

**PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICISM:  
ESSAYS AND REVIEWS**

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**CHAPTER FIVE**

**THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE AND  
THE NATURE OF MAN  
IN JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S PHILOSOPHY\*\***

There is no more prominent atheist today than Jean-Paul Sartre. Yet serious students of Sartre's philosophy are struck by his unabashed use of theological idiom. This use is so extensive that Professor Hazel Barnes in her translator's introduction to *Being and Nothingness* comments:

Many people who consider themselves religious could quite comfortably accept Sartre's philosophy if he did not embarrass them by making his pronouncement, "There is no God," quite so specific.<sup>1</sup>

The present chapter will explore the theological idiom of Sartre's philosophy of man and pose the question whether—once the "embarrassing atheistic pronouncement" is removed—Sartre's philosophical anthropology has any systematic value for the theologian. The chapter proceeds along six lines: (1) to investigate Sartre's conception of human nature; (2-4) to illustrate his employment of theological language in describing man as desiring to be God, guilty of original sin, and incarnate in love; (5) to appraise his arguments for atheism; and (6) to assess particular aspects of his description of human reality.

**I**

*Human Nature and Individual Character*

Sartre protests that human nature is not everywhere the same, that there is no nature common to man, that human nature changes.<sup>2</sup> On the surface he appears, paradoxically, to be denying the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of an essential difference between man and all other animals, i.e., the notion that man has a rational-moral nature which distinguishes him from the beasts. On the classical view all men, insofar as they are men, have

generic features which allow them to be classified as human beings. Thus, Aristotle could write, "All men by nature desire to know."<sup>3</sup> The so-called moderate realism of Aquinas largely takes over *en bloc* the Aristotelian theory of *universale in re*. Sartre's contention that there is no common human nature might lead one to suppose that he is adopting a nominalistic view of universals—to wit, that general terms merely reflect our conventional ways of grouping similarities, without there being an objective property common to all particulars called by the same general name. But such an interpretation does not take account of the context within which Sartre presents his theory. In short, the interpretation does not adequately portray the *Fragestellung* which governs Sartre's statements. His claim about human nature is not to be construed as entailing nominalism but as committing him to a specific view about human freedom. Sartre means to deny that man develops in accordance with a predeterminate nature which, in predisposing the choices he will come to make, excuses him from responsibility for that nature's acts. In *No Exit* Garcin is a coward. But because he is no coward by nature, he does not have to choose cowardly action.

Elsewhere Sartre alludes hypothetically to a wife whose marital difficulties result in persistent outbursts of anger. Her husband and friends label her *irascible*.

If, out of remorse, out of masochism, out of a deep feeling of inferiority, this young woman adopts the social and objective datum as if it were the absolute truth about her, if she accuses herself of having an *irascible* nature, if she projects behind her, into the darkness of the unconscious, a permanent predisposition to anger of which each particular outburst is an emanation, then she ...endows that which had no meaning other than social with a metaphysical meaning, a meaning prior to any relationship with society.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, Sartre is championing a view of human nature which is compatible with freedom-to-change and responsibility-for-action. In speaking about human nature, he seems to be discussing what is sometimes referred to as a man's *second* nature,

as when we say "Stealing is second-nature with John" or "John has his father's jovial nature." Sartre believes that a person's "second nature" is something over which that person has control and something which may vary from one individual to another.

If "human nature is not everywhere the same" refers to a man's second nature, then two segments of Sartre's philosophy previously deemed inconsistent now become reconcilable. Some critics, for example, have argued that if freedom belongs by definition to consciousness, as Sartre suggests, then the essence (nature) of consciousness is freedom. And if human reality is distinguished from all lower forms of reality by virtue of its freedom, then men do after all share a common nature. Hence, the argument runs, Sartre's position is inconsistent.<sup>5</sup> But once we have noted the duality in Sartre's use of "human nature," the appearance of inconsistency tends to vanish. For the two statements "Man is distinguished from the beasts in being rational and free (primary nature)" and "Not every man is reasonable, courageous, etc., (second nature)" can both be true.

## II

### *Desire To Be God*

The foregoing distinction applies equally well to Sartre's assertion that "man is fundamentally the desire to be God" (primary nature) and yet that not every man is religious (second nature) (cf. *BN*, 566). Christian theology has traditionally maintained that Satan and Adam sinned in willing to be like God. Anselm, taking his lead from Augustine, writes:

When [the Devil] willed what God did not will him to will, he willed inordinately to be like God .... Not only did [the Devil] will to be equal to God because he presumed to have an autonomous will, but he even willed to be greater [than God] by willing what God did not will him to will, for he placed his will above the will of God.<sup>6</sup>

To Sartre, on the other hand, man's willing to be (like) God is understood in terms not of guilt but of self-deception (*mauvaise*

*foi*). Sartrean man, fundamentally a bundle of desires projected toward becoming other than he is, pursues restlessly the state of cessation from all desire. Since the divine consciousness is envisioned as constituted precisely by such a state of cessation, man desires in effect to become God. Refusing to recognize this ideal as illusory, human consciousness self-deceptively makes a goal of experiencing quiescence of all desire. In pursuit of inner rest, man strives toward the logically impossible end of becoming essentially other than consciousness while remaining consciousness. Thus, in aspiring to be God, man aspires toward his own destruction. "The passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born."<sup>7</sup> But God is born only on account of man's *bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*); for in giving himself over to the nativity of God, man nihilates himself by seeking to constitute himself a nonconscious thing. Movement toward the divine ideal is, accordingly, movement toward death. "Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state" (*BN*, 90). Though Sartre does not agree with traditional Christian theology that willing to be (like) God casts men into a state of sin and guilt, he does view such willing as embodying forces destructive of man's primary nature. And this consequence, after all, lies at the heart of the Pauline teaching that "death spread to all men, because all men sinned" (Romans 5:12).

### III

#### *Fallenness and Original Sin*

Guilt, as Sartre understands it, arises out of that relationship to others in which I exist as fallen. Born innocent, Sartrean man becomes fallen through the presence of the Other, not through the project-to-be-God. "My original fall is the existence of the Other" (*BN*, xxxii, 263).

It is before the Other that I am *guilty*. I am guilty first when beneath the Other's look I experience my alienation and my nakedness as a fall

from grace which I must assume. This is the meaning of the famous line from Scripture: "They knew that they were naked." Again I am guilty when in turn I look at the Other, because by the very fact of my own self-assertion I constitute him as an object and as an instrument, and I cause him to experience that same alienation which he must now assume. Thus original sin is my upsurge in a world where there are others; and whatever may be my further relations with others, these relations will be only variations on the original theme of my guilt (*BN*, 410).

The force of this passage depends upon an implicit distinction between moral guilt and ontological guilt. Moral guilt arises through the violation of moral rules governing interpersonal relationships. I become aware of myself as guilty when condemnation is mirrored toward me from the eyes of the Other. Sartre turns to the life of Jean Genet in order to illustrate this point about man's fallenness.

At the age of ten Genet with little forethought steals from his foster parents and is caught in the act. "It is the moment of awakening. The sleepwalking child opens his eyes and realizes he is stealing. It is revealed to him that he *is* a thief and he pleads guilty, crushed by a fallacy which he is unable to refute; he stole, he is therefore a thief."<sup>8</sup> Before the Other, Genet is defined as a criminal. The Other seeks to constitute him as being what he has done. At this moment Genet becomes revealed as alienated from himself and from others. He has fallen, almost innocently, from grace. He stands exposed, knowing himself to be naked. But his total inner fall occurs only when he chooses to be the thief which crime has made of him. In so choosing, he transforms his fall into a plunge and consents to the evil which he now thinks of himself as being. Genet has inwardly appropriated the objective-social meaning of his initial crime. Guilty now in his own eyes, he reels under the burden of his morally metamorphosed self.

Unlike moral guilt, ontological guilt does not arise at a definite time or in conjunction with some specific rule-violating behavior. I am ontologically guilty because by "my own self-

assertion I constitute [the Other] as an object and as an instrument, and I cause him to experience that same alienation which he must now assume" (*BN*, 410). Thus, I am guilty not on the basis of having transgressed some moral or social rule, but simply on the basis of any self-assertion whatsoever vis-à-vis another. And since the human being cannot develop apart from social self-assertion, man is ontologically, or originally, fallen. He is perhaps "always already fallen" in the elliptical sense that his natural development as a human being will inescapably give rise at some point to assertion of himself over against the Other. This fact leads Sartre to maintain that man is guilty *in his very being* because through no fault of his own he is necessarily involved in transforming the being of the Other, and is thereby involved in treating the Other as an object.<sup>9</sup>

By means of the foregoing distinction Sartre is able to advocate both the relative moral innocence of the unfallen child Genet and Genet's fundamental ontological guilt.<sup>10</sup> Only the latter does Sartre call original sin, thereby dissociating himself at the same time from both the traditional Christian story and the Freudian theory of racial memory presented in *Totem and Taboo*.

#### IV

##### *Love and Incarnation*

Though Sartre discusses love in a generic sense, he has in mind the love of affection and sexual desire that binds two people. Love in this sense is desire to capture the Other's consciousness. It is not mere desire for bodily union, though it encompasses such desire. In the wish to possess the Other totally, I *incarnate* myself: I momentarily identify myself with my body in order to gain the other person through her body. Through incarnation I qualitatively and magically transform my body so that it becomes *flesh* and reaches out to appropriate the Other's incarnation (*BN*, 395ff.).

The lover seeks to become the beloved's ultimate goal, to be



“all the world” to her. He wants her to be what the Hegelian slave is to the master—except that he demands a willing slave. Thus, love is essentially conflict—an internal contradiction which cannot sustain itself in its triple destructibility (*BN*, 377):

a. First, love is a deception unto infinity. It is a deception because it posits an ideal which is out of reach, and treats it as if attainable. Like the desire to be God, love posits an *inconsistent* ideal, for it wills simultaneously the beloved's enslavement and her freedom. Love is a deception *unto infinity* because “to love is to wish to be loved.” So A's loving B is A's wanting B to love A. And A's wanting B to love A is A's wanting B to want A to love B. And so on, *ad infinitum*. Sartre views the infinite regress here as attesting to the fact that love is unstable and without the possibility of perduring.

b. Secondly, love is perpetually insecure. At any moment the lover can recall his love and abandon the beloved. So the insecurity that the beloved feels fosters the psychological dynamics which eventuate in jeopardy of love. For the lover is himself beloved; and the beloved is herself lover.

c. Thirdly, others cannot be kept from intruding upon the love-relationship. The lover is forced to behold the beloved as she appears in the eyes of others. In measuring her against others and by their standards, he relativizes her. She can no longer be the absolute object of his affections. She becomes encountered as potentially replaceable.

Sartre's novels and plays bear witness to his conviction that love cannot be sustained. He peers into the depths of human emotions and depicts lives where hell has become other people. He does not intend to indict human nature but simply to portray the phenomenological dialectic of love. He explicitly rejects Heidegger's notion of inauthentic existence, on the ground that “inauthentic” is gratuitously evaluative (*BN*, 531). For Sartre, the self-defeating character of love results from the nature of consciousness and is not the product of human fallenness. Love passes over into hatred, indifference, masochism, or sadism. But

each of these contains its own implicit contradictions. "Hate too is in turn a failure. Its initial project is to suppress other consciousnesses. But even if it succeeded in this—i.e., if it could at this moment abolish the Other—it could not bring it about that the Other had not been" (*BN*, 412). Sartre feels that even the most obvious emotions and dispositions have no undialectical expression. Even generosity embodies the wish to annihilate and reduces basically to a form of destructiveness (*BN*, 594). The plain man judges himself to be guilty for his hatreds. Sartre shows him that he is also guilty, ontologically guilty, for his generousities and his loves.

## V

### *Bracketing Sartre's Atheism*

Like Nietzsche Sartre proclaims that God is dead; unlike Nietzsche he adduces arguments.<sup>11</sup> There can be no God, he contends, because the concept of God is self-contradictory:

- (1) Every consciousness both is what it is and is not what it is (i.e., every consciousness involves a lack of being and can never be totally coincident with itself).
- (2) This lack of being is psychologically expressed as desire.
- (3) As a conscious being, God is a being who lacks and who desires.
- (4) But by definition God is a being who lacks nothing.
- (5) The concept of a self-conscious God who lacks nothing is inconsistent.
- (6) Therefore, God does not exist.

Sartre also utilizes a second argument:

- (1) God, by definition, is a being who is *causa sui*.
- (2) A being who is the cause of himself must be his own foundation (i.e., must be both cause and caused).
- (3) But the concept of a being who is the cause of his own being-caused-to-be is unintelligible.
- (4) Therefore, God does not exist.

The conclusions of these arguments follow from considerations of definition, so that the reasoning supporting them is totally

*a priori*—yielding ontological disproofs of the existence of God, as it were. But both arguments beg the question. In the first, Sartre defines “consciousness” in an atheistic way and then concludes, *mirabile dictu*, that God, conceived as conscious agent, cannot exist. Sartre is assuming what must be proven, viz., that the nature of divine consciousness cannot differ “substantially” from the nature of human consciousness. In the second argument he misconstrues the traditional meaning of “*ens causa sui*.” Neither Thomas Aquinas nor Baruch Spinoza thinks of God as a totality in which one part causes or sustains another part, or in which the entire totality must somehow act outside itself to sustain itself. “*Ens causa sui*” has ordinarily been equivalent to “*ens sine causa*,” “*ens per se*,” “*ens necessarium*.” God is His own-foundation, or reason for being, in the negative sense that He owes to no other being that which He Himself is. Sartre assumes, but does not prove, that the existence of an uncaused being is logically impossible.

Sartre does not pose the more usual objections against theism (e.g., the problem of evil). Nor does he formulate his *a priori* considerations in a logically rigorous way. In fact, aside from raising the definitional objections cited above, he seems content to view himself as working out the implications of the *assumption* that God is dead.<sup>12</sup> He follows Nietzsche in being an atheist-by instinct.<sup>13</sup> But there is no necessary connection between Sartre's atheism and the other elements of his thought. Therefore, we may bracket off his pronouncements concerning God and may proceed to assess his description of human reality.

## VI

### *A Criticism of Sartre's Philosophy of Man*

We have examined several aspects of Sartre's philosophy of man: (1) the desire to be God, (2) fallenness and original sin, (3) love and incarnation. Though other forms of theological idiom are to be found in Sartre's works,<sup>14</sup> it is here unfeasible to consider them in detail. Let us proceed to ask whether the views

already discussed have any positive value for theology.

At first glance one is impressed by how much Sartre's account of Genet's "falling from grace" resembles Paul Tillich's account of "falling from dreaming innocence."<sup>15</sup> So, then, if Tillich's existential-psychological analysis can validly interpret the biblical notion of the Fall, it might seem that Sartre's analysis can be put to the same theological use. But a second look suggests otherwise, for Sartre introduces the highly problematical concept of ontological guilt. I am guilty, he maintains, simply on the basis of self-assertion vis-à-vis the Other. Original sin is thus my upsurge in a world where there are others; for my very upsurge produces self-alienation in the Other. But on this view *any* disapprobation—though it stop short of attributing a morally evil *nature*—would count as self-assertion over against the Other and might lead to the Other's sense of estrangement. The consistent extension of this viewpoint leads to the absurd: I would be guilty for attempting to give a child corrective instruction or for engaging an adult in heated argument—both of which involve self-affirmation in relation to another. However, we do not ordinarily hold ourselves guilty or indebted simply for redirecting the lives of other people but only for redirecting them in harmful or gratuitous ways. In viewing my social interaction as inescapably producing self-estrangement in others, Sartre is also assuming that such estrangement is *per se* an undesirable end. But we generally think that only some forms of estrangement are undesirable. For instance, there is not necessarily something infelicitous about a man's coming to be alienated from the self he now is. If, now a thief like Genet, he comes tomorrow to repent and to repudiate his past self, then should that change of heart be occasioned by the remonstrances of a friend, the friend would not be guilty in any meaningful sense. Of course, *ad extremum*, one might stipulatively *define* a man as "originally guilty" because his very presence partially determines the psychological and ontological identity of the Other. But such a definition would be otiose; and the notion of original guilt

could then be dispensed with. Traditional Christian theology obscurely treats original sin as a moral notion. Sartre obscurely treats it as a nonmoral notion.

In last analysis, Sartre means to signal that various destructive forms of self-estrangement inevitably result from social interaction, so that each of us is a fundamental cause of some other's self-alienation, as when one man's success necessitates another's failure. Still, what is destructive about failure is not the experience itself, which may well be a constitutive part of one's learning to identify his talents and capabilities. Rather, what is destructive is the attitude that society takes toward the failure and the resultant penalties that society imposes. The assessment of these attitudes and penalties is a moral enterprise, not an ontological one. Sartre is attempting to specify a respect in which each man is guilty simply by virtue of *existing*—in addition to being guilty by virtue of some specific *doing*. And because Sartre regards moral culpability as relevant primarily to deeds and to acts of volition, he seeks another category—that of ontological guilt—for characterizing human reality qua existing. By contrast, Christianity (whether orthodox or not) seeks to conflate ontological guilt with moral guilt, by talking about the moral and spiritual “original” depravity of unredeemed fallen human nature.

Some theologians have looked favorably upon Sartre's description of various emotions and attitudes. They have assumed that if his phenomenological portrayal of love, hate, generosity, and indifference is correct, then this picture can be pointed to in order to exhibit man's inherent corruption (in spite of the fact that Sartre himself does not draw this conclusion). For if man is universally unable to sustain nonplatonic love and if love passes over psycho-dialectically into sadism and masochism, then the plight of man is as grave as Paul depicts in Romans 3:10-18. Thus, the argument runs: Sartre's philosophy of man, if true, furnishes phenomenological support for the Pauline understanding of human reality.

But how viable is the Sartrean picture of man? Chief among its defects is that it fails to preserve a distinction between normal and neurotic/psychotic expression of emotions. For example, Sartre describes hatred as self-defeating because even if it succeeds in destroying the hated object, it cannot destroy that object's past existence: it cannot bring it about that that object should not have been (*BN*, 412). Supposing himself to be describing the essence of hate, Sartre does not recognize that his statements apply only to psychotic hate. For only someone psychotic could be serious about seeking to do the logically impossible. I can hate a neighbor enough to kill him or enough to wish he had never been born. But only psychotic hatred can feel thwarted by its not being able at the present moment to prevent someone's having been born in the past.

Similarly, the claim that basic to generosity is a craze to destroy (*BN*, 594) might seem *prima facie* true. And a theologian might be tempted to find support here for Paul's indictments of human nature. But such a posture would be misguided, for Sartre misdescribes the essence of generosity. (Is there such an essence?) The generous gift may sometimes be an objective expression of a desire to obligate the Other, to gain control over him, to reinforce submissiveness or curry favor. Nietzsche has shown vividly that generosity is often a disguised expression of the will-to-power. However, on the ordinary meaning of "generosity" it is empirically false that generous behavior always attempts implicitly to manipulate, transform, ensnare, control, or possess. If Sartre's description is not empirical but conceptual, then he must *justify* his conclusions instead of merely setting them forth.

Sartre's account of love also fails and cannot therefore be taken as a phenomenologically valid portrayal of human reality. For even if the essence of A's love for B were A's desire to be loved by B, and even though the description of this essence can be viewed as giving rise to an infinite regress, still this regress is conceptual, not experiential, so that A's love has not been

shown to be psychologically reflexive *ad infinitum*.

### *Conclusion*

If objections such as the foregoing can be extended to other aspects of Sartre's ontological phenomenology, then his understanding of man can be of no serious use to the theologian. For unless his account is independently plausible, it ought not to be taken as a philosophical reinforcement for a religious interpretation of human being. Thus—contrary to the judgment of Professor Barnes—there is little likelihood that “many people who consider themselves religious could quite comfortably accept Sartre's philosophy” were it not for his atheism. Miss Barnes is misled by the cloak of theological language that advertises Sartre's position. In his intent to provide a systematic alternative to all religious understanding of man, Sartre attempts to employ theology's own language against itself. Of course, his intention to provide an alternative interpretation does not by itself entail a fundamental incommensurability between his phenomenology and such theological understanding. There are independent reasons for this incommensurability—reasons more telling against Sartre than against the theologians he opposes.

## NOTES TO SARTRE'S THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

\*\*This article appeared originally in the *Harvard Theological Review*, 61 (January, 1968), 27-38.

1. J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), xxviii. Referred to hereafter as *BN*.

2. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 14f.

3. *Metaphysics* 980<sup>a</sup>21.

4. J.-P. Sartre, *Saint Genet*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Mentor Books, 1963), 43f.

5. E.g., Wilfred Desan, *The Tragic Finale* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 165: "Sartre...proves not that *existence precedes essence* but that *essence (logically) precedes existence*; that is to say, that human existence does not create itself in some wild and unlimited freedom but follows a general scheme which is called human essence or human nature. [Hence Sartre's discussion is self-contradictory.]" See also p. 162.

Actually Sartre's statements concerning human nature *are* inconsistent on any interpretation other than the one offered in this present chapter (and they raise some doubts even about this interpretation). Compare, for instance, the following passages in *BN*: (1) "When I described consciousness, I could not discuss a nature common to certain individuals but only *my* particular consciousness, which like my freedom is beyond essence ..." (*BN*, 438). (2) "Certain original structures are invariable and in each For-itself constitute human reality" (*BN*, 456). In support of the present interpretation note *BN*, 476 and 552.

6. *De Casu Diaboli* 4 (my translation). Cf. Genesis 3:5.

7. *BN*, 615. Cf. *BN*, 575, where Sartre speaks of the Man-God.

8. *Saint Genet*, *op. cit.*, 27.

9. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), 331: "In the structure of thrownness, as in that of projection, there lies essentially a nullity. This nullity is the basis for the possibility of *inauthentic Dasein* in its falling; and as falling, every *inauthentic Dasein* factually is. *Care itself, in its very essence, is permeated with nullity through and through.* Thus 'care'—*Dasein's Being*—means, as thrown projection, *Being-the-basis of a nullity . . .* This means that *Dasein as such is guilty*, if our formally existential definition of 'guilt' as 'Being-the-basis of a nullity' is indeed correct."

10. Cf. *Saint Genet*, *op. cit.*, 14 with the statement at *BN*, 612 that "there is no such thing as an 'innocent' child."



11. These arguments are reconstructed from *BN*, 58, 80, 88, 90, 622f.
12. J.-P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 833.
14. E.g., "Each instant of our conscious life reveals to us a creation *ex nihilo*." *The Transcendence of the Ego*, translated by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Noonday Press, 1957).
15. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), Vol. II, 33-36.