

## Existentialist Etiquette

Sarah Corcoran

In "Existentialism and Humanism" Sartre says, "... [When] we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him be. In fashioning myself I fashion all man" (Course Reader 28-29). This view that one man's actions dictate those of mankind can seem contrary to fundamental elements of Existentialism. I will present Sartre's Existentialism, highlight the conflict regarding personal freedom and the above quote, and attempt to explain why the notion "in fashioning myself I fashion all man" (29) is indeed consistent with Sartre's views.

To understand Sartre, one must first understand his *modus operandi* concerning Existentialism. Sartre believes that nothing can define one except oneself. There are no fundamental core values; there is no human nature that predisposes man to act any certain way. Each man is born totally and utterly free to define himself however he chooses, "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world- and defines himself afterwards" (28). The Existentialist concept of existence preceding essence "puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely on his own shoulders" (28). Our choices are ultimately without justification since things only have meaning if we want them to. As our consciousness develops, we create our own values and standards through choices, decisions, and life projects that ultimately create our essence. Since we are directly responsible for what we choose to value, we are therefore directly responsible for the way we are at any given moment in time.

According to Sartre, there are two types of being and the responsibility for our existence and essence "resting squarely on our own shoulders" has to do with the type of being we are; a being-*for-itself* rather than a being-*in-itself*. A being-*in-itself* is the kind of being an object has; it [is what it is...has to be what it is] and can never change itself (23). Sartre presents this notion that a being-*in-itself* is not free, instead it is a part of the causal order of things and can be acted upon by an outside force; another being's will can be imposed on it. Humans, on the other hand, do not have this type of being; we are a being-*for-itself* because of our awareness and consciousness. "To exist as a being-*for-itself* is to be without a fixed identity; it is capable of changing from one identity to another. It is to be largely self defining" (23). By using our awareness and consciousness we are able to actively construct who we are. Consciousness is identified only by its activities such as questioning and pondering. The ability to raise and answer questions regarding our Self, such as "do I want to exist?" and "how do I want to exist?" allow us to have complete responsibility for our own existence and creation.

Each act of consciousness involves a way of perceiving some particular object. However, our consciousness is not able to ever perceive itself. Consciousness can never have itself as the object; that would be like trying to see one's own eyeball with one's very eye. Sartre says our consciousness must be "disclosed to us in contrast to its objects" (23). The best object to use in order to understand our own consciousness is another consciousness. It is through other people that we can come to know our own consciousness; much in the way a mirror allows us to see our own eye. It is through the Other's consciousness that I recognize my own consciousness and freedom and so begin to understand it. Our consciousness not only understands things, but allows us to make choices for ourselves.

We as humans with consciousness have complete freedom to define not only ourselves through life projects but also to define what constitutes standards and values. This complete freedom stems from our type of being and the ability of our consciousness to transcend its current state. This form of transcendence means "nothing determines that an individual consciousness will not abandon the self it has constructed and replace it with another" (24). The Self that each of us creates is not fixed, "individual consciousness may always replace the identity it has chosen" (24). This ability of the Self "to construct a new identity" (24) is essentially what makes us free. Every minute of every day we are free to reinvent ourselves with each action we perform or choice we make. We can either forge a new identity of change or reinforce the identity we have already chosen. Each of us has the absolute freedom to replace values and life projects with others as we struggle to define ourselves. Sartre says that in order to truly define oneself and live authentically, which is the Existentialist aim, one must commit to each choice with complete conviction and authenticity.

To act with complete conviction means that when choosing a life project, it is chosen not only because it is right for the individual but because one believes it is right for everyone. Let's say that I have committed myself to the practice of monogamy, but I have a friend who likes to "play the field." If I allow this friend to continue practicing polygamy without saying anything, then I am not living with complete conviction regarding my own choice. By not committing to my choice of monogamy with complete conviction, I am in fact practicing self deceit and living in bad faith. By allowing this friend to be a polygamist, I am in essence denying that particular aspect of my being and trivializing it. By trivializing the value of my choice to live monogamously, I am saying my choice is not really a self defining act and that I haven't "chosen for the better." This reasoning indicates I am not one hundred percent committed to my choice. If, on the other hand, I tell my friend that their actions are wrong, and that monogamy is the only true way to be, then I am living with complete conviction and authenticity. I am claiming that because I have chosen monogamy and "I am unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all," (28) that monogamy is also the right decision for my friend. I believe monogamy is the true way to live and I want my friend to make the right choice and live authentically as I have chosen to do.

Doesn't this conflict with Sartre's claim that "man is nothing but that which he makes himself?" (28). Aren't we all free to choose our own values and define ourselves in our own way? By saying that each man's decision for himself is right for all of mankind, it would seem as though Sartre is taking away each individual's ability to choose for themselves what values and standards to live by. This would therefore, also take away each individual's freedom to make any choice at all regarding personal values and life projects. "That in choosing for himself he chooses for all men" (28) would have it seem that all of mankind has been reduced to a being-*in-itself*, subject to the will of another being and thus part of the causal order of things. And if we are to be subject to the causal order of things, it would seem we are no better than say a table or rock or any other object you can think of. However, we do contain something a rock or table does not - consciousness.

Since it is through our consciousness that we always find the ability to choose, it is through our consciousness that Sartre finds the answer to this dilemma. For while it is true that "I apprehend him [another person] as an object"(45) when I tell my friend that polygamy is wrong and impose my values and ideals on him, it is also true that I "at the same time [apprehend him] as a man"(45). And to recognize someone as being a man is to recognize that they are a being-*for-itself*, with a consciousness of their own that is able to transcend and reinvent and choose. By recognizing the other as a man, I recognize my own ability to choose reflects the Other's ability to choose as well. While I may try to impose my will and values on another person, like my polygamist friend, ultimately each person will always have the freedom to choose what actions to take. When I deny a person that freedom and that ability to choose, I am in fact denying my very own freedom and ability to choose. I must admit that even though I think my friend should choose my values, because of individual consciousness, each person will always have the choice of whether or not to do so.

Sartre seems to have two opposing ideas regarding commitment and freedom but does a nice job of juxtaposing the two. It is true that when we commit to an act with complete conviction we are also committing all of mankind. But at the same time each of

us has the freedom to choose what is important in our lives and so carry the responsibility of the way things turn out. Sartre was in fact an idealist, not a fatalist, when it came to humanity as a whole because he believed people are unable to choose the worse, we always choose the better and in doing so naturally choose the better for mankind as well. But, we also recognize that our fellow man has a consciousness, making all of humanity and each man free at any point in time to make any decision he wants. So through this we see that it is possible to "be responsible for myself and responsible for all men" (29) while still maintaining the ability and freedom to choose. The Existentialist view is not one of bleak despair, as many think, but one of empowering choice- how do we want our life to be? And ultimately, we are the only ones responsible for how things turn out.