

11 Sartre

1. Existence Precedes Essence

Traditional view (essence precedes existence)

- For made objects (e.g., a paperknife):
 - The maker has a plan or concept (its essence) before it exists.
 - Its essence: what it is for, what it should be like, its proper function.
- In many religious / traditional philosophies:
 - God designs a fixed human nature and purpose.
 - Each person is an instance of this pre-given “human essence.”
 - Morality, meaning, and life-plans can be read off from this essence.

Sartre's existentialist view

- “Existence precedes essence” for human beings.
 - There is no God who has a plan or “blueprint” for humans.
 - Therefore, there is no fixed human nature that dictates what we should be.
 - A human being first exists (is “thrown into the world”) and only later, through their life, becomes something.
- For Sartre:
 - At the beginning, you are “nothing” in the sense of having no fixed essence.
 - Your essence = what kind of person you are, what you value, the meaning of your life.
 - This is not given in advance; it is created over time.

Key exam point:

For humans, unlike tools or artefacts, there is no pre-established essence. We first exist, encounter ourselves in the world, and only then define ourselves by what we do.

2. Freedom: “Condemned to Be Free”

Determinism vs libertarianism (about free will)

Determinism - Thesis: Every event (including every human choice and action) is fully determined by: - prior events + laws of nature. - Given the total state of the world at time T and the laws of nature, only one future is possible. - Implication for persons: - Your actions are ultimately the result of prior causes (genes, upbringing, environment, brain states). - You could not have done otherwise in the exact same situation. - Human beings are treated like complex objects,

comparable to tables or chairs whose behavior is fully predictable from their physical constitution and circumstances.

Libertarianism (about free will) - Thesis: Some human actions are not determined by prior causes and laws of nature. - When you act freely: - You genuinely could have done otherwise, even if everything before that moment had been the same. - You are a source of your actions, not simply a “result” of past events. - This is a metaphysical (philosophical) view about free will, not about politics.

Sartre’s position

- Sartre is a libertarian about free will and rejects determinism.
 - Determinism, he says, “makes a person into an object” like a table or chair.
- “Man is freedom.” There is no fixed human nature and no external plan; thus:
 - There are no given values or scripts that dictate your choices.
 - Every time you act, you choose, and you could have chosen otherwise.
- “Man is condemned to be free.”
 - You did not choose to exist, or to be in this situation, but:
 - Once you exist, you cannot avoid choosing; even not choosing is a choice.
 - There is no external authority or deterministic cause you can legitimately appeal to as an excuse.
 - From the moment you are “thrown into the world,” you are responsible for everything you do.

“No excuses” and responsibility

- Because determinism is false (on Sartre’s view), you cannot truly say:
 - “I couldn’t help it; it was my upbringing / my temperament / my passions / society / fate.”
- Sartre:
 - “There is no determinism — man is free, man is freedom.”
 - “The first effect of existentialism is that it places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely on his own shoulders.”
- You can try to hide behind excuses (passions, character, deterministic theories), but then you are in self-deception (bad faith).

Key exam point:

“Condemned to be free” means:

- 1) you did not choose to exist,
 - 2) there is no external script or nature that determines you, and
 - 3) you are therefore inescapably responsible for your choices and who you become.
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3. Essence Created Only by Actions

What is “essence” for Sartre?

- Your essence = what kind of person you are:
 - your character (cowardly, courageous, generous, selfish, etc.),
 - your real values and priorities,

- the meaning and purpose of your life.
- Traditional view: essence is given (by God, nature, biology, or a fixed human nature).
- Sartre's view: essence is made, not given.

“There is no reality except in action”

- According to Sartre, what creates your essence is only your actions, not:
 - your intentions,
 - your plans and promises,
 - your “potential” or talents,
 - your feelings or inner states,
 - your personality traits or temperament,
 - your self-image or identity labels.
- He insists:
 - “Man is not what he conceives himself to be, but what he wills.”
 - “There is no love apart from the deeds of love; no potentiality of love other than that which is manifested in loving.”

Implication:

If something never shows up in your actions, it is not part of your real essence. At most, it is an unrealized possibility.

4. Coward vs Hero: Actions Define You

How Sartre defines cowardice and heroism

- Coward:
 - A person who performs cowardly actions (e.g. repeatedly fleeing danger unfairly, betraying others out of fear, failing to take responsibilities one recognizes).
- Hero:
 - A person who performs heroic actions (e.g. courageously facing risk or sacrifice for worthy ends, persistently acting in the face of danger or difficulty).

Central point:

There is no such thing as a cowardly (or heroic) “nature” that fixes you independently of action.

- You are not a coward because:
 - you have “cowardly genes,”
 - you have a fearful personality,
 - you feel scared,
 - you imagine yourself as weak.
- You are a coward if, when actual situations arise, you choose cowardly conduct.
- Likewise, you are a hero only if you do heroic things.

Always free to change

- Because you are always free, Sartre says:

- There is always a possibility for a coward to stop being cowardly by choosing courageous acts.
- There is also a possibility for a hero to stop being heroic by ceasing those actions.
- Your past actions define who you have been so far, but:
 - Your present and future choices can re-create your essence.
 - You are never permanently locked into “coward,” “hero,” or any other label.

Key exam point:

On Sartre's view, whether you are a coward or a hero is determined solely by what you in fact do, and this is up to you to change at any time by choosing different actions.

5. Commitment (e.g. to a Monogamous Marriage)

What is commitment for Sartre?

- A commitment is not just:
 - an internal feeling,
 - a one-time verbal promise,
 - a self-image (“I'm a faithful spouse”).
- Rather, a commitment is:
 - a pattern of actions over time that expresses and sustains a chosen project or value.
 - your ongoing choice to structure your life in a particular way.

Example: commitment to a monogamous marriage

- To be genuinely committed to a monogamous marriage, on Sartre's view, means:
 - You regularly act in ways that honor that commitment:
 - * you remain sexually faithful,
 - * you say no to other romantic/sexual opportunities,
 - * you invest time, care, and energy into your spouse and shared life,
 - * you make long-term decisions (where to live, financial choices, etc.) with the marriage as a central priority.
- If you say:
 - “I'm deeply committed to my marriage”
but:
 - repeatedly cheat, lie, or neglect your spouse,
- then, for Sartre, your actions show that you are not committed, whatever you may claim internally.

Choosing for yourself and “for all humanity”

- Sartre also argues that when you choose for yourself, you implicitly:
 - endorse a value: you take what you choose to be better than the alternative.
 - You thereby “legislate” for all humans the value you express.
- Example: choosing monogamy
 - If you choose monogamous marriage for yourself (and actually act monogamously), you are:

- * implicitly affirming: “A life of faithful monogamy is better than its alternatives.”
- * thus, in Sartre’s terms, you are committing not only yourself but also “humanity as a whole” to the value of monogamy.
- This reinforces how serious commitment is:
 - you are not just picking a lifestyle; you are creating and affirming values through your actions.

Key exam point:

Commitment = not what you say or feel you are committed to, but the actions you consistently take in support of a project (like monogamous marriage). Your commitment is only as real as your behavior.

6. Love (e.g. Love of Your Mother)

Love as deeds, not just feelings

- Sartre: “There is no love apart from the deeds of love.”
- Love is not primarily:
 - a feeling in your heart,
 - a romantic ideal,
 - a private conviction (“deep down, I really care”).
- For Sartre:
 - Your love is what you do.
 - It is expressed and made real in concrete actions.

Example: love of your mother

- To love your mother (on Sartre’s view) is to:
 - choose to care for her in actual situations:
 - * visiting her,
 - * listening to her,
 - * helping her when she is sick or in need,
 - * sacrificing time or opportunities to support her.
- In his famous example:
 - A student must choose between:
 - * staying with his distressed mother, or
 - * leaving to fight in the war.
 - Sartre’s key point: the strength or reality of his love for his mother cannot be known independently of what he does.
 - * If he stays, he shows that love for her is decisive.
 - * If he leaves, he shows that his commitment to the war effort takes precedence.
- Feelings or “inner love” that are never acted on do not count, for Sartre, as real love.

Love, freedom, and responsibility

- Because you are always free:
 - You are always responsible for whether you act in loving ways.

- You cannot say: “I truly love her, but circumstances made it impossible to act” as a full excuse.
- Love is thus a freely chosen project, sustained (or not) by your day-to-day actions.

Key exam point:

On Sartre's view, you love your mother (or anyone) only insofar as you actually choose and act to care for them. Love is defined by deeds, not by intentions or feelings alone.

7. Quick Summary for Revision

- Existence precedes essence:
 - No God, no fixed human nature.
 - Humans first exist, then create their nature/essence through what they do.
- Libertarianism vs determinism:
 - Determinism: every action fixed by prior causes + laws → no real alternatives.
 - Libertarianism: some actions are not determined; you genuinely could have done otherwise.
 - Sartre: rejects determinism, holds libertarian free will.
- “Condemned to be free”:
 - You did not choose to exist, but you cannot escape choosing.
 - No external authority or nature determines your choices.
 - You are fully responsible; excuses (fate, character, passions) are bad faith.
- Essence created only by actions:
 - What kind of person you are = the pattern of your actions.
 - Not your intentions, plans, potential, feelings, or self-image.
- Coward vs hero:
 - Coward = one who performs cowardly actions.
 - Hero = one who performs heroic actions.
 - Always free to change by choosing different acts; labels are never final.
- Commitment (e.g. monogamous marriage):
 - Commitment is made real only by a sustained pattern of actions.
 - To be committed to monogamy is to consistently act faithfully and shape your life accordingly.
 - Choosing such a life also expresses a value you implicitly hold up for all humans.
- Love (e.g. of your mother):
 - “No love apart from the deeds of love.”
 - To love your mother is to actually care for her through concrete actions.
 - Feelings without action do not count as real love for Sartre.