

Existentialism

- **A philosophical movement of 19th and 20th centuries**
 - **Søren Kierkegaard**
 - **Friedrich Nietzsche**
 - **Martin Heidegger**
 - **Jean-Paul Sartre**
 - **Simone de Beauvoir**

A Conception of Philosophy

***Philosophy is authentic homesickness, a drive to be
“at home” everywhere***

Novalis

- **The implicit motivation for *all* philosophy, and the central theme of Existentialism**
- **Most of us don't recognise this**
- **Non-Existential philosophers try to resist homesickness in inappropriate ways**
- **Existentialists make no sharp distinction between their philosophy and their life**

The Human Condition

We, uniquely conscious beings, are “thrown” or “abandoned” in the world:

- **There is no justification for our existence**
- **There is no fixed human nature or predetermined direction for our lives, no “essence”**
- **Even if God exists we are too distant for it to make a difference**

The result: there is no purpose or meaning to life

Alienation

- **Alienated from ourselves**
 - **From the body**
 - **From emotions and intuitions**
 - **From the spirit**
 - **From life as experienced concretely and holistically**

- **Alienated from others**
 - **We objectify others, and others objectify us**
 - **Sceptical doubts about the reality of others**

- **Alienated from the world**
 - **We don't feel at home in our surroundings or in nature**
 - **Materialism, physicalism, scientism, "mechanical" nature**
 - **Sceptical doubts about external world**

How should we deal with this???

How *Not* to Deal with the Condition

- **Give up now!**
- **Wallow in our alienation**
- **Self-deception**
- **Seek metaphysical consolation**

How to Deal with it Correctly

The negative task: Diagnose our resistance:

- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Despair

The positive task: live Authentically

- Free
- Subjective
- Individual

Implications for the *form* of philosophy: novels, plays,
films

Lecture 2: Sartre's Existentialism

Ontology

- **Being in-itself – *Être En-soi***
 - Non-conscious existence
 - *Essence precedes existence*
- **Being for-itself – *Être Pour-soi***
 - Free, conscious existence enjoyed by human beings alone
 - Since there is no God, no designer, at least one being must precede essence
 - *Existence precedes essence:*
man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards (E&H)

Cf. Cartesian Dualism

- **Descartes: *substance* dualism (*res cogitans/res extensa*)**
Sartre: *property* dualism
- **Cartesian mind is the individual mind**
Being for-itself involves being with others
- **Cartesian mind can exist without body**
Being for-itself is necessarily embodied
- **Sartre: Sceptical issues don't arise**

If one considers an article of manufacture as, for example, a book or a paper-knife – one sees that it has been made by an artisan who had a conception of it; and he has paid attention, equally, to the conception of a paper-knife and to the pre-existent technique of production which is a part of that conception and is, at bottom, a formula. Thus the paper-knife is at the same time an article producible in a certain manner and one which, on the other hand, serves a definite purpose, for one cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper-knife without knowing what it was for. Let us say, then, of the paperknife that its essence – that is to say the sum of the formulae and the qualities which made its production and its definition possible – precedes its existence.

...

J-P Sartre, Existentialism and Humanism

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>

...

What do we [Atheistic Existentialists] 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 man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. 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.

Method

- **Opposed to traditional methods of (analytic?) philosophers or scientists who try to discern the reality that lies behind the appearances.**
 - **tells us nothing about our own lived encounters with the world**
 - **pictures humans as forever alienated from nature**
- **Sartre's task is to give a description of *reality as it appears to consciousness***
- **This is the *Phenomenological* method**

Six Sartrean Themes

Two sorts of Consciousness

- *Pre-reflective* consciousness
- *Reflective* consciousness

Even in pre-reflective consciousness, we are always implicitly self-conscious, and Phenomenology can make this explicit

Intentionality

- All consciousness is consciousness *of* something
- I see *a glass of wine*, notice *that it is dark in here*, remember *what I did yesterday*.

Emptiness

- There is nothing *in* consciousness itself
- A rejection of *the illusion of immanence*
- Intentional objects are always in the world

Nothingness

Nothingness lies coiled at the heart of being – like a worm (B&N)

- **Nothingness, or non-being, is as phenomenologically real as being**
- **A conscious act is separated from its intentional object by nothingness**
- **Further kinds of nothingness: unrealised but attainable possibilities**
- **The world is “haunted” by possibilities that give it meaning**

Emotion

- **A primary mode of apprehending the world**
- **Emotions present the world as “coloured”, e.g. cruel, terrible, bleak, joyful**
- **These colourings are structured by the nothingness of unrealised possibilities**
- **Emotions thus allow the world to be “magically transformed”**
- **This can help us deal with difficult situations:**
 - **the emotion brings us to act and change the world**
 - **our emotions transform the world**

See Sartre’s *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*

Freedom

- More radical than we normally suppose
- We are constantly free to choose, and are completely unconstrained by our past
 - We choose ourselves
 - We choose the world we inhabit
 - We choose our values

Acknowledging freedom causes *anguish*, and drives us to *bad-faith*

See next lecture....

Lecture 3: Existentialist Ethics

A Contradiction in Terms?

- **Subjectivity: moral values are created rather than “discovered ... like little diamonds in our path”**
- **A rejection of rules or principles:**
 - **multiple interpretations**
 - **blinds us to the particular concrete details**
 - **can’t decide between incommensurable options**
 - **provide excuses: attempts to avoid responsibility**
- **No way to choose between different kinds of morality**

The student’s dilemma: fight for the French resistance or stay at home to look after his mother

An “anything-goes” morality?

Extract from *Existentialism and Humanism*

As an example by which you may the better understand this state of abandonment, I will refer to the case of a pupil of mine, who sought me out in the following circumstances. His father was quarrelling with his mother and was also inclined to be a “collaborator”; his elder brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940 and this young man, with a sentiment somewhat primitive but generous, burned to avenge him. His mother was living alone with him, deeply afflicted by the semi-treason of his father and by the death of her eldest son, and her one consolation was in this young man. But he, at this moment, had the choice between going to England to join the Free French Forces or of staying near his mother and helping her to live.

...

...

[The student] found himself confronted by two very different modes of action; the one concrete, immediate, but directed towards only one individual; and the other an action addressed to an end infinitely greater, a national collectivity, but for that very reason ambiguous – and it might be frustrated on the way. At the same time, he was hesitating between two kinds of morality; on the one side the morality of sympathy, of personal devotion and, on the other side, a morality of wider scope but of more debatable validity. He had to choose between those two.

Sartre's advice:

“You are free, therefore choose, that is to say, invent.”

Sartre's Response

You cannot condemn somebody provided “he chooses his purpose and his commitment in all clearness and in all sincerity”, that is, he is *authentic*.

- **Positively:** freely commit to a way of life
- **Negatively:** condemn *inauthentic* acts, i.e. those done in bad-faith

Bad-Faith

To adopt strategies that disguise one's radical freedom and responsibility

- A way of avoiding anguish
- A form of self-deception

Examples of Bad-Faith

- Acceptance of “deterministic” theories
- Treating events as if they were just happening
- Overidentifying with a role
- Acting in accord with other people's image of you

Instead: be creative, rather than mechanical

But: no limits

The dreadful possibility of the authentic serial killer...?!@*#!

Limits on Authenticity

In willing freedom, we discover that it depends entirely upon the freedom of others and that the freedom of others depends on our own (E&H)

Q: But how can my freedom depend on yours, when each individual is “condemned to be free”?

A: To appreciate my freedom, I must also appreciate the freedom of others: *Reciprocal freedom*

Negative argument:

To the extent that I regard others as objects I cannot consistently regard myself as free either

Positive argument:

In acting authentically, I express my own freedom, thereby valuing freedom, so I can't fail to value it in other beings

Rules out authentic serial killing, anti-semitism, fascism, slavery, etc.

But perhaps rules in freedom-evangelism?

Criticism

- **Does Sartre go back on his thesis of radical freedom?**
- **Are moral values as “subjective” as we first thought?**
- **Existentialist Ethics begins to look like a standard form of normative ethics (cf. Kant)**

Endorsement

- **Reminds us of our responsibility for everything we do, and the constant temptation to avoid it**
- **Responsibility tends to be either denied or ignored by other moral theories, which only provide excuses**
- **Sartre makes a place for grand life-structuring questions about how one is to live**