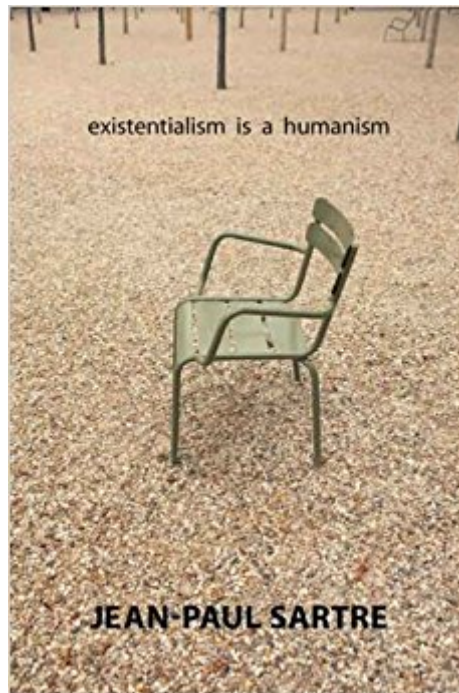




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Existentialism Is A Humanism



Synopsis

It was to correct common misconceptions about his thought that Jean-Paul Sartre, the most dominant European intellectual of the post-World War II decades, accepted an invitation to speak on October 29, 1945, at the Club Maintenant in Paris. The unstated objective of his lecture (‘Existentialism Is a Humanism’) was to expound his philosophy as a form of ‘existentialism,’ a term much bandied about at the time. Sartre asserted that existentialism was essentially a doctrine for philosophers, though, ironically, he was about to make it accessible to a general audience. The published text of his lecture quickly became one of the bibles of existentialism and made Sartre an international celebrity. The idea of freedom occupies the center of Sartre’s doctrine. Man, born into an empty, godless universe, is nothing to begin with. He creates his essence—his self, his being—through the choices he freely makes (‘existence precedes essence’). Were it not for the contingency of his death, he would never end. Choosing to be this or that is to affirm the value of what we choose. In choosing, therefore, we commit not only ourselves but all of mankind. This book presents a new English translation of Sartre’s 1945 lecture and his analysis of Camus’s *The Stranger*, along with a discussion of these works by acclaimed Sartre biographer Annie Cohen-Solal. This edition is a translation of the 1996 French edition, which includes Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre’s introduction and a Q&A with Sartre about his lecture.

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Customer Reviews

This short but extremely clear volume was one of the first opportunities after the war for Sartre to explain to a lay audience his version of Existentialism. It took place on October 29, 1945 when the then already very famous French philosopher was invited to the "Club Maintenant" to "promote literary and intellectual discussion." Sartre used this lecture as an opportunity to settle scores and to set the record straight by answering all his critics at once. They had, among many other charges, leveled the uncomfortable charge that Existentialism showed only the negative and pessimistic side of human nature, and therefore as a philosophy (concerned mostly with abandonment, anguish and anxiety), was thus itself very much devoid of humanity. Sartre took these charges rather personally and to better make his points, pitched the lecture to the least sophisticated of the audience. What results is a beautifully articulated and clearly translated formulation of Sartre's basic philosophy. He answers his critics with a biting flourish, in what is not only a clear exposition, but also a penetratingly coherent piece. To wit: Existence precedes essence, and in any case is arbitrary. In this world, man is defined by the choices he makes and by his commitments to those choices. He does not define himself prior to his existence and exists only in the present, well beyond any concept of natural determinism. In Sartre's view, there is no human nature superior to that described here. In short, there is no God; we have been abandoned to our fate. That point however should not be misconstrued as that Existentialism is only about Atheism. It simply affirms that even if a God existed, it would make no difference to our humanity.

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