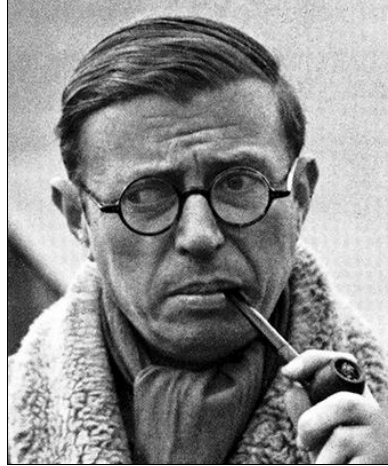


Jean-Paul Sartre

The urge for freedom

Jean-Paul Charles Eymard Sartre was born in Paris on June 21, 1905 and died there on April 15, 1980. He was already in his own time one of the most famous philosophers of the twentieth century. The philosophical position he developed is called existentialism. With the public, he is best known for his leftist political stance. Besides philosophical work Sartre wrote short stories, novels and plays. It cannot be determined whether Sartre's desire for freedom, like so many of his contemporaries craved, was the result of the Nazi occupation, or that Nazism was a



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result of the lack of freedom of man in times preceding. If the latter is the case, Nazism was the provisional climax of the era of unfreedom in which any person except in the name was the serf of the ruler, who could be driven in the manufacturing process and from war to war. The thoughts that Sartre developed during World War II, which formed the basis of the later existentialism, can be seen as a basis for the liberalization that produced a first peak in the youth culture of the sixties of the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>). When the Nazi regime represents the utmost stretch momentum of what unfreedom could be tolerated, then this was the reason for the need for freedom with as root cause all the preceding centuries to times before immemorial. Then also the Nazi ideology represented the extreme limit of applicability of the Luciwhear paradigm<sup>2</sup>). Like capitalism that, according to Karl Marx, carries its own cause of demise, each repressive system -with both physical oppression as well as thought police, religion- is doomed to perish on its own accord. Each answers the question to the how differently. How to find freedom was expressed by Sartre in his own manner.

The term existentialism was introduced by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard's philosophical position was partly a reaction to scholasticism which stipulated that the deep meaning of being human was set in his essence and that his

appearance, his existence, was of less or subaltern importance. For Kierkegaard the guiding principle was the specific and unique existence of the human individual. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) interpreted the uniqueness of man in his own way and conditioned that man, freed from all fears and being one with nature, ultimately had to determine what the values in his life could be himself. For the meaning of his life man needed no God, Nietzsche said. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is generally seen as the father of existentialism. His support for Nazism and the person of Adolf Hitler was not appreciated by the community, however, later in life he called that choice the biggest blunder of his existence. Nevertheless, Heidegger remained a major influence on twentieth century philosophy, especially because of his views on human existence, nothingness, fear and death. The absurdity and futility of existence, the alienation because of that hopelessness and the consequences of making the wrong choices in life, not only were existentialist philosophical motives, they were also found in literature, such as with Dostoyevsky, Kafka and Sartre himself<sup>3)</sup>.

One of the major tenets of existentialism is "l'existence précède l'essence". Being in the world is most fundamental, more than any other meaning that can be attributed to human life. A practical consequence of this is that people may define their own reality. In addition, existentialism rejects the premise that man is a rational being. Existentialists are primarily interested in what people find meaningful and significant and they suggest that the choices of man rather result from this than that those choices would be based on rational thinking. Man himself must give meaning to his life, how unstable that meaning may be. Furthermore, the only truth of which man can be sure, is the truth of which he acts. The existence of man infers subjectivity and no objective rationality, therefore there can be no question of being able to know of the existence of a God. Man is alone in an absurd, sometimes even hostile universe in which most likely no sense of a higher order exists.

Sartre was inspired by the ideas of the Moravian philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl attributed less importance to experience and reason, while assigning great importance to an autonomous, fully focussed consciousness. Heidegger, Husserl's student and assistant, focussed his life to questions about the meaning of existence. He felt that man in his existence gives shape to his capabilities mindful of his greatest concern, his finite future. For Heidegger, the fear of death is the main motive for the act in the present. Sartre, who briefly also studied with Husserl, transferred existentialism from the study and the auditorium by popularizing the notion in his own way. God does not

exist any more than the meaning of life according to Sartre. Sartre advises each person to take the absurdity of existence as the point to start from. Man has landed up in a meaningless world according to Sartre, where it all comes down to designing yourself. He states that man is condemned to that absurd freedom, a freedom that is unavoidable. That freedom burdens us with a huge responsibility and a person cannot but commit to that freedom. He may try to avoid the terrible freedom or deny it -then man is in bad faith to himself-, but he will eventually have to accept that freedom when he wants to be a moral being. Once freedom is upheld, a person through his choices has to give himself a place in the world and create meaning for himself. Making choices, according to Sartre, is a difficult process because you are always fighting views of others about yourself. According to Sartre, this is the reason why the others are always a burden, they make you to object. "Hell, is other people," says Sartre in his theatre play "Huis Clos"<sup>4)</sup>. In summary, the human being in the course of his life becomes aware of his existence and subsequently has the responsibility -the inescapable freedom even- to give form and content to his existence during the rest of his life. He cannot invoke a higher power or otherwise rely on the whether or not hidden meaning of existence. A person can only be completely autonomous therein, because the visions of others work only disruptive to the individual process<sup>5)</sup>.

#### Me, myself and I

The existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and his partner in life Simone de Beauvoir<sup>6)</sup> has not only been of great importance for the scientific community, but also has affected or perhaps even established an entirely new youth culture - not only in France, but throughout Europe and beyond. Listening to jazz or to Juliette Gréco and Edith Piaf in smoky rooms dressed in black clothing -in any case wearing a black turtleneck- and discussing the absurdity of existence, talking over the lack of a deeper meaning of life was fashionable in the fifties of the twentieth century. Most had not read the scientific work of Sartre, but many had read his



Simone de Beauvoir

novels and short stories, or had been to a play of his hand. The popularity of existentialism is probably partly explained by the situation in Europe after the Second World War. Most of Europe was in ruins, especially the big cities and even more so in France, and the futility of it all crept very close to the skin of the young generation. The war had cost the lives of fifty million people, including six million Jews, a fact that could prove nothing else than that God did not exist. A good breeding ground for individuality, also in response to the collectivity of Nazism and to some extent Communism, especially since Nikita Khrushchev in 1953 at the Party Congress of the Communist Party in Moscow had exposed Stalin as a ruler who did not lag behind Hitler - Stalin would have been responsible during his rule for nine million to possibly twenty million civilian victims. The public needed heroes and Sartre was such a role model - he fell in the same category of public icons as Albert Einstein, a slightly older contemporary. Both were touchable idols, people you could encounter on the street.

In itself, this carries an irreconcilable contradiction, followers of existentialism that are iconophiles. The other is after all the disturber of the strive to give meaning to one's life. Or in a paraphrase of Sartre's words, the mere presence of someone else causes a person to look at himself as an object in the perception of the other. Which infers the recognition of subjectivity, and thus the recognition of the judgment of others. It seems as though Sartre's ideas are influenced by the psychoanalysis as it was propagated by the Moravian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). However, Sartre was highly critical of Freud's assumptions and hypotheses. Or as Sartre put it in "L'Être et le néant", "I am the ego, but not the subconscious. I have no privileged position compared with my unconscious psyche. I am just one system within my psyche." With which the centrality of the ego claimed by Sartre is clear. Does that make existentialism a philosophy of egoism, or of egocentrism? And if so, does that make existentialism a philosophy which one should better stay away?

In everyday experience an egoist and to a lesser extent an egocentrist is a person who has merely his own interest at heart and who assigns no importance to the position or interests of others. The last part of this qualification is important in this regard. In practice one is called selfish, or egocentric, not by the person to whom the qualification of egoism applies, but by someone else, the other. In most if not all cases, this fact casts a dubious glance in the ego of the other. It would appear that for his salvation the other had his hopes set on the alleged selfish person - which is quite selfish. Does Sartre then make the recommendation to us all to be as the alleged egotist? If the importance

of giving meaning to life must be classified as at least egocentric, then surely. In the writings of Sartre, however, this is never propagated. What is propagated is the search for the meaning of your own existence without relying on the other, without thereby to expect salvation from the other. That makes existentialism a philosophy where one can only stay better close by. Close by. A person, however, who is looking for the meaning in life and who creates the meaning for his life, does not come far when he leaves it at that.

#### The growing spirit

The attractive aspect in Sartre's existentialism is his assertion that people in life on earth cannot rely on a higher power and that one should give form and content to life oneself. If one relies on a higher power, one arrives in hell, "L'enfer, c'est les autres". A person then gets to deal with all kinds of views on his actions and on his person, influential opinions of people one grants authority - because after all, one only takes note of their views. Probably for this reason Sartre situated "Huis Clos" in hell, although it is still odd that someone who considers God or a higher power to be irrelevant, for his setting chooses hell, eternal hell no less. This makes clear that Sartre, although less pronounced than Nietzsche, and perhaps without realizing it, still stands with one foot in the spiritual traditions of his ancestors. Why else mentioning eternal damnation, why else denying or ignoring the existence of a higher "power", why else taking the meaning of life in merely one's own hands. While it is true that the other may be hell, it does not follow logically as true that oneself may create heaven.

How is it that the others are hell? How is it that a person is influenced by people around him? This is obviously because man is a social being. A person would like to fit in into an environment, and he does that among others by adapting to his environment. In itself not strange or inadvisable. The hellish character makes its entrance only when the environment does not accept aspects of the person, taunting that person to cover or even eliminate aspects of himself. The hellish characteristic enters in full regalia when the environment dictates aspects to the person, when rules are imposed, or when that person is required to join in a particular hierarchy. When it has come that far, when a person has let it come this far, then he has become the slave of the community, the serf of the ruler - there is always someone at the top of the hierarchy. If a person conforms to the rules and orders of his

community, when he sees no possibility to escape, he is chained to the Luciwhear paradigm.

That virtually everyone on earth is chained to the law of the Ancient Spirit is because everybody was raised that way by his parents, school and society. That virtually no one realizes that he is the serf of the Ancient Spirit, is the result of socialization from his first day of life<sup>7)</sup>. The Ancient Spirit sustains itself by its iron grip on any kind of socialization, although he must move with the times from time to time. That existentialism is not the solution in breaking the age-old chain that maintains the hell on earth, shows that existentialism gave at least incomplete answers - incompleteness also imports faultiness. That flaw was not due to the alleged elitist character of existentialism espoused by scientists and students - in the end these also needed food on the table and eventually adapted. The incompleteness of existentialism is rooted in the perception of what constitutes the meaning of life - how the road goes towards meaning.

When on the one hand a person creates the meaning of life by answering existential questions he asks himself and on the other hand the motivation for acting in life can only come from a sense of impending death, as existentialists posit, then existentialism can give only temporary answers -answers in time- that cannot come but from that fear, mortal fear. That the others are hell then is caused by the fact that all of us here are in hell. By looking in the mirror the other can be, you see only hell. The only thing a person alternatively can do is to free himself from that hell by breaking the shackles of the Luciwhear paradigm. When a societal creature as man is, can break through the doctrine of the Ancient Spirit, he is hell for none. The breaking of the Luciwhear paradigm presupposes putting on the inner road, putting off the fear and discovering the inner Love, the 'higher purpose' of and behind existence. This is not associated with need or coercion, such as the socialization in fear -i.e. also in existentialism- within the hierarchy of the Ancient Spirit, but in the acceptance of the loss - the loss of Love. Some will find this latest stuff and nonsense. That does not matter, because everyone is anyway on his or her inner road. It is much more pleasant, however, when one wishes to travel awake.

In short, the position and the methodology in Sartre's existentialism are not completely inadequate. It is worth it and it is recommended to seek the meaning of life through self-examination and in this not being influenced or guided by external forces. Already this in itself may result in a breach of the Luciwhear paradigm. Completeness -and wisdom for that matter- is however only achieved when the meaning of life no

longer is derived from the existential fear for death. The passing of the fear, any fear, is a prerequisite for discovering the inner Love.

From the religious, through the rational to the existential. This is broadly the road that humankind has travelled at least since the beginning of the Middle Ages - in Europe anyway. Some societies are still in the religious stage, others in the rational. Some are still not ready for the existential and for some it is time to take the next step thereafter. The road does not go the same for everyone and sometimes shows a relapse. The road goes not for everyone at the same rate and sometimes expires certainly not smoothly and longitudinally. Everything is running together, but that does not mean that it is chaos. Oddly enough, everything turns really into chaos only when everything runs smoothly and everyone is in line - but it will never come to that. God likes a bit of jazz too apparently.

#### Concise bibliography

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[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1964/sartre-bibl.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1964/sartre-bibl.html)

## Notes

1) That freedom is fragile too, is evidenced by the developments after the sixties when the new artistry got encapsulated -and so was unfree- in a strategy to make money out of it. Beauty got corrupted by the success of its commercial aspects. From the seventies of the twentieth century onwards the free making youth culture turned into an object for big business in music and fashion - lifestyle.

True freedom cannot be organized and exists mainly in the perception of the individual. That individual freedom has its limits, is demonstrated by the adage that says that freedom ends where the influence of the other begins.

2) See the relevant chapters elsewhere in this book or search the index.

3) The most influential existentialists: Arthur Schopenhauer (precursor), Max Stirner (precursor), Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers.

4) The play gives a description of the afterlife in which three deceased characters are punished by being imprisoned for eternity together in a room. From this theatre play comes one of the most famous and most misunderstood quotes from Sartre, "l'enfer, c'est les autres", a reference to Sartre's ideas about image and the constant struggle that is caused when a person sees himself as a object in the perception of another person.

5) More about Sartre: Sartre's Political Philosophy, in the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/sartre-p/>

6) See for instance:  
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/>

7) The child of a convicted mother born in prison, sees its environment as normal and will experience great (initial) problems when it arrives in the world outside the walls, normal to everyone else.