SARTRE AND EXISTENTIALISM

Sartre's Life, Times, and *Vision du Monde*

Edited by
William L. McBride

Sartre and Existentialism

Philosophy, Politics, Ethics, The Psyche, Literature, and Aesthetics

Series Editor

William L. McBride
Purdue University

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Series Introduction

Perhaps no other philosophical movement has had as great an impact on the philosophy, literature, and general cultural outlook of the twentieth century as has existentialism. There are other contenders, to be sure—pragmatism, for example, or linguistic analysis or poststructuralism. The strongest rival of all is probably Marxism, but of course the originator lived in the previous century. Of all the prominent twentieth century philosophers, it is Jean-Paul Sartre to whom the "existentialist" label can be most securely affixed. It was also Sartre who, not by pure coincidence, during one long period of his career made the most concerted effort to bring Marxism and existentialism into a kind of synthesis, one that he himself ultimately found to be unstable.

The purpose of the present eight-volume collection of journal articles and book chapters, then, is to assemble some of the best of the secondary literature on Sartrean existentialism and on its background in, and connections with, existential philosophy in general, as well as on a few of its anticipations of post-existentialist thought. The collection includes some authors—Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers, Paul Tillich, Herbert Marcuse, and Lucien Goldmann, to name five—who are generally regarded as original writers primarily rather than commentators (as if this distinction could ever be rigorously maintained in the field of philosophy, where every practitioner since at least Thales owes some debt to predecessors!). That they have so much to contribute to our central theme only serves to reinforce the claim of existentialism's centrality to the twentieth century.

The objection will no doubt be raised that even Sartre himself, to say nothing of other writers on the subject, traced existentialism's origins to the nineteenth century Danish religious thinker, Søren Kierkegaard (and that some have even discerned strong religious existentialist themes in Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* from a much earlier time). This is true, but the identification of a distinctive way of thinking that eschews facile, self-assured, systematic rationalist formulas concerning some supposed essential structures of the cosmos, in favor of anguished reflection on the contingent situation of concrete human reality, as an *existentialist* way of thinking only became self-conscious nearly a century after Kierkegaard's death. Prior to Sartre's appearance on the stage, Marcel and Martin Heidegger both contributed to this developing self-consciousness, although both later preferred no longer to be called "existentialists" precisely because of the term's increasingly Sartrean connotations—Marcel in reaction to Sartre's atheism, Heidegger in reaction to his "humanism." These historical labelings and "unlabelings" and the

philosophical reasons behind them will be among the topics explored, especially in the early volumes of this collection.

The collection spans fifty-five years of scholarship—sixty-one, if we count the date of the original German version of Jaspers' essay—from Dorothy Emmet's 1941 discussion, in the British journal *Philosophy*, of Kierkegaard and existentialism, which conveys in a good existentialist manner a concrete sense of her world at war (and incidentally makes it clear that the recognition, beyond Germany's borders, of Heidegger's Nazi sympathies is not really a recent development), to contemporary discussions of Sartre's contribution to the understandings of racism, of the relations between the sexes, of hermeneutics, and so on. One of the peculiarities of the Sartrean corpus is that he left a number of manuscripts, concerning the fate of which he appeared to be comparatively indifferent, unpublished at the time of his death, and that his intellectual heirs have concurred with his adopted daughter and literary executor, Arlette Elkaïm Sartre, in wishing to make these writings public. The result of all this is that Sartre as posthumous author has proven to be nearly as prolific as he was when alive, and the relevance of the most significant of his posthumous writings is also reflected in a number of the articles from the past decade and a half that are included here.

The contents of these eight volumes are distributed according to a rationale which, while no one would claim that it conforms to a preordained order such that each article belongs uniquely to its assigned volume and to no other, attempts to do justice to all aspects of this subject. For Sartre was, of course, distinguished not merely as a writer of philosophy but also as a literary figure in a much broader sense, and, although he himself gave occasional indications that he accepted the traditional distinction between philosophy and literature, the study of much of his actual corpus militates strongly against regarding this distinction as rigid. To take one obvious illustration of this among many, his last major work, *The Family Idiot*, is a three-volume study of the nineteenth-century writer, Gustave Flaubert, that is by turns literary criticism, psychoanalysis, sociology, history, and always, in an important sense, philosophy. Most of the contributors to these volumes, whether sympathetic, neutral, or unsympathetic toward Sartre, were well aware of the need to cross inter- and intra-disciplinary lines in order to do justice to their subject.

Nevertheless, a certain order has been observed in the arrangement of this collection, and it runs as follows. Volume one provides a general overview of existentialism as a movement, from what I have called its self-conscious beginnings in the 1940s to periodic reflections, over the ensuing decades, on its central issues, its metamorphoses, and its continuing (though no doubt metamorphosed) relevance. Volume two contains selected studies, many comparative, of Sartre's best-known existentialist predecessors; although a few of these articles, like a few of those in volume one, make no explicit reference to Sartre, when taken as a whole they are meant to convey a strong sense of his increasing centrality, during the period of existentialism's apogee, to the debates surrounding it. In volume three, the figure of Sartre is brought unqualifiedly to the fore, with a view to analyzing (a) the way in which his ideas and the arguments they generated came increasingly to dominate the intellectual terrain in France, Europe in general, and North America; (b) some of the more enduring themes

that he can be seen to have emphasized throughout his career; and (c) some of the specific events, literary and other, that have led to the claims of major shifts of position in the course of his evolution.

The next three volumes, four through six, are divided according to the more-or-less standard philosophical areas—ontology, ethics, and social and political philosophy—to which Sartre devoted his principal theoretical writings. Volume four is concentrated above all on the best-known and most magisterial work of Sartre's early philosophy, *Being and Nothingness*, but it also contains studies of important work on imagination, on the emotions, and on the ego that preceded it, as well as some probings of issues in ontology, philosophical psychology, and philosophical method that take account of Sartre's later work insofar as it bears on these issues. Volume six focuses mainly on the magnum opus of the later Sartre, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, while also including discussions of certain political concerns that are not emphasized in that work. Between volumes four and six, the articles in volume five on Sartre's ethics, of which he never published an even partially definitive version in his lifetime, plunge the reader into considerations of such characteristically Sartrean concepts as bad faith, authenticity, radical conversion, and even—in this case drawing on extant manuscripts that still remain unpublished—the possibility of a socialist morality.

Volume seven concentrates both on another traditional philosophical subdiscipline, aesthetics, to which Sartre paid considerable attention, and also on philosophical issues in the area of literature, such as those emanating from his studies of Flaubert and Jean Genet. Eminent literary scholars are among the principal contributors to this volume. Finally, the collection in volume eight focuses on three of Sartre's erstwhile acquaintances who themselves made major contributions to the existentialist movement—Albert Camus, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Simone de Beauvoir—together with a few French "post-Sartreans," individuals whose own philosophies show obvious influences from him even if, as is true in most cases, they have been reluctant to acknowledge these influences. The last of these to be considered here, Emmanuel Levinas, who died recently at a very advanced age, is something of a special case, in that Sartre himself became acquainted with some of Levinas' already-published ideas at the beginning of his own career!

This selection might appear in a sense to close the circle (or as Sartre would put it, "*boucler la boucle*") of the literature surrounding Sartre and existentialism. But this would in fact be a false appearance, because articles and books dealing with Sartre, the most written-about French author of this century, continue and will continue to be published in great numbers, thus keeping the interpretation of his thought as open-ended as is that thought itself, undeviating as it is in its insistence on the centrality of human freedom.

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Volume Introduction

Whereas articles in the first volume of this series focused on the existentialist movement as a whole, incidentally locating Sartre's place within it, and those in the second volume concerned some of the most important existentialist background figures, or "ancestors" as I have called them, to Sartre's thought, the present volume is the first to feature Sartre himself. It does so from all three of the interconnected perspectives mentioned in its title, involving accounts of a number of significant moments in his life history, interpretations of the ways in which he reacted, both personally and philosophically, to major historical changes and events that took place during his long adult career from the 1930s until his death in spring 1980, and overviews of his thought as a whole and of some of the most dramatic developments in its evolution.

Some commentators would substitute "turning-points" for my bland term, "developments": there is a dispute about Sartre, as about most creative thinkers who lived comparatively long lives and wrote a great deal over many years, concerning whether there was general continuity in his thinking from start to finish of his career, or whether we should rather discern one or more radical discontinuities in it. That there were at least important shifts is obvious: the "early" Sartre, for instance, had very little to say about politics or political theory, whereas much of his later career as writer, editor, and globally recognized public figure was largely (though by no means entirely) dominated by such matters. Then there is the curious matter of his so-called "last words," consisting of a few pages of interviews that some have seen as a repudiation of a number of his most central earlier views—on ethics, on the nature of society, on religion, and so on. Whereas others have seen them simply as evidence of a further evolution, which in any case was cut short by his death very soon after these interviews were published. In short, this volume is intended to contribute to answering, in the case of Sartre, the question that he identified as the subject of his monumental late-life work on Gustave Flaubert, *The Family Idiot*: "Que peut-on savoir d'un homme, aujourd' hui?"—what can we know about [this] human being, today?

Our opening reprint is a brief magazine article written in 1946 by another towering intellectual figure of the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt. A refugee from the Nazi genocide who had spent several years in Paris before having to flee once more, this time to the United States in the wake of the German occupation of France, she reports on the intellectual scene that she has discovered there upon her return for a

visit. The wartime Resistance movement, she says, has spawned a mood of rebellion among formerly docile French intellectuals. The two most prominent figures whom she names are Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, their most dominant themes being the sense of absurdity and the repudiation of the bourgeois "spirit of seriousness."

A French philosopher whom Arendt took somewhat less seriously, but who must be assigned an important, if now often forgotten, role in the history of existentialism is Gabriel Marcel, author of the much longer article that follows. First written in 1947, this precious if somewhat bizarre testimonial to an early period in that history focuses entirely on Sartre, whom Marcel knows and appears not *thoroughly* to dislike, and on what he calls "Sartrean man," whom he despises. He begins by indicating his intention not to be polemical and by warning against simply dismissing Sartre, as some colleagues had apparently done when *Being and Nothingness* first appeared in 1943. Sartre's work is still in the making, says Marcel, and he is not to be viewed merely in the context of other writers, notably Heidegger. He recounts with pride his own role, as he conceives it, in having urged Sartre to develop further the theme of "the viscous," a notion that Sartre was to use as his controversial principal illustration of the idea of an existentialist "psychoanalysis of things," after hearing him give a paper at a small, private discussion group in Marcel's home. But as this essay proceeds one senses Marcel's ire rise—the ire of a religious and political ultraconservative toward a younger man whose values are in many ways polar opposites to his own. Marcel accuses Sartre of having a hatred of order, a sophistical understanding of human emotion, an interesting but flawed conception of "bad faith" which entails the false conclusion that role-playing is universal, a view of freedom that leaves no room for *grace*, even of a secular kind, and a deeply antisocial belief to the effect that, in the words of a character in Sartre's play, *No Exit*, which Marcel like so many later writers takes to reflect Sartre's own attitude, "Hell is the Other." In conclusion Marcel, who presciently predicts that Sartre may move further in the direction of the Marxists, charges him with holding an odiously offensive and degrading view of humanity, regarding human beings as "excrement," and of being a menace to misguided youth.

Ian Alexander's somewhat less flamboyant article of 1948 nevertheless reflects a similarly critical attitude toward Sartre's existentialism, which Alexander regards as an idealist approach to interpreting the relationship between the human self and the world, and which he contrasts unfavorably with Marcel's own alleged realism. One of the charges leveled against Sartre in this essay, which also contains a good deal of straightforward summary of his early thought, is that he has a false sense of time and lacks the attitude of *patience* which Marcel, according to Alexander, considers the very sense of time itself. For Alexander, Sartre epitomizes the *mal du siècle*, the crisis of twentieth-century intellectuals.

The next two essays, of great historical interest, were both printed in the first volume of the journal, *Yale French Studies*, which from time to time over subsequent decades has published further important studies of Sartre's thought. Herbert Dieckmann's contribution is itself an historical account of early anticipations of Sartre's philosophy in France. He emphasizes, *inter alia*, the roles played by Jean Wahl, by Gabriel Marcel, by the journal *Recherches philosophiques*, and by French translations of the German writers, Hedwig Conrad-Martius (one of Husserl's former students from

Göttingen), Karl Löwith, and Karl Jaspers, showing the interplay of themes from both the Kierkegaardian and the Husserlian phenomenological traditions in the genesis of French existentialism. He takes special note of an early study of Sartre's seminal essay from 1937, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, by his erstwhile schoolmate and friend, Raymond Aron; Aron had been the person most responsible for Sartre's spending the 1933–34 academic year, so important for his intellectual development, on fellowship studying Husserl's philosophy in Berlin.

Henri Peyre's article is a spirited defense of existentialist literature, primarily Sartre's but also Camus', against superficial critiques of it that he says are beginning to appear in the United States and that portray it as pessimistic and immoral. In fact, he says, this literature is the most concerned with "man's fate" of any French literary movement since the eighteenth century. It is, he maintains, heroic—an extremely exciting and welcome development.

The following article, like Dieckmann's, recalls the Sartre of the 1930s, but in a more personal way. John Gerassi's father and mother were good friends of Sartre's — Fernando Gerassi and Sartre, for example, had passed the time together while she was giving birth to John. The younger Gerassi later developed his own independent relationship with Sartre when he was a graduate student doing research in France after the war. There is a barely disguised portrait of a mother and her young son involved in the flight of refugees from Nazi-occupied Paris in Sartre's fictional trilogy about the onset of the war, *Roads to Freedom*. Gerassi here uses a methodological device for studying the behavior of human beings in their social settings, the "regressive-progressive method," which is advocated by Sartre in his *Search for a Method*, in order to raise questions about Sartre's decision not to follow Fernando Gerassi's lead upon hearing the news of the 1936 coup by Francisco Franco that initiated the Spanish Civil War and ultimately led to the establishment of the fascist regime there. The senior Gerassi, a painter, left instantly to fight on the Loyalist side; Sartre stayed. Gerassi contends that this guilt-provoking choice in fact marked the beginning of Sartre's sense of sociopolitical commitment, prior to his own war experiences.

It is Sartre's conduct in the course of those experiences, as depicted in his posthumously published *War Diaries: November 1939–March 1940*, that is discussed in the following article, by Hazel Barnes. This is the first of a number of essays by this distinguished scholar and English-language translator of *Being and Nothingness* and *Search for a Method* that are reprinted in this series. It was the time of the so-called "phony war," when German and French forces faced each other at combat-readiness but did not actually fight, until brief hostilities led to surrender by the Pétain government and the temporary imprisonment of a number of French soldiers, including Sartre. Barnes shows Sartre coming to an understanding, for the first time to his own satisfaction, of the meaning of ethics, but at the same time engaging in highly reprehensible behavior in connection with a short-lived love affair played out partly during leave back in Paris and partly through correspondence. She recounts his close reading of Heidegger during this very time when he was working out his basic ideas for *Being and Nothingness*, and demonstrates the influence exerted on Sartre (despite his apparent dismissal of this point in his 1980 interviews) by the Kierkegaardian-Heideggerean concept of *angst*, dread or anxiety. She argues that, despite Sartre's frequent and well-known indulgence

in behaviors of seduction toward many women, he maintained a relationship with his lifelong companion, Simone de Beauvoir, that was genuinely loving.

Giovanni Invitto's article, translated from the Italian original, is a detailed chronicle of Sartre's complex and stormy lifelong relationship, not with a person, but with a country—the United States of America. As a child who avidly read popular adventure stories about Buffalo Bill and other "heroes" of these books' quasi-mythical reconstruction of the Frontier past, he developed an enthusiasm for things American that evolved into a great interest, as a young man and high school teacher, in more serious American literature—Dos Passos, Faulkner, Hemingway, and others. His first trip to the United States was as a participant in a government-sponsored junket for French journalists after the liberation of Paris. Sartre continued to love many things about the country, especially about New York, but gradual disillusionment set in as he became more aware of its virulent racism and of the growing spirit of reaction that accompanied the escalation of the Cold War. The final stage of the relationship, just prior to Sartre's serious physical decline, was characterized by his fury over the American government's war in Vietnam, when, as Invitto sees it, he still entertained mythical images of America, but now of a predominantly negative kind.

Ann Fulton's piece looks at a slice of the same history from the opposite point of view—certain American philosophers' postwar appropriation, against their own philosophical "mainstream," of Sartre's thought. She shows that existentialism first gained a foothold in the United States primarily as a literary movement (Henri Peyre's article in this volume is a good illustration of this), mentions the importance of the *New Republic* article by Jean Wahl which appears in the first volume of this series, and puts into perspective the contributions of such other figures whose work we are reprinting as William Barrett, Maurice Natanson, and Hazel Barnes.

Barnes' own "Personal Recollections" essay, published in 1995 in the inaugural issue of *Sartre Studies International*, was originally prepared as a commentary or complement to an oral version of Fulton's essay that the latter presented at a meeting of the North American Sartre Society; these two histories have been reunited here. Barnes, whose doctoral studies had been in the field of classical languages, describes her unplanned evolution into the role of pioneer in existentialism in the United States and the less-than-ideal circumstances under which her translation of *Being and Nothingness*, still rightly regarded as a magistral accomplishment despite the errors that it admittedly contains, was rushed to completion.

At the center of Sartre scholarship on both sides of the Atlantic and worldwide is the author of the following selection, Michel Rybalka, who teaches in the United States and who has co-edited, along with Michel Contat, the most comprehensive and definitive bibliographies of Sartre and of that scholarship. As one who was close to Sartre himself, Rybalka talks about the philosophical problems surrounding the writing of biography in general, and in particular the biography of someone with whom one empathizes. As an illustration of such problems he points to the obvious antipathy shown by Simone de Beauvoir toward the secretary and confidant of Sartre's last years, Benny Lévy, in her account of those years, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*. Ideally, Rybalka would like to write a Sartre biography that would resemble an autobiography by him.

The long essay in intelllectual biography by Dominick LaCapra that comes next

takes up the central concept of freedom already stressed by Rybalka as having dominated both Sartre's life and his writings, and argues that there was, throughout his career, a dialectical interaction between the two which consisted of an interplay "between unifying and counteracting forces." To take two instances, one can observe the interplay between Sartre's *machismo* and his commitment to women's liberation, or between his comparative dislike of nature and his recognition of certain ecological values. LaCapra, by no means an unqualified admirer of Sartre, tries to show that *engagement* (commitment) to such Sartrean ideals as transparency, egalitarianism, and freedom, as exemplified in Sartre's notion of committed literature, can sometimes lead one close to the very forms of oppressive power that these ideals are intended to overcome.

The most comprehensive biography of Sartre that has been written to date is Annie Cohen-Solal's. In her essay here, she describes the challenge that she, a journalist rather than a philosopher or student of literature by profession, faced in undertaking her massive research for this book. She comments that the climate of opinion regarding Sartre has turned out to be more positive than she had expected—something that Rybalka also mentions—so that her book has been generally well received. In the course of becoming familiar, posthumously, with her subject, she was struck by the deep tension that existed between his felt need to engage in very public polemics in support of his convictions and his anti-elitist disinterest in being lionized. She cites with approval his commitment to "thinking against himself."

John Gerassi, whose second essay in this volume follows Cohen-Solal's, takes a tack opposite to hers in emphasizing some of the negative commentaries about Sartre (including one in the newspaper, *Libération*, which he had helped to support financially, and another in *The New York Review of Books*) that appeared after his death, as well as some of the numerous attacks on him—by Gabriel Marcel, Henri Lefebvre, André Malraux, and British philosophers A.J. Ayer and Mary Warnock—made during his lifetime. Albert Camus is widely preferred to Sartre, he claims, citing a very one-sided comparative study by Germaine Brée as an example, and the reasons for this are political: Camus "disturbs no consciences." Himself the author of a Sartre biography subtitled "Hated Conscience of His Century," Gerassi concludes by quoting approvingly from Françoise Sagan's posthumous *Love Letter to Jean-Paul Sartre*.

The next four contributions consist of overviews of Sartre's thought, rather than of his life. Xavier O. Monasterio's attempts to place Sartre in clear focus against the general background of existential philosophy and to offer a sort of appreciation of what existentialism has done for philosophy, neither of which tasks he thinks has as yet been carried out satisfactorily. He stresses, *inter alia*, Sartre's success in combining philosophy with literature, existentialism's principled opposition to philosophies of pure contemplation, and the existentialists' achievements with respect to the understanding of the human subject.

István Mészáros develops an intricate, six-phase sketch of the evolution of Sartre's (mature) thinking, which he nevertheless insists is characterized by greater continuity than discontinuity. The phases that he names and elaborates upon are: innocence and abstract heroism (1941–45), the search for the political "in the key of morality" (1946–50), the search for morality "in the key of politics" (1951–56), concern with the dialectic of history (1957–62), and emphasis on the notion of the "singular

universal" (1963–), first featured in Sartre's essay on Kierkegaard with that title. Mészáros' essay was published in 1975, before new questions about continuity in Sartre's thought were raised by the publication of his final interviews.

Thomas Flynn's 1979 article, published as it were on the eve of those interviews, presents clearly and concisely the stages of Sartre's thinking about politics and society—from his early, uneasy, often conflictual relations with Communist intellectuals, through his period of endorsement of a Marxism that was quite different from theirs, to his later movement in a direction "beyond Marxism." The article is a useful antidote to misunderstandings like those manifested in obituaries of Sartre, identifying him as a former Communist (with a capital "c"), which appeared even in some supposedly respectable newspapers.

The late Eléanor Kuykendall, writing in 1987, critically examines Sartre's intellectual career from a feminist standpoint that abhors violence and welcomes "fraternity," while wishing that there were a gender-neutral term for the latter. She discerns three stages in Sartre's thinking about questions of human togetherness, beginning with a "strange" conception of reciprocity in *Being and Nothingness*, passing through the period of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in which there is extensive treatment of what Sartre calls the "janus-faced phenomenon" of "fraternity-terror," and ending, precisely, with the reference to "fraternity" that is a salient feature of his 1980 interviews. She finds, on the one hand, that only the last of his treatments of fraternity holds real promise, but that, on the other hand, there is a positive conception of shared *consciousness* to be found in all three stages. As a scholar with a professional interest in language as well as in philosophy, she voices appreciation for his frequent use of neutral, nonsexist pronouns in contexts in which other male writers might have been less careful.

Herbert Spiegelberg, in an article printed in the same anthology as Kuykendall's, approaches the issue of Sartre's *Hope Now* (the translation of the French title given to his final interviews by the newspaper, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, in which they first appeared) in a very hopeful spirit. This distinguished historian of the phenomenological movement foresees the possibility of generating a new phenomenology of values out of Sartre's thought, especially as these interviews reveal certain benign aspects of it. Spiegelberg also refers to benign aspects of Sartre's private life—for example, his activities in the service of others, his commitment to social justice, and his little-known affection for his distant relation, Albert Schweitzer, the famous humanitarian physician and Protestant thinker.

My own discussion of the final interviews, which plays on the fact that it was first presented orally at a Sartre Society meeting that took place on a Good Friday, the day on which Christians commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, links these "last words" of Sartre both to the conception of community ("fraternity") that he adumbrates in this text and to the ultimately religious or spiritual community that Hegel idealized near the end of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Intriguing questions about Sartre's account of the nature of social reality and about his increasing interest, late in life, in the Jewish religion and the history of Judaism (largely under the tutelage of his interlocutor, Benny Lévy) are pointed out though hardly "resolved."

Modern Judaism is the title of the journal in which the long final essay of this

volume, concerning Sartre as "Jew," first appeared. Of course, he was never a Jew in any of several conceivable *literal* senses, but Steven S. Schwarzschild, the author, finds much of interest in the final interviews that relates both to Judaism and to Sartre's entire career. Sartre admitted to Lévy that at the time (1946) at which he published his influential essay, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (the original French title, *Réflexions sur la Question Juive*, is more appropriate to its actual contents), he did not have close acquaintances who were Jewish. But even in his early writings, according to Schwarzschild, there was a sense in which, as the Jewish philosopher/theologian Emmanuel Levinas put it in the title of his tribute on the occasion of Sartre's death, "He Spoke a Language Familiar to Us." While the systematic ontology developed in Sartre's early writings left room for God only as the impossible, contradictory idea of a unity of the In-Itself with the For-Itself, Schwarzschild suggests that a negation of this sort can be construed as a theological statement to the effect that, as a Sartrean sentence that he cites would have it, "Man loses himself as man so that God may be born." It is to more detailed examinations of that ontology and of related aspects of Sartre's thought that the next volume of this series will be devoted.

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Sartre's Life, Times, and *Vision du Monde*

FRENCH EXISTENTIALISM

BY HANNAH ARENDT

A LECTURE on philosophy provokes a riot, with hundreds crowding in and thousands turned away. Books on philosophical problems preaching no cheap creed and offering no panacea but, on the contrary, so difficult as to require actual thinking sell like detective stories. Plays in which the action is a matter of words, not of plot, and which offer a dialogue of reflections and ideas run for months and are attended by enthusiastic crowds. Analyses of the situation of man in the world, of the fundaments of human relationship, of Being and the Void not only give rise to a new literary movement but also figure as possible guides for a fresh political orientation. Philosophers become newspapermen, playwrights, novelists. They are not members of university faculties but "bohemians" who stay at hotels and live in the cafe—leading a public life to the point of renouncing privacy. And not even success, or so it seems, can turn them into respectable bores.

This is what is happening, from all reports, in Paris. If the Resistance has not achieved the European revolution, it seems to have brought about, at least in France, a genuine rebellion of the intellectuals, whose docility in relation to modern society was one of the saddest aspects of the sad spectacle of Europe between wars. And the French people, for the time being, appear to consider the arguments of their philosophers more important than the talk and the quarrels of their politicians. This may reflect, of course, a desire to escape from political action into some theory which merely talks about action, that is, into activism; but it may also signify that in the face of the spiritual bankruptcy of the left and the sterility of the old revolutionary élite—which have led to the desperate efforts at restoration of all political parties—more people than we might imagine have a feeling that the responsibility for political action is too heavy to assume until new foundations, ethical as well as political, are laid down, and that the old tradition of philosophy which is deeply imbedded even in the least philosophical individual is actually an impediment to new political thought.

The name of the new movement is "Existentialism," and its chief exponents are Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, but the term Existentialism has given rise to so many misunderstandings that Camus has already publicly stated why he is "not an Existentialist." The term comes from the modern German philosophy which had a revival immediately after the First World War and has strongly influenced French thought for more than a decade; but it would be irrelevant to trace and define the sources of Existentialism in national terms for the simple reason that both the German and the French manifestations came out of an identical period and a more or less identical cultural heritage.

The French Existentialists, though they differ widely among themselves, are united on two main lines of rebellion: first, the rigorous repudiation of what they call the *esprit sérieux*; and, second, the angry refusal to accept the world as it is as the natural, predestined milieu of man.

L'esprit sérieux, which is the original sin according to the new philosophy, may be equated with respectability. The "serious" man is one who thinks of himself *as* president of his business, *as* a member of the Legion of Honor, *as* a member of the faculty, but also *as* father, *as* husband, or as any other half-natural, half-social function. For by so doing he agrees to the identification of himself with an arbitrary function which society has bestowed. *L'esprit sérieux* is the very negation of freedom, because it leads man to agree to and accept the necessary deformation which every human being must undergo when he is fitted into society. Since everyone knows well enough in his own heart that he is not identical with his function, *l'esprit sérieux* indicates also bad faith in the sense of pretending. Kafka has already shown, in "Amerika," how ridiculous and dangerous is the hollow dignity which grows out of identifying oneself with one's function: In that book the most dignified person in the hotel, upon whose word the hero's job and daily bread depend, rules out the possibility that he can make an error by invoking the argument of the "serious" man: "How could I go on being the head porter if I mistook one person for another?"

This matter of *l'esprit sérieux* was first touched upon in Sartre's novel "La Nausée," in a delightful description of a gallery of portraits of the town's respectable citizens, *les salauds*. It then became the central topic of Camus's novel "L'Etranger." The hero of the book, the stranger, is an average man who simply refuses to submit to the serious-mindedness of society, who refuses to live as any of his allotted functions. He does not behave as a son at his mother's funeral—he does not weep; he does not behave as a husband—he declines to take marriage seriously even at the moment of his engagement. Because he does not pretend, he is a stranger whom no one understands, and he pays with his life for his affront to society. Since he refuses to play the game, he is isolated from his fellow-men to the point of incomprehensibility and isolated from himself to the point of becoming inarticulate. Only in a last scene, immediately before his death, does the hero arrive at some kind of explanation which conveys the impression that for him life itself was such a mystery and in its terrible way so beautiful that he did not see any necessity for "improving" upon it with the trimmings of good behavior and hollow pretensions.

Sartre's brilliant play "Huis Clos" belongs to the same category. The play opens in hell, appropriately furnished in the style of the Second Empire. The three persons gathered in the room—"Hell is the Others"—set the diabolical tor-

ture in motion by trying to pretend. Since, however, their lives are closed and since "you are your life and nothing else," pretense no longer works, and we see what would go on behind closed doors if people actually were stripped of the sheltering cover of functions derived from society.

Both Sartre's play and Camus's novel deny the possibility of a genuine fellowship between men, of any relationship which would be direct, innocent, free of pretense. Love in Sartre's philosophy is the will to be loved, the need for a supreme confirmation of one's own existence. For Camus love is a somewhat awkward and hopeless attempt to break through the isolation of the individual.

The way out of pretense and serious-mindedness is to play at being what one really is. Again Kafka indicated in the last chapter of "Amerika" a new possibility of authentic life. The great "Nature Theater" where everyone is welcome and where everybody's unhappiness is resolved is not by accident a theater. Here everybody is invited to choose his role, to play at what he is or would like to be. The chosen role is the solution of the conflict between mere functioning and mere being, as well as between mere ambition and mere reality.

The new "ideal" becomes, in this context, the actor whose very profession is pretending, who constantly changes his role, and thus can never take any of his roles seriously. By playing at what one is, one guards one's freedom as a human being from the pretenses of one's functions; moreover, only by playing at what he really is, is man able to affirm that he is never identical with himself as a thing is identical with itself. An inkpot is always an inkpot. Man is his life and his actions, which are never finished until the very moment of his death. He *is* his existence.

The second common element of French Existentialism, the insistence upon the basic homelessness of man in the world, is the topic of Camus's "Le Mythe de Sisyphe; essay sur l'absurde," and of Sartre's "La Nausée." For Camus man is essentially the stranger because the world in general and man as man are not fitted for each other; that they are together in existence makes the human condition an absurdity. Man is the only "thing" in the world which obviously does not belong in it, for only man does not exist simply as a man among men in the way animals exist among animals and trees among trees—all of which necessarily exist, so to speak, in the plural. Man is basically alone with his "revolt" and his "clairvoyance," that is with his reasoning, which makes him ridiculous because the gift of reason was bestowed upon him in a world "where everything is given and nothing ever explained."

Sartre's notion of the absurdity, the contingency, of existence is best represented in the chapter of "La Nausée" which appears in the current issue of the *Partisan Review* under the title The Root of the Chestnut Tree. Whatever exists, so far as we can see, has not the slightest reason for its existence. It is simply *de trop*, superfluous. The fact that I can't even imagine a world in which, instead of many too many things, there would be nothing only shows the hopelessness and senselessness of man's being eternally entangled in existence.

Here Sartre and Camus part company, if we may judge from the few works of theirs which have reached this country. The absurdity of existence and the repudiation of *l'esprit sérieux* are only points of departure for each. Camus seems to have gone on to a philosophy of absurdity, whereas Sartre seems to be working toward some new positive philosophy and even a new humanism.

Camus has probably protested against being called an Existentialist because for him the absurdity does not lie in man as such or in the world as such but only in their being thrown together. Since man's life, being laid in the world, is absurd, it must be lived as absurdity—lived, that is, in a kind of proud defiance which insists on reason despite the experience of reason's failure to explain anything; insists on despair since man's pride will not allow him the hope of discovering a sense he cannot figure out by means of reason; insists, finally, that reason and human dignity, in spite of their senselessness, remain the supreme values. The absurd life then consists in constantly rebelling against all its conditions and in constantly refusing consolations. "This revolt is the price of life. Spread over the whole of an existence, it restores its grandeur." All that remains, all that one can say yes to, is chance itself, the *hazard roi* which has apparently played at putting man and world together. "'I judge that everything is well,' said Oedipus, and this word is sacred. It resounds in the ferocious universe which is the limit of man. . . . It makes of destiny an affair of men which should be settled among men." This is precisely the point where Camus, without giving much explanation, leaves behind all modernistic attitudes and comes to insights which are genuinely modern, the insight, for instance, that the moment may have arrived "when creation is no longer taken tragically; it is only taken seriously."

For Sartre, absurdity is of the essence of things as well as of man. Anything that exists is absurd simply because it exists. The salient difference between the things of the world and the human being is that things are unequivocally identical with themselves, whereas man—because he sees and knows that he sees, believes and knows that he believes—bears within his consciousness a negation which makes it impossible for him ever to become one with himself. In this single respect—in respect of his consciousness, which has the germ of negation in it—man is a creator. For this is of man's own making and not merely given, as the world and his existence are given. If man becomes aware of his own consciousness and its tremendous creative possibilities, and renounces the longing to be identical with himself as a thing is, he realizes that he depends upon nothing and nobody outside himself and that he can be free, the master of his own destiny. This seems to be the essential meaning of Sartre's novel "Les Mouches" ("The Flies"), in which Orestes, by taking upon himself the responsibility for the necessary killing of which the town is afraid, liberates the town and takes the Flies —the Erinyes of bad conscience and of the dark fear of revenge—with him. He himself is immune because he does not feel guilty and regrets nothing.

It would be a cheap error to mistake this new trend in philosophy and literature for just another fashion of the day because its exponents refuse the respectability of institutions and do not even pretend to that seriousness which regards every achievement as a step in a career. Nor should we be put off by the loud journalistic success with which their work has been accompanied. This success, equivocal as it may

be in itself, is nevertheless due to the quality of the work. It is also due to a definite modernity of attitude which does not try to hide the depth of the break in Western tradition. Camus especially has the courage not even to look for connections, for predecessors and the like. The good thing about Sartre and Camus is that they apparently suffer no longer from nostalgia for the good old days, even though they may know that in an abstract sense those days were actually better than ours. They do not believe in the magic of the old, and they are honest in that they make no compromises whatever.

Yet if the revolutionary élan of these writers is not broken by success, if, symbolically speaking, they stick to their hotel rooms and their cafes, the time may come when it will be necessary to point out "seriously" those aspects of their philosophy which indicate that they are still dangerously involved in old concepts. The nihilistic elements, which are obvious in spite of all protests to the contrary, are not the consequences of new insights but of some very old ideas.

EXISTENCE AND HUMAN FREEDOM

The "Marxian Man" and the "Nietzschean Man" have been dealt with at some length elsewhere; but whether or not it will ever be possible to speak of the "Sartrean Man," it is clearly impossible to do so as yet. The work of Sartre, powerful and important as it is already, is still in the making. His system of ethics has not yet been presented. Actually I believe that the construction of this system will offer grave difficulties (I shall give my reasons for this further on); however this may be, it is impossible to speak of the "Sartrean Man" without a full knowledge of this system, as to which at present we can only make conjectures.

I should like to start by explaining in what spirit I propose to tackle my subject. To begin with, my attitude is not polemical. I consider it important, as well as, in the first place, honest, to admit fully the validity and the power of some of Sartre's premises, and I shall insist on this, perhaps at the risk of shocking some of my readers, because this seems to me the only way of establishing the basis of the critical conclusions at which I arrive.

Another preliminary point I should like to stress is this: in whatever direction we may look to-day, it is hard to escape the conclusion that we have entered upon what

Christians might describe as an eschatological age. This does not necessarily mean that the end of the world is chronologically imminent, and it would seem to me very rash to indulge in any prophecies on this subject. But what is clear is that men to-day are faced with a fact which would have been inconceivable at the beginning of this century: they know that they have it in their power to destroy the universe. Moreover, one would have to be blind not to see that, at every level of being, a clearly traceable process of self-destruction is taking place; while it is much harder to see what are the forces which can—or could if the occasion arose—keep this process in check. It is from this point which seems to me central that I should like to start my inquiry into Sartre's view of existence and of human freedom. I believe that the importance of this view should not be underestimated. This was a point of difference between me and some of my colleagues at the Sorbonne towards the end of 1943; I was told that I worried too much, that "these people" liked nothing so much as a scandal, and that, by taking them too seriously, I was playing into their hands. But I believed then, as I do now, that Sartre's philosophy was much too impressive, particularly to young people, not to be examined with the utmost seriousness and objectivity; though I admit that there is in Sartre a certain taste and propensity for scandal, but this is of secondary importance and I mention it only in passing.

As I was saying, we must begin by seeing what is valid in Sartre's premises. And for this I think it is important to avoid the temptation which besets professional philosophers to envisage his thought only in the context of other, earlier philosophies, particularly that of Heidegger, even though Sartre is the first to recognise his debt to his German fore-

runner. What interests us much more is the actual character of that initial experience of existence which Sartre has described with such vehemence and precision, particularly in *La Nausée*. I shall take it for granted that this experience is genuine; an account of it must form the preamble to any analysis of Sartre's anthropology, and I should like to say at once that, taken in itself, it appears to me irrefutable. Our problem—and it is a difficult problem—is to know what value to assign to it.

In what follows I shall assume Sartre's work to be unknown to my readers, although in fact, most of them are no doubt familiar with at least a part of it. It seems to me preferable to begin at the beginning, and if, at any rate in the first part of this essay, I shall refer mainly to *La Nausée*, it is because this is the most forceful expression of his personality—perhaps because it is his first book. It has, indeed, all the "impetus" which so often distinguishes the first original work of a thinker—we need only think of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, not that it would be altogether fair to burden Sartre with this rather intimidating comparison.

La Nausée is a novel, but it is in no sense a work of fiction: there can be no doubt that the identity of the hero, Antoine Roquentin, is that of the author himself. Its profound originality lies in the fact that it shows us the genesis of an experience which was at first simply lived, then fully recognised, and which finally assumed in some sense the authority of truth itself for its subject.

From the outset, Roquentin notes certain facts, such as the following:

> I am very fond of picking up chestnuts, old rags, and, particularly, pieces of paper. I like to hold them in my hands, to close my fingers over them; I could almost put them in my mouth, like

a small child. Annie [his mistress] used to get furious with me for picking up in the street some heavy and sumptuous paper which was perhaps stained with filth.[1]

Yet one day, seeing a piece of paper lying on the edge of a puddle and stooping to finger its soft, tender substance, Roquentin finds that he can not do it; he can no longer do what he wants:

Objects ought not to move one, since they are not alive. They should be used and put back in their place; one lives among them, they are useful and that is all. But I am moved by them, it is unbearable. I am as frightened of coming in contact with them as if they were live beasts.

He has the same experience when, holding a pebble, he has a sensation of sickly sweetness, what he calls "nausea of the hands." It is the metaphysical nature of this nausea that the novelist undertakes to explore. The experience is renewed again and again—for instance, when he looks at the braces of Adolphe, the cashier:

They annoy me by their sheep-like stubbornness; as though, having set out to be purple, they had stopped half way without giving up their pretensions. You feel like saying to them: Go, on, be purple and don't let's talk about it. But no, they remain in suspense, obstinate in their unfinished effort.[2]

Thus *nausea* (I am now speaking in my own person) seems to be bound up in its origin with an experience of fluency—not fluidity, but fluency—in so far as what is fluent slows down and assumes a kind of soft and spurious solidity. The sensation which this suggests is admittedly repellent. To understand and to sympathise with Sartre's basic experi-

[1] *La Nausée*, p. 24.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

ence I need only recall the disgusting feeling of coming on a "gooey" lump in a *purée*. "Gooeyness" is indeed the key word, but it is, for Sartre, gooeyness on an enormous scale: only an insignificant part of what he means to convey would be grasped if it were not understood that, for him, the whole of life is, if not actually gooey, at least tending towards gooeyness. What he has in mind is a certain experience of secretions and of mucus in process of formation.

> I exist, softly, softly and lightly, lightly as air. It moves a little. There are soft, melting contacts, gentle, so gentle. There is a little bubbling water in my mouth, I swallow it, it slips down my throat—and it is again in my mouth. I have in my mouth in perpetuity a little puddle of water, whitish, discreet, brushing against my tongue. And this puddle is myself, and my tongue and my throat, they too are myself.[1]

Such an experience is difficult to intellectualise; let us say that I apprehend myself both as the secretion and the mucous membrane, or rather as the mucous membrane in process of secreting. Nothing could be less formed, less definite, and it is surely in this absence of contours that the principle of *La Nausée* resides. But further, and much more paradoxically, the same is true, for instance, of my hand:

> It drags a little, hardly at all, softly, languorously, it exists. Wherever I put it down, I cannot get rid of it, any more than I can get rid of the rest of my body, of the damp heat which stains my shirt, or of the warm fat which heaves lazily, as if it were stirred with a spoon, or of all the sensations which come and go in it, rising from my thigh to my arm-pit, or drowsing softly in their accustomed place from morning till night.

Could not all this be summed up by saying that I apprehend myself as a *prey* of existence? A comparison occurs

[1] *Loc. cit.*, p. 129.

to me (I beg my readers' indulgence if I digress and interpolate my own definitions and comments, since this is the only way of maintaining the kind of contact which is necessary in order to understand and to criticise): it is that of a man who, on waking up one morning, discovers himself to be, not, as in Kafka's story, an ant, but a whole ant-heap —not just crawling with ants, but himself the seat, the centre of this monstrous proliferation, which literally comes out of him, and which, on leaving him still remains, incomprehensibly, himself.

Can we at least say that we can escape from this horror in spirit, in thought? Nothing could be more illusory, for thought itself is an ant-heap:

> Thought is the most insipid of all, more insipid even than flesh. It pulls out endlessly and it leaves a kind of aftertaste. And then there are words inside it, unfinished words, fragments of sentences which come back again and again. . . . It is worse than all the rest because I feel responsible for it, I feel like an accomplice. Take this long, painful rumination: I exist; it is I who go on ruminating. The body, once it has started up, lives on of itself. But it is I who entertain thought. I exist. I think that I exist. Ah, it is I who gently unwind this endless streamer, this feeling that I exist.[1]

Note the role of intermediary played by an image between the actual experience of the act of thinking and the nausea which is associated with this act—this will be of importance later on. It is quite impossible that my thought should appear to me spontaneously as a kind of viscous band, like a filament of toffee or liquorice. For this to happen, my thought has to withdraw from itself and to imagine itself as it would appear if it were seen as an object. The point to

[1] *Loc. cit.*, p. 130.

note is the metaphysical connotation given to a kind of repellent consistency which is alleged to be characteristic of thought.

A few years ago, after Sartre had read a paper at my house, I suggested to him that he should make an analysis of the viscous; it seemed to me so exactly in his line. The pages which he has since devoted to this subject are altogether remarkable, and I am happy and proud to have suggested it to him.

All this becomes clear *a contrario* when it is compared with the description which Sartre gives of "Boulevard Noir," the main artery of Bouville (the action of *La Nausée* takes place in "Bouville"—probably Le Havre, where Sartre was a schoolteacher):

> A street of iron, it has not the indecent mien of middle-class streets which make up to the passers-by. . . . It is inhuman like a mineral or a triangle. It is fortunate that there should be such a street in Bouville. Usually they are only to be found in capitals, in London beyond Greenwich or in the direction of Friedrichsheim or of Neukolln in Berlin. . . .
>
> Nausea has been left behind under the yellow lights. I am happy; this cold, this darkness are so pure; am I not myself a wave of frozen air? To have no blood, no lymphatic tissue, no flesh. To flow along this canal towards that pale light. To be nothing but the cold.[1]

This frozen and liberating emptiness is contrasted with materiality of whatever kind, or rather, to be more exact, with humid materiality wherever it assumes the form of proliferation or excrescence.

This kind of materiality is experienced by Sartre not as overabundance of being but as fundamental and absurd

[1] *Loc. cit.*, p. 45.

contingency. Nausea is, at bottom, the experience of contingency and of the absurdity which attaches to existence as such. Sitting in a public garden, Roquentin has the revelation of absurdity, to begin with the absurdity of inanimate things. He is staring at a root, and this root exists in the exact measure in which he finds it inexplicable. Nobbly, inert, nameless, it fills his vision and brings him back again and again to the problem of his own existence:

> It was useless to repeat to myself: This is a root; it did not click in my mind. Its function did not explain anything: there was no connection between its function as root, as hydraulic pump, and this hard compact surface, like the skin of a seal, this oily, harsh obstinacy. The function explained roots in general, but this particular root, with its colour, its shape, its arrested movement, was beneath all explanation. Every one of its qualities leaked from it a little, overflowed, became partly solid, became almost a thing; every one of them was unnecessary in a root.

This recalls the braces of Adolphe, and it is most interesting to see this unusual link emerge between braces and roots. This kind of obscene overabundance is contrasted with the linear perfection of a phrase of melody; but it must be said at once that this pure melody does not exist any more than a geometrical figure.

Make no mistake about it: it is not merely the existence of a thing—a root for instance—which is being challenged, one might almost say incriminated, but existence as such: existence as unmasked in the root, bereft of its seemingly innocuous, abstract, categorical mien, and revealed in its terrifying and obscene nudity. I apologise for the continuous recurrence of this adjective, obscene; it is the right

word, and we shall see the reason for it more and more clearly as we go on.

All these things—the chestnut trees, the bandstand, the statue by Velleda in the laurel thicket—abandoned themselves to existing like those tired women who relax into laughter murmuring in a tired voice: "It is good to laugh." I saw that there was no half way between non-existence and this swooning overabundance. If you exist at all, you have to exist to this point: to the point of swelling, of mouldering, of obscenity.

Note the comparison which is meant to underline this loose, unbuttoned excess. What could be further than this from the traditional vision of the overabundance of being which has haunted all the great poets, particularly the pantheists from Lucretius to Maurice de Guérin? The overflowing richness of reality which was experienced by them as something positive, and as a kind of glory, is for Sartre a looseness, an obscenity (the word is inevitable). And let there be no mistake: man himself is part of this looseness:

There we were, the whole lot of us, awkward, embarrassed by our own existence, having no reason to be here rather than there; confused, vaguely restless, feeling superfluous to one another. Superfluity was the only relationship I could establish between these trees, these hedges, these paths. Vainly I strove to compute the number of the chestnut trees, or their distance from the Velleda, or their height as compared with that of the plane trees; each of them escaped from the pattern I made for it, overflowed from it or withdrew. And I too among them, vile, languorous, obscene, chewing the insipid cud of my thoughts, I too was superfluous. [I is you or I or anyone.] Luckily I did not feel it, I only understood it, but I felt uncomfortable because I was afraid of feeling it. . . . I thought vaguely of doing away with myself, to do away with at least one of these superfluous existences. But my death—my corpse, my blood poured out on this gravel, among these plants, in this smiling garden—would have been superfluous as well. I was superfluous to all eternity.

We are in the full glare of the absurd.

Absurdity was not an idea in my head nor the sound of a voice, it was this long, dead, wooden snake curled up at my feet, snake or claw or talon or root, it was all the same. Without formulating anything I knew that I had at last found the clue to my existence, to my nausea, to my life. And indeed, everything I have ever grasped since that moment comes back to this fundamental absurdity.

Such is the revelation, the negative enlightenment. Mark this particular combination of words, for it is the clue to much of Sartre's work. It is because Sartre's enlightenment is negative that his philosophy is, in the last analysis, a philosophy of non-being. No doubt it may be questioned if enlightenment can indeed be negative: to say enlightenment is to say light, and absurdity is opacity itself, it is the contrary of what gives light. If there is any light in it, it can only come from myself, in so far as it is a self which is set up in opposition to reality, but this kind of self is, etymologically, *eidolon*—idol. Thus we clearly perceive the important truth that Sartre's thought is eidolocentric.

I have said thought, not wisdom. According to Sartre, what men commonly call wisdom or experience is most likely to be a deliberate way of lying to oneself and of concealing the fundamental absurdity which is existence itself. The following passage from *La Nausée* illustrates this view; it is a passage which I personally greatly admire, though not without reservations. Monsieur Achille is sitting in a *café* sipping his *Byrrh:*

His face is handsomely wrinkled: it has the vertical bars, the crow's feet, the bitter lines on either side of his mouth, not to count the yellow strings which hang down under his chin. He has clearly been fortunate: it stands out a mile that he has

suffered and lived. And indeed he deserves his face: at no moment of his life has he been in any doubt as to how to use his past, and now he has stuffed it and hands it out as experience for the use of ladies and young men.[1]

Who, then, are these V.I.P.'s, these professionals of experience?

They have dragged out their lives in drowsiness and half-sleep. They have scurried into marriage and they have conceived children by chance. They have met other men in *cafés* and at weddings and funerals. Now and then they have been caught in a whirlpool and have struggled to understand. But everything that went on around them began and ended out of their sight. Long obscure shapes, events coming from afar brushed swiftly against them and were gone before they could look round. Then, in the forties, they put together their little obstinacies and a few proverbs, they label this experience and they turn themselves into penny-in-the-slot machines: the slot on the right is for anecdotes wrapped in silver paper, the slot on the left is for valuable advice which sticks to your teeth like gum.

Their advice is to make the least possible noise, to live as little as possible and to allow oneself to be forgotten. The best stories are about eccentrics and rash people who have been caught and chastised. "Yes, that's how things are and nobody can deny it."

Further light on this is shed in the chapter which describes Roquentin's visit to the Museum of Bouville. A recently acquired picture hung over the entrance of the Bordurin-Renaudas gallery:

It was signed by Richard Severin and it was entitled "A Bachelor's Deathbed." Naked to the waist, the torso a little green as befits a corpse, the bachelor lay prone on an untidy bed; the disordered blankets and sheets showed that the agony had

[1] *Loc. cit.*, p. 92.

been long and painful. . . . This man had lived for himself alone, his punishment—a lonely deathbed—was as severe as it was deserved. This picture was a warning to me to retrace my steps while there was still time. And if I disregarded it I was to remember this: with the exception of the Reverend Mother of an orphanage and of a few young men whose premature deaths were mourned by their families, there was not a single celibate among all the hundred and fifty notables whose portraits hung on the walls of the great gallery which I was about to enter. Not one of them had died without leaving children and a will; not one of them had died without the last sacraments. On good terms with God and the world on that day as on all the others, these men had gone to claim the part of eternal life to which they had a right. For these men had had a right to everything: to life, to work, to wealth, to obedience, to respect and now finally to eternal life.[1]

Nowhere more than in these pages does Sartre reveal his resentment against all that is implied by "social order," and perhaps also by order as such. For clearly what is being ridiculed is quite different from mere pharisaism (if it were only that, we would have no difficulty in agreeing with Sartre); or to be more exact, all middle-class virtue is regarded as pharisaical, and indeed it may be asked since the publication of *Le Mur* and *Les Chemins de la Liberté* if all virtue (e.g. conjugal, filial, etc.), with the possible exception of courage, is not treated as middle class and consequently as *declassé* and as valueless.

I ought really to quote at length the extraordinarily biting description of the portraits of notables which adorn the Museum of Bouville. What seems to me particularly characteristic is the identification of the notable himself with his hideously academic portrait. It is as if the idea of the portrait were already contained in the idea of the notable: the no-

[1] *Loc. cit.*, pp. 109–10.

table *is* his own portrait; his very essence is to be lying and *trompe l'œil*. Every detail of this passage brings out Sartre's sympathy—and also his contempt—for the celibate as such, as well as the aversion he feels for the *paterfamilias* with his gaggle of brats. I would say at the risk of shocking some of my readers that there is in Sartre socially something of a Henri Bordeaux *à rebours*, just as in the same way there is in him, theologically, something of an inverted Bernardin de St. Pierre.

It should be noted that for Sartre the very existence of the family is profoundly suspect. This is, no doubt, partly the result of his temperament, as is borne out by an incident which I have in mind. I had suggested in conversation the idea, which I still hold, that Sartre's world is the world as seen from the terrace of a *café*. Incidentally, this remark brought upon me—or, rather, upon Fr. Troisfontaines, who repeated it—the bitterest criticism on the grounds that this was not the way to speak of a philosopher. Yet I think that we were right, and Sartre himself has recently said to Fr. Troisfontaines: I am accused of spending my life in *cafés*; it is true that I cannot work anywhere else. A *café* has the immense advantage of indifference: I and the other people who come to it are independent of one another. Just imagine, if I had a home, I could never work in it; there would be a wife, children; they would be a burden to me, and all the heavier the more they were obviously anxious not to be a burden, not to worry me. This is putting things at their best, and there are far more sinister possibilities.

But I believe personally that there is a good deal more in it than that. In addition to the fact that the family must represent for Sartre that viscous element which he particularly dislikes, I believe that the father of a family must ap-

pear to him as someone who is always playing a part. To use a formula which is not one of Sartre's, but which, I think, is Sartrian, to be a father is to be always and inevitably somebody who *acts* the role of a father; indeed, if he did not act this role he would be immediately accused of being an unnatural parent.

Let us stop a moment to consider this notion of play-acting. The performer inevitably performs not only for others, but also for himself; he is therefore *acting* rather than *being* what he is. But, asks Sartre, is this merely a perversion? Does it depend upon us to avoid it as a stumbling block? In his principal work he formulates this question with the utmost precision. How is it possible, he asks, to *be,* while, as it were, being at the same time the consciousness of one's being? Does not consciousness of being imply a gap, a space, which prevents the perfect coincidence of a being with itself, and therefore prevents any true simplicity void of all posturing?

All this may seem rather abstract, but the following analysis will enable us to understand the issue.

To get down to principles, what manner of being should be attributed to a being who exists for himself—that is, to a being who is conscious of his own existence? This kind of being is regarded by Sartre as something altogether different from that of being-in-itself. Being-in-itself, he tells us, is completely full of itself, it is purely and simply what it is; it has no inwardness and, consequently, no potentiality and no future. It can never be in the relation of "other" to another being; indeed, it can have no relationship with Another. It is itself, indefinitely and without any possibility of being anything else. We need not ask at this point if this view of being-in-itself is real or mythical, nor if the author

is justified in speaking of positivity in this context. The important point is that, in contrast with being-in-itself, being-for-itself is defined as not being what it is.

The characteristic of consciousness, Sartre tells us, is that it is a decompression of being. It is of the essence of conscious being to be what it is not and not to be what it is. The being of humanity is such that it is able to adopt a negative attitude in regard to itself. Thus, to prohibit something is to "deny some future transcendence." ("Transcendence" is a term which is overworked by Sartre who, like his predecessors, means by it merely something which transcends my immediate circumstances.) This denial is something different from a mere statement.

> My consciousness constitutes itself in my flesh as the annihilation (*néantisation*) of a possibility which is projected by another human consciousness as its own.

To understand what is meant by this jargon, let us take an example. Suppose that I say to my son, "No, you are not to be an actor" or "I won't let you be a dirt-track racer," I deny being to these possibilities which he had planned for himself. This denial is what Sartre means by *néantisation.* There are even some people—guards, overseers, he observes, whose entire social function is to be a *no.* They will have lived and died without ever having been anything but a "Thou shalt not." Clearly the function of a gaoler is to incarnate "Thou shalt not escape," and it is indeed melancholy to think that a human destiny can be reduced merely to this.

There are other forms of negation which are more inward such as irony or resentment. But all these attitudes are only made possible by a certain universal structure of being-for-

itself, which is, at is were, alloyed with non-being. We are told that conscious being is present to itself; but we are not to see in this the sign of an ontological dignity, as would have been held, for instance, by Pascal. From Sartre's standpoint, presence is inferior to coincidence, because presence implies a separateness.

Once again we see how Sartre's thought is dominated and, as it were, hypnotised by a given image. Let us imagine two leaflets placed exactly one on top of the other; this is coincidence. Now imagine that the leaflets have become slightly detached: this will correspond to *less being* as compared with coincidence, which was perfect and, as it were, ideal. We have seen that consciousness is a decompression of being. But if we ask ourselves what it is that separates a subject from itself, we shall be obliged to say that it is precisely *nothing*. In general separation is created by distance or the passage of time; but nothing separates, for example, the consciousness of a belief from the belief itself, since the belief is nothing other than the consciousness of the belief. Yet the fissure is there, it is intraconscious, but it will come to the surface as bad faith. Thus we come back to the concept of being as impersonation.

To make this clearer, let us follow one of those analyses of concrete examples in which Sartre excels, but from which he seems to me to draw quite unwarranted conclusions. It is just as if there were a "leakage" somewhere; and nothing is more important in a work of this sort, once we have established the validity of the premises, than to track down this "escape."

The example is that of a woman who goes for the first time to keep an appointment with a man, knowing what are his intentions in regard to herself. She knows that she

will have to make a decision sooner or later, but she prefers to put it off; she deliberately concentrates on the proofs of discretion and respect which her partner has given her. She confines herself to what the relationship is at the moment, without thinking of the further plans by which it is governed in his mind. In other words, the man is, for her, a charming and agreeable companion; as for what he keeps in the back of his mind, she discounts it, because clearly, if she thought about it, she would have to alter her attitude; she would have to be more reserved and less responsive to so much charm.

So she affects to regard the man as sincere and considerate in exactly the same way as a table is round or square; she treats his qualities as though they were permanently fixed, like the qualities of things. This is because she is not quite clear about what she wishes; she is deeply moved by the desire she has aroused, but if this desire were crude and unconcealed, she would feel humiliated and repelled.

To use terms which are not exactly those of Sartre, she establishes a relationship with the man by which she manages to deceive herself.

Now she allows her hand to be held; it lies inert between his warm hands, neither consenting nor resisting—it is a thing. She conceives herself as not being her own body, but at seeing it from above, as though it were a passive object at the mercy of happenings which it can neither provoke nor prevent, since they are outside itself.[1]

In this instance, bad faith consists in a certain act of holding contrary notions which combine an idea with its opposite.

But all this is only made possible by the peculiar structure

[1] *L'Etre et le Néant,* pp. 57–8.