

Existentialism is a Humanism

Jean-Paul Sartre, 1945¹

My purpose here is to defend existentialism against several reproaches that have been laid against it.

Existentialism has been criticised for inviting people to remain in a quietism of despair, to fall back into a the middle-class luxury of a merely contemplative philosophy. We are reproached for underlining human nastiness, and forgetting, as the Catholic Mme. Mercier has it, the smile of the child. All and sundry reproach us for treating men as isolated beings, largely because we begin with the 'I think' of Descartes. Christians especially reproach us for denying the reality and seriousness of human society, since, if we ignore God's eternal values, no-one is able to condemn anyone else.

Existentialism is being seen as ugliness; our appeal to nature as scandalous, our writings sickening. Yet what could be more disillusioning than repeating those mottoes like 'don't fight against tradition', or 'know your station'? They say that man is base and doomed to fall, he needs fixed rules to keep him from anarchy. In the end, is not what makes our doctrine so fearful to some merely the fact that it leaves all possibility of choice with man?

It has become fashionable to call this painter, or musician or columnist an "existentialist" - a term so loosely applied that it no longer means anything at all.

However, it can be defined easily. Existentialists are either Christian, such as the Catholics Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, or atheists like Heidegger and myself. What they have in common is to believe that existence comes before essence, that we always begin from the subjective.

What does this mean? If one considers a manufactured object, say a book or a paper-knife, one sees that it has been made to serve a definite purpose. It has an essence, the sum of its purpose and qualities, which precedes its existence. The concept of man in the mind of God is comparable to the concept of paper-knife in the mind of the artisan.

My atheist existentialism is rather more coherent. It declares that God does not exist, yet there is still a being in whom existence precedes essence, a being which exists before being defined by any concept, and this being is man or, as Heidegger puts it, human reality.

That means that man first exists, encounters himself and emerges in the world, to be defined

¹ Squashed version edited by Glyn Hughes: <http://www.btinternet.com/~glynhughes/squashed/sartre.htm>

afterwards. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. It is man who conceives himself, who propels himself towards existence. Man becomes nothing other than what is actually done, not what he will want to be.

And when we say that man takes responsibility for himself, we say more than that - he is in his choices responsible for all men. All our acts of creating ourselves create at the same time an image of man such as we believe he must be. Thus, our personal responsibility is vast, because it engages all humanity.

If I want, say, to marry and have children, such choice may depend on my situation, my passion, my desire, but by it I engage not only myself, but all humanity in the way of the monogamy. In fashioning myself, I fashion man. This helps us to understand some rather grandiloquent words like anguish, abandonment, despair.

The existentialist declares that man is in anguish, meaning that he who chooses cannot escape a deep responsibility for all humanity. Admittedly, few people appear to be anxious; but we claim that they mask their anguish, that they flee it.

This is what Kierkegaard called the anguish of Abraham. You know the old story: An angel commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. But anyone in such a case would wonder straight away, is this an angel? am I the Abraham? If we hear voices from the sky, what proves that they come not from hell, or the subconscious, or some pathological state? Who proves that they are addressed to me?

Each man must say to himself: am I right to set the standard for all humanity? To deny that is to mask the anguish. When, for example, a military leader sends men to their deaths, he may have his orders, but at the bottom it is he alone who chooses.

And when we speak about 'abandonment', we want to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to follow this conclusion to its end.

The existentialist is strongly against that sloppy morality which tries to remove God without ethical expense, like the French professors of the 1880's who saw God as a useless and expensive assumption but still wanted definitive rules like 'do not lie' to exist a priori.

The existentialist, on the contrary, finds it rather embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with him any possibility of finding values in a heaven. Dostoevsky wrote "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted"; that is the starting point of existentialism.

We are alone, without excuses. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. There is no power of 'beautiful passions' which propel men to their actions, we think, rather, that man is responsible for his own passions.

The existentialist cannot accept that man can be helped by any sign on earth, for he will

interpret the sign as he chooses. As Ponge has truly written "Man is the future of man".

To give you an example of this 'abandonment', I will quote the case of one of my pupils who came to me. He lived alone with his mother, his father having gone off as a collaborator and his brother killed in 1940. He had a choice - to go and fight with the Free French to avenge his brother and protect his nation, or to stay and be his mother's only consolation. So he was confronted by two modes of action; one concrete and immediate but directed only towards one single individual; the other addressed to an infinitely greater end but very ambiguous. What would help him choose? Christian doctrine? Accepted morals? Kant?

I said to him, "In the end, it is your feelings which count". But how can we put a value on a feeling?

At least, you may say, he sought the counsel of a professor. But, if you seek advice, from a priest for example, in choosing which priest you know already, more or less, what they would advise.

When I was imprisoned, I met a rather remarkable man, a Jesuit who had joined that order in the following way: As a child, his father had died leaving him in poverty. At school he was made to feel that he was accepted only for charity's sake and denied the usual pleasures. At eighteen he came to grief in a sentimental affair and then failed his military examinations. He could regard himself as a total failure, but, cleverly, took it as a sign that the religious life was the way for him. He saw the word of God there, but who can doubt that the decision was his and his alone? He could as easily have chosen to be a carpenter or a revolutionary.

As for 'despair', this simply means that we will restrict ourselves to relying only on our own will, or on the probabilities which make our action possible. If I am counting on the arrival of a friend, I presuppose that their train will be on time. But I am still among possibilities, outside my own field of action. No God, no intention, is going to alter the world to my will.

In the end, Descartes meant the same, that we must act without hope.

Marxists have answered "Your action is limited by your death, but you can rely on others to later take up your deeds and carry them forward to the revolution". To this I rejoin that I cannot know where the revolution will lead. Others may come and establish Fascism. Does that mean that I must give up myself to quietism? No!

Quietism is the attitude of people who say: "let others do what I cannot do". The doctrine that I present is precisely the opposite: there is reality only in the action; and more, man is nothing other than his own project and exists only in as far as he carries it out.

From this we see why our ideas so often cause horror. Many people have but one resource to sustain them in their misery; to think, "circumstances were against me, I was worthy of better. I had no great love because I never met anyone worthy of me. I wrote no great book because I

had no time. I am filled with a crowd of possibilities greater than anyone could guess from my few achievements."

But in reality, for the existentialist, there is no love other than that which is built, no artistic genius other than in works of art. The genius of Proust is the works of Proust. A man engages in his own life, draws his own portrait, there is nothing more.

This is hard for somebody who has not made a success of life. But it is only reality that counts, not dreams, expectations or hopes. What people reproach us for here is not our pessimism, but the sternness of our optimism.

If people reproach our writings, it is not because we describe humanity as frail and sometimes frankly bad, but because, unlike Zola whose characters are shown to be products of heredity or environment, you cannot say of ours "That is what we are like, no one can do anything about it". The existentialist portrays a coward as one who makes himself a coward by his actions, a hero who makes himself heroic.

Some still reproach us for confining man within his individual subjectivity. But there is no other starting-point than the "I think, I am" - the absolute truth of consciousness, a simple truth within reach of everyone and the only theory which gives man the dignity of not being a mere object.

All materialisms treat men as objects, no different in their being bundles of determined reactions than a table or a chair or a stone. We want to constitute a human kingdom of values distinct from the material world.

Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, contrary to the philosophy of Kant, we are discovering in the cogito not just ourselves but all others. We discover an intersubjective world where each man has to decide what he is and what others are.

It is not possible to find in each man the universal essence called human nature, but there is a human universality of condition. Any purpose, even that of the Chinese, or the idiot or the child can be understood by a European, given enough information. In this sense, there is a universality of man; but it is not a given, it is something perpetually re-built.

That does not entirely refute the charge of subjectivism. People tax us with anarchy; they say that "you cannot judge others, because you have no reason to prefer one project to another. You give with one hand what you pretend to receive from the other."

Let us say that moral choice is comparable to a work of art. Do we reproach the artist who makes a painting without starting from laid-down rules? Did we tell him what he must paint? There is no pre-defined picture, and no-one can say what the painting of tomorrow should be; one can judge only one at a time.

Amongst morals, the creative situation is the same, and just as the works of, say, Picasso, have consequences, so do our moral judgements.

That student who came to me could not appeal to any system for guidance; he was obliged to invent the law for himself. We define man only through his engagement, so it is absurd to reproach us for the consequences of a choice.

But it is not entirely true that we cannot judge others. We can judge whether choices are founded on truth or error, and we can judge a man's sincerity.

The man who hides behind the excuse of his passions or of some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver. "And what if I wish to deceive myself?" - there is no reason why you should not, but I declare publicly that you are doing so.

We will freedom for the sake of freedom. And through it we discover that our freedom depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that their freedom depends on ours. Those who hide their freedom behind deterministic excuses, I will call cowards. Those who pretend that their own existence was necessary, I will call scum.

To the objection that "You receive with one hand what you give with the other", that is, your values are not serious, since you choose them, I answer that, I am sorry, but having removed God the Father, one needs somebody to invent values. Things have to be taken as they are.

One has reproached me ridiculing a type of humanism in Nausea, and now suggesting that existentialism is a form of humanism. The absurd type of humanism is to glory in "Man the magnificent" ascribing to all men the value of the deeds of the most distinguished men. Only a dog or a horse would be in a position to declare such a judgement.

We cannot, either, fall into worshipping humanity, for that way leads to Fascism.

But there is another humanism, the acceptance that there is only one universe, the universe of human subjectivity. Existentialism is not despair. It declares rather that even if God did exist, it would make no difference.