

Editor's note: This lesson plan was designed by Jonathan Gerkin for a 75-minute class at ESP's Junction program. It was intended as a challenging humanities seminar which hinged on students' willingness to think deeply about the questions posed. Discussion was essential and the teacher allowed more time for topics that caught the students' attention. In a seminar of this sort, it is especially important for the teacher to guide open discussion, challenge different opinions, play devils' advocate etc. rather than pushing his or her personal views. The description of the class is below.

Sartre- Introducing Existentialism

Class catalog description: Does morality disappear with God? The Existentialist believes that with the modern dissipation of religion, virtue will decay as well, and that the modern human loses all excuses for his or her faults. The weak are simply weak and that is their own fault. While seemingly cold, this philosophy is empowering and disregards the misfortunes of fate. This class will explore the very basics of Existentialist thought as presented by Jean Paul Sartre, and then explore the philosophy's practicality and its moral standing.

Main Points

- How does Existentialism empower humans?
- How does it make humans responsible for others?
- Only action matters in Existentialist philosophy.
- Why do people consider it harsh? What does it deprive them of?

Lesson plan

1. Jean-Paul Sartre was born on the 21 of June 1905
2. Sartre among other things was a leading figure in both 20th century French Philosophy and Marxism
3. One of the few people to reject the Nobel Prize in Literature, and he did so due to the belief that "a writer should not allow himself to be turned into an institution."
4. Today, we will focus on a very brief summary of existentialism that Sartre wrote in his 1947 *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* or *Existentialism and Humanism*
5. I have a few select quotations that we will read and explain:
 - "Man is nothing Else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism."
 - "...existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him."
 - What man is "is the being who hurls himself toward a future...man will be what he will have planned to be. Not what he will want to be."

Man must make choices and design his own plan of existence, want is a desire, but not always a part of the plan one makes for themselves.

- “and when we say that he is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.”

Sartre means:

1. Humans always choose what they believe is “good” from their own subjective view.
2. This means that human beings are choosing a particular image of man whenever they make a choice.
 - “...the image is valid for everybody and for our whole age. Thus, our responsibility is much greater than we might have supposed, because it involves all mankind. If I am a workingman and choose to join a Christian trade-union rather than be a communist, and if by being a member I want to show that the best thing for man is resignation, that the kingdom of man is not of this world, I am not only involving my own case—I want to be resigned for everyone. As a result, my action has involved all humanity. To take a more individual matter, if I want to marry, to have children; even if this marriage depends solely on my own circumstances or passion or wish, I am involving all humanity in monogamy and not merely myself. Therefore, I am responsible for myself and for everyone else. I am creating a certain image of man of my own choosing. In choosing myself, I choose man.”

This creates “existential anguish” or the feeling that one is a lawmaker of the world with incredible responsibility.

Ask students how—if they accept this view—they feel about the idea that they are not only responsible for themselves, but for all men?

- “Certainly, many people believe that when they do something, they themselves are the only ones involved, and when someone says to them, “What if everyone acted that way?” They shrug their shoulders and answer, “Everyone doesn’t act that way.” But really, one should always ask himself, “What would happen if everybody looked at things that way?” There is no escaping this disturbing thought except by a kind of double-dealing. A man who lies and makes excuses for himself by saying “not everybody does that,” is someone with an uneasy conscience, because the act of lying implies that a universal value is conferred upon the lie.”

- Gives a great sense of empowerment
- Regardless of whether an angel or a demon tells you to do something, you retain a choice.
- You decide whether or not it is good to listen and their recommendation is a good one.
- YOU ARE ENTIRELY RESPONSIBLE
- There are a number of possible choices and paths in this world and one “has value only because it is chosen.”
- People do not like this because it makes things their fault entirely
- It does not matter that you could have been a doctor and are not, YOU ARE NOT. End of story, people did not like this because it allows no room for escape. Everything is the fault of the individual. If you end up poor, it is your fault, because you could have ended up rich.
 - a. We can interpret hardships in life in different ways, and we must interpret these hardships and find the best choice by us.
 - b. There is no why God, there is only why did I make this life.
 - c. Your feelings mean nothing unless they are validated by a choice. You may say you love your mother if you not only feel that you love her, but if you act that you love her.

On God

- “The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoyevsky said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." That is the very starting point of existentialism. Indeed, everything is permissible if God does not exist, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. He can't start making excuses for himself.”
- “We are alone with no excuses.”
- “Man is condemned to be free...The existentialist does not believe in the power of passion. He will never agree that a sweeping passion is a ravaging torrent which fatally leads a man to certain acts and is therefore an excuse.”
 1. This is an incredibly scary thought, because now we have established that all men are examples, and that all morals are null and void. This would ultimately lead to our destruction if accepted, and this is why it is distressing.
 2. It does not matter if God exists, because still we are in charge. We have no excuses for our mistakes and actions in any case.

- Descartes: "Conquer yourself rather than the world," Sartre agrees
3. No supernatural being is going to decide for us
 4. We must control our minds and our reactions, by living in the world of probability and make choice off of that
 5. There is no reality except action and we must be in control of our actions
 6. Quietism—let others do it—is foolish, in a world of action
"According to this, we can understand why our doctrine horrifies certain people.

Because often the only way they can bear their wretchedness is to think, "Circumstances have been against me. What I've been and done doesn't show my true worth. To be sure, I've had no great love, no great friendship, but that's because I haven't met a man or woman who was worthy. The books I've written haven't been very good because I haven't had the proper leisure. I haven't had children to devote myself to because I didn't find a man with whom I could have spent my life. So there remains within me, unused and quite viable, a host of propensities, inclinations, possibilities, that one wouldn't guess from the mere series of things I've done."

Now, for the existentialist there is really no love other than one which manifests itself in a person's being in love. There is no genius other than one which is expressed in works of art; the genius of Proust is the sum of Proust's works; the genius of Racine is his series of tragedies. Outside of that, there is nothing. Why say that Racine could have written another tragedy, when he didn't write it? A man is involved in life, leaves his impress on it, and outside of that there is nothing. To be sure, this may seem a harsh thought to someone whose life hasn't been a success. But, on the other hand, it prompts people to understand that reality alone is what counts, that dreams, expectations, and hopes warrant no more than to define a man as a disappointed dream, as miscarried hopes, as vain expectations. In other words, to define him negatively and not positively. However, when we say, "You are nothing else than your life," that does not imply that the artist will be judged solely on the basis of his works of art; a thousand other things will contribute toward summing him up. What we mean is that a man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which make up these undertakings.

When all is said and done, what we are accused of, at bottom, is not our pessimism, but an optimistic toughness. If people throw up to us our works of fiction in which we write about people who are soft, weak, cowardly, and sometimes even downright bad, it's not because these people are soft, weak, cowardly, or bad; because if we were to say, as Zola did, that they are that way because of heredity, the workings of environment, society, because of biological or psychological determinism, people would be reassured. They would say, "Well, that's what we're like, no one can do anything about it." But when the existentialist writes about a coward, he says that this coward is responsible for his

cowardice. He's not like that because he has a cowardly heart or lung or brain; he's not like that on account of his physiological make-up; but he's like that because he has made himself a coward by his acts. There's no such thing as a cowardly constitution; there are nervous constitutions; there is poor blood, as the common people say, or strong constitutions. But the man whose blood is poor is not a coward on that account, for what makes cowardice is the act of renouncing or yielding. A constitution is not an act; the coward is defined on the basis of the acts he performs. People feel, in a vague sort of way, that this coward we're talking about is guilty of being a coward, and the thought frightens them, What people would like is that a coward or a hero be born that way.”

Sartre is accusing people of being unable to take accountability for their position in life.

- a. How do you feel about this accountability?
- b. What do you think about his view on God?
- c. What do you think about his comments on cowardice?
- d. How do you feel about responsibility?