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Existentialism And Human Emotions Jean Paul Sartre

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795580884484077

Introduction: The Storm of Feeling and the Philosophy of Freedom

What does it mean to be truly free? For most of us, freedom is about external choices—where to live, what career to pursue, or whom to love. Yet, the 20th-century French philosopher **Jean Paul Sartre** proposed a far more radical and unsettling idea. He argued that we are "condemned to be free." This freedom is not a gift but a burden, and nowhere is this burden more intensely felt than in the realm of our emotions. The connection between **Existentialism And Human Emotions Jean Paul Sartre** explored in his seminal works like *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*offers a transformative lens through which to understand our own inner lives. Rather than viewing fear, love, or shame as simple biological or psychological reactions, Sartre saw them as fundamental choices—strategies we employ to navigate the terrifying reality of our own radical freedom. This article will delve deep into the existentialist perspective on human emotion, exploring how Sartre's philosophy redefines our most intimate experiences and challenges us to live more authentically.

Understanding the Pillars of Sartrean Existentialism

Before we can understand Sartre's view on emotions, we must first grasp the foundational principles of his existentialism. The most famous of these is the maxim **"existence precedes essence."**This means that unlike a paperknife, which is designed with a specific purpose (its essence) before it is manufactured (its existence), human beings have no pre-defined nature or purpose. We are born into the world as a blank slate—an existence—and only through our actions, choices, and passions do we create our own identity or essence. This philosophy places an immense weight on individual responsibility. We are not the product of our genes, our upbringing, or our social class. We are, at every moment, the sum total of our past choices. This radical responsibility is the engine of our emotional lives.

The Concept of Radical Freedom

For Sartre, freedom is not the ability to do whatever we want. It is, instead, an inescapable structure of human consciousness. He calls consciousness a "nothingness" because it is not defined by any fixed content; it is always projecting itself into the future, imagining possibilities, and negating the present. This ability to "nihilate" the given world is freedom. Because we are free, we are also completely responsible for everything we do. There is no external force, no God, no fate, and no human nature to blame for our failures. This can be terrifying, and it is precisely this terror that gives rise to our most profound emotions.

The Existential Theory of Emotions: A Magical Transformation of the World

In his early work, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (also known as *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory*),

Existentialism And Human Emotions Jean Paul Sartre articulates a revolutionary idea. He rejects both the physiological theory (that emotion is just a bodily reaction) and the psychoanalytic theory (that emotion is a subconscious symptom). Instead, he proposes that emotion is a **conscious strategy**—a “magical transformation of the world.”

When we are faced with a difficult situation that our rational, pragmatic powers cannot handle, emotion becomes a means of escape. But this is not an escape from the world; it is a transformation of it. If I am afraid of a ferocious animal, I do not simply feel a physiological change. According to Sartre, my consciousness “magically” alters the animal’s nature. It is no longer a complex being that could be reasoned with or avoided; it becomes a terrifying, overwhelming force. I “faint” into the emotion to make the world disappear. By losing consciousness, I have solved the problem—by denying the existence of the threatening object. Of course, this is a false solution, a degradation of consciousness, but it reveals the profound intentionality behind our feelings.

Emotion as a Choice

This is the most challenging and liberating aspect of Sartre’s theory. He argues that emotions are not passive states that happen to us We are not struck by fear like we are struck by a storm. Instead, we choose our fear. We select the emotional response as the best possible way to cope with a situation. This does not mean we consciously say, “I will now be sad,” but that our pre-reflective consciousness elects the emotional path. If I am sad about a failed relationship, my sadness is a way of making the world seem dull and grey, which justifies my inaction. It is a chosen behavior designed to avoid the more difficult task of taking responsibility for my happiness. This perspective places the power—and the blame—squarely back on the individual. Understanding Existentialism And Human Emotions Jean Paul Sartre teaches us that we are the authors of our own moods.

Three Fundamental Emotional Experiences: Anguish, Forlornness, and Despair

In his popular lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre outlines three specific emotional states that arise directly from the human condition. These are not just feelings; they are essential characteristics of an authentic awareness of our freedom.

Anguish (Angoisse)

Anguish is the dizzying realization that we are radically free and that our choices define the world for everyone. Sartre gives the example of a man standing on a cliff. He is not afraid of falling; he is anguished by the realization that he could choose to jump. He is also anguished because he knows that there is no external moral code telling him not to jump. He must choose his own values. Every choice we make is a proposal for what humanity should be. When you choose a partner, you are implicitly saying, “This is the kind of person worth loving.” This responsibility for all of mankind is the source of profound anguish. It is the emotion of realizing that you are the sole, unsupported foundation of your own values.

Forlornness (Délaissement)

Forlornness is the emotion that follows the realization that God does not exist. For Sartre, this is not a matter of joyful celebration but of deep, sobering loss. If God is dead, then there are no a priori values, no divine plan, and no commandments written in the sky. We are utterly alone, with no excuses. Dostoevsky famously wrote, “If God is dead, then everything is permitted.” Sartre agrees, but he points out that this is a terrifying “everything.” It means we have no moral compass external to ourselves to justify our actions. We cannot blame our upbringing, our society, or our stars. We are forlorn, and this emotional state is the necessary precondition for taking full responsibility for our lives.

Despair (Désespoir)

Finally, despair is the emotion that stems from acknowledging the limits of our control. Sartre is careful to distinguish despair from hopelessness. For the existentialist, despair is the acceptance that we can only rely on

what is within our power. We can control our own actions and our own will, but we cannot control the outcome of those actions. We cannot control what other people do, nor can we control the future. I can write a book, but I cannot control whether it is a success. I can love someone, but I cannot control whether they love me back. Despair is the clear-eyed acceptance of this limitation. It is an emotion that strips away false hope and bad faith, forcing us to act without the guarantee of a happy ending. It is a courageous emotion.

Bad Faith (Mauvaise Foi) and the Emotional Lie

No exploration of **Existentialism And Human Emotions Jean Paul Sartre**would be complete without discussing the central concept of “Bad Faith.” Bad faith is the act of lying to oneself to escape the burden of freedom and responsibility. It is a denial of our radical freedom. Emotions are the primary vehicle for bad faith.

- The “Excuse” of Temperament: How often do we say, “I’m so angry because I have a short temper”? Sartre would call this a lie. You are not a victim of your temper; you are choosing anger to avoid a more difficult confrontation. Bad faith uses emotion as a passivity, pretending that the feeling is an overwhelming force rather than a chosen project.
- Playing at Roles: A waiter in a café might move a little too quickly, speak a little too loudly, and act a little too perfectly. He is “playing at being a waiter,” reducing himself to a mere social function. This is a form of bad faith because he is denying his transcendence (his ability to be more than his job) and pretending to be a fixed object. Emotions of boredom or dutifulness can be part of this role-playing.
- Emotional Manipulation: Sartre analyses a coquette who is being courted by a man. She knows the man desires her, and she knows she is attracted to him. But she refuses to acknowledge this reality. She focuses only on the intellectual aspects of the conversation, “disembodying” herself. She is choosing a state of emotional confusion to avoid having to say “yes” or “no.” Her emotion is a tool of self-deception.

Living authentically, therefore, means recognizing when we are using emotions as a shield. It means owning our feelings as our own choices, rather than suffering them as afflictions.

The Practical Legacy: Applying Sartre’s Emotional Philosophy Today

The philosophy of **Existentialism And Human Emotions Jean Paul Sartre**is not an abstract academic exercise. It has profound practical implications for modern life, particularly in the realms of psychology, self-help, and personal resilience.

Emotional Responsibility and Mental Health

Modern cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) echoes many of Sartre’s insights. CBT teaches that our emotions are not caused by events, but by our **interpretation** of events. Sartre would say that is not enough—our interpretation is itself a choice. The existentialist take on therapy encourages clients to move beyond “anger management” and toward “authenticity management.” It asks: *What purpose is your sadness serving? What responsibility are you avoiding through your anxiety?*

This is a difficult path. It suggests that depression is not a disease that happens to you, but a project you are undertaking. This can be seen as harsh, but Sartre would argue that it is ultimately liberating. If you are responsible for your depression, you also have the power to choose differently. You are not a helpless victim of brain chemistry or childhood trauma. You are a free consciousness that has chosen a magical transformation of the world into a grey, hopeless place. The solution is not a pill but a radical re-evaluation of your choices.

Authenticity in Relationships

Sartre famously said, “Hell is other people.” But he meant this not in a misanthropic sense. Hell is being looked at by others because their gaze freezes us into an object. We are constantly tempted to be what others expect us to be. In relationships, we often use emotions to control others or to escape. We cry to manipulate, we get angry to intimidate, or we withdraw to punish. An authentic relationship, from an existentialist perspective, is

one where both people recognize each other as free subjects. It means admitting your fear, owning your jealousy, and confessing your love without demanding a guarantee of return. This is terrifying, but it is the only way to love without bad faith.

Conclusion: The Courage of Feeling

The exploration of **Existentialism And Human Emotions Jean Paul Sartre**offers us a demanding but exhilarating picture of human life. It strips away the comforting

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