

SECOND YEAR - SECOND SEMESTER
Unit 11 - Sartre
1/91
Lecture 2

The Ethics of Absolute Freedom
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I. Individuality, Freedom, and Ethics.

The modern conception of man is characterized, more than anything else, by individualism. Existentialism can be seen as a rigorous attempt to work out the implications of this individualism. The purpose of this lecture is to makes sense of the Existentialist conception of individuality and the answers it gives to these three questions: (1) What is human freedom? What can the absolute freedom of absolute individuals mean? (2) What is human flourishing or human happiness? What general ethic or way of life emerges when we take our individuality seriously? (3) What ought we to do? What ethics or code of action can emerge from a position that takes our individuality seriously. Although I am sure you will want to take a critical look at the assumptions from which Existentialism arises in your seminars, I will be attempting, sympathetically, to see what follows if one takes these assumptions seriously.

Let's begin by seeing what it could mean to say we are absolute individuals. When you think of it, each of us is alone in the world. Only we feel our pains, our pleasures, our hopes, and our fears immediately, subjectively, from the inside. Other people only see us from the outside, objectively, and, hard as we may try, we can only see them from the outside. No one else can feel what we feel, and we cannot feel what is going on in any one else's mind.

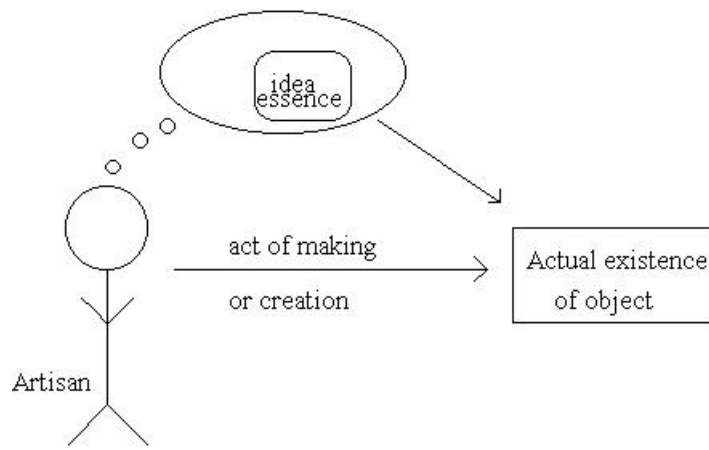
Actually, when you think of it, the only thing we ever perceive immediately and directly is ourselves and the images and experiences in our mind. When we look at another person or object, we don't see it directly as it is; we see it only as it is represented in our own experience. When you feel the seat under your rear-end, do you really feel the seat itself or do you merely feel the sensations transmitted to you by nerve endings in your posterior? When you look at the person next to you (contemplating how their rear-end feels), do you really see them as they are on the inside or feel what they feel? You see only the image of them that is presented to your mind through your senses. This is easily demonstrated by considering how our senses deceive us in optical illusions, but one simple example will have to suffice here. [split image demonstration] It seems, then, that we are minds trapped in bodies, only perceiving the images transmitted to us through our bodies and their senses.

Each of us is trapped within our own mind, unable to feel anything but our own feelings and experiences. It is as if each of us is trapped in a dark room with no windows. Our only access to the outside world being a television screen on one wall on which we (with our mind's eye) perceive the images of other people, places, and things. Thus, to be an absolute individual is to be trapped within ourselves, unable to perceive or contact anything but the images on our mental tv screen, and to be imperceptible ourselves to anyone outside of us. In a world where science has opened up and laid bare the nature of subatomic particles, far-away planets, and the workings of our very own bodies and brains, it is to remain, ourselves, hidden from the objective view. It is to be an island of subjectivity in an otherwise objective world.

II. The Existentialist View of Human Freedom.

What view of human nature can emerge from this view of the individual? One such view is the view of human nature identified with the name Existentialism. Sartre says that what all existentialists, both atheistic and christian, share in common "... is that they think that existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be the starting point." (EHE, p. 13) Sartre explains what this means by contrasting it with the opposite slogan: ESSENCE PRECEDES EXISTENCE. He uses the example of a paper-cutter to explain how the old view treated human beings as artifacts, whose nature is tied to a preconceived essence and to a project outside of them, rather than as absolute individuals. He says in Existentialism and Human Emotions:

Let us consider some object that is manufactured, for example, a book or a paper-cutter: here is an object which has been made by an artisan whose inspiration came from a concept. He referred to the concept of what a paper-cutter is Thus, the paper-cutter is at once an object produced in a certain way and, on the other hand, one having a specific use Therefore, let us say that, for the paper-cutter, essence ... precedes existence. (EHE, pp. 13-14)



Of course, the artisan in our case is God. Sartre continues:

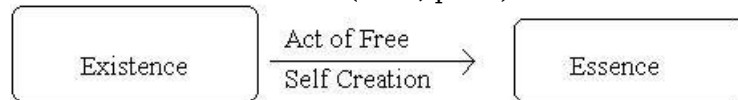
When we conceive of God as the Creator, He is generally thought of as a superior sort of artisan. ... Thus the concept of man in the mind of God is comparable to the concept of the paper-cutter in the mind of the manufacturer... . Thus, the individual man is the realization of a certain concept in the divine intelligence. (EHE, p. 14)

On this view, the one Sartre is attacking, we get our nature from outside of us, from a being who created us with a preconceived idea of what we were to be and what we were to be good for. Our happiness and our fulfillment consist in our living up to the external standards that God had in mind in creating us. Both our nature and our value come from outside of us.

According to the existentialist, however, EXISTENCE PRECEDES ESSENCE. Sartre explains:

What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. ... Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence.

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. (EHE, p. 15)



Thus, there is no human nature which provides us with an external source of determination and value. Sartre says:

If existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom.

Nothing outside of us can determine what we are and what we are good for; we must do it ourselves, from the inside. What we will be and what will be good for us is a radically individual matter. If we are radical individuals, there is no place else for our nature and value to come from, except from within us. It is this view of human nature, or the lack thereof, from which the existentialist conceptions of freedom and value flow.

We are now in a position to begin to answer the first of our three main questions: What is human freedom? What, exactly can the freedom of an absolute individual consist of? At first, it may seem clear that if we are islands of subjectivity, isolated from the forces of the outside world, we not only are capable of acting freely of outside determination, but we cannot help doing so since the only possible sources of action are internal. The situation, however, is somewhat more complex than this. To understand what freedom is for the Existentialist we must first see how, even though our inescapable nature is to be free, we all inevitably tend to try to escape our freedom. We all tend to act in what Sartre calls 'bad faith'. We attempt to deceive ourselves and act as if we weren't free, as if we were really determined by our nature, our body, or the expectations of other people.

The picture we drew earlier of the human individual trapped in a dark room perceiving the world only through our mental TV screens was too simple, for humans have a dual nature. Among the things we find on the mental tv screen, besides objects, other people, emotions, and desires, is ourselves. I see my body, and this thing I see is me. The human condition, for the Existentialist is a tension, a vertiginous imbalance, between the self that watches these images, standing apart from them, and the self that appears as an image. Just as I feel an imbalance upon walking into a department store and finding that one of the people on the video monitor is ME (caught by some unseen camera); or just as we feel a tension looking in the mirror wondering how the person in the glass can be ME if I am standing out here looking at it; so the self feels a tension between identifying itself with mind's eye behind the screen (standing apart from the give and take, the flux and flow, of our experience) and the images of us that appear as part of our experience (engaged in the world).

Thus, we all have the tendency to act in bad faith, to identify ourselves with one of the pictures we find on our mental TV screen, and to see ourselves as determined by one of the outside influences we find pictured there: our nature, our body, the physical world, or the expectations and pictures other people have of us. We are all familiar with the ways in which we try to excuse our actions by pretending that we are simply our bodies and are controlled by the forces that determine them. We have all said things like:

I can't talk to people, I just don't have that kind of personality.
I can't pass this course, I'm just don't have the brain for calculus.

I can't help the fact that I was born a man (or a woman); Certain things come naturally for certain types of people. (Says the man who can't take care of his children, or the woman who can't fix her car.)
I'm no good at this; I guess I just wasn't made to go to college.
Gee, I'm sorry about last night. I guess my hormones just got out of control.
I'm sorry I bit your head off yesterday. I must be premenstrual.
I don't know what happened. I guess the beer made me crazy.

In these cases, I am identifying myself with one of the pictures of me I find on my mental TV screen: I am my body, or my brain, or my personality, or my hormones. In each of these cases, I am deceiving myself. I am more than just these, and no matter how I try to avoid it, I am free.

We are also familiar with the way we all play roles, identifying ourselves, or seeing ourselves, in terms of how other people see us, letting other people determine what we are instead of deciding, ourselves, what we will be. We all to some extent tend to make ourselves into the image other people have of us. We are a different person with our friends than with our parents. We are a different person with a lover than with our acquaintances, and we are different still when we are in the classroom or at a job interview. It is often easier to let someone else determine what we will be than to do it ourselves, especially when we see our value in terms of the acceptance we get from other people. We all see little pictures of ourselves projected by other people and we often tend to try to make ourselves into these little pictures by playing roles. We play at being college students out for a good time, at being macho men or nurturing women, at being sons or daughters, at being businesswomen, policemen, scientists. We play at being students taking notes, and professors giving lectures. We play the roles; we make ourselves into characters in the plays; we make ourselves into little pictures on our mental tv screen determined by the script written by the expectations of other people.

But all of this is self-deception. We are more than any of the pictures we find on our mental tv screen. We stand behind it, watching it, making of it what we will. It is impossible to abdicate our freedom. In choosing to identify ourselves with some externally determined object we are choosing none the less. We cannot escape our freedom.

One might well ask at this point, "What does this freedom consist of. Am I free to become George Bush right now? Am I free to become a woman (without some fairly extensive and unpleasant surgery)? Am I free to fly up to the ceiling and hover above your heads? Am I free to close my eyes right now and find myself in the Bahamas when I reopen them? Unfortunately, it appears not. How, then, can I be free when most of my external circumstances are determined by forces beyond my control, when I cannot help where I was born, what type of body I have, and what type of abilities my brain has predisposed me towards?"

The answer to these questions lies in the nature of our radical individuality. I am not identical with any of the externally determined images on my mental TV screen. I am forever beyond the reach of their determinations within the island of my subjectivity.^[1] Even if I were a puppet, my body and its actions completely controlled by some malevolent master, what I am, my mind's eye would still be free and untouched. I could still be free to rebel against my master or make whatever I wished of the situation. They can do what they want to my body, manipulate the objects or pictures of me on my mental TV screen, but they can never touch or control the real me. The self within its island of subjectivity is radically free in virtue of its radical individuality.

Furthermore, I have control over the content of my TV screen as well. External circumstances may determine the objects that appear, how they appear, and when they appear, but I control how these various components will be put together into a coherent picture. Sartre compares the type of freedom we have to that of an artist (EHE, pp. 42-43). An artist cannot control the nature of the canvas, nor of the paints that she has to work with. Nor can she control the nature of the subjects she will paint. But she can control how she will view them, how she will put these various elements together into a unique whole. Likewise, we may not be able to control the various elements within our experience that come from outside us, but we can view them and combine them in any way we like. Our experience is not any one of these; it is the way in which we combine these into a unified whole. We have the power to edit the frames which constitute our experience into the film that is to be our life. We all know the power of good editing, of the creative juxtaposition of determinate elements. It can transform experience; make the ugly beautiful and the ordinary, sublime.

Our freedom is, thus, a freedom of synthesis. It is the freedom to pull ourselves together into the type of coherent whole that we will ourselves to be. Even if the raw materials from which we construct ourselves are determined (just as the materials of the artist are determined), what we make of ourselves out of these materials is up to us alone (just as what the artist makes of her subject is up to her alone). We can not make the external world determine this even if we try. The sentence of freedom is the necessity of pulling ourselves together at each moment out of the myriad different influences imposing themselves upon us from the environment, our community, and from our own bodies. We are required to make ourselves, to pull ourselves together, and we can make of ourselves what we will.

The answer to our first question is, then, that we can be free because (1) Our absolute individuality isolates our real self from the determining influences of the outside world; we can always rebel against its influence; and (2) Even though the raw material that makes up our experience is determined by outside influences we are free to put these elements together into a unified whole; we must make ourselves anew at each moment, and what we shall make of ourselves is up to us. We now need to see what view of human happiness and of morality arise from this conception of human freedom. Both of these can be summed up by the single slogan BE AUTHENTIC. The secret of human flourishing and of moral action lies in avoiding bad faith and honoring the responsibility we have to create our own nature and values. The Existentialist enjoins us to be ourselves and make the source of our nature and values our own internal decisions rather than the pictures of ourselves that appear in our minds from external sources. Let us now see what view of human happiness this implies.

III. The Existentialist View of Human Happiness.

Existentialism is often associated with such themes as the absurdity of human existence and the worthlessness of our lives given our inevitable death. One might well wonder what view of happiness could arise from such a view. Sartre characterizes the human condition by (1) our forlornness at the loss of external values and determinants of our nature; (2) anguish at the resultant responsibility to create human nature ourselves; and (3) despair of finding value outside of ourselves and reliance upon what is under our own control. Forlornness, anguish, and despair: Mr. Sartre, it would seem, was not a happy camper. For another 20th century French existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, however, the loss of any external source of value did not present quite such a dismal prospect.^[2]

Camus compares our situation to that of the mythical figure Sisyphus. In his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" he explains that:

The Gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor. (MS, p. 88)

It is easy to see the similarity between this situation and ours according to the Existentialist. Just as Sisyphus can find no end to his activities, no final resting place where he has finally reached his goal or lived up to some set of pre-existing standards, so we find that all of our activities lead to nowhere. There are no external values that we can live up to, no external viewpoint from which our life can be viewed to be valuable. Our life is a series of meaningless actions culminating in death, with no possibility of external justification. Yet, Camus will say that we must imagine Sisyphus (and ourselves) happy? "One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (MS, p. 91) Why? Why would this fool be happy eternally rolling a ball up a hill, and why should we be happy rolling our ball up the hill to nowhere?

At first, when one was still expecting to get ones value from outside of oneself, all this might seem depressing. Camus says:

When images of the earth cling to tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes to insistent, it happens that melancholy rises in man's heart: this is the rock's victory this is the rock itself. The boundless grief is too heavy to bear. These are our nights in Gethsemane. But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged.

.....
Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (MS, p. 90)

As we saw before, no matter what his external circumstances, Sisyphus is always free to make of them what he will, to rebel against them within his island of subjectivity. No matter what the Gods make him do, he is always free to give the Gods one of these [defiant gesture].

I remember when I first read this (as a senior in high school) thinking that this was sort of a stupid response to the absurdity of the human condition. What sense does it make to give one of these [defiant gesture] to a non-existent God whose absence is the source of the absurdity of our lives. What are we rebelling against? There must be more to the existentialist conception of happiness than this, I thought.

And there was. The despair and rebellion we feel at the loss of our external sources of value are the necessary price of a greater value and happiness that comes from within. One must lose all hope of external value before seeking value within. The theme that true happiness must come from within is one that is familiar to all of us, and it is the key to understanding the existentialist conception of happiness.

Two contemporary folk tales embody this existentialist theme well: The Wizard of Oz and How the Grinch Stole Christmas. This common theme probably does not show that these are existentialist works, but only that the American emphasis on self-reliance and internalism flows from the same individualist emphasis as Existentialism. In the Wizard of Oz there is an external realm, somewhere over the rainbow, where everything is as it should be and all problems are solved. There is a wizard who will give us brains, a heart, courage, and happiness. When Dorothy got there and discovered that Oz was full of the same type of evil as Kansas, when they discovered that the Wizard was a hoax, that there was nothing outside of them that was going to make them what they wanted to be, they were understandably depressed. But this disappointment was the necessary price of an important lesson: that the only place they could get a brain, or a heart, or courage was from within. Dorothy learns that if she ever loses anything that cannot be found within her own back yard, it wasn't really lost at all. There is no place like Home. (Especially if you are an island of subjectivity, for then there is no place but home.) The value one gets from within is infinitely better than the value one vainly attempts to get from outside.

The story of the Grinch shows why this is so. At first when the Who's in Whoville woke up to find that the Grinch had stolen their Bamboozlers and Dingdangers, they were at first very disappointed. They thought that the value of Christmas was in these external things. What they discovered, and what the grinch discovered looking out over Whoville listening for sounds of grief and hearing, instead, the sounds of joy, was that their real value came from within and was greater than any value that could come from external things since it couldn't be taken away.

A common theme in existentialist literature is the transformation that can occur in one's outlook on life when one is forced to face death. One of the founders of Existentialism, the 19th century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, actually had such a brush with death transform his life. He was involved in some activities that ran afoul of the Czar and was among the people rounded up in one of the Czar's crackdowns. He was told that he would be executed. He was blindfolded and made to wait his turn to face death. At the last minute, as Dostoevsky prepared to meet death, he got a reprieve. It turned out that he was to be sent to a labor camp instead and that this had merely been a cruel joke. One might imagine that if one could face one's death, face the impossibility of

getting any value from any external accomplishments, and still find value within oneself, that value would be invulnerable. It could never be taken away. What else could they do to you?

If, after all sources of external value have been taken away, you can find value within yourself, you would have found what philosophers have been looking for throughout the ages: a way of achieving human happiness that is not vulnerable to the uncontrollable contingencies of the natural world. If we find ourselves isolated from external value by our radical individuality, we can make a world of ourselves, a universe of our own experience, in which we can and must find ourselves happy. Camus writes of Sisyphus:

The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. ... he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death.

.....
But Sisyphus teaches a higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (MS, p.91)

The Existentialist's secret of happiness, then, is to get one's value from within oneself. In doing so, one loses the promise of external value, but they find a more real happiness, one that cannot be taken away by the external forces beyond their control.

IV. The Ethics of Absolute Freedom.

This conception of happiness, however, raises our third question: How ought we act towards other people? If the source of our value and nature is wholly internal, what obligations can I have to other humans? Can I freely and authentically choose to kill my mother, as Orestes does? Can I choose to be a murderer, a thief, or an exploiter of humanity? Is it true, as some Existentialist were fond of pointing out, that if God is dead then all things are allowable? I'm sure that you will want to discuss this issue, as it arises in *The Flies*, in your seminars, but I would like to briefly present you with what I take to be Sartre's three-fold response to this question in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*.

(1) First, in choosing our own human nature, according to Sartre, we choose human nature for all humans. Hence, we must choose courses of action that we would wish all humans to take. In choosing for ourselves, we choose for all men. This must be the case because, in order to act freely, I cannot allow myself to be affected by my peculiar circumstances, desires, or goals. This would be to act in bad faith, to try to identify myself with my desires, or my plans, or my circumstances, and these are all merely pictures on my mental TV screen. When I act freely, the only things that can affect my action must be things that I share with all free agents. Thus, I must choose in the same way I would want others to choose. To say that one must act authentically is to say that one must act in a way that ignores the differences between oneself and other people. After all, these differences are merely external and do not affect our identity as free agents, within our islands of subjectivity. To be free, then, I must follow the golden rule and act only as I would have others act.

(2) Sartre also argues that in order to be free, we must desire the freedom of all men. It is self-defeating to attempt to use other humans as objects to satisfy our desires, or to protect our freedom at the cost of enslaving others. If I attempt to enslave others or use them as objects, I make myself a slave and an object. The person who attempts to dominate other people finds himself a slave to his dependence on the attention and approval of the people he tries to enslave. Think of the tough guy leader of a clique of teenagers. He defines himself in terms of the expectations of his peers to keep their approval and admiration. He makes himself into a character controlled by the very slaves of whom he takes himself to be the master. The person who uses other people as objects to satisfy his desires makes himself an object. He can see other people only through his desires, and ultimately sees himself only as his desire. The manipulator, who attempts to buy and sell other people for his own ends, finds that he has sold his own soul as well by seeing himself merely as his desires. To see others as slaves of our desire is to make ourselves a slave of desire. To be free, we must desire the freedom of all men.

(3) Third, the free decisions that we make are not merely arbitrary. As we saw earlier, freedom does not mean just being able to do anything. The artist is free to create; she does not follow any explicit rules. Yet her action is constrained by the requirement that her creation must be coherent. In order to be her creation, she must pull the various disparate elements that go into the painting into one unified whole. Her freedom is a freedom of synthesis constrained by the material she has to work with and the requirement that she make some one unified thing out of it. In the same way, our actions must unify the many different influences on our lives into the one life that is to be ours. In pulling ourselves together, we cannot ignore the relationships and obligations that provide the raw materials of our lives. We must weave them into our lives, although how we will do this is up to us. Our actions, though free, are constrained by our situation in a community. Orestes, as you shall see in *The Flies*, is not free to ignore his family, his country, and his mother's crime. Why does he not just leave, as Zeus suggests?

The ethics of absolute freedom, it would seem, are not absolutely free. To be free we must take on the responsibility of choosing for all men, we must desire and work for the freedom of all men, and we must create ourselves within the context of the relationships and obligations we have to other people.

Is the ethic of absolute freedom a portrait of human greatness? Human excellence often defines itself in the struggle against the forces that oppose human flourishing. Existentialism attempts to find happiness, value, and meaning in a modern world characterized by isolation, inauthenticity, and absurdity. It attempts to see what human excellence can consist of if we find ourselves to be islands of subjectivity in an otherwise objective world. You will certainly want to ask if this is in fact what we find ourselves to be, but can it be doubted that the Existentialist attempt to find meaning in the face of absurdity exemplifies the basic drive that all portraits of human excellence must embody.

References

(MS) Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (trans. by Justin O'Brien). New York: Vintage, 1955.

(EHE) Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (Trans. by Bernard Frechtman). New York: Philosophical Library, 1957.

[1] Think of how Zeus is powerless against Orestes, once he recognizes his freedom.

[2] Sartre, himself, is not a pessimistic as the above passage makes him sound.

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