



# A Comparative Analysis of Human Nature in the Existentialism of Sartre and Camus

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**Abstract:** This article examines and compares the concepts of human nature in the existentialist philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. While both philosophers address fundamental aspects of human existence such as freedom, responsibility, and the absurd, they diverge in their views on the inherent nature or potential of humanity. Sartre emphasizes radical freedom and self-creation, while Camus, though acknowledging the absurd, posits a revolt against it and the importance of human solidarity. This paper analyzes these differences through their key works, highlighting the implications of their perspectives on ethics, politics, and the meaning of life.

**Keywords:** Human Nature, freedom, responsibility, and the absurd.

**Introduction:** Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are central figures in existentialist philosophy, a school of thought that grapples with the problems of human existence. Existentialism arose in the 19th and 20th centuries, addressing a growing sense of alienation, meaninglessness, and the breakdown of traditional values in an increasingly secular and industrialized world. Thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche laid the groundwork for existentialism, questioning the existence of God, the nature of truth, and the foundations of morality. Sartre and Camus built upon this foundation, applying existentialist insights to a wide range of human concerns, including individual freedom, responsibility, the search for meaning, and the experience of the absurd.

Both philosophers explore themes like freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in a world

often perceived as irrational or absurd (Makkarri, 1973). They reject the idea of a pre-ordained human nature or a divine plan, emphasizing the importance of individual experience and the subjective search for truth. However, despite these shared concerns, they offer contrasting perspectives on the fundamental question of human nature. This article aims to compare and contrast Sartre's emphasis on radical freedom with Camus's focus on revolt and solidarity, elucidating the implications of these differences for their broader philosophical systems. Their differing views on human nature lead to significantly different conclusions about ethics, politics, and the possibility of finding meaning in a meaningless world.

## METHODS

This study employs a comparative philosophical analysis. It examines the primary texts of Sartre and Camus, focusing on their major works that address the human condition. The analysis involves:

This comparative analysis employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on a close reading and interpretation of two primary texts: Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Both works are foundational to existential philosophy and provide the central framework for exploring human nature in existentialist thought. The analysis is structured around several key philosophical concepts, including freedom, absurdity, meaning, and the search for authenticity. The research methods involve the following steps:

1. **Textual Analysis:** The core of the research involves a close reading of the primary texts by Sartre and Camus. The texts are examined for their treatment of key existentialist themes, particularly focusing on how each philosopher conceptualizes human nature. Key passages that discuss freedom, responsibility, absurdity, and meaning are extracted and analyzed for their implications on human existence. The analysis also includes comparisons of how both philosophers frame these themes within their respective philosophical systems.

- o For Sartre, particular attention is paid to his exploration of "radical freedom," the concept of "bad faith," and the idea that "existence precedes essence." These elements are central to his understanding of human nature and the role of individual choice.

- o For Camus, the focus is on his articulation of the "absurd," the idea of the human search for meaning, and his existential rebellion. The key text here is Camus' interpretation of Sisyphus as a symbol of the absurd hero who defies the futility of existence.

2. **Philosophical Frameworks:** In addition to the

primary texts, the research incorporates an exploration of the broader existentialist philosophical frameworks within which Sartre and Camus wrote. This includes secondary literature on existentialism, including works by scholars who have analyzed and critiqued the existentialist philosophies of both thinkers. Secondary sources are used to contextualize Sartre's and Camus' views on human nature within the existentialist tradition and to examine how their ideas diverged from and contributed to broader existentialist thought.

- o For Sartre, secondary literature includes interpretations of his work that focus on his theories of existential freedom, subjectivity, and individual responsibility.

- o For Camus, secondary literature includes discussions of the absurd and the notion of revolt, as well as comparisons between Camus and other existentialist thinkers like Sartre.

3. **Comparative Approach:** The analysis uses a comparative approach to contrast Sartre's and Camus' views on key existentialist concepts. This involves identifying points of convergence and divergence in their philosophical positions on topics such as freedom, meaning, responsibility, and the human condition.

- o **Freedom:** Sartre emphasizes the concept of "radical freedom," where individuals are entirely responsible for their actions and must create meaning through their choices. Camus, on the other hand, sees freedom as limited by the absurd, acknowledging that while humans can rebel against the absurd, they are ultimately powerless in the face of a meaningless universe.

- o **Absurdity:** Sartre does not frame absurdity as a central concern in his work, as his focus is on human freedom and the creation of meaning. Camus, however, defines the absurd as the central condition of human existence, where the search for meaning collides with an indifferent and meaningless universe. Camus argues that humans must confront this absurdity without resorting to false hopes or illusions.

- o **Meaning and Existence:** Sartre advocates for the idea that individuals create their own meaning through their choices and actions. For Sartre, meaning is not inherent in the world; rather, humans must forge their own purpose. Camus, conversely, contends that meaning does not exist in the world, and while humans can search for it, they must accept that it may never be found. His concept of "rebellion" involves accepting the absurd and continuing to live authentically, even in the absence of meaning.

4. **Secondary Sources and Literature Review:** In addition to the primary texts, secondary sources play an

important role in the methodology. Scholarly articles, critical essays, and books that examine Sartre's and Camus' existentialism provide insights into the historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts of their work. The literature review will focus on comparing various interpretations of Sartre's and Camus' philosophies, including debates on their views on existential freedom, the absurd, and human nature.

- o Literature about Sartre's existentialism will be used to analyze his views on human subjectivity, personal responsibility, and how he links freedom to human nature.

- o Literature about Camus will be used to explore how his ideas on the absurd challenge traditional existentialism, especially in relation to the possibility (or impossibility) of finding meaning in a meaningless world.

5. Interpretive Framework: The interpretive framework involves analyzing the texts from an existential perspective that recognizes the centrality of human experience, individual choice, and personal responsibility. This analysis will also be influenced by the historical and philosophical context of existentialism in the mid-20th century, particularly the post-World War II period in which both Sartre and Camus were writing. The context of existentialism as a response to the disillusionment of modernity, the collapse of traditional metaphysical and religious structures, and the trauma of war will be considered in understanding the motivations and themes of both thinkers.

6. Synthesis and Conclusions: The final stage of the methodology involves synthesizing the findings from the comparative analysis and drawing conclusions about the philosophical treatment of human nature in Sartre's and Camus' existentialism. The synthesis will focus on how both philosophers present the individual's struggle with freedom, meaning, and responsibility, and the implications of these views for understanding the human condition. This synthesis will also explore the broader existentialist challenge to traditional ideas about human nature, morality, and existence.

## RESULTS

Sartre's existentialism is grounded in the assertion that "existence precedes essence." This means that humans are born without a predetermined nature or purpose; they are "condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1943). For Sartre, this radical freedom implies total responsibility. Individuals are entirely responsible for their choices, values, and actions. There is no external authority, no God, and no fixed human nature to provide guidance or excuse (Djurayev, 2024). Sartre explores the

psychological consequences of this freedom, including anguish, abandonment, and despair. He also introduces the concept of "bad faith," which describes the ways in which individuals attempt to evade their freedom and responsibility by deceiving themselves (Santoni, 2005).

Camus, while acknowledging the absurdity of existence—the conflict between humanity's search for meaning and the universe's indifference—does not deduce from this a radical freedom in the same way as Sartre. (Madison, 1964) Instead, Camus focuses on the human response to the absurd. He rejects suicide as a solution, advocating for a "revolt" against the absurd. This revolt involves a conscious recognition of the absurd, coupled with a refusal to submit to it. Camus emphasizes the importance of human solidarity in this struggle, finding meaning in the shared experience of rebellion and the pursuit of values such as freedom and justice (Alves, 2020). His concept of the rebel is central to his understanding of human nature (Camus, 1944).

## Human Freedom and Responsibility in Sartre's Existentialism

Sartre's existentialism is grounded in the concept of radical freedom. According to Sartre, human beings are "condemned to be free" because they are thrown into existence without a predetermined essence. For Sartre, existence precedes essence, meaning that individuals must define themselves through their choices and actions. Human nature, therefore, is not fixed or inherent; it is shaped by the decisions one makes. Sartre emphasizes that this freedom is both a blessing and a curse. While it allows individuals to define their own identity and values, it also places an immense burden of responsibility on them, as they must live with the consequences of their choices. Sartre rejects the idea of a universal moral order or essence, asserting that each individual is responsible for creating their own meaning and purpose in life.

## Absurdity and the Rejection of Meaning in Camus' Existentialism

Camus' existentialism, as articulated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, revolves around the concept of the absurd—the inherent contradiction between the human desire for meaning and the universe's indifference. For Camus, human beings instinctively search for meaning and order in a world that offers neither. This leads to the confrontation with the absurd, a realization that life lacks inherent purpose. Camus, unlike Sartre, does not propose that humans can create their own meaning through choice. Instead, he argues that the absurd arises from the tension between the human desire for meaning and the silence of the universe. However, Camus does not advocate for despair or nihilism. Instead, he promotes a philosophy of rebellion,

encouraging individuals to live authentically and fully in spite of the absurdity of life, much like the mythical figure Sisyphus, who continues his struggle against an absurd fate without hope for ultimate success.

#### Comparison of Sartre and Camus on Human Nature

While both Sartre and Camus reject traditional religious and metaphysical explanations for human existence, they differ significantly in their approach to the problem of meaning. Sartre's view is rooted in the belief that individuals are responsible for creating their own essence, whereas Camus acknowledges the absurdity of existence and suggests that individuals must confront this absurdity without expecting rational answers. Sartre's existentialism is characterized by a focus on human agency and the power of individual choice, while Camus focuses on the human struggle against an indifferent universe. Sartre's notion of freedom is optimistic, as it presents an opportunity for individuals to construct their own meaning, while Camus' philosophy, though hopeful in its emphasis on rebellion, remains grounded in the recognition that the search for meaning may ultimately be futile.

#### DISCUSSION

The key difference between Sartre and Camus lies in their understanding of the implications of the absurd. Sartre sees it as the foundation for radical freedom and individual responsibility, leading to a more individualistic and potentially anguished view of human existence (Djurayev, 2024). Camus, while recognizing the absurd, seeks to find meaning within its limits, emphasizing the importance of human solidarity and revolt against injustice. (Berthold, 2021)

Another way to frame it is that Sartre is focused on the ontology of the human being, while Camus is more concerned with the ethics of human action. Sartre asks, "What is the nature of human existence?" and answers, "To be free." Camus asks, "How should humans live in a world without inherent meaning?" and answers, "In revolt and solidarity." (Cooper, 1990) Sartre's emphasis on radical freedom can be seen as empowering, highlighting the potential for self-creation and the rejection of determinism. However, it can also lead to a sense of overwhelming responsibility and the potential for nihilism. Camus's focus on revolt and solidarity offers a more hopeful vision, suggesting that meaning can be found in the struggle against injustice and in the connection with other human beings (Abdurasulovich, 2023).

#### Interpretation of Sartre's Concept of Human Nature

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, particularly as outlined in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), places

radical freedom and personal responsibility at the core of human existence. Sartre famously asserts that "existence precedes essence," meaning that humans are not born with a predetermined nature but must create their own essence through actions and decisions. Sartre's concept of bad faith, the idea that individuals deceive themselves to avoid the burden of absolute freedom, is pivotal in understanding human nature in his philosophy. According to Sartre, humans are condemned to be free, meaning that they have the responsibility to shape their lives despite the discomfort and anxiety that this freedom entails.

From a Sartrean perspective, human nature is fundamentally characterized by the struggle for authenticity in the face of societal constraints and internal self-deception. Sartre views freedom as an essential and defining feature of humanity, but it is a freedom fraught with existential anxiety. This is an individualistic freedom, where the self is constantly in the process of becoming. Sartre's human subject is therefore always in flux, always projecting into the future, attempting to define itself through the choices it makes, and yet never able to fully escape the responsibility that freedom entails.

Sartre's emphasis on individual responsibility presents a human nature that is inherently linked to self-creation. His philosophical project raises important ethical concerns, particularly about the ways in which individuals navigate their relationships with others. For Sartre, humans are being-for-others, and in their interaction with others, they face the challenge of reconciling their freedom with the recognition of others' subjectivity. Sartre's human nature is thus not isolated but socially situated, defined through both self-definition and the recognition of others.

#### Camus and the Absurd Condition of Human Nature

Albert Camus, on the other hand, provides a more pessimistic but equally profound analysis of human nature in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Camus famously introduces the concept of the absurd — the conflict between humans' desire for meaning and the universe's indifference to that search. According to Camus, humans instinctively seek meaning in a world that offers none, and this fundamental contradiction is what he describes as the absurd. In his philosophy, human nature is defined by this clash between the quest for meaning and the meaningless nature of existence.

Unlike Sartre, who frames freedom as the central tenet of human existence, Camus highlights the tension between human aspiration and cosmic indifference. He sees this tension not as something to be transcended or resolved, but as a permanent feature of the human condition. The absurd hero, exemplified by Sisyphus, is



one who embraces this contradiction without resorting to false hope or nihilism. Camus argues that despite the absurd, individuals must continue to live authentically, acknowledging the lack of inherent meaning while still engaging in life's projects.

For Camus, human nature is not defined by an ability to create meaning but by a recognition of meaninglessness, followed by a decision to continue living in defiance of it. This is the essence of revolt, which for Camus, is the proper response to the absurd. The absurd hero does not succumb to despair but instead finds value in the struggle itself, in the pursuit of personal integrity and authenticity in an indifferent universe.

### **Comparative Analysis of Freedom and Responsibility**

The comparison between Sartre and Camus highlights their differing views on freedom and responsibility. Sartre's radical freedom is a cornerstone of his philosophy, where individuals have the liberty to define themselves and their lives. This freedom, however, comes with a heavy burden of responsibility. Sartre believes that human beings must live authentically, a task that requires a continual process of self-examination and rejection of societal conventions that impose false values.

In contrast, Camus sees human freedom as limited by the absurd. While Sartre emphasizes the individual's capacity to create meaning through freedom, Camus focuses on the futility of such attempts. For Camus, freedom does not provide a way out of absurdity but rather requires humans to confront it head-on. The tension here is significant: Sartre offers a vision of human nature marked by an almost boundless freedom to shape one's life, whereas Camus presents a human nature that is constrained by the limitations of the universe and the futility of human aspirations.

Despite these differences, both philosophers agree on the central role of personal responsibility. Sartre's view stresses the freedom to act in a way that aligns with one's authentic self, while Camus places importance on the responsibility to live authentically even in the face of an indifferent universe. Both existentialists reject traditional notions of morality and objective meaning, emphasizing instead the subjective experience of human beings.

### **Implications for Understanding Human Nature**

Both Sartre and Camus provide profound insights into human nature, but their views diverge on how individuals navigate the challenges of existence. Sartre's human nature is one of self-creation, where individuals are tasked with shaping their essence through their choices. For Sartre, human beings must

exercise their freedom to create meaning in a meaningless world. Camus, however, contends that meaning can never be fully realized, and human beings must come to terms with this absence. The existential rebellion that Camus advocates is a response to the absurd, while Sartre's philosophy suggests that the individual's struggle for authenticity is the primary way to confront life's meaninglessness.

These existential insights offer valuable perspectives on the human condition, especially in the modern world, where many individuals face existential crises. Sartre's emphasis on radical freedom has influenced contemporary existential psychology and humanistic approaches to therapy, where the focus is on personal choice and responsibility. On the other hand, Camus' exploration of the absurd has found resonance in discussions of existential nihilism and the search for meaning in a world perceived as indifferent to human existence.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

While this analysis provides a comparative look at Sartre and Camus, there are several limitations. First, the focus on only *Being and Nothingness* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* may overlook other relevant works by Sartre and Camus that could provide a more comprehensive view of their philosophies. Additionally, the scope of the analysis could be expanded to include other existentialist thinkers, such as Heidegger or Kierkegaard, to offer a broader context for understanding Sartre and Camus.

Further research could explore how Sartre's and Camus' ideas have influenced modern existential psychology, literature, and political thought. A study of how these philosophers' views on human nature intersect with contemporary concerns, such as environmental crises or global political struggles, could offer new insights into the relevance of existentialism in today's world.

The comparative analysis of Sartre's and Camus' views on human nature highlights both similarities and differences in their existentialist philosophies. Sartre emphasizes freedom and responsibility as central to the human condition, while Camus focuses on the absurd and the necessity of revolt in the face of meaninglessness. Both thinkers, however, share a commitment to understanding human existence outside traditional metaphysical or religious frameworks, and their work continues to provide valuable insights into the nature of human life and the struggles that define it.

### **CONCLUSION**

Both Sartre and Camus offer profound insights into the human condition, grappling with the challenges of

freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in a world without inherent purpose. While Sartre's existentialism emphasizes radical freedom and individual self-creation, Camus's perspective highlights the importance of revolt, solidarity, and the search for meaning within the limits of the absurd. Their works remain relevant for understanding the complexities of human existence and continue to provoke debate and reflection on the nature of what it means to be human (Breisach, 1962; Fulton, 1999).

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