

The Burden of Freedom

A FAKE Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre on Existentialism, Responsibility, and the Post-War Mind (AI Generated)

By Richard Freeman (RF)

RF You have famously written that man is “condemned to be free.” To the ordinary person, freedom sounds like a gift, a release, or a supreme privilege. Why do you view it so paradoxically as a condemnation? If freedom is our natural state, why should it feel like a sentence rather than a liberation?

JPS It is a condemnation because man did not create himself, yet is nevertheless entirely at liberty. From the moment he is thrown into this world, he is fully responsible for everything he does. There are no signs in the world to guide him, no divine scripts, no absolute moral frameworks written in the sky, and no human nature to rely upon as a blueprint. We are left entirely alone, without excuses. Every action you take, every choice you make, and even every choice you avoid making carves out exactly who you are.

The weight of this total, unavoidable responsibility causes what we call **angst** or existential anxiety. You cannot blame your upbringing, your genetics, your psychological complexes, or your socioeconomic circumstances for your life, because you ultimately choose how to act upon them and what meaning to assign to them. To realize that you are the sole author of your destiny is not a comforting thought. It means that if your life fails, or if you make a catastrophic choice, you have no one to point to but yourself.

RF But surely people find necessary comfort and stability in institutional roles. A waiter behaves like a waiter, a politician behaves like a politician, and a parent behaves like a parent. Is that not a functional and natural way to navigate society? If we abandon these social structures and behavioral expectations, do we not risk total social chaos and psychological collapse?

JPS It is undeniably common and functional for society, yes, but it is what I call **mauvaise foi** (bad faith). When the waiter plays the “role” of a waiter too perfectly, moving with rigid, exaggerated precision, he is trying to turn himself into an object, a machine, or an inkwell. He is hiding from his own freedom. He pretends he has no choice but to be a waiter, treating a temporary social function as if it were an immutable law of physics.

We engage in this collective theater because facing our absolute freedom is terrifying. It is much easier to pretend we are trapped by our jobs, our titles,

or our social expectations than to admit we choose to stay in them and recreate them every single day. Bad faith is the lie we tell ourselves to escape the burden of choice. True authenticity requires acknowledging that you are always more than your role, and that at any moment, you possess the terrifying power to walk away from it.

RF If we accept that roles are examples of bad faith, how does one actually function in daily life? We must still work, communicate, and interact within a structured society. Is it possible to fulfill these social roles without slipping into bad faith, or does the very act of participating in civilization force us into a state of perpetual self-deception?

JPS The distinction lies not in **what** you do, but in **how** you view your relationship to the action. An authentic individual can still serve tables, practice law, or govern a nation. However, they do so with the constant, acute awareness that their role does not define their essence. They recognize that they are **choosing** to play the part at every moment, and that they retain the freedom to stop playing it. They do not say, "I have no choice but to go to work today."

Slipping into bad faith occurs when you use the role as a shield to deny your agency. When you rely on the role to make decisions for you, you abdicate your personhood. To live authentically within society means maintaining a permanent internal distance from your social function. You are a free consciousness who happens to be performing a task, not an object designed solely to execute that task.

RF Critics often accuse your philosophy of being bleak, nihilistic, and even paralyzing. If there is no inherent meaning to life, no objective morality, and no cosmic purpose, why bother doing anything at all? How does your philosophy prevent a person from slipping into total despair, apathy, or moral irresponsibility?

JPS On the contrary, existentialism is an optimistic and profoundly liberating doctrine. It is, above all else, a philosophy of radical action. If meaning is not handed down to you by God, nature, or society, it means you possess the absolute power and dignity to create it yourself. Existence precedes essence. You exist first, and then it is entirely up to you to define what your life means through the projects you choose to engage in.

Your life has exactly the value that you choose to give it. You are nothing other than your lived experience; you are the sum total of your actions, your choices, and your commitments. Far from being a license for moral irresponsibility, this philosophy demands the highest form of ethical awareness. When you choose a path, you are not just choosing for yourself, you are affirming that path as valuable

for all of humanity. It is an urgent, uncompromising call to live authentically, discard your excuses, and build a meaningful life through direct action.

RF Your concept of radical freedom sounds noble in theory, but does it not ignore the harsh realities of human limitation? A person born into extreme poverty, slavery, or physical paralysis cannot simply choose to change their world. Is it not cruel and intellectually dishonest to tell someone who is systematically oppressed that they are completely free and entirely responsible for their situation?

JPS This is a frequent misunderstanding of what I mean by freedom. I do not mean that a person can arbitrarily wish for something and instantly achieve it. That is omnipotence, not freedom. Every human being exists within a specific **facticity**—the unchosen facts of our existence, such as our birthplace, historical era, physical body, and social restrictions. These conditions are real, and they heavily restrict our field of possibilities.

However, freedom is not defined by the number of options available to you; it is defined by your **attitude** and your **choice of project** in the face of those options. Even a prisoner retains the freedom to decide how to live his imprisonment. Will he resist, will he despair, will he cooperate, or will he plot an escape? The oppressor can control a man's body, but they cannot dictate what the man makes of that control. We are always free to choose what our circumstances mean to us, and how we project ourselves into the future from where we stand.

RF If there are no absolute moral laws and we must invent our own values, how do we avoid falling into a state of pure moral relativism where any atrocity can be justified? If a person authentically chooses a project that harms or oppresses others, on what philosophical grounds can you condemn their actions as wrong or evil?

JPS While it is true that value is created by human choice, freedom is the ultimate foundation of all values. When I recognize my own freedom, I realize that it is inextricably bound up with the freedom of others. I cannot make my own freedom my goal without simultaneously making the freedom of others my goal. To actively choose to oppress another human being is a fundamental contradiction of the existential truth; it is an act of bad faith because it treats human freedom as an object to be conquered.

Therefore, we can absolutely pass moral judgment. An action is wrong if it seeks to hide from freedom or deny the freedom of others. When a person chooses their path, they are committing not just themselves, but all of humanity. You must always ask: "What would happen if everyone acted this way?" If you rely

on a lie or an act of oppression to sustain your choice, you are acting in bad faith, and you are intellectually and morally cowardly.

RF You place immense emphasis on the individual, but human beings are inherently social creatures. Your descriptions of interpersonal relationships often sound deeply adversarial, famously stating that “hell is other people.” Is a genuinely loving, cooperative, and non-coercive relationship even possible in your philosophical framework, or are we doomed to perpetually struggle against the gaze of the Other?

JPS The phrase “hell is other people” is frequently misunderstood as a statement of misanthropy, but it actually describes the agonizing mechanics of the human gaze. When another consciousness looks at me, they turn me into an object in their world. They judge me, categorize me, and define me by their own terms, stripping away my subjective control over my own identity. This dynamic naturally creates a conflict, as each person attempts to reclaim their subjectivity by objectifying the other.

Yet, authentic relationships are possible, though they require immense effort. True love or meaningful cooperation occurs when two individuals acknowledge this tension and consciously choose to respect each other’s freedom rather than try to possess or absorb it. It means looking at the Other not as a tool or a threat to your autonomy, but as another free agent whose existence validates and enriches your own. It is a fragile equilibrium, but it is the only foundation for true community.