



# Introduction to Ethics

Louis Doulas

WEEK 7

# Agenda

- Jean-Paul Sartre's, "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1945)



# Existentialism is a Humanism



## Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)

- French philosopher, playwright, novelist, activist, and literary critic.
  - Awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964.
- Key figure in the philosophical movement known as “existentialism” (first to really popularize it).
- Famous “open relationship” with feminist and fellow existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir (together for over 50 years).
- *Existentialism is a Humanism* is probably the most widely read of all of Sartre’s philosophical writings and provides a good (though oversimplified) introduction to a number of key themes in his work, especially his famous *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

# Existentialism is a Humanism



## Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)

- *Existentialism is a Humanism* was presented as a public lecture in Paris in October of 1945.
- This was an important, reflective time in world history.
  - World War II (1939–1945).
  - Paris had been recently liberated from Nazi Occupation (1944).
  - The truths about the horrors of Auschwitz were emerging.
  - The atomic bomb had been dropped a few months prior.
- Moral questions became increasingly pressing and real.

# Existentialism is a Humanism



## Existentialism

- Philosophical movement exploring the nature of human existence; associated with several 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers and novelists.
  - Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir.
- “Existentialists hold that humans have no pre-given purpose or essence laid out for them by God or by nature; it is up to each one of us to decide who and what we are through our own actions” (Charles Guignon 2013).

## Themes

- Existence precedes essence
- Absurdity
- Nihilism
- Condemned to be free
- Radical free choice
- Lack of meaning in life
- Absence of a God



# Existentialism is a Humanism

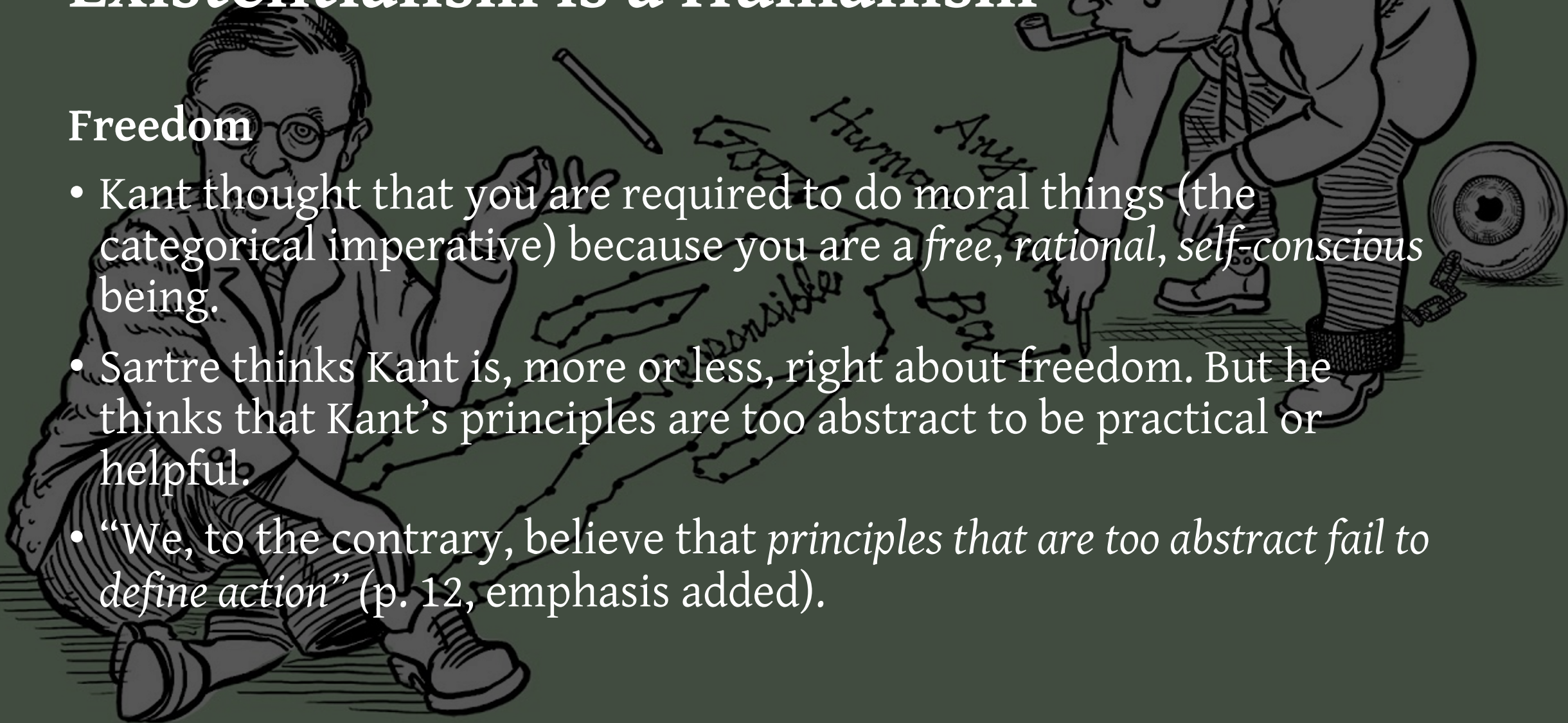
## “Existence precedes essence”

- Humans have no “essence,” no pre-established purpose or nature; there is nothing that we *have* to be and nothing that we *ought* to do.
  - Compare this to an ordinary object, e.g., a knife. For something to exist as a knife, it must be designed in a certain way. To be a knife is to exist with a pre-established purpose (to cut things). The knife *has* to be a certain way in order to exist as a knife. In this sense, the knife’s essence precedes its existence.
- Ultimately, we are forced to choose what we will become; we define ourselves by our choice of action.
- All that we are given is simply *that* we are, i.e., that we exist; we are not given *what* we are. What we are is ultimately up to us to determine.

# Existentialism is a Humanism

## Freedom

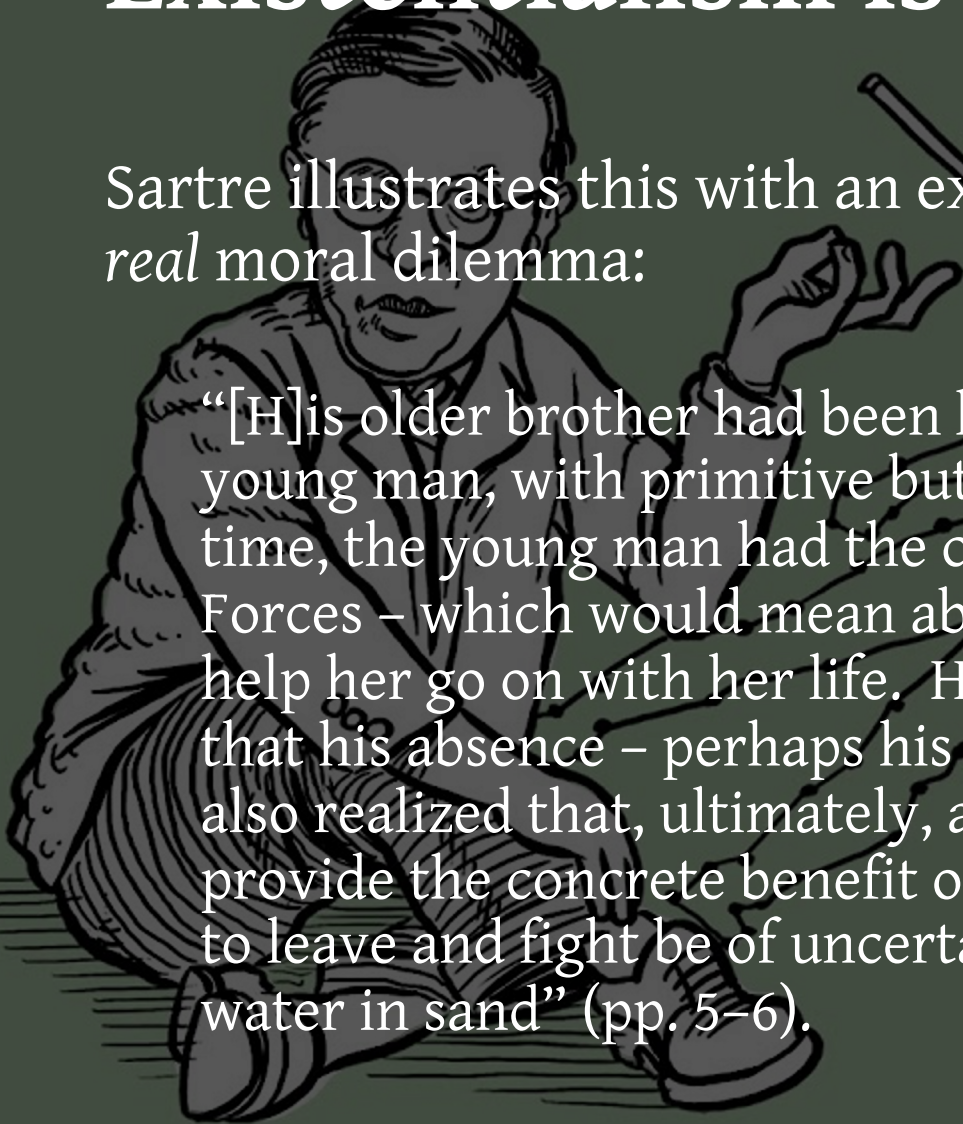
- Kant thought that you are required to do moral things (the categorical imperative) because you are a *free, rational, self-conscious* being.
- Sartre thinks Kant is, more or less, right about freedom. But he thinks that Kant's principles are too abstract to be practical or helpful.
- “We, to the contrary, believe that *principles that are too abstract fail to define action*” (p. 12, emphasis added).



# Existentialism is a Humanism

Sartre illustrates this with an example. A student of Sartre's faced the following *real* moral dilemma:

“[H]is older brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940, and this young man, with primitive but noble feelings, wanted to avenge him. ... At the time, the young man had the choice of going to England to join the Free French Forces – which would mean abandoning his mother – or remaining by her side to help her go on with her life. He realized that his mother lived only for him and that his absence – perhaps his death – would plunge her into utter despair. He also realized that, ultimately, any action he might take on her behalf would provide the concrete benefit of helping her to live, while any action he might take to leave and fight be of uncertain outcome and could disappear pointlessly like water in sand” (pp. 5–6).



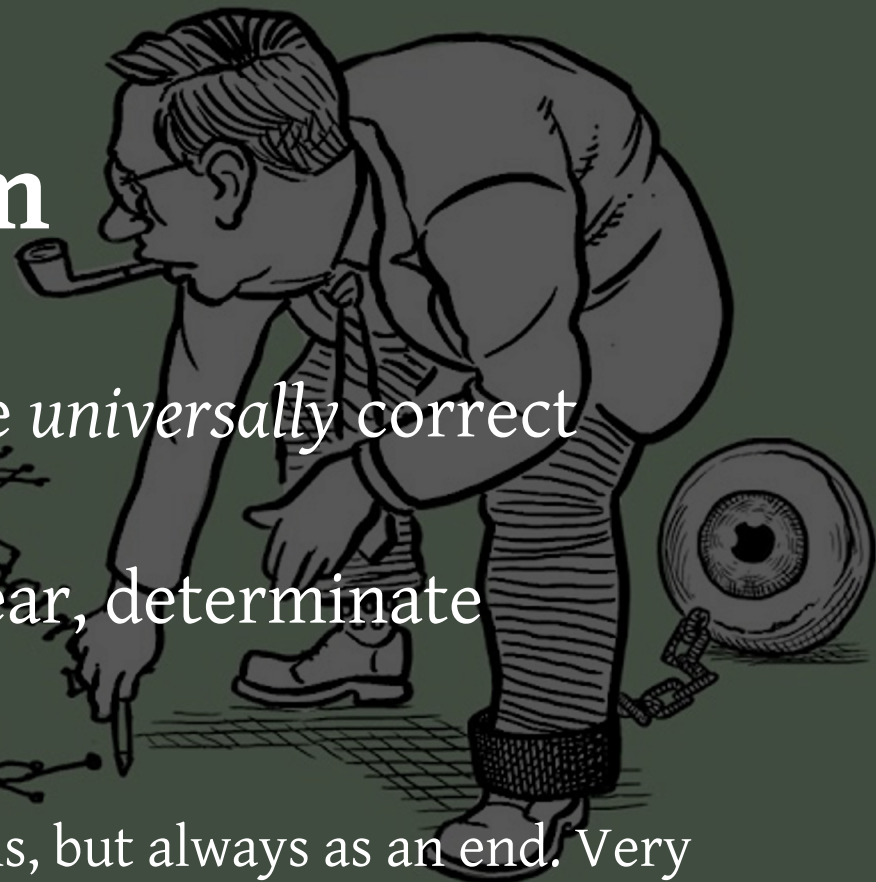


# Existentialism is a Humanism

What *ought* Sartre's student do here? What's the *universally* correct moral decision?

If we follow Kant, says Sartre, we won't get a clear, determinate answer:

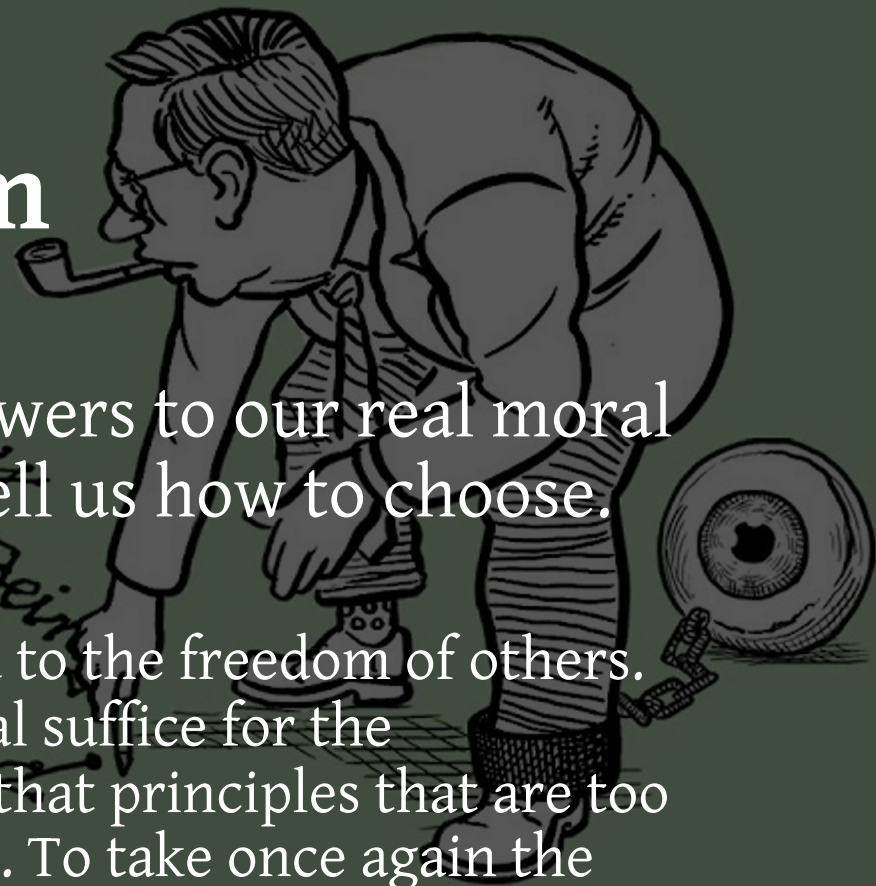
“The Kantian ethic says, Never regard another as a means, but always as an end. Very well; if I remain with my mother, I shall be regarding her as the end and not as a means: but by the same token I am in danger of treating as means those who are fighting on my behalf; and the converse is also true, that if I go to the aid of the combatants I shall be treating them as the end at the risk of treating my mother as a means. If values are uncertain, if they are still too abstract to determine the particular, concrete case under consideration, nothing remains but to trust in our instincts” (p. 6).



# Existentialism is a Humanism

Sartre thought there are no *objectively* right answers to our real moral questions. Reason—contrary to Kant—doesn't tell us how to choose.

“Kant declared that freedom is a will both to itself and to the freedom of others. Agreed: but he thinks that the formal and the universal suffice for the constitution of a morality. We think, on the contrary, that principles that are too abstract break down when we come to defining action. To take once again the case of that student; by what authority, in the name of what golden rule of morality, do you think he could have decided, in perfect peace of mind, either to abandon his mother or to remain with her? There are no means of judging. The content is always concrete, and therefore unpredictable; it has always to be invented. The one thing that counts, is to know whether the invention is made in the name of freedom” (p. 12).



# Existentialism is a Humanism



## Authenticity and Absurdity

But how should we interpret this? What does it mean to say that there is no objectively, or universally, right answer to moral questions?

### ERROR THEORY

Moral claims are always false, e.g., “Killing babies for fun” is false.

### SUBJECTIVISM

Moral claims are true, but “subjectively” true, e.g., “Killing babies for fun” is not objectively true—it’s true for some, but not for others.

### EXPRESSIVISM

Moral claims are neither true nor false, they simply express our attitudes, e.g., Boo! (killing babies for fun); Hooray! (not enslaving people).



# Existentialism is a Humanism

## Authenticity and Absurdity

It's unclear which of these Sartre endorses (if he he endorses any) *but* he does seem to think there is at least one basic truth:

*We are responsible to own up to our freedom and our choices.*

That is, we decide who to be in **absurdity** (= to acknowledge that reason won't settle our moral dilemmas) and must do so **authentically**.

To do so “unauthentically,” without authenticity, would be to act in **bad faith**: to act as though your future and self is *already determined* and so *not up to you*.

A painting of a man and a woman in a boat. The man is in the foreground, looking down with a somber expression. The woman is behind him, looking towards him. The background shows a body of water and a distant shore.

# Existentialism is a Humanism

## Authenticity and Absurdity

But isn't this itself a moral truth?—i.e., that we are responsible for our moral choices? And if it's admitted as a moral truth, then why not admit other moral truths? Why not say that it's wrong to kill or lie?

This isn't quite what Sartre is endorsing, though.

Sartre seems to think that being responsible for our moral choices is simply a basic fact about human existence: we are free, we are “condemned” to choose without sufficient reasons for one action or another. To accept responsibility to choose—freedom—is a matter of not living in denial about one's predicament.



# Existentialism is a Humanism

## Radical Freedom

There is no human nature, only a human *condition*, whose obstacles we try to overcome in our freedom.

Think again about “essence precedes existence”: “we first simply *exist*—we find ourselves born into a world not of our own choosing—and it is then up to each of us to define our own identity or essential characteristics in the course of what we do in living out our lives. Thus, our essence (our set of defining traits) is chosen, not given” (Charles Guignon).



# Existentialism is a Humanism

## Radical Freedom

Your life = the sum of the decisions you have made for yourself.

We choose who we want to be and want to become. Your fate is never determined by your past; your future is always open and up to you (i.e., “radical” freedom).

“[W]hen an existentialist describes a coward, he says that the coward is responsible for his own cowardice. He is not the way he is because he has a cowardly heart, lung, or brain. He is not like that as the result of his physiological makeup; he is like that because he has made himself a coward through his actions” (Sartre).

# Existentialism is a Humanism



## Collectivity

Because we are actively involved in the collective process of creating the human condition, in choosing for ourselves, we are also choosing for *all* people.

“A man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility” (p. 4).





# Existentialism is a Humanism

## Moral Anarchy?

But is there any way to distinguish between good and bad actions? Doesn't Sartre's existentialism just lead to moral anarchy?

It's true that existentialism offers no fixed, fundamental set of moral principles or axioms, but nevertheless we can judge *authenticity* and *bad faith*.

We can judge whether we are living up to the human condition—exercising our radical freedom, taking charge of our lives, etc.—or whether we are trying to deny our human condition—living in bad faith by acting as if we have no control of our fates, as if things are already pre-determined.



# Existentialism is a Humanism

But isn't Sartre's advice here just as impractical as Kant's? Consider how Sartre would advise his student in the moral dilemma:

“You are free, therefore choose that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world” (p. 7).

Yet just because existentialism offers no specific moral principles doesn't mean it isn't impractical. Assuming his student accepted Sartre's advice, it would have made the student realize that he was responsible for his choices in the face of absurdity. Existentialism can be empowering.

# Existentialism is a Humanism



## Exam Questions

8. Compare Sartre and Aristotle on the extent to which we can choose our selves. Give a reason why one or the other view seems more likely to be correct.
9. State one way that Sartre agrees with Kant, and one way Sartre disagrees with Kant.

How should we answer these questions?