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The Burden of Freedom: Exploring Sartre's Existentialism

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Abstract

This article explores Jean-Paul Sartre's profound and challenging philosophy of existentialism, centered on his iconic assertion that "existence precedes essence." It argues that humanity is born without a pre-defined purpose or nature, thereby being "condemned to be free" and entirely responsible for self-creation through choices and actions. The inherent weight of this radical freedom manifests in three core existential emotions: anguish, arising from universal responsibility; forlornness, stemming from a world devoid of objective divine meaning; and despair, born from acknowledging limits to external control. The essay further delves into Sartre's concept of "bad faith," a form of self-deception where individuals deny their freedom by adopting predetermined roles, contrasting it with the imperative for authenticity. It distinguishes between the inert "Being-in-itself" and conscious, evolving "Being-for-itself," highlighting the futile human endeavor to achieve a complete, divinized state. Finally, the article examines the existentialist view of the Other as both constitutive and threatening to one's subjectivity, concluding that despite its often-bleak outlook, Sartre's philosophy ultimately serves as a powerful call to active commitment, self-definition, and ethical responsibility in an indifferent world.

Keywords: Existentialism, Sartre, Freedom, Authenticity, Responsibility

In the vast and often labyrinthine landscape of 20th-century philosophy, few figures cast as long and provocative a shadow as Jean-Paul Sartre. A French philosopher, playwright, novelist, political activist, and literary critic, Sartre became synonymous with existentialism – a philosophical movement that, for a time, captivated intellectual circles and penetrated popular culture with its stark assertions about human freedom, responsibility, and the often-disquieting nature of existence. His work, characterized by its rigorous yet accessible prose, offered a radical departure from traditional metaphysical and ethical systems, positing a view of humanity fundamentally unburdened by pre-ordained essences and consequently condemned to an absolute, often terrifying, freedom.

To delve into Sartre's existentialism is to confront a philosophy that places the individual at the absolute center of reality, stripping away comforting illusions of divine purpose, inherent meaning, or fixed human nature. Its core tenet, famously encapsulated in his phrase "existence precedes essence," serves as the philosophical bedrock upon which his entire system is constructed. This assertion overturns millennia of Western thought, which largely held that an object or being first possesses an essence (a blueprint, a purpose, a set of defining characteristics) before it comes into existence. For a craftsman building a paper-knife, the idea and purpose of the knife (its essence) exist in the mind of the craftsman before the physical object is created. The knife *is* its essence; its existence serves that essence.

Sartre argues that for human beings, this order is reversed. We are not created with a pre-defined purpose, nature, or set of values. Instead, we are simply *thrown into existence* – we *are* before we *are anything*. It is only after our existence that we begin to define ourselves through our choices, actions, and projects. We emerge as a blank slate, and through the trajectory of our lives, we inscribe our own meaning. "Man simply is," Sartre declared. "Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but that he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing, as he wills to exist after his leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." This profound statement is the linchpin of Sartrean thought, dismantling deterministic views of human nature and placing an enormous, almost overwhelming, weight of self-creation upon the individual.

The immediate and most potent implication of "existence precedes essence" is **radical freedom**. If there is no pre-given essence, no divine plan, no inherent human nature dictating our actions, then we are entirely free to choose who and what we become. There are no external moral codes, no universal values, no biological or psychological determinism that can ultimately compel our choices. Even inaction is a choice. This is not a freedom *from* circumstances, but a freedom *in* circumstances. We are free to choose our attitude, our response, our *being* in the face of any given situation. This freedom, however, is not a joyous liberation but often a source of profound discomfort, leading to what Sartre identifies as three fundamental existential emotions: anguish, forlornness, and despair.

Anguish (Angoisse) is not mere anxiety or fear; it is a profound awareness of the absolute and total responsibility that accompanies our freedom. When we choose, we are not just choosing for ourselves but, in a sense, choosing for all humanity. Our individual choices implicitly define what we believe to be good or right. If I choose to be courageous, I am simultaneously asserting that courage is a valuable trait for all humanity. This realization that my singular choice has universal implications, that I am entirely accountable for the values I bring into existence through my actions, generates an overwhelming feeling of anguish. It is the "dizziness of freedom," the recognition that there are no external signposts, no higher authority to validate our choices, and that we stand alone as the creators of our own moral universe. The burden of being the sole legislator of one's own values, without appeal, is what constitutes anguish. It is a feeling that arises not from what might happen, but from the realization of our absolute freedom to decide what we *will* do.

Forlornness (Délaissement) stems from the stark realization that "God is dead," or more accurately for Sartre, that God does not exist, and even if He did, it would make no difference to our fundamental situation. With no divine being, there is no ultimate source of meaning, no transcendent moral law, no pre-ordained purpose for humanity. We are, in Sartre's famous words, "condemned to be free." We are "abandoned" in a world without objective values, without a cosmic plan. This abandonment means that we cannot look outside ourselves for justification, for answers, or for comfort. We are left alone, to create our own meaning in a silent, indifferent universe. The ethical implications are immense: if there are no objective moral laws, then we must invent our morality through our choices. There is no escape from this responsibility, no external authority to defer to. The forlorness of the human condition is the experience of being utterly alone in our self-creation.

Finally, **Despair (Désespoir)** arises from the understanding that we can only rely on what is within our power to affect. We cannot depend on others' wills or actions, nor on probabilities beyond our direct influence. While we are free to choose, the outcomes of our choices are not entirely within our control. We can embark on a project with all our might, but external circumstances, the actions of others, or sheer unpredictable chance can always intervene. Despair, for Sartre, is not a passive resignation but an active

recognition of the limits of our influence. It means focusing on what *is* achievable through our actions, rather than clinging to abstract hopes or probabilities that are beyond our sphere of immediate influence. It is a call to commit to action without illusion, to understand that while we are free to choose, the world is not necessarily obligated to conform to our desires.

These three emotional pillars – anguish, forlornness, and despair – are not pathologies to be overcome but integral aspects of authentic human existence, the natural consequences of confronting our radical freedom and absolute responsibility.

Central to Sartre's philosophy is the concept of **Bad Faith (Mauvaise Foi)**. This is a form of self-deception, an attempt to escape the burden of freedom by denying it. Bad faith occurs when we try to convince ourselves that we are not free, that we are determined by our circumstances, our roles, our past, or even our "nature." We adopt the attitude of an object, a *thing-in-itself*, rather than acknowledging our subjective reality as a *being-for-itself*.

Sartre famously illustrates bad faith with several examples:

- **The Waiter:** A waiter performs his role with excessive precision, moving with an almost mechanical grace, as if he *is* nothing but a waiter, an automaton serving tables. By embracing this role so completely, he denies his transcendence, his capacity to be more than just a waiter, his freedom to choose a different life. He attempts to become his essence, forgetting that his existence precedes it.
- **The Coquette:** A woman on a date holds her suitor's hand while simultaneously denying that her action carries any sexual meaning or commitment. She tries to objectify her hand, separating it from her conscious self, denying her own intentions and her freedom to engage or disengage. She is trying to be both object (innocent hand) and subject (desirous individual) simultaneously, refusing to fully embrace the responsibility of her freedom.

Bad faith is thus an inauthentic mode of existence. It is an escape from the anguish of freedom, a flight from responsibility. Yet, even in bad faith, we are still making a choice – the choice to deceive ourselves. This reinforces Sartre's assertion that we are always, fundamentally, free. The opposite of bad faith is **authenticity**, which involves embracing one's freedom and responsibility, acknowledging the contingency of existence, and living without self-deception. An authentic person confronts anguish, forlornness, and despair, and makes choices fully aware of their implications, without relying on external justifications or predetermined paths.

Sartre's philosophy also introduces a crucial distinction between **Being-in-itself (En-soi)** and **Being-for-itself (Pour-soi)**.

- **Being-in-itself** refers to objects, things, inanimate matter. They simply *are*. They are solid, complete, and fully determined by their essence. A rock is a rock; it doesn't choose to be a rock, nor does it have consciousness or self-awareness. It lacks negation; it is what it is.
- **Being-for-itself** refers to human consciousness. Unlike the Being-in-itself, the Being-for-itself is characterized by negation. It is what it is *not*, and it is not what it is. This means that human consciousness is always in a state of becoming, always transcending its present state. We are always projecting ourselves into the future, defining ourselves through our projects. We are never fully complete or reducible to a fixed essence. Our consciousness creates a "hole" in being; it is a lack, a nihilation, which allows for freedom and possibility. This "nothingness" at the core of consciousness is what allows us to define ourselves rather than being defined.

This distinction is key to understanding the human project. We constantly strive to overcome this inherent lack, this "nothingness" of the Being-for-itself, and become a Being-in-itself-for-itself – a being that is both fully substantial (like an object) and fully conscious and free. Sartre calls this attempt to merge consciousness with substantiality the desire to become God, a futile and ultimately impossible endeavor. "Man is a useless passion," he concludes, as the project of becoming a Being-in-itself-for-itself is doomed to failure. This does not, however, invalidate the project of self-creation, but rather underscores its inherent absurdity and the tragic dimension of human existence.

Another significant aspect of Sartrean existentialism is the role of **the Other**. While much of his philosophy focuses on individual freedom, Sartre recognized that human existence is always lived in relation to other conscious beings. The presence of the Other introduces a new dimension of our experience: the phenomenon of being an object for another's gaze.

In his seminal work *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre vividly describes the experience of being caught by the gaze of the Other. Imagine peeking through a keyhole, fully absorbed in your own project, your own consciousness. Suddenly, you hear a floorboard creak, and you realize someone might be looking at *you*. In that instant, you are no longer just a Being-for-itself, a pure subject; you become an object in the world for another's consciousness. This experience is profoundly disquieting. The Other's gaze constitutes me, defines me, and in a sense, steals my freedom by imposing an essence upon me that I have not chosen. The shame one might feel when caught spying is not just about the act itself but about the raw experience of becoming an object, of having one's subjectivity momentarily alienated.

This encounter with the Other leads to conflict. Sartre famously declared, "Hell is other people" in his play *No Exit*. This is not to say that other people are inherently evil, but that their existence fundamentally threatens our own freedom and subjectivity. Each Other is a rival consciousness, seeking to make an object out of us, just as we seek to make an object out of them. Relationships, therefore, become a constant struggle for recognition and self-affirmation, a battle to avoid becoming merely an object in the gaze of the Other. Love, for Sartre, is often an attempt to possess the freedom of the Other, to make them freely choose to make me their ultimate value, which is another impossible project.

Despite the seemingly bleak outlook of radical freedom, anguish, forlornness, despair, and intersubjective conflict, Sartre's existentialism is fundamentally a philosophy of **action and commitment**. Because we are condemned to be free, we are also condemned to act. In a world without predetermined values, values are created through our choices and actions. To exist authentically is to commit oneself to projects, to engage actively with the world, and to take responsibility for the values one thereby creates.

This emphasis on action means that intentions alone are insufficient. We are defined not by what we *think* or *feel* but by what we *do*. A person is not courageous because they feel courageous, but because they perform courageous acts. A person is not good because they *intend* to be good, but because their actions manifest goodness. This is a pragmatic and deeply ethical call to engagement, urging individuals to choose their being through their doing.

Sartre's political philosophy, though evolving, was also deeply rooted in his existentialism. His engagement with Marxism, for instance, saw him attempting to reconcile individual freedom with historical and material conditions. He argued that while our fundamental freedom is undeniable, we always exercise it within specific "situations" – the concrete historical, economic, and social realities into which we are thrown. These situations do not negate freedom but provide the context for it. Freedom is not an abstract void but a freedom *to* act in specific ways, *from* specific limitations, *for* specific goals within a given situation. His later work tried to bridge the gap between individual subjectivity and collective action,

wrestling with how free individuals could unite for social change without falling into determinism or authoritarianism.

Critiques and Legacy: Sartre's philosophy has not been without its critics. Early criticisms often focused on its apparent pessimism, its lack of clear ethical guidelines, and its seemingly egocentric focus on individual subjectivity. Albert Camus, a contemporary and one-time friend, famously broke with Sartre over the issue of political violence and the meaning of revolt. Critics from religious backgrounds found his atheistic premise unsettling and nihilistic. Analytical philosophers often found his prose dense and his arguments imprecise.

However, the enduring legacy of Sartre's existentialism lies in its powerful humanism and its uncompromising demand for authenticity. Far from being a philosophy of despair, it can be seen as an invigorating call to self-creation and responsibility. By confronting the terrifying truth of our freedom, Sartre argued, we are empowered to live more authentically, to take ownership of our lives, and to create meaning in a world that offers none pre-packaged. His work urged individuals to abandon excuses, to resist the temptations of bad faith, and to embrace the full, often uncomfortable, weight of their existence.

In conclusion, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, anchored in the revolutionary concept that "existence precedes essence," fundamentally reshaped 20th-century thought. It is a philosophy that forces us to confront the profound implications of absolute freedom, manifesting in the searing emotions of anguish, forlornness, and despair. By exposing the self-deception of bad faith and highlighting the inherent conflict in our relations with others, Sartre laid bare the challenging conditions of human subjectivity. Yet, through this rigorous and often stark analysis, he ultimately presented a philosophy of profound humanism – a passionate insistence on our capacity for self-creation, our inescapable responsibility, and our urgent imperative to commit to action in the face of an indifferent universe. The burden of freedom, in Sartre's view, is simultaneously our greatest challenge and our ultimate dignity.

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