

Jean-Paul Sartre

In the twentieth century it has been mainly through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre that existentialism has come to the attention of a wide international audience. Although he is disparagingly looked upon by some of his contemporaries as "merely a writer", yet his influence has been far greater upon this generation than that of Martin Heidegger or Karl Jaspers, both of them professional philosophers. His influence upon university students in Europe, and especially in France, has been tremendous. And his influence in the United States has been considerable. One reason for this great popularity has been the literary forms in which he has couched his philosophy. Besides a number of essays and books, Sartre has written several novels and plays, which have enjoyed wide circulation. Another reason for his influence has been his perceived consistency with regard to his own principles. Sartre has said, "Existentialism must be lived to be really sincere. To live as an existentialist means to be ready to pay for this view and not merely to lay it down in books." Heidegger and Jaspers said much the same thing. However, when World War II came along, Sartre fought in the French resistance, whereas Heidegger joined the Nazis after Hitler came to power, and Jaspers, with a Jewish wife, remained silent. Of course, after the war both Heidegger and Jaspers began to speak out again, but their words sounded somewhat hollow to the new, idealistic generation of university students. Sartre, on the other hand, continued to fight the status quo. Several years after the war, he joined the Marxist party in France; and later he refused the Nobel Prize for Literature (which carried with it a cash award of \$54,000) lest he be limited in some way by the approval of the establishment or by the strictures society would attempt to place upon him in terms of certain obligations. In all of this, Sartre has been perceived at least to be consistent.

Perhaps the three most significant expressions of his philosophy in written form are his essay *Existentialism*, his short story *The Wall*, and his large book *Being and Nothingness* (one of the three great classics of existentialism). Of these three works, his essay *Existentialism* gives the clearest, most concrete explanation of his view; and his short story *The Wall* gives the strongest emotional impact generated by the key motifs of existentialism.

A brief listing of Sartre's basic motifs would surely include the following:

- (1) Existence precedes essence.
- (2) The first, primary, absolute truth is grasped intuitively: *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I exist"). The realization of this truth enables me to perceive the existence of all other men ("intersubjectivity").
- (3) Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself (subjectivity); man chooses his own self; makes himself.
- (4) The choice to be this or that affirms the value of what we choose as good. This involves responsibility, both for myself and all men.
- (5) Thus in choosing myself, I choose man. However, this involves me in anguish, forlornness, and despair.