

Sartre and Human Nature

Factfile

Name: Jean-Paul Sartre
Dates 1905-1980
Habitat: Cafes
Consumed: Coffee & Cigarettes
Key Ideas: Existentialism, Freedom, Atheism,



Key Idea

We are free. We are not determined/fixed like objects. We always have the possibility of changing situations. There is no such thing as human nature as such.

Humans, Objects and Experience

1. There are two very different types of existence. Sartre calls these 'Being in itself' and '**Being for itself.**' 'Being in itself' is used of objects, they have a fixed form and cannot change themselves. '**Being for itself**' is far different and is used to refer to conscious human beings. Sartre then sets out to define the difference.
2. **Existentialism:** Sartre is an existentialist. This means that as far as he is concerned existence comes before essence (what something is) for human beings. Sartre illustrates this with the example of a knife. A knife is designed for cutting things. It is given this purpose or essence by a designer before it is made. Its essence comes before its existence. For human beings it is different: 'Existence precedes essence.' This means that we first exist and then have to work out what our purpose is.
3. Unlike previous philosophers, Sartre rejects the idea of human nature. Other philosophers had referred to human nature as the way that human beings have to be. Sartre does not believe that there is any such thing as human nature. None of our natures are fixed. Our essence is something we create for ourselves in the things we do.
4. Linked to his existentialism is his **atheism**. Human beings could only have an essence or purpose if made by a creator God. Yet Sartre does not believe there is such a God. Therefore there is no human essence.

Freedom and Bad Faith

1. **Freedom:** Admittedly we may not be able to choose our birth, our parents, hair colour or the laws of nature. (we cannot fly!) Sartre calls these facts 'Facticity' Apart from this we are free and can make any choice that we wish.
2. **Bad Faith:** However we sometimes deceive ourselves in living according to what Sartre calls 'bad faith.' This is where we deny our own freedom and lie to ourselves. 'I have no other choice' we effectively say. Sartre gives the example of a café waiter. We observe his exaggerated gestures, how he bends forward towards the customer, bows, carries the tray with a flourish etc. He is playing at being a waiter. He is acting as if he is a fixed object and

can do no other. Perhaps he even says to himself '*I am a waiter, I have no choice but to get up at 5am in order to get to work.*' But this is bad faith, he could stay in bed or change his career.

3. Sartre even rejects racial or sexual determinism. To say that I cannot do something because I am black or female or Jewish is an act of bad faith. Likewise our genes may make us more likely to do certain things but for Sartre genetic traits show many of us fail to embrace our freedom

