

Jean-Paul Sartre

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Biography

Sartre was a philosopher of paradox: an existentialist who attempted a reconciliation with Marxism, a theorist of freedom who explored the notion of predestination. From the mid-1930s to the late-1940s, Sartre was in his 'classical' period. He explored the history of theories of imagination leading up to that of Husserl, and developed his own phenomenological account of imagination as the key to the freedom of consciousness. He analysed human emotions, arguing that emotion is a freely chosen mode of relationship to the outside world. In his major philosophical work, *L'Être et le Néant* (Being and Nothingness) (1943a), Sartre distinguished between consciousness and all other beings: consciousness is always at least tacitly conscious of itself, hence it is essentially 'for itself' (*pour-soi*) – free, mobile and spontaneous. Everything else, lacking this self-consciousness, is just what it is 'in-itself' (*en-soi*); it is 'solid' and lacks freedom. Consciousness is always engaged in the world of which it is conscious, and in relationships with other consciousnesses. These relationships are conflictual: they involve a battle to maintain the position of subject and to make the other into an object. This battle is inescapable.

Although Sartre was indeed a philosopher of freedom, his conception of freedom is often misunderstood. Already in *Being and Nothingness* human freedom operates against a background of facticity and situation. My facticity is all the facts about myself which cannot be changed – my age, sex, class of origin, race and so on; my situation may be modified, but it still constitutes the starting point for change and roots consciousness firmly in the world. Freedom is not idealized by Sartre; it is always within a given set of circumstances, after a particular past, and against the expectations of both myself and others that I make my free choices. My personal history conditions the range of my options.

From the 1950s onwards Sartre became increasingly politicized and was drawn to attempt a reconciliation between existentialism and Marxism. This was the aim of the *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Critique of Dialectical Reason) (1960) which recognized more fully than before the effect of historical and material conditions on individual and collective choice. An attempt to explore this interplay in action underlies both his biography of Flaubert and his own autobiography.

1. Background

Sartre's prestige as a philosopher was at its peak, in France at least, in the late 1940s, in the aftermath of the Second World War, when a philosophy of freedom and self-determination fitted the mood of a country recently liberated from the Occupation. It was at its nadir in the late 1960s and 1970s when structuralism had discredited, temporarily, both humanism and existentialism, and proclaimed 'man' to be no more than a locus of forces traversed and indeed produced by

social and linguistic structures (see Structuralism). The British analytic tradition has never had much time for the literary and dramatic aspects of existentialism and phenomenology, though some recent critics, such as Phyllis Morris (1974) and Gregory McCulloch (1994), have attempted to take Sartre seriously as a philosopher and to assess his contribution in terms more accessible to analytically trained minds.

The emotive responses tend in their different ways to distort Sartre's arguments and to focus, for example, on one of the poles of the many paradoxes which his philosophy implies. For Sartre is indeed a philosopher of paradox – deliberately facing his readers with logically 'impossible' or self-contradictory statements in order to force them to think beyond the confines of the binary oppositions to which common sense and analytic reason have accustomed them. For example, 'Man is what he is not and is not what he is' (1943a: 97), provocatively compels the reader who perseveres to confront the difficult issues of the relationship between essence, existence and negation. 'Man is what he is not', that is to say, man is a being without an essential nature, a being who operates through negation, who cannot be identified with his past, or indeed his present self, and so 'who is not what he is'.

1940s Paris overestimated Sartre's faith in human freedom and lauded him for it; 1960s Paris made the same mistake and discarded him along with all other relics of mid-century humanism. Neither period read Sartre carefully enough to recognize the constraints and limits within which freedom was, from the outset, deemed to operate.

2. Early philosophy

Sartre's first published philosophical works were *L'Imagination* (1936a), a history of theories of imagination up to the theory of Edmund Husserl, and 'La Transcendance de l'ego' (The Transcendence of the Ego) (1936b). The Transcendence of the Ego shows hostility to any kind of essentialism of the self. In it Sartre argues (against Husserl) that the ego is not transcendental but transcendent, that is, it is not an inner core of being, a source of my actions, emotions and character, but rather a construct, a product of my self-image and my image in the eyes of others, of my past behaviour and feelings. Sartre maintains that consciousness is not essentially first-person but is impersonal, or at most pre-personal, and that it is characterized by intentionality, that is to say it is always directed at something other than itself. In this context Sartre positions himself in relation to the Kantian 'unity of apperception', arguing that although the 'I think' must be able to accompany all my representations, it does not always do so, at least explicitly. I may turn my attention at any moment away from what I am doing and direct it towards myself as agent, but this reflexivity is not a permanent,thetic feature of consciousness. Later, in *L'Être et le Néant* (Being and Nothingness) (1943a), Sartre claims that it is precisely this very reflexivity – the self-consciousness of consciousness – that personalizes consciousness and constitutes the human subject, but in *The Transcendence of the Ego* such a notion is absent and he is more concerned to argue against the identification of consciousness with selfhood than to explore the ways in which consciousness relates to the notion of subject.

In his *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* (Sketch for a Theory of Emotions) (1939) Sartre turns his attention to another area of human experience in order to show that this, in its turn, cannot be

described in essentialist terms. Emotions, in Sartre's account, are chosen rather than caused: emotion involves a 'magical' attempt to transform reality by changing what can be changed (my own feelings) rather than what is less easily malleable, that is, the outside world. In the face of extreme danger I may faint from fear: the danger has not disappeared but I am no longer conscious of it. Sartre here takes a radical position which he maintained but modified in later years, as his recognition of the degree to which we are formed by external conditions gradually increased. He is careful to distinguish between various areas related to emotion – passion, feeling and so on. Emotion is not sustainable continuously through time, but is subject to fluctuations of intensity, and may at times be replaced by alternative feelings. In this sense too Sartre rejects essentialism: like Proust he believes in the 'intermittances of the heart': love, for example, is not a continuous emotional state, but an amalgam of affection, desire, passion, as well as, perhaps, jealousy, resentment and even occasionally hatred. Love is not the permanent compelling state we may like to imagine: it is the product of a decision and a commitment (see Emotions, nature of §4; Emotions, philosophy of §4).

These two works form the grounding for Sartre's early theory of human freedom along with a second work on the imagination. In *L'Imaginaire, psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination* (The Psychology of the Imagination) (1940) Sartre picks up the threads of Husserl's theory of imagination and develops it further by showing how phenomenological psychology works in practice. Unlike traditional empirical psychology it is not based in a positivist methodology in which evidence depends on an accumulation of examples. The phenomenological method operates through a particular type of introspection or intuition in which the phenomenologist examines a single example, or a series of examples, of the phenomenon to be analysed (here imagination) and deduces from the example the general principles and features of the phenomenon. In this way Sartre describes what he calls the 'poverty' of the image – the fact, that is, that I can never find in it any more than I have already put there. If, say, I do not know the number of columns in the Parthenon, I can count them if I look at the temple in reality; if I merely imagine the temple the number of pillars will depend not on the real building but merely on my own implicit estimate. I cannot learn anything from imagination as I can from perception. But the reverse of this 'poverty' of the imagination is its *freedom* – in imagination I am not constrained as I am in perception by the material world around me. Indeed, imagination is not merely image formation – in Sartre's account it is itself constitutive of the freedom of consciousness. Without imagination we would be 'stuck in the real', unable to escape from the present moment of time and our immediate surroundings. It is imagination that allows us to step back from our material environment and take up an (imaginary) distance from it, in Sartre's terms to 'totalize' it, to see it as a 'world' with order and pattern. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre will also maintain that the imagination is the source of the purpose and finality we see in the world, but *The Psychology of the Imagination* concentrates rather on the different functions of imagination and image formation in the narrower sense (see Imagery; Imagination §2).

3. *Being and Nothingness*

Being and Nothingness sets out the main philosophical tenets of the 'classical' Sartre. Being is subdivided, as it were, into two major regions – being for-itself (*l'être pour-soi*) or consciousness, and being-in-itself (*l'être en-soi*) which is everything other than consciousness, including the material world, the past, the body as organism and so on. To being-in-itself Sartre devotes no more than six of his 660 pages; there is little to be said about it other than it is, it is what it is, and it is 'in itself'. Only through the 'for-itself' of consciousness does the 'in-itself' become a world to speak of. Indeed, Sartre argues, we cannot know anything about being as it is, only about being as it appears to us. It is through consciousness that the world is endowed with temporality, spatiality and other qualities such as usefulness. This is where the imagination in its broadest sense may be seen as primary: 'imagination is the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom' (1940: 236). Imagination makes a world of the 'in-itself', it totalizes and 'nihilates' it. Nihilation (*néantir*) is a term that is specific to Sartre, and means not annihilation but rather the special type of negation that consciousness operates when it 'intends' an object: it differentiates the object from its surroundings and knows itself *not* to be that object. But consciousness is not alone in the world it has created from the brute 'in-itself', indeed it has not created the world individually, but rather as part of an intersubjective community. And other people, or their consciousnesses, are not an afterthought for Sartre. Like Heidegger he sees man as always already engaged in relationships with others; unlike Heidegger he sees these not in terms of *Mitsein* (Being-with), but in terms of conflict in a manner reminiscent of the account given by Hegel of the relationship between masters and slaves. The other is in permanent competition with me. I wish to be a subject and make of the other an object, while he or she attempts to make me an object in my turn. In Sartre's account, this battle is the key to all human relationships, and not merely those which might appear conflictual, but also those of sexual desire and even love. Consciousness is engaged in a permanent struggle to maintain its freedom in the face of onslaughts from all sides.

These aspects of Sartre's early philosophy are probably the best known. Less familiar but no less significant are his accounts of the limits within which human freedom operates. The battle of consciousnesses is not disembodied, and my own body constitutes not only the condition of possibility but also one of the major constraints on my freedom. Consciousness and imagination are free, but they are free against a background of facticity and situation. Facticity in particular is rarely given due weight by exegetes of Sartre's philosophy. My facticity is all the facts about myself which cannot be changed – my age, sex, height, class of origin, race, nationality, for example. (Later Sartre comes to include in facticity more psychological elements of genetic or environmental origin.) One's situation may be modified, but it still constitutes the starting point for any change, and roots consciousness firmly in the world about it. All this means that the Sartrean philosophy of freedom is less idealized than it might at first appear. I am not free to change a whole multiplicity of aspects of my condition, and those I am free to change may not prove easy. As I live I create a self which does not bind me but which certainly makes some courses of action easier and more attractive than others. My own self-image and the image others hold of me also condition the range of possibilities open to me. I make a character for myself over the years, and though it is always open to me to act 'out of character' – after all it is a self I have constituted, not an essence I was born with – such a decision is not usually easy. Sartre describes this self-constitution in terms not so much of character as of 'project', each person

having a fundamental project of being, which is not necessarily the result of a conscious decision, and possibly elaborated gradually over time. This project forms the core of a whole nexus of choices and behavioural decisions which form the totality that constitutes my self. My actions form a meaningful whole, each act relates to others before and since, and so the decision to make significant changes always comes up against resistance from already existent patterns and structures. Discussing, for example, an episode when a man gives up on a long hike declaring he is 'too tired' to continue, Sartre discusses the abandonment of the walk in terms of a project which does not put persistence in the face of setbacks at much of a premium. He 'could have acted differently, of course,' Sartre comments, 'but at what cost?' (1943a: 531). Our personal history does not eradicate our freedom, but in practice it is often easier to deny our freedom than to employ it. We hide behind the selves we have constructed, fearing change and convincing ourselves that our choices are limited. Freedom is threatening to us, it opens up a range of possibilities which we find daunting, and we flee from it in what Sartre calls 'bad faith'. Ideally we would like the positive aspect of liberty – free choice, a lack of constraints – together with the security and comfort of a fixed character or nature. The two are incompatible, and our desire to combine them is termed by Sartre a 'useless passion' (see Self-deception, ethics of §2).

In 1943, then, Sartre already sets freedom firmly against a background of constraint – constraints which arise from the features of the material world, from other people whose projects may not coincide with mine, from bodily existence, from facticity and from fear of freedom itself. Freedom is always within and starting from situation, and it is on the determinants and conditioning power of situation that Sartre increasingly focuses in his later writings.

4. Literary works

The 1940s were the period of Sartre's most prolific literary production. From *La Nausée* (Nausea) (1938) which explores the relationship of contingency and necessity in life and art through the experiences of Roquentin, Sartre moves on in the war years to a contemporary trilogy *Les Chemins de la liberté* (The Roads to Freedom) (1945–9). The trilogy (or unfinished quadrology?) portrays the lives of a varied group of Parisian intellectuals at the outbreak of war, and in particular the ways in which they hide their freedom from themselves while convincing themselves that it is their ultimate goal. Mathieu, a university academic, is the main focus for such ambivalence as he tries to find money for an abortion for his long-term mistress Marcelle.

Sartre also wrote several very successful plays in this period – *Les Mouches* (The Flies) (1943b), a wartime allegory of resistance to German occupation, which uses the Oresteian myth to explore the power of human liberty in the face of oppression. *Huis Clos* (In Camera) (1944) shows the deadly consequences of conflictual human relations and self-deception in a hell comprising three characters doomed to remain together for ever in a Second Empire drawing room. *Les Mains Sales* (Dirty Hands, or Crime Passionnel) (1948) debates the issues of realism and idealism, means and ends, truth, lies and political commitment in Illyria, an imaginary Communist country in Eastern Europe. This finely balanced and complex play received an unexpectedly positive response from the bourgeois press who interpreted it, against Sartre's intentions, as predominantly anti-communist. In consequence Sartre felt obliged to ban its production for about ten years.

5. Later philosophy

The increasing politicization of Sartre's postwar writing meant that he left both literature and philosophy to one side in the 1950s as he became increasingly engaged as a writer, lecturer and public figure in concrete political issues and endeavours. His next major philosophical work, the *Critique de la raison dialectique* (*Critique of Dialectical Reason*), did not appear until 1960 and is clearly marked by his increasing intellectual engagement with Marx. The *Critique* is an attempt to do the impossible: to reconcile existentialism and Marxism; to revivify Marxism, which Sartre believed was becoming sclerotic, by reawakening its awareness of individual and collective subjectivity; and to bring existentialism into closer contact with the material conditions of historical existence. Sartre examines social and political issues such as group action, historical change, revolution and behaviour in the face of material scarcity of resources. He modifies his radical position on the extent of human freedom by recognizing more fully than before the effect of historical and material conditions on individual and collective choice. He takes as his own the famous slogan of Engels: 'Men make history on the basis of what history has made them.' We are not pawns or cogs in a machine, nor do we simply participate in processes of internalization and externalization: we are free agents, but agents who are profoundly and inescapably situated in specific social and material conditions. Indeed Sartre later uses the (Jansenist) term 'predestination' to explain how his views differ from positivist theories of human determinism. Material conditions set up the environment in which we operate. They do not causally determine our behaviour, but they do prescribe the (limited) range of options open to us. A white bourgeois male in a prosperous suburb has a vastly wider range of choices on which to exercise his freedom than an elderly black woman living in the poverty of an inner city ghetto. Both are free in the ontological sense, but their possibilities for making use of that freedom are not comparable. And in 1960 Sartre is as concerned with the restrictions imposed on freedom by the material world as with human liberty itself.

It is this preoccupation with the absolute and yet circumscribed nature of human freedom that underpins Sartre's two last major works: his autobiography, *Les Mots* (*Words*) (1963), a brief and finely wrought literary masterpiece, and *L'Idiot de la famille* (*The Idiot of the Family*) (1971–2), a 3,000-page biography of Flaubert which draws on a vast range of different disciplines. 'What can one know of a man, today?' was the question Sartre set out to answer in his account of Flaubert, and in it he synthesizes not only existentialism, phenomenology and Marxist theory and method, but also psychoanalysis, sociology, history of literature, aesthetics and anthropology. What did Flaubert make of what was made of him? Educated in a family embodying the historical conflicts of its age, second son of a doctor and expected to become a lawyer, the young Gustave Flaubert constructed a very different career for himself. Resistant to adult pressures to perform, he learned to read late (hence the *Idiot* of the title), lived in his elder brother's shadow and opted out of law school through a hysterico-epileptic crisis ('intentional' but not 'deliberate', in Sartre's terms) which made him an invalid – the 'hermit of Croisset' – and thus permitted him to live in the family home and become a writer. Sartre's account of his own choice of the same career is more succinct and more ironic: the Sartre and Schweitzer (maternal grandfather) families are not spared in the biting and witty descriptions of the 'family comedy' which made of young Jean-Paul a precocious charlatan, writing to please adults, writing for future fame – a

superman author – and finally writing as a professional. The gap between choice and destiny is shown to be very small, but it has not closed. Even when analysing with cruel perspicacity his own formation, Sartre maintains the framework he set up thirty years earlier: freedom within situation, even when the situation may leave little room for manoeuvre. Subjectivity is now defined as the *décalage* or difference between the processes of internalization and externalization; liberty may be no more than the ‘play’ in the mechanism, but the permanent dialectic between the poles of freedom and conditioning remains untotaled.

List of works

Sartre, J.-P. (1936a) *L’Imagination*, Paris: Alcan; trans. F. Williams, *Imagination*, a Psychological Critique, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1962.

(A history of theories of the imagination leading up to Husserl.)

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(Novel in diary form about the discovery by Antoine Roquentin of the contingency of existence.)

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(Drama of existence in which three people are trapped together for eternity.)

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(Trilogy of novels set in Paris of the early 1940s.)

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(An excellent collection of essays.)