

Sartre on Existentialism

Jean-Paul Sartre

(1905-1980)



- **French existentialist philosopher, playwright, novelist.**
- **Nobel Prize for Literature (1964), which he refused to accept.**
- **Today's reading: "Existentialism is a Humanism" — lecture delivered in 1946**
- **Most famous work: *Being and Nothingness* (1943; *L'Être et le néant*)**

“Existence Precedes Essence”

This is true of human beings, as both a species and as individuals.

Essence = *what* a thing is.

Existence = *that* a thing is.

Three Aspects of the Human Condition

Anguish/Anxiety — from realizing my total freedom and responsibility

Abandonment/Forelornness — from realizing the absence of God.

Despair — from realizing the freedom of others.

Anxiety

“Fear is fear of beings in the world;
anxiety is anxiety before myself.”

(Being and Nothingness, sect. 3)

“We are condemned to be free.”

(“Existentialism is a humanism”)

Abandonment

“We ourselves choose our own being.”

But how shall I choose?

Moral standards can't help me.

My feelings can't help me.

The advice of others can't help me.

... and there is no God to help me.

Despair

I am free ...

... and so is my neighbor.

Therefore I cannot, ultimately, count on the aid or agreement or promises of others.

Criticisms (and responses)

Existentialism is ...

- (1) Pessimistic [but we *do* control our lives]
- (2) Not serious about life [but life has meaning only to the extent that we *are* serious]
- (3) Quietistic [no one emphasizes human action more than existentialists]
- (4) Subjective: capricious, unable to judge others, and its self-chosen values are worthless.

Is Existentialism Subjective?

- (1) We must begin with the certainty of the self.
- (2) Other minds are a key feature.
- (3) There is a universal condition: freedom.
- (4) Freedom is not caprice, but the authentic creation of oneself through choice.
- (5) We judge others based on freedom.
- (6) There are no other values.