

**What does Sartre mean when he claims that
we are condemned to be free?
Why does he believe this?**

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Introduction to Philosophy

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“l’homme est condamné à être libre” or in English “man is condemned to be free”, Jean Paul Sartre famously claims in his 1946 lecture titled Existentialism Is a Humanism (Sartre, 1956). This paper aims to explain what Sartre is trying to tell us, how it applies to the origin of meaning of our existence and to uncover the thinking which has led Sartre to this claim.

Contrary to most previous approaches to metaphysics Sartre argues that ‘existence precedes essence’ (Sartre, 2007, p. 25). The essence or purpose and definition of an individual’s being is therefore formulated throughout his existence rather than being predetermined and merely propagated through the existence, as is the case with causal determinism in which there exists no free choice. In his own words ‘A man is nothing but a series of enterprises, and that he is the sum, organization and aggregate of the relations that constitute such enterprises’ (Sartre, 2007, p. 38). Furthermore, Sartre also rejects any notion of a higher being, a God as some may call it, which could be responsible for our essence.

Sartre still recognizes the causation emerging from physical properties subject to physical laws within which lies our existence and manages to incorporate them into his existential philosophy. He uses the term *facticité* (facticity) (Sartre, 1966, pp. 79-83) to describe such properties and the consequences they have on our choices and therefore our essence.

Sartre puts forward two modes of being, *être-en-soi* (being-in-itself) and *être-pour-soi* (being-for-itself). The former describes objects whose entire existence can be mapped onto their facticity. They do not possess a freedom of choice and therefore their essence and form remain constant throughout their existence. The latter describes entities or beings capable of making free choices and therefore developing from their initial facticity. In this mode of being, facticity only provides a set of boundaries within which the being is free to make choices. ‘I am not “free” either to escape the lot of my class, of my nation, of my family, or even to build up my own power or my fortune or to conquer my most insignificant appetites or habits.’ (Sartre, 1966, p481).

From the two modes of being we can see that the overall being or existence of objects, which are inanimate entities, is described by their being-in-itself whereas the existence of living entities constitutes of both their being-in-itself and being-for-itself.

Conducting free choice requires the formulation of a decision which can only occur if the entity is capable of recollecting and reflecting on its past experiences as well as questioning its future all in the light of its current state of mind. ‘But if past and present events do not completely determine choice, what is the additional factor? It is their novel and unprecedented conjunction in the present moment’ (McGill, 1949, p.334). It is therefore necessary for all entities which exhibit being-for-itself to not only possess consciousness but more importantly self-consciousness. Because the in-itself mode of being is the annihilation of being-for-itself, and being-for-itself is a consequence of consciousness we can conclude that being-in-itself can only fully describe the existence of non-conscious objects.

The self-consciousness, characteristic to us as being-for-itself, plays an important role in the origin of our essence in that it leads us to experience and perceive ourselves through our experiences in which we act as causal agents. In other words, for us we are what we decide to

do. We have the freedom to choose ourselves through the experiences which we choose to have.

How can we assure ourselves that our choices are absolutely free? The proof of the freedom of choice is hidden in the absence of choice in our existence. So long as there are choices there is the possibility to evade the choices which is itself a choice. This primary choice of undertaking or evading choices must be a free choice since with every choice, regardless of the facticity, there is always a possibility to not make a choice. Now since the choice of evading a secondary choice is a free choice, the contrary act of making the secondary choice must be free as well and so must be the secondary choice. We can therefore be certain that as long as we have the choice to not make a choice, the choice in question must be a free choice.

Now that we have established that it must be possible to make free choices, we must ensure ourselves that it is us who is responsible for the free choices. When we make a choice, it contributes towards the development of our essence and so we must be the entity who is responsible for that choice. An individual making a choice and therefore acting as a causal agent will affect the facticity of another individual and therefore indirectly affect the constraints of their free choice. Our choices, which we are responsible for, are therefore only choices which we make, and which can directly affect our essence via a mechanism devoid of our facticity.

To conclude, no one can make a choice for us, for if they were to do so the choice would have a greater effect on their essence than it would on ours, thus becoming their own choice. It would also require us to accept their choice thereby returning the responsibility of choice to us.

At first Sartre's statement and the idea of being free to make our own choices seems liberating. It is therefore rather surprising that he precedes it with the claim that we have been condemned to such a terrible predicament. Almost as if we are to be trapped within our own limitless freedom of choice.

Throughout our life we encounter choices and as previously discussed evading the choices is itself a choice therefore the freedom which we experience is inescapable. 'What is impossible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I must realize that if I decide not to choose, that still constitutes a choice' (Sartre, 2007, p. 44). In addition to this, since the choices we encounter are our own, we are left to bear the responsibility for these choices. Due to our self-conscious nature which comes with our being-for-itself we; reflect on our past choices, anticipate our future choices and worry about the choices we must make in the moment. This ultimately leaves us with an existential *l'angoisse* (angst). 'I become intuitively certain of my freedom in angst' (McGill, 1949, p. 332).

This angst therefore originates from our understanding of the inevitability of free choice and the effects which the choices have on our essence. It is this angst tied to the notion of freedom of choice which makes Sartre believe that we are condemned to be free.

One can argue against the freedom of choice by claiming that we are not free to choose to be born, we might not have asked for our life. While this is initially true, we ultimately still

make our life a choice of our own by choosing to end it and therefore admitting to having control over it.

Sartre suggests that we must acknowledge the freedom which accompanies our existence and embrace the responsibility of choice. He uses the term bad faith to name all of our attempts to renounce our freedom and the responsibility which accompanies it by fabricating theories of meaning. These theories are a false perception of reality in which we feel as though we have no free choice and therefore can not be held accountable for the essence which we develop. 'Bad faith is obviously a lie because it is a dissimulation of a man's full freedom of commitment' (Sartre, 2007, p. 48).

Looking at Sartre's statement that we are condemned to be free once again, we may now understand the following. He believes that we base our essence on the way we perceive ourselves through our free choices. This gives us hope as it assures us that there is always at least some fundamental choice which we are free to make, no matter our facticity. He then claims that we are condemned to our freedom since he shows that it is impossible for us to evade our choices and the associated responsibility. Furthermore, in order to make choices we must be capable of contemplating both our past choices and our future intentions. These abilities come as a part of our self-consciousness and lead us into an existential angst from which there is no escape. As a resolution Sartre proposes for every individual to embrace his freedom and use it to establish their own essence.

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