectivity (Christian and Platonist, such as Iris Murdoch).

Sartre immediately begins by giving provisional responses to the charges.

1) *Quietism* - With respect to the first reproach, he characterises existentialism as a humanism in that it renders human life possible (more on this later). It is therefore not quietistic, but is a doctrine in which truth and action have an environment and a human subjectivity.

2) *Pessimism* - He objects to the characterisation of existentialism as dark, gloomy, or, as obsessed with the ugly or with evil; indeed, he declares that existentialism is not pessimistic, but rather, is essentially optimistic, as 'it confronts man with a possibility of choice.' (EH, p. 2)

3) *Subjectivism* - Sartre states that existentialism is characterised by the phrase 'existence comes before essence' – and he continues, 'or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective'. (EH, p. 3) Here he is directly and comprehensively confronting the third reproach against existentialism and is seeking to show that the reproach is based upon a misunderstanding of existentialism – one perhaps generated by the over-exposure of pseudo-existentialist notions in the mainstream media of the time.

Sartre distinguishes existentialism from *production* in which essence precedes existence, as with the manufacture of an object based upon a formula or technique. He compares such an originary essence to the notion of a God as creator. Sartre states,

God makes man according to a procedure and a conception, exactly as the artisan manufactures a paper-knife, following a definition and a formula. Thus, each individual man is the realisation of a certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding. (EH, p. 3)

Yet, the mere absence of God in such a scenario, as with the eighteenth century, does not immediately lead to the dissolution of a pre-existent essence, as with the notion of human nature of the universal conception of 'Humankind'. Kant for instance held that all humans, indeed, all rational beings, were in essence, the same.

Sartre, in this way, declares that atheistic existentialism is different from previous conceptions of atheism, in that with the absence of God, the human is a being whose existence precedes his essence, who exists before there is 'any conception of it' (which could be compared to Kant's *aesthetic* judgment). (EH, p. 4) Sartre asks,

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards. If the human as the existentialist sees him/her is not definable, it is because to begin with he is He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its 'subjectivity,' using the word as a reproach against us. (EH, p. 4)

The principle of subjectivity, Sartre declares, far from evading the *raison d'être* of the eternal laws and commandments of God, is that which originally gives to the human his or her 'dignity' – in comparison to a mere object. The human, who lives his or her subjective life, projects him/herself into the future, he/she is this projection of purposes, and 'before that projection of the self, nothing exists'. (EH, p. 4) Indeed, not only does existence precede essence, but nothing precedes existence, and it is through the projection that existence itself is achieved. And, it will be upon this provisional, situational basis, that the human will find his/her essence through the realisation of his/her purposes.

On the basis of this first principle of existentialism, that the *human makes himself or herself*, Sartre further states the first effect of this spontaneous decision is that the human is 'responsible for what he is'. (EH, p. 4) But, this is not a narrow subjectivism of a mere ego, as Sartre states that when I am responsible for my own self, this means that I am responsible for all humans. In this way, he turns to a clarification of the meaning of the term 'subjectivism' with the intention of undermining the third reproach against existentialism.

### **On Subjectivism**

Sartre states that by subjectivism, he does not merely mean the 'freedom of the individual subject, but, on a deeper level, that the human cannot transcend the situation of human subjectivity as such'. (EH, p. 4) In this way, subjectivity does not mean that each of us is free to choose, out of caprice, whatever we may wish. Returning, in a certain sense, to the ethical universalisation of the Kantian categorical imperative, Sartre states that as we freely choose for ourselves, we are, at once, choosing for all humankind.

This universalisation takes place through the construction of an image of 'humankind' that is implied by some particular individual choice – an image of what the human 'ought to be'. And, since nothing precedes the choice to give us guidance on that which we are or ought to be, the choice itself bestows value upon that which is chosen, upon the image that is projected as what the human 'ought to be'. Sartre states, 'In fashioning myself, I fashion man'. (EH, p. 5)

Before we proceed with Sartre to delineate several key existentialist terms – anguish, abandonment, and despair, I will like to make a note: Sartre's claim of fashioning humankind does not amount to an aestheticisation of morality, but is an ontological aesthetics which supports the ethical methodology of dignity – the meaning of Sartre's claim that the individual choice implies a moral necessity for the rest of humankind. Yet, if each choice participates in the construction of an essence, a picture of what a human is, there must have always been such, as is evident in ancient art and literature.

Does not such a historicity, even the very use of language, sexual difference, amount to more than 'nothing' and whose own 'tables of values' are excluded from existence? Or, have we misunderstood again? Is he perhaps relying on Nietzsche notion of the 'death of God' which has somehow wiped the slate clean?

Indeed, if what Sartre is saying is that human subjectivity is absolutely free and whose existence precedes its essence, then how are we to orient and maintain human subjectivity with respect to its on-going life-world, and with respect to its past actions? Such is the essence of Heidegger's criticisms of Sartre. The future is undefined, in Sartre's view, but is he not always forgetting the concrete past of human subjectivity in which we dwell? Or, is he perfectly aware of what he is doing as the destroyer of the old law tablets?

## Key Existentialist Terminology

### *Anguish* –

Humankind is in anguish since, with Sartre's interpretation of existentialism, he/she is the legislator for humankind as a whole. The individual is in anguish since 'in a such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility.' (EH, p. 5) My choice can never be for myself alone, but will always be an example that will be projected as a universal law. Sartre states, moreover, that even though I can never know that I am correct (from the standpoint of any positivistic criteria), I am obligated to choose and to perform actions that will be examples for others – and the others are watching (Lacan's 'Mirror Stage').

Sartre states (in a way that sounds not only similar to Breton's *Nadja*, but also to the panopticism of Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*), 'Everything happens to every man as though the whole human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing and regulated its conduct accordingly.' (EH, p. 6). Anguish, in this way, arises due to our acceptance of the implications of our freedom, from our being condemned to be free, obligated to choose, and with our choice, to be an example to others who will apprehend what we value in the wake of our choice for one of a myriad of possibilities.

### *Abandonment* –

Sartre states that this term *abandonment*– which he claims to take from Heidegger's *Aufgabe* – signifies that 'God does not exist,' and that we should accept the full implications of this non-existence. The full implications of this non-existence is not, Sartre contends, the establishment of a secular *a priori* morality, without God. On the contrary, Sartre contends that without God, the entire basis of morality collapses, including the values of secular morality since God played the role of the perfect witness and guarantor of our *a priori* ideas.

Sartre quotes Dostoevsky approvingly: 'If God did not exist, everything would be permitted,' (EH, p. 7) stating that this is the starting point for existentialism. This starting point is related, moreover, to what he previously called the first principle of existentialism – that the human makes him/herself, and to its first effect, that the human is solely responsible for him/herself. Since the human has nothing to rest upon and no recourse to either a divine or a human nature, 'man is free, man *is* freedom'. (EH, p. 7) Sartre states,

We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does.' (EH, p. 7).

We are condemned to ceaselessly invent humankind and that means that we are condemned to decide our being, our essence.

### ***Despair –***

Despair entails, for Sartre, that we remain within the realm of possibilities and probabilities and, in this context, must limit ourselves to that which is within the capacity of our wills and that which is concerned with our own action. Sartre states, 'Beyond the point at which the possibilities under consideration cease to affect my action, I ought to disinterest myself.' (EH, p. 9) In other words, we should, in the words of the Delphic Oracle, know ourselves and know our limits, which means that that which is beyond our capacity should not concern us, such as a hope for the limitlessness of an eternal life or to an event, such as a revolution, that may take place in the distant future.

It is at this point that Sartre's essay shows its datedness as he begins to rehearse a conversation with Communists who tell him that although he may die, there will be others who could carry on the work 'of the revolution' into the future. While scepticism toward such a futural project may be understandable, Sartre strangely replies that he will be committed to such a struggle, but only if he is in an organisation that he can 'more or less control', in which he knows with whom he is working, etc. He states that he cannot count upon men he does not know, nor upon that which he cannot know, seemingly, first hand (Russian Revolution). Sartre states, giving an example of his own personal despair, 'I must confine myself to what I can see.' (EH, p. 10) It is interesting that Sartre eventually became a Communist.

There is a strong current of positivism in this self-limitation, and a marked lack of trust or 'faith'. At the same time, this does not mean that he will not act, but that he will act and 'do what he can', but without illusions.

### **Returning to the Reproaches**

#### ***Quietism -***

In light of the Sartre's clarification of the meaning of existentialist terminology – obviously necessary in light of vast, mainstream (journalistic) misunderstandings – he returns to the reproaches with which he began to give a clearer and less provisional account of the meaning of existentialism. He states that far from being a quietism, existentialism holds that 'there is no reality except in action.' (EH, p. 10) the human is nothing else but what he/she does, as /she realises the projection of him/herself into the future. And, in connection to the first effect of existentialism, the human has total responsibility for his/her actions and thus for what he/she will become – there can be no excuse, neither social conditions, nor genetics, etc. Sartre states, 'In life, man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait.' (EH, p. 11) Quietism, in this light, would be merely bad faith.

#### ***Pessimism –***

As stated earlier by Sartre, it is not pessimism that bothers those who have been confronted by existentialism, but the 'sternness of its optimism'. (EH, p. 11) In other

words, humans have a choice; he/she begins in nothingness, and becomes that which he/she chooses and does – and he/she is completely responsible for that which he/she becomes, whether for good or evil. In this way, the destiny of humankind lies solely with humankind itself, with its self-commitment, with its choices and with its actions.

### *Subjectivity –*

Sartre declares that the point of departure for his philosophy is in the Cartesian *cogito* ('I think') – which he characterises as the 'absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself.' (EH, p. 12) Sartre contends that we must begin with this position of self-attainment, of this absolute truth of consciousness, since it grounds the otherwise probabilistic state of affairs which is the situation in which the subject finds itself. He states that there must be an absolute truth and that this is found in 'one's immediate sense of one's self.' (EH, p. 12)

We should keep in mind that this assertion of absolute truth and the necessity of the *cogito* is connected to our earlier questions as to the seemingly privileged position of Sartre in his ability to legislate for the rest of humankind – or perhaps of humanity (inter-subjectivity) to legislate for itself by constructing the images, examples of the 'human being'. Such absolutism is also related to his quasi-positivistic statements of despair such that he/she must confine himself to what he/she can see. Sartre is a Fichte, but one who lives in Diogenes' Agora.

The second justification for the Cartesian starting point is that it 'alone is compatible with the dignity of man'. (EH, p. 12) And, again, this subjective starting point, as with his deeper definition of subjectivity is not a *cogito* of mere individual attainment, but that of others as well (what Heidegger would call **Mitdasein**). Sartre is explicit as to his innovation: 'Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, contrary to that of Kant, when we say "I think" we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves.' (EH, p. 13)

And, what this means is that he/she cannot *be* anything at all, unless others recognise him/her as such. Sartre states, 'I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself.' (EH, p. 13) In this way, we are in a world in which rival freedoms confront each other upon a *topos* of inter-subjectivity.

Is this a coherent position? Can I speak of a subjectivity and as an 'immediate presence of one's self', as the 'absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself', if another is required as a mediator, as a witness? Or, is this *attainment*, as self-consciousness, a form of collective consciousness, as with Marx's notion of class consciousness? What is Sartre suggesting?

This *topos* of inter-subjectivity, this place where rival and allied freedoms confront each other is not, for Sartre, human nature, but can be described as a *condition* of human universality (the *human condition*), of a deeper human subjectivity in which each

legislates and is responsible for all. Such a human condition, for Sartre (as with Hannah Arendt), describes the 'limitations which *a priori* define man's fundamental situation in the universe.' (EH, p. 13)

These limitations are, for Sartre, those of being-in-the-world, labour, and death, which are at once subjective (as having to be lived), and objective (as they are universal for human beings, no matter their background). In this way, the purposes of human beings are also universal and are immediately understood by other human beings within a human universality which is not given as an essential nature, but it is made through human choice and action.

### **The Absolute Character of Free Commitment**

As a provisional answer to our questions concerning the legitimacy of the Cartesian point of departure, Sartre states that human freedom, free being, resides in the act of absolute commitment that one projects upon possibility in one's choice for oneself. This commitment, as already stated, is not simply one for myself alone, but is legislative for all of humanity and is witnessed by all of humanity, and is understandable to all of humanity in every epoch.

It is in this way both relative to diverse epochs and situations of humankind, and absolute as the free choice and act of the one who has made him/herself through this choice. In this light, Sartre contends that free being is absolute being, or in other words, that being is subjectivity conceived as the universal subjectivity of the human reality.

### **Final Responses to Reproaches of Subjectivism**

The first reproach is that, in light of subjectivism, it does not matter what is chosen. Sartre states that, in light of what he has said, that it certainly does matter, especially in light of his notion of subjectivity as human inter-subjectivity. He states, 'I am obliged to choose my attitude to it (sexuality), and in every respect I bear the responsibility of the choice which, in committing myself, also commits the whole of humanity.' (EH, p. 14)

Subjectivism is not mere caprice, but a decision amid a situation of obligation and responsibility, a situation from which there is no exit and that cannot be passed over to someone or something else. Sartre states, 'In our view, man finds himself in an organised situation in which he is himself involved: his choice involves humankind in its entirety, and he cannot avoid choosing.' (EH. P. 14)

Moreover, once again, there are no set rules for such decisions, based either upon divine law or some conception of human nature. It is, Sartre states, more akin to a work of art, it is something that comes out of the situation as commitments are decided and action are undertaken – but all within the constraints of obligation and responsibility. Sartre states, '... there is no pre-defined picture... the artist



applied himself to the composition of a picture, and the picture that ought to be made is precisely that which he will have made.’ (EH, p. 15)

In terms of our ‘moral’ situation, there is also no *a priori* set of rules to guide our decision. We are obliged to choose, but this choice entails that we are obliged to invent a morality for ourselves – and one that we would set up as an example for the rest of humankind. Sartre states, ‘Man makes himself; he is not found ready-made; he makes himself by the choice of his morality, and he cannot but choose a morality, such is the pressure of circumstances upon him. We define man only in relation to his commitments; it is therefore absurd to reproach us for irresponsibility in our choice.’ (EH, p. 15)

A second objection to ‘subjectivism’ is that we would be unable to judge others. This is also based, for Sartre, upon a profound misunderstanding of existentialism. Sartre contends that we can judge others, and this in two ways. On the one hand, there are judgments of truth, or logic, in the characterisation of our situation, our human condition as such. Anyone who states that we are not fully responsible, etc. is, for Sartre, a self-deceiver.

On the other hand, there is the capacity of a moral judgment to the extent that someone may deny the reality of our freedom, which not only means my freedom but that of others as well. Sartre states, ‘Those who hide from this total freedom, in the guise of solemnity or with deterministic excuses, I shall call cowards. Others, who try to show that their existence is necessary, when it is merely an accident of the appearance of the human race on earth – I shall call scum.’ (EH, p. 16)

Freedom is the end and means of itself and we are obligated – if we are of good faith – to act for its emergence for all humanity. There are no abstract principles, such as a moral law (Kant) to which we can have recourse in our struggle. Sartre states, ‘The content is always concrete, and therefore, unpredictable; it has always to be invented. The one thing that counts, is to know whether the invention is made in the name of freedom.’ (EH, p. 17)

This latter statement already addresses the final reproach that Sartre is not serious about his morality since it is his own invention. However, as we can already see, Sartre is forcing us to admit that all the previous recourses to moral guidance are false, and that there is no way for a moral judgment to be ready-made for us. Sartre states, ‘Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose.’ (EH, 17)

### **On Humanism**

The use Sartre makes of the term ‘humanism’ is the concern of the final reproach against his contention that existentialism is a humanism. But, once again, the reproach and the response to it depends upon a question of meaning and of the misunderstandings that arise when meanings are casually transposed from one context to another. Sartre states that humanism has two different meanings. On the one hand, there is the humanism as a

theory of man as an 'end-in-itself and as the supreme value'. (EH, p., 18) This is a humanism of a generic humankind, the meaning of which is considered fixed, and which is a general concept (essence), of which particular men are the derived existences.

Again, this is similar to the example of production in which an essence precedes existence. However, as Sartre states, humankind is not an end as he himself is ceaselessly in a state of re-invention and self-attainment (self-realisation). In this sense, humanism is an ideology that will no longer allow humanity to overcome itself (Nietzsche).

The meaning of an existential humanism, on the other hand, concerns humankind as self-surpassing, self-creating, that humankind of a deeper human subjectivity. Sartre states, echoing both Nietzsche and Heidegger, 'Man is all the time outside himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist.' (EH, p. 18) There is no exit from the condition of the human universe; but nevertheless, that which we are, and that which we can become is not limited.

There is no human nature, no essence before our existence. There is nothing before we exist, and our only essence comes from our own commitment, our own acts, our own invention of ourselves – in other words, from our own freedom. And, it is in this sense that Sartre answers the Christian and the Communist with the contention that it is not God or the Revolution that gives us grounds for hope – but simply our own inexorable freedom which simply calls us to awaken to the truth of our abyssal fate.

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