

Analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre's Political and Existential Account of Anti-Semitism

In his work, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Jean Paul Sartre expands his primarily metaphysical existentialist philosophy into the political sphere with an analysis of phenomena exacerbated by the dominance of WWII Germany. While Sartre had previously explored novel concepts such as bad faith and anguish on a “blank slate” of personhood, his analysis of these concepts through a political/sociocultural lens raises even more questions and provides a new vantage point from which to analyze his ideas. This paper will analyze the evolution and application of Sartre's existential themes from *Existentialism is a Humanism* to *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Furthermore, Sartre's main arguments in *Anti-Semite and Jew* will be evaluated and its strengths and weaknesses will be highlighted.

Sartre sculpts the fundamentals of facticity, bad faith, freedom, and anguish in *Existentialism is a Humanism* and provides a handful of examples in which existential freedom may manifest itself, one being the case of the young man who is torn between going to war or staying with his sick mother. In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, however, Sartre takes the bold step of fleshing out some of these ideas and laying them on political issues of the time. The nebulous task of living authentically comes into focus when juxtaposed with a real world character that exemplifies bad faith and other existential treacheries. Mainly, the existential issue of bad faith is given a face, that of the anti-Semite. The anti-Semite, according to Sartre, is in blatant bad faith by reducing the existence of others (specifically people of Jewish descent) to an essence. The facticity of a Jewish person through this framework is an essence of evil, or more specifically, that of an anathema to the anti-Semite. Sartre provides a powerful description of the notion of a

Jewish person and from an anti-semitic perspective, “the Jew even contaminates the air [they] breathe” [A&J, 24]. Sartre also makes clear that in order for the anti-Semite to exist, it is necessary that there is a racialized other such as the Jewish people. From a strictly existential lens, the anti-Semite, according to Sartre, desires to reduce their own existence to an essence. This subconscious choice is motivated by a fear of one’s own freedom and responsibility. This is put eloquently when Sartre says, “Anti-semitism in short, is fear of the human condition. The anti-semite is a man who wishes to be a pitiless stone, a furious torrent, a devastating thunderbolt, anything but a man” [A&J, 53]. The ideology and actions of the anti-semite are diametrically opposed to the existential freedom and responsibility Sartre describes in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. According to him, “Moral choice is like constructing a work of art” [E.H, 45]. Not only is true identity cloaked by anti-semitism, but the freedom and responsibility to construct one’s values and projects is taken away and replaced with a base and dogmatic prescription for existence.

In addition to the desire to relinquish the self, Sartre wisely identifies that there is a certain camaraderie involved in the enterprise of the bigot. This is also illuminated when he states, “[One] has made [themselves] an anti-Semite because that is something one cannot be alone. The phrase, ‘I hate the Jews,’ is one that is uttered in chorus; in pronouncing it, one attaches himself to a tradition and to a community- the tradition and community of the mediocre” [A&J, 15]. Not only is this belief/course of action problematic by a reduction to the factual, but it even warps the facticity of the anti-Semite into a more desirable state of being. The guise of the anti-Semite is constructed in a way that inflates the self. Where prior works painted bad faith as a form of escape, Sartre’s account of this phenomenon illustrate that to

identify as an anti-Semite is not only an opportunity to use Jewish people as a scapegoat, but a way to conflate one's essence and personhood to that of a fabricated elite; to be an anti-Semite is to revel in a rich legacy of existential superiority.

Sartre blooms when explaining bad faith through the motivations of the anti-Semite. In prior works such as *Existentialism is a Humanism*, bad faith is clearly identified, but it can be hard to grasp in concrete terms with the exception of a few isolated examples. Sartre's feelings on bad faith are made fairly clear in this work when he says:

"I can pass judgement on those who seek to conceal from themselves the complete arbitrariness of their existence, and their total freedom. Those who conceal from themselves this total freedom, under the guise of solemnity, or by making determinist excuses, I will call cowards" [E.H, 49].

Who better fits the bill than the anti-Semite? The account of the anti-Semite beautifully demonstrates the problem of bad faith through a political phenomena that all readers would be familiar with. Furthermore, a clear image of facticity is given to the reader in *Anti-Semite and Jew* as opposed to a mere template in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. The factual self now also has a face, that of the Jewish person.

While *Anti-Semite and Jew* is a success in further articulating many of Sartre's ideas, he falls short in many political and practical ways. There is a poignant critique of the crisis of the self in the context of liberal democracy, but Sartre struggles to explain through his proposition of concrete democracy where facticity ends and consciousness begins when evaluating a person as subject. It is one issue to identify where the self is being jeopardized, but another to provide an existential anatomy of the self within the context of politics.

Aside from complexity of personhood from a political angle, another glaring issue is Sartre's inability to adequately capture what it truly means to be a Jewish person. While Sartre

successfully and extensively describes the quasi-essence and caricature of Jew as constructed by the Anti-Semite, he fails to fill the void with a fulfilling definition of who/what a Jewish person is. Critics might argue that he conflated Jewish identity with facticity itself as well as a mere composite of traditions and communal values. Factical identity is also complicated by notions such as hybrid identity. While it is clear that the identity of a Jewish person through the eyes of an anti-Semite is erroneously labeled as a singular essence, it is still unclear whether Jewish identity is completely factual. In this regard, it can be argued that Jewish identity is a factual aspect of the self that may inform the conscious, or the I, but does not hinder or dictate the agency of consciousness itself. From a semantical standpoint, the labels of anti-Semite and Jew may also raise confusion.

As with most philosophy, there lies an issue in successfully implementing the existential political ideas that Sartre introduces. While there is a thorough diagnosis of the issue at hand, there is less information of solutions. The subtitle of *Anti-Semite and Jew* is “An exploration of the etiology of hate,” not “An exploration of the etiology of hate and its subsequent eradication.” Sartre also falls short in regards to the pragmatic nature of his philosophy. His contemporaries such as Simone de Beauvoir take a more active stance in response to existential and political issues. Again, while an excellent commentary and diagnosis has been made on Sartre’s part, it would have helped him to take a page or two from de Beauvoir and other action oriented thinkers. Despite this, Sartre was not aiming to write an airtight political manifesto that shows how every individual can live authentically while embracing their facticity.

One might personally depart from Sartre’s thinking in regards to remedying the problem of the anti-Semite. While Sartre is correct in labeling anti-semitism as a passion with many

irrationalities and existential fallacies, one can argue that with thorough exposure, education, and life experiences, the tendencies of bad faith can be curbed and/or reversed. Perhaps this requires a far more optimistic view than the one informed by Sartre, but it is certainly not unfathomable.

Thought initially not well received, Jean-Paul Sartre's flesh and blood account of bad faith and other misdeeds in the work *Anti-Semite and Jew* is a strong step toward actualizing and applying philosophical principles of existentialism in the real world. It becomes clear where Sartre runs into the obstacles that come with navigating politics through philosophy, but some of his shortcomings provide strong insights into the complexity of humanity itself. One can clearly see the evolution and increasing detail of Sartre's idea from *Existentialism is a Humanism* to *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Furthermore, *Anti-Semite and Jew* is a valuable work that was the forerunner of many political existentialist accounts, notably historical/philosophical analyses like those of Simone de Beauvoir and Michel Foucault. Sartre was correct when diagnosing anti-semitism as an etiological issue; it is not a disease of the body, but that of the soul. Bad faith is breathed to life with this historical account, and while not perfect, it is certainly valuable when exploring the philosophical underpinnings and implications of bigotry, populism, and nationalism.

Sources:

1. Sartre, Jean-Paul, and George Joseph Becker. *Anti-Semite and Jew*. New York: Schocken Books, 1948.
2. Sartre, Jean-Paul, John Kulka, Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre, Annie Cohen-Solal, Carol Macomber, and Jean-Paul Sartre. *Existentialism Is a Humanism (L'Existentialisme Est Un Humanisme) ; Including, a Commentary on The Stranger (Explication De L'Étranger)*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007.