

# *Sartre: Existentialism is a Humanism*

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## ***Existence Precedes Essence (Being-in-Itself & Being-for-Itself)***

For things, essence precedes existence. For humans, existence precedes essence.

**Artifacts.** The *essence* of an artifact is . . .

- (1) a *concept* in the mind of the artisan who creates it;
- (2) the concept specifies a particular *function*;
- (3) which determines the *norms* about what counts as a good member of its kind.

**Humans.** The *essence* of a human doesn't exist prior to its existence. There are no Human Artisans. There is no You-concept that existed prior to you existing. You have no predetermined purpose; there's no predetermined fact about *what you should be doing with your life*.

EXAMPLE: A CHAIR. The essence of a chair is the chair-concept that (1) exists in the mind of chair-makers before they build them; (2) specifies that the function of a chair is to support comfortable sitting; and (3) determines the norms about what counts as a good chair.

What about God? Couldn't it be that God created us with a divine plan in mind? Sartre's an atheist.

### ***One Consequence: No Norms***

There are not any *moral norms* that predetermine what you should and should not do.

#### NO PREDETERMINED MORAL NORMS

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| <p><b>P1</b> There are moral norms that determine that makes a thing a good X only if Xs have a well-defined essence.</p> <p><b>P2</b> Xs have a well-defined essence only if the Xs were created with a purpose.</p> <p><b>P3</b> You were created with a purpose only if God exists.</p> <p><b>P4</b> God doesn't exist.</p> <hr/> <p><b>C</b> There aren't any moral norms that determine what makes someone a good human — so, there's nothing that predetermines what you should or shouldn't do.</p> |
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### ***Another Consequence: radical freedom***

Humans are "condemned to be free." If there's no God, then humans lack an essence — a human nature — to constrain our choices. If there's no God, then there's no divine plan for me to adhere (or fail to adhere) to.

What does Sartre mean by "free" though? Aren't there lots of things that I simply cannot do (and am thus not *free* to do)? Yes. According to Sartre, it's not that we're free to do anything; rather, it's that we're always free to do *something*.

### *One More Consequence: responsibility*

We are, ultimately, responsible for *who we are* and *what we do*. Our essence is not predetermined, so we must create it.

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 . . . this being is man . . . . Man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards *defines himself* . . . . Only afterwards he will be something, and *he himself will have made what he will be*.

We create who we are by making choices. (E.g., You make yourself a coward by choosing to do cowardly things). If you create who you are, you are responsible for all of your actions.

If you don't like who you are, if you don't like the outcomes of your choices, etc., you have no one to blame but yourself. You're free. You cannot blame your "bad" decisions on your nature (you don't have a predetermined one), your environment, God (there isn't one), etc.

### *Existential Ethics*

If there's no God, then there are no predetermined moral norms. Does this mean that there is no morality at all? Is Sartre a Nihilist? No: *morality is created by us*.

#### CREATING MORAL NORMS THROUGH CHOICE

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| <p><b>P1</b> Whenever we choose, we choose in the presence of others.</p> <p><b>P2</b> In choosing ourselves, we choose who we are.</p> <p><b>P3</b> We are all particular human beings.</p> <hr/> <p><b>C</b> Whenever we choose, we choose to be a certain type of human being in the presence of others. So, in choosing myself, I project a certain image of what it is to be human to others.</p> |
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There is no predetermined facts about what is and is not *valuable*. But, by choosing, we confer value on to things. When we choose *A* over *B*, we thereby make a proposal to everyone: *A* isn't less valuable than *B*. When I choose for myself, there is a sense in which I also choose for everyone.

**Bad Faith.** To act in *bad faith* is to adopt strategies that disguise one's radical freedom from oneself.

Bad Faith is a form of self-deception. Living an authentic life involves avoiding bad faith.

This all affords Sartre the resources to avoid Nihilism. Here's the idea: (1) Whenever we choose *authentically*, we thereby affirm the value of freedom; (2) By affirming my own freedom, I make a proposal to others — I project a certain image of what it is to be a human; (3) So, acting authentically requires respect for freedom (in myself *and others*).