*Existentialism is a Humanism* – Jean-Paul Sartre

*Existentialism is a Humanism* was a talk given by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1945 to explain exactly what existentialism was and defend it from its detractors. Essentially, Sartre argued that existentialism merely takes atheism seriously and investigates the consequences that follow from this premise.

The following are the key points raised:

1. Existence precedes essence – This means that there is no innate human nature (essence) which belongs to all humans; in other words, a human being is not a particular example of a pre-existing universal concept. We are what we make ourselves to be, as opposed to something like a knife, which is what it was made to be; i.e. whose essence (as a cutting implement) precedes its existence.

Human essence can only precede existence if we imagine that there is a creator God who created us in the same way that we create a knife.

1. Responsibility – The fact that our existence precedes our essence means that we are responsible for what we make of ourselves. It is in this context that Sartre says we are also responsible for all others, and that every decision we make, we make for the whole of humankind. The reason for this is that in making, and therefore being responsible for, ourselves, we are asserting those values/behaviours that all people everywhere should hold/perform.
2. Anguish –The weight of our responsibility and the fact of our abandonment (see point 4 below) produces anguish. It arises when we ask ourselves, “What if everyone acted this way?” In addition, we *must* ask ourselves this question. To not do so is to mask our anguish.

Some have seen in anguish the beginnings of quietism or inaction. Sartre denies this, comparing it to the anguish a military leader feels when making a choice which may get his men killed. His anguish doesn’t lead him to inaction; rather it is the condition of his action.

1. Abandonment – In a universe with no God and therefore no *a priori* values, we find ourselves alone and realise we are making everything up ourselves. Existentialism begins with the realisation that without God “everything is permitted”.

Sartre gives the example of a student who asked him for advice. He was trying to decide whether to stay with his aging, divorced mother whose eldest son (his brother) had been killed by the Germans or join the Free French Forces. Nothing can help him make this decision – no code of conduct or ethical injunctions – because ultimately, only he can determine *which* code of conduct or ethical precept (the importance of family/filial obligation or defending ones country) has more value. In short, he is abandoned to his freedom.

1. Despair – This arises when we realise that we can only rely on those things that depend on our own will. All else lies outside of this and cannot be relied on. This is particularly the case when it comes to other people because they, like us, are completely free and not bound by their past.
2. Action – Existentialism declares that reality only exists in action. We are nothing more than what we have done. Sartre goes so far as to say that we exist only to the extent that we realise ourselves, that is, act. This is disturbing because people tend to make excuses for their failures saying things like, “If only I had been born in a different country”, or “Circumstances have been against me.”

Sartre claims that a coward is not born a coward, nor is a hero born a hero. Rather, a person who acts cowardly/heroic is a coward/hero.

1. Intersubjectivity – Through the *cogito* we discover not just ourselves but also others. I cannot discover anything about myself without also discovering myself in the presence of others. I cannot *be* anything unless others acknowledge me as such. The other is therefore essential to my existence.
2. The universal human condition – Although there is no universal human *nature* there is a universal human *condition*. This refers to the limitations which define our fundamental situation in the universe; i.e. that we *be* in the world with other people. This is the same for everyone and because of it, even though individual historical situations may be different, we are nevertheless capable of understanding any other human project on the grounds of this universal condition.
3. Subjectivity – A human being exists as a subjective consciousness. Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* reveals to us the absolute truth of consciousness confronting itself.
4. Freedom – Existentialists believe that all humans are totally, radically free. We cannot avoid this freedom by appealing to our brain, our situations or even our emotions. In addition, our freedom depends on the freedom of others and their freedom depends on ours. This follows from number (7) above where I can’t *be* anything (including free) unless others are free to acknowledge me, and therefore reveal me, as free.
5. Morality – Moral codes, because of their very nature, are always general and abstract. Human situations however, are specific and detailed. The former, therefore, cannot provide guidance to the latter.

Sartre doesn’t distinguish between the *contents* of different ethical systems. The only thing that matters, the only value that has meaning, is whether the decision was made in the name of freedom. However, this is not a selfish concern because in willing our own freedom, we must also will the freedom of others; the two are linked.

1. Humanism – Existentialism is a form of humanism, not because it praises or worships humanity in the form of a Comteian cult, but because it reminds us that there is no legislator outside ourselves and in making our own decisions, even in our abandoned state, we create value and meaning for ourselves. In addition, we learn that it is only by turning outwards, seeking goals outside ourselves, that we can realise ourselves as human.

In addition to these major points Sartre also mentions the following:

* Values are vague because it is we who give them meaning in the first place. Feelings/instincts don’t help in creating values either because one cannot measure the strength of a feeling. What gives value to feelings are the actions that they inspire (the only way to measure the strength of a feeling is to act the way the feeling dictates) but since we are depending on the feelings to justify our actions we are caught in a vicious circle. Not only this, feelings are developed through the actions we take therefore we can’t use them as guidelines for action.
* We interpret all the ‘signs’ we see. Any meaning we find in the world, we put there.
* Materialism turns human beings into objects.
* Existentialists don’t believe in the idea of progress because progress implies improvement but human beings are always the same, that is, confronting a situation in which we have no choice but to choose.

Sartre’s talk answers a number of criticisms usually levelled at existentialism:

1. Existentialism is a philosophy of quietism

Reply: Quietism is an attitude that says, “Others can do what I cannot.” Existentialism doesn’t advocate this because it defines us by our actions.

1. Existentialism is pessimistic

Reply: Far from being pessimistic, existentialism is actually optimistic because the only thing that matters is what we do and we are in complete control of that.

1. Existentialism leads to inaction

Reply: Existentialism’s focus on action renders this criticism clearly false.

1. Existentialism imprisons humans within their individual subjectivity

Reply: We must start from human subjectivity because that is the only absolute truth but through this subjectivity we find ourselves in the presence of others. In fact, no other starting point can get us outside of our heads.

1. Existentialism forbids nothing, we can do anything we want

Reply: In one sense this is true. We are never *bound* to perform some action. In every situation we must choose and we must do so freely. However, in choosing, the fact that we are choosing with responsibility for all human beings limits whim and caprice. Ethical systems just don’t help us because we have to invent and determine the importance of the very values they are built on.

1. In existentialism we cannot judge anyone else because there is no reason to prefer one action to another

Reply: We can pass judgements of truth because some choices are made in error or bad faith. We can also pass moral judgements because although the *content* of individual moralities may vary, a certain *form* of that morality is universal, i.e. that freedom be the foundation of all values. It is on this ground that we can make moral judgements, i.e. not on what someone does, but on whether they ground their action on freedom which, by the nature of freedom, necessarily wills not just our freedom but also the freedom of others.

1. Our values are meaningless because we choose them for ourselves

Reply: Without God *someone* has to invent values. This may not be ideal but it is the way it is and we must accept it. But it is not as bad as all that because, in reality, life is nothing until it is lived. It is *only* through living that values and meaning *can* arise in the first place.