

WHY SARTRE WAS WRONG

Jean Paul Sartre was one of the 20th century's great philosophers. Not only was he a powerful writer and personality, but he was the founder of one the great strains of thought in recent times: existentialism. In this bleak and sad philosophy, there is no God, nor is there any meaning to life. In works like *Being and Nothingness* and also in the famous play *No Exit*, Sartre expounds on such themes. One of the most illustrative symbols of this philosophy occurs in the work of Sartre's sometime friend and rival Albert Camus: that of a man trying to push a rock up a hill, but getting nowhere. That is existentialism in a nutshell. But does this philosophy make sense? Is it in any way a good way to live? This essay will make two arguments against existentialism and the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre. First, if this is all there is why does so much science point to the opposite conclusion, and second, is the world really nauseously filled only with us and our perceptions, as Sartre argues in many of his works?

Is this all there is? Is the world we see around us all there is? No God, nothing more stronger or powerful than our own lives? We simply are born and die and there is no purpose to anything—this is what Jean-Paul Sartre believed despite the fact that there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. He essentially made up his philosophy in his own mind without looking to external evidence to solidify his own ideas. He even says this in *Being and Nothingness*, "Life has no meaning *a priori* ... It is up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing but the

meaning that you choose.”¹ This is also clear when he writes, “Nothingness haunts being.”² But these ideas do not take into account how much of the world is designed directly for us. A lot of the science around the alternative philosophy of anthrocentrism suggests that everything in our world is calibrated for us. If there was 1 % more oxygen in the air we probably wouldn’t be alive. Now why would this be? So that we can be even more tortured by the meaninglessness of life?—or is because there is a higher power who created and watches over us? It isn’t surprising that Sartre came up with such a bleak philosophy: he lived through the Second World War and probably saw a lot of sadness and misery. His old world was destroyed and he literally had to try to come up with new values for a new world. It is just a bit disappointing that these new values are not based in the past and are cut free from any tradition or original truth like the existence of God.

One of the most famous quotations from *Being and Nothingness* is “Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.”³ The idea that freedom is a negative thing, is something that a person is *condemned to*, is very strange. It is a bit like saying light is darkness or absence is presence. What Sartre means is that freedom is a terrible responsibility if all you have is your one life and nothing more. But this doesn’t make too much sense, if a person believes, like Sartre, that the world is meaningless. The nausea of seeing yourself and your perceptions reflected back in the world or the world filling with yourself is also something to be disagreed with. In a way the kind of existentialism Sartre

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. (New York: Routledge, 1969), 566.

² Ibid, 16.

³ Ibid, 485.

complains about is really solipsism: the belief that you are the only thing in the world, or the only thing that exists. If Sartre stopped for a moment to look at the world, he wouldn't see his own ugly face reflected back in the petal of a flower or in a sunrise: he would see a dazzling display of the natural world and the fact that people are part of it all, that this is designed to be our world where we should be happy.

Sartre was clearly a very smart man, but he was too much a product of his time and unable to get outside of his gloomy state of mind to see the world as it really is. There is so much wonder and strangeness in the world that it is actually quite difficult to do what he did: reduce it all to ash. If he could simply see how the world is designed for us to live in and enjoy, he would have changed his mind. Likewise, if he could just look at the beauty around him and stop worrying about his own problems he would have felt better.

Work Consulted

Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. New York: Routledge, 1969.