

Critical Analysis on *Existentialism is a Humanism*: Existential Freedom and Human Responsibility

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Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive critical analysis of *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946) by Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the most influential existentialist philosophers. Originally, the work was presented as a public lecture in post-war France. Sartre rejects the misconceptions that existentialism promotes pessimism, moral relativism, and nihilism. He claims that the principle “existence precedes essence” forms the foundation of radical human freedom and total responsibility. This article examines Sartre’s ideas on freedom, anguish, abandonment, despair, authenticity, and ethical commitment. It explores how Sartre’s existentialism fosters and articulates a demand for human dignity. The work is grounded in action, accountability, and moral seriousness.

Keywords: Existentialism, Precedence, Nihilism, Pessimism

Introduction: Existentialism in Crisis

The devastation of the Second World War produced a profound moral, political, and intellectual crisis across Europe. Established religious institutions, political ideologies, traditional values, and ethical systems appeared incapable of preventing large-scale destruction and injustice. In this historical context, existentialism emerged as a philosophical response to human anxiety, freedom, and the burden of moral choice.

Jean-Paul Sartre became the leading voice of this movement. His 1945 lecture, later published as *Existentialism is a Humanism*, introduced the nature of existentialist philosophy to a global audience. The lecture was both explanatory and defensive, addressing widespread misconceptions that existentialism was a philosophy of despair. Sartre countered these criticisms by asserting that

existentialism is not a doctrine of despair but a rigorous humanism rooted in freedom and responsibility. This article critically examines Sartre's ideas, evaluates his conception of existential freedom, and explores the ethical implications of existentialism as a form of humanism.

Historical and Intellectual Background

Existentialist thought developed in response to social instability and philosophical uncertainty. The collapse of moral values and the erosion of faith in traditional authority compelled thinkers to reconsider human values and freedom. Although existentialism is associated with multiple thinkers, Sartre's articulation remains the most significant form of atheistic existentialism.

His contemporaries, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir, explored themes of absurdity, freedom, and responsibility in distinct ways. Sartre's position differs sharply from that of the religious existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, who viewed faith as the ultimate response to existential anxiety. Sartre explicitly rejected theological foundations. For him, one should not use God as an excuse. Without divine authority, human beings must assume responsibility for creating their own values and meaning.

Existence Precedes Essence: The Foundational Principle

At the core of Sartre's lecture lies the famous declaration: *existence precedes essence*. Traditional metaphysics holds that human beings possess a fixed nature defined by God or universal reason. According to this view, essence—the defining characteristics or purpose of a being—precedes its existence.

Sartre compares human beings to manufactured objects. A paper-cutter, for instance, is designed with a specific purpose; its essence is determined before it is produced. In contrast, human beings first exist—appear in the world—and only later define themselves through their actions.

This principle carries radical implications: there is no predetermined human nature, no innate moral guidelines dictated by divine command, and individuals construct their identity through lived choices. Human beings are not born courageous, cowardly, virtuous, or corrupt; they become so through repeated actions. Identity is created. Sartre rejects determinism, arguing that although biological, social, and historical conditions influence individuals, they do not fully determine them.

Radical Freedom and Responsibility

From the principle that existence precedes essence, Sartre develops the idea of radical freedom. Human beings are “condemned to be free.” This phrase emphasizes that although individuals did not choose to be born, once they exist, they cannot escape the necessity of choosing.

Freedom, in Sartre's account, is ontological—it defines the structure of human consciousness. Even under oppressive circumstances, individuals retain the ability to choose. A prisoner may lack physical freedom but still possesses the freedom to interpret and respond to imprisonment.

Sartre's ideas elevate human responsibility alongside freedom. If we are always free, then we are always responsible. We cannot blame fate or God for our actions. Excuses become forms of self-deception. Freedom is therefore inseparable from responsibility. Sartre insists that when an individual chooses, they are implicitly choosing for all humanity. Each choice expresses an image of what one believes a human being ought to be. Thus, human choice carries universal significance.

Anguish, Abandonment, and Despair

Sartre identifies three existential conditions that accompany radical freedom: anguish, abandonment, and despair.

Anguish:

Anguish arises when individuals recognize the weight of their responsibility. In choosing for oneself, one also chooses a model for humanity. This realization generates existential anxiety. However, anguish does not paralyze action; rather, it reflects moral awareness and signals the seriousness of human choice.

Abandonment:

Abandonment refers to the absence of divine guidance. Sartre invokes Fyodor Dostoevsky's claim that "If God does not exist, everything is permitted." While Sartre accepts the absence of a divine lawgiver, he rejects the idea that morality collapses. Instead, abandonment intensifies responsibility. Without God, there is no external moral authority; individuals must create their own values through committed action.

Despair:

Despair arises from the recognition that, although individuals are free to choose, they cannot control outcomes. One must act without certainty of success. Despair encourages realism rather than illusion, teaching individuals to rely only on what lies within their control.

Together, anguish, abandonment, and despair define the emotional landscape of existential freedom.

Ethical Decision-Making and Moral Ambiguity

Sartre illustrates existential ethics through the example of a young man during the Nazi occupation. The young man faces a dilemma: whether to care for his dependent mother or join the resistance. No universal moral law can determine the correct choice.

If he stays, he affirms filial duty; if he leaves, he affirms political resistance. Both choices embody legitimate values. Sartre's point is that morality cannot be reduced to abstract rules. Ethical meaning emerges only through concrete commitment. The individual must choose without absolute certainty, and through that choice, define himself and contribute to shaping human values.

Authenticity lies in assuming responsibility for one's decision rather than seeking external justification.

Authenticity and Bad Faith

Although *Existentialism is a Humanism* does not fully elaborate the concept of "bad faith," it is implicit in Sartre's argument. Bad faith occurs when individuals deny their freedom and pretend that they are determined by circumstances.

For example, a person who refuses to change denies their creative freedom. Similarly, someone who hides behind social roles avoids acknowledging their capacity for choice. Authenticity requires an honest recognition of freedom. To live authentically is to act with awareness, consciously choosing and shaping one's identity. This demand makes existentialism ethical rather than permissive.

Existentialism as Humanism

Sartre presents existentialism as a form of humanism that enhances human dignity. It places the source of value within human beings rather than in any transcendent authority. Humans are self-determining agents capable of creating meaning.

Existentialism emphasizes individual responsibility: people are accountable for their choices and for the image they project of humanity. There is no moral escape. It encourages action rather than resignation and rejects passive fatalism. A meaningful life is created through engagement in projects, relationships, and commitments.

Unlike traditional humanism, which assumes a fixed human nature, Sartre's humanism is dynamic and self-creating. It celebrates human potential through conscious effort and responsibility.

Comparison with Other Existential Thinkers

Sartre's philosophy shares themes with other existential thinkers but differs in important ways. Kierkegaard emphasized faith as a response to existential anxiety, whereas Sartre rejected religious consolation. Albert Camus focused on the absurdity of existence—the tension between humanity's desire for meaning and the silence of the universe.

Sartre, by contrast, placed greater emphasis on freedom and ethical responsibility. Simone de Beauvoir extended Sartrean existentialism into feminist theory in *The Second Sex*. Her assertion that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” reflects the principle that existence precedes essence, highlighting how identity is shaped through social conditions and individual actions.

Critiques and Philosophical Challenges

Despite Sartre's defense, existentialism has faced criticism. Some argue that grounding morality in individual choice risks moral relativism. Sartre responds by emphasizing the universality of choice—each action reflects a vision of humanity and must be considered responsibly.

Other critics question the feasibility of radical freedom, arguing that social, economic, and psychological forces significantly limit human agency. Sartre acknowledges these constraints but insists that freedom persists within them.

His existentialism remains a powerful philosophical framework, emphasizing human choice, responsibility, and ethical engagement.

Conclusion: A Demanding but Affirmative Humanism

Existentialism is a Humanism stands as a compelling articulation of Sartre's thought. His claim that existence precedes essence redefines human identity as self-created rather than predetermined. Radical freedom becomes the foundation of human dignity.

Anguish, abandonment, and despair are not signs of pessimism but reflections of moral responsibility. Existentialism encourages individuals to confront their freedom honestly, reject bad faith, and act with commitment.

Far from promoting nihilism, Sartre's philosophy calls for courage, accountability, and ethical engagement. Although life lacks predetermined meaning, human beings possess the extraordinary capacity—and responsibility—to create value in their lives. Sartrean existentialism is thus a rigorous and demanding humanism, grounded in realism and trust in human agency.

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