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## Jean-Paul Sartre

philosopher, social advocate

Many American students begin their exploration of existentialism by reading either Sartre or [Albert Camus](#). Jean-Paul Sartre's strong political beliefs, ever-evolving as they were, and his need to be in the public eye, contribute to his long shadow. Sartre was largely responsible for the "trendy" nature of existentialism — the lingering images of men and women wearing black, smoking Turkish cigarettes, drinking black coffee. The Beat Generation owes a great deal to Sartre.

As you read this document, understand that I view Sartre as a political and popular figure, not as a brilliant writer. I know people might cringe at not honoring Sartre's genius, but I question the ease with which the term is applied to Sartre. Of course, without Sartre, you might not even be exploring this Web site. Personally, I consider [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) the most important of the existentialists.

Do not misunderstand. I have a great respect for Sartre's genuine concern for humanity — especially the "working class" he fought so hard to defend during the 1960s, when France was a political quagmire. What has given me more respect for Sartre are his own notes and interviews with his companion [Simone de Beauvoir](#). Sartre was candid about his failure to write a great novel, or remarkable play. But then again, those were never his reason for being. Sartre was a student of the human condition. I can think of no more honorable a pursuit.

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### Biography

Before delving into the details of Jean-Paul Sartre's life, I think it reasonable to reveal what type of man Sartre was. The best description of Sartre appears in Ronald Hayman's *Sartre*. This passage reveals more of Sartre's personality than any other I have read; I am left to quote rather liberally from Hayman's text.

Sartre felt most at home in cafés and restaurants where he could annex space by dominating the conversation and exhaling smoke.... But, like [Kafka](#), he never felt more free than when he was writing, creating an imaginary space. Paper as magic carpet; pen as wand.... After a paradisaical infancy centered on the belief that he was beautiful, he

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systematically tried to reject his body. To reassure his mind that it had nothing to fear from sibling rivalry with his maltreated body he consistently ignored all messages [his body] sent out. He resisted fatigue, treated pain as if it were a challenge. To step up his productivity he made reckless use of... stimulants, taking sedatives when he wanted to relax. He resented the time he had to spend on washing, shaving, cleaning his teeth, taking a bath, excreting, and he would economize by carrying on conversations... through the bathroom door. He had no personal vanity.... When his smoke-stained teeth began to decay, he refused to waste time on seeing a dentist.... He took immeasurable pride in his intellect — “I’ve got a golden brain.”

- *Sartre*; Hayman, p. 21–22



The image of Sartre painted by various biographers, even [Simone de Beauvoir](#), is one of a man obsessed with his own intellect, to the neglect of almost all else. Sartre was always certain of his own value to society as a philosopher and writer, never avoiding an opportunity to demonstrate his superior mind. In the end, he managed to convince a great many people of his importance. That alone made him important.

### Early Years

Jean-Paul Sartre was born 21 June 1905 in Paris, the only child of Jean-

Baptiste and Anne-Marie Sartre, two individuals from distinguished families. Jean-Baptiste Sartre was the son of Dr. Eymard Sartre, a noted country doctor in the Dordogne region of France. Eymard had written several medical texts; he published his first work in his early twenties. Sartre’s mother was the first cousin of Albert Schweitzer, the famous German missionary.

Eymard was a cynical and unhappy man. He had married the daughter of a pharmacist, under the impression her family was well-positioned. Much like his grandson Jean-Paul, it is clear that Eymard cared a great deal about his social status. The marriage was unhappy, with Eymard seldom speaking. Jean-Baptiste came to resent his homelife, especially his father’s silences. Setting his sights upon escaping from his family, Jean-Baptiste focused his energies upon his studies. An excellent student, Jean-Baptiste gained admission into the Ecole Polytechnique, a prestigious technical school. Still, he wanted to be even further from his past. Jean-Baptiste sought refuge in the French navy, enlisting in 1897.

Anne-Marie Schweitzer was the daughter of Karl “Charles” Schweitzer. While the uncle of famed thinker Albert Schweitzer, Karl was famous in his own right. Karl had published several texts on religion, philosophy and languages. In fact, Karl was the co-author of a series of texts on English, German, and French. With two authors for grandfathers, Jean-Paul Sartre might have been destined to write.

Jean-Baptiste Sartre and Anne-Marie Schweitzer married on 5 May 1904, in Paris. The two were truly in love, Anne-Marie completely dedicated to her husband. Both families seem to have been pleased by the marriage; Eymard Sartre finally established a link to a well-placed family, while the Schweitzer’s seemed to appreciate Jean-Baptiste’s intellect. To the joy of all, the young couple had a son, Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre, on 21 June 1905. Jean-Baptiste, however, was away on a naval assignment. Upon his return in November, Jean-Baptiste wrote to his family of how handsome his son was. Jean-Paul Sartre’s father also noted how active the young child was, how full of energy.

Sadly, Jean-Baptiste had contracted enterocolitis during a voyage to China. He became ill in March, 1906, and was forced to request a leave

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from the navy. the young family moved to a farm near Eymard Sartre's residence. Jean-Baptiste died on 17 September 1906, at the age of 32. Barely more than a year after Jean-Paul's birth, his father had died. "The death of Jean-Baptiste was my greatest piece of good fortune. I didn't even have to forget him," Sartre later claimed.

After the death of Jean-Paul's father, his mother moved into her parent's home. His grandfather was a strict man, dedicated to learning, while his mother pampered young Jean-Paul. The year's living in the Schweitzer house affected Sartre for his entire life.

Anne-Marie and Jean-Paul shared a room in the Schweitzer residence. A young woman, Anne-Marie found herself treated like a child by her domineering father. To escape his oppressive personality, Anne-Marie showered her young son with attention, often treating him like a toy or a doll. She dressed her son in frilly clothing, let his hair grow long, and lavished him with attention. Young Jean-Paul was called "Poulou" by his mother, usually in a sweet tone.

Karl Schweitzer presided over others with his size and personality. His white beard and commanding voice intimidated others; members of the local Catholic parish treated Schweitzer with respect often reserved for a priest. The Schweitzer family's reputation contributed to Karl's confidence -- and vanity. Though in his sixties, Karl knew he was still attractive, and sought to prove his virility at every chance. As Jean-Paul grew, he saw this "religious" man conduct numerous affairs, including one with a former student. Anne-Marie came to despise her father's behavior, as did her son. Curiously, Sartre would engage in numerous affairs and empty relationships throughout his life.

Eventually, Karl tired of having a grandson that looked more like a girl. One day, he took Jean-Paul to a local barber and had the boy's long hair trimmed. Upon seeing her son, Anne-Marie rushed to her room and cried. Jean-Paul was ugly. Many biographers have described Sartre as ugly or unattractive. From an early illness, Sartre lost most of his vision in one eye. This eye, with a strabismus, seemed to look askance, as if Sartre was not paying attention. Worse, it was clear the boy was destined to be short and awkward. His grandparents referred to Jean-Paul's physique as a "Sartre" fault. Without his curly long hair and fancy clothes, Sartre's ugliness was obvious -- even to his mother.

Children being predisposed to brutal honesty, did not hide their disdain for young Jean-Paul's appearance. His lack of physical size and his odd appearance made him a target for abuse. He began to show signs of a vindictive and angry personality. Jean-Paul's only comfort was his self-confidence; he knew he was smarter than other children.

Karl also knew his grandson was smart. From seven generations of teachers, Karl was eager to tutor young Jean-Paul. In fact, Karl was quite proud of his "little man" as a student. Curiously, Sartre would deny in several essays and his autobiographies that he had been tutored by his grandfather. Sartre's willingness to avoid the truth was established at a young age, and he continued to lie or omit facts throughout his life. Karl, despite Jean-Paul's statements to the contrary, was an excellent tutor and was dedicated to his grandson's success. After all, Jean-Paul carried Schweitzer blood.

Fearing her son was falling under the influence of her father, Anne-Marie sought to expose Sartre to more common experiences. While the great thinkers were important, as were other subjects, Anne-Marie also thought the world should be experienced. She took young Jean-Paul to movies, bought him comics, and gave him serials to read. Sartre was especially fond of American Western heroes, such as Buffalo Bill. Taking Sartre out of the house also allowed Anne-Marie out, as she was not interested in a social life, remaining loyal to the memory of Jean-Baptiste.

At the age of eight, Sartre received some puppets from his mother. These gifts inspired Sartre to write scripts and stage shows. He slowly gained a small group of friends, or at least children willing to tolerate him in return for entertainment. Sartre enjoyed the attention associated with his shows; he had learned that people like a performer.

Eymard Sartre died in October, 1913. His death allowed the Schweitzer family near-complete control over Jean-Paul.

Germany declared war in August, 1914. Sartre, like most French citizens, was caught up in the frenzy of nationalism. War was exciting, as long as it wasn't personal. In October of 1914, Sartre even wrote a short story about a young French private who captures the Kaiser. To prove he is superior to the German, the young Frenchman challenges the Kaiser to a fist fight and wins. Jean-Paul was writing constantly; he felt a sense of power and control while writing.

In the fall of 1915, Jean-Paul enrolled at Lycée Henri IV, a well-regarded school. At the school, Sartre easily made friends. These young men were of the same class, with a great respect for knowledge and wit. Sartre demonstrated an abundance of wit. In a sign of things to come, one instructor noted that Sartre possessed an excellent mind, but lacked mental discipline; Jean-Paul did not refine his thoughts. This criticism mirrors that of scholars who now study Sartre's works, so this is clearly a personality trait Sartre never outgrew. His mind would race from topic to topic, never focused long enough to refine a thought. This tendency also resulted in careless errors.

## The Stepchild & Rebel

When Sartre was twelve, his mother remarried. For some reason, he viewed this as a betrayal. Sartre had grown unusually close to his mother and demanded all her attentions. The tension between Jean-Paul and the dominant patriarchs in his family lasted for his entire life. Sartre seems to have rebelled against his grandfather and stepfather at every opportunity. Yet, for all indications, Joseph Mancy tried his best to be a good father to Sartre.

When Joseph Mancy married Anne-Marie in April of 1917, it was the culmination of a long-time attraction. Mancy had met Anne-Marie even before she met Jean-Baptiste Sartre. Mancy found Anne-Marie quite attractive and wanted to know her better, but he was the son of a railway employee and considered "lower class" by her family. In the intervening years Mancy had attended the Ecole Polytechnique and earned an engineering degree. He was employed by the French Navy, making him quite acceptable to her family -- he was smart, well-educated, and capable of providing for Anne-Marie and her son.

Mancy moved the family in 1917 to La Rochelle, where he was working with military contractors. Sartre quickly rebelled and found himself constantly in trouble. He fought with fellow students often enough that he could regularly be found serving after-school detention. His parents began to worry that he would become a thug -- a common thief or worse. Sartre stole money from his mother's room, then lied about doing so. His behavior was too much for his stepfather to accept. By 1920, Mancy recognized that he could not control young Jean-Paul. The young Sartre was sent back to Paris and the Lycée Henri IV, where he was a boarder at the school. He was thereby reunited with Paul-Yves Nizan, one of the most important figures in his life.

## Paul-Yves Nizan

Only [Simone de Beauvoir](#) had a greater effect upon Jean-Paul Sartre than Paul-Yves Nizan. Nizan enrolled at the Lycée Henri IV in 1916 and soon after established a friendship with Jean-Paul. Nizan was a great deal like his father. An engineer, the elder Nizan often slipped into deep depressions without cause. The slightest stress could drive him to spells of drinking or, possibly worse, doing nothing at all. Sartre could never understand these bouts with depression and thought they were a sign of mental weakness. Despite this odd link between father and son, Sartre did envy the two Nizans' close relationship. Paul-Yves knew his father, something Sartre was not able to do.

While many students thought of Nizan as shy and quiet, Sartre recognized a form of silent rage in his classmate. Over the years, he would learn that

Nizan was indeed carrying a great sense of rage, namely at various social injustices. Nizan could not help but ponder the state of mankind and French society in particular. Nizan seemed like an old man at time, not the young student he was.

Reunited with Nizan in 1920, the two quickly became best friends. Other students would call them "Nitre & Sarzan," in recognition of their unusually close relationship. Only women, as might be expected, would come between them from 1920 into the early 1930s. Unlike Sartre, Nizan was popular without trying. He found himself dominant among others through a natural ease. Sartre would develop popularity through a form of forced outrageousness.

In the fall of 1922, Nizan and Sartre enrolled at Lycée Louis-le-Grande, considered among the best preparatory schools in France. Being one of the "best" meant that the school was also drab, authoritarian, and conservative. Over time, Sartre would develop a distaste for the French "establishment" and its skills-based form of instruction.

There is some indication that Sartre came to think of Nizan as more than a mere friend. Having read several accounts of the relationship, one might conclude that there was a form of "love" between the two young men -- at least from Sartre's perspective. When the two became estranged from March through October of 1923, Sartre suffered a near-collapse emotionally; he had come to rely upon Nizan. Sartre vowed never to care as much for any person again.

The two students were a study in opposites. Academically, Sartre was prone to "excessive elaboration of insufficiently clarified ideas," according to one of his instructors. (Cite: Cohen-Solal and Hayman) At best, Sartre seemed disorganized and undisciplined in his writings. Meanwhile, despite his own unpredictable nature, Nizan seemed the perfect student. His works were clear and concise; he would later be known for his journalistic style of writing. If his academic works were disorderly, Sartre himself was also lacking any polish. His sanitary habits were questionable, his clothing a mess, and his nature loud. Nizan presented a neat, stylish, and calm exterior.

Sartre might have been "hyperactive" or what today is recognized as "ADD/ADHD" by psychiatry. To Nizan's consternation, Sartre seemed in a constant state of motion and confusion. Sartre could not even sleep as others might; he required earplugs and a blindfold to sleep at night. He would bundle in his bed, to block all distractions. Awake, he would fidget and move about a room. Sartre seemed agitated by the slightest things... one minor annoyance would set him off emotionally. For one dedicated to the idea of self-control, he was unable to control his own mind and body. These personality traits might explain some of the tension between the two friends.

## Ecole Normale Supérieure

Despite their distaste for all things traditional and authoritarian, Nizan and Sartre both enrolled in yet another famous French school for their next level of education. The Ecole Normale Supérieure was widely regarded as among the best of French universities. A companion school of the Sorbonne, Ecole Normale Supérieure served as a psychology and philosophy campus. (Historical note: Robert de Sorbon endowed a college at the University of Paris for theological studies between 1250 and 1260. The independent college of theology and philosophy came to be known as "the Sorbonne." The Sorbonne currently incorporates three colleges of the Universities of Paris.)

In August of 1924, Sartre placed seventh on the ENS entrance exams, which are to this day highly competitive. Sartre's classmates included René Maheu, Jean Hyppolite, Pierre Guille, and Raymond Aron.

Raymond Aron's role as a political and philosophical adversary of Sartre in later life places him alongside Nizan and [Albert Camus](#) as someone Sartre would personally insult -- ruining a good friendship.

Raymond Claude Ferdinand Aron lived from 1905 until 17 Oct 1983. Much like Nizan, Aron presented a calm, humble, yet brilliant persona. Unlike Nizan, Sartre, and many other French intellectuals, Aron came to be known for his pro-American and anti-Communist views. Like Sartre, Aron was influenced by Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Max Weber. At the start of France's occupation in 1940, he fled to London to join the forces of Gen. Charles de Gaulle, while Sartre and others remained in France. Aron viewed the main issue of the twentieth century as the threat of strong governments to individual freedom. Curiously, Aron never turned upon Sartre -- no matter how poorly Sartre treated him and his beliefs.

In this new environment, Nizan became quite political. While Aron avoided leftist causes and Sartre simply followed much of the time, Nizan, Maheu, and Guille came to be known as true radicals at the school. Sartre's outrageous nature lent itself to the group -- he seems to have liked rebelliousness for its own thrill. These four students were hostile, even somewhat destructive.

During Sartre's first year at ENS, he was one of only five students of philosophy. "Normaliens," as ENS students were known, tended to study theology, psychology, and the classics. Philosophy, at least during the 1920s, had fallen from favor -- viewed as a topic without application. Sartre did enjoy the study of psychology; he would study and critique Freud throughout his writings. And, despite his later claims that he did not read the "classics" while at ENS, library records indicate Sartre checked out hundreds of books, many of them classics.

Reading hundreds of works gave Sartre a vast amount of information from which to construct his papers as a student. Unfortunately, Sartre was still as disorganized intellectually as he had been at Lycée Henri IV. Instructors' notes located by biographers indicate Sartre would base papers upon theories he only partially understood; he was quick draw conclusions. However, as many students have demonstrated, a gift with words sometimes masked Sartre's ignorance or even intentional errors. Eloquence served Sartre as a substitute for any depth of knowledge.

As a student at ENS, Nizan's bouts with depression and anxiety increased. He would skip seminars, spend countless days in drunken state, and often vanish for days at a time. His depression increased with his interest in politics and philosophy. Nizan described himself as torn between "action" and "la vie intérieure" -- the interior life, possibly best translated as "living for the self."

Though he thought Nizan was self-absorbed, it could be argued that Sartre was actually self-centered to an extreme. Sartre even believed that by writing about his life he communicated truths for all humanity. While Nizan wanted to help all people through political action, Sartre lived his own life without much political involvement -- an apathy later changed by World War II. Nizan joined the Parti Communiste Français, the French Communist Party, and was active in Groupe d'Information Internationale, an international student "news" organization. Sartre saw his friend's actions as a waste of time and energy on behalf of others. Sartre once commented that Nizan's attraction to Marxism was an attempt to justify hatreds.

The center of his own universe, Sartre wished to be the center of all attention. Long ago made aware of his unattractive features by his grandfather, Sartre realized he was the opposite of Nizan. Yet, instead of hiding, Sartre would announce his presence to all at any opportunity. During the March 1925 ENS "student revue," a nude Jean-Paul Sartre danced with Nizan. It was played for laughs; Sartre would rather be comic than ignored.

But more important than being the center of attention, Sartre truly wanted to be the smartest person at ENS.

I want to be the one who knows the most things  
- Hayman, p. 61

x x x

If you are moral... {{quote this}}  
- Hayman, p. 61

x

## The First Simone

Before Jean-Paul Sartre met his life-long companion [Simone de Beauvoir](#), he met and fell in love with Simone-Camille Sans. While attending a funeral for a cousin, Sartre first noticed Simone-Camille. She was 22 and from a respected family. Her father was a chemist in the Toulouse region of southern France. By the end of 1925, Sartre and "Toulouse," as he called Simone-Camille, declared their love to each other in letters and to friends.

Simone-Camille's adventurous nature appealed to Sartre. She experimented with any and all freedoms, but especially pursued sexual pleasures. She had been involved in several wild orgies in Toulouse, hosted by the sons and daughters of other middle and upper-class families. The 1920s were a time for such experimentation.

Sartre's nature quickly revealed itself to "Toulouse." She noted his constant desire for self-control and order, while he continued to be volatile and disorganized. Her fiancé wrote and talked of being completely in charge of his own fate, but he seemed to lack any discipline. As for independence, Sartre eventually seemed possessive and needy -- he needed to feel loved. When Sartre asked to see Toulouse during Easter break of 1926, she had to decline due to family commitments. Sartre could not understand her telegram: "NOT FREE. POINTLESS TO COME SUNDAY." He took her message as a rejection, not the simple statement it was. In anger, he set a deadline for her to meet with him. One might assume he would have let the deadline slip; he would not have rejected her.

For two weeks in December of 1926, Toulouse visited Sartre in Paris. She attended the ENS winter formal, attracting some attention. She was an odd-mix of proper and ill-bred. She was interesting. Following her visit, Sartre's letters to Toulouse became less formal; in comparison, he would later treat Simone de Beauvoir with formality -- at all times.

While Sartre struggled to reconcile his relationship with Toulouse and his strong desire for control, Nizan dated and fell in love with Henriette Alphen. Nizan and Alphen were married on 24 December 1927, with Sartre and Raymond Aron serving as witnesses. Once again, Nizan demonstrated a greater maturity and personal growth.

By 1928, the Sartre-Toulouse relationship was ending. Simone-Camille became the mistress of Charles Dullin, a well-known French stage actor. Anny, in *La Nausée* is based upon Toulouse -- Anny is the mistress of an actor, too. When Sartre saw Toulouse in 1929, she seemed rather eccentric. She "talked" to the dead, danced about in a drunken state, and seemed lost in her thoughts.

## Student Revolutionary

French students, it would seem, have been in a constant state of revolt since the late eighteenth century. Students, lacking any other target for their anger, often turn on the institutions of learning -- and the people in charge. Jean-Paul Sartre and his classmates at the Ecole Normale Supérieure followed in this tradition. Sartre's personal target was Gustave Lanson, the head of the school. Jean-Paul was impersonate Lanson and pull childish pranks at the master's expense.

Sartre's campaign against Lanson culminated on 25 May 1927. Charles Lindbergh was on tour in Europe, following his trans-Atlantic flight. Sartre and other students informed the media that Lindbergh was to visit the Ecole Normale Supérieure. The students then arranged a look-alike to dash into the buildings with a circle of escorts in the morning, while the media followed. The stunt drew attention throughout Paris -- and Lanson was forced to resign for not having better control of the ENS "normaliens."

Minor rebellion might make one's life interesting, but the French student population drifted towards political action. Sartre's classmates, including his best friend Paul-Yves Nizan, joined left-leaning political organizations. Nizan joined the French Communist Party, a move Sartre described as "totally grotesque." Sartre himself was not willing to be called a socialist or communist. He preferred to remain independent -- and self-absorbed. Sartre's self-imposed ignorance of most leftist activities and beliefs was aided by the anti-Marx and Hegel rhetoric of his instructors. Curiously, Hegel was not even among the course reading lists.

Eventually, politics came home... Sartre faced conscription into the French military. His response was to write anti-military columns in the student newspaper. Sartre was shortly called before the ENS disciplinary council. In November 1928, Sartre joined 82 other students in signing a petition against military training.

## Simone de Beauvoir

In 1928, Jean-Paul placed last -- fiftieth -- in his class at the Sorbonne on his agrégation, a form of exit exam. The topic of Sartre's paper had been Nietzsche's writings and "contingency."

Failing was difficult for Sartre, who considered himself quite smart. However, this setback might be the most important event in his life. Forced to wait for another examination, Sartre met [Simone de Beauvoir](#). Easily his intellectual match, Simone offered Sartre emotional and professional companionship throughout his life. For the next agrégation the two studied together. Sartre placed first on the exam this time, and de Beauvoir placed second. In many ways, this is how they are remembered: together one right after the other.

It is clear Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre were deeply in love, though in the most unconventional of relationships. They were never exclusive, both having other lovers at different times in their lives. The pair never lived together and marriage was certainly out of the question for both -- it represented society's view of relationships. According to many sources, they addressed each other formerly, as colleagues more than romantic lovers. Maybe they both feared expressing their love would be perceived as a weakness... we may never know.

For 18 months, beginning in 1929, Sartre served in the French military. After his discharge from the military, Sartre took a position at a lycée in Le Havre, in northwest France. As Simone was teaching at Marseilles, located in the south, the two frequently met between the two cities -- usually in Paris. One night in Paris, Raymond Aron was drinking with the couple when he mentioned phenomenology. Aron used a beer mug to illustrate phenomenology, discussing the mug's properties and essence.



Sartre was intrigued, so he began to read about this school of philosophy.

Jean-Paul went to Berlin in 1933 to study the lectures of [Edmund Husserl](#). After a year, Sartre returned to teaching with new enthusiasm.

Sartre experimented with mescaline in February 1935. As a result, he suffered hallucinations for the next year.

The novel *Nausea* was published in 1938. Sartre included a phenomenological analysis of a glass of beer in the novel, as a tribute to Raymond Aron.

## The War Years

At the start of World War II, Sartre was conscripted into the military once again. Sartre served in the meteorological service, launching weather balloons. Unfortunately, Sartre was captured on 21 June 1940.

While in the stalag, Sartre spend much of his time writing what was to become *Being and Nothingness*. According to one biographer, Sartre neglected himself while imprisoned, washing rarely, failing to shave, and developing a reputation for being rather foul. Sartre escaped in March 1941. He managed to return to Paris and somehow returned to his teaching post.

In June 1943, Sartre's anti-Nazi play *The Flies* opened at a Paris theatre. Despite the play's lack of subtlety, even uniformed German soldiers attended the production. The play closed after 40 performances, but left quite an impression among the artistic community of Paris. By 1945, at the end of World War II, Sartre found himself famous -- and "existentialism" was *the* philosophy to study. Sartre spread his idea through his editorship of the magazine, *Les Temps Modernes*. The publication was named for the Charlie Chaplin film *Modern Times*, considered a masterpiece by many.

## Politics and (or?) Philosophy

Curiously, as existentialism grew in popularity -- to the point of becoming a pop-culture term -- Sartre slowly left the philosophy that had brought him fame. Sartre claimed a "conversion" to [Marxism](#). In part, Sartre's move to the political left resulted from the influence of [Maurice Merleau-Ponty](#). As the Cold War developed, Sartre came to support the Soviet Union. Eventually, his support of Soviet Communism cost Sartre his friendship with [Albert Camus](#).

Sartre published his defense of Marxism, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in 1960. The work was meant to be two volumes, but the second was abandoned by Sartre before completion. This unfinished work was published after Sartre's death. In *The Critique*, Sartre tried to defend "pure" Marxism as respecting individual freedoms. Unfortunately for Sartre, most people saw Marxism as it existed in the Soviet Union -- anything but a system respecting freedom.

In 1964, Sartre was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He refused to accept the award on "political" grounds.

Paris university students rebelled in 1968, calling for various reforms. Sartre's support of the students caused him problems with both the left and the right in France. The right-leaning supporters of President de Gaulle thought Sartre contributed to the protests. The French Communist Party did not support the students, thinking their demands for liberalized education unreasonable. Both the left and right in France considered the universities fine as they were.

From 1968 until his death, Sartre embodied the left, socially and politically. He stopped wearing suits and ties, protested the Vietnam War, and found a new following in student "radicals" in both Europe and America.

By the late 1970s, Jean-Paul Sartre's body began to rebel. He smoked two packs of cigarettes a day, drank heavily, and used amphetamines while writing. For all this talk about logic and individual will, Sartre could not stop his bad habits.

## The Exit

On 15 April 1980, Sartre died. Simone de Beauvoir attempted to spend the night next to his body, but hospital employees removed her from his bed. She had loved him since they met to study for the agrégation.

Sartre's popularity might have diminished by the end of his life, but his death brought forth the kind of emotional displays normally reserved for great political leaders. Of course, a political leader is what Sartre was in many ways. More than 50,000 people lined the streets of Paris for Sartre's funeral procession on 19 April 1980. Sartre's ashes were buried at the Montparnasse Cemetery. Later, Simone de Beauvoir's ashes were buried next to his.

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## Chronology

1905 June 21	Born to Jean-Baptiste Sartre and Anne-Marie (Schweitzer) Sartre.
1905 October 20	The General Strike of Russia, leading to the formation of the first Soviet in St. Petersburg.
1906 November 17	Jean-Baptiste dies.
1907	Sartre and Anne-Marie move in with her parents: Karl "Charles" Schweitzer, noted writer and music historian, and Louise. Anne-Marie's cousin is Albert Schweitzer.
1909	Sartre suffers from a cold or influenza, causing leucoma in his right eye. He loses some sight in the eye.
1911	The Schweitzers move to Paris.
1913 October	Dr. Eymard Sartre dies.
1914 June 28	Assassination of Austrian archduke Francis Ferdinand in Sarajevo signals the start of World War I.
1914 August 1-23	Various European nations formally declare war against each other.
1916 January 29	Germans launch an air raid on Paris, using the Zeppelin Fleet.
1917	Anne-Marie marries Joseph Mancy. The couple settles in La Rochelle.
1917 April 2	America declares war on Germany.
1917 November 7	(October 26, according to old Russian calendar) The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.
1917 November 8	Lenin assumes the chair of the Council of People's Commissars.
1918	Writes novel <i>Götz von Berlichingen</i> .
1918 November 9	Revolution in Berlin.
1920 February	German Workers' Party changes its name to the National Socialist Party.
	Writes the short <i>L'Ange du morbide</i> and begins

1922	the novel <i>Jésus la Chouette</i> , which he does not finish.
1923 August 10-13	Riots in Germany, lead by unions and National Socialists.
1925 January 16	Trotsky dismissed as chair of people's Military Council.
1926 October	Stalin expels Trotsky and Zinoviev from Politburo.
1927	Writes thesis <i>L'Image dans la view psychologique</i> .
1927 December 27	Trotsky expelled from Communist Party.
1928	Fails agrégation.
1929	Meets <a href="#">Simone de Beauvoir</a> . They both take the agrégation. He places first, she places second.
1929 January 31	Trotsky exiled from Soviet Union.
1930	Inherits portion of grandmother's estate.
1931	Publishes <i>La Légende de la vérité</i> and starts writing <i>Nausea</i> .
1934	Writes <i>La Transcendance de l'Ego</i> .
1935	Grandfather, Karl "Charles" Schweitzer dies.
1935 Fall	Relationship with de Beauvoir and Olga Kosakiewicz.
1936	Alcan publishes <i>L'Imagination</i> . Sartre writes the short stories <i>Erostrate</i> and <i>Dépayement</i> .
1936	Series of government changes in France, the result of power struggles between the left and moderates.
1936 July 18	Spanish Civil War begins.
1937	The journal <i>Recherches Philosophiques</i> publishes <i>La Transcendance de l'Ego</i> .
1938	Writes about 400 pages of <i>Le Psyché</i> and begins writing <i>La Age de raison</i> . Publishes the stories <i>La Chambre</i> , <i>Intimité</i> , and <i>Nourritures</i> (originally titled <i>Dépayement</i> ).
1938 April	Publishes <i>La Nausée (Nausea)</i> .
1938 September 7	French government activates all reserve military personnel.
1940 June 14	German troops enter Paris.
1940 June 21	Sartre is taken prisoner by German army.
1941 March	Escapes from German stalag. He founds the resistance group Socialisme et Liberté, which is dissolved within the year. <a href="#">Maurice Merleau-Ponty</a> , a student of <a href="#">Husserl</a> and acquaintance of de Beauvoir joins the group.
1941 December 8, 11	America declares war on Japan, then Germany.
1943 June 2	Meets <a href="#">Albert Camus</a> .
1943	Writes <i>Huis clos</i> in two weeks. Finishes <i>Le Sursis</i> and <i>Réflexions sur la question juive</i> , published in 1946.
1944 July	Escapes from Paris with de Beauvoir.
1944 August 25	Allied troops enter Paris. The liberation of France does little to change the instability of the French government.
1944 Fall	Forms <i>Les Temps Modernes</i> , which is to remain a popular journal.
1945 January 21	Stepfather, Joseph Mancy, dies.
1945	Refuses the Légion d'Honneur.
1946 November 8	The plays <i>Morts sans sépulture</i> and <i>La Putain respectueuse</i> premiere.

1946 November 10	French elections are marked by Communist and Socialist gains, leading to a Socialist-Communist coalition government.
1948 February	Joins the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (RDR).
1950	Denounces Soviet labor camps, after defending them in several articles.
1952	Publishes <i>Saint Genet</i> .
1952 May 28	Communists demonstrate in Paris.
1952 August	Publishes public reply to <a href="#">Camus</a> ' essays on rebellion in <i>Les Temps Modernes</i> .
1953 May	<a href="#">Merleau-Ponty</a> parts with Sartre, leaving the staff of <i>Les Temps Modernes</i> .
1954 January-February	The former Allies meet to discuss German autonomy. The Soviet Union vetoes proposed free elections in Germany.
1954 May-June	Visits the Soviet Union for the first time.
1954 December	Elected president of the Franco-Soviet Association.
1955 May 5	Occupation of Germany officially ends, but troops remain.
1955 June	<a href="#">Merleau-Ponty</a> publishes <i>Les Aventures de la dialectique</i> , which includes a chapter attacking Sartre for <i>ultra-bolshevism</i> .
1955 October 2	France withdraws from the United Nations over perceived interference by other nations in the Algerian-French Revolt.
1956 November	Condemns Soviet intervention in Hungary.
1956 December	Martial law is declared in Hungary. Once again, Sartre is forced to recognize the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union.
1958 December 21	Anti-communist De Gaulle elected president of France, just two months after radical-socialists had formed a coalition government. In many ways, De Gaulle's rise is a result of Soviet actions.
1959 September 24	The play <i>Les Séquestrés d'Altona</i> premieres.
1961 May	Maurice Merleau-Ponty dies.
1961 July 19	A bomb explodes near Sartre's apartment, 24 Rue Bonaparte.
1962 January 7	Another bomb attack prompts Sartre to move.
1962	Sartre visits Russia three times during the year. He is also elected as vice-president of the Congrès de la Communauté Européenne des Ecrivains (COMES). He steadfastly remains a supporter of Marxist ideals.
1962 July 3	Algeria wins independence from France and soon after joins the Arab League.
1963	Received by Krushchev in Soviet Georgia. Sartre will make regular trips to the USSR in coming years.
1964	Refuses the Nobel Prize in literature.
1965	Again elected as vice-president of COMES.
1965 January 25	Begins adoption process of Arlette Elkain.
1968	After appearing on Czech television in support of the Prague Spring, Sartre once again is faced with the true nature of the Soviet Union when it crushes Czechoslovakian reforms with tanks.
1969	Sartre's mother, Anne-Marie, dies.
1969 May	Supports Communist candidate for French presidency.
	The Soviet Union expels Solzhenitsyn from the

1969 November 12	Union of Soviet Writers. Sartre remains publicly loyal to the Communist Party.
1970 November 9	De Gaulle dies.
1971	Publicly breaks with Fidel Castro.
1972 May 22	American President Richard Nixon becomes the first President to visit Moscow.
1974 February 13	The Soviet Union deports Solzhenitsyn and revokes his Soviet citizenship.
1976	Sartre leads a campaign of 50 Nobel prizewinners for the release of Mikhail Stern, a political prisoner in the Soviet Union.
1976 April 15	In Spain the Union of Workers convenes its first congress in 44 years.
1976 April 25	Portugal has first elections in 40 years. The Socialist Party wins most seats.
1976 November 7	Accepts a doctorate from Jerusalem University.
1977	In an interview, Sartre declares that he is no longer a Marxist. The interview appears in <i>Lotta Continua</i> .
1977 May 17	Israeli Labour Party defeated after 29 years in power.
1978 February	Visits Israel.
1978 March 12	In French elections leftists parties win an absolute majority for the first time.
1980 April 15	Dies at 9 p.m. in a Paris hospital while in a coma.

## Works

- *Emotions: Outline of a Theory*, Essay: 1936 (*L'Imagination*)
- *Transcendence of the Ego*, Text: 1937 (*La Transcendance de l'Ego*)
- *Nausea*, Novel: 1938 (*La Nausée*)
- *Being and Nothingness*, Essay: 1943 (*L'Être et le Néant*)
- *The Flies*, Play: 1943 (*Les Mouches*)
- *No Exit*, Play: 1944 (*Huis Clos*)
- *The Age of Reason*, Novel: 1945 (*L'Age de raison*)
- *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, Text: 1946 (*L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*)
- *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Essay: 1946 (*Réflexions sur la question juive*, written 1943)
- *The Respectful Prostitute*, Play: 1947
- *Dirty Hands*, Text: 1948 (*Les Mains sales*)
- *Saint Genêt*, Biography: 1952
- *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Text: 1960
- *The Family Idiot*, Critique: 1982

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## Commentaries

Before commenting upon Jean-Paul Sartre's published works, it is important to offer some background information. Sartre's philosophical position evolved, along with his politics. Any attempt to place Sartre's works in context is likely to fail in the limited space available, due to his complex nature. Further complicating matters, Sartre, like most philosophers, developed his own lexicon. While Sartre might use the same terms as another writer, he often intended a unique definition. The most important term promoted by Sartre was "existentialism," a term borrowed from [Karl Jaspers](#).

Walter Kaufmann recognized Sartre's occasional lack of clarity, stating

that "at times he is misled by words and writes what is no longer meaningful." Maybe Sartre tried too hard to express his views in some instances, in part due to an enthusiasm for philosophical debate.

Being misled is one matter. Misleading others is quite different. It is important to understand that Sartre alternately valued intentions, actions, and results; at least in his writings and lectures. Evidence exists, however, demonstrating a personal profound lack of respect for intentions and, at times, even the truth. Sartre found nothing wrong in lying or intentionally misrepresenting the theories of others. Among the victims of Sartre's willingness to avoid facts were [Martin Heidegger](#), [Karl Jaspers](#), and other philosophers. Sartre stated Jaspers was a Catholic, which he wasn't, and that Heidegger was an existential atheist, which Heidegger denied in a series of angry letters. Sartre wanted so much to solidify his own positions, that truth was sometimes sacrificed.

If he was not always honest, it was partly because honesty was a luxury he could not afford.  
- *Sartre*; Hayman, p. 13

Why was, and is, Sartre influential? As biographer Ronald Hayman explains, it was not due to the quality of his literary works, even though Sartre is usually considered a "writer" by most scholars.

As a playwright Sartre was highly successful but less innovative and less significant than Beckett or Ionesco. As a novelist Sartre completed only one work, *Nausea*, his other three novels being parts of an unfinished tetralogy. The bulk of his writing time was devoted to political journalism and biography, but he can hardly be called a journalist, while his biographies of Baudelaire, Genet, and Flaubert are not biographies in the usual sense of the term.... he had to earn his living as a schoolteacher until 1944, when he was almost forty.  
- *Sartre*; Hayman, p. 16

Sartre's fame and influence are the result of self-promotion. He was a celebrity, especially in France.

## The Core of Sartre's Existentialism

Trying to define the core of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism is beyond my abilities. Instead, I have chosen to rely upon the efforts of others. As previously mentioned, I place the confusion concerning Sartre's works at the philosopher's own feet -- I could easily tangle his various definitions of "existentialism" into an incoherent mass of words. Still, Sartre popularized the term. Sartre's influence upon the school of philosophy broadly known as "existentialism" has been summarized by professor Walter Kaufmann as follows:

It is mainly through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre that existentialism has come to the attention of a wide international audience. Even [Heidegger](#)'s great prestige in Germany after the second World War is due, in no small part, to his tremendous impact on French Thought. Nevertheless, Sartre is widely considered a mere *littérateur*, and in the nineteen hundred and fifties is has become much more fashionable to criticize him, or rather dismiss him, than to take him seriously, let alone praise him. Oddly, it is widely argued against him that he is in some way strikingly unacademic, as if academic existentialism were not a contradiction in terms.  
- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 40

What often troubles academic audiences is that Sartre defined

existentialism in a simplistic manner. One must question if something must be complex to be accepted by this audience. However, the oversimplification of Sartre's own philosophical system is often apparent:

Existentialism maintains that in man, and in man alone, existence preceded essence.

This simply means that man first is, and only subsequently is this or that. In a word, man must create his own essence: it is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines himself. And the definition always remains open ended: we cannot say what this man is before he dies, or what mankind is before it has disappeared.

- From "A propos de l'existentialisme: Mise au point,"  
*Action Magazine*, December 29, 1944

Many people wrongly quote "existence precedes essence" as if that summarizes existentialism. Sartre was merely stating that man, as the only sentient being on earth, was forced to define who he was through living, while objects are what they are until destroyed. With our ability to think, grow, and change, mankind is in the unique position of defining itself. We are each in charge of defining our own lives.

In a certain sense, Sartre's definition of existentialism simply radicalizes a view that is very common among most social scientists: that there are no *instincts* that cause specific actions.

There are always alternatives to anything that counts as human action. For Sartre, this is always true, even when we *feel* that there are no alternatives.

- *Sartre for Beginners*; Palmer, p. 26

In today's world of "New Age" beliefs and enthusiasm for Eastern philosophies, it is interesting that in 1956 Kaufmann compared Sartre's existentialism to the teachings of the Buddha. Not that the two personalities are alike, Kaufmann carefully noted. Sartre was never at peace; he challenged anything and thought an existentialist must pursue life. The Buddha's teachings are more disposed toward accepting life and adapting to it.

Nevertheless, the Buddha, too, opposed any reliance on the divine because he wanted men to realize their complete responsibility. His final, and perhaps most characteristic, words, according to tradition were: "Work out your own salvation with diligence." And if the diligence is rather uncharacteristic of the existentialists, the Buddha's still more radical dictum with which the Dhammapada opens is nothing less than the quintessence of Sartre's thought: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought."

Few words in world literature equal the impact of this saying. All man's alibis are unacceptable: no gods are responsible for his condition; no original sin; no heredity and no environment....

- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 46

If you can think, you have free will. Sartre viewed this as the human condition. While concerned primarily with human beings -- or at least sentient beings -- Sartre's existentialism does address other creatures and objects. It is obvious that to understand humans one must first understand other objects. Sartre's study of the universe grew from the phenomenology of [Edmund Husserl](#). Take Sartre's notion that "in man, and in man alone" there is first the body, then an essence is defined through actions. Now, reverse this for all other objects and Sartre's view

of the universe is clear: essence precedes existence for all objects; they have meaning then form.

## Political Confusion

Jean-Paul Sartre's political views and activities present, at best, the philosopher's lack of consistency.

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Sartre's sympathies were always with the left, but after making his philosophical debut as an impassioned advocate of individual freedom, denouncing Marxism as deterministic and Communist party as undemocratic, he aligned himself with Marxism and relegated Existentialism to being a mere "ideology." Marxism, he declared, was the only valid philosophy for our time. But in the seventies he announced that he was no longer a Marxist.

Instead of reducing his importance, these inconsistencies enhance it. Better than any of his contemporaries, he incarnates the dilemma of the intellectual torn between creativity and commitment, unable to concentrate on literature or philosophy when to campaign against oppression and injustice might possibly alleviate suffering.  
- *Sartre*; Hayman, p. 10-11

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Professor Walter Kaufmann wrote of Sartre's Marxism in 1956:

Sartre, back from the war, fought in the resistance. That is often forgotten today. But what is not forgotten is his more recent decision to make common cause with the Communist Party in France. In the United States, this is held against him more than anything else. His decision is utterly quixotic. Unlike [Heidegger](#) in 1933, Sartre derives no advantage from it whatsoever. Moreover, he himself insists that he is not a Communist, that he cannot accept the doctrines of the party, and he knows that his head would soon fall if they should come to power. It is his impassioned opposition to the *status quo* and his conviction that the Communists, but not the socialists, are serious about overthrowing it that leads him to believe he must for the present make a common front with them. Unconsciously he reminds us of a lesson we learnt from the Greeks, from Plato in particular: that philosophical profundity and political sense do not always go together; on the contrary.  
- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 48

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During the Cold War his knowledge of social injustice in the United States combined with his ignorance of social injustice in the Soviet Union (a country he had not yet visited) to make him more anti-American than most of his non-Communist contemporaries. He believed that nothing was more important than stopping Europe from aligning itself with the United States against the Communist bloc....  
- *Sartre*; Hayman, p. 11

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I have added to the [existential lexicon](#) based upon one appearing in *Sartre for Beginners*. I have expanded upon some terms, as best I can in limited space.

## The States of Being, In General

Sartre's discussions of the "States of Being" are, at best, tangles of thought. It is easy for a student to feel lost among the words.

The pity of it is that Sartre clothes his analysis in spurious dialectic: he speaks of "the nothing" like [Heidegger](#), takes "in-itself" and "for-itself" from [Hegel](#), and above all plays on the word "being" in a way that veils his meaning from most readers, while the few who recognize his systematic confusion of "am" and "am nothing but" are apt to feel that this invalidates his while analysis -- which it does not.  
- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 43

### Being-in-Itself

Sartre applied the French "en-soi," which loosely means "in-self," to describe the state of being of objects -- things without self-awareness. Sartre's "*Being-in-Itself*" represents the idea that only concrete phenomena have any ontological status; only the concrete is real. [Edmund Husserl](#)'s approach to phenomenology was embraced by Sartre as a basis for existential exploration. To simplify this concept, Sartre might state that a rock is a rock -- it cannot change what it is. In this manner, Sartre suggests there is facticity, or truth, in the existence of some objects.

### Being-for-Itself

In contrast to "*Being-in-Itself*" is Sartre's "*Being-for-Itself*" -- a state of self-awareness and control. Walter Kaufmann explains the differences thusly:

The *pour-soi* (for-itself) is that being which is aware of itself: man. Its structure is different from that of the *en-soi*, and the phenomenon of self-deception serves the author as a clue: what must the *pour-soi* be like in order to make self-deception possible?  
- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 43

Sartre's "*Being-for-Itself*" describes human consciousness as possessing the characteristics of incompleteness and potency, with an indeterminate structure. The absence of a Creator leaves man without a predefined nature. Without a nature, individuals are nothingness. In effect, the essence of man is a complete lack of everything. Nothingness, Sartre thought, was freedom and free will. Applying this definition of nothingness to individuals, mankind is freedom. Sartre contended that not only was the individual free, but the *essence of mankind was freedom*. As a result of this freedom, individuals are responsible for all their actions and thoughts.

What makes self-deception possible, according to Sartre, is that the *pour-soi* differs from the *en-soi* or, to be concrete: a man is not a homosexual, a waiter, or a coward in the same way in which he is six feet tall or blond.... If I am six feet tall, that is that. It is a fact no less than that the table is, say, two feet high. Being a coward or a waiter, however, is different: it depends on ever new decisions.  
- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 44

What Sartre always wanted his audience to understand was that he believed we always have the ability to choose a new role, a new state of being. Today, one might be a philosopher, while tomorrow that same person might wait tables. In fact, humans can be and are more than one thing at a given moment. According to Sartre it becomes nearly impossible to describe a person. "He is what he is," might be the best description of anyone.

Many of the works by Sartre address a dualism between subject and object, the subjective consciousness and the objective human being. Sartre considered freedom a subjective experience. *Being and Nothingness* explores this dualism: "Being" is the thing-in-itself, similar to the Hegelian Absolute, and "Nothingness" refers to freedom. Sartre wrote that freedom is the ability to define and assign meaning to things and events. Without thought, we could not be free. As an example, the play *No Exit* is about the results of how we define ourselves -- especially those who fail to seize the freedom to define themselves.

According to Sartre, we could not exceed the limits of our experiences; we remain within the phenomenological limits of experience. Though he accepted Husserl's approach to study, Sartre rejected Husserlian Idealism, considering the concept of a transcendental ego solipsism -- only the self is real. Sartre was a critic of this school of thought, preferring the idea being consists of more than consciousness, yet is at the same time fixed in a reality.

## Logical Atheism

Starting with the theory that man is inherently nothingness or free will, Sartre developed what he considered was a logical argument for atheism. In the absence of a Creator, individuals feel abandoned, with a sense of anger at the universe. Anger and despair lead to a tendency to embrace "*Bad Faith*." Bad Faith represents a self-deception in which the person views self as an object, not as a person with free will. As an object, a person is without responsibility. Religion, according to Sartre, was a form of bad faith, teaching that previous humans, namely Adam and Eve, were responsible for human frailty. The unconscious is also a form of bad faith, allowing people to deny their thoughts.

Sartre went so far as to deny the existence of an unconscious thought process, claiming that people must be making a conscious decision in order to repress specific memories. Dreams and mental disorders represent conscious thoughts and ideas; it is a lie to claim one cannot remember them or they are not controllable.

## Sartre's Morality

Sartre based his existentialism on human free will. As individuals are free, from the moment of conception, they define their essence throughout their existence. A person's nature is what he or she has done in the past and what that person is doing at the moment. No one is complete until death, when self-definition ceases. Then, how others interpret the individual is based upon the individual's accomplishments and failings.

Existential morality arises from the fact that all choices affect others, physically and emotionally. Social responsibility results from the interdependencies of individuals. Since any living person is engaged in the process of defining self and others, ethics develop accordingly. Since the existentialist values free will and wants others to respect his or her freedom, the ethical system developed is based upon free expression.

## The Futile Attempt to Become God

A major problem for Sartre was the lack of purpose to human existence. As a result, he developed the theory of "*Being of God*" -- the idea that individuals seek to be like or as the mythical God. Sartre wrote:

To be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God.... Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-Itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the "Ens causa sui," which religions call God.

### *The Transcendence of the Ego (La Transcendance de l'Ego, 1937)*

A short work, *Transcendence* is a phenomenological study of the human consciousness. This work marked Sartre's break from the teachings of [Edmund Husserl](#).

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### *Nausea (La Nausée, 1938)*

The novel *Nausea* is an experimental work, with no real hero, only a main character, Roquentin, who spends the novel trying to understand existence and essence.

Roquentin, sitting in a trolley car and staring out the window, suddenly is unable to place items in context -- at least the context humans understand. It begins as a familiar illusion: the buildings outside seem to be moving instead of the trolley. All movement, all objects, become relative to Roquentin. As he ponders the illusion, he rests his hand on the seat, but realizes he cannot feel a "seat" but nothing with which he is familiar. The seat is no longer a seat because he cannot clearly associate the word "seat" with its function. Is Roquentin hallucinating? Is he suffering a mental collapse? Or has he experienced a major breakthrough?

It's a seat.... But the word stays on my lips: it refuses to go and put itself on the thing. Things are divorced from their names.... I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenseless, they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me.

According to Walter Kaufmann, the novel is Sartre's exploration of his own philosophical journey.

In 1938 he lays down his experience of the thirties in *La Nausée*. No reader can fail to notice that it is his own experience, not mere cerebration.  
- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 40

*Nausea* cemented Sartre's position as a leading French thinker.

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### *Being and Nothingness (L'Être et le Néant, 1943)*

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Toward the end of *L'Être et le néant* Sartre argues that it is man's basic wish to fuse his openness and freedom with the impermeability of things, to achieve a state of being in

which the *en-soi* and *pour-soi* are synthesized. This ideal, says Sartre, one can call God, and "man is the being who wants to be God." The chapter ends: "But the idea of God is contradictory... man is a useless passion."  
- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 47

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### *The Flies (Les Mouches, 1943)*

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### *No Exit (Huis Clos, 1944)*

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### *The Age of Reason (L'Age de raison, 1945)*

x

### *Existentialism and Human Emotions (L'Existentialisme est un humanisme, 1946)*

Also known as *Existentialism*, this work is the text to a lecture delivered by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1946. It contains several factual errors, misrepresentations, and is less than perfect. However, the work is often considered a definitive statement on the nature of existentialism. To be fair, professor Walter Kaufmann and many since have recognized the work as important, but "not the alpha and omega of existentialism."

In the English-speaking world, Sartre's lecture on *Existentialism* is probably his best known work. This is rather unfortunate because it is after all only an occasional lecture which, though brilliant and vivid in places and unquestionably worthy of attention, bears the stamp of the moment. It contains unnecessary misstatements of fact as well as careless and untenable arguments and a definition of existentialism which has been repudiated by Jaspers and Heidegger, and ought to be repudiated by Sartre, too, because it is no less unfair to his own thought.  
- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 45

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### *Anti-Semite and Jew (Réflexions sur la question juive, 1946)*

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Here Sartre tries to show that a man is not an antisemite the way he is blond: he chooses to be an antisemite, says Sartre, because he is afraid of freedom, openness, and change and longs to be as solid as a thing. He wants an identity, he wants to be something in the manner in which a table is something, or a rock. At the outset, perhaps, he plays at being an antisemite; but when it has become second nature, the man has achieved nothing less than an escape from freedom: he has abdicated his humanity.  
- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 44

## The Critique of Dialectical Reason (1960)

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In a way, this is the epitaph of existentialism. Jaspers and Heidegger had sought to dissociate themselves from existentialism as soon as Sartre made it world famous after World War II. This is not the place to discuss Sartre's Marxism, which is at least as eccentric as Kierkegaard's Christianity. But he no longer writes under the banner of existentialism; nor does any other major figure. In a sense, then, "Marxism and Existentialism" marks the end of existentialism.

- *Existentialism*; Kaufmann, p. 281

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## Quotes

### Transcendence of the Ego

Perhaps the essential role of the ego is to mask from consciousness its very spontaneity. *Transcendence of Ego*, p. 100 (1957 translation)

### Nausea

Things are divorced from their names. I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenseless, they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me. *Nausea*, p. 125 (1964 translation)

The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench -- I couldn't remember it was a root anymore. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface.... Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of "existence." *Nausea*, p. 126 - 127

And then, all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things... the diversity of things, their individuality, was only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses all in disorder -- naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness. *Nausea*, p. 127

The word "absurdity" is coming to life under my pen; a little while ago in the garden, I couldn't find it, but neither was I looking for it, I didn't need it: I thought without words, on things, with things.... In fact, all that I could grasp beyond that returns to this fundamental absurdity. Absurdity: another word. I struggle against words; down there I touched the thing. *Nausea*, p.129

### Being and Nothingness

All human actions are equivalent... and... all are on principle doomed to failure. *Being and Nothingness*, "Conclusion, sct. 2" (1943)

I am responsible for everything... except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being. Therefore everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible. I am abandoned in the world... in the

sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant. *Being and Nothingness*, "Being and Doing: Freedom," sct. 3 (1943)

Generosity is nothing else than a craze to possess. All which I abandon, all which I give, I enjoy in a higher manner through the fact that I give it away.... To give is to enjoy possessively the object which one gives. *Being and Nothingness*, "Doing and Having," sct. 2 (1943)

Man is a useless passion. *Being and Nothingness*, "Doing and Having," sct. 3 (1943)

To eat is to appropriate by destruction. *Being and Nothingness*, "Doing and Having," sct. 3 (1943)

## Existentialism and Human Emotions

To choose this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 17 (1977 translation)

Our responsibility is much greater than we might have supposed, because it involves all mankind. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 17

## Other

At the root of humanity I see only sadness and boredom.

Fascism is not defined by the number of its victims, but by the way it kills them. "On the Execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg," in *Libération* (22 June 1953)

Hell is other people. *No Exit*, Garcin, in scene 5.

One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become. One lives one's death, one dies one's life. *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, book 2, "The Melodious Child Dead in Me..." (1952)

What then did you expect when you unbound the gag that muted those black mouths? That they would chant your praises? Did you think that when those heads that our fathers had forcibly bowed down to the ground were raised again, you would find adoration in their eyes? (1948)

If literature isn't everything, it's not worth a single hour of someone's trouble. (1960)

Every age has its own poetry; in every age the circumstances of history choose a nation, a race, a class to take up the torch by creating situations that can be expressed or transcended only through poetry. (1948)

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