

Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism"

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Existentialism

- Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a leading proponent of a style of philosophy known as "existentialism."
- He did a great deal to popularize existentialism through his literary work and his popular essays.
- In "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre tries to explain what existentialism is and to defend it from various criticisms.
- Sartre's existentialist slogan is that human existence is prior to human essence.
- My essence, the kind of person I am now, is the product of the free choices I have made in the course of my life.
- In describing humans as self-made, Sartre faced two kinds of criticisms:
 - The communists say that we would be forced into inaction,
 - The Christians accuse him of overthrowing the basis of morality, which is divine command.
- Both sides claim that there would be no human solidarity.

Existence and Essence

- The prevailing philosophical view of human beings is that they have a "nature" or "essence" which greatly constrains what they can become.
- For example, Christians take humans to be created by God in accordance with a prior concept of humanity.
- Sartre denies the existence of God, and he thinks that this has the consequence that there is no human essence.
- People first exist, then make themselves into whatever it is they become.

- The subjectivity of their existence is unique to human beings and is their dignity.
- Although the starting-point is the individual self, Sartre contends that the self chooses for all of humanity.
- I determine what I ought to be, and in so doing I determine what humans in general ought to be.

Anguish

- Sartre's ethics builds on psychological categories described earlier by Kierkegaard and Heidegger.
- If I am to choose for all of humanity, then I am deeply responsible for what humanity is to become.
- I may try to deny that I have this universal responsibility, but this is only self-deception.
- Many possibilities are open to me, and in many cases I have no proof that any one course of action is right.
- This leads to "anguish" which is characteristic of the human condition.
- Without a God to guide me in my choices, I am "forlorn."
- I am thrown into the world with no support and condemned to be free—responsible even for my passions.

An Example

- A student has good reasons to remain with his mother (who needs him) or to leave her to fight the Nazi occupation.
- It is certain that staying will help his mother, and staying is dictated by an ethics of sympathy.
- It is not certain that he will have any effect on the occupation, but a social ethics dictates that he fight.
- The moral laws of neither Christian nor Kantian ethics can determine what he should do.
- In the end, the student remained with his mother because of his feeling of sympathy.
- His feeling had no value in itself: it got its value from the fact that he chose on the basis of it.

Despair

- Humans are in despair because they can only reckon from probabilities.
- The probabilities are distributed over possibilities, which the human will does not generally determine.
- At best, we can try to make the future different from what it would have been without our actions.
- Existentialists maintain that people are nothing more than the collection of acts that make up their lives.
- This is a reason people reject existentialism:
 - They would rather think of what they might have done.
- Existentialism promotes an ethics of action and involvement.
- It embodies an optimistic toughness.

The Consequences of Subjectivity

- Critics of existentialism think that the subjective starting-point of all choice precludes objective assessment of human actions.
- But the subjectivity of human choice does not place it beyond all evaluation.
- As noted earlier, our choices are made for all of humanity.
- Our choices are not arbitrary, because we make them on the basis of a conception of what we want to become as a result.
- Although we cannot say that someone's choices are better or worse as choices, we can criticize their choices as being in error.
 - Some choices are made incoherently, such as when one chooses to be dishonest rather than to be honest.
 - Some choices are made on the pretext that they are determined by one's passions and not free.

Inventing Values

- There is a universal principle of ethics, which is the desire for freedom of one's self and others (Kant).
- But there is no system of ethics which can provide us with a basis for our choices.

- God has been rejected, so there is no theological basis.
 - Kantian ethics is too abstract to provide real moral guidance.
- It would be comforting for there to be another being to take away our forlornness, anxiety, and despair.
- But as human beings, we must invent values for ourselves.
- In so doing, we can create a human community.

Humanism

- We can now show why existentialism is a kind of “humanism.”
- It is not a humanism in the sense of taking individual credit as a human for the deeds of others.
 - We may only take credit or blame for our own actions.
- But it is a humanism in the sense that in choosing for one’s self, one chooses for all of humanity.
- The universe is a human universe, and the lawgivers of that universe are individual human beings.
- Neither God nor a human essence is required for there to be a genuine human community.