

**EXISTENTIALISM IS A  
HUMANISM**

**JEAN PAUL SARTRE**

# Sartre, Jean Paul



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**21 June 1905 – 15 April 1980**

**1929 Met Simone de Beauvoir**

**1938 La Nausée (The Nausea)**

**1943 L'Être et le Néant (Being and Nothingness)**

**1946 Existentialism is a Humanism**

**After WWII Embraces Marxism and supports the  
Independence Movement in Algeria**

**October 1964 Wins the Nobel Prize for Literature  
but Refuses it**

# Existentialism is a Humanism

Defense of Existentialism against **four attacks**:

1. **Quietism of Despair** (by Communists)
2. **Underlying the ignominious in the human situation** (by Catholics)
3. **No solidarity** (both by Communists and by Catholics)
4. **Denying reality and seriousness of human affairs** (by Catholics)

# Existentialism is a Humanism

Existentialism makes **human life possible**  
affirming that **every truth and every action**  
**imply an environment**

**Optimism of choice**

**Two kind of existentialists:**

- 1. Christians (Jaspers and Marcel)**
- 2. Atheists (Heidegger, Sartre & other French existentialists)**

# Existentialism is a Humanism

## EXISTENCE COMES BEFORE ESSENCE

In Objects essence comes first, For Ex. A **paper-knife**: it is producible in a certain manner and serves a definite purpose □ essence precedes existence

It was the same for humans when God was considered the creator of men

XVIII Century Gives up God, but not Essentialism: man still possesses a human nature (Man)

**Atheistic Existentialism**: there is at least one being whose existence comes before his essence, a being which exists before it can be defined any conception of it: man or human reality

□ Man first of all exists and defines himself afterwards

# Existentialism is a Humanism

There is **no human nature**:

“**Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself**”

Man is a Project with a subjective life

- Man is **entirely responsible** for his existence **and responsible for all men**: In choosing for himself he chooses for all man because **to choose is to affirm the value of what is chosen**.

In other words with his/her choice man is setting an example of what he/she thinks is the right thing to do

# Existentialism is a Humanism

**1. ANGUISH:** it derives from the weight of being responsible in our choices and to set examples for others on the basis of what we consider right

**Test:** “Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do?”

**Ex. Military Leader** who is ordered to attack and has to send his men to face death

Anguish does not prevent action, on the contrary it is its very condition of possibility



# Existentialism is a Humanism

**2. ABANDONMENT:** The absence of God generates consequences. It is not easy to find a-priori values. But then there is the necessity to face Dostoevsky “If God does not exist, everything would be permitted” □ This is the starting point of existentialism

**No determinism:** Man is free, man is freedom

Actually, **man is left alone, condemned to be free**

**Ex. Of the Pupil** (to go fighting the Nazis or stay home helping the mother) (even choosing an adviser means choosing because you already know what the adviser is likely to tell you)

# Existentialism is a Humanism

**3. DESPAIR:** “we limit ourselves to a reliance upon that which is within our wills, or within the sum of the probabilities which render our action feasible”

□ Act without hope (in something transcendental)

First I ought to commit myself and then act my commitment without illusions

# Existentialism is a Humanism

## AGAINST QUIETISM

There is no reality except in action

**“Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what is life is.”**

**□ In life a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait**

# Existentialism is a Humanism

## OPTIMISM

### The example of cowards in novels

There is no justification in society for cowardice, each one is responsible for it

□ People are not born cowards (which would be reassuring) they choose to be so or to be brave

□ Total commitment

# Existentialism is a Humanism

## AGAINST CRITICISM OF SUBJECTIVISM

Point of departure is **subjectivity** (Descartes, I Think, therefore I am)

Besides subjectivity expresses **human dignity** (man is not an object)

But for existentialism Thinking can happen only in the presence of others

□ **Intersubjectivity**

□ **Human Condition** (not nature)

# Existentialism is a Humanism

## AGAINST THE CRITIQUE OF ANARCHY

It is not anarchy because it is **not possible not to choose**, and with choice one has to take **full responsibility**

Besides existentialism does **not support an aesthetic morality**, although in **common between art and morality there is creation**: **man makes himself, he is not found ready-made**

# Existentialism is a Humanism

## AGAINST THE CRITIQUE OF NOT BEING ABLE TO JUDGE OTHERS

Existentialists **do not believe in progress**

**But Judging is possible:**

- It is possible to judge when in some cases a choice is based upon an error and in others upon the truth
- Freedom has itself as an end and I cannot make my liberty unless I make that of others equally my aim

# Existentialism is a Humanism

## AGAINST THE CRITIQUE OF NOT BEING SERIOUS

The answer stands in the concept of **Humanism**

**1. Man as an end in itself** (being proud of humans because 'we' invented the airplane) □ **Absurd** for two reasons: first, maybe animals should be judging upon the greatness of men not ourselves; second, man can not be an end in itself because for existentialists man still needs to be determined



# Existentialism is a Humanism

## AGAINST THE CRITIQUE OF NOT BEING SERIOUS

The answer stands in the concept of **Humanism**

**2. Man outside of himself: Self-surpassing** □ “This is humanism because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human”

# Existentialism is a Humanism

“Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. It declares, rather, that **even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view.** Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what **man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God.** In this sense existentialism is **optimistic.** It is a **doctrine of action,** and it is only by self-deception, by confining their own despair with ours that Christians can describe us as without hope.”