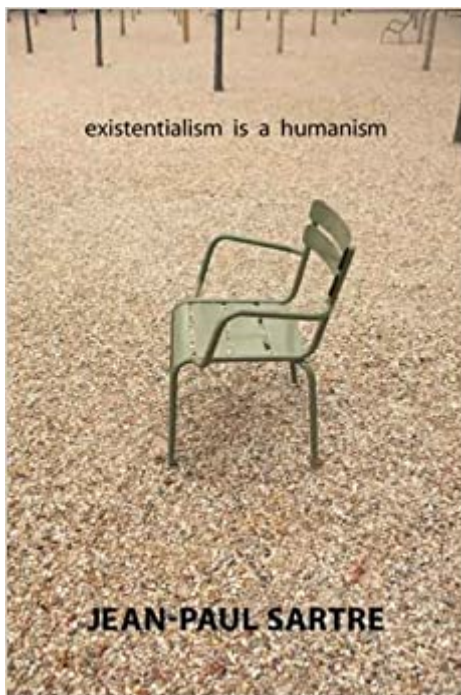


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Existentialism Is A Humanism



Synopsis

It was to correct common misconceptions about his thought that Jean-Paul Sartre, the most dominant European intellectual of the post-World War II decades, accepted an invitation to speak on October 29, 1945, at the Club Maintenant in Paris. The unstated objective of his lecture ("Existentialism Is a Humanism") was to expound his philosophy as a form of "existentialism," a term much bandied about at the time. Sartre asserted that existentialism was essentially a doctrine for philosophers, though, ironically, he was about to make it accessible to a general audience. The published text of his lecture quickly became one of the bibles of existentialism and made Sartre an international celebrity. The idea of freedom occupies the center of Sartre's doctrine. Man, born into an empty, godless universe, is nothing to begin with. He creates his essence—his self, his being—through the choices he freely makes ("existence precedes essence"). Were it not for the contingency of his death, he would never end. Choosing to be this or that is to affirm the value of what we choose. In choosing, therefore, we commit not only ourselves but all of mankind. This book presents a new English translation of Sartre's 1945 lecture and his analysis of Camus's *The Stranger*, along with a discussion of these works by acclaimed Sartre biographer Annie Cohen-Solal. This edition is a translation of the 1996 French edition, which includes Arlette Elkaim-Sartre's introduction and a Q&A with Sartre about his lecture.

Book Information

Paperback: 128 pages

Publisher: Yale University Press; Trade Paperback Edition edition (July 24, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0300115466

ISBN-13: 978-0300115468

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.4 x 7.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 58 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #4,623 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #1 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Existentialism #2 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > European > French #2 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Free Will & Determinism

Customer Reviews

"When [Sartre] demands that we take responsibility for our lives, for the shape of our world, for the situation of the least favored — for others as well as ourselves — he is expressing decisively important conditions for learning to live as responsible citizens in this globalized world. This is no outmoded radicalism, but the message of one of the most challenging and contemporary philosophies." — Ronald Aronson, International Herald Tribune "Like no one else, [Sartre] sought to understand exactly what it means to be responsible." — Ronald Aronson, International Herald Tribune "In this small book, we discover Sartre as more than the café existentialist or the playboy. Here we see the committed philosopher working in public, with many of its evident hazards. Despite its flaws, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, we have a model for a committed philosophy — one that is sorely needed today." — Nicholas Hengen, Rain Taxi "To understand Jean-Paul Sartre is to understand something important about the present time." — Iris Murdoch

Philosopher, playwright, and novelist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was the most dominant European intellectual for the three decades following World War II. In 1964, he was awarded but declined the Nobel Prize in Literature. Annie Cohen-Solal is the author of the acclaimed *Sartre: A Life*, an international best-seller that has been translated into sixteen languages.

“What do we mean here by *Existence precedes essence*? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism.” — Jean-Paul Sartre from *Existentialism Is a Humanism*

Jean-Paul Sartre was a French philosopher, novelist, playwright, and critic. He was a leading intellectual of the 20th century and the leading proponent of existentialism. While reading *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, I saw that James Stockdale included this book in his course syllabus on moral philosophy. So, of course, I immediately picked it up along with a bunch of the other titles. (We will be systematically working through that syllabus.) Interestingly, both Stockdale and Sartre were prisoners of war. Sartre spent a year in a Nazi prison camp while Stockdale spent eight years in a North Vietnamese prison. In addition to sharing that experience, the two also share a FIERCE commitment to personal

responsibility. It is, at the core, what both Stoicism and existentialism are all about. (On that note, Viktor Frankl comes to mind. Another man who suffered the indignities of war and wrote about the last freedom we each have: the freedom to choose our response to any given situation he describes in *Man's Search for Meaning*.) This short book is a transcript of a speech Sartre gave in 1945 to address many of the critics of existentialism. It is a remarkably lucid, concise exposition on the primary tenets of existentialism. It is even more remarkable given the fact that Sartre gave this lecture without notes. Let's explore some of my favorite Big Ideas:

1. Existential Anguish - + Its antidote.
2. Passion vs, Choice - Always your call.
3. Quietism vs. Commitment - Do what you're here to do.
4. The Stern Optimism - Of an ethical militant.
5. Moral Choices - As a work of art.

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This short but extremely clear volume was one of the first opportunities after the war for Sartre to explain to a lay audience his version of Existentialism. It took place on October 29, 1945 when the then already very famous French philosopher was invited to the "Club Maintenant" to "promote literary and intellectual discussion." Sartre used this lecture as an opportunity to settle scores and to set the record straight by answering all his critics at once. They had, among many other charges, leveled the uncomfortable charge that Existentialism showed only the negative and pessimistic side of human nature, and therefore as a philosophy (concerned mostly with abandonment, anguish and anxiety), was thus itself very much devoid of humanity. Sartre took these charges rather personally and to better make his points, pitched the lecture to the least sophisticated of the audience. What results is a beautifully articulated and clearly translated formulation of Sartre's basic philosophy. He answers his critics with a biting flourish, in what is not only a clear exposition, but also a penetratingly coherent piece. To wit: Existence precedes essence, and in any case is arbitrary. In this world, man is defined by the choices he makes and by his commitments to those choices. He does not define himself prior to his existence and exists only in the present, well beyond any concept of natural determinism. In Sartre's view, there is no human nature superior to that described here. In short, there is no God; we have been abandoned to our fate. That point however should not be misconstrued as that Existentialism is only about Atheism. It simply affirms that even if a God existed, it would make no difference to our humanity. Human nature is not a self-congratulatory

condition, but rather a fearful, uncertain, anguished and forlorn condition. Thus the real problem with our humanity is not with God's existence, but with man's own existence. Existentialism argues that man does not need a God so much as he needs to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself -- not even proof of the existence of a god. In Sartre's view, this understanding alone makes Existentialism, not only profoundly human, but also optimistic about human nature and the human condition. But more to the point, according to this formulation, anyone who believes otherwise is actually acting in "bad faith." From the Existentialist's point of view, once man is abandoned to his own fate he can have only one true goal: freedom for its own sake. That is to say, he is abandoned to his own fate with freedom (and his commitment to it) as his only universal project. At the bottom of this project, choice becomes the root node of the human condition, and the very basis of his primary reality. And because there is no god, there can be no pre-determined good. Good, like meaning, morality, judgment and values, all must be constructed from scratch as an existential project. That is to say, these all emerge directly from having made the choice and commitment to be free. Thus man has another important choice to make: to proceed through his world in either "good," or "bad" faith. If he proceeds in "good faith," he will discover that life has no a priori meaning. In our quest for freedom we must make committed choices that result in the invention of meaning and values as we go. Life itself is nothing until (and unless) it is lived. It is we (and not our gods or our dreams and wishes) that gives life its meaning. And values are nothing more than the meaning we ascribe to them through our actions. Thus proceeding in "good faith" means that things must be accepted as they are; one must learn to live an authentic life of action, taking responsibility for his own existence -- without the need for either crutches or excuses. Proceeding in "bad faith," on the other hand, means living an inauthentic life, one based on fantasy, excuses, wishes, promises and mythology. According to this formulation, God is seen as the "grand executor" and "creator" of all meaning. And as a result, man's only responsibility (both to himself and to his god) is obeying God's will and edicts. From the Existentialist point of view this approach is a barren and a coward's way out, because it forces man to shrink from being responsible for his own existence. He chooses instead a kind of self-congratulatory fetishized life of fantasized meanings. The last chapter of the book also has a critique of Camus' "The Stranger," but I will leave that aspect for my own review of that book. Five Stars

In this short and powerful lecture Sartre seeks to defend Existentialism against charges levied against it by Communists, who accuse it of being a contemplative, bourgeois philosophy, and Catholics, who accuse it of being a pessimistic philosophy. In response to the Communist charge,

Sartre says that Existentialism is a philosophy based on human action. Everything that man is is a result of his actions, not his dreams and expectations. "... he (Man) is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life." Against the charge put forth by the Catholics, Sartre says that Existentialism is overtly optimistic because it stresses man's ability to make himself as he wishes. What I have just spelled out is a superficial overview of Sartre's defense. There are other interesting concepts explored in this book such as morality, anguish, abandonment, despair, and intersubjectivity. Although I do disagree with some of Sartre's implications put forth, especially concerning morality, I still think it is a rather strong defense of Existentialism. If you are looking for a systematic treatise in defense of Sartrean Existentialism, turn to Being and Nothingness. If you are looking for a short defense and description of Existentialism, I suggest picking up this book.

Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count on no one but himself; that he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this earth.

A classic that stands the test of time!

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