

Year 11 Introduction to A-level Religion, Philosophy and Ethics

Each week I will be posting an extract from Sophie's World and asking you to answer some questions.



Week 5: Sartre

Read the extract below and answer the following questions

1. What was the key word in Sartre's philosophy? What does this mean?
2. "Existence take priority over essence." Humanity must therefore create itself because our nature or essence is not fixed in advance. Do you agree?
3. Sophie suggests that "it is quite normal to feel depressed or that everything is just too boring." Why? What does she mean?
4. What does freedom oblige us to do?
5. Sartre claimed that there is no innate (predetermined) meaning to life. Does this mean that he thought nothing mattered or that anything is then permissible?

"A man who was influenced by both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche was the German existential philosopher Martin Heidegger. But we are going to concentrate on the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, who lived from 1905 to 1980. He was the leading light among the existentialists—at least, to the broader public. His existentialism became especially popular in the forties, just after the war. Later on he allied himself with the Marxist movement in France, but he never became a member of any party."

"Is that why we are meeting in a French cafe?"

"It was not quite accidental, I confess. Sartre himself spent a lot of time in cafes. He met his life-long companion Simone de Beauvoir in a cafe. She was also an existential philosopher."

"A woman philosopher?"

"That's right."

"What a relief that humanity is finally becoming civilized."

"Nevertheless, many new problems have arisen in our own time."

"You were going to talk about existentialism."

"Sartre said that 'existentialism is humanism.' By that he meant that the existentialists start from nothing but humanity itself. I might add that the humanism he was referring to took a far bleaker view of the human situation than the humanism we met in the Renaissance."

"Why was that?"

"Both Kierkegaard and some of this century's existential philosophers were Christian. But Sartre's allegiance was to what we might call an atheistic existentialism. His philosophy can be seen as a merciless analysis of the human situation when 'God is dead.' The expression 'God is dead' came from Nietzsche."

"Go on."

"The key word in Sartre's philosophy, as in Kierkegaard's, is 'existence.' But existence did not mean the same as being alive. Plants and animals are also alive, they exist, but they do not have to think about what it implies. Man is the only living creature that is conscious of its own existence. Sartre said that a material thing is simply 'in itself,' but mankind is 'for itself.' The being of man is therefore not the same as the being of things."

"I can't disagree with that."

"Sartre said that man's existence takes priority over whatever he might otherwise be. The fact that I exist takes priority over what I am. 'Existence takes priority over essence.' "

"That was a very complicated statement."

"By essence we mean that which something consists of—the nature, or being, of something. But according to Sartre, man has no such innate 'nature.' Man must therefore create himself. He must create his own nature or 'essence,' because it is not fixed in advance."

"I think I see what you mean."

"Throughout the entire history of philosophy, philosophers have sought to discover what man is—or what human nature is. But Sartre believed that man has no such eternal 'nature' to fall back on. It is therefore useless to search for the meaning of life in general. We are condemned to improvise. We are like actors dragged onto the stage without having learned our lines, with no script and no prompter to whisper stage directions to us. We must decide for ourselves how to live."

"That's true, actually. If one could just look in the Bible—or in a philosophy book—to find out how to live, it would be very practical."

"You've got the point. When people realize they are alive and will one day die—and there is no meaning to cling to—they experience angst, said Sartre. You may recall that angst, a sense of dread, was also characteristic of Kierkegaard's description of a person in an existential situation."

"Yes."

"Sartre says that man feels a//en in a world without meaning. When he describes man's 'alienation,' he is echoing the central ideas of Hegel and Marx. Man's feeling of alienation in the world creates a sense of despair, boredom, nausea, and absurdity."

"It is quite normal to feel depressed, or to feel that everything is just too boring."

"Yes, indeed. Sartre was describing the twentieth-century city dweller. You remember that the Renaissance humanists had drawn attention, almost triumphantly, to man's freedom and independence? Sartre experienced man's freedom as a curse. 'Man is condemned to be free,' he said. 'Condemned because he has not created himself—and is nevertheless free. Because having once been hurled into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.' "

"But we haven't asked to be created as free individuals."

"That was precisely Sartre's point. Nevertheless we are free individuals, and this freedom condemns us to make choices throughout our lives. There are no eternal values or norms we can adhere to, which makes our choices even more significant. Because we are totally responsible for everything we do. Sartre emphasized that man must never disclaim the responsibility for his actions. Nor can we avoid the responsibility of making our own choices on the grounds that we 'must' go to work, or we 'must' live up to certain middle-class expectations regarding how we should live. Those who thus slip into the anonymous masses will never be other than members of the impersonal flock, having fled from themselves into self-deception. On the other hand our freedom obliges us to make something of ourselves, to live 'authentically' or 'truly.' "