

In his *Existentialism and Human Emotions* published in 1947, Sartre notes that what existentialists have in common is the fact that “they believe that *existence* comes before *essence*—or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective” (3). Yet immediately after establishing this as his existentialist slogan, Sartre begins to argue that objects have essence because they were made according to a certain plan and because they serve a definite purpose. So the essence of the object precedes its existence because of its determined production and because of the use to which it is put. But suppose that the maker of a knife knew that it was good *in general* (or useful) for tasks and did not know specifically which tasks such a tool could possibly achieve. Or, better yet, the book that Sartre refers to in the same passage is meant to be, its essence is established as a thing-to-be-read. At the same time, this essence is only realizable with human subjectivity—or, to be less anthropomorphic, various forces can cause the book to *do* things (or be used for acts) that it isn’t particularly made for. It can be thrown, banned, burned, or *misread*. Sartre writes, “Let us say, then, of the paperknife that its essence—that is to say the sum of the formulae and the qualities which made its production and definition possible—precedes its existence” (3). And here is the problem—how can an object’s essence *precede* its definition; that is, how can the artisan of mankind create a *tool*—and this is Sartre’s utilitarian anthropomorphism—whose essence comes before the actual use to which the object is put. Sartre seems to say that objects have production and definition—fair enough. But here again, Sartre takes for granted the fact that the definition of things somehow inheres with an object’s essence, providing some sort of stable being, when in actuality an object’s essence is more defined by the forces which take hold of it—or an object’s *essence* should be considered as *accidence*.

Sartre's whole point, however, is to make a distinction between the way in which objects have essence and the way in which human subjects do. If existence precedes essence, then all of my actions lead toward defining my human subjectivity. Yet Sartre is vague here. Define ourselves for whom? Why do we have to be a readable text? Who could interpret our singular essence as a definition and thus gain a firm grasp or knowledge of my situation, my existence? By emphasizing that the primary quality of human subjectivity is existence, Sartre tries to show that "man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so" (4). This quotation presupposes that everyone has a 'self' that is capable of propulsion towards an undisclosed 'future', and, furthermore, that we all do this naturally *with* the self-consciousness that we are doing so. Let's unpack this a little. Before anything else, I know myself, thrust myself towards a(n) (un)known future, and in the process, I am conscious of such a project. This may sound like a crude thing to say about "Existentialism Is a Humanism," but isn't Sartre giving people too much freedom? And what's even more amusing is that this freedom, even man's existence itself—which Sartre says *is* freedom—is not primary: "Before the projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be" (4). Is Sartre being sneaky here? From where did Sartre bring up this notion of projection, which is subtle and by no means made obvious throughout the essay. I have to wonder where the rigor and exactitude of *Being and Nothingness* went, and why Sartre is playing fast and loose with ambiguous language. One example will suffice: if existence is dependent on crafting a purpose for ourselves, then what about silly purposes, absurd ones, even a goal to abolish all purposes? Would man still exist?

I have to scratch my head and wonder: how could Sartre ground ontology with teleology? How can we guarantee existence by the creation of a *purpose* for ourselves? Why does purpose come

first, even *before* existence? What's even more ludicrous and shocking, at least to my philosophical standpoint, is the fact that Sartre hurriedly brings in inter-subjectivity—which he hardly develops—and grounds a severe ethics from his belief that the other is found in the cogito and the other guarantees my subjectivity. He's rather vague here, for he wants to claim that all of mankind is free, and yet I must choose from the standpoint of the universal as though *all* of my petty actions are choices for all of mankind. If man is freedom, if freedom equates with the being of humanity, then how can Sartre argue that we cannot but will our freedom while at the same time willing freedom for others (17)? Is freedom willed, given beforehand, asserted in the human community by default, or is Sartre simply not developing ideas adequately?

One aspect of the text that can help us understand these different motivations is the duality that Sartre constructs between the Christians and the Marxists throughout the essay. At one point, Sartre argues that if I am a worker and wish to join a Christian group rather than a Communist trade group, that is due to my resignation of the earthly world and the *desire* for a heavenly one (5). Or, to be more precise, it is due precisely to my indifference to Communism, or to my skepticism that the working class will be duly represented, or, indeed, that the Communists are *not revolutionary enough*. Though he wrote this pamphlet twenty-two years before the student uprisings in May 1968, Sartre could have had enough hindsight to realize that even if I cannot help but to choose a path for myself, a trajectory so to speak, then, obviously my choice *can be wrong* and that this judgment of good and bad can be performed *retroactively*. I can have a “sense of complete and profound responsibility” and still be able to self-reflexively critique myself and find myself lacking, wrong, or misled (5). If I am completely responsible for mankind, then that means that you are as well, and so is Sartre—ironically then, all of us are responsible for all of us, and so, Sartre's ethical imperative is a laughable tautology.

Let's look at the exact imperative that he gives us. Sartre first obligates us to act from the universal: "one ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing; nor can one escape from that disturbing thought except by a kind of self-deception" (5). Isn't his argument more subtle? Can he possibly take into account the singularity of the individual and the complexity of each and every situation? It almost seems like this could be rewritten as, 'If you do something under certain circumstances, expect other people to do it too, even at your expense!' This does not give Sartre enough credit for what he's trying to do here, and so I want to move on to discussions of class consciousness in order to make some sort of sense out of Sartre's ethical drama.

Moving back to the Christians and Communists: both groups in an odd way believe in the post-apocalyptic paradise in two extremely divergent ways. Christians believe in the beyond of heaven while Commies used to believe in the beyond of capitalism (which turned out to be *late* capitalism). Should I join the union? What is my purpose? How to choose? Aren't these three questions of commitment, goal, and action Sartre's central concern? It may not be too presumptuous to guess that this essay plays an important role in Sartre's move from *Being and Nothingness* to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The fact is that Sartre doesn't include an adequate recognition of the importance of a group to the individual. His source for the ethical is too abstract, too absolute, too universal, *too Kantian*. Furthermore, his notion of the working class is outdated and needs some revamping in order to compete with postmodern philosophy. Compare Sartre to Deleuze and Guattari: what's missing is the dialectic of the molar and the molecular—not every worker identifies with the common conception of the working class. And this notion of class has been and continues to be exploded—what bourgeoisie, what proletariat? are these masses or classes?

-Taylor Adkins