

# Jean-Paul Sartre

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## Western Philosophy 20th-century philosophy

**Name:** Jean-Paul Sartre

**Birth:** June 21, 1905 (Paris, France)

**Death:** April 15, 1980 (aged 74) (Paris, France)

**School/tradition:** Existentialism, Marxism



Declined Nobel Prize in Literature (1964)

**Main interests:** Metaphysics, Epistemology, Ethics, Politics, Phenomenology, Ontology

**Notable ideas:** "Existence precedes essence"  
"Bad faith"  
"Nothingness"

**Influences:** Kant, Hegel, Marx, Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Jaspers, De Beauvoir, Camus

**Influenced:** De Beauvoir, Camus, Fanon, Iris Murdoch, Laing, Deleuze, Guattari, Badiou, Michel Foucault, Jackson (anthropology)

**Signature:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JP Sartre'.

**Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre** (June 21,

1905 – April 15, 1980), normally known simply as **Jean-Paul Sartre** (pronounced: [ʒɑ̃ pol saʁ.tʁ (ə)]), was a French existentialist philosopher and pioneer, dramatist and screenwriter, novelist and critic. He was a leading figure in 20th century French philosophy.

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## Biography

## Early life and thought

Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris to Jean-Baptiste Sartre, an officer of the French Navy, and Anne-Marie Schweitzer. His mother was of German-Alsatian origin, and was a cousin of German Nobel prize laureate Albert Schweitzer. When Sartre was 15 months old, his father died of a fever. Anne-Marie raised him with help from her father, Charles Schweitzer, a high school professor of German, who taught Sartre mathematics and introduced him to classical literature at a very early age.

As a teenager in the 1920s, Jean became attracted to philosophy upon reading Henri Bergson's *Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. He studied in Paris at the elite École Normale Supérieure, an institution of higher education which was the alma mater for several prominent French thinkers and intellectuals. Sartre was influenced by many aspects of Western philosophy, absorbing ideas from Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Martin Heidegger among others. In 1929 at the Ecole Normale, he met Simone de Beauvoir, who studied at the Sorbonne and later went on to become a

noted thinker, writer, and feminist. The two, it is documented, became inseparable and lifelong companions, initiating a romantic relationship, though they were not monogamous. Sartre graduated from the École Normale Supérieure in 1929 with a doctorate in philosophy and served as a conscript in the French Army from 1929 to 1931.

Together, Sartre and de Beauvoir challenged the cultural and social assumptions and expectations of their upbringings, which they considered bourgeois, in both lifestyle and thought. The conflict between oppressive, spiritually-destructive conformity (*mauvaise foi*, literally, "bad faith") and an "authentic" state of "being" became the dominant theme of Sartre's early work, a theme embodied in his principal philosophical work *L'Être et le Néant (Being and Nothingness)* (1943). Sartre's introduction to his philosophy is his work *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), originally presented as a lecture. In this work, he defends existentialism against its detractors, which ultimately results in a somewhat incomplete description of his ideas. The work has been considered a popular, if over-simplifying, point of entry for those seeking to learn more about Sartre's ideas but lacking the background in philosophy necessary to fully absorb his longer work *Being*

*and Nothingness*. One should not take the expression of his ideas contained here as authoritative; in 1965, Sartre told Francis Jeanson that its publication had been "an error".

## **Sartre and World War II**

In 1939 Sartre was drafted into the French army, where he served as a meteorologist. German troops captured him in 1940 in Padoux, and he spent nine months as a prisoner of war — in Nancy and finally in Stalag 12D, Trier, where he wrote his first theatrical piece, *Barionà, fils du tonnerre*, a drama concerning Christmas. Due to poor health (he claimed that his poor eyesight affected his balance) Sartre was released in April 1941. Given civilian status, he recovered his position as a teacher of *Lycée Pasteur* near Paris, settled at the Hotel Mistral near Montparnasse at Paris and was given a new position at Lycée Condorcet, replacing a Jewish teacher who had been forbidden to teach by Vichy law.

After coming back to Paris in May 1941, he participated in the founding of the underground group Socialisme et Liberté with other writers Simone de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Jean-

Toussaint, Dominique Desanti, Jean Kanapa, and École Normale students. In August, Sartre and Beauvoir went to the French Riviera seeking the support of André Gide and André Malraux. However, both Gide and Malraux were undecided, and this may have been the cause of Sartre's disappointment and discouragement. *Socialisme et liberté* soon dissolved and Sartre decided to write instead of being involved in active resistance. He then wrote *Being and Nothingness*, *The Flies* and *No Exit*, none of which was censored by the Germans, and also contributed to both legal and illegal literary magazines.

After August 1944 and the liberation of Paris, he was a very active contributor of *Combat*, a newspaper created during the clandestine period by Albert Camus, a philosopher and author who held similar beliefs. Sartre and Beauvoir remained friends with Camus until he turned away from communism, a schism that eventually divided them in 1951, after the publication of Camus' *The Rebel*. Later, while Sartre was labelled by some authors as a resistant, the French philosopher and resistant Vladimir Jankelevitch criticized Sartre's lack of political commitment during the German occupation, and interpreted his further struggles for liberty as an attempt to redeem himself.

When the war ended Sartre established *Les Temps Modernes* (*Modern Times*), a monthly literary and political review, and started writing full-time as well as continuing his political activism. He would draw on his war experiences for his great trilogy of novels, *Les Chemins de la Liberté* (*The Roads to Freedom*) (1945–1949). Sartre was the head of the Organization to Defend Iranian Political Prisoners from 1964 till the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

## **Sartre and Communism**

The first period of Sartre's career, defined by *Being and Nothingness* (1943), gave way to a second period as a politically engaged activist and intellectual. His 1948 work *Les Mains Sales* (*Dirty Hands*) in particular explored the problem of being both an intellectual at the same time as becoming "engaged" politically. He embraced communism, though never officially joining the Communist party, and took a prominent role in the struggle against French rule in Algeria. He became perhaps the most eminent supporter of the FLN in the Algerian War and was one of the signatory of the *Manifeste des 121*. Furthermore, he had an

Algerian mistress, Arlette Elkaïm, who became his adopted daughter in 1965. He opposed the Vietnam War and, along with Bertrand Russell and others, organized a tribunal intended to expose U.S. war crimes, which became known as the Russell Tribunal in 1967. Its impact was limited.

As a fellow-traveller, Sartre spent much of the rest of his life attempting to reconcile his existentialist ideas about free will with communist principles, which taught that socio-economic forces beyond our immediate, individual control play a critical role in shaping our lives. His major defining work of this period, the *Critique de la raison dialectique* (*Critique of Dialectical Reason*) appeared in 1960. Sartre's emphasis on the humanist values in the early works of Marx led to a dispute with the leading Communist intellectual in France in the 1960s, Louis Althusser, who claimed that the ideas of the young Marx were decisively superseded by the "scientific" system of the later Marx. Sartre went to Cuba in the 60's to meet Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara. After Guevara's death he said that Guevara was the most complete human being of his age. This is actually noted in the trailers for the film *The Motorcycle Diaries* which documents Guevara's travels around South America as a young man.



## Late life and death

In 1964, Sartre renounced literature in a witty and sardonic account of the first ten years of his life, *Les mots* (*Words*). The book is an ironic counterblast to Marcel Proust, whose reputation had unexpectedly eclipsed that of André Gide (who had provided the model of *littérature engagée* for Sartre's generation). Literature, Sartre concluded, functioned as a bourgeois substitute for real commitment in the world. In the same year he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, but he resoundingly declined it, stating that he had always refused official honours and didn't wish to align himself with institutions. Though his name was now a household word (as was "existentialism" during the tumultuous 1960s), Sartre remained a simple man with few possessions, actively committed to causes until the end of his life, such as the student revolution strikes in Paris during the summer of 1968 during which he was arrested for civil disobedience. General De Gaulle intervened and pardoned him, commenting that "*you don't arrest Voltaire*".<sup>[1]</sup>

In 1975, when asked how he would like to be remembered, Sartre replied: "I would like [people]

to remember *Nausea*, [my plays] *No Exit* and *The Devil and the Good Lord*, and then my two philosophical works, more particularly the second one, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Then my essay on Genet, *Saint Genet*...If these are remembered, that would be quite an achievement, and I don't ask for more. As a man, if a certain Jean-Paul Sartre is remembered, I would like people to remember the milieu or historical situation in which I lived,...how I lived in it, in terms of all the aspirations which I tried to gather up within myself." Sartre's physical condition deteriorated, partially due to the merciless pace of work (and using drugs for this reason, e.g., amphetamine) he put himself through during the writing of the *Critique* and the last project of his life, a massive analytical biography of Gustave Flaubert (*The Family Idiot*), both of which remained unfinished. He died April 15, 1980 in Paris from an oedema of the lung.

Sartre's atheism was foundational for his style of existentialist philosophy. In March 1980, about a month before his death, he was interviewed by his assistant, Benny Lévy, and within these interviews he expressed his interest in Judaism which was inspired by Levy's renewed interest in the faith. Through Sartre's study of Jewish history he

became particularly interested in the messianic idea of the faith. Some people apparently took this to indicate a deathbed conversion; however, the text of the interviews makes it clear that he did not consider himself a Jew, and was interested in the ethical and "metaphysical character" of the Jewish religion, while continuing to reject the idea of an existing God. In a separate 1974 interview with Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre said that he often saw himself "as a being that could, it seems, only come from a creator." However he immediately adds that "this is not a clear, exact idea..." and in preceding and following passages he makes it clear that he remained an atheist and found in atheism a source of personal and ethical power. Sartre's words were:

I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here; and this idea of a creating hand refers to God.<sup>[2]</sup>

Sartre lies buried in Cimetière du Montparnasse in Paris. His funeral was attended by 50,000 mourners.

## **Thought**

## Sartre's metaphysics

The basis of Sartre's existentialism is found in *The Transcendence of the Ego*. To begin with, the thing-in-itself is infinite and overflowing. Sartre refers to any direct consciousness of the thing-in-itself as a "pre-reflective consciousness." Any attempt to describe, understand, historicize etc. the thing-in-itself, Sartre calls "reflective consciousness." There is no way for the reflective consciousness to subsume the pre-reflective, and so reflection is fated to a form of anxiety, i.e. the human condition. The reflective consciousness in all its forms, (scientific, artistic or otherwise) can only limit the thing-in-itself by virtue of its attempt to understand or describe it. It follows, therefore, that any attempt at self-knowledge (self-consciousness - a reflective consciousness of an overflowing infinite) is a construct that fails no matter how often it is attempted. In Sartre's words (or more accurately an interpretation of Sartre's words), "Consciousness is consciousness of itself insofar as it is consciousness of a transcendent object."

The same holds true about knowledge of the "Other." The "Other" (meaning simply beings or

objects that are not the self) is a construct of reflective consciousness. One must be careful to understand this more as a form of warning than as an ontological statement. However, there is an implication of solipsism here that Sartre considers fundamental to any coherent description of the human condition. [3] Sartre overcomes this solipsism by a kind of ritual. Self consciousness needs "the Other" to prove (display) its own existence. It has a "masochistic desire" to be limited, i.e. limited by the reflective consciousness of another subject. This is expressed metaphorically in the famous line of dialogue from *No Exit*, "Hell is other people."

### ***La Nausée* and existentialism**

As a junior lecturer at the Lycée du Havre in 1938, Sartre wrote the novel *La Nausée* (*Nausea*) which serves in some ways as a manifesto of existentialism and remains one of his most famous books. Taking a page from the German phenomenological movement, he believed that our ideas are the product of experiences of real-life situations, and that novels and plays describing such fundamental experiences have as much value as do discursive essays for the elaboration of

philosophical theories. With this mandate, the novel concerns a dejected researcher (Roquentin) in a town similar to Le Havre who becomes starkly conscious of the fact that inanimate objects and situations remain absolutely indifferent to his existence. As such, they show themselves to be resistant to whatever significance human consciousness might perceive in them.

This indifference of "things in themselves" (closely linked with the later notion of "being-in-itself" in his *Being and Nothingness*) has the effect of highlighting all the more the freedom Roquentin has to perceive and act in the world; everywhere he looks, he finds situations imbued with meanings which bear the stamp of his existence. Hence the "nausea" referred to in the title of the book; all that he encounters in his everyday life is suffused with a pervasive, even horrible, taste — specifically, his freedom. The book takes the term from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where it is used in the context of the often sickening quality of existence. No matter how much Roquentin longs for something else or something different, he cannot get away from this harrowing evidence of his engagement with the world. The novel also acts as a terrifying realization of some of Kant's fundamental ideas; Sartre uses the idea of the

autonomy of the will (that morality is derived from our ability to choose in reality; the ability to choose being derived from human freedom; embodied in the famous saying "Condemned to be free") as a way to show the world's indifference to the individual. The freedom that Kant exposed is here a strong burden, for the freedom to act towards objects is ultimately useless, and the practical application of Kant's ideas prove to be bitterly rejected.

The stories in *Le Mur* (*The Wall*) emphasize the arbitrary aspects of the situations people find themselves in and the absurdity of their attempts to deal rationally with them. A whole school of absurd literature subsequently developed.

## **Sartre and literature**

During the 1940s and 1950s Sartre's ideas remained ambiguous, and existentialism became a favoured philosophy of the beatnik generation.<sup>[4]</sup> Sartre's views were counterposed to those of Albert Camus in the popular imagination. In 1948, the Roman Catholic Church placed his complete works on the Index of prohibited books. Most of his plays are richly symbolic and serve as a means of

conveying his philosophy. The best-known, *Huis-clos* (*No Exit*), contains the famous line "L'enfer, c'est les autres", usually translated as "Hell is other people".

Aside from the impact of *Nausea*, Sartre's major contribution to literature was the *The Roads to Freedom* trilogy which charts the progression of how World War II affected Sartre's ideas. In this way, *Roads to Freedom* presents a less theoretical and more practical approach to existentialism. The first book in the trilogy, *L'âge de raison* (*The Age of Reason*) (1945), is the Sartrean work with the broadest appeal.

## **Sartre and terrorism**

Following the Munich massacre in which eleven Israeli Olympians were killed by the Palestinian organization Black September in Munich 1972, Sartre said terrorism "is a terrible weapon but the oppressed poor have no others." Sartre also found it "perfectly scandalous that the Munich attack should be judged by the French press and a section of public opinion as an intolerable scandal."<sup>[5]</sup>

## **Selected bibliography**



- *L'Imagination (Imagination: A Psychological Critique)*, 1936
- *La Transcendance de l'égo (The Transcendence of the Ego)*, 1937
- *La Nausée (Nausea)*, 1938
- *Le Mur (The Wall)*, 1939
- *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions (Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions)*, 1939
- *L'Imaginaire (The Imaginary)*, 1940, lit. "The Unconscious"
- *Les Mouches (The Flies)*, 1943 - a modern version of the *Oresteia*
- *L'Être et le néant (Being and Nothingness)*, 1943
- *Réflexions sur la question juive (Anti-Semite and Jew; literally, Reflections on the Jewish Question)*, 1943
- *Huis-clos (No Exit)*, 1944
- *Les Chemins de la liberté (The Roads to Freedom)* trilogy, comprising:
  - *L'Âge de raison (The Age of Reason)*, 1945
  - *Le Sursis (The Reprieve)*, 1947
  - *La Mort dans l'Âme (Troubled Sleep, title formerly translated as Iron in the Soul, literally "Death in Spirit")*, 1949
- *Morts sans sépulture (Deaths without burial; aka The Victors)*, 1946
- *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme (Existentialism is a Humanism)*, 1946

- *La Putain respectueuse (The Respectful Whore)* 1946
- *Qu'est ce que la littérature? (What is literature?)*, 1947
- *Baudelaire*, 1947
- *Situations*, 1947 –1965
- *Les Mains sales (Dirty Hands)*, 1948
- "Orphée Noir" (Black Orpheus), introduction to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*. edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor, 1948
- *Le Diable et le bon dieu (The Devil and the Good Lord)*, 1951
- *Les Jeux sont faits (The Game is Up)*, 1952
- *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr*, 1952
- *Nekrassov*, 1955
- *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 1957
- *The Problem of Method*, 1957
- *Les Séquestrés d'Altona (The Condemned of Altona)*, 1959
- *Critique de la raison dialectique (Critique of Dialectical Reason)*, 1960
- "Preface" to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961
- *Search for a Method* (English translation of preface to *Critique*, Vol. I), 1962
- *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, 1964
- *Les Mots (The Words)*, 1964, autobiographical

- *L'Idiot de la famille* (*The Family Idiot*), 1971–1972 - on Gustave Flaubert
- *Cahiers pour une morale* (*Notebooks for Ethics*), 1983, 1947-48 notes on ethics
- *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre: Novembre 1939 - Mars 1940* (*War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phony War 1939-1940*), 1984, notebooks from Sartre's time in the Phony War of 1939-1940

## Further reading

- Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre 1905-80*, 1985.
- Simone de Beauvoir, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
- Thomas Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- John Gerassi, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Hated Conscience of His Century*, Volume 1: Protestant or Protester?, University of Chicago Press, 1989. ISBN 0226287971.
- R. D. Laing and D. G. Cooper, *Reason and Violence: A Decade of Sartre's Philosophy, 1950-1960*, New York: Pantheon, 1971.
- Suzanne Lilar, *A propos de Sartre et de l'amour*, Paris: Grasset, 1967.
- Heiner Wittmann, *L'esthétique de Sartre*.

*Artistes et intellectuels*, translated from the German by N. Weitemeier and J. Yacar, Éditions L'Harmattan (Collection L'ouverture philosophique), Paris 2001.

- Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Levy, *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*, translated by Adrian van den Hoven, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- P.V. Spade, Class Lecture Notes on Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. 1996.
- H. Wittmann, *Sartre und die Kunst. Die Porträtstudien von Tintoretto bis Flaubert*, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1996.

## References

1. ^ Superstar of the Mind, by Tom Bishop in New York Times June 7, 1987
2. ^ Norman L. Geisler, *Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of Contemporary Humanism*, 1983 pp. 46-47
3. ^ Sartre, 1936 *Trancendence of the Ego*, Williams and Kirkpatrick, 1957 pp. 98-106 translation from "La transcendence de l'ego..."
4. ^ This is debatable. In "Desolation Angels," Kerouac implies that his fantasy of Parisian life had been tarnished by Sartre and existentialism.
5. ^ *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*, Bernard-Henri Lévy, p.343).

## External links

### By Sartre

- Americans and Their Myths Sartre's essay in *The Nation* (October 18, 1947 issue)
- Sartre Internet Archive on Marxists.org
- French Audiobook (mp3), incipit of *The Words* (1964), read aloud in French by IncipitBlog.

### On Sartre

- Groupe d'études sartriennes, Paris
- Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason essay by Andy Blunden
- Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980): Existentialism Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy
- Sartre.org Articles, archives, and forum
- "The Second Coming Of Sartre", John Lichfield, *The Independent*, 17 June 2005
- The World According to Sartre essay by Roger Kimball
- Reclaiming Sartre A review of Ian Birchall, *Sartre Against Stalinism*
- Biography and quotes of Sartre
- 1987 audio interview of Annie Cohen-Salal,

author of Sartre: A Life. Interview by Don Swaim of CBS Radio - RealAudio

- Living with Mother. Sartre and the problem of maternity, Benedict O'Donohoe, *Sens Public*.
- L'image de la femme dans le théâtre de Jean-Paul Sartre - Jean-Paul Sartre:sexiste? by Stephanie Rupert
- Pierre Michel, *Jean-Paul Sartre et Octave Mirbeau*.
- "Sartre y la Filosofía de la Nueva Música" by Susan Campos.

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