**Sartre, Jean-Paul (1905–1980)**

Jean-Paul Sartre was a French philosopher, left-wing political activist, playwright, and novelist. A graduate of the École normale supérieure in Paris, Sartre rose to prominence in French artistic and literary circles during and after the Second World War, when existentialism gradually replaced surrealism as the major trend of the French avant-garde. He was part of a group of artists and intellectuals that included Alberto Giacometti, Jean Genet, Boris Vian, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Albert Camus, his lifelong partner and feminist Simone de Beauvoir, and journals such as *les Temps modernes*. Sartre remained a key figure of French political and intellectual life until his death his 1980.

A close reader of G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger, Sartre was the major theorist of existentialism in post-war Europe. One profound event in the development of Sartre’s thinking was the weekly seminar on Hegel taught from 1933 to 1939 at the École des Hautes Études by the Russian émigré, Alexandre Kojève. At the time, there was no available French translation of Hegel’s work, and Kojève (following on the heels of another Russian émigré champion of Hegel, Alexandre Koyré) more or less singlehandedly revived French interest in Hegel. A colleague of Sartre, Jean Hyppolite, finally published a translation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1939. But it was Kojève, in an idiosyncratic reading of the first six chapters of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, who integrated Hegel with Marx and Heidegger and synthesized a perspective in which Hegel’s master-slave dialectic—a relatively minor illustrative story in the original *Phenomenology*—becomes a key to both existential morality and political history. The confrontation of slave and master is a version of self and other that is simultaneously deeply personal and broadly political, and the two realms merge in the individual’s confrontation with death and his demand for recognition from the other. The master reaches an existential impasse in which there can be no development of the will, while the slave, beginning with his acceptance of chains rather than death, realizes his freedom by working to overcome his bondage. Kojève merges Hegel and Marx here in a way that would be transformative for Sartre and his generation. Indeed, Kojève’s presentation of Hegel as sage, in whom human history has come to an end as it becomes conscious of itself in his writing, would emerge as a template for intellectual life in France after the war: Kojève himself assumed the mantle of Hegelian sage in his seminars, as did Sartre, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and countless other intellectuals in emulation of Kojève.

But Heidegger was the third leg of Kojève’s teaching. For Sartre, human nature emerged not as given, but as derived from a choice. We are thrown into life, as it were—Heidegger’s notion that human beings are creatures of their *Geworfenheit*, or “thrown-ness,” was central to Sartre, and the human confrontation with the nothingness that is existence without human action forms the core of his philosophical project, especially his *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In Sartre’s famous formula, essence does not precede existence; rather, existence precedes essence. The atheism declared by this formula was important, for it reinvigorated Nietzsche’s dictum that “God is dead” for a Catholic France both shocked and shamed by Nazi domination. As a prisoner of war in 1940, and later as he attempted to organize intellectual resistance to Nazism, Sartre experienced first hand the existential problem of making and acting on moral choices. Sartre concluded that, irrespective of background and belief, we are only what we make of ourselves, and that we still make choices, by necessity, even in circumstances (such as imprisonment) where choice would seem to be extremely limited. The moral point of view here is reminiscent of ancient Roman stoicism, particularly that of Seneca, for whom suicide remained a significant expression of will and dignity when no other form of resistance was available. Sartre’s is thus a philosophy that places a huge emphasis on the primacy of the human will and the decision to act (or not to act, which is also a choice), to become *engagé* rather than to succumb to the *mauvaise foi* (bad faith) of mere complicity with domination.

In this sense, along with Kojève’s version of Hegel and Heidegger, it was Nietzsche’s notion of the will to power and Kierkegaard’s idea that our moral choices are a leap of faith (or, in other words, absurd) that Sartre adapted as central components of existentialism. Nietzsche’s claim that our so-called Christian morality is actually of extra-moral origins and Kierkegaard’s claim that Christianity is a non-rational choice meant for Sartre that human will was not something to be restrained *by* a given morality—rather, in a way echoing Immanuel Kant’s reflections on practical reason as well as Nietzsche’s atheism, morality was something that could only be created out of the autonomous freedom of the will. One of the basic human anxieties was thus in Sartre’s view fear of this freedom—our inability to accept such absolute freedom in the face of nothingness. Such claims were always in some sense in tension with Sartre’s Marxism, since it was Marx who noted (as in the opening lines of the *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*) that human history is not simply up for grabs: the human species follows a discernible path, a destiny, that is in part inherited form the past and shaped by the material needs of production and reproduction in the present. But Sartre preferred the earlier, more left-Hegelian Marx, to the dismay of many in the French Communist Party and later academics such as Louis Althusser.

Beginning with his *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946), Sartre had long considered that existentialism, despite its Nietzschean roots, was not incompatible with basic humanist values. For example, the necessary freedom of the will for Sartre entailed a sense of responsibility to the other—that is, a responsibility to recognize and respect the freedom of will of the other—that was itself the basis of all moral (including Christian) thought. But, as many of Sartre’s critics pointed out, there was some incoherence in this stance. Nietzsche’s emphasis on the absolute autonomy of the will placed no restrictions on its expression, in some contrast to Kant’s earlier (and far more Christian-humanist) claim that the freedom of the will still entailed that it act in a “lawful” fashion, which is to say in a manner such that our own choices would at the same time be licit for all others. The logic of Nietzsche’s thinking, in which the master properly owed no recognition at all to the slave, was clearly anti-humanist, and so was Heidegger’s. Sartre’s later attempt to revivify a post-Stalinist Marxism, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960)*,* constituted a revision of much of his earlier existentialism. But even here, Sartre was never able to resolve the moral contradiction between the absolutely autonomous will and the duty to recognize an equivalent will in the other and to work in harmony with it. In a very real sense, Sartre’s dilemma, with its roots in Kant, remained the principle stumbling block of much continental philosophy in his wake.

Sartre was an indefatigable political activist for decolonization, the rights of women, resistance to anti-Semitism, and social justice. He was also a noted novelist, playwright, and literary critic—some of his major philosophical themes were worked out first in literary works such as *La Nausea* (1938). In many ways, he defined the meaning of “public intellectual” for the Europe of his time, and it was a role that invited controversy. Sartre supported the Communist Party in France, though he was not a member; but he also denounced the injustices of Stalinism, the invasion of Hungary in the 1950s, and the Cold War rivalry of the Soviet Union and the United States. His role in opposition to the declining French Empire after WWII, especially during the bloody conflict Algeria in the 1950s and early 1960s, is often cited; but Sartre was also willing to accept revolutionary atrocities as necessary in resistance to those of the colonizer. He became an important mentor to figures on the anticolonial left, in particular the Martinique psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon, whose work on race and nationalism in the wake of decolonization has had a significant role in post-colonial studies. While Fanon questioned Sartre’s assumption that movements such as pan-African negritude were simply a phase of the historical dialectic, he nevertheless echoed Sartrean existentialism, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), by insisting that he was his own foundation, and not simply a distorted reflection of a white world. Finally, despite his support for Jews and the state of Israel, Sartre noted that the Palestinian attack on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics in Munich could be justified on the grounds that the Palestinian resistance had little choice other than terrorism. One might conclude that, even in 1972, Sartre had still not resolved the tension between existential freedom and responsibility to the other.

**Bibliography**

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Raphael Koenig

Harvard University

Vincent P. Pecora

University of Utah