



Humanism in Existential Thought: J P Sartre's views on freedom and Its Ethical Implications

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Abstract: This study analyzes the concept of humanism within existential philosophy, focusing on Jean-Paul Sartre's perspectives on freedom and its ethical implications. Sartre's existentialist framework posits that freedom is the fundamental characteristic of human existence, emphasizing the individual's responsibility to define their essence via choices and acts. The paper analyzes Sartre's resolution of the seeming contradiction between radical freedom and moral responsibility, and in his notions of authenticity and the obligation to respect the freedom of others. This research examines key texts, such as *Existentialism is a Humanism*, *Being and Nothingness*, to investigate the ethical ramifications of Sartre's philosophy, emphasizing critiques of subjectivity and moral relativism. The discussion highlights how Sartre's views on freedom deepen the understanding of humanism, presenting an ethical framework based on autonomy, responsibility, and the communal aspect of human existence.

Keywords: Existentialism, Humanism, Freedom, Ethical Implications, Authenticity, Responsibility, Moral Accountability

1. Introduction

Despite their differences in historical trajectory, the universal themes of human flourishing, free will, and the search for meaning in a meaningless and chaotic cosmos unite the philosophical traditions of existentialist and humanism. One of the most prominent names in existentialist philosophy, Jean-Paul Sartre, poses a serious challenge to established moral theories and philosophies by proposing an extreme perspective of human freedom. Rejecting the idea of a predetermined human nature and emphasizing the capacity of the individual to shape their own essence via deliberate decisions and acts, his revolutionary assertion that "existence precedes essence" serves as the cornerstone of his philosophy. Freedom is portrayed by Sartre's existential humanism as an inevitable state and a fundamental feature of human existence. This viewpoint rethinks what it means to be free by shifting the emphasis from outside forces to the personal accountability that accompanies agency in making one's own decisions¹. The weight of responsibility that comes with every decision is highlighted by Sartre's focus on radical freedom, which does not mean an unbridled license to act. In his opinion, people should take personal responsibility for their actions and also have an ethical obligation to create a society that values the freedom of others. Sartre places a premium on authenticity in his ethical

¹Afryansyah, A., Sukardi, I., Astuti, M., & Bahrudin, A. (2024). The existentialism philosophy (Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard) in the contextualization of education in the digital era. *TOFEDU: The Future of Education Journal*, 3(5), 1198-1207.

framework; it states that people should act in line with their values and recognize the consequences of their freedom. The opposite of authenticity is "bad faith," the state in which individuals give in to pressure from others, societal standards, or deterministic beliefs, thereby denying or evading their freedom. Sartre's philosophy urges people to fearlessly face their freedom, with all the worry and duty that comes with it, and to reject moral complacency and self-deception².

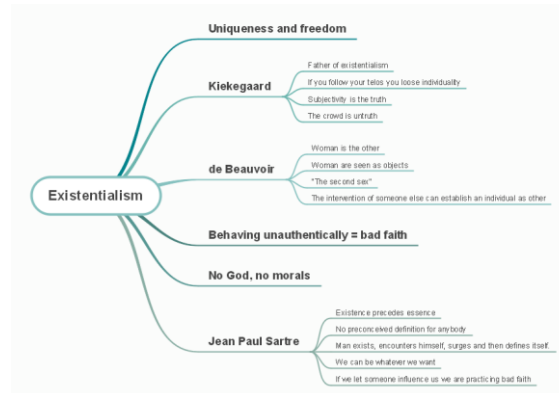


Fig. 1 Jean-Paul Sartre Biography, Ideas, Existentialism [11]

Beyond the individual, Sartre's theories have ethical ramifications for interactions in society and between individuals. Sartre tackles the ethical obligation to honor the independence of others while negotiating the intricacies of cohabitation by stressing the interdependence of human freedom. This method begs important questions like the dangers of moral relativism and subjective ethics, the proper balance between individual freedom and socially accepted standards of conduct, and other related topics. This paper delves deeply into Sartre's ideas on freedom and the ethical implications of those ideas. Using his foundational works as a guide, this research delves into the philosophical underpinnings, applicability to larger existentialist concerns, and criticisms leveled against his beliefs. This study aims to provide light on the lasting impact of Sartre's ideas on modern debates about responsibility, ethics, and freedom by examining the relationship between humanism and existentialism via his perspective³.

1.1 Background

The intellectual upheaval of modernity—the disappointment after the wars, the growth of industry, and the fall of conventional religious and moral systems influenced the emergence of existentialist thought as a major philosophical movement in the twentieth century. Fundamental to existentialism are inquiries into the nature of human beings, their agency, and the meaning of life in the face of an apathetic or ludicrous cosmos. Jean-Paul Sartre, a prominent figure in the movement, developed an attractive existential humanism by focusing on the human situation, freedom, and responsibility. While developing his own unique viewpoint, Sartre drew inspiration from thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger, whose work is firmly ingrained in the existentialist tradition. His famous statement, "existence precedes essence," rejected the assumption that people were born with a fixed character or destiny. He insisted that people need to find

²Elikwu, J. N. (2024). Harmony and existential fulfillment: A comparative study of Wu-Wei philosophy and Jean-Paul Sartre's perspectives. *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis*, 7(1), 80-90.

³Russo, M. (2022). From Jean-Paul Sartre to critical existentialism: Notes for an existentialist ethical theory. *Sartre Studies International*, 28(1), 49-66.

their identity in the things they do, the relationships they cultivate, and the decisions they make in life because they are born without any intrinsic meaning. The core of Sartre's existentialist worldview is freedom, which is emphasized by this emphasis on self-definition.

1.2 Defining Humanism in Existential Thought

In its conventional sense, humanism affirms human life's inherent worth, dignity, and purpose by drawing on religious or philosophical foundations. Typically governed by divine will, natural law, or universal moral truths, these frameworks assert a preordained essence or destiny for humanity, which is based on philosophical or theological ideas. Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy, on the other hand, rethinks humanism via the rejection of any fixed essence and outside power⁴. The ability to make meaning of one's life and the choices one makes is what really defines a human being, according to Sartre, not innate traits but free will. In his landmark article "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre encapsulates existential humanism and defends it against nihilism and moral relativism. Existentialism, he says, is deeply humanistic because it upholds the importance of individual liberty and the duty that accompanies it. When Sartre says that "existence precedes essence," he basically says that it is up to the person to define themselves, authority and responsibility included. Humanism according to Sartre is an alternative to classical humanism that emphasizes the uniqueness and variety of human experience rather than imposing a universal ideal on people⁵.

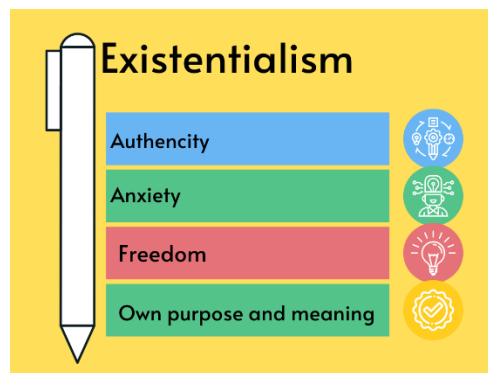


Fig. 2 Existentialism [12]

Sartre directly confronts the charge that existentialism encourages hopelessness or an absence of moral principles in Existentialism is a Humanism. To this, he responds by stressing that people still need to be morally accountable for the decisions they make, even in a world without fixed principles. Since everyone's deeds shape the human condition, Sartre argues that this duty goes beyond individual lives to include all of mankind. The interdependence of personal liberty and society as a whole is brought out by this communal facet of Sartre's humanism. The emphasis on genuineness is another hallmark of Sartre's humanism⁶. Sartre argues that in order to live an honest life, one must recognize and accept their independence while rejecting deceit and the pressures from outside forces. Being true to oneself entails taking personal responsibility for

⁴Russo, M. (2021). The normative bond between Kantian autonomy and Sartrean authenticity: A critical existentialist perspective. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 29(1), 43-54.

⁵Fox-Muratón, M. (2020). Kierkegaard and Beauvoir: Existential ethics as a humanism. *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 25(1), 241-264.

⁶Liakh, V. V., & Khylyko, M. I. (2019). J.-P. Sartre's humanism in the context of modern anthropological situation. *Anthropological Measurements of Philosophical Research*, (16), 116-132.

one's actions while still honoring the autonomy of others. In contrast, more conventional humanist principles may place a premium on following predetermined rules, such as those of a particular religion or set of universally accepted moral principles. In his existentialist reinterpretation of humanism, Sartre questions the very basis of traditional morality while providing an alternative, more libertarian outlook on the human condition. Emphasizing the philosophy's significance as both a criticism of deterministic or dogmatic worldviews and an anthem for human potential, creativity, and responsibility, his argument of existentialism as a humanism highlights each of these aspects⁷.

2. Literature Review

In their study on the contextualization of education in the digital era, Afryansyah et al. (2024) delve into the use of existentialist ideas in contemporary educational settings, particularly in relation to the digital age. The authors of the study are Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard. They look at how educational practices that promote critical thinking and real learning in the midst of fast changing technology environments can be informed by Sartre's and Kierkegaard's views on human freedom, choice, and self-realization. In light of the growing trend of online learning, the authors argue that Sartrean existentialism with its focus on free will and individual accountability can shed light on how to design educational systems that foster genuine self-expression and genuine existence.

In *Harmony and Existential Fulfillment: A Comparative Study of Wu-Wei Philosophy and Jean-Paul Sartre's Perspectives* (2024), Elikwu draws parallels between Sartre's existentialist ideas about authenticity and freedom and the Daoist teachings on Wu-Wei, also known as "non-action." By comparing and contrasting the two ideologies' views on freedom and existence, Elikwu examines how they deal with the question of human fulfillment. Wu-Wei's emphasis on easy activity in harmony with the natural flow of the cosmos stands in stark contrast to Sartre's radical freedom, where humans are condemned to make choices and define themselves. While both ideologies aim to help people find their purpose in life, Elikwu says that Sartre's technique is more active and involves taking responsibility for one's actions, while Wu-Wei's model is more passive and involves being in harmony with the cosmos.

In his book *From Jean-Paul Sartre to Critical Existentialism: Notes for an Existentialist Ethical Theory*, Russo (2022) delves into the development of critical existentialism and how it impacts Sartre's ethical philosophy. In this article, Russo discusses the ways in which modern existentialist ethical theory has been shaped by Sartre's views on radical freedom and the accompanying responsibility. Topics covered include honesty, deceit, and the impact of societal systems on personal decisions. To tackle the intricacies of contemporary moral quandaries like social justice, inequality, and communal responsibility, Russo proposes a critical existentialism that expands beyond Sartre's original framework. This study argues that Sartre's writings provided the framework for an ethical theory that takes into account the interconnectedness of people in society and places an emphasis on being one's true self.

The normative link between Kantian autonomy and Sartrean authenticity: A critical existentialist viewpoint delves further into the connection between the two in Russo's (2021) investigation of the topic. Russo investigates whether Sartre's idea of authenticity which centers on personal freedom and self-definition and the rational self-governance advocated by Immanuel Kant are compatible. According to the research, both

⁷Udokang, E. J. (2016). Implications of Sartre's humanistic existentialism. *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, 39(1/2), 83-96.

philosophies are normatively equivalent in their support for individual agency, but Sartre's authenticity brings a more radical understanding of freedom by stressing the need to recognize the absurdity and contingency of life. According to Russo, a more powerful ethical theory that helps people deal with the conflict between individual liberty and collective duty can be achieved by combining existentialism with Kantian autonomy.

In *Kierkegaard and Beauvoir: Existential Ethics as a Humanism*, Fox-Muraton (2020) delves at the links between Simone de Beauvoir's and Søren Kierkegaard's existential ethics, specifically as it pertains to humanism. In spite of their disagreements on human freedom and existential dread, Fox-Muraton shows that Kierkegaard and Beauvoir are both humanists who focus on the journey of the individual seeking meaning and fulfillment in a meaningless world. With an emphasis on the social aspects of freedom, the article shows how Beauvoir's feminist existentialism expands upon Kierkegaard's concepts of personal responsibility and ethical choice. Fox-Muraton highlights the possibility of existentialist ethics providing the groundwork for a humanism that values individual honesty and communal accountability by bringing their viewpoints together.

3. Methodology

Research Design

Jean-Paul Sartre's ideas on humanism, freedom, and the ethical consequences of these concepts are investigated and analyzed in this work through the use of a qualitative and theoretical approach. It follows the format of an interpretative inquiry and places an emphasis on analyzing Sartre's foundational writings, such as *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*, in great depth. In order to decipher Sartre's existential humanism, this study takes an exploratory approach, focusing on his ideas on radical freedom, poor faith, and authenticity. A more comprehensive grasp of Sartre's beliefs is achieved by comparing them to other existentialist thinkers' views and to more conventional humanist ideologies. Engaging with academic perspectives and tackling difficulties like subjectivity and moral relativism, the research seeks to offer a balanced critique of Sartre's philosophy. This layout guarantees an all-encompassing examination of Sartre's work within the larger conversation about ethics and humanism.

Theoretical Analysis

As the foundation of his existential humanism, Sartre's claim that "existence precedes essence" serves as the theoretical framework's focal point. The significance of this idea for autonomy, personal choice, and ethical accountability is examined. By highlighting the lack of a predetermined essence and the need of individuals defining themselves by their choices and actions, Sartre's concept of radical freedom is examined as a distinguishing element of human life. The approach explores the moral dilemmas that freedom poses, specifically the conflict between independence and responsibility. Sartre's ethical framework, which centers on the concepts of bad faith and authenticity, sheds insight on the difficulty of being one's true self while yet honoring the freedom of others. This study also takes into account Sartre's argument that existentialism is a humanism, which recognizes the commonality of human responsibility while also celebrating individual agency and the boundless creativity and potential of the human spirit.

Ethical Considerations

Intellectual honesty, equity, and tolerance of differing viewpoints are central to the study's ethical concerns. The study strives for an authentic portrayal of Sartre's ideas, steering clear of any reduction to or misreading of his philosophical work. To keep things fair, the critique takes into account opposing viewpoints and

responds to critiques leveled against Sartre's ideas, such as claims of subjectivity or moral relativism. Researchers also keep in mind the larger moral questions raised by Sartre's philosophies, especially as they pertain to modern discussions of individual liberty, truthfulness, and human dignity. This maintains the study's rigor and guarantees its contribution to ongoing philosophical conversations.

4. Findings & Discussion

Findings

Based on the premise that "existence precedes essence," Sartre's existential philosophy radically reimagines humanism by arguing against fixed human natures and purposes, as this study shows. By arguing that people are free to invent their own meaning and purpose in life, this idea emphasizes the tremendous autonomy that comes with being human. Radical freedom, as Sartre stresses, is both a gift and a curse because it requires accepting full responsibility for one's actions and how they affect society as a whole. To live authentically, according to Sartre's ethical dimensions, one must recognize their own freedom, refrain from self-deception (bad faith), and act in a way that respects the freedom of others⁸. The results also show that Sartre was critical of conventional humanism, which he said put too much faith in supernatural or religious sources. In its place, Sartre puts forth an atheistic humanism that places an emphasis on autonomy, originality, and the need to build one's own and society's moral code. Although Sartre's humanism places an emphasis on the importance of the individual, it also recognizes the interdependence of all human life and the role that individual decisions play in molding the human situation as a whole. The essence of Sartre's humanistic existentialism lies in this union of autonomy and moral obligation⁹.

Discussion

Sartre's existential humanism questions traditional ideas of right and wrong and presents a new way of looking at freedom and ethics. Individuals are freed from deterministic limits and given the power to construct their own meaning when Sartre rejects predetermined essences. But there are new ethical questions and existential fears brought up by this extreme freedom. In a world without universally accepted moral principles, people must face the consequences of their actions and develop a sense of integrity while also honoring the autonomy of others. Issues of individuality, social justice, and human rights have taken center stage in modern times, making the ethical implications of Sartre's philosophies all the more pertinent. An important foundation for dealing with these problems is Sartre's emphasis on authenticity, which calls on people to be honest and think about how their actions may affect others. Some have argued that his rejection of objective moral truths could pave the way for moral relativism and subjectivity. In critiquing conventional humanism, Sartre demonstrates his fresh perspective on human worth and potential. He moves the emphasis from outside forces to the ability of the person to define themselves and take creative action by situating humanism within an existential

⁸Özen, U. (2013). Contemporary humanism: Sartre's existentialist humanism and Heideggerean humanism. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(6), 665-665.

⁹Briedis, M. (2009). Phenomenology of freedom and responsibility in Sartre's existentialist ethics. *Santalka: Filologija, Edukologija*, 17(3), 71-82.

framework. Still, in situations calling for common moral principles or principles, this reinterpretation of Sartre's work begs the question of how to put his theories into practice¹⁰.

| Concept | Jean-Paul Sartre's Philosophy | Traditional Humanism | Other Existentialists (e.g., Kierkegaard, Beauvoir) |
|-------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Existence and Essence | "Existence precedes essence" individuals define their essence through actions and choices. | Essence is often predetermined (e.g., by divine or natural law). | Both Kierkegaard and Beauvoir also emphasize individual choice, but with different emphases on faith and society. |
| Freedom | Radical freedom; individuals are free to make choices without predetermined constraints. | Freedom may be limited by inherent nature or divine will. | Freedom is central, but Kierkegaard emphasizes existential anxiety, while Beauvoir highlights social constraints on freedom. |
| Authenticity | Authenticity involves living in accordance with one's true self, acknowledging freedom and responsibility. | Authenticity is often linked to fulfilling a predefined role or purpose. | Authenticity is central in Beauvoir's feminist existentialism and Kierkegaard's religious existentialism. |
| Bad Faith | A form of self-deception where individuals deny their radical freedom and responsibility. | Traditional humanism often encourages conformity to social or religious norms, which Sartre critiques as forms of bad faith. | Both Kierkegaard and Beauvoir also explore forms of self-deception, though with different approaches (religious vs. feminist existentialism). |
| Ethical Responsibility | Ethics arise from personal choices and responsibility; the individual must acknowledge the consequences of their freedom. | Ethics are often derived from external, objective sources like religion or natural law. | For Beauvoir, ethics involve recognizing the freedom of others, while Kierkegaard's ethics are rooted in faith and personal commitment. |
| Human Nature | There is no inherent human nature; individuals must create their own essence through actions. | Traditional humanism often posits a shared human nature based on reason, dignity, or divine design. | Both Kierkegaard and Beauvoir argue for the centrality of the individual, though Kierkegaard views human nature in a religious context. |
| Role of Society | Society is a backdrop against which individuals assert their freedom; social norms are often restrictive. | Society plays a key role in shaping individuals according to shared values or divine purposes. | Beauvoir emphasizes how society restricts women's freedom, while Kierkegaard focuses on the role of the individual in relation to God. |

¹⁰Thompson, N. (2008). Existentialist ethics: From Nietzsche to Sartre and beyond. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 2(1), 10-23.

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| Humanism | Sartre's humanism is atheistic, focusing on the individual's capacity for self-creation and ethical responsibility. | Traditional humanism is often linked to belief in human dignity, morality, and a metaphysical order. | Kierkegaard and Beauvoir also explore humanism, but Kierkegaard's focus is on religious existentialism, while Beauvoir integrates social and gender dimensions into humanism. |
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5. Conclusion

Jean-Paul Sartre's existential humanism is a thought-provoking and extensive reinterpretation of human ethics, freedom, and nature. Sartre places the onus of self-definition on the individual by stating that "existence precedes essence," highlighting radical freedom as the distinguishing feature of human life. Every person has the power to direct their own life and should be held responsible for the larger outcomes that result from their decisions. Authenticity and the rejection of bad faith are at the heart of Sartre's ethical framework, which urges people to live their lives honestly while also respecting the freedom of others. The emphasis moves from individual autonomy and self-creation to traditional humanism's dependence on metaphysical or theological ideas, which Sartre criticizes. By doing so, he presents a powerful atheism that humanizes, urging people to embrace their freedom even as they face the existential crises brought on by a lack of a higher power or objective moral principles. A compelling plea for human accountability, honesty, and ethical interaction with the world, Sartre's philosophy has been criticized for perhaps leading to moral relativism due to its emphasis on personal freedom. Finally, modern discussions of individualism, social justice, and human rights still rely on Sartre's ideas on freedom and the ethical consequences of these concepts. By outlining a framework for comprehending the intricacies of responsibility, ethics, and freedom, his existential humanism encourages people to acknowledge the power and gravity of their own agency in molding not just their own lives but also the human condition as a whole.

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