SARTRE & EXISTENTIALISM

The Freedom to Live an Authentic Life
Name of theory is derived from Jean Paul Sartre’s claim that:

- “Existence comes before essence. ... man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards.”

(p. 508)
Sartre’s Concept of the Self:

- **Facticity** - the facts that are true about oneself at any given time - includes the fact of one’s existence, past history, experiences and prior choices.

- **Transcendence** - One’s projections into the future and includes one’s ambitions, plans, intentions, hopes, and fantasies. It is what one may chose to do about one’s facticity.
SARTRE’S CONCEPT OF THE SELF:

“One is what one is not, and one is not what one is.” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*)

“It seems that we are our past and future selves, and this is our responsibility; yet we are not identical with our past and future selves. As temporal process, we are always becoming who we are.”

Sartre on “Bad Faith” - Three Instances of How It May Occur

1. Refusing to accept responsibility for the consequences of one’s past choices and actions. “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (p.508)

2. Refusing to accept responsibility for one’s future choices & the possibility of change. “...but he struggles with all his strength against the crushing view that his mistakes constitute for him a destiny.” (Sartre, On Being and Nothingness)

3. Ignoring the factical dimension of every situation (e.g.“I can do anything by just wishing it”). “You are - your life, and nothing else.” (p.514)
“The woman’s date makes a subtle move on her - he grasps her hand - and she doesn’t quite know what to do. She doesn’t want to offend him or to appear to be prudish, but she really doesn’t know whether she wants to have a relationship with him either. So she does nothing. She somehow manages to ‘detach’ herself from the situation, as if her body really doesn’t concern her, and, while he moves in on her, her hand seems not to belong to her at all.” (p.498)
The waiter defines himself solely as a waiter - who does his job well and fully to the extent of his abilities. But he fails to realize that there is more to him than being a waiter. “The waiter has turned himself into a thing, an ‘in itself’ that doesn’t have to choose anymore.” (p.499)
THE AUTHENTIC LIFE

- Sometimes described as the only existentialist virtue
- Is the opposite of “bad faith”
- Involves a sense of living with a clear awareness of the contingency and responsibility for each of one’s choices. *(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*
- For Sartre, it is “one’s relationship to oneself as a person making moral choices.” *(p.483)*
- Excludes choices that oppress or consciously exploit others. *(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*
- Embraces the possibility of change and growth - views life as “a project” or work in progress. *(p.508)*
EXISTENTIALISM AND FREEDOM

- “There are no accidents in life...” (p.496)
“Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness)

“...I cannot ask, ‘Why was I born?’ or curse the day of my birth or declare that I did not ask to be born, for these various attitudes toward my birth...are absolutely nothing else but ways of assuming this birth in full responsibility and of making it mine....Thus in a certain sense I choose being born.” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness)
Sartre argues that even if the deterministic claim that all our actions arise from preexisting causes is true, we’re still radically free and must take responsibility for our choices:

- P1) We must make decisions - even a choice not to choose is still a choice.
- P2) “No amount of information and no number of causal circumstances can ever replace our need to make (choices).” (Solomon, *Introducing Philosophy*, 5th ed., OUP, p.641)
- P3) For ourselves, we do not know how we will decide until we have decided - embedded in the act of choosing is a consciousness of being able to choose otherwise. “...for the action presupposes that there is a plurality of possibilities.” (p.509)

C) “There is no escape from freedom or responsibility.” (Solomon, *Introducing Philosophy*, 5th ed. OUP, p.641)
Sartre on Anguish:

- “When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind - in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility.”  
  (p.509)

- “...in choosing for himself, he chooses for all men.”  
  (p.508)

- Sartre’s example - the military leader knowingly sending soldiers to their possible and even probable death.  
  (p.509)
“...that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw the consequences of his absence right to the end....”

“There can no longer be any good a priori, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it.”

quoting Dostoyevsky, “If God did not exist, everything would be permitted.”

“Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse - We are left alone, without excuse.”

(all quotes - p.509)
So can we at least find comfort in the company of other people, close friends, lovers, or relatives who also have to face hard choices? For Sartre, that presents no real solution; the presence of the Other — another person, different from myself — only reminds me of my absolute responsibility to make choices.” (p.498)
"It answers the question that was tormenting you: my love, you are not 'one thing in my life' - not even the most important - because my life no longer belongs to me because...you are always me."

(Sartre, Lettres)
SARTRE ON THE ABSURD AND “NAUSEA”

- For Sartre, without God, without *a priori* good, life becomes “absurd” and lacks any preset or given meaning or inherent objective value.
- Once we realize that there is no absolute meaning, it is as if we are standing on a precipice, not knowing where the next step is leaving us dizzy in our freedom.
- Nausea occurs when we perceive the arbitrariness of our preconceptions and the illusion of those masques we all wear and see that these are just human constructs - useful but not contingent on the object or person.
- Nausea is the result of realizing the rift between our self- our knowledge and the reality of objects in the world - when we begin to see objects differently and realize that it is not the object changing but ourselves.
Thus for Sartre, any meaning life has is meaning we assign to it - choose for it to have.

The authentic person, therefore, is a person who courageously embraces that freedom to define meaning, understanding that he “...is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does.” (p.509)
“...true authenticity must come from personal choices and not from just following role models” but, “Whatever we choose, even if we think it will concern only ourselves, actually will concern all of humanity, because we are endorsing our action as a general virtue.” (p.498)
From Shakespeare:

“This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as night the day,
Thou can’st not then be false to any man.”
“For the existentialists such as Sartre the concept of authenticity captures the moral value of knowing oneself; it isn’t merely a question of being comfortable with who you are, or even of constantly questioning yourself and your role in life; more important, you must be able to act out of a sense of integrity, and with absence of bad faith, in everything you do.” (p.500)
“WAKING LIFE”

- Robert C. Solomon lectures on Sartre
- https://vimeo.com/35992277