

The Burden of Self-Creation: On Sartre's Notion of Anguish in Contemporary Technological Life

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Abstract: The existentialist thought of Jean-Paul Sartre contends that the human individual is free to carve the path they so desire, rather than be born with meaning. However, authentic freedom is accompanied with a haunting responsibility, one of which consists of anguish, abandonment, and despair. This paper examines Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of *angoisse*, or anguish, as one of the emotional conditions of existentialism primarily through his *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*, with supplementing through scholarly existential works, and briefly other Sartrean works. Exploring his various literature would aid in conceptually discussing anguish as an inevitable, existential thought, and contextualize anguish in the contemporary technological and media spaces. The paper is mainly divided into three sections. The first section situates Jean-Paul Sartre as an influential thinker whose works popularized existentialist concepts, and raises the underexplored notion of anguish, despite its significance in the existential framework. The second section will cover the genealogy of anguish, primarily tracing its conceptualization from Kierkegaard and Heidegger, to expounding upon it through Sartre's works, and lastly briefly covering post-Sartrean conceptions of anguish up until the contemporary philosophical space in technological and media contexts. Finally, the third section will examine anguish as the structural and inescapable role in human existence. Sartre claims that in pursuing authentic freedom, the self must be capable of satisfying the demands it brings. The Sartrean notion of anguish represents the inescapable confrontation with human freedom and responsibility, and remains a persistent, structuring aspect of the human condition that requires the self to confront it as a necessary tension in the burden of self-authorship even in contemporary settings.

Keywords: *angoisse*, *anguish*, *contemporary*, *existentialism*, *Jean-Paul Sartre*

Introduction

To exist is to stand trial before the self, and await self-imposed decisions, judgement, and verdicts. The self being forced to confront the human condition and the dread that comes with death, freedom, and meaninglessness is a key framework in existentialist thought. Its early precursors, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, laid the foundations for philosophical discussions. Yet the most popular luminaries of existentialism reached the masses by means of literary works—plays, short stories, and novels. Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the most influential existentialist thinkers by ways of dramatizing the lived experience of freedom and responsibility against tragic contexts. This section will establish Sartre's existentialism as the central philosophical framework used in the paper and Sartre's concept of anguish as its specific focus. Moreover, it will

act as a precursory discussion on anguish from classical existential thought being redefined in contemporary discussions. At the end, it will provide the discussion flow of the paper.

Despite being born into relative affluence, Sartre lived his childhood amidst World War I, and his young adulthood amidst the Great Depression. Sartre delved into his childhood memories and the profound impact of his literary awakening in his work, *The Words*.¹ Oftentimes he was immersed in books, in which he grappled with his dreams of posterity, immortality, and his existence. Come the onset of World War II, he had developed his phenomenological thought with those of existentialism in theme; freedom, authenticity, responsibility, and anguish. The latter of which was translated from the French *angoisse* into English by renowned academic philosophers, Hazel Barnes and Sarah Richmond.²³ After being drafted into the French army in 1939, wrote about using his downtime amidst the war to accomplish his novel⁴ which is implied to be his magnum opus, *L'Être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, or more widely recognized as *Being and Nothingness*, as to be subsequently referred to. In 1940, Sartre spent nine months as a prisoner of war. He had passed the hours through reading other philosophical works, namely Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, or *Being and Time* and became a prolific writer. Among the works he had written and subsequently published are his *Being and Nothingness* (1943), then lecturing *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, to be translated and published under the English title, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946). Once World War II ended, Sartre had continued to live as an independent writer.

Many of these early encounters shaped Sartre's preoccupation with groundlessness and the absence of predetermined essence. Moreover, it would be these encounters that would contribute to his concept of anguish as the self's confrontation with its own freedom, despite external circumstances. Although this paper does not go into detail of Sartre's phenomenological thought prior to developing his existential phenomenology, and more so his existentialism as a whole, it does not seek to disregard the significance of his thought progress. The collapse of Europe, the disintegration of meaning during wartime, and his time as a prisoner of war all heightened his awareness of radical freedom under constraint. During this period, Sartre was exposed to phenomenology, particularly through Husserl's concept of intentionality. His engagement with Husserl allowed him to conceptualize consciousness and intentionality in a manner that underpinned his developing existentialism and focus on freedom, responsibility, and anguish. Sartre expressed said engagement in literary form in his work, *La Nausée*, or *Nausea* in proceeding mentions. Through literature, Sartre showcased his early metaphysical understanding of phenomenology.⁵ The feeling of nausea that Roquentin, the main character of the novel, experienced in a public garden whilst obsessively watching a chestnut tree, explicitly shows Sartre's understanding of such a radical absence of necessity as the expression of the fundamental contingency of being. In short, phenomenology provided the foundation for Sartre to develop his metaphysical knowledge, and systematize in the early, dense portions of *Being and Nothingness*.

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995).

² Jack Reynolds and Pierre-Jean Renaudie, "Jean-Paul Sartre," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified March 26, 2022, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sartre/>>.

³ Adrian van den Hoven, "Sarah Richmond's Translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*," in *Sartre Studies International* 26:1 (2020): 1-2, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48745474>>.

⁴ Emily Temple, "How Jean-Paul Sartre managed to spend his military service working on his novel," *Literary Hub*, last modified 2022, <<https://lithub.com/how-jean-paul-sartre-managed-to-spend-his-military-service-working-on-his-novel/>>.

⁵ Jack Reynolds and Pierre-Jean Renaudie, "Jean-Paul Sartre."

Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, and subsequently his *Existentialism is a Humanism*, exemplifies his preliminary notions of both phenomenology and existentialism. For the purposes of brevity in this exposition, he essentially posits that the subjective existence of reality precedes and defines its nature. "Existence precedes essence," is what Sartre expounds in *Being and Nothingness* and directly states repeatedly in *Existentialism is a Humanism*.⁶⁷ Furthermore, he proposes the notion that individuals are "condemned to be free," and ought to construct their own meaning in an impersonal world. Sartre does not mean that the individual is free to do anything, more so under the pretense of the self is capable of anything at all. Rather, he asserts that one's freedom exists within real-life circumstances, and that the self is always present within a particular context or circumstance, which he calls facticity—the self being there in the world.⁸

It is also important to note that Sartre's existentialism is atheistic in nature.⁹ This kind of existentialism maintains the foundation that the self is not born with a predefined existence; there is no Providence, divine plan, or universal "essence" prescribed at birth. Hence, there is a greater emphasis of the humanistic aspect in Sartre's existentialism as well as the fundamental idea that the human individual has the capacity to make their choices of living and is responsible for what they are. Existentialism "puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders," as Sartre puts it.¹⁰ Among other features and concepts in his works, Sartre's ontology emphasizes groundlessness, radical freedom, "bad faith," and three emotional conditions of existentialism. According to Sartre, anguish, abandonment, and despair characterize human existence. With existential anguish, hereby referred simply as *anguish* in proceeding mentions within this paper, he posits that it is an escapable cost of autonomy, and often draws on it as direct evidence of phenomenological and existential experience.

Despite the immense popularity of existentialism, and in Sartre's case for his themes of radical freedom, bad faith, and authenticity, the notion of anguish remains an underexplored concept, or conflated with other concepts such as anxiety or angst. Hatzimoysis pointed out that contemporary discussions at times blur the distinction between psychological anxiety and Sartre's anguish.¹¹ In a similar vein, Vieira and Lotufo Neto showed that empirical studies highlighted the complexity of anguish, as it is experienced beyond the theoretical domains, carrying significance in the lived experiences as well.¹²

In the age of the Internet, wherein many video-commentaries are widely published and circulated, a contemporary conversation on existential anguish comes in the form of "the desire to

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1977).

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, trans. by Philip Mairet (New York: Meridian Books, 1989), <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>>.

⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 83.

⁹ Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Anthony Hatzimoysis, "Anguish and Anxiety," in *Sartre and Analytic Philosophy*, (New York: Routledge, 2023), <10.4324/9780429455919-10>.

¹² Fernando Vieira and Francisco Lotufo Neto, "An Exploratory Study on Anguish in Patients with Psychiatric Diagnoses." *Revista de Psicologia* 42:2 (2024), <<https://revistas.ucsp.edu.pe/index.php/psicologia/article/view/1693>>.

not exist.” Videos from Ben Thomas,¹³ Mike McEwen,¹⁴ and Clark Elieson¹⁵ are among the philosophy-oriented content aiming to conceptualize this desire, either on its own or with the aid of other media, such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, in the case of Elieson’s video. While the phenomenon is particularly visible in online spaces, it is unclear whether this desire is truly restricted to the digital era, or if it simply finds new expression and visibility through Internet culture. At the time of writing this paper, there are few if any scholarly studies about this desire, or whether or not it arises from anguish, despair, or both. As such, only the aforementioned videos are the currently existing discussions of the desire, as they are of an abstract nature and the present way to understand it is to contextualize it upon personal experiences. Despite the lack of a proper, more scholarly, term for the contemporary struggles with despair and meaninglessness, the desire echoes Sartre’s reflections on the confrontation with nothingness. In other words, this desire could be perceived as a new expression of the same existential structure that Sartre dramatizes through Roquentin’s experiences in *Nausea*; anguish still persists within contemporary technological and media contexts. In this sense, Sartre’s insights into anguish are not confined to the mid-20th century philosophies. It could become a new perspective attempting to make sense of the human condition in current times, especially with the rise of digital culture that could amplify anguish.

This paper clarifies what Sartre means by anguish namely through his *Nausea*, *Being and Nothingness*, and *Existentialism is a Humanism* works. By concisely comparing it with Kierkegaard’s anxiety and Heidegger’s angst, and showing some of its resonance in contemporary technological and media contexts, this paper seeks to discuss anguish and its distinctive role in Sartre’s existentialism as primarily showcased through the aforementioned works. Moreover, it shows how it can serve as a foundation for understanding responsibility, freedom, and authenticity, and potentially serve as a perspective for understanding the human condition today.

After this introductory section, the next section will cover the genealogy of anguish, primarily tracing its conceptualization from Kierkegaard and Heidegger, to expounding upon it through Sartre’s *Nausea*, *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*, and lastly briefly covering post-Sartrean conceptions of anguish in the contemporary technological and media contexts. The third section will then examine anguish as the warden of freedom, with an emphasis on its structural and inescapable role in human existence. Meanwhile, the last section will end with the conclusion of the exposition.

The Genealogy of Anguish

Anguish is not an original concept of Sartre, but it also did not emerge in a vacuum. It was articulated by thinkers predating and following Sartre in an effort to grapple with the awareness of human finitude, responsibility, and possibility. In situating anguish within its wider existential genealogy, from Sartre’s time to the contemporary space, this section aims to discuss the indispensable and distinctive lens of Sartre’s anguish for thinking about the human condition. It will briefly discuss Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s contributions, then expounds on anguish as

¹³ Ben Thomas, “the desire to simply not exist,” *YouTube* last modified November 10, 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mb3A3uCWjk>>.

¹⁴ Mike McEwen, “The Desire to Not Exist,” *YouTube* last modified October 22, 2023, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dTtKnWgoZk>>.

¹⁵ Clark Elieson, “The Desire to Not Exist,” *YouTube* last modified May 4, 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8msOPSbJUKo>>.

contextualized in Sartre's works, and afterward, touch upon the other contributions made by Sartre's interlocutors up until thinkers in the contemporary-technological space.

Before Sartre, the term has been articulated in analogous experiences under *anxiety*, as first described by Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Anxiety*,¹⁶ then later as *angst* in Heidegger in *Being and Time*.¹⁷ The understanding of the concept remains largely the same within the existentialist tradition. It signifies, to an extent, a life-changing experience that compels the individual to acknowledge the undeniable reality of their own way of being. But in the case of the different terms being utilized to describe this phenomenon, it is possible that linguistic and semantic nuances caused this particular rift between the usage and acceptance of anguish, angst, and anxiety.¹⁸ Such a circumstance would explain the particular appeal of choosing one term over the other. During the early 1940s, the German word "Angst" had found its way into the French philosophical vocabulary, which gave credence to Sartre's usage of *angoisse*, rather than *anxiété*.¹⁹ Nonetheless, anguish and anxiety hold different connotations, more so nuances that keep them distinct in the existential tradition.

Sartre's notion of anguish has its earliest sightings in his pre-philosophical works; *Nausea* in particular. Although it was written at a time when Sartre had more often delved into the creative writing sphere, it introduced the existential themes he would later develop more systematically in *Being and Nothingness*. In *Nausea*, Sartre had written the emotional structure of anguish; it consists of the perception of things simply existing with no purpose or essence innately present, an emotional clarity over nothingness in the presence of meaning. Sartre also implies the weight of such a radical freedom over the self: "Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance."²⁰ At this point, the self is but a series of moments, perceptions, and choices; all of which involve an inward and anxious confrontation with the realization that the self ought to either create themselves, or become nothing.

In its more formal and philosophical elaboration, the notion of anguish has been given significant emphasis on Part I, Section IV, "The Phenomenological Concept of Nothingness," and Section V, "The Origin of Nothingness" from Chapter One of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre, through Heidegger, had shown his approach of *Nothingness*, establishing it as not a mere philosophical concept, but rather as a lived experience. The self lives nothingness in regret, hatred, moral decisions, and above all, in anguish. Sartre furthermore described anguish as the moment in which an individual confronts their radical freedom, and the possibility of non-being such as in the cases of death, failure, and meaninglessness.²¹ This line of thought in Part I is also echoed in Sartre's subsequent lecture of *Existentialism is a Humanism*: "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism."²² Hence, one could say Sartre contends the

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. by Reidar Thomte and Albert Anderson, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), <10.2307/j.ctt24hrfg>.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1962).

¹⁸ Hatzimoyssis, "Anguish and Anxiety."

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* ed. by Hayden Carruth, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions Books, 1985).

²¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 16-17.

²² Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism."

primary understanding that anguish is the feeling that comes from being aware of one's freedom and responsibility in a world wherein the individual defines meaning.

In Section IV, Sartre elaborates that *Nothingness* is an activity where a negating process takes place; it is not an experience that could be discovered on a whim. "Nothing is not; it nihilates itself."²³ He adds that *Nothingness* occurs when the individual surpasses or withdraws from the world, often through emotional states such as anguish. It is through this elaboration on *Nothingness*, and to an extent borrowing and reworking Heidegger's *Dasein* from *Being and Time*,²⁴ that Sartre develops the concept of anguish and how it arises in the phenomenological sense of human experience.²⁵ Withdrawing from the world leads to *Nothingness*, and as a result, anguish occurs as the discovery of a double, perpetual nihilation.²⁶ It is the realization that the human being, or *Dasein* as Sartre uses, is not wholly confined to their present state, as they are continually surpassing themselves through acts of choice. Likewise, it is in this thought that the world itself is not necessary and could as easily not have existed. This double realization then leads to the existential question. The felt experience of a radical freedom and the absence of any ultimate ground; the feeling of anguish.

In Section V, Sartre moves towards a more philosophical, and existential understanding of *Nothingness* and anguish, applying his concepts in an abundance of examples and scenarios. He first establishes that "Nothing" acts as the structural absence of which separates the present consciousness from the past consciousness.²⁷ The separation is the internal discontinuity of how consciousness relates to itself, and what makes negation possible. Sartre explains that the ability to negate arises from an internal nothingness; it is a constitutive distance within consciousness where the self steps back from what is. Since consciousness is never identical with its facticity, it can introduce absence into the world through the recognition of what is *not* the case. This capacity for negation is also what grounds "freedom,"²⁸ as it is a constant condition wherein the self is capable of change, choice, and moral responsibility. He writes:

...it is in anguish that man gets the consciousness of his freedom, or if you prefer, anguish is the mode of being of freedom as consciousness of being; it is in anguish that freedom is, in its being, in question for itself.²⁹

This is where Sartre establishes anguish as a fundamental existential experience. It is in anguish, he writes, where the human self becomes aware of their freedom; the realization that nothing prevents human choice. Yet it is within this nothingness that there is no excuse for inaction, and that the self holds full responsibility. Hence, as Sartre notes, anguish is the consciousness of freedom. The emotional experience in realizing the self as the sole responsibility in choice.

²³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁸ Sartre's notion of freedom is ontological. It refers to the structural condition of consciousness that allows it to negate and distance itself from its facticity. It is not the ability to "do whatever one wants," but it is the unavoidable condition of having to choose and define oneself.

²⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 29.

In the succeeding paragraphs of Section V, Sartre synthesizes Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's descriptions on anguish.³⁰ Kierkegaard describes anguish as the fear of possibility, choosing, and the infinite scope of freedom; whilst Heidegger describes it as the encounter of nothingness as the world loses meaning and falls away. Sartre notes that these two descriptions are two sides of the same coin; experiencing nothingness is experiencing the terrifying freedom of defining oneself.

Moreover, in the latter end of Chapter One, Sartre establishes the difference between fear and anguish, more so in relation to freedom, responsibility, and self-awareness, and the various expressions of anguish. Not only to catalogue emotional states, but as well as to clarify what is unique about anguish as an existential structure.³¹ Fear, he argued, always directs outward to a determinate threat which is one that is beyond the self. Anguish, in contrast, directs inward and arises when consciousness confronts its own capacity for freedom. Sartre gives credence to Kierkegaard's description that fear is of something in the world, whilst anguish is of oneself which arises from contemplations on personal freedom, responsibility, or the potential of failure. Although on paper both are synonymous, Sartre establishes the distinguishing characteristics of anguish through lived experiences; the vertigo in the choice, the terrifying sense of failure or wrong choices, the exclamation of uncertainty. "He is 'afraid of being afraid'; that is, he is filled with anguish before himself," as Sartre concludes.³²

This inwardness also explains why fear and anguish cannot occur simultaneously. Fear is experienced when one's attention is shifted to external threats and anguish turns back to the self and its freedom. However, Sartre notes that individuals often move back and forth between fear and anguish, with fear responding to the outside world and anguish stemming from the internal reflection on personal responsibility. Fear and anguish are mutually exclusive; anguish can exist without fear.³³ Sartre had also described an "anguish of the future" and "anguish of the past,"³⁴ respectively referring to the uncertainty being experienced when the self contemplates future possibilities, and the struggle with past choices, emotional turmoil, and previous choices. Both show how freedom permeates one's temporal existence; the future evokes anxiety over unrealized possibilities, while the past confronts the self with choices they must now own. Together, these distinctions showcase how anguish reveals the self to itself throughout time as a structural feature of freedom, rather than being merely a passing emotion.

The aforementioned paragraphs delved into the substantial and conceptually dense discussion regarding Sartre's concept of anguish in *Being and Nothingness*, albeit focusing on the primary notions provided and unable to capture the full extent of Sartre's discussions in the book. To complement this analysis, the following paragraphs will consider Sartre's treatment of anguish in his subsequent lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* which offers a more accessible perspective. Yet, it is important to note that the lecture was met with considerable critique despite its recognition as an entry point into Sartre's existentialist thought. Many philosophers and thinkers considered the lecture disappointing, and even factually incorrect at times. In a 2003 edition of *Being and Nothingness*, Mary Warnock wrote in the introduction:

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29-30; 32-45.

³² *Ibid.*, 29-30.

³³ *Ibid.*, 32-45.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

It has sometimes been suggested that Sartre's positive approach to moral philosophy was outlined in the essay "Existentialism is a Humanism," first published in 1946. This essay has been translated several times into English, and it became, for a time, a popular starting-point in discussions of existentialist thought... However, I mention this essay here only to dismiss it, as Sartre himself has dismissed it. He not only regretted its publication, but also actually denied some of its doctrines in later works.³⁵

Some philosophers found that Sartre's discussion of metaphysical concepts such as "existence precedes essence" and "the problem of relation between individuals" are notably weaker and even at odds with his magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*. One of the reasons of the popularity of the lecture and Sartre's discomfort is the content dissonance between the profound discussions and writings Sartre developed in *Being and Nothingness*, and the clarity of the core ideas of his existentialism in the lecture. Sartre showcases his efforts in expanding his ideas into the social and political sphere; partly as a response to his Communist and Catholic critics. In other words, the lecture is speculated to have muddled Sartre's true thoughts on the matter of existentialism. Through "weakening" or simplifying his profound philosophical language in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's lecture may cause a widespread misinterpretation of his existentialist thought in efforts of being understood by the general readership.

Despite the lecture's simplification of Sartre's thought and the critiques it had received, *Existentialism is a Humanism* remains a valuable lecture for understanding his evolving thoughts on anguish. Significantly, it presents key existential ideas such as freedom, responsibility, and authenticity in a more accessible form. Moreover, it offered insights into the practical implications of anguish for the individual. Through examining this lecture alongside *Being and Nothingness*, this paper can trace both the foundational and the developing aspects of Sartre's philosophy of anguish.

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre first notes that alongside abandonment and despair, anguish is one of the emotional conditions of existentialism.³⁶ Anguish is described as the deep feeling of responsibility that comes alongside freedom, and to an extent, overwhelms the self. Sartre also emphasizes that anguish is not about the feeling of terror, uncertainty, or an excuse to do nothing, but rather the deep awareness of responsibility in having no guaranteed guidance that confirms the righteousness of actions, especially in the absence of external justification. Even in moments of supposed righteousness, the self alone interprets and takes full responsibility; no outside authority can absolve the self of the burden of freedom. In the case that individuals may pretend that they are not responsible, or act carelessly, Sartre remarks that such acts are fleeing from anguish and a form of "bad faith." Evading responsibility may even be akin to a hidden anguish. Sartre borrows from Kierkegaard's "the anguish of Abraham" to show this deeper layer to anguish. In sum, Sartre puts an emphasis on the self as the sole authority, with their anguish keeping them accountable of their personal responsibility.

After 1946, Sartre wrote and published *Critique of Dialectical Reason* wherein he shifts from only the individual existential experience to the sociopolitical aspect of freedom.³⁷ Anguish, in this

³⁵ Mary Warnock, "Introduction," in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), xi–xxi.

³⁶ William Penne, "Anguish, Abandonment, Despair: Existentialism's Promise of Hope in a Time of Crisis," in *The Diana McDonald Writer's Challenge* (2021), <https://spark.parkland.edu/mcdonald_award/12>.

³⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. by Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004).

work, is described to go beyond the isolated personal mood, and has underlying connections to historical responsibilities, collective struggles, and oppressions. It pushes people to commit to choices that are bound with others in society, and not only the self. Aside from the *Critique*, the play *Dirty Hands* was produced; Sartre in that work dramatizes anguish in concrete interpersonal and political situations, tying in themes from his previous writings and his play, *No Exit*.

Aside from Sartre, to contextualize the philosophical underpinnings of anguish prior to current times, there are other notable existential thinkers who interpreted anguish. Simone de Beauvoir extended Sartre's existentialism into the field of ethics in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* where she treated anguish as the recognition of freedom of the self and of others: a double responsibility.³⁸ Anguish for her is the anxiety of limiting or harming the freedom of others, and the awareness of its ethical register in radical freedom. Albert Camus, albeit resisting being labelled as an "existentialist," reframed anguish as the experience of absurdity. The confrontation between human longing for meaning and the universe's silence is central in his works *The Myth of Sisyphus*³⁹ and *The Plague*.⁴⁰ For Camus, anguish is the tension between revolt and resignation, as opposed to responsibility under freedom. Gabriel Marcel, a Christian existentialist, interpreted anguish through hope, transcendence, and fidelity, contrasting against Sartre's atheistic despair.⁴¹ Lastly, Paul Tillich, a theologian, wrote about anguish in *The Courage to Be* as the "anxiety of non-being" and utilizes a religious framework in showing anguish as a universal condition that only faith could ground.⁴²

Anguish, in the 21st century, is still a prominent discussion, but has been reframed and applied in contemporary contexts. Hatzimoysis explicitly addresses how Sartre's anguish relates to what has become commonly associated with fear and anxiety,⁴³ and Saadeh uses Heidegger's framework of fundamental disposition to describe anguish as crucial in the structure to existence.⁴⁴ There is also the growing influence of non-Western perspectives in contextualizing anguish, signifying that anguish goes beyond Western existentialism.⁴⁵ But anguish in contemporary discussions are often in reference to its clinical, psychological, and medical contexts. In "Circumstance anguish: an iatrophilosophical model for depresalgia," anguish is treated as the link to chronic pain, depression, and stress; it is embedded in medical and personal suffering.⁴⁶ Bueno-Gómez coincides with this in "Conceptualizing suffering and pain," saying that anguish also involves the senses of meaning, identity, and agency.

With the rise of technology, virtual platforms, and cyber-conditions, existential conditions shifted towards artificial intelligence (AI), cyberlandscapes, and the tension between physical

³⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1948), <<https://antilogicalism.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ethics-of-ambiguity.pdf>>.

³⁹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955).

⁴⁰ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (London: Penguin Books, 1948).

⁴¹ Cheng-Ling Yu, "Hope and Despair: A Discussion on the Atheistic Existentialist, Evolutionary Biologicistic and Intersubjective Accounts of Hope," in *Marcel Studies* 5:1 (2020): 1–20.

⁴² Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

⁴³ Hatzimoysis, "Anguish and Anxiety."

⁴⁴ Manuela Saadeh, "The question of anguish as a form of a proper self-existence in Martin Heidegger," in *ARGUMENTOS - Revista de Filosofía* 16 (2024):214-225, <10.36517/argumentos..32.92147>.

⁴⁵ Correya, Stalin. "Giving the Imaginary Interlocutor Her Due: Existential Anguish in the Madhyamaka," in *SOPHIA* 62 (2024): 133–157, <10.1007/s11841-022-00925-0>.

⁴⁶ Martin Vargas-Aragón, "Circumstance anguish: an iatrophilosophical model for depresalgia," in *Estudios de Filosofía*, 70 (2024): 201-224, <110.17533/udea.ef.355349>.

existence and virtual existence.⁴⁷ In these spaces, Sartre's idea of anguish exemplifies philosophical pessimism and meaninglessness in a fast-paced society. To some extent, it has also contributed to the phenomena, for the lack of a better descriptor, involving the capacities of understanding complex emotions, desires, and moods. Such examples are in regard to the "desire to not exist," otherwise described as the "desire to not be born," and "desire to not actively think." Video-commentaries⁴⁸ attempt to discuss such desires but they lean towards reflection and making sense of the phenomena rather than aiming to provide a definitive, scholarly, explanation for the contemporary struggles with despair and meaninglessness. Yet, they do acknowledge how the desire echoes reflections on the confrontation with nothingness.

This paper posits that, given the commentary videos and the writings of Sartre, the "desire to not exist" could be contextualized as a form of anguish wherein the yearning to disappear, preferably in a manner that does not require sadness, violence, or death. Sartre's writings could be interpreted in such a way that his writings are a reflection on the nature of human existence and how, as human beings, we interpret the existence of others. Perhaps Sartre even wrote his works with the idea that nobody truly escaped the torture of daily pains and disappointments. Although it would be right to compare these to a degree of pessimism when we think of the desire to not exist, we imagine something akin to the idea of life is meaningless and insufferable. Like anguish, at least in the Sartrean sense, the desire itself is not a logical set of beliefs about the characteristics of life but rather a complex psychological wish where the human being longs for nothingness; however, it should be noted that the desire is comparable to cognitive dissonance, as it embodies contradictory beliefs of hope and yearning for nothingness. This is unlike anguish, which is more consistent in its nature.

In sum, Sartre's anguish in these times is perceived as the notion of exhausted existence. Discourses around nihilism or works in philosophical pessimism explore this yearning to escape or the notion of non-existence becoming preferable in certain contemporary circumstances. However, there has yet to be any explicit scholarly work that explores anguish in the contemporary-technological space.

In observing Sartre's anguish across its genealogy, it consistently emerges as a confrontation with human finitude and freedom. Anguish follows a continuity and transformation connected to its time period. Additionally, anguish remains a relevant concept to the emerging existential thought of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, the socio-political space of Sartre, and the contemporary debates in philosophy, medicine, and technology. Moreover, persistently adapting to the new contexts of human existence, constantly reminding the self of responsibility, and demanding the pursuit of meaning in the world. As anguish endures through time, disciplines, and cultures, the question is no longer whether it is a passing mood or concept, but rather if it is inescapably bound to existence itself. The next section discusses the inevitability of anguish; its genealogy is evident that anguish is far from being an occasional intrusion, but it is important to see as well if its genealogy shows how anguish is woven into the structure of freedom, responsibility, and the human condition.

⁴⁷ Boris Aberšek, "From Chaos to the Absurd: Existentialism for the 21st Century," in *Philosophies* 9 (2024): 168. <10.3390/philosophies9060168>.

⁴⁸ Thomas, "The Desire to Simply Not Exist," see also Elieson, "The Desire to Not Exist," as well as McEwen, "The Desire to Not Exist."

Anguish as the Warden of Freedom

The genealogy of anguish highlights how anguish has never been confined to any single thinker or tradition; all explanations put forward all point towards its enduring significance in philosophical-existential discussions, and contribute to broadening its discourse. What unites these varied perspectives is the structural role of anguish, as the condition that safeguards and disciplines freedom. The following section discusses how anguish is ultimately inescapable; neither a fleeting mood nor an accidental and occasional occurrence. Anguish is what gives structure, and the reach of freedom and responsibility.

Building upon the established genealogy, Sartre develops his notion of anguish beyond Kierkegaard's "anxiety of possibility" and Heidegger's "angst before nothingness," and into a radicalized, inescapable aspect of human existence. Sartre draws from anxiety's dizziness of possibility, and angst's nothingness at the ground of being, but makes anguish the explicit consciousness of freedom. Anguish is the recognition that nothing predetermines action, and responsibility is not deferred or delegated to anyone that is not the self. In his lecture, he notes, "Clearly, the anguish with which we are concerned here is not one that could lead to quietism or inaction."⁴⁹ Anguish is not paralyzing, but is the accountability in taking freedom and responsibility seriously. Rather than indicating despair or passivity, anguish is a necessary condition for real action. Real responsibility can only occur if the self confronts and accepts their anguish. Action assumes freedom to choose, and with said freedom comes anguish, as without it, authentic action would not be possible.

As anguish is an exclusive emotional state, Sartre notes that, to a degree, it is a rare phenomenon.⁵⁰ Anguish arises when consciousness perceives itself as cut off from its essence or future possibilities, as such, becoming an exceptional experience. The rarity is due to most situations not evoking it, as the self actively realizes possibilities without recognizing nothingness or freedom. Moreover, it arises from the avoidance of confronting freedom, and attributing actions to determinism. Sartre also speaks of a "freedom to be anguished,"⁵¹ or the capacity to confront anguish, acknowledge responsibility, and the absence of external justifications. In this sense, he gives significance to the integral presence of anguish to the human condition, arising from awareness of choices and uncertainties. Sartre illustrates, through his own experiences in writing *Being and Nothingness*, that embracing anguish is essential for authentic self-awareness and realizing one's freedom. This is even evident in his *No Exit* play, as suffering—anguish—is not inflicted upon them, but is rather the accumulation of their own choices, actions, and self-deceptions.⁵²

Moreover, Sartre notes that the self experiences either "fleeing anguish" and "being in anguish."⁵³ The former denotes the avoidance or escape of discomfort and awareness of anguish, often through denial or distraction, while the latter means fully acknowledging and embodying anguish as integral to human experience. The latter in particular gives credence to Sartre's belief that

⁴⁹ Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism,"

⁵⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 35.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵² Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*, in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (London: Vintage International, 1989).

⁵³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 44.

human beings live in constant anguish. “To be free is to be condemned to be free,” he writes.⁵⁴ The lack of a pre-defined purpose along with an “absurd” existence that presents infinite possibilities and choices, is what Sartre attributes to the “anguish of freedom.”

Sartre’s peers, and succeeding thinkers, also posit their own explanations as to how anguish is inescapably tied and disciplines freedom, ensuring that it is never exercised without responsibility. In his lecture, Sartre further adds that every deliberate choice and action carries with it a universal weight. Most would not feel anguish directly in their being, but Sartre asserts that “they are merely disguising their anguish or are in flight from it.”⁵⁵ For Beauvoir, anguish extends to any and all actions concerning ethics, as one’s responsibility is doubled by the responsibility to respect the freedom of others;⁵⁶ For Camus, anguish provokes revolt or resignation, translating into the absurd confrontation between human longing for meaning, and the world’s silence; Marcel emphasizes the fidelity and potential for transcendence that embodies anguish; and Tillich provides the theological framework that faith, primarily of the self to the self, is the answer to the universal anguish of non-being.

These main perspectives all contribute to underscoring Sartre’s central claim that anguish is the permanent shadow of freedom, and that it is constantly in operation even if freedom was to be evaded or disguised. Furthermore, anguish has long endured across centuries due to its capability to adapt to the ever-changing contexts of human existence, a constant reminder of responsibility and authenticity. This persistence still remains even as contemporary debates redefine anguish with different connotations and moods, as through anguish, Sartre’s insistence that the confrontation between freedom and nothingness continues to define existential struggles.

Anguish endures as a necessary reminder of finitude, responsibility, and freedom; a silent weight in accompanying authenticity. It signals an existential necessity as it is confronted as a condition of existence. Although its meaning varies in the contexts of different time periods, societal settings, and especially the perspective of the philosopher imparting their thoughts to the masses, what remains consistent in its conception is that anguish remains wherever human beings grapple with their freedom.

Conclusion

In the genealogy of existentialism, anguish is a central concept, representing the emotional experience of confronting radical freedom and full responsibility. Building upon Kierkegaard and Heidegger’s notions, Sartre reexamines anguish as the self’s awareness of Nothingness and the burden of creating meaning within the world without inherent purpose. The lived consciousness that nothing is predetermined and there is no external forces that can relieve the weight of responsibility. In his literary and philosophical works, anguish is not paralyzing, but rather a condition for authentic action; but it must be noted that, despite Sartre’s extensive discussions of anguish as a natural existential condition amongst individuals, the presence of a conventional method of management or overcoming anguish is absent. However, this does not mean that the emergence of approaches to overcome anguish is impossible, as evident with contemporary discourses discussing and reflection on the lived experiences of anguish. Furthermore, in the process of dialogue on anguish thinkers

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁵ Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism.”

⁵⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

return to Sartre's emphasis on the need for anguish to be confronted, embraced, and lived through as an integral part of the self's existence. Anguish is the exact moment wherein the self is stripped of their deceptions and forced to confront their own freedom. Freedom and its consequences are inescapable. Hence, Sartre had posited that the self is "condemned to be free," although anguish does not go away, it is what pushes the self to act meaningfully. As otherwise, it leads to perpetual suffering and self-imprisonment.

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