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CHAPTER 5

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)

MANDARINS

Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris and educated at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, which was affiliated with the Sorbonne. During his student years he began a lifelong relationship with the writer Simone de Beauvoir; it was to her that he dedicated his book *Being and Nothingness,* using for her the nickname "Castor," or beaver, signifying her industriousness. During the Second World War Sartre served in the French Army until he was captured by the Germans. When he was released, he continued to be active in the French resistance to the German occupation, and he wrote his magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness* (1943). During this time he also contributed to a clandestine paper called *Combat,* edited by his friend Albert Camus. He continued his literary career after the war, founding an influential magazine called *Les Temps Modernes,* and was eventually awarded the Nobel prize for literature (which he declined for political reasons). In his day he was a highly acclaimed literary figure and the leading proponent of existentialism. He was influential in the political sphere as well, having expended a great deal of effort during the latter part of his career on working out an acceptable version of Marxism. His attitude towards Marxism remained ambivalent, but at one point he was so thoroughly immersed in Marxism that he declared existentialism to be a mere ideology.

Sartre's literary contributions include the novel *Nausea,* "The Wall" and other short stories, and plays such as *No Exit.** In his early philosophical work, comprising *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936), *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory* (1939), and *The Psychology of Imagination* (1940), he offered phenomenological accounts of consciousness, a notable element of which is the argument, as against Husserl, that the ego or self is not a transcendental being but rather a construction of consciousness. *Being and Nothingness* develops Sartre's ontological theory of human being. He offered an influential characterization of existentialism and restated some of his central ideas about human being in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), which therefore can serve as a useful introduction to *Being and Nothingness.*

*A selection from Sartre's literary contributions can be found in Chapter 7—ed.

EXISTENTIALISM

In *Existentialism is a Humanism,* Sartre offers an influential definition of existentialism: It is the doctrine that we exist before we have an essence or definitive attributes. This doctrine is easily misinterpreted if too much emphasis is placed on the term "essence," because in Sartre's view very little is actually essential to human beings. They are free to define themselves as they wish and permanently free to change that definition. Nonetheless, the doctrine is a helpful account of Sartre's brand of existentialism because it calls to mind four theses that Sartre associates with existentialism.

1. Human beings were not created to serve a preexisting purpose. We are unlike tools such as scissors, whose essence or definitive purpose does in fact precede their existence. Human beings might be alive for some time before they adopt a purpose for themselves. Of course, one might think that God created people for some purpose. But Sartre denies the existence of God.
2. In large measure people are self-creating. As Sartre clarifies in his other writings, the self is a construction of the individual consciousness.

3. The individual consciousness is not causally determined to construct a particular identity or pursue particular ends; it freely chooses its identity and projects and even its emotions. Neither the individual's circumstances nor a pre-existing purpose or human nature force the individual to be a particular self or to pursue particular ends, and this would be true even if God existed, as Sartre dramatizes in his play *The Flies*:

> *Zeus:* Impudent spawn! So I am not your king? Who, then, made you?
> *Orestes:* You. But you blundered; you should not have made me free.
> *Zeus:* I gave you freedom so that you might serve me.
> *Orestes:* Perhaps. But now it has turned against its giver. . . . I *am* my freedom. No sooner had you created me than I ceased to be yours.[1]

4. Values are subjective. Something is valuable because I choose to value it, rather than the other way around. My values will result from my choice of a fundamental project by which I am engaged in the world and which constitutes the center of my identity. There are no objective values upon which to base the (continuously renewed) decision to be the self I am.

PHENOMENOLOGY

Sartre begins *Being and Nothingness* with a discussion of his phenomenological approach to human being. Like Heidegger (and Hegel), Sartre thought that a proper phenomenological method could overcome troublesome forms of dualism that are the inevitable outcome of traditional epistemological approaches. Especially troublesome is the chasm between the mental and the physical. This chasm was deeply entrenched in Western philosophy by Descartes.

According to Cartesian dualism, both minds (or souls) and the physical things of the world are object-like. Minds and physical things are substances in that neither is dependent upon the other for its existence. Moreover, mental substances interact with physical substances—otherwise minds could not perceive other things or control the body (itself a physical thing). However, the form of interaction between mental and physical things is unintelligible to us because mental substances do not have physical attributes (such as mass and location) that would seem to be necessary if they are to alter the physical world.

Sartre's (neutral monistic) idea is to start with phenomena, or appearances, that are not initially presumed to be mental or physical and on that basis to reach conclusions about what is mental and what is physical. At this initial stage we must be especially careful to avoid the presumption that the phenomena constitute a veil of ideas that separate the "inner" and the "outer," the subject and the object; the phenomena do not constitute a "superficial covering which hides from sight the true nature of the object." Instead, "the being of an existent is exactly what it appears. . . . The phenomenon can be studied and described as such, for it is absolutely indicative of itself. . . . The appearance does not hide the essence, it reveals it; it *is* the essence."[2]

Sartre wishes to avoid traditional forms of dualism by avoiding the suggestion that the appearances are sense data. He also wants to avoid smuggling in the idealist thesis that to be is to be perceived or the realist view that to be is to be a physical object (or a physical property).

CONSCIOUSNESS, BEING FOR-ITSELF, AND BEING IN-ITSELF

However, Sartre's philosophy does not banish all forms of dualism. As he realizes, his account of being builds on a sharp dualism between (1) consciousness itself and (2) what consciousness is conscious of—the objects of consciousness, or that to which consciousness refers. The objects of consciousness disclose themselves in a relatively familiar way: we are conscious of them. But how is consciousness disclosed to us? Well, in being conscious of an object such as a wine bottle, we are *aware of our consciousness* of that object. But this awareness is implicit in our consciousness of the bottle. Our awareness of our consciousness of the bottle is not separate from our consciousness of the bottle. Sartre is especially concerned to avoid saying that our consciousness of a bottle entails our consciousness of our consciousness of the bottle, for then

being conscious of the bottle would also entail being conscious of our consciousness of the bottle, as well as being conscious of all *that*, and so on, which seems impossible. In fact, this regress of consciousness can never get started, according to Sartre, for consciousness itself can never be its own object; it always separates itself from its objects.

Consciousness, then, cannot be disclosed to us as its own object. But according to Sartre this means that it must be disclosed to us in contrast to its object. Let me try to make Sartre's idea clearer. Our grasp of something, say A, might be constituted entirely by the idea that it is not something else, say B. This presupposes that we have a positive conception of B, and our grasp of A consists in the fact that *A is not B*. Things we apprehend in this contrastive way Sartre calls *negativities*. Sartre thinks that negativities are a part of the world as it presents itself to us. He also thinks that negativities could not exist if there were no human beings to think of ways the world might be if it were not as it is. For example, *the absence of Pierre from the café* is a negativity that I might discover but only if I were expecting to find Pierre in a café and failed to find him. In such a case I grasp a part of the world by contrasting it against my positive conception of Pierre's presence in the café. I grasp *Pierre's absence from the café:* As Sartre says, "I myself expected to see Pierre, and my expectation has caused the absence of Pierre to happen as a real event concerning this café."

According to Sartre, it is in this contrastive way that we grasp the being of consciousness. We start with our positive conception of the being of an object. This type of being is called *being in-itself*. Sartre says that being in-itself "is what it is," but he adds a more helpful characterization: the in-itself "*has to be* what it is."[3] Sartre's idea is that an in-itself is not free; to be presented as an object of consciousness is to be presented as a mere thing, a thing that is part of the causal order.

In terms of our positive conception of being in-itself we form our conception of the being of consciousness, which Sartre calls being *for*-itself. Being for-itself is being that is not being in-itself. Consciousness, unlike its object, is free, and is conceived as outside of the causal order. But the freedom of consciousness is tantamount to its lacking any definite shape. Its being is that of a for-itself, and, as Sartre says in several places, "the being of the *for-itself* is defined . . . as being what it is not and not being what it is."[4] What this paradoxical definition means is that the for-itself *may* be what it is not and *need not be* what it is. To exist as a for-itself is to be without a fixed identity; it is to be capable of changing from one identity to another. It is to be (largely) self-defining.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE SELF

In order to elaborate upon the relationship between consciousness and identity, Sartre distinguishes between pre-reflective (or nonthetic or nonpositional) consciousness on the one hand and reflective consciousness on the other. To grasp the distinction Sartre has in mind, notice that sometimes we do not explicitly spell out for ourselves the activities we are engaged in although we are *conscious* of those activities. This form of consciousness Sartre calls *pre-reflective* consciousness. Your reading the first sentence of this paragraph may be a good example of an act that is pre-reflective, for although you were certainly aware of reading the sentence, you probably did not explicitly spell out for yourself what you were doing. Contrast your reading the sentence just before this one, which literally spelled out your act of reading the first sentence in the paragraph, and which therefore prompted *reflective consciousness*. You cannot be reflectively aware of reading a sentence unless you are pre-reflectively aware of doing so, but pre-reflective consciousness is possible without reflective consciousness. You read the first sentence in this paragraph and you were aware of what you were doing, yet you did not spell out to yourself "I am reading this sentence."

According to Sartre, consciousness is not the same thing as the self or ego; in fact, the self is *constructed* by reflective consciousness. But in constructing the self, consciousness must decide how to situate the self with respect to the two modes of being, the in-itself and the for-itself, which he describes as incommensurable: the in-itself and the for-itself are "absolutely separated regions of being" that are "without communication."[5] Sartre stresses that consciousness is capable of constructing the self in any number of ways, but he also suggests that an accurate view (a) portrays the self as continuous with consciousness and (b) reflects the nature of consciousness as a for-itself.

FREEDOM AND ANGUISH

Insofar as our being is that of a for-itself, we are free. But we experience our freedom as anguish, according to Sartre. The anguish resulting from our freedom takes several forms. One form of anguish is a consequence of the fact that nothing determines that an individual consciousness will construct and identify with a given self rather than some other possible self. Our choice of identity is not causally determined. Hence, nothing determines that an individual consciousness will not abandon the self it has constructed and replace it with another. Nothing an individual consciousness does now can guarantee that the identity it embraces today will be the identity it embraces tomorrow. Sartre expresses this point in a paradoxical way: "I *am* not the self which I will be."[6] A more straightforward way to put his point is to say that an individual consciousness may always replace the identity it has chosen. His point is that whether I choose as an individual consciousness to retain a particular identity over time is always up to me; if I remain the same self, I do so only by a continuously renewed decision.

This discovery causes me anguish (more exactly: "anguish in the face of the future") because I care about my continued existence; I would really like to persist as the very same person indefinitely, and hence, I would like to ensure right now that I will do so. But ensuring my continuation would require that I do something now that will deprive the individual consciousness that will animate my body tomorrow of the freedom to construct a new identity, and that is something I cannot do. I cannot eliminate my freedom. Sartre adds that anguish in the face of the past is possible, too, as when a gambler wishes to abandon his identity as a gambler, but discovers that there is no decision that he can make now to deprive himself of the freedom later to renew his identity as a gambler.

Another form of anguish Sartre calls *ethical anguish*. We are completely free to decide for ourselves what is valuable, according to Sartre, and this decision cannot be based on an appeal to the objective facts about what is valuable, for according to Sartre there are no such objective facts: "Value derives its being from its exigency and not its exigency from its being." That is, as Schopenhauer suggested, I do not decide to value things because they are valuable in themselves; rather, something is valuable to me because I decide to value it. Therefore, "nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values," and "as a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable."[7] Ethical anguish results when I recognize my groundlessness as a creator of value and my permanent freedom to replace those values with others.

FLIGHT AND BAD FAITH

The typical response to anguish is flight, according to Sartre. We attempt to flee or deny the freedom that causes us anguish. The main way people conceal their freedom from themselves is by adopting *psychological determinism*, the view that human nature is responsible for what we do. By adopting psychological determinism, we attempt to reduce ourselves to "never being anything but what we are";[8] that is, we convince ourselves that we cannot help but retain our identity, which is to think of ourselves as no more than an in-itself. The fictional story we tell ourselves, according to Sartre, calls to mind some of the views of the Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677). The story is that the self is my essence and "an act is free when it exactly reflects my essence. It is a matter of envisaging the self as a little God which inhabits me and which possesses my freedom as a metaphysical virtue."[9]

The attitude by which I try to hide something from myself Sartre calls *mauvaise foi*, which is literally translated as "bad faith" (it is sometimes translated as self-deception). Thus, when we flee our freedom and our anguish, we are in "bad faith." Sartre thinks that "people can *live* in bad faith," but he also thinks that bad faith is difficult to comprehend. He characterizes it as "evanescent," "metastable," and "precarious."[10] Bad faith is difficult to understand because we can hide something from ourselves only if we know what we are hiding; we must know the truth in order to conceal it from ourselves. Consciousness is entirely translucent to itself; because it must be aware of something in order to launch the project of concealing it, the project cannot succeed. In particular, we can never

fully succeed in hiding our anguish from ourselves because we must acknowledge that we are in anguish in order to hide our anguish from ourselves. According to Sartre, "I flee in order not to know, but I can not avoid knowing that I am fleeing; and the flight from anguish is only a mode of becoming conscious of anguish."[11]

Even though he says that bad faith is something "we can neither reject nor comprehend,"[12] Sartre does offer illuminating descriptions of some patterns of bad faith. Principally, people vacillate between seeing themselves as what Sartre calls a "facticity" and as a "transcendence." That is, people vacillate between seeing themselves as an in-itself or as a for-itself. Such vacillation allows us to disarm unwelcome truths, such as "I am cowardly" or "my values are baseless," by alternating between two positions whenever it suits us: (1) saying that the repugnant claim would be true of us only insofar as we had a given nature when in fact we are free to transcend our nature, or (2) saying that the repugnant claim would be true of us only insofar as we were free to transcend when in fact we have a fixed nature. Thus, to disarm "I am cowardly," I would adopt (1), but to disarm "my values are baseless," I would switch to (2).

A second device is to vacillate between our own self-conception and the conception of us held by other people. If I have managed to con people into thinking that I am humble, I might assess my character in light of their view rather than in light of my own opinion that I am better than anyone else. But I will switch to my own self-conception when others (falsely!) believe that my character is unsavory. A third device is to chop our selves into different person stages and identify with some of these at one time, and with others at other times.

The project of bad faith gives us powerful grounds to leave the question of our identity up in the air. If the question were finally resolved, we could not continue to deceive ourselves through caginess about how to see ourselves. Finally deciding who we are is also made difficult by something else. According to Sartre, sincerity, "the antithesis of self-deception," is problematic because sincerity seems to require "that a man be for himself only what he is," which appears to entail identifying ourselves entirely as an in-itself. But that suggests that sincerity is itself a form of self-deception.

THE OTHER

According to Sartre, I can be aware of my own existence only if other people, other conscious beings, exist, for self-awareness involves awareness of a public dimension of the self. There is a "primary relation between my consciousness and the Other's" by which "the Other must be given to me directly as a subject although in connection with me. . . ."[13] To illustrate his point, Sartre uses the example of shame. Shame reveals something about my self, but "I am ashamed of myself *as I appear* to the Other. . . . I recognize that I *am* as the Other sees me."[14]

Much like Hegel before him, Sartre suggests that there is a permanent tension between the way we see ourselves and the way others see us. Under examination by another, we are objects deprived of our transcendence or freedom. But the same is true of them when we examine them: "While I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me."[15] To resolve the tension, therefore, we would have to submit to the perspective by which we are objects for others, or else we would have to impose upon others the perspective by which they are objects for us. Neither perspective can win out, because our freedom precludes our being objects for others, and their freedom precludes their being objects for us. However, Sartre is able to use his account of the struggle over objectification to illuminate various aspects of human psychology such as love, sexual desire, masochism, and sadism.

EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

In the last part of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre sketches the approach to psychoanalysis that his account of human being favors. In his view the proper foundation for a psychological explanation of someone's personality is the identity freely chosen by that person. One's identity will involve a fundamental project, a "project of being," by which one is engaged in the world, and it will not only establish one's values, it will give a meaning to one's behavior, a meaning that transcends that behavior and renders it intelligible. Sartre likens the freely chosen identity to something Spinoza calls an "intelligible character," but Sartre says that "the distinguishing characteristic

of the intelligible choice . . . is that it can exist only as the transcendent meaning of each concrete, empirical choice."

Sartre also returns to his theme that the conscious individual must come to terms with both the in-itself and the for-itself when constructing the self. The ideal self would partake of both forms of being. We would like to remain free (the for-itself component of our ideal), but simultaneously we would like the fact that we remain who we are to be a matter of absolute necessity (the in-itself component of our ideal). Because God has precisely this ideal self, Sartre says "to be man means to reach toward being God."[16]

NOTES

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays,* trans. S. Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1946), 120.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, Introduction to *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 5.
3. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 28.
4. Ibid., 28.
5. Ibid., 26.
6. Ibid., 68.
7. Ibid., 76.
8. Ibid., 79.
9. Ibid., 81.
10. Ibid., 90.
11. Ibid., 83.
12. Ibid., 90.
13. Ibid., 341.
14. Ibid., 302.
15. Ibid., 475.
16. Ibid., 724.

WORKS BY JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Existentialism and Humanism

My purpose here is to offer a defence of existentialism against several reproaches that have been laid against it.

First, it has been reproached as an invitation to people to dwell in quietism of despair. For if every way to a solution is barred, one would have to regard any action in this world as entirely ineffective, and one would arrive finally at a contemplative philosophy. Moreover, since contemplation is a luxury, this would be only another bourgeois philosophy. This is, especially, the reproach made by the Communists.

From another quarter we are reproached for having underlined all that is ignominious in the human situation, for depicting what is mean, sordid or base to the neglect of certain things that possess charm and beauty and belong to the brighter side of human nature: for example, according to the Catholic critic, Mlle. Mercier, we forget how an infant smiles. Both from this side and from the other we are also reproached for leaving out of account the solidarity of mankind and considering man in isolation. And this, say the Communists, is because we base our doctrine upon pure subjectivity—upon the Cartesian "I think": which is the moment in which solitary man attains to himself; a position from which it is impossible to regain solidarity with other men who exist outside of the self. The *ego* cannot reach them through the *cogito.*

From the Christian side, we are reproached as people who deny the reality and seriousness of human affairs. For since we ignore the commandments of God and all values prescribed as eternal, nothing remains but what is strictly voluntary. Everyone can do what he likes; and will be incapable, from such a point of view, of condemning either the point of view or the action of anyone else.

It is to these various reproaches that I shall endeavour to reply to-day; that is why I have entitled this brief exposition "Existentialism and Humanism." Many may be surprised at the mention of humanism in this connection, but we shall try to see in what sense we understand it. In any case, we can begin by saying that existentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity. The essential charge laid against us is, of course, that of over-emphasis upon the evil side of human life. I have lately been told of a lady who, whenever she lets slip a vulgar expression in a moment of nervousness, excuses herself by exclaiming, "I believe I am becoming an existentialist." So it appears that ugliness is being identified with existentialism. That is why some people say we are "naturalistic," and if we