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Jean Paul Sartre Existentialism And Humanism Sparknotes

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Understanding Jean Paul Sartre Existentialism And Humanism: A Path to Authentic Living

Jean Paul Sartre's landmark lecture and subsequent essay, **Existentialism And Humanism** (often translated as "Existentialism is a Humanism"), stands as one of the most accessible yet profound introductions to existentialist philosophy. Delivered in 1946 at the Club Maintenant in Paris, this work was Sartre's direct response to critics who accused existentialism of being gloomy, nihilistic, and anti-human. Instead, Sartre boldly argued that existentialism is the most optimistic and empowering philosophy of the modern age precisely because it places the full weight of human freedom and responsibility on the individual. For anyone seeking to understand the core tenets of existentialist thought, Sartre's **Existentialism And Humanism**remains an essential starting point, offering a defense that links personal freedom to a broader, engaged humanism.

The Historical Context: Why Sartre Wrote Existentialism And Humanism

To fully appreciate **Jean Paul Sartre Existentialism And Humanism**, it is helpful to understand the intellectual climate of post-World War II Europe. The war had shattered traditional values, religious certainties, and faith in human progress. Existentialism, with its emphasis on individual choice in a meaningless universe, was gaining popularity but also attracting sharp criticism. Christian critics, for instance, attacked Sartre for denying divine providence and moral absolutes. Communists accused existentialism of promoting bourgeois individualism and political quietism—a withdrawal from collective social action.

Sartre wrote **Existentialism And Humanism**as a public defense. He wanted to show that existentialism was not a philosophy of despair but one of action, engagement, and deep respect for human dignity. He sought to clarify misunderstandings and to demonstrate that acknowledging the absence of a preordained purpose does not lead to chaos but to a more profound sense of personal and collective responsibility. This lecture was his attempt to reclaim the narrative and present existentialism as a coherent, ethical humanism for the modern world.

Existence Precedes Essence: The Foundation of Sartre's Thought

The single most important principle in **Jean Paul Sartre Existentialism And Humanism** is the famous dictum: **"existence precedes essence."**To understand this, consider a manufactured object like a paper-knife. A craftsman has a concept (essence) of the knife in his mind before he makes it. He knows its purpose, its design, and its material. The knife's essence—what it is intended to be—comes before its existence.

Sartre argues that for human beings, the opposite is true. Unlike the paper-knife, we are not created according to a pre-existing concept or divine plan. There is no fixed human nature, no predetermined purpose, no "blueprint" for what a person should be. We are simply born into the world first, and only then do we define

ourselves through our choices and actions.

- No preordained human nature: There is no universal "human essence" that applies to all people at all times.
- Man is what he wills himself to be: Our identity is not given; it is created through our decisions.
- Radical freedom: We are condemned to be free because we have no choice but to choose.

This reversal—existence before essence—is the bedrock of Sartre's philosophy. It means that we cannot blame our genes, our upbringing, our social class, or even God for who we become. We are entirely responsible for crafting our own essence. This is both terrifying and liberating.

Freedom, Responsibility, and Anguish

If existence precedes essence, then freedom becomes the fundamental condition of human life. Sartre famously declared that "we are condemned to be free." This is not a joyful freedom but a burdensome one. Because there are no external values or divine commandments to guide us, we must invent our own values and create our own moral codes with every choice we make.

This realization leads to what Sartre calls **anguish**(angoisse). Anguish is not the fear of something external, like a tiger or a storm. It is the profound, vertiginous awareness of our own total freedom and responsibility. When you realize that your choices have no external justification, and that you are choosing not only for yourself but for all of humanity, you experience anguish.

Sartre gives the famous example of a young man torn between joining the Free French Forces to avenge his brother and staying home to care for his elderly mother. No abstract moral system can provide a clear answer. Christian ethics might say "love thy neighbor," but which neighbor? The distant soldier or the immediate mother? Kantian ethics might say "treat others as ends," but this also offers no resolution. The young man must choose, and in choosing, he creates the value of his decision. Anguish is the unavoidable companion of this radical freedom.

Bad Faith (Mauvaise Foi): The Flight from Freedom

Because anguish is so uncomfortable, humans often try to escape it. Sartre calls this escape **bad faith** (mauvaise foi). Bad faith is lying to oneself, denying one's freedom and responsibility by pretending to be a passive object rather than a free subject. It is the refusal to accept that existence precedes essence.

Sartre provides vivid examples in **Existentialism And Humanism** and his other works:

1. The waiter: A waiter who is "too much" of a waiter—who moves with exaggerated, mechanical precision—is playing a role. He is identifying himself entirely with his social function, pretending that he is nothing more than a "waiter-thing" with a fixed nature. He denies his freedom to be something else.
2. The coward: A person who says "I am a coward, I cannot help it" is in bad faith. They treat cowardice as a fixed essence, like the color of their eyes, rather than as a pattern of choices they have made and could choose to change.
3. The woman on a date: In a well-known passage, Sartre describes a woman who allows a man to take her hand but refuses to acknowledge the sexual implication of the gesture. She treats her hand as a mere object, not as part of her free, choosing self.

Bad faith is the opposite of authentic living. To live authentically is to embrace our freedom, to acknowledge our anguish, and to take full responsibility for our choices without making excuses.

Existentialism as a Humanism: The Ethical Dimension

The central thesis of **Jean Paul Sartre Existentialism And Humanism**is that existentialism is indeed a humanism. But Sartre is careful to define what he means by this. He rejects the traditional humanism that worships "humanity" as an abstract ideal or an end in itself. Instead, his humanism is grounded in the concrete

reality of individual human freedom.

"When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men."

This is a critical point. Because there is no fixed human nature, the values we create through our choices become models for everyone. When I choose to marry, I am not just making a personal decision; I am affirming that monogamous commitment is a valuable form of human relationship. When I lie, I am implicitly endorsing lying as a valid means of dealing with others. This means that personal responsibility is also universal responsibility. My freedom is completely bound up with the freedom of others.

You Are Your Actions: The Rejection of Determinism

Another key theme in **Existentialism And Humanism** is the idea that a person is nothing other than the sum of their acts. Sartre vehemently rejects the notion that we have hidden potentials, unexpressed talents, or secret virtues that are not actualized. You are not "brave potentially" if you have never acted bravely. You are not "a great artist" if you have never created art. What matters is what you **do**, not what you intend or dream.

- No hidden essence: You cannot appeal to a "true self" that exists beneath your actions.
- Life is what you make of it: Your life has the meaning you give it through your projects and choices.
- Cowardice and heroism are choices: A coward is not born; they are made through a series of cowardly acts. Similarly, a hero is made through heroic acts.

This is an empowering but demanding philosophy. It denies us the comfort of saying "I could have been something if only..." It insists that we are our lives. This is the heart of Sartre's humanism: the dignity of the individual lies not in some inherent quality but in the capacity for self-creation through action.

Criticisms and Sartre's Defense

Not everyone accepted Sartre's arguments in **Existentialism And Humanism**. Critics raised several important objections, which Sartre addresses directly in his lecture.

1. The charge of quietism: If there are no objective values, critics argued, why should we act at all? Why not just sit back and do nothing? Sartre responds that choosing to do nothing is still a choice. Quietism is impossible because human life is fundamentally active. We are always in the world, always making choices.
2. The charge of solipsism: If everything is subjective, how can we relate to others? Sartre counters that the existentialist realizes that they cannot define themselves without reference to others. The "You" is just as necessary as the "I." Freedom is only meaningful in a social context.
3. The charge of despair: If there is no God and no afterlife, what is the point? Sartre argues that this is a misreading. Existentialism does not lead to despair but to a sober acceptance of our situation. It encourages us to commit ourselves fully to this life, to action, and to the human community.

Sartre's defense is ultimately a call to maturity. He asks us to give up the comforting illusion of external guidance and to accept the full weight of our freedom. This is not a philosophy for those who want easy answers, but it is a philosophy for those who want to live authentically.

The Legacy of Jean Paul Sartre Existentialism And Humanism

More than seventy years after its delivery, **Jean Paul Sartre Existentialism And Humanism**continues to resonate with readers who grapple with questions of meaning, freedom, and responsibility. It has influenced not only philosophy but also literature, psychology, political theory, and art. The core message—that we are what we do, that we are responsible for creating our own values, and that personal freedom is inseparable from the freedom of others—remains profoundly relevant in a world that still struggles with uncertainty, moral pluralism, and the search for meaning.

Sartre's existentialist humanism is not a comfortable doctrine. It offers no safety net, no guarantee of success,

and no moral algorithm. What it offers is something rarer and perhaps more valuable: a vision of human beings as radically free, radically responsible, and radically capable of creating meaning in a universe that offers none. It is a philosophy of action, engagement, and hope—a genuine humanism for those brave enough to embrace their freedom.

Conclusion: Choosing Yourself, Choosing Humanity

In **Jean Paul Sartre Existentialism And Humanism**, we find a philosophy that refuses to separate the individual from the collective. Sartre shows us that to choose ourselves is to choose for all of humanity, and that our personal projects are never truly private. The message is clear: there are no excuses, no hiding places, and no external authorities to blame. We are alone with our freedom, but this solitude is not a curse—it is the very ground of our dignity. By accepting that existence precedes essence, we accept the challenge of creating ourselves and, in doing so, of creating a world. This is the humanism of existentialism, and it is as urgent today as it was in 1946.

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