

# PHILOSOPHY FOR BEGINNERS

## THE MEANINGS OF LIFE

**Sartre and Existentialism**  
**Week 9. 20<sup>th</sup> June 2018**



# What we'll cover today

- Introduction to Jean-Paul Sartre
- What is existentialism?
- Existence precedes essence...
- Anguish, despair and bad faith
- Living a truly free life



'I am condemned to be free'  
'Hell is other people'

# Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80)

- French philosopher, playwright, novelist and political activist
- Profoundly influential, a key figure in popularising 'Existentialism' and the cliché of the chain-smoking, café-dwelling French intellectual
- Prolific writer, producing novels, plays, essays, biographies and major philosophical works like *Being and Nothingness*

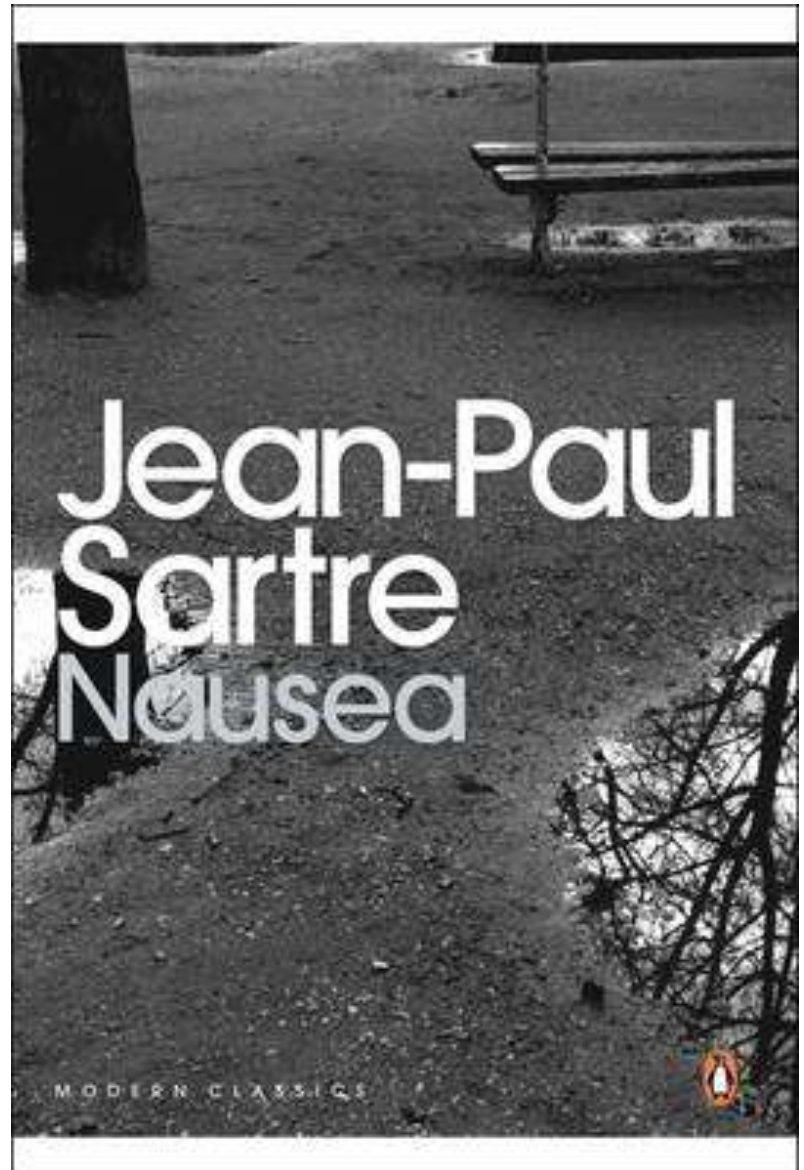


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# Sartre

Being and Nothingness

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## ➤ **Novels**

- *Nausea* (1938)
- *The Age of Reason* (1945);  
*The Reprieve* (1947);  
*Troubled Sleep* (1950)

## ➤ **Plays**

- *The Flies* (1943)
- *No Exit* (1944)
- *The Respectful Prostitute* (1947)
- *The Condemned of Altona* (1960)

## ➤ **Biography & literary criticism**

- *Baudelaire* (1947)
- *Saint Genet* (1952)
- *The Idiot of the Family* (on  
*Flaubert*) (1971)

## ➤ **Autobiography: Words** (1963)

## ➤ **Philosophical works**

- *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1937)
- *The Psychology of the Imagination* (1940)
- *Being & Nothingness* (1943)
- “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1946)
- *Search for a Method* (1957)
- *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Vol. I, 1960; Vol. II, 1985)

# Freedom

- Sartre's philosophy is fundamentally concerned with freedom
- "Man is condemned to be free because once he is thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."
- "Man is free, man *is* freedom"
- *The task of existentialist philosophy is to get us to live up to the consequences of this fundamental, philosophical freedom*

# Condemned to be free?

- Take a look at the first excerpt, 'Freedom'
- Read through and then discuss in pairs...

*What does Sartre mean by choosing to be free?*



# Facing up to freedom

- Sartre's philosophy is primarily concerned with facing up to our freedom, the choices we all can make about how we live our lives
- Being 'condemned to be free' involves the difficulties and possibilities of our fundamental choices, which results in *anguish*
- In turn what we choose reflects our values and projections about humanity too
- Sartre gives the examples of not joining a trade union or marriage: 'In choosing myself, I choose man'



‘Dream as if you’ll live forever, live as if you’ll die today’ – James Dean

# Freedom: Two arguments

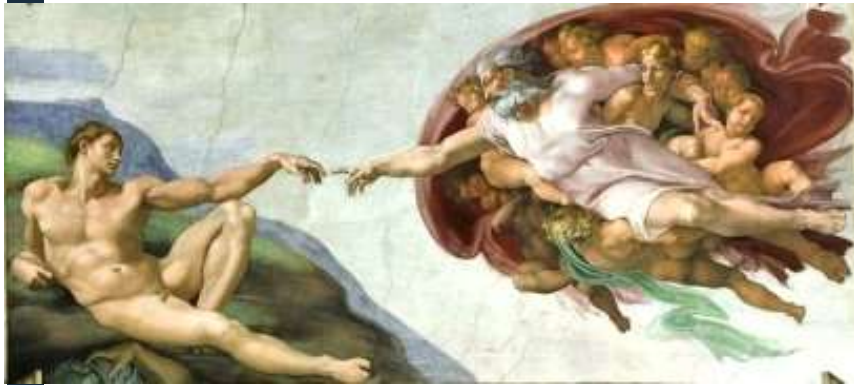
- Sartre presents two arguments for freedom
- The first of these is the “Existence precedes essence” argument, given in the popular lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*
- The second and more fundamental argument concerns Sartre’s particular conception of the nature of consciousness, appearing in his more forbidding work *Being and Nothingness*

# Existence precedes essence

- Sartre distinguishes between the *subjective* and *objective*, or between persons and things
- What he proposes is a reversal of the traditional teleological argument...

*Non-conscious  
Objects or Things* → Essence precedes Existence

*Conscious  
Subjects or Persons* → Existence precedes Essence



# The knife

- Imagine a manufactured object, say a knife
- It has been made by someone with a prior conception of what it should be like – its essence precedes its existence
- Traditionally we have imagined God like this, a creator or artisan, who from an essence of ‘human nature’ produces each one of us
- But maybe we’ve been looking at the problem the wrong way round: if God does not exist, where did our idea of ‘essences’ come from?



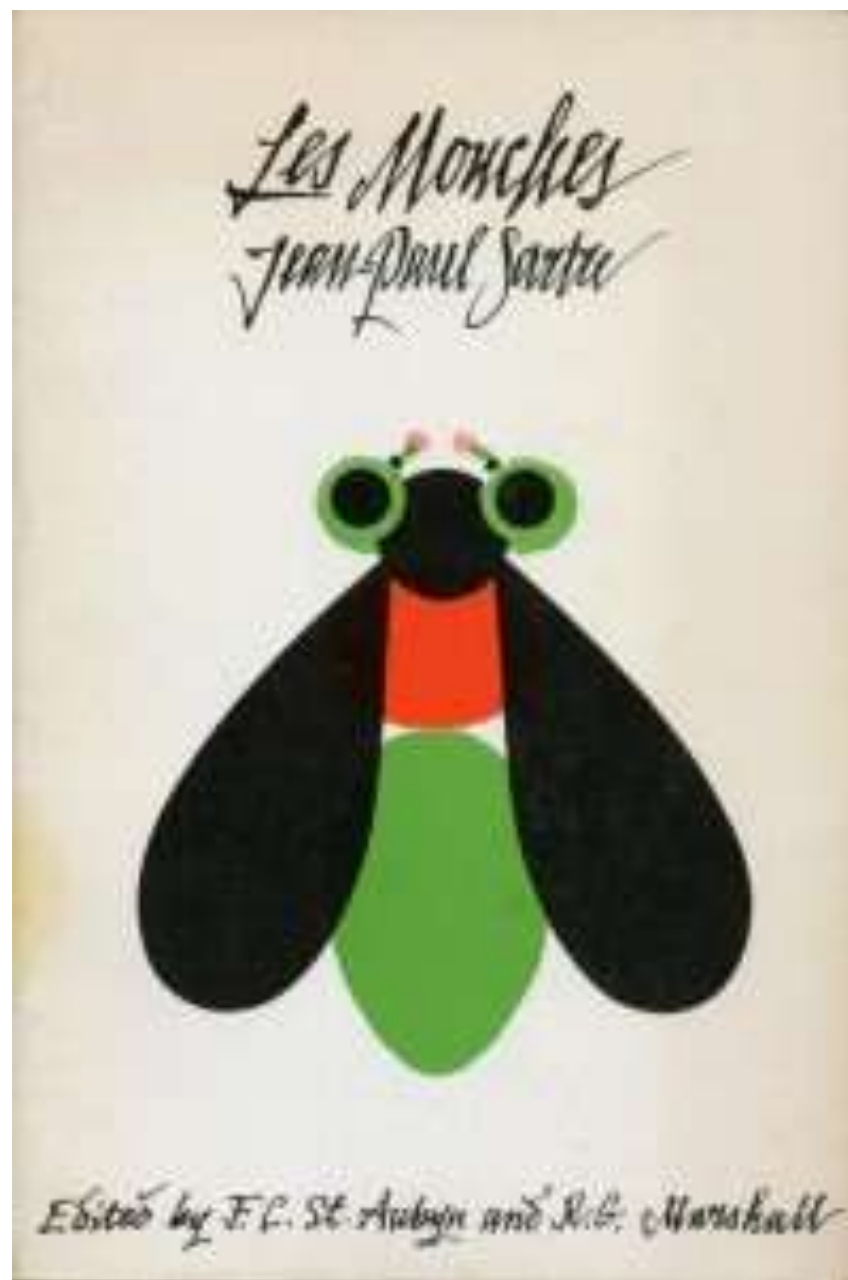


# Man the self-maker

- Take a look at the third paragraph of the second excerpt
- Read carefully and then in pairs discuss these questions:
- *What is the first principle of existentialism?*
- *How does Sartre's arguments about God and freedom relate to earlier thinkers on our course?*

# No God, no essence prior to existence

- If there is no God, then there is no “supernal artisan” to have a conception of man prior to his existence
- There is no pre-defined “human nature” that dictates the essential nature of our being prior to our acts of existence
- Thus we are fundamentally free in the sense that it is only our actions which can define our essence
- We *are* what we *choose* to do



# Another distinction between subjects (persons) & objects (things):

## ❖ Subjects (persons) are

- *free,*
- *self-creating,*
- *& therefore*
- *personally responsible for what they create & do.*

## ❖ Objects (things)

- *have no freedom,*
- *are not self-creating,*
- *& thus*
- *have no responsibility for what they are or for how they function.*

# The burden of freedom

- What I am (*my essence*) is a product of my choices & actions (*my existence*)
- Since I freely create myself (*my essence*), I am responsible for my choices and actions, and what I have created
- But I also have responsibility in my choices for all of humanity...
- And because I cannot look to God for guidance since God does not exist, I am faced with...
- **Anguish, despair and abandonment!**





"First, what do we mean by *anguish*? The existentialists say . . . that man is anguish. This means that the man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a lawmaker who is, at the same time, choosing all humankind as well as himself, cannot escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility."

# Anguish

- If there are no pre-set, objective moral values (because there is no God to have first of all created them) then it follows that values are *created* by us in our actions and our choices
- But then when we choose, we are creating values not just for ourselves, but for everyone else as well

# Abandonment

A response to the non-existence of God, which leaves...

- No foundation for objective and absolute values
- All values are human creations
- Man is 'condemned to be free'
- We are alone, with no justifications and no excuses

Dostoevsky: "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted."

## ... And despair

- A response to the unreliability of others
- Sartre calls on us to rely on ourselves, and on what is subject to our own will, rather than on persons or things external to us
- It's about taking responsibility and facing up to our choices
- We are really free, but this also means then we are also without excuses (e.g. 'human nature', 'upbringing', 'culture', etc.)

# Optimism?

- Despite the seemingly miserable terms, Sartre insists that his version of existentialism is ultimately an optimistic philosophy
- It gives human beings the dignity they deserve and does not reduce us to the status of objects
- Take a look at the third excerpt and discuss
- *Are you persuaded by Sartre's claim that his is an optimistic philosophy?*





# Looking for answers

- How to resolve moral dilemmas: A student's struggle with conflicting moral obligations in the French Resistance
- There is no objective measure we can turn to resolve this dilemma for us: "You are free, therefore choose"
- How to define the meaning of one's life: A young priest's interpretation of the "signs."

# Bad faith

- So far, Sartre has presented freedom as both fundamental to our being and a source of anxiety
- The prospect of all our choices is both dizzying and terrifying
- To manage the anxiety of our many choices, Sartre says that we often develop ways to imagine that we are not actually free
- This form of self-deception he calls *bad faith*

# Bad faith



# Bad faith

Take a look at the final excerpt and discuss:

*Why is the waiter displaying bad faith?*



# Bad faith

- The keen waiter is entirely free, but acts as if he were a robot
- He is 'playing' at being a waiter, denying his freedom, personality, choices and emotions
- Sartre isn't condemning this: we act in bad faith often in our lives
- The point is to recognise that we do have choices that we should strive live up to



# Authenticity

- Sartre calls 'authenticity' where we take full responsibility for our life, choices and actions (albeit limited by society and nature - 'facticity')
- We have a free will that allows us freedom to determine our lives from the choices available
- This echoes Camus: we live in an uncaring, absurd universe where the only escape from suicide or religion is by creating meaning in life through rebellion





# Rounding up

- Sartre says human beings are 'condemned to be free' – but what kind of freedom are we condemned to?
- Does freedom always result in anxiety?
- Are you persuaded by his account of atheistic existential freedom?



# Next week...

- We turn to Simone De Beauvoir!
- We'll focus primarily on her essay "The Ethics of Ambiguity", and the existentialism feminism of *The Second Sex*
- Any questions, do email me  
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