

PHIL 3024: Existentialism
T. Parent
Final Project: Sartre prompt

On the first day of class, I had you write on the following two questions.

1. What is your dream? More precisely, what do you want to do with the rest of your life? (Avoid vague cop-outs like 'be happy', 'be successful', 'be a good person'. Be as detailed as you can.)
2. In general, what is the most valuable sort of life? (Again, be detailed.)

For the final project, I want you to consider how various existentialists would respond to your answers. Here is the prompt for you to discuss what Sartre might say.

1. Many people will say that it is part of their dream, or part of the best sort of life, to be in a long-term loving (romantic) relationship. (Merely for simplicity's sake, I shall speak as if such an LTR is monogamous, but feel free to relax that assumption as need be.) Yet there is a tension concerning the *value* of relationships with others, and the tension arises in relation to Sartre especially. On the one hand, Sartre seemed to value his LTR with Simone de Beauvoir; also, he speaks in positive terms about love in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*. (Cf. Hazel Barnes' discussion of Sartre on love, in the last pages of her piece in the Solomon anthology.) But on the other hand, Sartre is (in)famous for suggesting that "Hell is other people" (= the last line of *No Exit*). He describes how the Other erodes my *freedom*; the Other superimposes a *structure* onto my being, where I become a "teacher" vs. "student," a "woman" vs. "man," or even a "good listener" vs. "good leader," and so on... But really, Sartre thinks *authentic* being is living in the recognition that I exist suspended between numerous possibilities for what I might be. Yet the Other destroys authentic being by categorizing me in various ways.

Less abstractly, being in an LTR amounts to a *severe limit* on one's freedom, and not just in limiting your love life to one specific person (to the exclusion of others). As Sartre implies, it also means subjecting yourself to *expectations* imposed upon you by the other. For instance, you must become *predictable* and *safe* in certain ways, if the other person is to trust you enough to become emotionally intimate (vulnerable) with you. This means you must regularly *resist* doing or saying what you *really* want, simply because the other person *expects* it of you. Naturally, if you are not *committed* to the other person in an LTR, you can simply leave them. But in a n LTR, you are supposed to *remain* with the person regardless, and continue to *care about* that person more than anyone else—more than even yourself!

Given all that, why is being in an LTR desirable? Note that it's not enough to say that you don't want to be lonely. After all, you can be lonely even while in an LTR, and you can also avoid loneliness without being in an LTR. Is it really just a non-rational drive (which may not necessarily be bad)? Or is there an adequate rationale for such a thing?