
101 Sessions 9, 10, 11, 12: Sartre

To do tuesday:

- freedom
- the meaning of essence
- against 'human nature'
- against personality/identity
- deciding for humanity (Thursday)
 - responsibility
 - anguish, abandonment, despair
- feedback

To do Thursday:

- check on book purchases
- quiz!
- recap: what is essence, having a purpose
- abandonment
- projection/purpose/will
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Second Thursday:

- choosing for all
- responsibility
- comparison to Frankfurt
- read 24

The philosopher of freedom

- freedom is a very important theme in philosophy
- we see this in
 - James
 - the freedom to believe in what you will
 - a sort of epistemic freedom
 - Frankfurt
 - a freedom from our desires
 - which is to say a freedom of our will and action over our involuntary characteristics
 - this conception of freedom comes more or less from Kant
- Sartre is the philosopher for whom freedom was the highest principle
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Existence precedes essence

- essence = identity
- our identity is not determined until our actions and lives make it so
 - it is because we do not have a pre-determined identity that we are all free to determine ourselves as we will
 - if you had an identity already, then you would not be free to determine yourself
 - you would already be what you are
 - intelligent
 - lazy
 - an architect
 - none of these things define you
 - this is true both on the individual level and for humanity as a whole
 - if there were a human nature you would not be free, and we would not be free to transform humanity

what does essence mean?

- read 20–21
- we aren't used to thinking about essence
- but everything we deal with has an essence
 - - it is the essence of a tree to draw water from the earth and produce oxygen
 - it is the essence of a city to be busy and complicated
 - it is the essence of a philosophy lecture to be informative and interesting
 - it is the essence of a paper-knife to be able to open letters
 - it is the essence of this thing to be a desk
 - it is the essence of a desk to have a smooth surface
 - these characteristics are all essential to the things of which they are the essence
 - if this wasn't a desk it would be something other than what it is
 - if this desk didn't have a smooth, flat surface it would not be a desk
 - a warped desk on craigslist
 - there is nothing about a human that is essential

No human nature

- read 21-22
- Sartre accuses the secular/atheist philosophers who hold onto an idea of human nature of maintaining the role of God without God
 - if there were a creator god, then it could be that we were designed by god the way that this desk was designed by a furniture maker
 - if that were so, then we could conceivably say that as humans we are created according to an idea of our creator
 - and that would mean we have an essence, a human nature
- what about natural characteristics?
 - isn't it essential to the human to breathe air, to be larger than any ant, and smaller than a normal, fully grown elephant, to be born, to die?
 - yes, but none of those things determine a human's essence, because a human's essence is fundamentally purposive
 - only a purpose can provide the human with their essence

- this is because our existence consists in our projection of ourselves into the future
 - we are not like cauliflower or moss
 - read 23

Abandonment

- existentialists find it disturbing that God no longer exists
 - because God is not there to tell us what is good, let alone what to do
 - If God does not exist, everything is permissible. - Dostoyevsky
- Abandonment is our being abandoned by any possible moral or practical guide
 - and our having no choice but to decide for ourselves
- wait, but can't we rely on ethics?
 - ethical systems underdetermine our choices
 - Kant only tells us what not to do
 - it can't help us choose between permissible alternatives
- wait, but what about signs?
 - can't we look at our lives to see what God or fate wants from us?
 - story of the priest
 - sure, but you must take responsibility for interpreting those signs
- what about guides and advice?
 - story of the student deciding between fighting and his mother
 - you can get advice, but you choose who to ask
 - and you choose whether or not to follow it

Projection

- Frankfurt and Sartre both think that purpose is important
 - For Frankfurt, our fundamental self-consciousness leads us to look for reasons
 - reasons exist in the future
- the human does not exist in the present (at least, not alone)
 - before all else, S writes, the human projects himself into the future
 - we are always planning, anticipating, worrying
 - these are all ways in which our will is directed towards the future
- You exist here and now, but in what way?
 - maybe you are bored, so you are just waiting for the class to end
 - or you're hungry and so you're dreaming about the leftovers in your fridge and imagining the moment you'll get to take a bite of them
 - but what about your being in this class—doesn't your existence here and now fit into some project for the future you have—to get a degree
 - you're probably sitting here worrying about the grade you're going to get
- the point is—what you are is incomprehensible just on the basis of your existence in the present—your future, or to be precise, your orientation towards your future is essential to what you are
 - we can even say that you exist in the future
- The future is even more fundamental than we realise
 - when you agonise over a decision you think that that is the moment you are determining your will
 - so you may agonise now over what to major in
 - but you have already determined if not what course to take, at least how you are going to make that determination, by choosing your particular habits
 - by choosing what fears and loves to be motivated by

- are you motivated by the admiration of others, by the fear of doing harm in the world, by the pleasure of exertion, by the pleasure of being lazy?
 - all these tendencies will determine the way in which you now make your decisions
 - and yet you are always free to decide what to make of the person you have turned yourself into
- so through our will we are projecting ourselves even further than we might be consciously aware of

Our projection makes us free

- since the human is always projecting into the future, and therefore is defined by the orientation towards the future, it cannot be defined just by what it is right now
- so you are a student now, but it is not your essence to be a student
 - if it were, you would not be free. you would not be free to not be a student
 - it is a mistake to think that what you are defines you, because this forgets your freedom to choose and always to change your mind

Frankfurt vs. Sartre

- Similar structure of willing in Frankfurt
 - both are big into will and what comes with it: purpose
 - similar non-determination of particular cares,
 - freedom from over-rationalisation or general determination of the meaning or purpose of life
 - Sartre and Frankfurt both think that there is not one universal care or purpose that gives our lives meaning
- But Sartre thinks that we have greater freedom to determine what we care about
 - Whereas Frankfurt thinks we can't help caring about what we care about.
- And because Frankfurt thinks that certain cares are universal, belonging to human nature, in his system we have a subjective basis for universal and necessary moral claims.
 - For Sartre there cannot be any universal cares.
 - For Frankfurt there aren't really either, it's just that only some can be made sense of and these are the bases for moral reason
 - they are the normal, and normative, cares
 - the very idea of norm in terms of what we can intend is the idea of an essence, an essential purpose
 - the only reason that frankfurt can say that there are cares which are normal for volitional reason is that there is an essence of the human nature that makes them normal
 - for example, that self-preservation is an elementary constituent of volitional reason is another way of saying that our essence is self-preservation
 - the problem is then that with the suicide not only do I not agree with their choice, I am constrained to think them less human than I am
 - this is not an exaggeration—if the essence of the human is self-preservation, then to not self-preserve is to fail to be human
 - But for Sartre there is no legitimate basis for distinguishing what cares are normal because they accord with rational and self-reflexive human nature.
 - though Kant/Frankfurt would point out that we can't be free without self-reflection
 - but there is danger there of deriving ought from is
 - though when when what is is already normative (which it is when it comes to reason and will), there is no strict is/ought distinction

- There is nothing determining what is human nature and what is not, and this is especially crucial when it comes to distinguishing between behaviours which actually exist
 - normalising some and rejecting others
- Therefore for Sartre our freedom to determine what each of us and therefore what the human is is unrestricted

discussion: are there any essential constituents of volitional reason? or are we absolutely free?

- pair discussion
 - decide which of you think which (more)
 - next week: debate
- candidates:
 - self-preservation
 - minimal social contact
 - freedom from injury
 - freedom itself

no identity

- There is also a danger in having no essence, that there is nothing to make humanity what you'd like it to be if you don't

Value

- there is a common misconception that for Sartre and existentialism nothing matters anymore. This is indeed what he's trying to disabuse us of here
- we have no pre-existing essence, identity, human nature
- that doesn't mean we don't still have value as an inherent component of action
 - we have value because we do have essences, and our values are what constitute those essence
- we develop essences eventually
 - you eventually become something
 - otherwise you would have no qualities
 - it would be impossible to distinguish between people
- we still value
 - think of Frankfurt's cares
- Sartre is more simple about the relationship between value and action than frankfurt was
 - to act is to value what you act
 - you don't get to decide independently from deciding to act whether to value the act
 - since any action is a choice (S and F), to do any action is to choose that act, therefore it is an expression of valuation of it
- to perform an act is to make it constitute the essence of humanity
 - no act is possible which just fades into nothingness, without creating the essence of yourself and of humanity
- therefore to act is to choose not just an action but an essence of humanity
 - therefore it is to value that action

Choosing for all

- it is impossible to act in a way that does not create the essence of yourself
 - it is also impossible to not create the essence of humanity through yourself
- why?
 - to value something is not just an isolated act
 - it makes that valuation public
 - it holds it up as something to be recognised by everyone
 - to not recognise this would be to deny that your actions determine humanity
 - either because you deny that humanity can become determinate
 - or because you deny that there is such a thing uniting us
 - but we are all part of humanity which we cannot but create through our actions
 - therefore to choose is necessarily to value what is chosen as the essence of humanity
 - and therefore it is to choose it for all

Responsibility

- this means it is impossible to make an exception of yourself
- you cannot say: humanity is honest in general, but I'm going to cheat
 - just as you can't say I'm generally brave, but I'm not going to tell my friend what I think about his drinking
- there is no essential goodness as a safety net unless it is what you do