

Existencialism and subjectivity essay sample



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The first principle of existentialism, according to Jean-Paul Sartre's Lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism," given in 1946, is defined by man's continued creation of his essence by the choices he makes. In Sartre's words, it is that "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (349). The idea's that give rise to and stem from this is that man's arrival into the universe marked his existence, but the essence of who he would become, his definition, is dependent upon nothing outside of himself but upon him. It identifies man as the agent of his own formation, the subject of his situation, the doer of all actions from which spring all consequences. This idea of man negates human nature as, according to Sartre, no God exists to conceive it. Therefore, man must create his "nature" by his own effort.

In saying that existence comes before essence, Sartre argues that man is "something which propels itself towards a future" (349), yet with no influences external to that of his own will that prompt him to make choices. All is dependent upon him. In the New Testament, Paul relates that he often does things that he does not want to do, and he recognizes this a sin's being at work in his life. The first principle of existentialism attributes this to man's making the best choice, for he is "unable ever to choose the worse" (350). However, there is something unsettling in the idea of one's creating oneself by one's choices. People often find it difficult to engage in certain activities that he or she would like to be a part of. A shy person may not like being shy, and though he or she may take great pains to get over it, shyness persists though it may be obscured. A biologist might consider personality traits to be genetic. It would be interesting to note the geneticist's reaction to this tenet of existentialism.

The first meaning of the term subjectivism as given by Sartre is “ the freedom of the individual subject” (350). It is the point at which man is single in himself and identifies himself as different from others. He is alone, “ solitary,” detached and free from the conception of others. His freedom might be seen at work in the subjects’ being at liberty to make the choices that soon define him.

The other meaning is that it is not possible for man to go beyond his own subjectivity. Sartre identifies this second subjectivism as the “ deeper meaning of existentialism” (350). It postulates man as unobjectifiable; that is, he is unable to become an object in his own situation because he is his own scrutinizer. Therefore, not only is it impossible to see man as a whole, but it is also impossible to “ inquire what lies ‘ behind’ appearance” (Copleston, 186). But man can surpass himself in that by making choices he continually becomes more than what he was before. This “ what he was before” can be scrutinized by him: himself the subject, viewing what he once was as object, though this object is no longer the man. The fact that a man, until he dies, can never fully occupy the role of object is what is mean by his inability to go beyond his own subjectivity.

This idea is an intriguing one, especially as it regards man’s being both the subject and the object. It grants him a duality of roles that seems typical of Sartre’s doctrine which says man, in effect, creates himself. The implication of Sartre’s doctrine that man cannot seek for what is beyond himself as subject is an agnostic one. It seems not to deny the existence of God so much as it states that one cannot know because he cannot inquire. However, Sartre does deny the existence of God.

He considers theism a “ deterministic doctrine” (365) that removes man from the center of the picture and artificially imposes a scapegoat on which to place the blame for all his actions. He considers this a self-deception, which is “ evidently a falsehood, because it is a dissimulation of man’s complete liberty of commitment” (365). According to this view, then, falsehood might be considered good, for it is part of the same doctrine that credits man with the inability in any situation to choose the worse alternative.

References

Copleston, Frederick, S. J. (1966). *Contemporary Philosophy*. Westminster: Newman.

Sartre, Jean Paul. (1975). “ Existentialism is a humanism.” *Existentialism: from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. (pp. 345-368). London: Penguin.