

Exploring Existentialism in Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" and Brad Bird's "The Iron Giant"

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Abstract: This essay explores the existential themes of identity, freedom, and responsibility in Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" and Brad Bird's "The Iron Giant." While Sartre's essay offers an abstract philosophical framework, Bird's film presents a concrete narrative that illustrates these existentialist principles in action. Both works emphasize the necessity of actively shaping one's identity through choices and actions. However, the essay reveals nuanced differences in their treatment of individualism versus collectivism. Sartre's work advocates for self-reliance and the rejection of external influences, whereas "The Iron Giant" suggests that relationships and community play a critical role in identity formation. This analysis underscores the complexity of human existence and highlights how external factors can complement individual agency in defining one's essence. The comparative study concludes that while both works align with existentialist thought, Bird's narrative can be interpreted as offering a more inclusive view of identity, integrating the influence of society and interpersonal connections.

Keywords: Existentialism, identity, freedom, responsibility, individualism, collectivism.

1. Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that arose in the 20th century that focuses on individual freedom and choice in the creation of meaning and self-identity, as well as the absolute responsibility people have for their actions [1]. By arguing that individuals must actively define themselves through the choices they make, existentialism challenges the traditional notions of predetermined roles and identities.

Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" outlines the fundamental tenets of existentialism, examining key ideas such as the role of individual choice in defining oneself and the responsibility that comes with this [2]. In contrast, Brad Bird's animated film "The Iron Giant" embodies these themes through the journey of the titular character, a sentient robot who defies his programming as a weapon and ultimately emerges as a hero [3]. Whilst Sartre's essay sketches a more general and abstract philosophical framework, Bird's film presents a concrete illustration of this existentialist framework in action.

This essay will argue that both Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" and Brad Bird's "The Iron Giant" explore existential themes of identity, freedom, and responsibility. While Sartre

provides an abstract reasoning of existentialist principles, Bird offers a concrete illustration of these principles in action, emphasizing the necessity of actively shaping one's identity through choices and actions. Both works highlight the power of embracing freedom and responsibility, albeit with differing emphases on individualism and collectivism. Bird's film suggests a more positive role for external influences such as relationships and society. This essay will explore the similarities in their treatment of existentialist philosophy, as well as nuanced differences, particularly in how they handle individualism, collectivism, and existential authenticity.

2. Theme 1: Identify and Self-definition

Identity and self-definition are central themes of existentialism, which holds that an individual's identity is not innate, inherent, or predetermined but is actively constructed through their choices. Both works emphasize the importance of active self-definition.

For example, Sartre's now famous assertion that "existence precedes essence" means that humans are not inherently endowed with a predetermined identity or purpose. Instead, they first come into being and subsequently actively construct their own identities through personal choices [4]. Sartre holds that "Man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterward, defines himself." Conversely, Sartre uses a letter opener to exemplify an object created with a predetermined purpose and design to fulfill that purpose; its essence precedes its existence [2]. Humans are thus distinct from other objects in this regard. This rejects the previously dominant essentialism pervading other frameworks, which hold that identity is predetermined by nature or divinity.

The Iron Giant presents a more narrative illustration of existence preceding essence and this path to self-definition through the Giant's journey from a weapon – programmed for destruction – to a hero [5]. The situation of the Giant appears to be similar to that of a letter opener, as it has been designed with a specific purpose in mind. However, the Giant is able to shape his own identity and defy his predetermined nature through his personal choices and aspiration to be seen as a hero. Sartre's essay presents existentialism's understanding of identity and self-definition as a more general and abstract framework, providing sparse examples to illustrate these principles. Bird's film complements Sartre's theoretical work by bringing these principles to life through the Giant's personal journey, thus rendering them more tangible and relatable. Aside from their style, there is also room to interpret Bird's film as crafting a stronger formulation of "existence precedes essence". Sartre's main focus was on the concept that, unlike other objects, humans are not born with a predetermined essence, which allows them to create their own identity. Sartre's use of the term "precedes" can be interpreted as indicating a chronological relationship, with existence coming before essence in terms of time. The Giant, however, clearly has a predetermined essence that temporally "precedes" his existence. However, he still has the ability to shape his own destiny and essence once he comes into existence in the world. Thus, the formulation of "existence precedes essence" that the Giant embodies is better characterized as using "precedes" as it relates to significance. That is, the Giant's existence is more significant than his predetermined essence; his mere existence and capacity to reflect on his choices outweighs any predetermined essence, regardless of temporal priority.

As such, both works underscore the significance of identity and self-definition, embracing the principle that existence precedes essence. However, the manner in which they articulate these concepts differs, and a nuanced interpretation reveals variations in the precise ideas they convey.

3. Theme 2: Freedom and Responsibility

Closely related to the above, existentialism emphasizes the absolute freedom individuals have in defining themselves, as well as the corresponding responsibility for one's choices and outcomes.

Sartre's concept of radical freedom is summarized in his declaration that humans are "condemned to be free", highlighting that the absence of absolute guidelines necessitates a significant burden of responsibility for one's actions and their consequences [6]. People must assert their values through their choices, and take responsibility for the results. Sartre illustrates the dilemma of a young man during World War II who is faced with the conflicting duties of joining the French Resistance to fight the Nazis, or staying at home to care for his impoverished mother who relies on him. Though both choices have strong moral justifications, Sartre stresses that no predetermined rules can definitively guide the student on the correct path. The decision is entirely the young man's, and he must accept full responsibility for the consequences of whichever path he chooses.

In Bird's film, the Giant faces the burden of responsibility that accompanies his realization that he can choose to accept or reject his predetermined programming as a weapon. Faced with the choice of destroying or protecting life, the Giant actively asserts his values by choosing to be a hero. Moreover, by committing to this choice and saving the town, the Giant's self-sacrifice is the ultimate expression of taking responsibility for his capabilities and decisions.

Both works underline the intricate relationship between absolute freedom and responsibility. While Sartre's examples provide a more philosophical and theoretical treatment of the idea compared to Bird's animated film, they also effectively illustrate these existentialist concepts in a vivid and emotionally relatable manner. The key difference in their treatment of these ideas is the tone with which they are explored. Sartre focuses comparatively more on the existential anguish associated with making choices, and the inevitable anxiety associated with such freedom and responsibility. On the other hand, Bird's film depicts a more hopeful and redemptive narrative, in which unconstrained choices are more palatable and inspiring, offering a view of responsibility that includes the potential for positive outcomes and societal impact.

4. Theme 3: Individualism vs Collectivism

Many commentators have discussed a potential tension between individualism and collectivism within the existentialist framework, given the existentialist emphasis on self-reliant authenticity and rejection of imposed values.

Sartre viciously advocates for individuals creating meaning and identity without reliance on external impositions such as societal values. For him, each individual must navigate the challenge of defining themselves by rejecting the comfort of conforming to collective values and beliefs, without succumbing to such external pressures. Sartre's existentialism therefore represents a more individualistic philosophy, where the spotlight is on the individual's solitary and isolated journey of freely defining their essence [7].

In contrast, *The Iron Giant* offers a more collectivist perspective, emphasizing the role of society, relationships, and community in shaping identity and values. For example, the Giant's identification with Superman upon exposure to him in a comic book could be characterized by a Sartrean critic as succumbing to the external imposition of values and adopting a prescribed identity. However, the film instead portrays this as aspiring to inspirational societal ideals, where an external model of heroism serves as a catalyst for self-discovery and personal development. Similarly, the Giant's journey from weapon to hero is heavily intertwined with his interactions with Hogarth and other members of the community, through which he learns about empathy and compassion. This aligns more closely with the existentialism of Buber, which emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships [8]. Had he formed relationships with distinctly opposite characters, the Giant's journey may well have been different. Bird's film thus depicts a much more nuanced interaction between individual choice and external influences than Sartre's essay, signaling the subtly differing perspectives present within existentialist philosophy.

5. Theme 4: Existential Authenticity

Given these nuances in their treatment of individualism and collectivism, people can examine how these broader philosophical differences shape the concept of existential authenticity in Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" and Bird's "The Iron Giant." Existential authenticity, a cornerstone of existentialist thought, pertains to the extent to which an individual lives in accordance with their true self, free from external impositions.

In "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre argues that living authentically requires resisting societal pressures and embracing the freedom to define one's own essence. [9] Sartre's focus on individualism, as previously discussed, directly informs his understanding of authenticity. He asserts that authenticity can only be achieved when individuals make choices that reflect their true nature, independent of external influences. Sartre's concept of "bad faith" illustrates the danger of conforming to societal expectations rather than embracing the freedom to create one's identity. For Sartre, existential authenticity is an inherently solitary journey, where the individual must take full responsibility for their choices, rejecting the comfort of relying on predetermined roles or collective values [10].

In contrast, "The Iron Giant" offers a more nuanced portrayal of authenticity, where relationships and community play a significant role in shaping identity. The Giant's journey towards self-definition as a hero, despite his original programming as a weapon, is heavily influenced by his interactions with Hogarth and the community. This collectivist perspective suggests that authenticity does not necessarily require the rejection of external influences. Instead, the Giant's path to authenticity involves integrating positive societal values, such as heroism and compassion, into his self-concept. Bird's narrative challenges Sartre's more rigid view by illustrating that authenticity can be achieved through a synthesis of individual choice and external influence, provided the individual consciously embraces these influences as part of their identity. Similar ideas have been elucidated by a number of other existentialist thinkers [11].

This nuanced approach to authenticity in "The Iron Giant" complements Sartre's philosophy by expanding the possibilities for authentic living. While Sartre emphasizes an inward-focused authenticity, Bird's film suggests that authentic living can also involve engaging with and internalizing external values that resonate with one's self-defined identity. The Giant's ability to forge his own path while incorporating external ideals demonstrates that existential authenticity is not necessarily in opposition to societal influence but can involve a conscious integration of these influences.

Ultimately, the differences in how Sartre and Bird approach existential authenticity reflect their broader philosophical stances on individualism and collectivism. Sartre's emphasis on individualism leads to a conception of authenticity that is deeply personal and often in opposition to societal norms. In contrast, Bird's collectivist perspective allows for an authenticity that is influenced by external factors but remains independent. Interestingly, it may be argued that the two works can be reconciled if Sartre is viewed as rejecting the imposition of external values, or a complete reliance on them, rather than rejecting the possibility – or even utility – of their influence. It can be imagined that Sartre might approve of these influences on the Giant's decisions, if the ultimate decision to subscribe to these values was his and his alone [12].

6. Conclusion

Both Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" and Brad Bird's "The Iron Giant" offer profound insights into the existentialist themes of identity, freedom, and responsibility. Sartre's essay provides an abstract philosophical framework that systematically explores the tenets of existentialism, emphasizing the necessity of individual choice and the weight of responsibility that comes with it. In

contrast, Bird's film brings these concepts to life through a narrative that resonates with audiences on an emotional and experiential level. Despite their differing mediums, both works converge on the idea that identity must be actively shaped through personal choices and that individuals must bear the full responsibility for those choices.

The comparison between the two works reveals both significant similarities and nuanced differences. Both Sartre and Bird emphasize that existence precedes essence, asserting that individuals are not born with a predefined identity or purpose but must instead create their own through actions and decisions. Sartre's theoretical approach underscores the philosophical principle that human beings must define themselves in a world devoid of inherent meaning, while Bird's narrative illustrates this principle through the Giant's transformation from a weapon to a hero. However, their approaches diverge in the treatment of individualism, collectivism, and existential authenticity. Sartre champions a solitary journey of self-definition, where authenticity is achieved by rejecting societal pressures and relying solely on personal agency. In contrast, Bird's film suggests that authenticity can also involve integrating external influences, such as relationships and community values, provided they align with one's self-defined identity. While Sartre's perspective is rooted in individualism, Bird presents a more collectivist approach, where external influences can complement the individual's journey toward self-discovery and authenticity.

In conclusion, the analysis of these works highlights both the shared and divergent ways in which Sartre and Bird approach the complexities of human existence. Altogether, these perspectives provide a comprehensive exploration of existentialism, encouraging individuals to contemplate how their identities are shaped by both personal choices and the broader social contexts in which they reside.

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