

Jean-Paul Sartre and Existentialism



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Existentialism

- “Existentialism is a catch-all term for those philosophers who consider the nature of the human condition as a key philosophical problem and who share the view that this problem is best addressed through ontology” (Douglas Burnham, “Existentialism,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)
- Three central concerns:
 1. Individual human beings: general theories about human nature leave out what is important about individual experience
 2. Meaning: importance places on the meaning or purpose of human existence, rather than either scientific or metaphysical truths □ inner experience more important than objective truth
 3. Emphasis on freedom: we each have the ability to choose our actions, purpose, values, etc. We must realize our freedom and act on it.

Early existentialists

- These philosophical themes have appeared in various philosophers in various times □ to be existentialist philosopher, though, requires some analysis of the human condition
- Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855): first modern existentialist
 - Reacted against the abstract philosophical systems of Hegel □ they are a mansion in which the owner does not actually live
 - Focused on individual and their life choices
 - Three basic attitudes of life: the aesthetic (pleasure), the ethical (duty), and the religious (the highest)
- Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900): “God is dead” and we have to find our purpose alone
 - Freedom to change the basis of our values

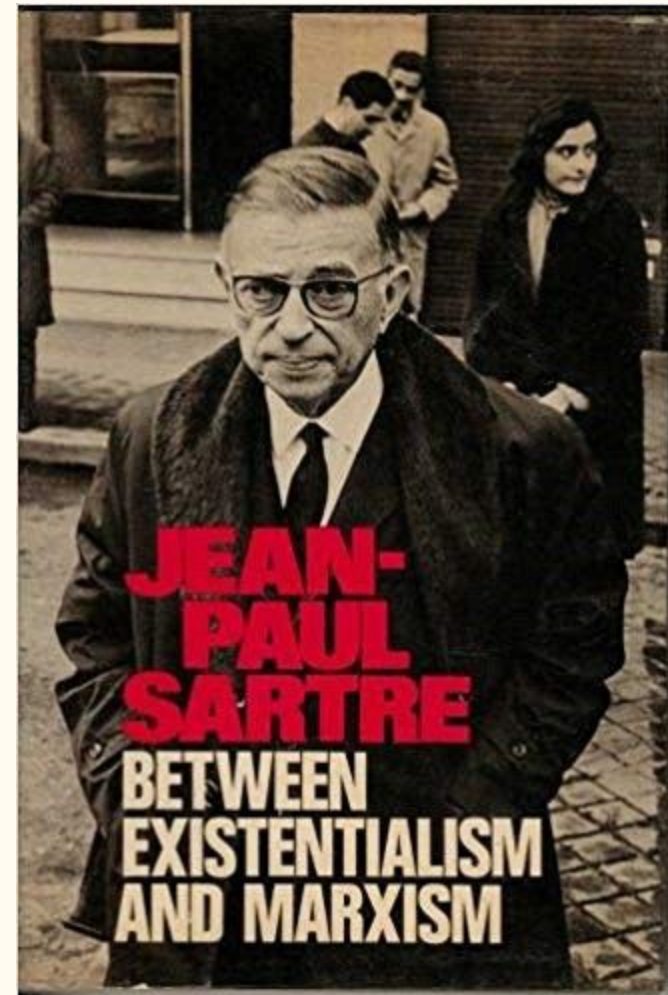
Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)



- Was a prisoner of war during the Nazi occupation of France □ sympathetic to French resistance to fascism
- Most important work is *Being and Nothingness* (1943) which was influenced by Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927)
- War and violence in Europe □ led to pessimistic account of human condition
- Each person faced with choice: collaboration with Nazis, risky resistance, or quiet self-preservation

Sartre and Marxism

- Devoted his life to intellectual pursuits □ moved from the individualist approach in early writings and began to focus on social and class issues
- Argued for a classless democratic society □ necessary for true human freedom
- Marxism is “the inescapable philosophy of our time” □ though needed modification via existentialism
- Supported Algerian independence from France and opposed US war in Vietnam
- Passage 1 on handout



Being and Consciousness

- Being-for-itself: consciousness or “human reality”
 - Intentional, consciousness *of something* distinct from subject (subject and object dualism)
- Being-in-itself: inanimate, nonconscious reality
 - No awareness of anything, no conception of self
- Sounds similar to mind/body dualism of Descartes, but it is different
 - Human being a unified reality
 - No distinguishing between two substances, but two modes of being: “the way that conscious beings exist is different from the way that inanimate things exist.”

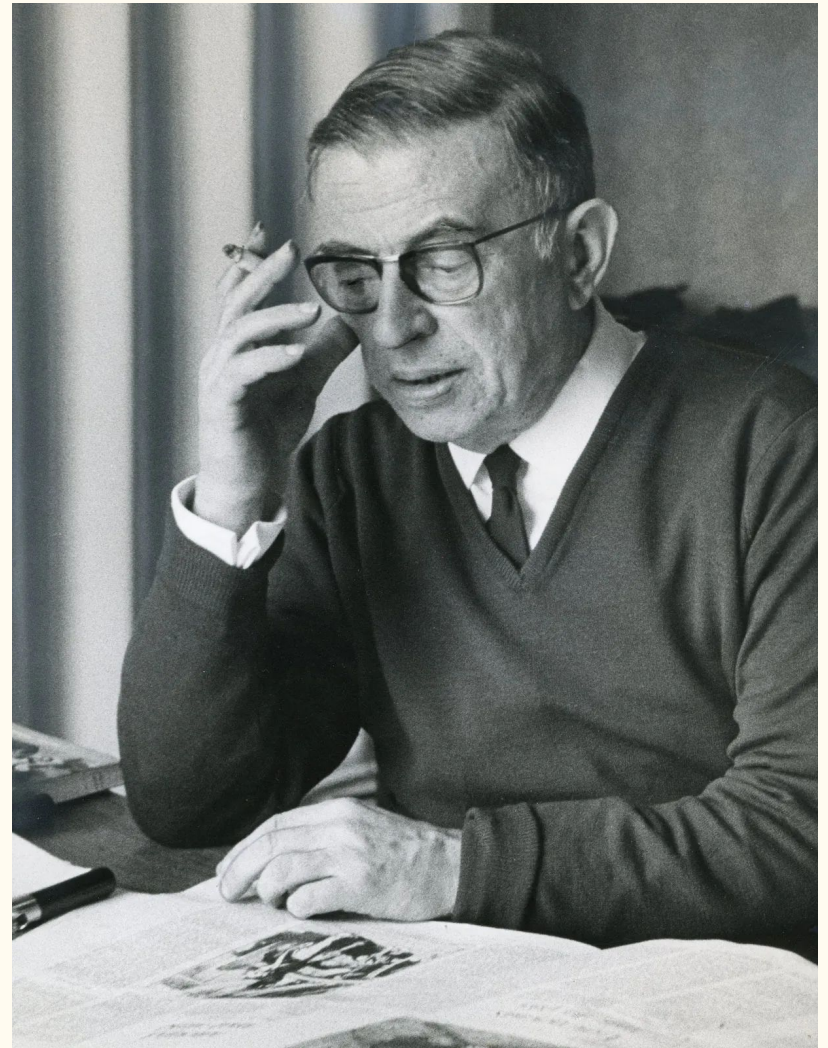
No external justification for values



- Differs from the theist not just in metaphysics, but entire life view
 - No transcendent values set for us
 - No commandments from God
 - No Platonic Form of the Good
 - No meaning or purpose in human life
 - No Aristotelean *telos*
 - No Heavenly Father to tell us what to do
 - No external or objective justification for values

Sartre and the denial of God

- Important metaphysical assertion: there is no god.
- Sartre: we all desire to be God
 - to be our own foundation
 - We would like to be perfectly complete and self-justifying
 - We aspire to become in-itself-for-itself
- **In-itself-for-itself:** the coming together of being-in-itself and being-for-itself



For-itself: the incompleteness of human experience

“The for-itself, as the locus of subjective experience, is what brings value and meaning to the universe. Without it, the universe really would be nothing more interesting than atom-sized billiard balls smacking into each other. However, there is a problem with the for-itself; namely, it lacks the certainty and ‘fullness’ that comes with being. As something as insubstantial as a perspective or a relation, it is consigned to an ambiguous existence, never attaining a ‘full’, or ‘pure’, being. It is never wholly ‘this’ or ‘that’ thing, for if it were, it would immediately cease to be consciousness and become in-itself instead”

(Nathan Hohipuha, “Sartre and Buddhism”).

For-itself or in-itself

- The for-itself: aware of this lack
 - Existence is incomplete, a subject always separate from an object
 - Leads to alienation
 - Consciousness is always consciousness *of something* □ consciousness of something other is the beginning of subject/object dualism
 - Incompleteness of the being of the *for-itself*
- Should we become *being-in-itself*?
 - We would gain the certitude and completion of in-itself
 - But we would lose consciousness □ self-annihilating
 - Achieved complete being but unable to know ourselves as being
 - Root of the desire to become *in-itself-for-itself*

Sartre and Human Nature

- No stable human nature or essence that comes before individual choice: “existence precedes our essence”.
- Neither scientific or religious: no god or evolutionary purpose □ only what we choose
- Only truth of human nature: radical freedom
 - Only limitation to freedom is that we can not choose to not be free
 - We are “condemned to be free”
- Negation and nothingness:
 - Consciousness recognizes that it is *not* the object it perceives □ many things are *not* the case and/or we lack many things
 - Concept of nothingness or negation □ related to freedom
 - In order to conceive of what is not implies freedom to imagine and choose other possibilities
 - Consciousness is largely about desiring things to be different and conceiving things that are different □ not as they are
 - Nothingness and negation suggests absolute freedom of mind and action

Against mental determinism

- Rejects Freud's mental determinism and the idea of the unconscious
 - Freud believed that decisions were not made using reasoned free will but were influenced by the unconscious mind
- Sartre: we can choose our mental states, like emotions □ as well as character traits
 - "I am not shy, I choose to be shy"
- Radical freedom is clear when we make resolutions
 - I might say that I won't eat cookies, but when the next week comes I am free to eat them □ I am not constrained by my past resolution
- Being confronted by choices creates angst □ when we confront our freedom it brings anxiety