

## **Navigating Anguish in Sartre's Existential Philosophy**

### *CAS PH 248 Existentialism*

The condition of anguish is a fundamental aspect of the human experience in Sartre's existential philosophy. In essence, Sartre says that anguish is the reflective awareness of our own freedom and the ensuing burden of unlimited choice. As we come to the realization that we are solely responsible for our decisions, actions, and overall meaning of life, we are confronted with a profound sense of anxiety and uncertainty. We are forced to navigate a world without an inherent and clear meaning, forcing us to confront the consequences of our choices on the world and our own identity.

We face anguish in many forms everyday. For example, I am currently facing anguish in the sense of the future and the past. I know that I have gotten bad grades on my two midterms in one of my math classes. So I'm in anguish because I am fearful that my future self will continue to push off studying for the final and mess up my whole grade and GPA. While in the sense of the past, I kept telling myself that I would start writing the ten journal entries required before this class ends, but I continued to put it off. Now, I am overwhelmed with the sheer amount of work I have to do for all of my classes, and as a result, I am experiencing anguish.

In addition to this, as we navigate our unpredictable world, we inevitably encounter factors beyond our control. These can be societal norms, other people's actions and feelings, or natural events. These forces significantly shape our lives and affect our sense of identity and understanding of freedom. We then realize that our anguish not only stems from our own freedom, but also the influence of unforeseen external circumstances. This tension between these limitations and our radical freedom heightens our anxiety and further intensifies our anguish.

Because of this complicated relationship, we, as humans, are then tasked with finding a balance between grasping our freedom and adapting to the constraints of our environment. Sartre refers to the ways we try to find balance as the "safeguards against anguish." An example of a safeguard would be a form of self deception which Sartre calls, "bad faith". People with bad faith deny their freedom and are convinced everything is predetermined. They accept all that happens to them as not their responsibility and out of their control with nothing they can do. Another example is being for others. Instead of asserting one's freedom, one would instead conform to societal norms. Fitting into the crowd can give one a sense of security and structure knowing that there is something defined as "normal." This relieves them of the discomfort of having to make their own conscious decisions by following the well-trodden path. Lastly, one could also take no responsibility at all for their action and comfort themselves by convincing themselves everything will be alright. By blinding themselves to the reality of their decisions and actions, they take on an approach to life that ignorance is bliss.

The only real choice we have is to embrace our anguish. This allows us to confront the responsibility that comes with our freedom and create our own meaning for our lives. Once we accept our anguish, we can realize that this meaning is not isolated and extends to our immediate community and beyond. We can realize that our actions are not insignificant and actually have the potential to impact others, whether that be positive or negative. By recognizing our freedom and the responsibility it bears, we can choose to act in ways that promote good living for all. We can shape the world in ways that positively impact everybody and influence the meaning of others lives. Contrary to Sartre's quote, "In anguish, I apprehend myself as the

same time as being completely free, and as not being able to alter the world so that its meaning did not come from me,” we actually can give a meaning to the world collectively. In doing so, we can transform our anguish from a source of despair into a motivator for personal growth and positive change throughout our communities.