

\$4.95/V-808

*The Philosophy
of Jean-Paul Sartre*
edited and introduced by
Robert Denoon Cumming



THE PHILOSOPHY OF

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY
ROBERT DENOON CUMMING



903500*



VINTAGE BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, NEW YORK

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THE PHILOSOPHY OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

INTRODUCTION

Joe laid out a couple of frogs and was backing off towards the door, when he saw in the mirror that a big guy in a blouse was bringing down a bottle on his head held with both hands. He tried to swing around but he didn't have time. The bottle crashed his skull and he was out.

In August, 1938, Jean-Paul Sartre cited this description from U.S.A. of the death of the American Joe in a French café, and went on to reach the verdict, "Dos Passos is the greatest novelist of our time." The verdict may now seem preposterous, but it reminds us that one important formative influence on Sartre, who published his first novel in 1938, was the "technical revolution in the art of telling a story," which he credited to American novelists. This influence might provide an initial point of contact between our American experience and Sartre's intellectual career. Some point of contact is desperately needed, for Sartre has remained entirely indifferent to the techniques of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy—he admits he prefers detective stories to Wittgenstein. And we have been almost as indifferent to his philosophical writings. Can we ease our way into an understanding of Sartre's philosophy by taking advantage of his debt to the techniques of American novelists? Sartre's novels and plays have attained considerable recognition in the United States, and some selections from these works are included in this anthology. But if we are to approach his philosophy by way of his literary works, we eventually shall have to face the complicated philosophical question of the relation between his literary works and his philosophy.

Unfortunately there are other complications, which we had better not shirk. For Sartre's affection for things American has weakened since 1938, and he has recently commented on his

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sense of remoteness from us, by complaining that Americans are "too full of oversimplifications."

The first item difficult to pin down in any simple fashion is Sartre's inheritance. This novelist-philosopher is doubly a hybrid: if he began his career as a novelist with enthusiasm for the contemporary American novel, he began his career as a philosopher with enthusiasm for contemporary German philosophy. Indeed it is fashionable to regard Sartre's philosophy as really German rather than French, because Germans are supposed to be romantic, turbulent, and confused, while Frenchmen since Descartes are supposed to be rationalistic, clear, and distinct. German influences were in fact present from Sartre's birth in 1905 in Paris, for his mother's family were German-speaking exiles from Alsace. Sartre even favors German names for his heroes—Schneider, Hoederer, Goetz. But the most recent of these heroes is Franz, whose German name suggests that his role in the play is somehow French.

Indeed we shall see that what is most striking with regard to any influence on Sartre he has himself recollected is some equivocal complication. His French father, a naval engineer, died of tropical fever while Sartre was still a baby, so that he enjoyed without challenge the "peaceful possession" of his mother, and feels that he may have been spared an Oedipus complex. But this delightful simplification of his relationship with his mother was complicated by the child's thinking of her as an older sister. (After her husband's death she had resumed her place as the daughter of the family, and Sartre took his place beside her as her infant brother.) If Sartre could not see himself in the role of Oedipus, he could still turn to Greek myth for the plot of his first play and find a particular fascination in the relationship between Orestes and Electra. An incestuous brother-sister relationship is still featured in his last play, and he admits, "Even today, this is the only form of relationship which I have any feeling for." We shall see that hybrid, equivocal, and ultimately frustrating relationships are at the focus of his philosophy.

That incest tantalizes Sartre is due less, he suspects, to its sexual attractiveness than to the fact that the sexual consummation is frustrated by a prohibition. But the only prohibition Sartre ascribes to his dying father was the injunction, "Don't let him join the navy." Thus the bereaved child was not prop-

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erly equipped (a psychoanalyst has reported) with a superego. He has taken full advantage of this inadequacy, mocking the piety of his generation as a generation of "Aeneases with their Anchiseses mounted on their backs." His lack of respect for the prohibitions of any higher tribunal extends to the Puritan conscience of his German forebears and its American equivalent. Nothing is sacred for Sartre, not even the Freudian theory of the superego.

Why then has he remained so tantalized by frustrating prohibitions? It has been suggested that Sartre's grandfather compensated for the loss of Sartre's father, by equipping him with a super-superego. Grandfather dominated the family by staging, in the most grandiloquent Victorian style, patriarchal performances which assigned the child his role in life. Grandfather had received the academic reward meted out to educated exiles from Alsace: he taught German in French schools. He also taught his grandson to hate the Germans who had "taken Alsace and all the clocks in the house"—although there was still one, which had been given by grateful German students to whom he had taught French, and "the family always wondered where they had stolen it." Sartre recalls that "at the age of seventy," grandfather was "still entranced with French, because he had had a difficult time learning it, and never felt it was quite his." Thus he attempted to dedicate his grandson to French literature. But the youthful Sartre preferred Nick Carter, Buffalo Bill, and Michael Strogoff. Grandfather also attempted to dedicate him to an academic career. "In my person," Sartre explains, "martyred Alsace would enter the *École Normale Supérieure*, pass the finals brilliantly, and emerge that prince among men—a professor of literature." But the child detected something equivocal in his grandfather's devotion to French authors: "On the pretext of worshipping them, . . . he cut them up to transport them more easily from one language to another."

He who would translate and anthologize Sartre has been duly warned.

In 1929 Sartre emerged from the *École Normale*, but having failed his finals on the first trial, and as a professor of philosophy. During the next ten years he taught in various *lycées*, except for the academic year 1933-34, which he spent in Berlin studying German phenomenology. The trip was prompted by news of

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this movement brought back by Raymond Aron. At the news Sartre reportedly turned "almost pale with excitement." Here was his emancipation from the French philosophical tradition in which he had been indoctrinated at the Sorbonne and the École Normale. His excitement, a few years later, over the revolutionary techniques of American novelists was similarly excitement over the prospect of his emancipation from the French literary tradition. Emancipation itself will become the theme of both Sartre's philosophical and his literary works. Thus Sartre apparently did inherit a sense of mission from the patriarch dedicated to the emancipation of Alsace. But Sartre himself (characteristically, as we shall see) has accented the negative—the loss of Alsace in 1871: "I am a grandson of the defeat." To "this shame I did not suffer," he has attributed "a certain spirit of revenge" that lent epic scope to his aspirations as a youngster. It may be that this spirit has continued to animate such aggressive *prises de position* as the attack on French literature implicit in Sartre's peremptory verdict that an American is "the greatest of living novelists."

In any case, truculent *prises de position* have punctuated Sartre's career, rupturing his relations with such former friends and collaborators as Aron and Camus, and encouraging the impression that he is unpredictable and outrageous. Thus a question posed by the first anthology to present his thought from his earliest to his latest philosophical work is whether or not this is a development in which some continuity can be traced. I have just suggested the theme of emancipation. But there are complications in his treatment of this theme. I shall try to unravel some of them in this introduction. It is not an essay on Sartre which can be read or understood independently of the selections, and the headings in this introduction anticipate some of those which will be used for the selections themselves. Page references to the selections are supplied in brackets. In order to indicate the chronology of Sartre's development, the dates given in parentheses after the English titles of Sartre's works are the original French publication dates.

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Since the selections from Sartre's earliest philosophical work are followed by selections from his earliest novel, the first step

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in dealing with the question of continuity is to examine the relationship between Sartre's philosophical and literary preoccupations. It is not simply a question of his adopting a literary form to sugar-coat the bitter pill of philosophical argument. Later we shall see that in Sartre's philosophy it is not possible to separate form from content, technique from substance. We shall find that there are substantive philosophical reasons why Sartre resorts to literature, and that the particular literary forms and techniques he employs are philosophically significant.

If we begin by asking ourselves why Sartre "knows of nothing more impressive" in literature than Dos Passos' description of the death of Joe, we shall soon discover how difficult it is to separate the American novelist in Sartre from the German philosopher. The technique that most obviously appeals to Sartre here is Dos Passos' use of the mirror. For it is not just one technique among others; it is storytelling itself. Sartre has begun his essay on Dos Passos with the announcement, "A novel is a looking glass." No analogy seems more harmlessly traditional than that of art mirroring life, but Sartre adds a revolutionary implication. The analogy appeals to him, because a mirror is a surface. It lacks depth. Dos Passos' art of storytelling is superficial in the sense that a looking glass is merely "reflective"; all that is disclosed by his descriptions is a succession of appearances—"inexplicable tumults of color, noises, and passions." But reflection in the traditional French novel was a different and a more profound undertaking, which Sartre is employing the mirror analogy to discredit. (We shall see in a moment that Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* is the discreditable novel Sartre has primarily in mind.) In this tradition reflection is explanatory: individuals in the novel pause to reflect and explain what they are doing, by reference to their characters. And insofar as their explanations are incomplete, they allow themselves to be further explained by the reflections of the novelist. They, or the novelist, intervene in the succession of appearances, go behind what they appear to be doing, and discover that their souls have depths wherein reside the causes that explain what they are really doing. The succession of appearances is no longer inexplicable, but predetermined. Everything ultimately finds its place in the novel. The "tumults" themselves turn out in retrospect to have been only superficial disturbances; the "noises" and the "passions" are finally stilled by being explained.

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Sartre's denial that the novelist has any right to intervene in his novel and reflect on what is happening roused a critical protest in the United States. What was overlooked was the congruity of Sartre's doctrine of the "authorless novel" with his doctrine of characterless characters, and the fact that the literary Sartre, who dislodges the novelist from the novel and character as a principle of explanation in the novel, is a philosopher who dislodges the self from consciousness as an explanation of its structure. What we see, in the "mirror" provided by Dos Passos' novel, is what is mirrored, for example, by Joe's own consciousness. In other words, I am suggesting that one reason Sartre "knows of nothing more impressive" in literature than Dos Passos' description of the death of Joe, is that consciousness for Sartre as a philosopher is fundamentally analogous to Joe's final glimpse in the mirror, when he is merely conscious of what is happening. Now Sartre is not denying that we do reflect, in the deeper, traditional sense, and explain what we do by reference to our characters. What he is asserting is that the self or character of which we then become conscious, is an outcome of this process of reflection; it is not an antecedent structure which, when disclosed by reflection, will provide a causal explanation of why I am doing what I am doing. He is further asserting that to the extent that I construe as an explanatory principle the self or character of which I become conscious through reflection, my self-consciousness is self-deception.

Sartre's attack on the traditional novel's reflective structure is an attack on the reflective structure of consciousness in the French philosophical tradition. The threat of deception in this tradition had come from outside consciousness: things might not conform to our sensory impressions—to what we are conscious of when we perceive them. But this external threat seemed to have been outmaneuvered as soon as Descartes had recognized it by doubting the existence of these things. For he could not then also doubt his own doubting—*i.e.*, that this process of reflection presupposed his own existence. He thus became conscious of himself as a deeper reality, a "sub-stance"—something underlying and sustaining the process of reflection—to which could be attributed what appeared during this process, even if the appearances have no direct reference to external things. This maneuver of reflective self-enclosure, when consciousness concludes that the self of which it has become reflexively con-

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scious is impregnable to deception, is for Sartre the characteristic maneuver of self-deception—and of the French philosophical tradition, from Descartes' *cogito* to Bergson's *moi profond*. This entire tradition Sartre lumps together as "subjective idealism."

Sartre's literary techniques and his philosophical approach are alike designed to emancipate us from this self-deception. They subvert the Cartesian distinction between my indirect experience of external things and the immediate experience of myself, and restore and reinforce as my immediate experience my pre-reflective consciousness of things, and of my involvement with things, so that what we see reflected in the "mirror" of pre-reflective consciousness is recognized to be presupposed by the operations of reflection. The philosophical task of restoration is complicated by the fact that Sartre's philosophical procedure is itself reflective. He will therefore face the methodological problem of insuring that philosophical reflection actually reflects—mirrors—what appears in the "mirror" of the pre-reflective consciousness.

I have been drawing attention to Sartre's use of an analogy, because his philosophy will develop by traveling along a network of analogies. Although other analogies will soon become more important, I have been drawing attention to the analogy of a mirror in order to circumvent a serious difficulty, which could not be resolved in the translations themselves. This is the difficulty of dealing with the levels of reflection in Sartre and the distinction between reliable and distorting reflection. "Reflection" implies etymologically a reversal in the direction of a movement, but this reversal can be instanced either by an optical reflection in a mirror (and in this instance the reflection is immediate in the sense that no movement is visible) or by the visible movement of a physical body (for which French has the term *réflexion*). Sartre will rely on reflection in the sense suggested by the instance of the mirror (*i.e.*, on the reflective consciousness, insofar as it *immediately* reflects what appears to the pre-reflective consciousness) in order to expose the distortions in the structure of consciousness which we shall see are introduced by the *movement* of reflection in the second sense. I ordinarily employ the term "reflection" in this second sense, and I have brought in the analogy of the mirror to have it available when I need to distinguish "reflection" in the first sense. To