

# 13 Haybron

## Sartre's Existentialism – Exam Notes

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### 1. "Existence Precedes Essence"

#### Key ideas

- For artifacts (e.g., knives, chairs):
  - Essence precedes existence: the designer has a plan/definition (its essence) before the thing exists.
  - Essence = what it is for, what it is supposed to be and do.
- For human beings (on Sartre's view, given God does not exist):
  - There is no divine plan, fixed human "nature," or built-in purpose.
  - We first exist — find ourselves thrown into the world — and only later define who we are.
  - So: "Existence precedes essence."

#### What "essence" means here

- A person's "essence" = their self-definition or character:
  - what kind of person they are (coward, hero, loyal, selfish, loving, etc.)
  - what values they actually live by.

#### Consequences

- There is no given role or destiny that determines what you must be.
  - You make yourself by how you live.
  - Any talk of "that's just who I really am inside" is suspect unless backed by consistent actions.
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### 2. Determinism vs Libertarianism (Freedom)

You must understand these general theories of free will to grasp "condemned to be free."

#### Determinism

- Determinism: Every event (including every human choice) is fully caused by prior states of the world plus the laws of nature.
- If determinism is true:
  - Given the past and the laws of physics, only one future is possible.

- Your “choices” are ultimately the inevitable outcome of factors beyond your control.

#### Libertarianism (about free will)

- Libertarianism (metaphysical, not political):
  - Some human choices are not determined by prior causes.
  - At the moment of choice, you could genuinely have done otherwise, even with the entire past and laws of nature fixed.
  - Free will requires this sort of deep, undetermined freedom.

#### Sartre's Position

- Sartre is a libertarian about free will:
    - Our choices are not fixed in advance by nature, character, or circumstances.
    - Radical, inescapable freedom is a basic fact of our situation.
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### 3. “Man is Condemned to be Free”

#### Meaning of the phrase

- “Condemned”:
  - We did not choose to exist.
  - Yet, once we exist, we cannot escape having to choose.
- “Free”:
  - We always have genuine alternatives; nothing fully determines our choices.
  - Even not choosing is itself a choice.

#### Why it feels like a “condemnation”

- There is no external authority (God, nature, tradition) that can tell us what we must do in a way that removes our responsibility.
- We are wholly responsible:
  - For our actions.
  - For what we become (our essence).
  - For the values we live by.
- This responsibility brings anguish:
  - We cannot hide behind “That’s just how I was made,” or “That’s my nature,” or “I had no choice.”

#### Determinism vs Sartre's picture

- Against determinism: Sartre insists that we ultimately decide.
  - We often feel determined (“I couldn’t help it”), but Sartre says this is usually self-deception to avoid facing our freedom.
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### 4. Essence is Created Only by Actions

#### Central claim

- A person's essence (who they are) is created only through their actions, not by:
  - intentions,
  - personality traits,
  - potential,
  - feelings,
  - social labels.

#### Coward vs Hero Example

- Cowardice/heroism are not:
  - built-in traits,
  - fixed psychological types,
  - predictions others make about you.
- On Sartre's view:
  - You are a coward if you in fact keep acting in cowardly ways (running away, abandoning others, refusing to face danger when it matters).
  - You are a hero if you in fact act courageously (facing danger to help others, persisting under threat).
- Your:
  - self-image ("I know deep down I'm brave"),
  - intentions ("I really meant to be brave"),
  - "potential" ("I could have been heroic")
 do not determine what you are. Only what you actually do does.

#### Freedom to change essence at any time

- Since there is no fixed, essential "inner nature," you are always free to act differently right now.
- Therefore:
  - A person who has been a coward can become a hero by actually acting bravely in future choices.
  - A person with a history of heroic deeds can turn into a coward by later refusing courage.
- There is no point at which your character is permanently fixed:
  - You are continually re-creating yourself through present actions.

#### Exam angle

- If asked "On Sartre's view, what makes someone a coward/hero?":
  - Answer: their pattern of actual deeds, not their inner feelings or potential.
  - Stress the possibility of change at any time through new actions.

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

Sartre's notion of commitment follows from radical freedom and "existence precedes essence."

#### What commitment is not (for Sartre)

- Not a once-and-for-all inner decision that magically fixes your future behavior.
- Not a deep feeling alone ("I feel very committed").
- Not a status or label ("I'm married, so I'm committed by definition").

What commitment is (in Sartrean terms)

- A project you continually enact through your choices.
- To be committed is:
  - to keep choosing in line with a certain pattern and value.
  - to keep acting in ways that realize that project in the world.

Commitment to a Monogamous Marriage

- To be committed to monogamy is:
  - To repeatedly choose fidelity:
    - \* not to cheat,
    - \* to invest time, care, and energy into this one partner,
    - \* to prioritize this relationship in concrete actions.
- You show your commitment:
  - by how you actually live: how you treat your spouse, the choices you make about sex, time, honesty, and shared life.
- Because you are always free:
  - the commitment is never guaranteed or automatic.
  - Every day you are free to break it — and thus free, if you don't, to re-affirm it.

Tension with bad faith

- A common form of bad faith:
  - Treating “I am a committed husband/wife” as a fixed thing, as if your role guarantees your behavior.
  - Using the role to deny your ongoing freedom and responsibility (“I’m married, therefore I will be faithful, end of story”).
- Sartre: Authentic commitment requires recognizing:
  - “I am the one who must keep choosing fidelity; nothing external forces me.”

Exam angle

- If asked “What is commitment on Sartre’s view?”:
    - Emphasize: ongoing action, not single promise or inner feeling.
    - Use monogamy example: you are committed only insofar as you act faithfully and keep choosing the marriage.
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6. Love (e.g., Love of Your Mother)

Sartre’s general strategy is the same: focus on acts and projects, not mere inner states.

What love is not (for Sartre)

- Not just a feeling of affection or warmth.
- Not purely an inner, private state you can have regardless of what you do.
- Not guaranteed by biological relation (you don’t love your mother just because she is your mother).

What love is (in Sartrean terms)

- A project expressed in an ongoing pattern of behavior:
  - a way of taking up the other person in your life.
- To love someone (e.g., your mother) is:
  - to act in ways that express care and value for her:
    - \* helping her when she's ill,
    - \* making time to see or call her,
    - \* listening, supporting, respecting her as a person,
    - \* organizing parts of your life around her well-being.

#### Feelings vs actions

- You might feel strong affection but:
  - if you never act on it (never visit, call, help, or even think of her in your concrete decisions),
  - Sartre would say this “love” is empty talk, or at least not your real project.
- Conversely, someone without intense sentimental feelings but who consistently cares and sacrifices might count as truly loving, because their actions embody the project.

#### Freedom and instability of love

- Since you are always free:
  - You are not bound by your past declarations of love.
  - At any moment, you can choose to stop loving by changing how you act.
  - Authentic love is therefore something you must keep re-creating through your choices.

#### Love and bad faith

- Bad faith in love:
  - Saying “I love my mother/partner; that’s just how it is,” while ignoring how your actions contradict this.
  - Hiding behind the word “love” to avoid facing the fact that you are not actually living that love.

#### Exam angle

- If asked “On Sartre’s view, what constitutes loving your mother?”:
  - Answer: A pattern of concrete actions that express care and value for her.
  - Stress: Feelings or intentions alone are insufficient; love is an ongoing project you enact.

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### 7. Bad Faith vs Authenticity (Useful to Tie Everything Together)

Not a separate exam topic, but helps unify Sartre’s views above.

#### Bad Faith

- Bad faith: self-deception about your own freedom and responsibility.
- Examples:
  - “I can’t help being a coward; that’s just my nature.”
  - “I had no choice but to cheat; my desires were irresistible.”
  - “I truly love my mother” while consistently neglecting or mistreating her.

- In each case, you pretend you are determined or that inner feelings alone define you, to avoid blame for your actions.

#### Authenticity

- Authenticity:
  - Acknowledging that you are what you do.
  - Owning your freedom and responsibility:
    - \* “If I am a coward, it is because I have acted cowardly.”
    - \* “If I want to be faithful/loving, I must actually live that in my choices.”

#### Connection to all exam points

- Existence precedes essence → no fixed nature; you define yourself.
- Condemned to be free → you cannot escape the task of choosing.
- Essence created by actions → coward, hero, lover, faithful spouse = patterns of deeds.
- Commitment & love → real only as ongoing projects enacted in what you do, not as inner labels.

Using this structure in an exam answer will show that you understand how all of Sartre's claims hang together.