**Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions***

**Notes to the chapter “Existentialism”**

**Also published as “Existentialism is a Humanism”**

***Page numbers correspond to the book, not the article* “Existentialism is a Humanism”**

In this essay Sartre defends himself against certain criticisms of existentialist philosophy in general, and his variety of existentialism in particular. The criticism we will focus on mainly in class is the charge of *subjectivism*, brought up on pages 40 and 41.

In responding to the charges, Sartre is able to elaborate on some features of his existentialist philosophy.

The main feature that all existentialist philosophies share is the premise that *existence precedes essence.* This premise holds good for at least one being among all others: the human being. The example of the paper cutter illustrates the difference between the being of a human being and the being of a paper cutter with regard to this premise.

**Classical Philosophy: Essence precedes existence and the example of a paper cutter**

The paper cutter is fashioned after an idea that the creator of the paper cutter has in her head before making it. This is an example of essence (the idea of a paper cutter) preceding existence (the activity of being a paper cutter, i.e., cutting paper).

The implications to be drawn from this example: a paper cutter is a kind of object, a tool, and tools are artifacts (things created by a creator). Objects are things whose essence precedes existence in the mind of the creator of that object. Once the idea or essence of the object has been conceived by the creator, the existence of the object is fashioned in the likeness of that idea.

An object is a thing that does not have any freedom to change its essence. It does not have the freedom to choose its purpose in life.

An object is a thing that can be used as a tool by human beings; as a tool, the object functions as a means to achieving some intended purpose that is fixed by its essence. A paper cutter can’t do anything else except cut paper and other things of that sort. If it is used to do something else, say, as a paper weight or a door stop, then again, it takes the mind of a “creator” to imagine another purpose for the object, and then fashion it in a way that it can be used as such.

**Sartre’s position: Existence precedes essence**

A human being is a *subject,* not an *object.* A human being is not an object created by a creator (i.e., God).

Here Sartre is arguing against the position taken in classical philosophy. God is thought as the divine craftsman, a divine creator of everything that exists, including the human being. (Remember Descartes and the Third Meditation). This position can only be maintained if you assume that God exists.

Sartre, however, does not believe God exists. If God does not exist, this has many consequences for how we understand the existence of the human being.

First and foremost: the human being first exists then defines him or herself afterward.

“Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism” (15).

Implications of no God and no essence for human existence:

1. The human being is nothing other than what they create of themselves. That means originally and essentially, we are nothing. This nothingness means we must create something of ourselves.
2. The basis of human freedom lies in our nothingness and the will and necessity to create something out of this empty existence we are given. If our essence were fixed already, then we would be, like the paper cutter, without any choice as to what we should create and make of ourselves.
3. Human beings have no purpose (predefined). Our task is to create our purpose.
4. When I choose my purpose as a good one, I choose for everyone. There is no image of humanity that exists outside of what each person chooses for themselves. Each person exists as the model of what human being is. Thus in creating myself, I create all of humanity; thus I am responsible not only for myself, but for everyone.
5. Since the human being is nothing that means the project of self-creation is never finished. I must re-create myself through my projects and actions over and over again.

**Freedom means Responsibility**

If Sartre were to say what the essence of human being is it would be *freedom*. Human being is freedom (23). But as free, we are open and empty—nothing. This freedom is difficult because it is paradoxical: we are free to choose, within the constraints given by our existence, who we will be, but we do NOT have a choice about choosing. Our freedom logically entails the necessity of choosing actions that will create who we are.

Thus we are “condemned to be free” (23).

If my freedom defines me and my life, it means that no one can choose for me. **Freedom means we are responsible for what we do and every choice we make.** *No matter how hard we might try, we cannot outsource our lives**or the responsibility for our lives.* No one can live my life for me. No one can die for me. My freedom is what makes me utterly singular, utterly unsubstitutable.

**Authenticity and Bad Faith**

When I make choices that reflect this knowledge of my freedom and unsubstitutability, then I choose authentically. Authenticity is being responsible for my actions and for others (18, 19, 22).

Inauthenticity, or “bad faith” as Sartre calls it elsewhere, is when I hide my responsibility from myself (see page 19).

**The Existential Emotions: Anxiety, Forlornness, Despair**

Inevitably our responsibility and freedom sneak up on us. The existential emotions of anxiety, forlornness, and despair are like symptoms that testify to the fundamental nature of human freedom. In other words, if we weren’t free, we wouldn’t feel anxious, forlorn, or desperate in the existential ways Sartre talks about.

To feel these emotions as *existential emotions* is different than to feel them in a more mundane way. It’s when we look deeper or behind our daily bouts of anxiety in the face of an exam, or the feeling of forlornness when a boyfriend leaves us, or the feeling of desperation when we can’t find a job, that we can see how these emotions all have their origin in human freedom.

Anxiety: *I* have to choose. No one else can.

Forlornness: I am ultimately alone in living and dying: no can live my life for me, no one can die for me.

Despair: Nothing and no one will save me. The only thing that is possible is what is within my realm of action.

Come to terms with your freedom and you will free yourself of these crippling emotions as well.

**Subjectivism (40-41)**

Subjectivism is the charge of relativism in Sartre’s philosophy. If there is no God and therefore no absolute truth, then one person’s “truth” is as good as anyone else’s. There is also no way of judging what is good and what is bad; it’s all relative, i.e., up to the individual.

Implications of subjectivism: there is no right or wrong, good or bad, and thus no ground for judging moral action. Therefore I couldn’t really say that murder is wrong, for example. Anything is possible and everything is arbitrary.

This would be a problem because we couldn’t live together as a cohesive, functioning society without some standard for judging right and wrong, truth and falsehood. We also wouldn’t be able to say whether one life is better lived than another.

He solves this philosophical problem with two moves (44-45).

1. Sartre concedes that there is no basis, other than in each individual, for judging good and bad.
2. I can, however, say whether someone is speaking and living truthfully or falsely; I can judge whether someone is in error or if they are correct.

The implication here is that right and wrong are replaced with true and false. Someone who lives falsely and dishonestly is living in bad faith. That is to say, they are not being honest about their freedom and the involvement in life at every moment that it entails.

Sartre illustrates this with a telling example. The moral judgment is likened to the creation of a work of art.

No one would say of Picasso: he shouldn’t have made the *The Old Guitarist*. We can’t judge *what* kind of artwork someone should make. Similarly, we can’t judge what kind of life someone should create for themselves.

We can, however, judge if a work of art is true to itself; we can judge whether it is coherent according to its own logic and purpose.

If Michelangelo had put a tail on David, this would have been completely arbitrary and contrary to the logic of perfect male form that the artwork sets out to present.

Your life is your work of art. What is the logic of your decisions? Do you have some that stick out like a tail on David? If so, you haven’t been honest about your freedom in that case; you have not been honest about the fact that when you choose you choose for everyone, and you must choose what you believe is good, and thus good for everyone. If you deny this responsibility that denial sticks out; this would be an instance of bad faith.