

Existentialism is a Humanism

(Lecture, 1945), an excerpt

Jean-Paul Sartre

[*Sartre is talking about many other writers claiming to be "existentialists"]*

What they have in common is they believe that existence comes before essence—or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective. What exactly do we mean by that?

If one considers an article to be manufactured, for example, a book or a letter opener — **one sees that it has been made by an artisan who had a conception of it;** [*What does this sound like?*] and he has paid attention, equally, to the conception of a letter opener and to the pre-existent technique of production which is a part of that concept and it is, at least, a formula. Thus the letter opener is at the same time an article to be produced in a certain manner and one which, on the other hand, serves a definite purpose, for one cannot suppose that a man

would produce a letter opener without knowing what it was for. **Let us say, then, of the letter opener that its essence** (that is to say the sum of the formulae and the qualities which made the production and the definition possible) **precedes its existence.** The presence of such-and-such a letter opener or book is thus determined before my eyes. Here, then, we are viewing the world from a technical standpoint, and we can say that production precedes existence. When we think of God as the creator, we are thinking of him, most of the time, as a superior artisan. Whatever doctrine we may be considering, whether it be a doctrine like that of Descartes, or of Leibnitz himself, we always imply that the will follows, more or less, from the understanding or at least accompanies it, so that when God creates he knows precisely what he is creating. Thus, the conception of man in the mind of God is comparable to that of the letter opener in the mind of the artisan: God makes man according to a procedure and a conception, exactly as the artisan manufactures a letter opener, following a definition and a formula. Thus each individual man is the realisation of a

certain conception which dwells in the divine understanding.

In the philosophical atheism of the eighteenth century, the notion of God is suppressed, but not, for all that, the idea that essence is prior to existence; something of that idea we still find everywhere, in Diderot, in Voltaire and even in Kant. Man possesses a human nature; that "human nature," which is the conception of human being, is found in every man; which means that each man is a particular example of a universal conception, the conception of Man. In Kant, this universality goes so far that the wild man of the woods, man in the state of nature and the bourgeois are all contained in the same definition and have the same fundamental qualities. Here again, the essence of man precedes that historic existence which we confront in experience.

Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being

which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing—as he wills to be after that leap towards existence.

Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. And this is what people call its "subjectivity," using the word as a reproach against us. But what we mean to say by this is that man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table, right? For we mean to say that

man primarily exists—that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so. Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. **Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he wills to be.** Not, however, what he may wish to be. For what we usually understand by wishing or willing is a conscious decision taken—much more often than not—after we have made ourselves what we are. I may wish to join a party, to write a book or to marry—but in such a case what is usually called my will is probably a manifestation of a prior and more spontaneous decision. If, however, it is true that existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we

do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.

[*This sounds so wonderful! This was written in 1945... either just before WWII ended or at least it appeared that it was coming to an end. I wonder what Sartre would say if he could see how things are now? The "new" world was filled with hope. The dreadful war was over...life could get back to "normal."*]