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Annotated Sample of Writing from Philosophy

The following is an academic article from the field of Philosophy. Miami faculty from Philosophy have inserted comments to indicate and explain disciplinary writing conventions in Philosophy.

This sample contains 11 comments. These comments appear within the text of the article and are noted with bold text, brackets [], and the word "comment." The comments always come before the intended annotated area. You can also view these annotations and the original paper in a [Google Doc format](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xDJTf4iFbWv7mXeMpT51K3GBrSWVJGsmYgtobua0qSw/edit?usp=sharing) (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xDJTf4iFbWv7mXeMpT51K3GBrSWVJGsmYgtobua0qSw/edit?usp=sharing).

Annotated Philosophy Paper (Sarte)

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| Introduction (4 comments) |
| <p>[Comment 1: Opening statement gets straight to the point without vague generalities or sweeping historical claims.] In Existentialism Is a Humanism, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that humans act in the world as free agents, choosing an image for themselves—and the rest of humanity—through their actions. [Comment 2: Here the author set up a problem that will be resolved in the paper. Notice the use of "seems" in the first two sentences and "suggests" in the last two sentences, indicating the author is taking a tentative view on how to understand Sartre. Logically speaking, the first two sentences are incompatible with the last two sentences, so the author is showing something must be awry. That's the problem the author will solve! Also, notice the use of logical connectors "it [seems] to follow..." "therefore..." The author is thinking through the logical relation between concepts.] It seems to follow from this claim that to think that social conditions dictate individual choices is to deny human freedom and consequently to be guilty of what Sartre calls “bad faith.” It therefore seems fair to infer that there is no room within a Sartrean account for a critique of institutions such as that forwarded by Angela Davis in Are Prisons Obsolete? However, in Anti-Semite and Jew, Sartre does suggest that the anti-Semite is living in bad faith when they ignore the role that social institutions play in determining our circumstances and our choices. This suggests that Sartre sees human choices as conditioned and our chosen image for ourselves and humanity is not purely a freely chosen endeavor. In this paper, I will explain Sartre’s definition of existentialism and notion of bad faith in order to demonstrate that a recognition of social conditions is in fact a prerequisite for understanding and embracing one’s individual freedom. [Comment 3: Thesis statement that takes a position on the topic that will be supported in the body of the paper.] In this light, I will ultimately argue that the anti-Semite’s perception of the Jew as critiqued by Sartre elucidates the judgment of the criminal and prisons as critiqued by Davis. Moreover, I will argue not only can a Sartrean existentialist make institutional critiques, they must.</p> <p>[Comment 4: "Roadmap" indicating the structure of the argument and laying out the steps the paper will go through.] I will begin by explaining the meaning of “existentialism” and “bad faith” in Sartre’s “Existentialism is a Humanism.” Next, I will explain how Sartre understands anti-Semitism as a passion rather than the result of a free choice. This understanding will provide the framework for my analysis of why Sartre thinks the anti-Semite’s view of the Jew as an individual bad actor is itself in bad faith. I will show how this clarification of Sartre’s philosophy helps to demonstrate how an existentialist can make a critique of social institutions. Specifically I will do so by showing how Angela Davis’ critique of a particular conception of prisons in the United States—in particular the narrow focus on individuals who perpetrate crime without regard to social and institutional problems—is structurally similar to Sartre’s critique of the anti-Semite.</p> |

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| Argument (7 comments) |
| <p>Sartre’s most important claim in “Existentialism is a Humanism” is that existence precedes essence. [Comment 5: Author elucidates a key claim with "this means that."] This means that, as Sartre puts it, “man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself” (22). This claim stands in contrast to previous philosophical doctrines that argued for a pre-existing human nature , that humans’ essence exists before they materialize in the world. Sartre goes on to argue that, since existence does precede essence, then “man is responsible for what he is”, and “in creating the man each of us will ourselves to be, there is not one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be” (24). Thus Sartre concludes that humans are responsible for all humankind. If people fail to realize this responsibility, they are said to be acting in [Comment 6: Definition of a key concept.] bad faith, which is</p> |

essentially a form of self-deception insofar as someone refuses to confront facts or choices that are available to them. Bad faith is a use of one’s freedom to deny one’s freedom. Any inaction still constitutes a choice, and we may judge any human who “takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, [or] is operating in bad faith” (47). These judgements lay the groundwork to the charges Sartre brought against the anti-Semite in Anti-Semite and Jew.

To understand Sartre’s judgment of the anti-Semite, one must first understand that for Sartre anti-Semitism is not an opinion—a word that presupposes the equality of all points of view—**[Comment 7: Use of textual evidence, integrated within the student's own words, to support claims. Includes author's name and page number in parentheses.]** but a passion, which Sartre describes as “a strong emotional bias [that] can give a lightning-like certainty; it alone can hold reason in leash; it alone can remain impervious to experience and last for a whole lifetime” (12). We begin to understand anti-Semites once we understand that they adopted from the very beginning a preconception of the Jew and his disposition. Experience did not engender a negative view of the Jew; in fact, it is quite the opposite. If anti-Semitism is not a result of any external factors, then it is “a free and total choice of oneself” (17). However, anti-Semites are choosing unfreedom insofar as they choose to “live a life of passion rather than one of reason”; they “discharge reason” and make themselves “impenetrable,” closed off to criticism and change (18). As such, the anti-Semite is the epitome of bad faith. Reason can be doubted and uncertain, whereas passion is a state by which to uncritically justify one’s actions. In fear of being alone to bear the responsibility of their choices, anti-Semites choose to hide behind their passions within a group that conveniently constructs for itself “disorder without responsibility” and a worldview of their innate superiority (31). In order to justify their own intrinsic superiority, the anti-Semite makes the Jew inherently bad, “totally free and yet chained to evil” (40).

To avoid the ill-contrived realities of an unequal society, and to avoid responsibility for constructing a new one, anti-Semites “have chosen to explain history by the action of individual wills, not the “play of economic organisms and the interaction of synthetic groups” (37). Unlike the working class who see society “as the product of real forces acting in accordance with rigorous laws,” the anti-Semites—strictly a bourgeois phenomenon, according to Sartre—explain “collective events by the initiative of individuals” (36). The world’s problems, according to the anti-Semite, are not a result of class struggle, imperialism, or clash of interests, but rather a consequence of the Jew and his evil and intentional actions. In their flawed reasoning, once the Evil of “Jewishness” and its negative impact on society is removed, then those unfortunate problems will go away and only Good will remain. **[Comment 8: This sentence highlights a key part of the argument, which tries to resolve a tension in two different parts of Sartre's work.]** We have arrived at a point of tension. Sartre takes issue with this focus on the individual, which may seem confusing at first given his emphasis on the importance of acting out of individual freedom. However, Sartre’s point is that anti-Semites are in bad faith not because they focus on individual choices and actions, but because they do not see their own perspective on those individuals as resulting from an uncritical passion.

While Sartre is more sympathetic to the position of the worker than to that of the bourgeois anti-Semite, ultimately neither has the correct perspective on human action and existence. Sartre takes the position that we are neither completely determined by social and economic factors, nor does individual choice happen independently of social and economic factors. No matter how determined you are by your social position freedom is always a possibility. What passion does is to deny the range of possibilities open to one’s freedom. Individual choice is still a crucial aspect for explaining one’s position in life, and Sartre does argue in Existentialism is a Humanism that “there is no one particular situation or action that fully commits you, one way or the other,” but social and economic institutions delimit a set of opportunities to individuals depending on their given circumstances (39). Environmental factors cannot be removed from the picture. The anti-Semites’ failure to recognize the role of social institutions in conditioning our circumstances and choices puts them in bad faith.

[Comment 9: Indicator of what has been accomplished so far, and its relation to what follows.] With this understanding in place, we can now see how an anti-Semite’s perception of Jews is comparable to the perception of criminals and prisons critiqued by Angela Davis in Are Prisons Obsolete?. Angela Davis questions the validity of prisons as a natural and necessary component of our society, claiming that the expansion of the prison system in the 1980s was in part a consequence of deindustrialization in America. As corporations moved overseas to reap the benefits of cheap labor and fewer regulations, entire communities were left without jobs, leaving “education and other surviving social services” and thus “profoundly affected” (16). The ensuing proliferation of prisons was ostensibly a solution to the economic problems facing these communities and promised to stimulate their redevelopment. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, economic recovery remains to be seen. Davis argues that even though people are aware of the presence of prisons in their lives, “there is a reluctance to face the realities hidden within them” (15). An “impenetrable” conviction, to use Sartre’s language, has been employed in order to avoid the realities prisons produce; Davis argues that “the prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers” (16). **[Comment 10: Pointing out a similarity between two texts that supports the author's argument.]** This sounds a lot like the anti-Semite and the Jew. Acting in bad faith, the anti-Semite chooses to relinquish his ability to reason in favor of the certainty and intensity of his passions. That he no longer feels the precarious nature of truth allows him to blame the Jew for the nefarious realities facing society. Like the Jew, the prisoner is considered intrinsically evil. Only after all the “evildoers” are removed from society can we feel safe and secure in our communities – Good will remain. And like the anti-Semite who views history as a result of individual wills, Americans who focus “myopically on individual criminal conduct and efforts to ‘curb crime’” fail to contemplate the “economic and political structures and ideologies” underlying the prison industrial complex (85). Mass imprisonment has not influenced the crime rates in America, so it is clear that placing more “evildoers” behind bars will not improve the situation. **[Comment 11: Ending with a**

paraphrase of the main argument leading into conclusion. Also connecting Sartre and Davis in another way.] To paraphrase Sartre, we can pass judgement on those people who do not promulgate freedom for all men and justify their views in bad faith. I argue that we can apply these same judgments to Americans who choose to ignore the realities within prisons.

Conclusion (0 comments)

In conclusion, Sartrean existentialism need not deny the impact of social structures and forces. In fact, it requires us to consider social forces when understanding the situation and choices of individual agents. Through an analysis of Sartre’s Anti-Semite and Jew, I have complicated the picture of Sartre as relying only on a philosophy of individual freedom and responsibility. Reading Sartre in conjunction with Angela Davis’ Are Prisons Obsolete?, I have argued for the compatibility of Davis’ critique with Sartre’s critique of anti-Semitism in order to demonstrate the extent to which Sartrean existentialism can (and indeed must) support social and institutional critique.

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