

Jean-Paul Sartre

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Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the few philosophers who deeply influenced the debates in the 20th century and one of the most controversial authentic philosophers of his age. Upon his death, it is said that 50,000 people spontaneously gathered to pay tribute and accompany him on the way to the cemetery. His intellectual engagement in philosophy, psychology, literature, arts, and practical politics was dedicated to the search for emancipation and liberation from all oppressive relations. This is probably the reason why he has been attacked permanently by Heidegger who has nothing positively to contribute to the debate on human emancipation. The core concepts therefore which underlie all Sartre's works are alienation and freedom.

Sartre was part of an intellectual movement that came to be called *existentialism*, a term that, though borrowed from Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, was appropriated by Sartre. Existentialism originates from Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger represented the right wing of existentialism and Husserl and Sartre represented the left wing. The philosophy of the former prepared the way for fascist ideology and supported fascism as a political movement, whereas the philosophy of the latter moved more and more toward Marxism.

Sartre's first philosophical work was *Being and Nothingness* (1943). This work attempted to show how human beings can become self-conscious revolutionary agents in the sense that they can overcome all determining social and political boundaries and create a realm of freedom. In this work he criticised neo-Kantian abstract philosophy and developed a philosophy that should grasp the world in its most concrete form. The main subject of the work was 'being' and combined two opposite philosophical principles: René Descartes's *cogito* principle and the mirror principle that may be traced back in modern philosophy to Gottfried Leibniz and Adam Smith, as well as drawing on Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's pseudo ontology. But as opposed to Heidegger's ahistorical approach, he introduces a historical approach to ontology. It starts with consciousness rather than with being. It is therefore appropriate to qualify Sartre's early philosophy as subjectivist idealism.

Sartre divides being into two forms: being-in-itself (the natural world) and the being-for-itself (human society). The natural world is an objective and mechanical world. He sees therefore development and advancement only in human society. He employs an intersubjective approach that he borrows from Husserl and analyses it in terms of power relations and alienation. As opposed to Michel Foucault, however, he is always interested in showing ways out of power relations and establishing authentic human relations. In this connection his philosophical work *Imagination* (1940) and the play *The Flies* (1943) are very important for understanding his conception of freedom.

Being and Nothingness received a controversial reception from the right as well as from the left. Sartre's move in his later work toward Marxism proves that he took some of these left-wing critiques very seriously, esp. that of Georg Lukács. His work *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (1960) shows this clearly. His work *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946) attempts to clarify some of the misperceptions and questions raised in the debates about his first major philosophical work.

His later philosophical work is the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), in which he tried to give his existential philosophy a Marxist foundation. It is no longer an abstract concept of freedom he refers to but praxis. He links this concept to the concept of needs. Human beings plan their praxis to satisfy their needs—an aim that leads them to change their circumstances and establish their freedom. In this second major philosophical work Sartre employs not only an intersubjective approach, but he uses also the concepts of group, majority, and minority. The concept of majority refers in Marxian terms, though Sartre never makes it explicit, to the subordinated classes, whereas the minority refers to the ruling classes. His use of the concepts of majority and minority, however, highlights his hesitation to use Marx's concept of class. If human beings act to satisfy their needs, they meet other human beings with contradictory interests. This is then the cause for collective or group action, which can become oppressive toward individuals. In this connection his plays *Dirty Hands* and *Lucifer and the Lord* are very illuminative to read, because they are devoted to the complex of ethical problems of the relationship of the means and the ends in revolutionary and liberation movements.

Sartre's political life was determined by his experiences of World War I and World War II. In 1939 he was called up to military service, but in 1940 he was taken prisoner. Fortunately he could escape with fake documents and went immediately into the resistance movement against fascist German occupation. Between 1948 and 1949, he was one of the founders of Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Democratic Assembly) to enforce third-way socialism. However, he supported between 1952 and 1956 the Communist Party of France, the world peace movement, and the Soviet Union. He supported the Algerian liberation movement, which almost cost him his life. He was active against the Vietnam War and chaired the Russell Tribunal against U.S. war crimes in Vietnam. He published his observations about racism in the United States in his *Respectful Prostitute* (1946). His assertion in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946) that no one in France would be free as long as there was a Jew suppressed in the World reminds us of Marx's assertion in *Capital* that the labor in white skin in Europe would never be emancipated as long as the labor in black skin in the United States was enslaved and is today more valid than ever before: as long as there is one individual suppressed no one in the world can claim to be free. He called for a permanent revolution until the last man and woman are free. These are the main message of Sartre's work.