



Jean-Paul Sartre

CHAPTER 22

Radical Freedom

One of the best-known and most widely discussed intellectuals since World War II, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), was born in Paris. His mother was a cousin of the renowned Christian and missionary doctor Albert Schweitzer, and his father, who died when Sartre was an infant, was a naval officer. Sartre was brought up in the home of his maternal grandfather and entered the *École Normale Supérieure* in 1924, concentrating on philosophy and literature. He completed his examinations in 1929 and, after meeting his military obligation, divided his time during the next eight years between teaching philosophy in several *lycées* and studying at the Institut Français in Berlin and the University of Freiburg. In this period he produced the acclaimed philosophical novel *Nausea*.

When the war began in 1939, Sartre returned to the army as a private. He was captured at the infamous Maginot line and remained a prisoner of war for nine months. Upon his release—prompted by ill health—he joined and was active in the Resistance movement and wrote for underground newspapers. He also completed his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*, before the liberation. In this work Sartre lays the psychological and ontological foundations for his distinctive brand of existential philosophy. In the immediate postwar period, Sartre wrote several novels and plays that led to his recognition as a world literary figure. He also joined with his companion Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) and his friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) in founding *Les Temps Modernes*, a critical review that addressed politics and literature from the viewpoint of existentialism.

Sartre became increasingly active politically as his fame grew. As early as 1951 he attempted to unify the noncommunist parties on the left, which brought him into conflict with the French Communist Party. Not long thereafter, however, his political agenda to secure freedom, justice, and equality became difficult to distinguish from the Communists'. At the theoretical level, he strove with great sophistication to explain, in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), that there is an underlying harmony between Marxism

and existentialism. The lasting contribution of Sartre, however, does not reside in his political sagacity; it resides rather in his literary works and in his casting of existential philosophy. In literature, he was awarded the 1964 Nobel Prize (which he declined), and in philosophy, he has joined the select ranks of those who must be studied.

Some of Sartre's most important philosophical works are *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1937), *Being and Nothingness* (1943), *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946), and *The Psychology of Imagination* (1948).

The opposition of existentialism to the rationalist tradition can scarcely be exaggerated. From Kierkegaard to Sartre and beyond, existentialists have insisted that the attempt to understand humanity by imposing rational categories is ill-fated. In the first place, as rationalists employ the familiar dichotomies of freedom and responsibility, object and subject, being and nonbeing, existence and essence, they fail to meet their own standard of logical consistency. In the second place, they forever preclude themselves from encountering reality. In the third place, they never encounter the existing individual in his or her totality.

It is the hallmark of existentialism to speak of the human condition as one in which individuals are radically free. But this thesis leads the existentialist immediately into the seeming paradox that freedom is our essential characteristic, that humans are slaves of the concept of freedom; thus human beings are not free to be *unfree*. The existentialist counters that the term *freedom*, when properly used, refers to the *condition of human existence* rather than to a *characteristic of human nature*. Our freedom is manifested in our creative endeavors, in spontaneous actions, and most of all in decision making. It falls to individuals alone to commit themselves at every moment to a limitless range of possibilities. Furthermore, according to the existential doctrine of Sartre, neither reason, nor social convention, nor God's will can relieve a person of the burden and responsibility of having to make choices. Even not choosing is a choice. Moreover, none of these factors can ensure the superiority of one decision over another. The human circumstance is agonizing and admits of no palliatives. Sartre summarizes the consequences of facing up to the true state of affairs in this way:

If existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom. On the other hand, if God does not exist, we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct. So in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses.¹

Existential philosophy holds that *who* people are is a function of the choices they make, not that the choices they make are a function of *who* they are. The ever-present danger for us as individuals in our highly organized society is that we will lose our uniqueness through submitting to external forces. It is difficult, however, to envision anyone choosing freely against the immense number of determinative pressures—social, political, economic, religious, and intellectual—that sanction and demand mere

¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), p. 27. Reprinted by permission of Citadel Press. Kensington Publishing Corp. All rights reserved. www.kensingtonbooks.com.

conformity. Is not the pathetic weakness of the individual sufficient in itself to justify moving with the crowd? The existentialist points out that such a plea is nothing more than a pretense for shirking responsibility. The question is not whether, like a hero of one's imagination, a person can overcome tremendous odds, but rather whether that individual has the courage to live *authentically*—to live, that is, according to choices made consciously and responsibly. To claim that one has no choice because of all the external pressures that can be brought to bear is to exchange the human situation for that of an automaton—to sacrifice being a genuine subject in favor of becoming a mere object. Furthermore, even if such an exchange occurs, the choice bringing it about and the responsibility for the resulting renunciation of individuality are still the individual's. In brief, at no time or place can individuals plead that who they are has been shaped by any factor other than themselves in the process of choosing and acting.

According to the existentialist, although our individual decisions may have a profound impact on others, we are still confronted with the dreadful realization that there are no universal principles to guide or sanctify our conduct. Between one person and another, there are no assured bonds. Social order, like natural order, is a fabrication, an avoidance of the fact of our total isolation. The virtue of authentic or genuine people lies in their honest recognition of this fact. They alone have integrity; their reward in an admittedly unique sense of the word is that they do not suffer self-alienation.

Sartre stresses the facticity of the situation wherein we choose. Indeed, he holds that if we were not constantly confronted by an array of brute facts, we could *not* act freely. In the absence of the existence of things, of our memories, of other people, of social institutions, and of other givens, there would be nothing to bring into conformity with our purposes, nothing to invest with significance, nothing to which a policy could pertain. For example, that rock on the ground may go virtually unnoticed until, say, my interest turns to establishing a lawn, or to scientific identification, or to building a retaining wall. Thus the rock can be molded by me and *for me* into an object to be removed, into an item for geological classification, or into a potential component of a structure. The possibilities for choice here seem limitless, but the *responsibility* for that choice and its consequences *is mine alone*. For Sartre, such unmitigated responsibility marks all of my policies, and most emphatically, all policies wherein I bring others into conformity with my ends.

Although classifying existentialists is difficult and risks error, it can be pointed out that some among them show a decided religious orientation, whereas others steadfastly reject religion in any form. Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich (1886–1965) are clearly members of the first group; Sartre and his associate Simone de Beauvoir belong to the second. Kierkegaard does not claim any objective knowledge of God; nevertheless he believes, after the manner of a Christian mystic, that however absurd and paradoxical it seems, the individual can establish rapport with the eternal God by a "leap of faith." Sartre and de Beauvoir, on the other hand, warn that it is as self-deceptive for human beings to escape the burden of responsibility for their actions through an appeal to supernatural belief as it is to avoid responsibility by claiming that one's actions fall under natural laws. From birth to death, Sartrean humans are bound only by the ideals and obligations that, in their freedom, they create for themselves.

1. According to Sartre, who a person is is a function of what she or he chooses or wills. But he insists that this in fact means "in creating the man we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be."

Atheistic existentialism, which I represent . . . states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man, or, as Heidegger says, human reality. What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence.

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is also what is called subjectivity, the name we are labeled with when charges are brought against us. But what do we mean by this, if not that man has a greater dignity than a stone or table? For we mean that man first exists, that is, that man first of all is the being who hurls himself toward a future and who is conscious of imagining himself as being in the future. Man is at the start a plan which is aware of itself, rather than a patch of moss, a piece of garbage, or a cauliflower; nothing exists prior to this plan, there is nothing in heaven; man will be what he will have planned to be. Not what he will want to be. Because by the word "will" we generally mean a conscious decision, which is subsequent to what we have already

made of ourselves. I may want to belong to a political party, write a book, get married; but all that is only a manifestation of an earlier, more spontaneous choice that is called "will." But if existence really does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him. And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.

The word subjectivism has two meanings, and our opponents play on the two. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, that an individual chooses and makes himself; and, on the other, that it is impossible for man to transcend human subjectivity. The second of these is the essential meaning of existentialism. When we say that man chooses his own self, we mean that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that that in making this choice he also chooses all men. In fact, in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all.

If, on the other hand, existence precedes essence, and if we grant that we exist and fashion our image at one and the same time, the image is valid for everybody and for our whole age. Thus, our responsibility is much greater than we might have supposed, because it involves all mankind. If I am a workingman and choose to join a Christian trade-union rather than be a communist, and if by being a member I want to show that the best thing for man is resignation, that the kingdom of man is not of this world, I am not only involving my own

case—I want to be resigned for everyone. As a result, my action has involved all humanity. To take a more individual matter, if I want to marry, to have children; even if this marriage depends solely on my own circumstances or passion or wish, I am involving all humanity in monogamy and not merely myself. Therefore, I am responsible for myself and for everyone else. I am creating a certain image of man of my own choosing. In choosing myself, I choose man.^a

2. An acute source of anxiety and despair lies in the fact that we choose for humanity rather than for ourselves as isolated beings. What we do must be what others might do as well.

The existentialists say at once that man is anguish. What that means is this: the man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a lawmaker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, can not help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility. Of course, there are many people who are not anxious; but we claim that they are hiding their anxiety, that they are fleeing from it. Certainly, many people believe that when they do something, they themselves are the only ones involved, and when someone says to them, “What if everyone acted that way?” they shrug their shoulders and answer, “Everyone doesn’t act that way.” But really, one should always ask himself, “What would happen if everybody looked at things that way?” There is no escaping this disturbing thought except by a kind of double-dealing. A man who lies and makes excuses for himself by saying “not everybody does that,” is someone with an uneasy conscience, because the act of lying implies that a universal value is conferred upon the lie.

Anguish is evident even when it conceals itself. This is the anguish that Kierkegaard called the anguish of Abraham. You know the story: an angel has ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son; if it really were an angel who has come and

said, “You are Abraham, you shall sacrifice your son,” everything would be all right. But everyone might first wonder, “Is it really an angel, and am I really Abraham? What proof do I have?”

There was a madwoman who had hallucinations; someone used to speak to her on the telephone and give her orders. Her doctor asked her, “Who is it who talks to you?” She answered, “He says it’s God.” What proof did she really have that it was God? If an angel comes to me, what proof is there that it’s an angel? And if I hear voices, what proof is there that they come from heaven and not from hell, or from the subconscious, or a pathological condition? What proves that they are addressed to me? What proof is there that I have been appointed to impose my choice and my conception of man on humanity? I’ll never find any proof or sign to convince me of that. If a voice addresses me, it is always for me to decide that this is the angel’s voice; if I consider that such an act is a good one, it is I who will choose to say that it is good rather than bad.

Now, I’m not being singled out as an Abraham, and yet at every moment I’m obliged to perform exemplary acts. For every man, everything happens as if all mankind had its eyes fixed on him and were guiding itself by what he does. And every man ought to say to himself, “Am I really the kind of man who has the right to act in such a way that humanity might guide itself by my actions?” And if he does not say that to himself, he is masking his anguish.^b

3. For Sartre, human freedom and the denial of God’s existence place us in the precarious position of being solely responsible for our actions. There are no *a priori* guidelines to give direction to our lives. This is a brute fact that each of us must face.

When we speak of forlornness, a term Heidegger was fond of, we mean only that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this. The existentialist is strongly opposed to a certain kind of secular

ethics which would like to abolish God with the least possible expense. About 1880, some French teachers tried to set up a secular ethics which went something like this: God is a useless and costly hypothesis; we are discarding it; but, meanwhile, in order for there to be an ethics, a society, a civilization, it is essential that certain values be taken seriously and that they be considered as having an *a priori* existence. It must be obligatory, *a priori*, to be honest, not to lie, not to beat your wife, to have children, etc., etc. So we're going to try a little device which will make it possible to show that values exist all the same, inscribed in a heaven of ideas, though otherwise God does not exist. In other words—and this, I believe, is the tendency of everything called reformism in France—nothing will be changed if God does not exist. We shall find ourselves with the same norms of honesty, progress, and humanism, and we shall have made of God an outdated hypothesis which will peacefully die off by itself.

The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoevski said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He can't start making excuses for himself.

If existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom. On the other hand, if God does not exist, we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us,

nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses.

That is the idea I shall try to convey when I say that man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.^c

4. Sartre provides examples and comments about our need to choose an active life, one in which we seek to make decisions rather than to avoid them. Failing to act is tantamount to retreating from the challenge of life.

Actually, things will be as man will have decided they are to be. Does that mean that I should abandon myself to quietism? No. First, I should involve myself; then, act on the old saw, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Nor does it mean that I shouldn't belong to a party, but rather that I shall have no illusions and shall do what I can. For example, suppose I ask myself, "Will socialization, as such, ever come about?" I know nothing about it. All I know is that I'm going to do everything in my power to bring it about. Beyond that, I can't count on anything. Quietism is the attitude of people who say, "Let others do what I can't do." The doctrine I am presenting is the very opposite of quietism, since it declares, "There is no reality except in action." Moreover, it goes further, since it adds, "Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life."

According to this, we can understand why our doctrine horrifies certain people. Because often the only way they can bear their wretchedness is to think, "Circumstances have been against me. What I've been and done doesn't show my true worth. To be sure, I've had no great love, no great friendship, but that's because I haven't met a man or woman who was worthy. The books I've written haven't been

very good because I haven't had the proper leisure. I haven't had children to devote myself to because I didn't find a man with whom I could have spent my life. So there remains within me, unused and quite viable, a host of propensities, inclinations, possibilities, that one wouldn't guess from the mere series of things I've done."

Now, for the existentialist there is really no love other than one which manifests itself in a person's being in love. There is no genius other than one which is expressed in works of art; the genius of Proust is the sum of Proust's works; the genius of Racine is his series of tragedies. Outside of that, there is nothing. Why say that Racine could have written another tragedy, when he didn't write it? A man is involved in life, leaves his impress on it, and outside of that there is nothing. To be sure, this may seem a harsh thought to someone whose life hasn't been a success. But, on the other hand, it prompts people to understand that reality alone is what counts, that dreams, expectations, and hopes warrant no more than to define a man as a disappointed dream, as miscarried hopes, as vain expectations. In other words, to define him negatively and not positively. However, when we say, "You are nothing else than your life," that does not imply that the artist will be judged solely on the basis of his works of art; a thousand other things will contribute toward summing him up. What we mean is that a man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which make up these undertakings.^d

5. Sartre acknowledges that one given of the human condition is that all persons are born and live in a definite time, place, and culture, but he denies that this implies that they possess an "essential nature."

If it is impossible to find in every man some universal essence which would be human nature, yet there does exist a universal human condition. It's not by chance that today's thinkers

speak more readily of man's condition than of his nature. By condition they mean, more or less definitely, the *a priori* limits which outline man's fundamental situation in the universe. Historical situations vary; a man may be born a slave in a pagan society or a feudal lord or a proletarian. What does not vary is the necessity for him to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal there. The limits are neither subjective nor objective, or, rather, they have an objective and a subjective side. Objective because they are to be found everywhere and are recognizable everywhere; subjective because they are *lived* and are nothing if man does not live them, that is, freely determine his existence with reference to them. And though the configurations may differ, at least none of them are completely strange to me, because they all appear as attempts either to pass beyond these limits or recede from them or deny them or adapt to them. Consequently, every configuration, however individual it may be, has a universal value.

Every configuration, even the Chinese, the Indian, or the Negro, can be understood by a Westerner. "Can be understood" means that by virtue of a situation that he can imagine, a European of 1945 can, in like manner, push himself to his limits and reconstitute within himself the configuration of the Chinese, the Indian or the African. Every configuration has universality in the sense that every configuration can be understood by every man. This does not at all mean that this configuration defines man forever, but that it can be met with again. There is always a way to understand the idiot, the child, the savage, the foreigner, provided one has the necessary information.

In this sense we may say that there is a universality of man; but it is not given, it is perpetually being made. I build the universal in choosing myself; I build it in understanding the configuration of every other man, whatever age he might have lived in. This absoluteness of choice does not do away with the relativity of each epoch. At heart, what existentialism shows is the connection between the absolute character of free

involvement, by virtue of which every man realizes himself in realizing a type of mankind, an involvement always comprehensible in any age whatsoever and by any person whosoever, and the relativeness of the cultural ensemble which may result from such a choice.^c

6. Two senses of the term *humanism* must be distinguished. Rejecting that form of it in which we judge the human race by its outstanding accomplishments, Sartre adopts instead that form that is appropriate for existentialism—namely, one in which people are dynamic agents seeking common goals.

Moreover, to say that we invent values means nothing else but this: life has no meaning *a priori*. Before you come alive, life is nothing; it's up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing else but the meaning that you choose. In that way, you see, there is a possibility of creating a human community.

I've been reproached for asking whether existentialism is humanistic. It's been said, "But you said in *Nausea* that the humanists were all wrong. You made fun of a certain kind of humanist. Why come back to it now?" Actually, the word humanism has two very different meanings. By humanism one can mean a theory which takes man as an end and as a higher value. Humanism in this sense can be found in Cocteau's tale *Around the World in Eighty Hours* when a character, because he is flying over some mountains in an airplane, declares, "Man is simply amazing." That means that I, who did not build the airplanes, shall personally consider myself responsible for, and honored by, acts of a few particular men. This would imply that we ascribe a value to man on the basis of the highest deeds of certain men. This humanism is absurd, because only the dog or the horse would be able to make such an overall judgment about man, which they are careful not to do, at least to my knowledge.

But it cannot be granted that a man may make a judgment about man. Existentialism

saves him from any such judgment. The existentialist will never consider man as an end because he is always in the making. Nor should we believe that there is a mankind to which we might set up a cult in the manner of Auguste Comte. The cult of mankind ends in the self-enclosed humanism of Comte, and, let it be said, of fascism. This kind of humanism we can do without.

But there is another meaning of humanism. Fundamentally it is this: man is constantly outside of himself; in projecting himself, in losing himself outside of himself, he makes for man's existing; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist; man, being this state of passing-beyond, and seizing upon things only as they bear upon this passing-beyond is at the heart, at the center of this passing-beyond. There is no universe other than a human universe, the universe of human subjectivity. This connection between transcendence, as a constituent element of man—not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense of passing beyond—and subjectivity, in the sense that man is not closed in on himself but is always present in a human universe, is what we call existentialism humanism. Humanism, because we remind man that there is no lawmaker other than himself, and that in his forlornness he will decide by himself; because we point out that man will fulfill himself as man, not in turning toward himself, but in seeking outside of himself a goal which is just this liberation, just this particular fulfillment.

From these few reflections it is evident that nothing is more unjust than the objections that have been raised against us. Existentialism is nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position. It isn't trying to plunge man into despair at all. But if one calls every attitude of unbelief despair, like the Christians, then the word is not being used in its original sense. Existentialism isn't so atheistic that it wears itself out showing that God doesn't exist. Rather, it declares that even if God did exist, that would change nothing. There you've got our point of view. Not that we

believe that God exists, but we think that the problem of His existence is not the issue. In this sense existentialism is optimistic, a doctrine of action, and it is plain dishonesty for Christians to make no distinction between their own despair and ours and then to call us despairing.^f

7. Sartre criticizes all efforts to place human beings on the same level as inanimate objects or things. To shirk one's responsibility in this way is a form of concealment and indicates "bad faith." Even in a war situation, a person cannot claim to be an innocent victim, as psychological determinists maintain.

The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being. We are taking the word "responsibility" in its ordinary sense as "consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object." . . .

Furthermore this absolute responsibility is not resignation; it is simply the logical requirement of the consequences of our freedom. What happens to me happens through me, and I can neither affect myself with it nor revolt against it nor resign myself to it. Moreover everything which happens to me is *mine*. By this we must understand first of all that I am always equal to what happens to me *qua* man, for what happens to a man through other men and through himself can be only human. The most terrible situations of war, the worst tortures do not create a nonhuman state of things; there is no nonhuman situation. It is only through fear, flight, and recourse to magical types of conduct that I shall decide on the nonhuman, but this decision is human, and I shall carry the entire responsibility for it. But in addition the situation is *mine* because it is the image of my free choice of myself, and everything which it presents to me is *mine* in that this represents me and symbolizes me. . . .

If I am mobilized in a war, this war is *my* war; it is in my image and I deserve it. I deserve it first because I could always get out of it by suicide or by desertion; these ultimate possibles are those which must always be present for us when there is a question of envisaging a situation. For lack of getting out of it, I have *chosen* it. This can be due to inertia, to cowardice in the face of public opinion, or because I prefer certain other values to the value of the refusal to join in the war (the good opinion of my relatives, the honor of my family, *etc.*). Any way you look at it, it is a matter of a choice. This choice will be repeated later on again and again without a break until the end of the war. Therefore we must agree with the statement by J. Romains, "In war there are no innocent victims." If therefore I have preferred war to death or to dishonor, everything takes place as if I bore the entire responsibility for this war. Of course others have declared it, and one might be tempted perhaps to consider me as a simple accomplice. But this notion of complicity has only a juridical sense, and it does not hold here. For it depended on me that for me and by me this war should not exist, and I have decided that it does exist. There was no compulsion here, for the compulsion could have got no hold on a freedom. I did not have any excuse; for as we have said repeatedly in this book, the peculiar character of human-reality is that it is without excuse. Therefore it remains for me only to lay claim to this war.^g

8. In his view, freedom extends to the brute fact of being born, for which one is, of course, not literally responsible.

Yet this responsibility is of a very particular type. Someone will say, "I did not ask to be born." This is a naive way of throwing greater emphasis on our facticity. *I am responsible for everything, in fact, except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being* [italics added]. Therefore, everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible. I am *abandoned* in the world, not in the sense

that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe like a board floating on the water, but rather in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant. For I am responsible for my very desire of feeling responsibilities. To make myself passive in the world, to refuse to act upon things and upon others is still to choose myself, and suicide is one mode among others of being-in-the-world. Yet I find an absolute responsibility for the fact that my facticity (here the fact of my birth) is directly inapprehensible and even inconceivable. . . . I am ashamed of being born or I am astonished at it or I rejoice over it, or in attempting to get rid of my life I affirm that I live and I assume this life as bad. Thus in a certain sense I *choose* being born. This choice itself is integrally affected with facticity since I am not able not to choose, but this facticity in turn will appear only in so far as I surpass it toward my ends. Thus facticity is everywhere but is inapprehensible; I never encounter anything except my responsibility. That is why I can not ask, "Why was I born?" or curse the day of my birth or declare that I did not ask to be born, for these various attitudes toward my birth—*i.e.*, toward the *fact* that I realize a presence in the world—are absolutely nothing else but ways of assuming this birth in full responsibility and of making it *mine*. Here again I encounter only myself and my projects so that finally my abandonment—*i.e.*, my facticity—consists simply in the fact that I am condemned to be wholly responsible for myself.^h

Questions

1. What are the philosophical consequences of Sartre's view that "existence precedes essence"?
2. Sartre claims that he is an "existentialist humanist." What does he mean?
3. What would be Sartre's defense of nontheistic existentialist ethics against the implications of

Dostoevski's maxim "If God does not exist, everything is permitted"?

4. Develop Sartre's thesis that humans are condemned to be free.
5. Kierkegaard and Sartre are both existentialists. What are their points of agreement and difference?
6. What does Sartre mean when he says that "we invent values"?
7. When Sartre speaks of our being responsible for the choices we make, is he using the term *responsible* in an ordinary sense or in a special sense? Discuss.
8. Review Sartre's thesis that in creating the person we want to be, we are at the same time creating "an image of man as we think he ought to be." Is this convincing?
9. What are the chief characteristics of humans as moral beings in Sartre's view?
10. What problems of social morality are posed by the radical subjectivity of existential ethics? Is the solution proposed by Sartre adequate to ensure social order?

Key to Selections

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1957. Copyright © 1957, 1985 by Philosophical Library. Reprinted with the kind permission of the Carol Publishing Group.

^app. 15–18.

^bpp. 18–20.

^cpp. 21–23.

^dpp. 31–33.

^epp. 38–40.

^fpp. 49–51.

^gp. 52, pp. 53–54, pp. 54–55.

^hp. 57, pp. 57–58.

Guide to Additional Reading

Primary Sources

- Jaspers, K., *Existentialism and Humanism* tr. E. B. Ashton, New York, R. F. Moore, 1952.
- Marcel, G., *The Existential Background of Human Dignity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963.