

PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

Session 12

October 19th, 2015



Human Nature: Sartre



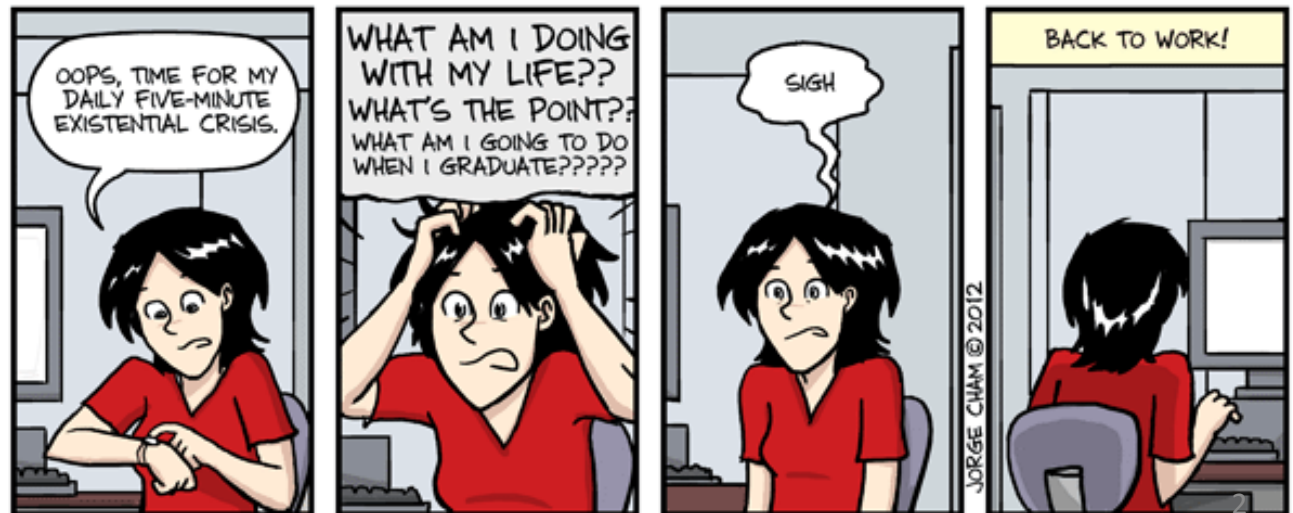
Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980): French;
possibly the quintessential existentialist philosopher

- » **Existentialism** is a movement of Continental philosophy (in contrast with Analytic philosophy),
 - which insists that “existence precedes essence”:
people define their own nature through their actions.

In “**Existentialism is a Humanism**” (a public lecture, Oct. 1945),

- Sartre aims to dispel several misconceptions about this movement.
 - He will explain how it is a **humanism**: i.e., a view that *empowers* human beings to take charge of their lives to make *positive* change.

- There is *much* more to it than so-called ‘existential crises’!



Sartre claims that **there is actually *no such thing* as human nature.**

- Whereas most philosophers (including Hobbes and Rousseau) take for granted that “man possesses a human nature”
 - i.e, some collection of attributes common to all human beings, which constitutes our *essence*,
 - ...such that “each man is a particular example of a universal conception of Man”,
 - and human beings across all times and places “have the same fundamental qualities”, (3)
 - » Sartre thinks **there is no cluster of traits that is shared by all humankind.**
 - » Moreover, **none of us are born with qualities which dictate the sort of person we become.**

The revelation that we have no pre-set nature has a number of implications for the way we conduct our lives

- Sartre will explain how, *contrary to popular belief*,
- **existentialism encourages us to be caring, active, and moral people.**

Sartre starts his lecture by noting a number of **common *misunderstandings* about existentialism**:

- *It seems to invite people “to dwell in quietism of despair”*:
 - » i.e., it motivates people to do nothing except mope around and think about their powerlessness to effect real change upon the world.
- **video:** bit.ly/1jvApgj

Existentialist Firefighter Delays 3 Deaths



SCHAUMBURG, IL—In an ultimately futile act some have described as courageous and others have called a mere postponing of the inevitable, existentialist firefighter James Farber delayed three deaths Monday.

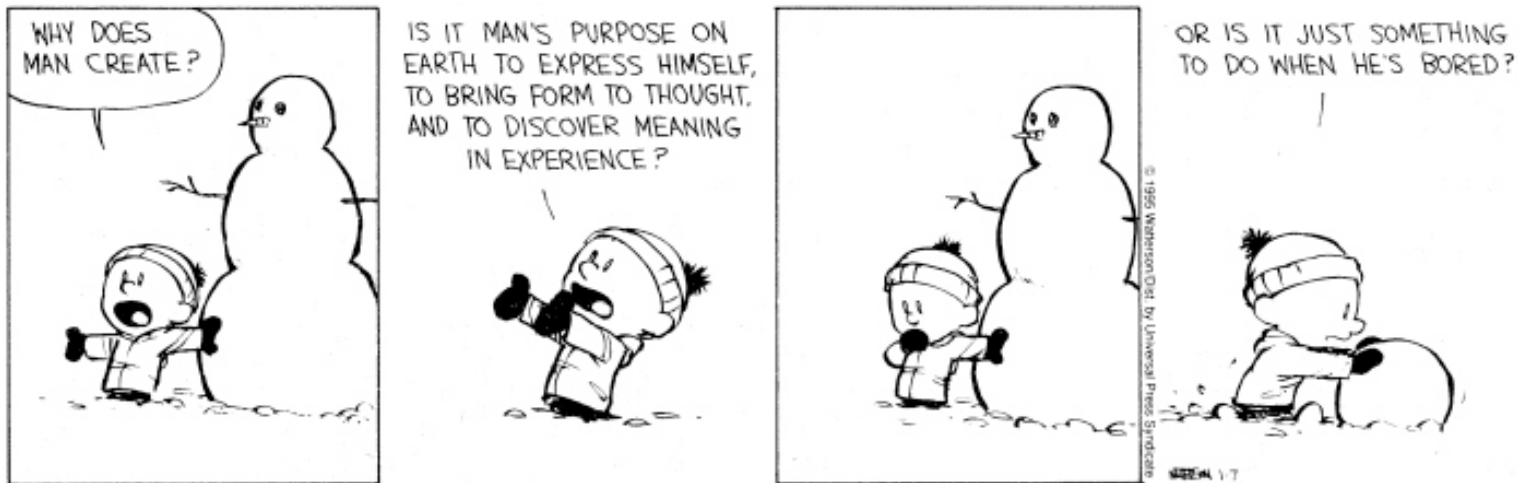
"I'm no hero," Farber said after rescuing the family from a house fire on the 2500 block of West Thacker Street, and prolonging for the time being their slow march toward oblivion. "Like any other man, I am thrown into this world, alone and terrified, to play a meaningless role in an empty life. In my case, that role happens to involve charging through towering blazes to pull helpless individuals from a sea of flames before they suffocate or are burnt alive."

<http://onion.com/1RPYx98>

Farber deferred praise, saying that by charging into danger to rescue the victims he "merely put off the fate that befalls us all."

Other complaints about existentialism are that:

- *it's bourgeois*
 - i.e., a view that can only be embraced by rich people with the luxury of time to sit around and contemplate the meaning of their existence.



- *it's individualistic*
 - It focuses too much on the experience of single individuals and neglects “the solidarity of mankind” (1)
- *it's overly liberating:*
 - “Everyone can do what he likes, and will be incapable, from such a point of view, of condemning either the point of view or the action of anyone else.”
 - It is interpreted as saying that absolutely anything goes (morally speaking), and no one can be blamed or punished.

Sartre explains that

- **many people imagine that human beings are made according to a design, in order to fulfill a predetermined purpose.**



- This commonsense idea is that human beings are made just like artifacts (tools, objects) are:
- E.g., a paper-knife is “made by an artisan had a conception of it” (2)
 - The artisan could not have made such an object unless they already had an idea of what it was supposed to be like, and what purpose it would serve.
 - “Let us say, then, of the paperknife that its *essence* –
 - » ...the sum of the formulae and the qualities which made its production and its definition possible
 - – *precedes its existence.*” (ibid.)

- **“When we think of God as the creator,**
 - **we are thinking of him...as a [heavenly] artisan,”** (3)
 - who makes human beings according to a divine plan,
 - and has a certain purpose in mind for us to fulfill.

Atheistic existentialists (like Sartre), believe that:

- **“there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it.**
 - I.e., if there is no designer for human beings, then there is no design to which we all conform (i.e., a human nature) which allows us to achieve some particular purpose.

Hence, **“...Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.”** (3)



- Another more metaphorical way he says this is that ***each person “draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait”***: (7)
 - Our lives don't follow any script or plan:
 - We shape our own destinies through our actions.

This conclusion is captured in the phrase “*Existence precedes essence*”:

- “...man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.
- If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing.
- He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.” (3)



So, “although it is impossible to find in each and every man a universal essence that can be called human nature,

➤ there is nevertheless **a human universality of condition.**”

This universal condition is that **of having to make sense of our existence,**

• and **to give our lives meaning through our choices.**

➤ A fundamental feature of the condition of our species is that **we each possess subjectivity:** *a sense of oneself as having a particular perspective on the world.*

• Sartre calls this “the first principle of existentialism” (3)

– **Each of us is “something which propels itself towards a future and is aware of doing so.”** (ibid.)

• Moreover, we are each *free* as individuals to shape our futures in accordance with our own vision of what our lives ought to be like.

Sartre agrees with Descartes (specifically with the *cogito* argument),

- that **we recognize our own existence from our inner thoughts, feelings, and subjective experience.**
 - “...there cannot be any other truth than this, *I think, therefore I am*” (8)
 - This is “a truth which is simple, easily attained and within the reach of everybody; **it consists in one’s immediate sense of one’s self.**” (8)

But he adds that:

- “...*it is not only one’s own self that one discovers in the cogito, but those of others too.*” (ibid.)
 - In other words, we reason from “*I think, therefore I am*”, to “*all human beings think, therefore they exist too*”.
- Hence, **existentialism does *not* encourage egocentrism,**
- i.e., single-minded concern for oneself.

» Instead, **it makes us all aware of our *intersubjectivity*:**



- the fact that we are all interrelated by being together in the human conditions of a) having subjectivity, and b) having to figure out what to do with our existence.



- » Because we have no predetermined essence that will dictate who we become,
 - **“man is *responsible* for what he is.”** (4)
- » Existentialism “puts every man in possession of himself as he is,
 - and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders.” (ibid.)

Furthermore, **the choices we make for ourselves define *not only ourselves*, but *all of humankind*.**

- **“When we say that man chooses himself...we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men.**
 - For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be.” (4)
- To choose to act in one way and not another is “to affirm the value of that which is chosen”: to say that it would be good for anyone & everyone to act that way.
 - **“I am thus responsible for myself and for all men,**
 - **and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be.**
 - In fashioning myself I fashion man. ” (4)



To illustrate how our decisions make us responsible for all of mankind, he gives an example:

- “if...I decide to marry and to have children, even though this decision proceeds simply from my situation, from my passion or my desire,
 - *I am thereby committing not only myself, but humanity as a whole, to the practice of monogamy.”* (4)

Having such profound responsibility can cause us to feel *anguish*.

➤ Making choices that define *all* of humankind is daunting and stressful.

- “When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be,
- but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind...
 - ...in such a moment **a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility.**” (4)

- He admits that “There are many [people], indeed, who show no such anxiety.

- » But we affirm that they are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it.” (ibid.)

Sartre explains that we are *terrified* by our awareness that we have the power to determine the course of history through our actions.

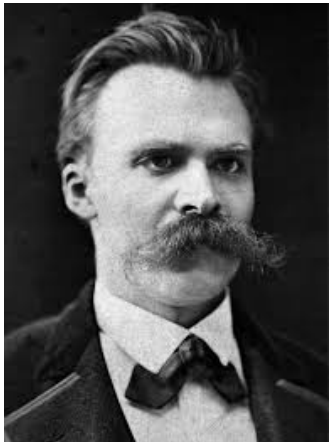
- “Everything happens to every man as though the whole human race had its eyes fixed upon what he is doing and regulated its conduct accordingly.
 - So every man *ought* to say, “Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do?”
 - If a man does not say that, he is dissembling [i.e., hiding] his anguish.”
- Sartre is saying that our awareness of our power should lead us to question whether our actions shape our world into the kind of world that we would want to live in.



- » People who behave as if their actions do *not* have profound consequences are just deceiving themselves in an attempt to make their lives easier.
 - » Even worse are people who try to avoid acting at all, in order to avoid committing themselves to becoming some particular kind of person.
- In other works, Sartre calls these attempts to avoid feeling anguish ‘*acting in bad faith*’.

We are especially likely to feel anguish about our responsibility if we accept that there is no God watch over us and intervene in our lives.

- In other words, we feel as if we have been **abandoned by a higher power**,
- and realize we are **left to fend for ourselves.**
- Many people believe that if there is no God, then there is no morality.
 - Sartre disagrees, and insists that **morality doesn't depend on the existence of God, nor belief in any religion.**
 - On this matter, he agrees with German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900) that many people in Christian nations have been tricked into thinking that being religious is the only way to grasp what is right and wrong.



Moreover, some people believe that even if there is no God,
» moral values “exist all the same, inscribed in an intelligible heaven” (ibid.), *independent of human activity.*

- This view assumes that “if we are to have morality, a society and a law-abiding world,
- it is essential that certain values should be taken seriously; they must have an *a priori* existence ascribed to them.”

- Sartre affirms that **moral values do exist**, but thinks **they are a posteriori**:
 - they only exist *as a consequence of our actions.*

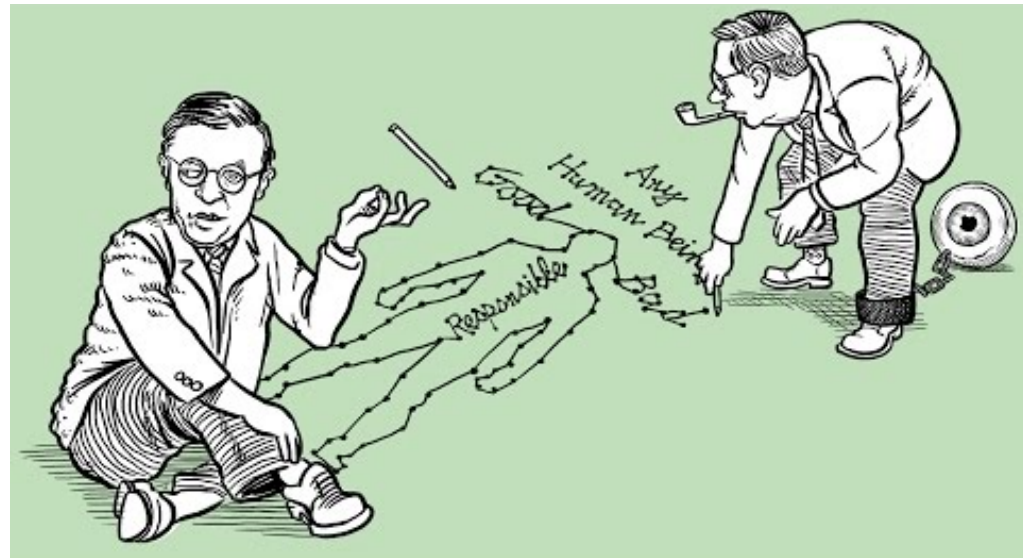
“Dostoevsky once wrote: ‘If God did not exist, everything would be permitted’;

- **Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist,**
- and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself.
 - He discovers forthwith, that he is *without excuse.*”
- The absence of a higher power forces us to accept that **we are solely responsible for choosing whether we become good or bad people.**



“**Nor**, on the other hand, if God does not exist,

- **are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behavior.**
 - Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values,
 - any means of justification or excuse.” (6)



Some people mistake existentialism for advocating that people are free to do *whatever* they want,

- regardless of the moral consequences of one's actions.
 - Sartre explains that the absence of a *priori* moral rules or values does *not* mean that our world is a moral free-for-all.



He uses an **argument by analogy**,

- i.e., a form of argument where you draw a conclusion by showing parallels between a) the topic you are arguing about, and b) another topic about which there is little dispute.



...to explain that:

- just as in *art*,
 - where there are no aesthetic rules that an artist follows in order to create a beautiful painting,
- in our *moral* lives,
 - **we can behave morally (i.e., respect others' humanity) even if we don't have pre-determined moral rules to inform or guide our actions**





Existentialists claim that *man is “nothing else but the sum of his actions”* – you are what you do.

- Some people are horrified by this, citing their bad luck:
 - “Circumstances have been against me, I was worthy to be something much better than I have been.
 - ...there remains within me a wide range of abilities, inclinations and potentialities, unused but perfectly viable, which endow me with a worthiness that could never be inferred from the mere history of my actions.” (7)

Sartre insists that **we are not defined by our capacities or our intentions,**

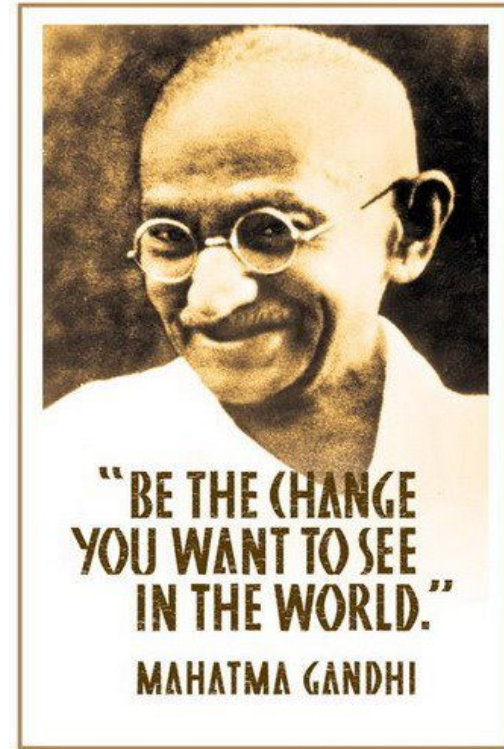
- **but rather by what we do.**
 - Only our actions leave a trace in human history.

Existentialism teaches us to be self-reliant.

- “I cannot count upon men whom I do not know,
 - I cannot base my confidence upon human goodness or upon man’s interest in the good of society,
 - seeing that man is free and that there is no human nature which I can take as foundational.” (7)

One can never know how future generations will transform humankind through their choices.

- But **this should *not* lead us to *quietism***:
 - *an attitude where we think we shouldn’t bother acting, because our choices won’t matter in the long run.*
- Instead, Sartre thinks that **we should act upon a conviction that**:
 - “whatever may be in my power to make it so, I shall do;
 - **beyond that, I can count upon nothing.”** (ibid.)
 - This is much like Gandhi’s advice:
 - **“Be the change you wish to see in the world”**



Sartre summarizes the complicated condition of humankind in his famous phrase

“Man is condemned to be free”:

- **“Condemned**, because he did not create himself,
- yet is nevertheless **at liberty**,
 - and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is **responsible for everything he does.**” (6)

In other words,

- A person does *not choose to exist*,
- But once s/he exists, s/he *must* act upon her/his freedom in making choices about how to live her/his life.
 - **“what is *not possible* is *not to choose*.**
 - ...if I do not choose, that is still a choice.” (9)
 - 8-bit philosophy **video:**
bit.ly/1ty446f

