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Understanding what consists of a human's essence is a difficult task, being that there are hundreds of philosophers who have different opinions and perceptions on the matter. Some believe that our bodies are insignificant to our essence, others believe that our essence is dependent on our physical bodies. However, the 20th-century existentialist philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir provide their perspectives on how our essence materializes itself in the world and within ourselves. In the piece *Existentialism is a Humanism* by Jean-Paul Sartre, Sartre claims that existentialism argues how existence precedes essence and represents an atheistic perspective on existentialism, and in her piece *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir makes the claim that societal perceptions of gender having an essence is false and that there are no essential aspects of gender that influence the human existence.

Sartre makes his initial claims in defending existentialism from misconceptions surrounding the philosophy early in this piece. His claim that "Their belief that existence precedes essence; or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be our point for departure," argues how human essence isn't present immediately as we enter the world, but it develops with our understanding of life (Sartre 20). He further develops this claim by arguing that humans are different from inanimate objects with a starting essence because we have no given purpose when we're created but we discover our essence through our choices, and thus our existence occurs before our essence is formed. Sartre's claim makes the argument that one will be one they make of themselves, and that truly encapsulates his philosophy of existentialism, "Man first exists: he

materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself.” (Sartre 22).

Sartre’s explanation of existentialism is further broken down by how the choices one makes affect their understanding and perception of the world around them. To understand Sartre’s claim that the choices made by one man are choices for all of humanity, you must understand the three pillars upon which existentialism is built: anguish, abandonment, and despair. First, he introduces how man is in anguish. In development, a man who recognizes that he isn’t only the individual he makes choices for, he is also a legislator in choosing what humanity should be through his actions. This only causes him to become self-aware of his responsibilities to and role in the universe, which is a condition of acting on or making choices. This concept means that everyone is responsible for the choices they make and for humanity. Every choice they make is inherently advocating for a broader moral code; their actions should be universalizable. Shifting to the concept of abandonment, Sartre argues that there is no external force to tell one how they should live their life and that they make that choice on their own. Sartre concludes that the belief in a god at the beginning of life takes away for one to construct their essence because they believe their life already has a higher meaning. The issue with the belief in a God is that humans then assume their essence without coming to that conclusion by themselves or with their discovery. In abandoning the aspect of a god in life and accepting to live a free life, one can recognize that their choices are what they make of life, “man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does,” (Sartre 29). And finally, understanding despair is understanding that you are not in control of the world; you are only in control of your actions. One must understand that there are no guarantees about how the future will play out and that they shouldn’t be dependent on the trust of others or trust in the universe, because they are

unreliable. In understanding these inevitable aspects of human life, Sartre unfolds his perception of how the choices made by a man are choices made for humanity.

To extend Sartre's emphasis on choice-making about existentialism, he provides the analogy of morality and art. He does so by relating freedom of choice that we all have the option to create a product through our artistic lens. Every choice we make in life is comparable to a brushstroke made by an artist on a painting and how they do not have any insight as to what they should paint on their blank canvas, nor do they have a predetermined picture to base their painting off. Nevertheless, we cannot judge what the artist does with his blank canvas until we can appreciate the full picture, because each brush stroke alone contributes to the full work of art rather than being recognized on its own. The relation to morality is that one shouldn't be given guidance in finding their morals because their choices in life contribute to their larger understanding or conception of personal morality.

In de Beauvoir's existentialist take on the essence, she explores the essential qualities of gender. In her claims made in the piece *The Second Sex*, she argues that there is no essence or essential qualities to gender. From her understanding, society perceived gender as having an essence: having an influence on the actions and choices you make in a day, having an influence on how you approach life, etc., "Woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature," (de Beauvoir 21). She claims this concept of gender was false because there are no essential aspects of gender that influence or determine who you should be, and that concept of gender having an essence is a result of the emphasis on gender roles in society. To her understanding, gender biologically and sociologically does not put any limits on the choices one can make in their life, and that gender does not cause restrictions in certain aspects of life.

Shifting from the previous claim of de Beauvoir, her argument that men have been socialized as self/subject and women as object/other is centered around the same issue as the previous: gender roles being historically enforced. She argues that men are seen as the 'norm' and women are seen as the 'other' in society, because there often tends to be an outcast when presented with other's success, and women, unfortunately, fall behind in the position of the other, "Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another," (de Beauvoir 22). Men are treated as 'Self' and women are subject to treatment as Other/Object, this is because men perceive themselves as the center of the world and women are there to support their identity and aspirations rather than to have their own. Men are identified as both the neutral and the positive in society, woman is the opposite of what men portray themselves, which is stereotypically strong, dominant, etc., therefore women are portrayed as negative. She claims that socially we must break past the outdated social norms that have been passed on for generations to be able to recognize that gender is unessential to your life and personality. Sexism and other forms of inequality often don't work in a purely 'us vs. them' form, we all reinforce gender roles and actions in our everyday interactions which allows for the normalization of these '-isms', and there won't be a change in these attitudes towards women until there is a cultural change is what de Beauvoir's main criticisms of society's perception of the 'self/other', "If a woman seems to be the inessential that never becomes essential, it is because she fails to bring about this change," (de Beauvoir 25). Her argument of gender roles not existing in our essence is proved by the surfacing of non-binary presence in society today. Being that when one is non-binary, they don't fit into the roles of 'self' or 'other' in this aspect of life, they are defying the stereotypical norms

that are harmful to establishing essence, and to be non-binary is to be freeing oneself from the gender roles in de Beauvoir's philosophies.

I agree with Sartre's claim that humans don't have a broad understanding of how they're supposed to exist before they've conceptualized the world around them. Sartre argues that humans don't have human nature, and instead humans mimic how others act in life and use their observations to make decisions for themselves, which falls in line with what I believe to be true of human essence. To my understanding, humans act the way they do because it's a learned trait, and in observing our surroundings and the mannerisms of other humans from infancy to adulthood, humans gain a sense of 'human nature', but not because it's something ingrained into their DNA. I agree with this claim fully regarding de Beauvoir's argument that gender is an aspect of life without essence. In my personal experience in life, I have never felt that there was anything ingrained in me that forced me to act in a feminine way, it was always just society telling me how I should act to be perceived as feminine, but without those learned traits I would lack the ability to be perceived as a certain gender. The same goes for masculine elements of my life too, if I engaged in activities that fell on the 'opposite' side of the gender spectrum, I was told I was being a 'tomboy', whereas I only recognized that I was enjoying an activity, unaware of any gendered connotations that may have gone along with it.

In the piece *Existentialism is a Humanism* by Jean-Paul Sartre, Sartre claims that existentialism seeks to conceptualize how existence precedes essence and his philosophy provides or represents an atheistic perspective on existentialism. Meanwhile, existential philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in her novel *The Second Sex* claims that societal perceptions of gender having an essence is false and that there are no essential aspects of gender that influence human existence.

Works Cited

Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex (Vintage Feminism Short Edition)*. Random House, 2015.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Yale University Press, 2007.