

Introduction to Existentialism

1. We saw in the first half of the course how literacy enhances both objectivity and subjectivity. Immediately before the break we did a deeper dive into an objective, scientific approach to human nature, appealing to evolution to account for general patterns of human behavior. In the following couple of weeks we will explore how to understand human behavior in terms of human subjectivity, in the post-war existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre.
2. Evolutionary psychology adopted an objective, scientific approach to the study of human behavior. (1) It adopts the perspective of a 3rd person detacher or impartial observer . Existentialism on the other hand, with its focus on human subjectivity, (2) will adopt the first-person perspective of the individual agent. Thus, rather than seeking to (3) *explain* human behavior in terms of (4) *objective* causes existentialism will seeks to (5) *understand* human behavior in terms of (6) *subjective* motives. It asks not what *causes* behavior but what *motivates* behavior. That is, existentialism looks at behavior as means taken to realize a subject's (7) goal or (8) purpose, ultimately their (9) fundamental goal or "project" that the individual pursues directly or indirectly in everything that they do.
3. This difference of perspective, leads to opposite positions on human freedom.(1) As we saw, in an objective, scientific approach, freedom is an illusion, every choice requires a cause to explain it. (2) However by adopting the first person perspective of the agent making the decision, freedom is necessarily true. (3) I cannot be said to deliberate over a choice if I already know the choice I will make. To be a genuine choice, there must be more than one live option to choose *from*. (4) Note that neither case is a discovery, but a methodological presupposition. (5) For science freedom means that I cannot scientifically explain the choice. (6) However for existentialism, I can only understand a choice if is truly determined by the free choice of the individual making the decision.
4. As we saw before spring break, evolutionary psychology adopted a computer model for the self in which (1) consciousness served as its monitor, displaying but not determining whatever appears on the screen, that is, whatever we experience. (2) Existentialism on the other hand, adopts a literary model of the self, (3) like an author writing a novel, specifically, their autobiography the story of their life. (4) Now its true that the first chapters of our lives are largely written for us by others, especially our parents and the

society in which we are raised. And we do get to choose our parents, nor do we have much say over how they raise us. (5) But as we grow up we take up the pen and start writing for ourselves the subsequent chapters, (6) in which we decide what those initial chapters *mean* for us going forward. I have found existentialism to be very attractive to students, because you are at the point of having to decide what to do with the life you have been given. And you are at the point when you have to evaluate the values your parents and society generally have raised you with. Are they the right values? Which values do you keep, which should you discard going forward. In short, (7) science seeks to explain behavior in terms of the facts about us, while (8) existentialism seeks to understand what those facts mean to a given subject.

5. For the same facts can mean different things to different subjects. The same objects can be interpreted differently depending upon the goal different individuals are pursuing. (1) Take for example this object. What is it?
 - a. (2) Normally we would identify it as a table. Is it essential that it be made of wood? Could it be made of steel instead?
 - b. (3) But what if it is below zero and we are stuck here for the night? Now its firewood. Now its being made of wood is crucial. Whether you can write on it though, that is now irrelevant.
 - c. (4) Or what if there is an active shooter approaching down the hall? Now it's something to barricade the door with. Is it important that it is wooden now? It might even be better if it were made of steel.
 - d. So objectively what is it? A table we can use for firewood or firewood we can use as a table? Is it really a table we can use to barricade the door, or a barricade we could use for firewood if its too cold?
6. What it is depends on the situation. In the end, it is not an objective question. (1) Rather *what* it is, depends on *how* it is to be used. (2) And how it is to be used depends on what it will be used *for* and that in turn, (3) depends on goal or purpose it can serve as a means for achieving. (4) What something is then, is not an objective question but relative to the goals of the agent, the purpose the individual will put the object to.

7. What about us though? What am I? (1) That too will depend on what I do with myself, what I choose to make of myself. (2) But what about my genes? What if I have a genetic predisposition to alcoholism. Does that mean that I am an alcoholic? (3) (4) It might make it harder for me to resist alcohol, but its still up to me whether I give in to the temptation. In fact it is up to me whether I even see it as a temptation rather than a treat. It will ultimately depend on what I want to do with myself, how I want to live, who I aspire to become. (5) Being an alcoholic is not a fact, it's a choice. It may be an easier or a harder choice for different people, but it is still a choice.
8. Now it may not always be a deliberate choice. I may simply find myself in situations where I need a drink. But then the meaning of the situation is itself a function of what I am trying to do in that situation. (1) What's happening? Why do I care? (2) If it is frustrating some goal I am trying to accomplish and (3) I deal with frustration by having a drink, then yes, the situation "demands" a drink. But I only need a drink because of what my goals are and how I chose to behave when my goals are thwarted. (4) Someone else, not pursuing the same goal, may not feel my frustration. Or even if they do also feel frustrated if they deal with frustration some other way, maybe by going for a hard run. Then the situation would not call for a *drink*, but for a *run*. They may no more feel they are making a deliberate choice than I do.(5) Just what the situation is, and what kind of response is needed are not a function of the facts, which are the same for both of us, but a function of our goals, which are different, and the choices we make to achieve our goals, which can also be different.
9. A person then is a subject, not an object. (1) A person is free, an individual's choices motivated by goals not determined by causal forces or genetic programs that operate no matter what we might think. In fact what is true whether we like it or not, is precisely that we are free. (2) Sartre will argue that freedom itself is not a choice, but a fact. In his words, (3) we are *condemned* to be free.

Now that might seem an odd way to put it. Who does not want to be free? Well, Sartre thinks, almost everyone, almost all the time. (4) For Sartre thinks that facing the fact of our freedom evokes feelings of (5) anxiety, (6) abandonment, (7) despair and (8) nausea. What!?! How can that be? Let's go through them one by one:

10. First anxiety: Why would facing the fact that we are free make us anxious?
- a. (1) Because Sartre points out, rather brutally, if we are free then we are responsible, fully responsible for our lives. (2) No matter what we do, we have no one to blame but ourselves for our doing it. Our life is in our own hands.
 - b. (3) But what about our circumstances? (4) Don't circumstances mitigate our freedom?
11. It helps to situate Sartre in his context here. He is writing in 1946, just after the liberation of France from the Nazis. And everyone is having to face how they have acted over these past four years. And how family, friends, neighbors, even strangers are judging how they have acted during the Nazi occupation.
- a. (1) When criticized for having perhaps cooperated with the Nazis, some defended themselves by protesting that they could not be held responsible for what they did during the occupation. Sometimes they had to cooperate with the Nazis. (2) If they didn't they risked torture, or having their whole family killed. They were forced to cooperate with the Nazis, they had no choice.
 - b. (3) How do you think Sartre would respond to such a defense? (4) That they did have a choice. It might have been a hard choice—cooperate with the Nazis or be tortured by the Gestapo. Cooperate or have your family shipped off to a death camp. But it was still a choice. (5) Why don't you want to take responsibility for making that choice? For choosing your life and your family's life over resisting the Nazis? You decided which was more important. Why not responsibility for your decision?
12. Now some might say: I do not follow my own will but God's will. As a good Christian I do what God chooses me to do.
- a. (1) But of course it is you who have chosen to follow God's will. (2) And its up to you to decide just what God's will is. (3) You have to decide whether what you feel is an inspiration or a temptation, the voice of God or the voice of the devil.
 - b. (4) Or you could interpret what you feel as a repressed desire forcing its way into consciousness, (5) or as hormones triggered by your genetic programming.
 - c. How to interpret your desires? Its up to you.

13. Or some might say, my life is not my fault. (1) My parents traumatized me growing up. They ruined my life.
- a. What could Sartre say to this? You may have been mistreated, abused as a kid, but its now up to you to decide what that past abuse means for your life going forward. Does it mean you give up on yourself? Or does it mean you fight back? Is your past abuse the story of a coward, or a hero?
14. Again, some might say: Wait...I am the victim here! Its not my fault that I was (1) mugged, or (2) fired. Its not my fault (3) that I was born in poverty, (4) that I suffer from a disability.
15. Sartre agrees you may not be responsible for some of your factual circumstances (1) but again you are responsible for what you do with those facts. (2) You are responsible for what those facts mean. (3) You are responsible for what kind of story you write dealing with those facts.
- a. In other words, (4) you may not be responsible for your circumstances, (5) but you are responsible for how you interpret those circumstances. (6) You are responsible for what you determine to be your situation in light of those circumstances.
16. Sartre gives an example from his own experience early in the war. He was drafted into the army as the political situation in Europe deteriorated in 1939. He was assigned to an observation post on the boarder with Germany. When the Germans invaded he was captured and spent some time in a prisoner of war camp.
- a. (1) While in the camp he met a young Jesuit priest. The man's life had been one failure after another—he flunked out of school, he was fired from his job, his girlfriend had dumped him. But rather than interpreting his life as a failure, the young man interpreted it to mean he was being called by God to a different kind of life, a religious life as a priest, rather than a successful life in the world. What accounts for his story? Sartre asks. Not the facts, but how he chose to deal with those facts.
17. Every day of our life is a new page in our story. Every day we have to decide again whether to remain true to the decisions we made yesterday, or whether to change, to give up or to double down. Our story up to now informs but does not determine what we

write today. we cannot change the facts of yesterday, but its our decisions today that determine what those facts mean today. On any given day we may decide to change, convert, turn a new leaf, start a new chapter that changes who we are going forward, that transforms the meaning of all that went before.

18. Another element of anxiety: I am not making my choices are for myself alone. If I am not to be a hypocrite, I am not just deciding what I should do in a given situation, but what anyone should do. Everyone else is looking at how I am living my life and judging me accordingly. And they have a right to.
19. For example, a lot of the survivors of the German occupation are complaining that no one has the right to judge what they did under the Nazis. (1) But in collaborating with the Nazis rather than risking death they were judging that life was more important than resisting the Nazis.
20. What if I choose to ignore other's judgements? Does that enable me to avoid responsibility? No, for I am also judging myself, and that is a judgment I can never evade.
21. And then one day we die and our story is done. It may not be at the right moment. In fact Sartre says that people often complain that its not time for them to die. That (1) they are dying too early , before they have had a chance to realize their goals, or (2) too late, after they have failed their dreams, betrayed their values, ruined their lives. But at the moment of death our story is over. They meaning of our story is no longer in our own hands, it lies with those we leave behind to judge what kind of life we lived, what kind of person we were, what kind of story we wrote.
22. So there is plenty to be anxious about. Total freedom means total responsibility. (1) But why would a recognition of our freedom evoke feelings of abandonment?
23. For freedom also means that no one can make my decisions for me. We can choose to obey someone else, follow their decision, but it is us who are choosing to do that. Its still our choice to follow someone else's choice.
 - a. Sartre illustrates this point with another story, this time of a student of his who came to ask him for advice during the war. (1) The student wanted to escape from France and join the Free French forces fighting the Nazis. But he was hesitating. (2) For he knew that if he were to flee France he would be leaving his mother all

alone under terrible circumstances. Should he not rather stay and take care of her? He is torn. What should he do? Which of his commitments should take precedence? His commitment to his country or to his mother?

24. But he at least lighten his responsibility by asking others for advice?

- a. But it was up to him to choose whom to ask for advice.
 - i. (1) Does he ask someone he suspects is already a collaborator or (2) someone he suspects may be a member of the resistance?
 - ii. And he still has to decide whether to follow their advice. Is it good advice?
 - iii. (3) He chooses to ask his philosophy teacher. Who of course has not himself left France to join the Free French, but who was in the resistance, and maybe the student knew or suspected as much.

25. Sartre's response is again brutal: Sartre says that he cannot decide for him. The young man has to decide for himself which commitment is more important.

- a. (1) Sartre says his student ultimately decided to go with his gut. With what felt at the time to be the right thing to do.
- b. (2) But is what I want to do an inspiration or a temptation. Sartre thinks going with his gut was a cop out. For as we will see in the next video, Sartre argues that feelings are not divine inspirations, or genetic programs or hormones or chemicals, feelings themselves depend on our choices. They are assessments of our situation in light of our goals. Whether I am frightened or angry at a threat to my life depends on what I value. It also depends on whether I am already fighting or fleeing. For Sartre argues that ultimately, I do not run away because I feel afraid, I feel afraid because I am running away already in my head.
- c. (3) What advice Sartre does give, is that whichever decision he made, commit to it. (4) Make it the right choice by seeing to it through. (5) Don't waver, don't keep second guessing yourself. Make your choice and commit yourself to it... Even though of course you remain free to change your mind tomorrow.

26. Sartre claims that recognition of freedom thus also evokes despair. Not in the sense of misery, but in the stoic sense, (1) that I cannot count on anyone but myself to give my life meaning and purpose. (2) For Sartre, the value of my action does not lie in its outcome or

result, it does not depend on whether I succeed or fail. (3) Nor does the value of my action lie with what others do with what I have done. (4) Rather the value of my action lies with what it says about me. That I am the kind of person that makes this kind of choice in this kind of situation.

- a. After all, what if Sartre's student had went off to join the Free French but was drowned crossing the channel and never fired a shot. Would that mean he made the wrong choice?
- b. Or what if the student stayed to care for his mother. The Nazi's were defeated anyway. Would that mean he made the right choice?
- c. The problem with counting on others is that they are free too, and so you cannot control them. The meaning, and value, of what that young man did does not lie in how the war eventually turned out but rather on what his decision and how he made that decision says about him.

27. And so finally recognition of our freedom evokes a feeling of nausea, (1) like sea sickness. (2) For freedom means that here is no objective meaning or measure, no pre-determined purpose or destiny for one's life. (3) Who you are to be is up to you. (4) What is good or evil is relative to your goals—does it advance your purpose in life or threaten to undermine it? Goodness is not an objective, scientifically measurable property any more than meaning is, any more than interpretation is.

- a. (5) Its like being out at sea, on a boat rocking with the waves, with no firm ground on which to stand. Your life is meaningful to the extent that you chose to make it meaningful by the goals you choose to pursue. The meaning of your life is up to you. There is no escaping that choice. Even to refuse to make a choice is to choose not to choose. (6) We are condemned to be free.