



Precognition Transcript  
Episode 87: Jean-Paul Sartre's  
*"Existentialism is a Humanism"*  
and *"Bad Faith"*

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Hi, this is Mark Linsenmayer, talking about Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism. The readings we'll be covering for the upcoming episode are his 1946 essay "Existentialism is a Humanism," the essay "Bad Faith," which is chapter 2 of part 1 of his 1943 masterwork *Being and Nothingness*, and his play *No Exit*. Here I'll be focusing on the first two of these.

"Existentialism is a Humanism" is a somewhat edited version of a transcript of a speech Sartre gave in Paris in 1945, and is unusual for him in its clarity. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, it's the only one of his publications that he regretted, perhaps because of that clarity. It's also the work that made him famous, and served as a quasi-manifesto for the existentialist movement.

Existentialism, according to Sartre, had become by the time of his lecture a term thrown around in pop culture enough to become meaningless, and existentialist novels and thinkers were unfairly criticized as being unduly pessimistic, nihilistic, subjectivist, and undermining of political action. In arguing that existentialism was a form of humanism, Sartre is arguing that his philosophy does involve real values, does respect the dignity of humanity, and does provide an impetus for carefully considered action.

Sartre defines existentialism as defined by the doctrine that for people, "existence precedes essence." For a tool like a knife, there was a plan for it first: someone wanted to make a cutting implement, and then that knife was manufactured. In that way, its essence (cutting) preceded its existence. Man is the opposite: we exist, and then we make ourselves into something in particular through our free action and through our consciousness.

He identifies this as an outcome of atheism, and says that much of his project is a matter of trying to figure out what a really thorough-going atheism should look like. Listeners to our recent Nietzsche episode will recognize this project, but while Nietzsche argues that free will is an illusion and that we need to investigate the complexities of human nature, Sartre argues that the lack of a creator God is what condemns us to freedom, to self-creation and the creation of values.

Besides Nietzsche, whom Sartre doesn't explicitly mention in the essay, another starting point is Descartes, in that Descartes takes the position of subjectivity as the necessary starting point in philosophy, where one is an individual consciousness contemplating itself and the experiences presented to it. We don't start from the third-person position of the scientist, who might describe human behavior in terms of cause and effect, but as consciousness, which has the experience of its absolute freedom. To face up to this freedom is the challenge of existentialism for Sartre.

If you make a decision, if you take some action, if you take a certain attitude toward yourself or something else, not only is there no causal excuse for this, like "my genetics made me do it," but there's no justificatory excuse, no moral law that required the action of us. A moral rule like Kant's categorical imperative or the principle of utility is always too vague to definitively decide a particular moral dilemma: for Sartre, the decision always ends up being an individual one, that the individual alone has responsibility for in the strongest possible sense.

Moreover, the way this "creation of values" that Nietzsche talked about works is this: whenever you make a decision, you're positing that that decision is right, you're by your very action, your very attitude,

positing a moral law that should hold for everybody. This sounds very much like Kant's Categorical Imperative, but whereas for Kant, that thought experiment "could your action right now posit a moral law for everyone?" is meant to be a test that would enable us to then label some actions permissible and others wrong. For Sartre, as I just said, this responsibility doesn't set up an objective standard for us to adhere to or fail to; all it does is add immense weight to all of our decisions, much in the way the Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence did. Existentialism is supposed to make us take actions seriously, to see that even inaction counts as action, and that since we create ourselves and our world, we need to step up and do so deliberately and not passively.

If we deny our freedom, we're in "bad faith," and this is where the section we're reading from *Being & Nothingness* comes in. The section is also called "Self-Deception" in some translations. I do consider this section pretty much an independent essay even though it makes some reference at the beginning to the couple of preceding sections of *Being and Nothingness*; remember this is only chapter 2 of part 1, and all he does in the preceding sections is set up the admittedly complex technical language he's using. For our purposes, all you need to know about that is that Being is, of course, what is, what has a determinate character: an object that has an essence. Nothingness is something that we as conscious beings encounter in experience by seeing beyond the given: we have expectations, we have memory, imagination. The fact that I don't see my friend Pierre in front of me now means, if I'm thinking about her, that I'm perceiving the lack of Pierre. Sartre thinks this is the distinctive character of consciousness: consciousness is nothing in itself, but just our exposure to the world: an open wound, a translucence.

This is a difficult picture to get a handle on, and you can go listen to our past episode 47 on an earlier book of Sartre's to learn more about it. For the present purposes, the important thing is that, as Sartre said in "Existentialism is a Humanism," man is not a Being in the sense of having a definite, static essence. Human consciousness is the being for which its being is in question, to put it terms that will sound familiar to fans of Heidegger (and Sartre was a big fan of Heidegger). So a person is not "a saint" or "a coward," or anything else; we all transcend our past actions: we are what we are not and we are not what we are.

"Bad faith" is the failure to face up to either your freedom, which is this transcendence of your past, or your facticity, which is your past. He uses the example of being gay. If you repeatedly engage in acts of homosexual behavior but deny that you're really gay, then you're clearly in bad faith; you're denying your facticity: the facts of what you've done. However, if you define yourself as gay, on the other hand, then you're reducing yourself to these past actions, to a tendency, to a definition; you're denying your true freedom. Either way, you're in bad faith.

We might think that the opposite of bad faith is sincerity, and existentialism is often thought of as the challenge to be authentic in some way, but this attempted authenticity, too, is bad faith according to Sartre: because by nature we are what we aren't and we aren't what we are, then the command to "be yourself" or (in Nietzsche's words) become who you are is nonsensical. He doesn't, in this essay, tell us what to do to live in accordance with the facts of our nature—to full acknowledge your freedom while facing up to the responsibility of what you've done—but you can bet it's not going to be easy, and

certainly existentialism is not going to provide you a rule-book for what you should and should not do despite its emphasis on values and its challenge to avoid bad faith.

He does stress in “Existentialism is a Humanism” that this creation of self and values is an interpersonal event. Not only do we in making a free choice posit something as objectively valuable, i.e. for everyone, but more generally, all this “creation of values” and creation of self is in a strong sense public: we’re doing this in the sight of others. Even if you’re just thinking to yourself, you’re using the conceptual apparatus you’ve inherited, and referencing a world that gets its objectivity by the fact that others are aware of it as well. One of the things that determines bad faith is when we deny things about ourselves that are obvious to others. By extension, just as we can be in bad faith by denying our own freedom, we’re similarly wrong if we deny that freedom to others. This again sounds like Kant, this time like Kant’s decree to treat everyone as ends in themselves, to respect their human dignity. Following Hegel here instead of Descartes, for Sartre, the interpersonal is fundamental: the presence of other people and their judgments about me and about the things in the world is a fundamental piece of that subjective starting point that I referred to earlier. While we necessarily grasp ourselves as a free, individual consciousness, that doesn’t mean that we can doubt the existence of other people or an external world. To do that would be to deny what we can’t help but believe, which would be yet another manifestation of bad faith.

Well, that’s a lot to chew on, and I encourage you to go read Sartre’s essay “Existentialism is a Humanism,” at least, and then join us for the full podcast discussion.