

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE (1905–1980)

Pioneer of existentialism

Jean-Paul Sartre was born on June 21, 1905, in Paris, France. When Sartre's father died in 1906, Sartre and his mother moved in with his mother's father, Karl Schweitzer, who was a respected philosophical and religious writer. His grandfather's religious beliefs proved to be a point of contention for Sartre growing up, and though he resented his grandfather's presence, he was open to being tutored by Schweitzer.

Sartre studied philosophy at the prestigious university École Normale Supérieure in 1924, and in 1928, he met fellow classmate and lifelong companion Simone de Beauvoir (who would go on to write *The Second Sex*, which is considered to be one of the most important feminist texts ever produced). Upon graduating, Sartre enlisted in the army and then took a teaching job in France. By 1933, Sartre had moved to Berlin to study philosophy with Edmund Husserl, and while in Berlin, he also became acquainted with Martin Heidegger. The work of these two men would have a profound impact on Sartre's own philosophy, and in 1938, Sartre's philosophical novel, *Nausea*, was published.

In 1939, at the beginning of World War II, Sartre was drafted into the French army. In 1940, Sartre was captured by the Germans and was held as a prisoner of war for nine months. During this time, Sartre began to write his most famous existential work, *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre returned to Paris in 1941, and two years later, *Being and Nothingness* was published, propelling Sartre's fame in the public eye and establishing him as a key intellectual of the post-war era.

Sartre then served as editor for the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, where he was able to continually write and hone his philosophy, focusing on the political and social world of the time and becoming a political

activist. Sartre remained committed to political activism for the rest of his life. A staunch Socialist, Sartre supported the Soviet Union during the Cold War (even though he was critical of the totalitarianism that was featured in Sovietism), met with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in support of Marxism, opposed the Vietnam War, and was famously an outspoken critic of France's colonization of Algeria.

Sartre was a prolific writer. In 1964, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, which he declined (making him the first person to ever do so), claiming that no writer should be turned into an institution and that the cultures of the East and West must be able to exchange with one another without the help of an institution. Throughout his extensive writing career, he wrote philosophical books, films, and plays.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

While his pursuits in political activism took up his later life, his early work in existentialism is considered to be some of the most profound philosophical work ever produced.

Knowing the Self

Sartre believed every individual person to be a "being-for-itself" that has self-consciousness. According to Sartre, people do not have an essential nature. Rather, they have a self-consciousness and a consciousness, and these can always be changed. If a person believes that his place in society determines his sense of self or that his views cannot be changed, he is deceiving himself. Telling someone "that's just how I am" is also self-deception.

According to Sartre, self-actualization, the process of making something from what someone has already been made into, is always possible. To do so, one must recognize what Sartre calls the "facticity"—the realities (based on facts) that occur outside of the individual that are acting on him. One must also understand that he has a consciousness that exists independently from those realities.

Sartre believed the only type of truly authentic outlook is understanding that, while an individual is responsible for his consciousness, consciousness of self will never be identical to actual consciousness.

Being-in-Itself and Being-for-Itself

To Sartre, there are two types of being:

- **en-soi (being-in-itself):** Things that have an essence that is both definable and complete; however, they are not conscious of their complete essence or of themselves. For example, rocks, birds, and trees.
- **pour-soi (being-for-itself):** Things that are defined by the fact that they have consciousness and are conscious that they exist (like humans), and are also consciously aware that they do not have the complete essence associated with *en-soi*.

The Role of the Other

Sartre says that a person (or being-for-itself) only becomes aware of his own existence when he sees another being-for-itself observing him. Thus, people become consciously aware of their identity only when being viewed by others who also possess consciousness. Thus, a person only understands himself in relation to others.

Sartre goes on to claim that encountering the "Other" can be tricky at first because one might think that the other conscious being is objectifying him with regard to appearance, type, and essence (even if that is imagined). As a result, a person may then attempt to view Others as simple and definable objects that lack any individual consciousness. According to Sartre, it is from the idea of the Other that we see things like racism, sexism, and colonialism.

Responsibility

Sartre believed that all individuals have an essential freedom and that people are responsible for their actions, their consciousness, and all aspects of their self. Even if an individual wishes not to be held responsible for himself, according to Sartre, that is a conscious decision, and he is responsible for the results of his inaction.

Based on this notion, Sartre explains that ethics and morals are subjective and related to an individual's conscience. Therefore, there could never be any type of universal ethics or morality.

Freedom

As he began to focus more on politically inclined issues, Sartre examined how individual consciousness and freedom fit into social structures such as racism, sexism, colonialism, and capitalist exploitation. He said that those structures do not recognize individual consciousness and freedom, and instead, objectify people.

Sartre believed people always have freedom—no matter how objectified an individual is, the fact that freedom and consciousness exist means that individuals still have the ability to make something happen. To Sartre, the inherent freedom of consciousness is both a gift and a curse. While freedom can allow one to make a change and shape his life, there is also a responsibility that comes along with it.