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Sartre: Radical Freedom

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) was a philosopher in two senses. After a brilliant student career, he wrote some strikingly original books and with the publication of his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* he was widely recognized as France's leading philosopher. But he was also a very public intellectual who expressed his ideas in novels, plays and biographical studies, and applied them to the great social and political issues of his time, taking controversially radical stances against the conventional wisdom of his day.

Let us first put Sartre in the context of **existentialist** thought over the preceding century. Three main concerns were central. The first is with *individual* human beings: existentialists think that general theories about human nature leave out precisely what is most important, namely the uniqueness of each individual and his or her life situation. Second, they are concerned with the *meaning* of human lives rather than scientific or metaphysical truths (even if the latter are about human beings). Inner or "subjective" experience is at the center of attention, rather than "objective" truth. Third, there is a very strong emphasis on *freedom*, on the ability of each individual to choose not just particular actions but attitudes, projects, purposes, values, and lifestyles. Moreover, the typical

existentialist concern is not just to assert this but to persuade people to *act* on it, to exercise their freedom.

These themes can be found in a wide variety of contexts, especially in descriptions of the concrete detail of particular characters, situations, and choices, whether in biography or in fiction. But an existentialist *philosopher* must offer some general analysis of the human condition, and the most obvious division is between theist and atheist accounts.

The Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) is generally recognized as the first modern existentialist, though there is an existential dimension to all religions, notably in Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Pascal in the Christian tradition. Like his contemporary Karl Marx, Kierkegaard reacted against Hegel's philosophy, but in a very different direction. He rejected the abstract Hegelian system of world-historical development, likening it to a vast mansion in which the owner does not actually live. Kierkegaard concentrated instead on what he thought supremely important, the individual person and his or her life choices. However, he did offer *some* generalizations about life, distinguishing three basic attitudes: the aesthetic (the search for pleasure), the ethical (commitment to marriage, family, work, and social responsibility), and the religious (seeing everything in terms of the eternal, the transcendent, the divine). He held that the religious (more specifically, the Christian) way is the highest, although it can be reached only by a free "leap into the arms of God." But he was scathingly critical of the conventional Christian church of his time, thinking that it diverted its adherents from making their own decisions about how to live.

The other great nineteenth-century existentialist was a crusading atheist. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) notoriously said "God is dead, and we have killed him." That was obviously a metaphorical statement meaning that "we" (the European culture of his time or the more influential sections of it) have ceased to find Christianity credible and ignore it in practice. So we need to rethink the meaning and purpose of our lives and use our radical, unsettling freedom to change the basis of our attitudes and values (there Kierkegaard would agree), finding meaning in human terms alone (there he would disagree). In this, Nietzsche had much in common with his earlier compatriot Feuerbach. In many existentialist thinkers there is a tension between a relativist tendency to say that there is no objective basis for choosing or valuing one way of life more than another, and a recommendation of a particular choice or values. In Nietzsche's case the latter was expressed in his vision of the **superman** (*Ubermensch*) of the future, who will reject conventional values based on Christian humility (which Nietzsche rather implausibly connected with the resentment felt by an

underclass—so-called "slave morality") and replace them with ideals of human fulfillment based on creativity, and self-assertion, even the "will to power." After Nietzsche's collapse into madness, that latter incautious phrase was used by his sister in a book edited from his unpublished notes; it was taken up by the Nazis—but probably he would have been horrified.

In the twentieth century, too, existentialists included both believers and atheists. Notable existentialist theologians were Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) in France, Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) in Germany, and the Jewish thinker Martin Buber (1878–1965). Existentialist philosophy developed mainly in continental Europe, and in the hands of Heidegger and Sartre it became academic, jargon-ridden and system-building. An important source was "phenomenology," the method of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) based on giving detailed descriptions of phenomena, how things appear to human consciousness. This concern with human experience rather than scientific truth is characteristic of existentialism, but a different version developed in the "ordinary language philosophy" in the English-speaking world in the mid-twentieth century, especially in the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) which explored the subtlety of our everyday descriptions of things.

The most original twentieth-century existentialist philosopher was Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), whose *Being and Time* was published in 1927. Heidegger's language is strange and difficult: in his effort to rethink the fundamental concepts of Western philosophy he invented a system of hyphenated neologisms in the German language. Although he often seems to be doing abstract metaphysics (like Aristotle), it emerges through his ponderous prose that he has a central concern with the meaning of human existence, which he calls our relation to **Being**, and he points to the possibility of **authentic** life by facing up to one's real situation in the world, especially to the inevitability of one's own death (again, this seems to be the recommendation of a particular kind of attitude). "Being" in Heidegger often sounds like an impersonal substitute for God—the elusive ultimate reality of which we can become aware if we attend in the right sort of way. In his later work there is an emphasis on quasi-mystical kinds of experience that may be expressed in poetry or music but not in literal philosophical statements.

LIFE AND WORK

The precocious young Sartre rapidly absorbed the thought of those three formidable German *H*s—Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger—and much of the obscurity in his writing reflects the influence of those purveyors

of ponderous abstractions. Themes from Husserlian phenomenology are prominent in his early books, the remarkably philosophical novel *Nausea* (1938) and three short studies in the philosophy of mind: *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936), *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (1939), and *The Imaginary* (1940). The centerpiece of Sartre's early philosophy is his massive work *Being and Nothingness* (1943), strongly influenced by Heidegger's *Being and Time* but written with Sartre's own French flair.

At the beginning of the Second World War Sartre served as a meteorologist in the French army but was soon taken prisoner, and apparently he spent the time reading Heidegger. After release back into Nazi-occupied Paris, he was sympathetic to the French Resistance but devoted himself to writing *Being and Nothingness*. Something of the atmosphere of that time can perhaps be detected in the pessimistic conception of the human condition he presents in that work. The choice that confronted each French citizen—collaboration, risky resistance, or quiet self-preservation—was an obvious example of what Sartre saw as the ever-present necessity for individual choice. Similar themes are expressed in his trilogy of novels *Roads to Freedom* and in his plays *No Exit* and *Flies*. After the liberation he gave a stylish account of his atheistic existentialism in *Existentialism and Humanism*, a lecture delivered in 1945 to much public acclaim—but his treatment there was brief and popular and does not express the depth of his thought.

Sartre formed a famous open relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, a talented philosopher in her own right and a highly influential feminist. He rejected academic positions and became a freelance writer and a leading French intellectual for the rest of his life. As time went on he modified the very individualist approach of his early philosophy and devoted more attention to social, economic, and political realities. He asserted the need for a classless democratic society if genuine human freedom was to be possible for everyone, and he came to espouse a form of Marxism that he described as "the inescapable philosophy of our time," though needing fertilization by an existentialist account of individual freedom. He joined the Communist Party at the time of the Korean War but left it a few years later when the Soviets invaded Hungary in 1956.

The later phase of Sartre's philosophy started with *Search for a Method* (1957) and continued with the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, the first volume of which appeared in 1960, concentrating on the French Revolution; the second volume, about the Russian Revolution, was published posthumously in 1985. Sartre developed a strong sympathy for the oppressed, both the workers under capitalism and the population of Third World countries suffering from colonialism or imperialism. He supported

Algeria's violent struggle for liberation from French rule, and he campaigned against the American war in Vietnam. He gave a notable lecture on his mature view of ethics in Rome in 1964, and toward the end of his life, unable to write because of blindness after a stroke, he gave interviews that have since been published. His funeral was attended by some fifty thousand people.

Like that of any other serious philosopher, Sartre's thought was never at rest and cannot be captured in a single system. There is a fairly clear distinction between his early philosophy which focuses on individual freedom, and the second phase which explores the social and economic limitations on freedom. The former is that for which Sartre has become most famous. We will concentrate here on his central work *Being and Nothingness* (with page references to the English translation) but will add a final section giving an outline of his later approach to ethics.

It is only fair to warn students that *Being and Nothingness* is difficult reading (the other early works mentioned above, especially the 1945 lecture, are more accessible). This is a matter not just of length and repetitiousness but of technical terms, abstract nouns, and unresolved paradoxes. Sartre seems to enjoy teasing his readers with obscure, apparently contradictory, or grossly exaggerated statements. He had an extraordinarily self-confident facility to pour out philosophical verbiage onto pages (in Parisian cafés, at the dead of night, so the story goes), but he does not seem to have been so good at self-criticism or revision (legend has it that his manuscripts were delivered straight to the printer from the café tables). There are passages of relative lucidity and psychological insight, however; and the effort to understand his system reveals a view of human nature that has a certain compelling fascination.

METAPHYSICS: CONSCIOUSNESS, OBJECTS, ATHEISM

The most basic feature of Sartre's system is his radical distinction between consciousness or "human reality" (*être-pour-soi*, **being-for-itself**) and inanimate, nonconscious reality (*être-en-soi*, **being-in-itself**). These terms derive from Hegel but are given new definitions by Sartre in his Introduction. This distinction may sound like the dualism of mind and body of Sartre's French predecessor Descartes, but it is important to see how very different it is. Sartre affirmed that a human being is a unified reality ("the concrete is man within the world," p. 3): there are not two substances or "beings," but two modes of being—the *way* that conscious beings exist is different from the way that inanimate things exist. Sartre understood human consciousness as **intentional** in the Brentano's sense: our states

of consciousness are typically of something conceived as distinct from the subject (p. xxvii), but they also involve an implicit awareness of oneself (pp. xxviii–xxx). In contrast, being-in-itself (the mode of existence of rocks, oceans, and tables) involves no awareness of anything and no conception of itself (pp. xxxix–xlii). (What Sartre would say about animal perception and action is not clear.)

Sartre made a further distinction between **reflective** ("positional" or "thetic") and **prereflective** (nonpositional, nonthetic) consciousness. All consciousness is positional in the sense that it is of something distinct from the subject. But "every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself" (p. xxix). In his example, if I am counting the cigarettes in my case, I am conscious of the cigarettes and that there are a dozen of them; and I am *prereflectively* conscious that I am counting them, as is shown by the answer I immediately give when asked what I am doing; but I am not *reflectively* conscious of my activity until someone asks me (or I ask myself what I am trying to do).

Perhaps Sartre's next most important metaphysical assertion is his denial of the existence of God. (He did not take over the mystical, quasi-religious dimension of Heidegger's conception of Being, though his posthumously published manuscript *Truth and Existence* is closer to the spirit of Heidegger.) Sartre makes the remarkable claim that we all fundamentally desire to *be* God in the sense that we want to "be our own foundation"; that is, we would like to be perfectly "complete" and self-justifying: as he puts it, we aspire to become **in-itself-for-itself** (p. 566). But he thinks this ideal, which he identifies with God, is self-contradictory (pp. 90, 615); so it is a necessary truth that God does not exist.

Like Nietzsche, Sartre held that the absence of God is of the utmost significance: the atheist does not merely differ from the theist on a point of abstruse metaphysics; he holds a profoundly different attitude to human life. (In Chapter 6 we raised a doubt about this, if the concept of God is interpreted metaphorically.) In Sartre's worldview there are no transcendent objective values set for us—neither commandments of God nor a Platonic form of the Good, nor is there any intrinsic meaning or purpose in human existence (no Aristotelean *telos*). In this sense, our life can be described as **absurd**: we are "forlorn" or "abandoned" in this world. There is no heavenly father to tell us what to do, or help us do it; as grown-up people we have to decide for ourselves what is worth aiming for, and look after own destiny. Sartre repeatedly insisted that the only foundation for **value judgments** lies in our own choices; there is no external, objective justification for the projects and ways of life that people adopt (pp. 38, 443, 626–27).

THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE: EXISTENCE
AND ESSENCE, NEGATION AND FREEDOM

In one sense Sartre denied that there is any such thing as human nature for there to be theories about. This would be a typical existentialist rejection of generalizations about human beings and human lives. He expressed it in a summarizing formula, "man's existence precedes his essence" (pp. 438–39), by which he meant that we have no essential nature: we have not been created for any particular purpose, whether by God or evolution or anything else; we simply find ourselves existing by no choice of our own, and we have to *decide* what to make of ourselves; each of us must create his or her own nature or "essence". Of course, there are some true generalizations about our *bodily* nature, such as our necessity to eat, our metabolism, and our sexual impulses. But, as we noticed in Chapter 9, there is room for some dispute about what count as *purely* biological facts. Sartre certainly thought there are no general truths about what human beings want to be: the alleged universal project of "becoming God" is only the abstract form of our particular desires, which are many and various (pp. 566–67). There are no general truths about what we ought to be.

An existentialist philosopher, however, is bound to offer some generalizations about the human condition, and Sartre's central assertion is freedom. We are "condemned to be free"; there is no limit to our freedom except that we cannot cease being free as long as we are alive and conscious (p. 439). He derived this conclusion from his understanding of conscious intentionality as of something distinct from oneself. (Even if someone is mistaken in a particular case, as Macbeth was about an illusory dagger, he was thinking of something that he *believed* to exist at a position in space.) Sartre saw a connection between consciousness and the mysterious concept of **nothingness** that appears in the title of his book. The subject is aware in a prereflective way that the perceived object is *not* the subject: it has (or is believed to have) a separate existence of its own (pp. xxvii–xxix, 74–75). That is one way in which negation is involved in conscious awareness. Another way is that many of our judgments about the world are negative in their content: we can recognize what is not the case, as when I look unsuccessfully for Pierre in the café where we arranged to meet and say disappointedly, "Pierre is not here" (pp. 9–10). When we ask a question, we already understand the possibility of a negative reply (p. 5). We also perceive the world as enabling possibilities for our actions, and this involves conceiving of possible states of affairs that are not already the case ("nothingnesses" in Sartre's rebarbative language), but which we might decide to make

real. Desire and intention involve recognition of the *lack* of something (p. 87, 433ff.). Thus, conscious beings, who can think and say what *is* the case, also conceive of what *is not* the case.

Sartre indulges in some verbal play with this concept of nothingness in paradoxical phrases such as "the objective existence of a non-being" (p. 5), which presumably means some negative statements are true, and in dark metaphorical sayings like "Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm" (p. 21), which presumably means that we can think of what is not true, as well as what is true. "Nothingness" makes a conceptual connection between consciousness and freedom, for the ability to conceive of what is not the case implies the freedom to imagine other possibilities (pp. 24–25) and to try to bring them about. As long as one is conscious one can conceive of something being otherwise than it is, and one may desire it to be otherwise. Our mental power of negation thus involves both freedom of mind (to imagine new possibilities) and freedom of action (to try to actualize them). So to be conscious is to be continually faced with choices about what to think and what to do, and we can never become the Godlike "in-itself-for-itself".

Sartre thus contradicts two fundamental Freudian claims. His view is flatly incompatible with complete psychic determinism (p. 458ff.). He also rejects the postulate of unconscious mental states, on the ground that consciousness is necessarily transparent to itself, prereflectively (p. 49ff.). However the latter point sounds like mere verbal legislation: of course, *consciousness* cannot be unconscious, but Sartre has not shown that it is illegitimate to talk of unconscious states that are *mental* in some wider sense.

Every aspect of our mental lives is, in Sartre's view, chosen in some sense and is ultimately one's own responsibility. Emotions are usually thought to be outside the control of our will, but Sartre rather heroically maintains that if I am sad, it is only because I have chosen to make myself sad (p. 61). His view, explained more fully in *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, is that emotions are not just moods that "come over us," but ways in which we apprehend the world. They are "intentional" in the sense that they typically have objects—for example, one is fearful *of* some possible event, or angry *with* someone *about* something. But what distinguishes emotions from other ways of being aware of things is, in Sartre's view, that they involve an irrational attempt to transform the world by magic. When one cannot reach a tempting bunch of grapes, one may dismiss them as "too green," attributing this quality to them even though one knows that their ripeness does not depend on their reachability. We are responsible for our emotions, for they are ways in which we have chosen to react to the world (p. 445).

There is something right about this, in that emotions presuppose both beliefs and value judgments; for example, anger with someone involves belief that he or she has done something wrong. If one ceases to believe that they did it or did it intentionally, or if one ceases to judge it as wrong, one's anger disappears. (The ancient Stoic philosophers tried to cure us of emotion by telling us to stop caring about anything other than our own virtue, which they assumed is completely under our own control.) But much of what we care about—whether our own health and freedom from pain, the attractiveness of others, or the well-being of our children—does not seem to be a matter of choice but more of a biological given. On emotion and what we care about, and on moods like depression or mania that may well have neurophysiological causes, Sartre seems to overstate his case.

He held us equally responsible for longer-lasting features of our personality or character. He argued that one cannot just assert "I am shy" (or a great lover, or unable to do even simple math) as if this is an unchangeable fact about oneself like "I am female, or black, or five feet tall," for the former descriptions depend on the way we behave in certain situations— and we are always free to behave differently, or at least to *try* to do so. To say "I am ugly" (or attractive, persevering, or easily discouraged) is not to assert a determinate fact that is already in existence, but to anticipate how one will act and how other people will react in future—and one has choices about that (p. 459). However there is reason to wonder how much truth there is in this, in view of the evidence of genetic influences on personality and sexuality.

Sartre tries to extend our freedom and our responsibility to everything we think, feel, and do. He suggests there are certain situations in which this radical freedom is clearly manifested to us. In moments of temptation or indecision (e.g., when the person who has resolved to give up gambling is confronted with the gaming tables once again), one realizes, painfully, that no motive or no past resolution, however strong, determines what one does *next* (p. 33). Every moment requires a new or renewed choice. Following leads from Kant's practical defense of free will, Kierkegaard and Heidegger, Sartre uses the emotive term **anguish** to describe this consciousness of one's own freedom (pp. 29, 464). Anguish is not fear of an external object but the uneasy awareness of the unpredictability of one's own behavior. The soldier fears injury, pain or death, but feels anguish when he wonders whether he is going to be able to "hold up" courageously in the coming battle. The person walking on a clifftop fears falling, but feels anguish in realizing that there is nothing to stop them from jumping (pp. 29–32). Anguish is relatively unusual because it is "the reflective apprehension of freedom by itself" (p. 39).

DIAGNOSIS: ANGUISH AND BAD FAITH,
CONFLICT WITH OTHERS

Anguish, the consciousness of freedom, is mentally painful; and we try to avoid it (pp. 40, 556). Sartre thinks we would all like to achieve a state in which there are no choices left open for us so that we would "coincide with ourselves" like inanimate objects and would not be subject to anguish. But that is illusory, for conscious beings like us are necessarily free and without external justifications for our hoices. Such is Sartre's metaphysical diagnosis of the human condition, hence his gloomy descriptions of our life as "an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state" (p. 90) and "a useless passion" (p. 615).

The crucial concept in Sartre's diagnosis is that of **bad faith** (*mauvaise foi*, sometimes translated as "self-deception"). Bad faith is the attempt to escape anguish by trying to represent one's attitudes and actions as determined by one's situation or character, relationship to others, employment or social role—anything other than one's own choices. Sartre believes bad faith is the characteristic mode of most human life (p. 556) and gives two famous examples of bad faith, both of them scenes from the Parisian cafés that were his favorite haunts (pp. 55–60). He pictures a young woman sitting with a man who she has every reason to suspect would like to seduce her. But when he takes her hand, she tries to avoid a decision to accept or reject him, by seeming not to notice: she carries on their intellectual conversation while leaving her hand in his as if she were not aware of what is going on. In Sartre's interpretation, she is in bad faith because she pretends—not just to her companion but *to herself*—that she is something distinct from her body, that her hand is a passive object, a mere thing, whereas she is a conscious embodied person who knows perfectly well what is happening and is responsible for her actions.

The second example is of the waiter who is doing his job a little too keenly, his movements with the trays and cups are flourished and overly dramatic: he is "acting the part" of being a waiter. If there is bad faith here at all (and there need not be), it would lie in his identifying himself completely with the role, thinking that it determines his every action and attitude, whereas the truth is that he has chosen to take on the job and is free to give it up at any time, even if he might face unemployment. He is not *essentially* a waiter, for nobody is essentially anything. As Sartre puts it, "the waiter cannot be immediately a café waiter in the sense that this inkwell *is* an inkwell"; "it is necessary that we *make ourselves* what we are" (p. 59). An employee's actions are not literally determined by company policy, for he or she can always decide to object or to resign. Even a soldier can refuse to fight, at the cost of court martial or execution.

Anything we do, any role we play, and any value we respect (pp. 38, 627) is sustained only by our own constantly remade decision.

Sartre rejects any explanation of bad faith in terms of unconscious mental states (pp. 50–54). A Freudian might try to analyze the café examples as cases of repression: the girl could be repressing the consciousness that her companion has made a sexual advance. But Sartre points out an apparent contradiction in the very idea of repression. We attribute the act or process of repressing to some element within the mind (which Sartre calls "the censor"), yet this censor must be able to distinguish between what to repress and what to retain in consciousness, so it must be aware of the repressed idea in order to become *un*aware of it. He concludes that the censor itself would have to be in bad faith, and that we cannot explain how bad faith is possible by localizing it in one putative part of the mind rather than in the person as a whole (pp. 52–53).

Sartre goes on to argue that "good faith" (or sincerity) presents just as much of a conceptual problem: for as soon as one describes one's role or character in some way ("I am a waiter," "I am shy," "I am gay"), a distinction is involved between the self doing the describing and the self described. The ideal of complete sincerity seems doomed to failure (p. 62), for we can never be mere objects to be observed and described like external matters of fact. Sartre offers the example of someone with a clear record of homosexual activity but who resists describing himself as gay (p. 63): he is in bad faith because he refuses to admit his inclinations and tries to offer some other explanation of his sexual encounters. His candid friend ("a champion of sincerity") demands that he acknowledge that he is indeed gay, but in Sartre's view nobody just *is* gay in the way that a table is made of wood or a person is red-haired. If the gay person were to admit that he is gay and imply that he *cannot* cease his homosexual activity, he would also be in bad faith—and so would any "champion of sincerity" who demanded such an admission (p. 63). But we may want to make a distinction here between sexual orientation—which may be a matter of unchosen genetics (though the point is controversial)—and sexual activity, over which it is hard to deny that we have some degree of control.

Sartre is touching here on the deep difficulties of self-knowledge which arise for all serious philosophies. But his account threatens to make these matters unnecessarily perplexing, for he displays an inordinate fondness for the paradoxical formula that "human reality must be what it is not, and not be what it is" which recurs throughout *Being and Nothingness* (e.g., pp. xli, 67, 90). But it is a self-contradiction, so we cannot literally believe it. What did Sartre mean? (Did he enjoy teasing his philosophical readers?) He leaves us some hints about how to resolve the paradox, however: we can take it as misleading shorthand for "people are not *necessarily*

what they are, but must be *able* to become what they are not yet," which is a paraphrase of what he says on p. 58. The crucial point remains that we are always free to try to become different from what we are.

In Part 3 of *Being and Nothingness* entitled "Being-for-Others," Sartre gives his philosophical analysis of interpersonal relations and comes to some further pessimistic conclusions. He throws some light on the philosophical problem of other minds by arguing that in common experience we often have an immediate, non-inferential awareness of other people's mental states. When one sees a human face (or even an animal's) with two open eyes directed at oneself one immediately knows one is being *observed*, and one knows it with as much certainty as any merely physical facts in the world. Sartre emphasizes the special power the "look" of another person has over us: if we are engrossed in doing something not normally approved of such as spying through a keyhole or picking our nose, and we hear (or think we hear) a footstep approaching behind us, we suddenly feel *ashamed*, aware of someone else who will probably be critical of our actions. Conversely, when witnessed doing something admirable, like winning a race, we feel pride. Many of our emotions involve the existence of other people and their reactions to oneself.

Sartre goes on to argue for the more disputable thesis that the relationship between any two conscious beings necessarily involves conflict. Supposedly, another person represents a threat to one's freedom by their conscious existence, in that their perception "objectifies" oneself as an object in the world. According to Sartre one has only two strategies to ward off this alleged threat: one can try to treat the other person as a mere object without freedom, or one can try to "possess" their freedom and use it for one's own purposes (p. 363). He gives a persuasive version of Hegel's famous discussion of the master–slave relation in which, paradoxically, the slave ends up with more psychological power because the master needs the slave to *recognize* him as master. Sartre applies this analysis to some forms of sexual desire, especially sadism and masochism (p. 364ff.). He demonstrates that sexual relations raise philosophical issues about human nature, but he goes on to allege that genuine respect for the freedom of other people, in friendship or in erotic love, is an impossible ideal (p. 394ff.). At this stage the outlook seems bleak.

But is there not a contradiction between Sartre's insistence on our freedom and his analysis of the human condition as determined in these ways? He asserts that we all aspire to fill the "nothingness" that is the "essence" of our existence as conscious beings, and we aspire to become Godlike, the foundation of our own being, an "in-itself-for-itself" (pp. 90, 566, 615). And, as we have just seen, he claims that any personal relationship always involves conflict, an attempt to deny or to possess the freedom of the other

(pp. 363, 394, 429). In these two ways he represents human life as a perpetual striving for the logically impossible. But *must* it be like that? Can't we acknowledge the impossibility of becoming objects, and choose not to treat other people as objects? Are we not free *in this respect* too?

PRESCRIPTION: REFLECTIVE CHOICE

In view of the rejection of objective values (in his early philosophy), Sartre's prescription has to be a somewhat empty one. There is no *particular* project or way of life that he can recommend. But he condemns bad faith, the attempt to think of oneself as not free. Bad faith may be the usual attitude of most people, but Sartre implies that it *is* possible reflectively to *affirm* one's own freedom. It seems that all he can praise is the making of our individual choices with fully self-conscious, "anguished" awareness that nothing determines them. We must accept our responsibility for everything about ourselves—not just our actions, but our attitudes, emotions and characters. The **spirit of seriousness**, namely the illusion that values are objectively in the world rather than sustained by human choice—which Sartre tends to ascribe especially to "the bourgeois" who are comfortable with their situation in life—must be decisively repudiated (pp. 580, 626).

In *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre illustrates the impossibility of prescription by the case of a young Frenchman at the time of the Nazi occupation who was faced with the choice of joining the free French forces in England or staying at home to be with his mother, who lived only for him. The former course would be directed to his nation, but would make little difference to the war effort. The latter would be of immediate practical effect, but directed to only one person. Sartre suggests that no ethical doctrine can arbitrate between such incommensurable claims. Nor can strength of feeling settle the matter, for there is no measure of such feeling except in terms of what the subject actually does—which is precisely what he has to decide. To consult an adviser or supposed moral authority and to take the advice is only another sort of choice. So when Sartre was consulted by this young man, he could only say, "You are free, therefore choose."

It has to be admitted that no system of objective ethical values (whether Platonic, Aristotelian, Christian, or Kantian) can offer a determinate, unambiguous answer to every individual human dilemma in every complicated situation. Sometimes more than one course of action may be morally permissible; but this is certainly not to say that *anything* is permissible, or that no moral question ever has a right answer, which seems to be what Sartre implies.

He does commit himself to the intrinsic value of "authentic" self-conscious choice, and his descriptions of cases of bad faith are not morally neutral, but implicitly condemn any refusal to acknowledge the reality of one's freedom

and one's choices. Sartre thus offers another perspective on the ancient virtue of self-knowledge put before us by Socrates, Spinoza, Freud, and many others. For all its obscurities, there is something important to learn from his analysis of how the very notion of consciousness involves freedom. His view is not a misuse of language, for we commonly reproach each other not only for our actions but for our attitudes, reactions and emotions: "How *could* you feel like that, when you know that *p*?" "I don't like your attitude to *X*," "*Must* you be so selfish?" Such reproaches (and more neutral psychotherapeutic interventions) are not without effect, for to make someone *aware* that he or she is feeling or behaving in a certain way can make a difference. The more a person becomes aware of their own anger or pride or self-centeredness, the more they may be capable of change.

Sartre's understanding of the nature and possibility of self-knowledge differs from Freud's, however. He rejects the very idea of unconscious causes of mental events; for him everything is supposed to be already available to consciousness, if we use our power of reflection (p. 571). But in view of how much has since been discovered about the operation of the brain, this is assertion rather than argument. Since Freud there is a strong empirical case (confirmed by much recent psychology) for the existence of unconscious processes not open to introspection that deserve to be called mental in view of their influence on behavior.

What Sartre calls **existential psychoanalysis** is an interpretive, hermeneutic program rather than a scientific one (compare the discussion of Freud toward the end of Chapter 10). We are to look not for the *causes* of a person's behavior but for the *meaning* of it, that is, for *reasons* involving the person's beliefs and desires (Kant's "intelligible character"—see Chapter 8). And for Sartre desires depend more on value judgments than on biological drives or instincts (pp. 568–75). (Some psychiatrists have emphasized this methodology of seeking to understand how patients see their world, rather than—or as well as—looking for unconscious drives or brain states behind their behavior.)

Sartre argues that because a person has to be a unity, not just a bundle of unrelated desires or habits, so there must be for each person a "fundamental choice," what he calls an **original project**, that gives the ultimate meaning or purpose behind every aspect of his or her life (pp. 561–65). The biographies he wrote of Baudelaire, Genet, and Flaubert are exercises in existential psychoanalysis, applied to the whole of a life. But it is not obvious that for each person there must be a *single* fundamental choice, and Sartre himself allows that people can sometimes make a sudden "conversion" of their original project (pp. 475–76). And need there be just *one* such project in each stage of life? Can't someone have several projects that are not derived from any common formula (e.g., family, career, sport, art, or politics)? And aren't some people radically disunited, even caught up in inner conflict?

If no reasons can be given for fundamental choices, they would seem to be unjustified and arbitrary. On his own premises it seems Sartre would have to commend, or at least not condemn, the man who "authentically" chooses to devote himself to exterminating Jews, attacking non-Muslims, tricking people out of their money, abusing children, or playing computer games—provided that he makes such choices with full reflective awareness. Can Sartre find within his own philosophy any reason to criticize a Nietzschean superman who resolutely and reflectively develops his own freedom at the cost of other less-than-super human beings? Conversely, if someone devotes himself or herself to bringing up children, helping the disabled, or playing the cello, but deceives himself or herself (in Sartre's view) into thinking that these are objective values, would he condemn that person as living in bad faith?

In some intriguing footnotes in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre uses quasi-religious language to suggest that it is possible to "radically escape bad faith" in "a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted." He calls this "authenticity" (in the footnote on p. 70), and he talks of "an ethics of deliverance and salvation" and of "a radical conversion" (p. 412). And in the midst of some of his most obscure theorizing (about time in Part Two) he distinguishes "purifying" or **pure reflection** from "impure" or "accessory" reflection (pp. 155, 159ff.). He attributes a peculiarly moral power to the former, which can be attained only as the result of a "katharsis" or cleansing. However, he says these ideas cannot be developed in a work of ontology, and he ended *Being and Nothingness* with a promise to write another book on the ethical plane (p. 628). But he never published such a work, presumably because his views began to change.

AUTHENTICITY AND FREEDOM FOR EVERYONE

Sartre's *War Diaries* and *Notebooks for an Ethics* were published posthumously, so it is possible to see in what direction his ethical thought was heading. (These notes, not authorized for publication by Sartre himself, run to hundreds of pages. Clearly, the flow of words never left him, indeed he entitled his autobiography *Words*!)

Sartre came to recognize, even more explicitly than in *Being and Nothingness,* that human freedom is situated within **facticity**, the facts about oneself and one's situation that constrain the ways in which one can express one's freedom. One kind of facticity is the vulnerability of the human body; for example, one's freedom is importantly limited if one contracts a serious illness such as tuberculosis. Another kind of facticity is one's situation in a society at a certain stage in history. A slave, a manual laborer, a worker on an assembly line, a sales assistant, a cleaner or a "sex worker" may have some very limited choices about how to react in his

or her situation; but it would be a cruel deception to assure such people that they are fundamentally as free as every other human being, simply because of the nature of consciousness. In the abstract philosophical terms of *Being and Nothingness* perhaps they are free, but in concrete realistic terms they are not. Thus, Sartre acknowledges the obvious: that socio-economic factors limit human freedom, even if they do not determine every choice. (Compare our discussion of Marx in Chapter 9.) So he now rejects "abstract morality" in favor of an ethics that takes account of biological, economic and social factors and places its hopes in social (perhaps revolutionary) change, as much as in individual psychological transformation.

In the *Notebooks* Sartre says some interesting things about pure reflection and the authentic human existence it is supposed to give rise to. Pure reflection enables us to give up the project of becoming Godlike beings, which he had previously represented as our inevitable but useless passion. We can come to accept the contingency of our existence, and in a creative, generous spirit we can give meaning and purpose to our lives and thereby to the world:

> authentic man never loses sight of the absolute goals of the human condition . . . to save the world (in making there be being), to make freedom the foundation of the world, to take responsibility for creation, and to make the origin of the world absolute through freedom taking hold of itself. (*Notebooks*, p. 448)

It sounds as if we are to give up the project of becoming God in one sense by becoming divine in another sense, seeing ourselves as the only source of salvation for the world—an assertion of heroic human pride that most religions would reject.

Sartre now allows that in authentic existence, relations with other people can be transformed for the better. Another person's perception of me, although "objectifying" in the obvious sense that they perceive my body as one particular physical object, is not necessarily a threat:

> It only becomes so if the Other refuses to see a freedom in me *too*. But if, on the contrary, he makes me exist as an existing freedom as well as a *Being/object* . . . he enriches the world and me, he *gives a meaning* to my existence *in addition to* the subjective meaning that I myself give it. (*Notebooks*, p. 500, italics in original)

So sympathetic comprehension of another person, and assistance in pursuing his or her goals, is possible after all. Sartre even talks of "authentic love" that "rejoices in the Other's being-in-the-world, without appropriating it" (*Notebooks,* p. 508), which is surprisingly reminiscent of Christian *agape.*

The freedom of the individual thus becomes Sartre's basic value. This has to be understood as not merely the necessary truth that every conscious

being is free in the abstract sense, but the value judgment that every person should be able to *exercise* his or her freedom in concrete ways and, therefore, that human societies should make this a reality for everyone. Sartrean authenticity, the reflective assuming of responsibility for one's own free choices, now involves respecting and valuing the freedom of all other conscious, rational beings.

He had earlier made a suggestion in this Kantian direction in *Existentialism and Humanism* (p. 29), where he said that in choosing for oneself one chooses for all people, and thereby creates an image of people as one believes they ought to be. In the *Notebooks* he uses the phrase "a city of ends" to express this goal, which he now sees as "absolute". That phrase echoes two previous ideals: Augustine's "City of God" (distinct from all earthly societies) and Kant's formula of the "Kingdom of Ends" (that we should treat every rational being never merely as a means but always as an end). Sartre, however, interprets the goal in more down-to-earth terms as a socialist, classless society—invoking the same sort of utopian ideal as Marx's envisioned "truly communist" state of future society in which all human beings will be free.

The vast verbiage of Sartre's philosophy thus issues a practical challenge to us all: first, to become more truly self-aware and use our freedom to change ourselves for the better and, second, to work toward a worldwide society in which all people have equal opportunity to exercise their freedom.

FOR FURTHER READING

For thought-provoking introductions to existentialism see William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books/ Doubleday, 1962), and David E. Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

For admirable short guides to important existentialist thinkers, Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London: Fontana, 1978); Arthur C. Danto, *Sartre* (London: Fontana, 1975).

Anyone wanting to get acquainted with Heidegger's though might start with his "Letter on Humanism" of 1947, translated in *Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, revised and expanded edition 1993).

Those who want to read Sartre for themselves could begin with his philosophical novel *Nausea* and his lecture *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen, 1948), then his short books *The Transcendence of the Ego* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1957) and *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (London: Methuen, 1962). Rather than trying to plow straight through *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, (London: Routledge, 2002; Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 2001), it might be

helpful to start with Part 4, the second chapter of Part 1 ("Bad Faith"), the concluding pages ("Ethical Implications"), then Part 3, Chapter 1, section III ("The Look").

Francis Jeanson, *Sartre and the Problem of Morality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980, first published in French in 1947), is an interpretation of the early philosophy that was endorsed by Sartre himself.

In *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1993), Thomas C. Anderson gives an account of Sartre's "first ethics" from the period immediately after *Being and Nothingness*, and his "second ethics" especially as presented in the Rome lecture of 1964. (Anderson's summary saves us from wading through hundreds of pages of jottings "of uneven clarity and significance.")

Gregory McCulloch, *Using Sartre: An Analytical Introduction to Early Sartrean Themes* (London: Routledge, 1994), offers a clear interpretation of some fundamental issues in Sartre, relating them to analytical philosophy of mind and epistemology.

Sebastian Gardner, *Sartre's Being and Nothingness: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2009), is an excellent aid to deeper understanding of that difficult text.

Leslie Stevenson, "Kant and Sartre on Self-Knowledge," in *Comparing Kant and Sartre*, ed. S. Baiasu (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015).

KEY TERMS

absurd	**in-itself-for-itself**
anguish	**intentionality**
authentic	**nothingness**
bad faith	**original project**
Being	**prereflective**
being-for-itself	**pure reflection**
being-in-itself	**reflection**
existential psychoanalysis	**spirit of seriousness**
existentialism	**superman**
facticity	**value judgment**

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does Sartre mean by calling human life "absurd"? Is he right?
2. Can you explain and defend Sartre's concept of "nothingness"?
3. Do we choose our own emotions?
4. Is Sartre's conception of "bad faith" coherent?
5. Is there any sense in which when we choose for ourselves, we choose for everyone?