

History of Philosophy

71 Jean-Paul Sartre

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Abstract:

This text examines Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy by contrasting his rejection of the **transcendental self** with earlier traditions. Sartre argues that there is no enduring core or fixed identity to the human ego; instead, individuals **create themselves** through every thought and action. Utilizing the framework of **phenomenology**, he asserts that consciousness is essentially **intentionality**, a "meaning-giving act" that points toward external objects. This results in a dialectical struggle between the **for-itself** (the conscious self) and the **in-itself** (the objective world), leading to a state of **absolute freedom** where existence precedes essence. Ultimately, Sartre characterizes human life as a continuous **creation ex nihilo**, where the lack of universal structures places the burden of meaning entirely on the individual.

Briefing Document:

The Existential Phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre: The Loss of the Self and Absolute Freedom

Executive Summary

The philosophical system of Jean-Paul Sartre represents a radical departure from 19th-century idealism and traditional Enlightenment thought. Based on the analysis provided by Dr. Arthur Holmes, Sartre's work—specifically in *The Transcendence of the Ego* and *Being and Nothingness*—is characterized by the "loss of the self," the rejection of a transcendental ego, and the prioritization of existence over essence.

Sartre utilizes phenomenology to describe consciousness as nothing more than "intentionality"—a meaning-giving act that points to objects in the world. This leads to a dialectical tension between the *pour-soi* (being-for-itself) and the *en-soi* (being-in-itself). Within this framework, knowledge is not a representation of reality but an

act of making objects present to the consciousness. Consequently, human existence is defined by an absolute, often "dreadful" freedom: because there are no fixed universal structures or divine blueprints, individuals must create their own nature and values through spontaneous, moment-by-moment decisions.

I. The Transcendence of the Ego: Rejecting the Unified Self

Sartre's philosophy begins with a rejection of the traditional "transcendental self"—the idea of a unified, enduring core that remains identical over time.

- **The Loss of the Self:** Sartre argues there is no "unifying core" to the self. Instead, the self is created anew with every act of thought, sense perception, and experience.
 - **Critique of Predecessors:**
 - **Kant and Husserl:** While Kant and Husserl posited a "transcendental I" behind consciousness to light up phenomena, Sartre repudiates this. He claims phenomenology does not need a unifying "I" because consciousness unifies itself by "escaping from itself" toward objects.
 - **Psychology/Behaviorism:** Sartre rejects behavioristic accounts that view the self as a passive product of environmental causes. He aligns more with "depth psychology," viewing emotions as intentional acts directed toward the world.
 - **Consciousness as Intentionality:** Sartre asserts that consciousness is "nothing but intentionality." It is a "meaning-giving act" that attends to and focuses on objects, pulling them into a "phenomenal status."
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II. Phenomenological Structures: Reflective vs. Non-Reflective Consciousness

Sartre distinguishes between different modes of being in the world through his descriptions of how consciousness operates in daily life.

The Modes of Consciousness

Mode	Description	Example from Source
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Non-Reflective	Total absorption in an object or task where the "I" disappears.	Running to catch a streetcar; being "plunged into the world of objects."
Reflective	Consciousness turning back upon itself to observe its own states.	Thinking about oneself running for the streetcar.

- **The "Greased Pig" of the Ego:** Sartre notes that the ego never appears when one looks for it directly. In the non-reflective state, the "I" is annihilated by the object of focus. In the reflective state, the ego appears only "out of the corner of the eye" as a horizon; as soon as the gaze is fixed upon it, it vanishes.
- **Creation *Ex Nihilo*:** Every instant of conscious life is a new existence, not merely a rearrangement of the old. Sartre describes this as a "tireless creation of existence" where the individual ceaselessly escapes their past self to become something new.

III. The Dialectic of Being: *Pour-soi* and *En-soi*

In his magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre develops a systematic dialectic that mirrors the master-servant relationship of Hegel but lacks a final synthesis.

1. **Pour-soi (For-itself):** This is the conscious self. It is "contentless" and has no essence. It finds its identity by "not being" the other. For instance, a master's identity is defined by not being the servant.
2. **En-soi (In-itself):** This is the noumenal object—the thing that simply is, regardless of the self.
3. **Being and Nothingness:** From the perspective of the *pour-soi*, the *en-soi* is "nothing" except what it is "for me." The "nothingness" refers to the gap between the conscious subject and the objective world it intends.

IV. Knowledge and Epistemology

Sartre explicitly rejects the Enlightenment model of representational knowledge.

- **Knowledge as Presence:** Sartre argues that knowing is a mode of being in the world. To know something is to make it "present for me" through an intentional act.
 - **The Rejection of Essence:** Because there are no universals, one cannot have objective intellectual knowledge of a thing's "essence." One only knows what a thing is "for-me."
 - **Anti-Representationalism:** Sartre views representational knowledge as an "invention of philosophers." By following Kant's first critique to its conclusion, Sartre exits the Cartesian framework, asserting that the hyphenated "subject-object" relationship is the only basic given.
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V. Interpersonal Relationships: The "I-It" Dynamic

Sartre's view of human relations is famously pessimistic, characterized by conflict and the "dehumanization" of the other.

- **Conflict and Manipulation:** Because every person is a *pour-soi* trying to make the world "for me," they inevitably treat others as phenomenal objects—or "its." This results in a "clash of opposites" or a "dialectic struggle."
 - **Absence of Synthesis:** Unlike Hegel, who saw potential for an "I-Thou" relationship or synthesis, Sartre sees only "antithesis, antithesis, antithesis."
 - **Literary Illustrations:**
 - **No Exit:** Demonstrates the impossibility of escaping the "for-me" fashion of relating, where characters manipulate or dominate rather than respect one another.
 - **The Flies:** Uses the story of Orestes to show how intentionality "claims" the world (e.g., the palace door becoming "his"), leading to actions that haunt the individual.
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VI. Existential Freedom and the "Death of God"

The central tenet of Sartre's existentialism is that **existence precedes essence**. This has profound implications for freedom and morality.

- **Absolute Freedom:** Without a God to provide a blueprint or a transcendental ego to provide a pre-structured nature, the individual is "absolutely free."
- **The Death of God and Universals:** Sartre expands on Dostoevsky's "If God is dead, everything is permissible" by adding that if there are no universals or fixed structures of the self, anything is possible.
- **Dreadful Freedom:** While earlier Enlightenment and Romantic thinkers celebrated freedom, Sartre views it as "dreadful." It is a heavy burden because every spontaneous act creates a new "you" and carries the weight of potentially "blowing up the entire universe" through choice.
- **Argument for Atheism:** Sartre's commitment to freedom serves as a *modus tollens* argument against the existence of God:
 1. If God exists, absolute freedom is impossible (because the ego would be structured by God).
 2. Absolute freedom (phenomenologically observed) exists.
 3. Therefore, God does not exist.

Study Guide:

A Comprehensive Study Guide to the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre

This study guide provides a detailed overview of the philosophical themes, arguments, and terminology associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, as presented in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It focuses on Sartre's existential phenomenology, his rejection of the transcendental ego, and his radical conception of human freedom.

Section 1: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. What does Sartre mean by the "transcendence of the ego"?
2. How does Sartre's definition of consciousness differ from traditional nineteenth-century philosophy?
3. Explain the significance of Husserl's "intentionality" to Sartre's work.
4. What is the core meaning of the phrase "existence precedes essence"?
5. Define the dialectical relationship between the *pour-soi* (for-itself) and the *en-soi* (in-itself).
6. According to Sartre, why is knowledge not "representational"?
7. How does the example of running for a streetcar illustrate non-reflective consciousness?
8. Why does Sartre characterize the relationship between individuals as an "I-it" rather than an "I-thou" relationship?
9. What does Sartre mean by "creation *ex nihilo*" in the context of the self?
10. How does Sartre connect the "death of God" to the concept of absolute freedom?

Section 2: Quiz Answer Key

1. **What does Sartre mean by the "transcendence of the ego"?** Sartre argues that there is no "transcendental self" or unifying core that possesses an enduring identity. Instead, the ego is "outside" in the world, created anew with every act of thought, sense perception, and experience.
2. **How does Sartre's definition of consciousness differ from traditional nineteenth-century philosophy?** Nineteenth-century philosophy viewed the self as a unified, transcendental consciousness that mirrors reality. Sartre rejects this, stating that consciousness is "nothing but intentionality"—a meaning-giving act that points to objects rather than an internal substance.
3. **Explain the significance of Husserl's "intentionality" to Sartre's work.** Sartre adopts Husserl's idea that consciousness is always directed toward an object (intentionality) but rejects Husserl's later return to a

"transcendental I." For Sartre, intentionality is the sole structure of consciousness, allowing it to transcend itself and unify through its focus on external objects.

4. **What is the core meaning of the phrase "existence precedes essence"?** This principle asserts that for human beings, there is no pre-established blueprint or universal nature. A person first exists in the world and then defines their "essence" or nature through their spontaneous choices and actions.
5. **Define the dialectical relationship between the *pour-soi* (for-itself) and the *en-soi* (in-itself).** The *pour-soi* represents the contentless, conscious self that defines itself by what it is not, while the *en-soi* refers to the "in-itself," or objects that simply are what they are. The dialectic occurs as the *pour-soi* attempts to make the *en-soi* part of its own meaning, often leading to conflict or "negation."
6. **According to Sartre, why is knowledge not "representational"?** Sartre rejects the Enlightenment idea that the mind contains images that represent external things. He argues that knowledge is an act of "intentionality" that makes an object present to the consciousness, meaning we only know things as they exist "for us" (*pour-soi*).
7. **How does the example of running for a streetcar illustrate non-reflective consciousness?** When a person is absorbed in the act of running for a streetcar, their consciousness is entirely focused on the object (the streetcar) and its qualities. In this "non-reflective" state, the "I" or self-awareness disappears because the individual is "plunged into the world of objects."
8. **Why does Sartre characterize the relationship between individuals as an "I-it" rather than an "I-thou" relationship?** Sartre believes we cannot truly know another person's consciousness; we only know them as they exist "for me" as a phenomenal object. This leads to a "one-way street" where others are treated as "its" to be manipulated or dominated, rather than "thous" to be respected.
9. **What does Sartre mean by "creation *ex nihilo*" in the context of the self?** He suggests that every new state of being is created "out of nothing"

because it was not previously contained within the me. Each moment of conscious life is a new existence where the self determines its essence spontaneously without any prior structure.

10. **How does Sartre connect the "death of God" to the concept of absolute freedom?** Sartre follows Dostoevsky's logic that if God (and universal structures) do not exist, "anything is possible." Without a divine creator or a fixed transcendental ego to pre-structure human nature, the individual possesses "dreadful," absolute freedom to create their own values and world.

Section 3: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the following prompts to develop in-depth analytical essays regarding Sartre's philosophical system.

1. **The Rejection of the Transcendental Ego:** Discuss Sartre's critique of Kant, Descartes, and Husserl regarding the existence of a permanent "self." How does his "ego-ology" redefine the self as a product of the world rather than an inhabitant of consciousness?
2. **The Dialectic of Conflict:** Analyze Sartre's view of interpersonal relationships as depicted in *No Exit* and *The Flies*. Explain how the *pour-soi/en-soi* dialectic leads to "alienation" and why Sartre views these interactions as inherently antagonistic.
3. **Phenomenology and Reality:** Explain Sartre's use of phenomenological description (e.g., the streetcar, breaking wood, nausea) to prove the existence of the external world. How does this approach bypass traditional Cartesian doubts about reality?
4. **Absolute Freedom and Its Consequences:** Evaluate the psychological and ethical implications of "dreadful freedom." If "anything is possible" and humans are "tireless creators of existence," what is the impact on the concept of moral responsibility and universal values?
5. **Reflective vs. Non-Reflective Consciousness:** Detailed Sartre's distinction between the two modes of consciousness. Why does Sartre claim that the

ego "vanishes" the moment we attempt to look at it directly through reflection?

Section 4: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Absolute Freedom	The condition of being entirely unconstrained by God, universals, or a fixed ego, allowing for total self-creation.
Creation <i>Ex Nihilo</i>	The "creation out of nothing" that occurs at every instant of conscious life as the self determines its own essence.
Ego-ology	The study of the ego, specifically how it is constituted through actions, states, and qualities in reflective and non-reflective modes.
En-soi (In-itself)	The "noumenal" object or thing that simply is; it is non-conscious and independent of the self's intentionality.
Erelibness	A German term (equivalent to "lived-through-ness") referring to concrete, lived experience rather than abstract theory.
Existence Precedes Essence	The foundational existentialist claim that humans exist first and then define their nature through their actions.
Facticity	The brute facts of our "being in the world" and the context of our existence, often revealed through emotions like nausea.
Intentionality	The structure of consciousness that is always "pointing to" or meaning an object; for Sartre, consciousness <i>is</i> intentionality.
Non-reflective Consciousness	A state of total absorption in an external object or action (e.g., running for a streetcar) where self-awareness is absent.
Phenomenal Object	The object as it appears to consciousness; an object that has been given "meaning" by the act of intentionality.

Pour-soi (For-itself)	The conscious self that is "nothing but intentionality" and defines its being through its relationship to objects and others.
Reflective Consciousness	A mode of consciousness where the "gaze" is turned back upon one's own lived experiences and actions.
Transcendental Ego	A permanent, unifying, and individualizing "I" that sits behind consciousness (a concept rejected by Sartre).
Transcendent Ego	The self as it "rises beyond" what it was, becoming something new through continuous action and intentionality in the world.