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J-P Sartre & Existentialism

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existentialism

A philosophical position associated with two main theses: first, that humans have a special sort of existence that always points beyond itself and which cannot be assimilated to the mode of existence of nonhuman things; second, that it is possible to overcome the error of conceiving of ourselves as fundamentally alienated or estranged from the world by revealing the dependence of a significant world upon human meaning-bestowing practices.

Such a characterization of existentialism is not uncontentious, especially when compared with the received popular view. Existentialism is often popularly portrayed as advocating a form of nihilism and a consequent flight into irrationality: the world as a whole is without meaning or value and actions are groundless and arbitrary; the lack of any necessity for the existence or order of the world leads to a sense of despair and Angst in the face of actions and a life that is free but, if we are honest, seen as irredeemably and utterly groundless and futile; the individual can at best act only in response to his “true self,” knowing no external standards exist against which to check his values.

That such a view of existentialism is mistaken can be gleaned from an examination of the two most important existentialists, Heidegger and Sartre. That the misconception has arisen is traceable partly to the inclusion of just about anyone from the history of human thought who has emphasized our Alienation from a world that seems to provide no justification for, and is unresponsive to, any System of values, often with the added complication of the “death of God” as external arbiter and law giver. Such a view is found in the writing of Albert Camus. There is also a confusion between existentialism as a systematic philosophical position and existentialism as a historical movement associated with its hangers-on who adopted the term to justify, in the apparent absence of anything but gratuitous and arbitrary guides to action, an egoistical, nihilistic, and sometimes hedonistic lifestyle tending towards self-destruction.

Apart from those already mentioned, important thinkers for the understanding of existentialism are Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Merleau-Ponty, Ortega y Gasset, and Simone de Beauvoir. More controversially, Nietzsche is sometimes added to this list.

Far from embracing our supposed alienation from the world, existentialism seeks to overcome it. It does so by rejecting the fruit of Cartesian philosophy which in one sense culminates in the Phenomenology of Husserl. While existentialism accepts Husserl’s view that the distinctive nature of human consciousness is its intentionality – that in any conscious act there is always a pointing to an object of attention – it rejects the Cartesian-inspired project of a significant world emerging from a process whereby all the contingencies of the human perspective are stripped from our conception of the world to reveal it as it is in itself: a view from nowhere. It is the world thus characterized, supposedly the true objective view of it, which is revealed by the nonperspectival disinterested standpoint of the detached ego or soul, that inevitably leads to a fundamental rift with and our alienation from the world. The first step in undermining this view comes from making phenomenology existential, holding that not only is all consciousness intentional, but that also it must in its conscious acts point to something that is not-consciousness. This undercuts the idealism latent in Husserl’s pure phenomenology. Existentialism attempts to overcome world alienation by arguing for the logical primacy of the world significances that arise from our concrete encounter with the world as actors with distinctively human needs and purposes. Without such concrete being-in-the-world in a manner distinctive of human conscious existence (see Heidegger’s term *Dasein*) – as opposed to as a detached transcendental ego – no world of any significance would emerge at all, and without such significances there is no mechanism for referring to the world. There can be no *a priori* apprehension of pure meanings. We are beings “thrown” *in* the world, and it is only in grappling or dealing with it as a problem in human actions and

projects, encountered as an “obstacle,” that a world of significance appears at all. In this sense there is no question of one’s being alienated from the world, for we have recaptured the primacy of a world that is suffused with human values, that is, the concrete everyday world essential to human survival and action, which is not one made flat by neutral disinterest, but one highlighted and given shape by human concerns. It must be emphasized that such a human world, one of significances-for-human-beings, is not inferior to the world of scientific or metaphysical speculation, or one that is merely “subjective,” to be transcended by a truer “objective” view, for such a disinterested view, if possible at all, is in fact parasitic upon the world arising from our being-in-the-world: the world as it is for human beings. The whole tendency of existentialism is to erase the subjective– objective dichotomy, since the basis for its articulation is misconceived.

The distinctive mode of human existence is in Sartre’s phrase that it is what it is not, and is not what it is. Consciousness, being-for-itself, stands out from the mode of existence of things, being-in-itself. Unlike a nonhuman thing which simply is, human conscious existence has no predetermined essence fixing its nature; rather, it makes itself in its acts and is constantly becoming, pointing beyond itself to future projects. Human existence is characterized by the process of becoming, and only by including in its description what it is not yet can a description be adequate. Indeed, only in death can some kind of assessment of what kind of person one was be legitimately made. The interdependence of the existence of consciousness (as not-a-thing which emerges only in its separation from the nonconscious object of its conscious act) and the existence of the world (which is intelligibly referred to, has significance and meaning, only as an object for consciousness) dissolves the mind– body dualism that leads to the problem of the knowledge of the existence of the external world and our alienation from it. In the same way our knowledge of other minds is grounded in some aspects of our self-awareness which presuppose that we view ourselves as an object for others.

Existentialism emphasizes our freedom by arguing that in the human mode of being existence precedes essence. We first are, then become what we are. Existentialism argues thus not to support the view that human action must be arbitrary, capricious, and irrational, based perhaps on gut instincts or an adherence to being “true to oneself” – there is in fact no self other than that created in acts – but rather to emphasize that the responsibility for one’s life rests only with oneself. It does not entail that moral choice is merely one of invention. To deny this freedom is to act in “bad faith.” To live in full knowledge of our freedom, that we are responsible for our life and cannot pass such responsibility to an external authority – we would in any case have to choose – is to live with authenticity. To live capriciously and inconsistently with disregard for the consequences of one’s decisions, and without commitment, would be to live inauthentically.

Reading

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Sartre, Jean-Paul (1905–80)

French philosopher and writer, closely associated with the philosophy of Existentialism. He is also known for his plays and novels in which philosophical issues are often to the fore. Later in life he became increasingly absorbed in theoretical and practical politics. Important influences on him are Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Hegel, Jaspers, and Heidegger.

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943) he addressed philosophical problems regarding the universal aspects of the individual human consciousness and its relation to the world, but later in life became increasingly concerned with questions of social anthropology, the relations of groups, and believed that his ideas must become more socially responsible, which led him to attempt a *rapprochement* of existentialism and Marxism.

Sartre, following Husserl, accepts that the distinguishing feature of consciousness is “intentionality”: conscious awareness is always directed to an object of attention. He rejects the idealism latent in Husserl’s *Phenomenology* and insists that the object of one’s attention in a conscious act must be something that is not-consciousness. He suggests, as had Heidegger, that the world has significance for us only through our concrete being-in-the-world as actors with specifically human concerns, purposes, and needs. Such a world is logically prior, and is in no way inferior to the scientific world and metaphysical speculation which aim at a view of the world stripped of the distorting contingencies of the human perspective, one that is a passive pure disinterested spectatorial account of things, delivering the truth about the world as it is in itself; such an alienating view is parasitic on the world that emerges from our being-in-the-world.

Sartre insists that consciousness, being-for-itself, is not a thing at all, but defines itself through its negation (nothingness) in not being the nonhuman thing, being-in-itself, of which it is conscious. The interdependence of consciousness and a significant world undercuts dualism and the problem of our knowledge of the reality of the external world. Similarly our knowledge of other minds is presupposed in certain aspects of our consciousness of ourselves as a being-for-others, whereby we are aware of ourselves as an object of consciousness for others. These three modes of being are Sartre’s complete and uneliminable list of ontological categories.

Sartre concludes that we are forced to be free. Human consciousness is what it is not, and is not what it is. We have no fixed predetermining essence, no prior “real selves,” but rather make ourselves what we are only through what we do. We alone are responsible for what we choose to do and cannot pass the responsibility to any external authority in an attempt to escape our freedom; but it does not follow that we can act only irrationally. To act in “bad faith” is to attempt to evade our freedom while at root knowing that we cannot. Although conditioned by the “facticity” or circumstances of our situation, we have always the possibility of choice. To live in full awareness of our freedom is to act with authenticity. Only in death does an assessment of what kind of person someone is become fully legitimate.

In *Nausea* (1938) the existence and nature of the world in its full particularity are not intelligible or explicable: things are said to be “absurd” or “superfluous.” Particular things exist and have features which are not deducible from their falling under essences or universal concepts; the categorization of a thing as falling into a class of things gives no intelligible explanation of the existence and the individualizing features of a thing. Particulars are ultimately unknowable and science is a simplifying fiction. Nonexistent ideal objects, such as triangularity, are completely determined and made intelligible by their defining essence; they are all and only what follows from their essence. *Nausea* describes a nightmare world in

which things are starkly revealed as slipping out of being captured by our organizing categories and in which contingent causal laws break down.

Sartre's promised book on ethics failed to materialize. However, one ethical consequence might be the duty upon us not to reify the Other, by "The Look," as a being-in-itself, for in that way we fix others and deny their freedom. Nevertheless, it is difficult for us to resist this temptation because in fixing others as things we simultaneously undermine the other's ability to fix ourselves.

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