



Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)



Jean-Paul-Charles-Aymard Sartre was born on June 21, 1905 in Paris. His father died when Sartre was only a year old, and so he went to live with his maternal grandfather, Carl Schweitzer. As a boy, Sartre was small and cross-eyed, and he would search for playmates in the Luxembourg Gardens of Paris. He attended the Lycée (Government supported secondary school) Henri IV in Paris and after the remarriage of his mother, the lycée in La Rochelle. From there he went to the École Normale Supérieure, graduating in 1929. Sartre had a life-long companionship with Simone de Beauvoir but because of their resistance to bourgeois values, they never married. During his years in graduate school, Sartre met many great writers of the time, including Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone Weil, Jean Hippolyte and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Sartre taught at the lycées of Le Havre, Laon and Paris from 1931 to 1945.

He began writing his first novel, *La Nausée* (*Nausea*, 1938), while teaching at Le Havre, influenced at the time by the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and his Phenomenological method. It is a story of life without purpose, in which the protagonist, Antoine Roquetin, discovers an obscene excessiveness of the world around him, inducing in his own solitude experiences of a totalizing, psychological nausea. Sartre portrays a horrific rationality and fixity of the banal nature of bourgeois culture, which he compares to an impressive solidity of stones on the seashore. While the publication of his early, largely psychological studies, *L'Imagination* (1936), *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* (*Outline of a Theory of the Emotions*), 1939, and *L'Imaginaire: Psychologie Phénoménologique de l'Imagination* (*The Psychology of Imagination*), 1940, did not garner much attention, *Nausea* and the collection of stories *Le Mur* (*Intimacy*, 1938), swiftly brought him recognition. In these stories one can find the currents and themes of Sartre's interest in existentialism and its themes of alienation, commitment and salvation through art.

While teaching at Le Havre, Sartre received a stipend from the Institut Français, allowing him to study in Berlin with Husserl and Martin Heidegger in 1932. He broke from his teaching a second time when he was drafted in 1939 to serve in World War II. In 1940 he was captured and held prisoner for a year. Upon his release he began teaching in Neuilly, France, and later in Paris, where he was involved in the French Resistance. He and Merleau-Ponty founded a resistance group of intellectuals called Socialisme et Liberté. The German authorities, unaware of his subversive and underground activities, allowed the production of Sartre's anti-authoritarian play *The Flies* (1943) and the publication of his major philosophic work *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In 1945 he quit teaching and with de Beauvoir, founded *Les Temps Modernes*, a political and literary magazine (Sartre eventually playing the editor-in-chief). After the War, Sartre was an active independent Socialist, being critical of the USSR and the USA for the cold war. However, he would soon align himself with the Soviet cause, though he remained critical of their policies. His hopes for Communism were ended after the



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entry of Soviet tanks into Budapest in 1956. He dedicated a long article in *Les Temps Modernes*, “Le Fantôme de Staline”, that condemned both the Soviet intervention and the submission of the French Communist Party to the interests of Moscow. His ongoing critiques of the Communists led to the formation of “Sartrean Socialism” that he expressed in the publication of his major work, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). He was an outgoing supporter of the student movement in France of May ‘68, rising to unusual height in his accusation of the Communist Party as having betrayed the May revolution. He remained politically involved by editing and supervising the publication of various Leftist publications. Proclaiming, “commitment is an act, not a word”, Sartre often participated in street riots, in the sale of left-wing literature, and in other activities to promote the revolution.

Sartre published his most influential work, *L'Être et le Néant (Being and Nothingness)* in 1943, formulating his fundamental system in which “existence is prior to essence.” He makes the distinction between things that exist in themselves (en-soi) and human beings who exist for themselves (pour-soi). Human beings live with an understanding of the limits of knowledge and mortality, therefore in a state of existential dread. The loss of God is not mourned, for humankind is condemned to freedom, and free from all authority, a realization that must be faced if one is to become a moral being. The acceptance of the terrible freedom requires that man make meaning for himself (by the detachment of oneself from things so as to lend them meaning) and commit to a role within this world – yet this is futile without the solidarity of others. Sartre’s Cartesian view of the world extended to the creation of the world by the self through detachment, by rebelling against authority and accepting personal responsibility for one’s own actions, without aid by society, traditional ideas of morality or religious faith. The realm or the human world, as differentiated from the non-human, is characterized by nothingness, by the human capacity for negation and rebellion. The recognition of one’s absolute freedom of choice is the fundamental condition for authentic human existence.

Sartre shifted the locus of his existentialist thought in *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* in 1960 (*Critique of Dialectical Reason*), to Marxist social determinism, arguing that the influence of modern society was so strong it produced a serialization, or a loss of self. To regain individual freedom from such forces in society, one must seek for group revolutionary action. He discovered after close examination that the Marxist dialectic did not exist in the Soviet Union. He felt that Marxism was too rigid and universalist to deal with the ever-changing situations that produce demands particular to existential, concrete circumstances. Such demands are also characterized by Historical Materialism, although they differ for each collectivity, as well as each individual and their personal freedom.

Sartre was offered the Nobel Prize for literature in 1964 for his autobiography *Words* though he subsequently rejected the award based on his own notions of integrity as a writer. His own philosophy bears the influences of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, the metaphysics of G.W.F. Hegel and Martin Heidegger, and the



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political and social theories of Karl Marx into his own brand of existentialism. The existentialist humanism which Sartre championed in his widely read essay *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (*Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1946), also appears in the series of novels, *Les Chemins de la Liberté* (*The Roads to Freedom*, 1945-49). He wrote extensively in literary criticism, and his other publications include *Baudelaire* (1947) and a somewhat ethical study on the French writer and poet Jean Genet entitled *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr* (1952). From 1960 until 1971 Sartre worked on a four-volume biography on Gustave Flaubert called *L'Idiot de la Famille*, using Freudian and Marxist interpretations from his other philosophical works. Flaubert had been a childhood preoccupation for Sartre, demonstrating Flaubert to be the person his family and society had determined him to be. By 1971, however, only two of the volumes had appeared owing to his heart troubles and having suffered two heart attacks at the time. His sight was faltering badly, and although his productivity was lessened, he continued to do interviews and write scripts for motion pictures. A close friend whom Sartre had met in 1970, Pierre Victor, aided him in an endeavour to write a book on ethics, Victor reading to Sartre the articles and books that he could no longer read on his own. They engaged in discussions on the subject. With de Beauvoir, Sartre attempted to capture their dialogues of his autobiography on tape, though his health after the second heart attack left him in frail condition. In 1980 Sartre was hospitalized for oedema of the lungs, his health worsened, and after a month there he lapsed into a coma, dying two days later.

“Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count no one but himself; that he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this earth.” (from *L'Être et le Néant* / *Being and Nothingness*, 1943).

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