

## IS ETHICS SUBJECTIVE? SARTRE ON GOD, ETHICS, AND EXISTENTIALISM

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**Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980)** was a famous French philosopher, playwright, and novelist. His most famous works include the philosophical book *Being and Nothingness*, and the plays *No Exit* and *Nausea*. He was married to **Simon de Beauvoir**, who was one of the most important feminist philosophers of the twentieth century. In his essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Sartre is trying to defend his “existentialist” philosophy against criticisms from Marxists, Christians, and others.

**A little background to the essay.** The essay was written in 1946, just after Nazi Germany had been defeated and France had been liberated. During the war, Sartre had been captured by the Nazis and briefly held as a prisoner of war. However, he had been released within a year and allowed to go back to Paris. While back in Paris, Sartre had NOT joined his fellow existentialists (such as **Albert Camus**) in fighting the Nazis, but had instead spent his time working on philosophy (and had even took a teaching position that had been held by a Jew). After the war, “existentialism” became very popular (especially with college students), but was also attacked by many people for spreading “immorality.” Sartre’s essay is an attempt to (1) explain what *exactly* existentialism is and (2) to show how existentialism relates to ethics. For Sartre, this was also a personal matter, since many of the French opponents of existentialism (both right-wing Catholic conservatives and left-wing Marxists and Socialists) had argued that Sartre’s behavior during the war was ethically wrong.

### WHO ARE ALL THESE PEOPLE THAT SARTRE TALKS ABOUT?

“Existentialism is a Humanism” was written for ordinary people, and not just for philosophers. However, “ordinary people” in mid-century Paris actually knew quite a bit about the history of philosophy. With this in mind, here are a few of the most important people and ideas that Sartre assumed his readers would know about.

- **Aristotle (384 to 322 BCE)** was Plato’s most famous student. He is known as the “father” of biology and logic. He argued that humans were *essentially* “animals capable of reason” and that being “ethical” or “virtuous” just meant being a *good* rational animal. He concluded that cultivating character traits such as courage, moderation, honesty, friendliness, and generosity was *objectively right* for all humans. His views were later adopted by the theologian **Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)**, and they now serve as the basis for Catholic (and much Protestant) thinking on ethics. Aristotelianism and Thomism dominated philosophy (and science) until Descartes.
- **Rene Descartes (1596 to 1650)** was a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist (“Cartesian coordinates” were his invention, as were “laws of nature”). Among many other things, he is famous for his **cogito** argument “I think, therefore I am,” and for his claim that humans are essentially “thinking things” (as opposed to physical objects or animals, which simply take up space and obey the laws of physics). He was a **dualist** who held that the human mind (or soul) existed independently from the body (or brain).
- **Immanuel Kant (1724 to 1804)** was a German philosopher who has greatly influenced modern thought on ethics, art, and psychology. He argued that all rational beings (such as humans) are ethically required to follow the **categorical imperative**: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction.” This means, for example, that it is unethical to lie. After all, if you universalize lying (for example, “What would happen if everyone lied all the time?”) you reach a contradiction (for example, “In that case, there would be no point to lying, since no one would believe you.”) He held that the categorical imperative was knowable **a priori** (“simply by thinking about it”).
- **Karl Marx (1818 to 1893)** was a German economist and philosopher. Among other things, he argued that (1) the most important beliefs and desires of individual humans are entirely determined by their **material circumstances** (that is, by how much stuff they have, and of what sort) and (2) ethical people should therefore focus their time and energy on trying to improve everyone’s material circumstances. (Marx: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”)

Sartre also mentions some fellow existentialists: the Danish philosopher **Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)**, the Russian novelist **Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881)**, and the German philosophers **Frederich Nietzsche (1844-1900)** and **Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)**.

### WHAT IS EXISTENTIALISM? WHY SHOULD I BE AN EXISTENTIALIST?

**Existentialism**, according to Sartre, is the thesis that “existence precedes essence.” Here, **essence** means something like “purpose, or correct use”, while existence simply means “you exist, and are having experiences of the world around you.”

- Everyone (including Sartre) would agree that the sorts of tools made by humans have essences. So, for example, the essence of a hammer is “to pound nails”, the essence of a car is “to transport people and goods”, and the essence of Microsoft Word is “to create electronic documents.” These essences make it possible to say objectively what is “good” or “bad”—for example “A good hammer is one which pounds in nails well; a bad hammer doesn’t do this as well.”

- Many philosophers have held that humans *also* have essences, and that these essences determine what it means to be “good” or “bad”, or “ethical” or “unethical” in an **objective** sense (the *world* determines what is right or wrong). So, for example, Aristotle thought that humans were essentially “rational animals,” while Marx thought that they were essentially “products of their culture.” Many religions hold that God made humans in somewhat the same way as humans make tools.
- Existentialists emphasize that humans are forced to *choose* their own “essence”, “purpose,” or “goal.” This means, according to Sartre, that value is **subjective** (each *individual* gets to determine what is right or wrong for him- or herself).

So what does this mean for ethics? Sartre emphasizes two closely related ideas:

- **Human beings ought to feel (some) angst/anxiety about ethical choices, since there is no correct answer.** Existentialists claim that we always have to make ethical choices without knowing what the right answer is (in fact, they don’t think there is a right answer). Kierkegaard (a Christian existentialist) gives the example of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham *thinks* that God has told him to kill his son, but there is no way for him to know (1) whether this was really God (and wasn’t a demon or a mental illness) and (2) whether he ought to obey God (after all, there was no way of knowing whether God was *good*).
  - This sense of existential **angst** (“What should I do?”) leads naturally to **despair** (“I must decide for myself. No one can help me.”) Sartre emphasizes this does NOT mean we should be grumpy, sad, or suicidal—it just means that moral issues are tough, and we have to face this fact in order to live as **authentic** (“true to ourselves”) human beings.
- **“If there is no God, everything is permitted” (Dostoyevsky).** Existentialists argue that there could be an objective morality *only* if (1) God existed AND (2) it is possible for us to *know* that God existed. However, atheist existentialists (like Sartre) think that God *doesn’t* exist, while religious existentialists (like Kierkegaard) think we can’t *know* whether God exists.
  - Sartre gives an example of an ethical question that he thinks is “unsolvable” without God. A young man asked him whether he should (1) join the army to fight the Nazis and liberate France or (2) stay home and care for his dying mother. Sartre claims that, without God, *there is no right answer to these sorts of questions*.

## WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE YOU? OBJECTIONS TO EXISTENTIALISM

Sartre discusses a number of objections that other philosophers have raised to existentialism and tries to answer them:

- **Objection 1: Since existentialism teaches that all human action is futile, it leads to QUIETISM (passive contemplation; unconcern with what is happening around us).** Sartre responds that existentialism does NOT mean that human action is futile, but rather that actions have whatever meaning we assign to them. This means that, if we want to lead meaningful lives, we *have* to “get involved” with activities such as love, politics, and art. We should not be quietists.
- **Objection 2: Existentialism presents an unrealistically pessimistic view of human life, which overemphasizes the role of anxiety and despair.** Sartre responds that existentialism holds that a life must be judged by “what you do with it.” So, for example, a great artist *must actually produce great works of art* and a kind person *must actually be kind to people*. For some people, this causes angst and despair, since it means they can’t make excuses like “I know I acted badly, but I’m still a good person on the inside...” Sartre thinks this is actually an optimistic view of life, since we have control of what kind of people we are (there’s no “original sin”).
- **Objection 3: Since existentialism claims that the existence of individual human “subjectivity” precedes everything else, it can’t account for the importance of our relationships with other people.** Sartre responds that most of our subjective life is spent interacting with other people, and that no one (even an existentialist) can seriously entertain thoughts like “I am the only creature who really exists and matters, and everyone else is a figment of my imagination.”
- **Objection 4: Since existentialism claims that all value is subjective, it makes it impossible for us to say that things like murder (or Fascism, or the Holocaust) are wrong.** Sartre responds by saying that, when we choose how to lead our *own* lives, we are effectively claiming “This is the ethically *best* way to live for someone in my circumstances.” This allows us to meaningfully disagree with how other people choose to act.

## QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What do philosophers mean by essence? What is the essence of a chair? Of a bicycle tire?
2. Sartre claims that an individual human’s essence (and especially his or her choice of values) is due entirely to his or her free *choices*, and is NOT affected by things such as biology or culture. Do you think a biologist would agree with this? Would a sociologist?
3. Sartre’s example of the student is intended to show that SOME ethical choices “have no right answer.” Do you think that he succeeds in showing that this holds for EVERY ethical choice? Why or why not?
4. What do you think of Sartre’s own ethical choices during the war (which allowed him to get out prison camp, get a university teaching position, and publish his work in Nazi-controlled Vichy France)? Were these actions right? Wrong? A matter of subjective choice?
5. Do you think that adopting existentialism provides a satisfactory method for finding meaning/purpose in life? Why or why not?