

**J. P. SARTRE'S ONTOLOGY OF  
"NEGATIVE ENLIGHTENMENT"**

The whole of Sartre's philosophical thought can be divided into three phases. The first phase comprises of his phenomenological psychology as expounded in his works, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936); *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory* (1939); and *The Psychology of Imagination* (1940). The second constitutes his contribution to phenomenological ontology of human existence as expressed in his *magnum opus*, *Being and Nothingness* (1943); and *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946). And the third is marked by his marxist sociology as delineated in his 'epic,' *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). This paper deals with Sartre's second phase. Its aim is to show how Sartre 'enlightens' the readers with the idealistic<sup>1</sup> atheism of his phenomenological ontology.

The paper is a detailed account of the illuminative atheism of Sartre's ontology. It consists of five parts: The first part introduces Sartre's atheism with the declaration that man's passion to be God is useless. The second substantiates the atheism with an illustrative description of the impossibility of the union of the for-itself with the in-itself. The third deals with Sartre's ontological affirmation of the fact that human existence is doomed to despair. The fourth is a brief account of the charges levelled against Sartre's ontology. And the fifth is devoted to the defence of Sartre's ontology. In it, it is argued that Sartre's ontology, though criticised as being incorrigibly atheistic and anti-idealistic,

enlightens man on his condition here and now by making him absolutely free and responsible for what he is and for what the world is.

## I

Sartre, like a religious thinker, admits that man is ontologically a being who intends to become God. The very 'nature' or 'essence' of man is to attain the status of God. Man's very being is oriented with the desire to be God. Man possesses an inborn and inalienable comprehension of the being of God. God is *sensible to the heart of man*. God is man's supreme value. Sartre says, "To be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God."<sup>2</sup> But Sartre, at the same time and unlike a religious thinker, contends that it is impossible for man to become God. He concludes his principal text *Being and Nothingness* with a tragic note that man's passion to be God is useless. He maintains that human reality is by 'nature' unhappy. It is impossible for man to surpass his unhappiness by metamorphosing himself into an "in-itself-for itself" which Sartre calls God. For Sartre, God is a Utopian union of the being-for-itself (man) with the being-in-itself (thing).<sup>3</sup> God implies a being who is what he is and at the same time who is not what he is and is what he is not. Such a being is impossible, for it presupposes the combination of the two incompatible characteristics in one being - the translucency of the being-for-itself and coincidence with itself of the being-in-itself. Sartre declares, "Each human reality is at the same time a direct project to metamorphose its own for-itself into an In-itself-for itself... Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being the *Ens causa sui*, which religions call God. Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion."<sup>4</sup>

## II

Sartre describes in detail the nature of the totality—“for-itself-in-itself”—and shows in clear terms why it is impossible for the for-itself to become the in-itself. He says that the nature of the “for-itself-in-itself” is such that it is not ‘relative’ to consciousness. It is neither an object of consciousness nor posited through consciousness. It is neither prior to nor posterior to consciousness. Consciousness is not conscious ‘of’ this totality as it is conscious of an inkwell. It can’t have an apprehension of this totality as it can have of a pencil. It can be conscious of it only as it is conscious of itself, for it haunts the non-thetic self-consciousness itself. Therefore, the totality is not ‘given.’ It is in no way different from consciousness. It is only a coincidence of consciousness with itself. It is consciousness itself as the lacked-in-itself. “The being toward which human reality surpasses itself is not a transcendent God; it is at the heart of the human reality; it is only human reality itself as totality”<sup>5</sup>

Consciousness derives its meaning as consciousness from this being. Consciousness ceases to be consciousness without this totality. The totality exists as long as consciousness enjoys being a consciousness of being. But the contradiction is that it exists as the not-being of consciousness. This is what Sartre means when he says that the totality is perpetually present and perpetually absent and that the totality ‘is’ in not being itself and consciousness is this totality in ‘not’ being it. As it is already said, neither consciousness nor the totality is prior to the other. The totality comes into being along with consciousness. They are simultaneous and co-extensive to each other. Nither can exist independent of the other. The totality and consciousness *form a dyad*.<sup>6</sup> It is self-evident that consciousness exists only as ‘engaged’ in this totality and can never be free from it. In fact, this totality manifests itself in all the movements of consciousness. Or consciousness in

all its movemens manifests itself as this totality. This totality surrounds consciousness on all sides and paralyzes it with its phantom presence. But the irreducible fact is that this totality is not separate from consciousness. This being is consciousness itself which consciousness cannot be (as an inkwell is an inkwell). Sartre says, "It is consciounees itself, as an absence, an unrealizable. Its nature is to enclose its own contradiction within itself, its relation to the for-itself is a total immanence which is achieved in total transcendence".<sup>7</sup>

Sartre substantiates the futile pursuit of the for-itself by putting it in a situation, by giving it concrete characteristics. Here he takes the feeling of suffering as an example. He says that the norm of consciousness is to experience the feeling of suffering as a totality which would be what 'is'. But consciousness can never succeed. The total feeling of suffering remains always as a lack 'suffered' in the very heart of suffering. The suffering consciousness feels, can never be complete due to the fact that consciousness nihilates itself as consciousness of suffering. The feeling of suffering is not 'given'. It is only consciousness as the lack of total suffering. Therefore, it exists in and through consciousness. Consciousness is its foundation. Suffering is not independent of consciousness. Suffering is simply consciousness-of-suffering. Consciousness makes its own suffering and raises suffering into existence in its free spontaneity. Consciousness is responsible for its suffering. Therefore, consciousness can never be the suffering-in-itself. The suffering-in-itself can only be spoken about but can never be felt. The in-itself-of-suffering, the suffering which has 'being', can only be seen on the faces of others, in portraits and statues. Such an objective suffering exists as a compact and an objective whole, for it does not depend on us for its being 'there'. Whereas the suffering we feel exists in and through us. It is perpetually being sup-

ported by the consciousness-of-suffering. Therefore consciousness can never attain the status of the statue-in-itself of suffering, since it presupposes the annihilation of consciousness, the reduction of consciousness to the status of in-itself. The statue-in-itself of suffering can exist only through and for others. The suffering of consciousness is never full but always loquacious. The suffering of the statue has 'being'. The statue 'suffers'. Whereas the suffering of consciousness lacks 'being'. Consciousness suffers from not suffering enough. Therefore, consciousness exists (its) suffering "only as consciousness (of) not being enough suffering in the presence of that full and absent suffering".<sup>8</sup>

To put it still more concretely, Sartre illustrates it by taking the case of a beaten man who in vain attempts at attaining a statue-in-itself of his suffering. The beaten man moans, wails, cries and wrings his hands in order to realize the suffering in totality. He makes sounds and gestures ridden by the suffering-in-itself which he is not. As Sartre puts it, "Each groan, each facial expression of the man who suffers aims at sculpturing a statue-in-itself of suffering."<sup>9</sup> But the fact is that he can never realize it, since his suffering is not independent of him. The suffering exists only in and through him. It is he who brings it about. He feels his suffering as being its foundation. He plays without respite the drama of suffering in order to realize it. Therefore the beaten man cannot grasp his suffering in its totality. His inalienable desire to be his suffering and at the same time to conquer it removes the possibility of feeling his suffering in its copacity.

The beaten man may look for others as one who 'suffers'. His suffering with its lowered head and veiled face without speaking may resemble the silence of the statue. We may take him as if he is totally seized, flooded and devastated by suffering like a

storm. But the fact is that he is never an in-itself of suffering. It is only 'for others' that he looks like the suffering-in-itself in all the expressions of his suffering. But in himself the beaten man chatters incessantly. That is, he still aims at becoming the in-itself of suffering. The words of his 'inner' language are like the outlines of the 'self' of suffering which he can't be. Sartre says, "It is for my eyes that he is "crushed" by suffering, in himself he feels himself responsible for that grief which he wills even while not wishing it and which he does not wish even while willing it, that grief which is haunted by a perpetual absence—the absence of the motionless, mute suffering which is the "self", the concrete, out-of-reach totality of the for-itself which suffers, the 'for' of Human Reality in suffering".<sup>10</sup>

The suffering-in-itself is the "for-itself-in-itself" in concrete. Since consciousness can never be the in-itself of suffering, it can never be the in-itself of any kind. The suffering of consciousness suffers from being what it is not and from not being what it is. So also the "for-itself-in-itself" of consciousness suffers from being what it is not and from not being what it is. It remains for ever 'a realizable unrealized.' Therefore consciousness can never become one with itself. Consciousness, in all its movements, escapes from being one with itself, for it is ever being separated from itself, from its being one with itself by a 'reflective fissure' which Sartre calls nothingness. The fissure of nothingness is again not 'given.' It does not come from outside. It is not different from consciousness. Consciousness itself is the foundation of this nothingness. Consciousness creates this nothingness in all its activities including the act of overcoming the gap of nothingness. Hence consciousness can neither get rid of its ideal "self," the "for-itself-in-itself" nor merge with it. Therefore, the ideal "self," the ultimate value of consciousness remains forever beyond its reach. "At the point of being made

one with itself, it escapes, separated from itself by nothing, by that nothingness of which it is itself the foundation".<sup>11</sup>

### III

It is worth noting that whole of Sartre's dialectical description of the impossible union of the for-itself with the in-itself is a strong proof against the existence of God, and an extensive and energetic ontological affirmation of his atheism. It involves directly or indirectly the principle that man lives in vain with the constant ideal of achieving the synthesis of the "for-itself-in-itself" projected in the form of God. Sartre makes the point clearer by showing that the movement of consciousness is always horizontal but never vertical. Though consciousness is by ontological necessity directed towards the attainment of Godhood and appears to be progressing towards the status of 'being,' it is in reality condemned for ever to a 'down-to-earth' existence. Just as the vertical attraction the moon exercises on the ocean results in the horizontal movement of water which is the tide, so also, the perpetual haunting the "for-itself-in-itself" exercises on the for-itself results only in the flat movement of consciousness.<sup>12</sup> It is impossible for consciousness to progress toward the dignity of the *causa sui*. Consciousness can never be different from what it is ontologically. Consciousness by its very 'nature' is a constant project to be God and any attempt to transcend the project is necessarily a failure. Nothing can dissuade it from its project to be God. But Sartre at the same time says that consciousness comes into being only in and as the pursuit of God. Consciousness reveals itself as the world only in its vain effort to attain the ideal synthesis. Consciousness and the world cease to be what they are in the absence of the ever missing totality. Sartre says "Everything happens as if the world, man and man-in-the-world succeed in realizing only a missing God. Everything happens therefore as if the in-itself and the for-itself

were presented in a state of disintegration in relation to an ideal synthesis." <sup>13</sup>

By showing that man can never become God, Sartre shows that life is tragic and man is doomed for ever to exist as an unhappy being. Ontologically, man is condemned to despair without remedy because he is constantly haunted by the phantom totality, because he is never free from the totality, because he is totality without being able to 'be' it and finally because the Godhood is always indicated without being realized. He also holds that since every human activity is basically a failure to be God, it matters little whether one is a drunkard or a ruler of a nation. The basic ontological position of every human act is the same — a source of despair. There is therefore no single act that is superior to the other. He says, "Men are condemned to despair, for they discover at the same time that all human activities are equivalent for they all tend to sacrifice man in order that self-cause may arise and that all are in principle doomed to failure. Thus it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or a leader of nations". <sup>14</sup>

#### IV

It is on this account that Sartre's ontology has been criticised as lacking in the spiritual dimension and as being nihilistic. It has been criticised as being merely an unhappy reaction of France to German occupation and post-war distress. It is held that Sartre's ontology emphasizes the extreme need for the Absolute without however conceding its existence. In it, man is merely pictured as having an irremediable nostalgia for the Absolute. Man is shown as a being which desires to be God and at the same time it is shown that the saturation of man by the 'divine' is impossible. It is also held that there is nothing positive that Sartre could give to humanity through his ontology.



Instead, what he could successfully give man is the extreme sense of the negative side of human existence. What pervades all through his ontology is despair, anguish and nausea. It is also held that Sartre's ontology is contaminated by a strong sense of subjectivism and as being one-sided and incomplete. Its conclusions are foregone and not discovered after an objective examination of the 'what is' of human existence. Sartre is said to have made his choice well already in the beginning of his inquiry. His choice was the dread of human existence and the absence of happiness. What he has done in his *Being and Nothingness* is nothing but the description of his uncompromising atheism to which he was committed beforehand. To quote Desan, "The aim in many cases is to confirm an idea of existence which the author has made up for himself at the start, a different initial conception of existence could have been proved similarly strengthened by different descriptions. The result is that descriptions, instead of affirming a proof, become mere illustrations of what was planned and wanted".<sup>15</sup>

It is also disputed that Sartre's ontology is applicable universally. It is maintained that it stands a testimony to Sartre's own personal psychology but not to humankind as a whole. Therefore Sartre cannot be regarded as a law giver in ontology, and it is preposterous to say that his ontology is *the* ontology man can rely upon. After all, in the history of philosophy, Sartre's ontology is one more movement which fails to stand the test of time, since it fails to fulfil the task of revealing to man human existence as it 'really' is.

## V

But Sartre's ontology has to be judged within its frame-work. It should not be assessed taking the issues which it does not

take into consideration. One is not justified in criticising it for the concepts which it does not include into its frame-work. The important fact one cannot afford to ignore is that Sartre never intended his ontology to be treated as metaphysics.<sup>16</sup> His aim was to give a philosophy of man but not that of God. One has to keep in mind the fact that Sartre's ontology limits itself to the description of the "known" and does not attempt at unravelling the 'unknown'. Sartre was of the view that a strictly human and all encompassing philosophy of man is possible only in the absence of God. He did not wish to conceive a metaphysical ending to the tragic finale of human existence. Being honest to his ontology, which is phenomenological in nature, Sartre was constrained to refrain himself from a possible attempt at reconciling the for-itself with the in-itself. The question of the divine does not belong to the province of his ontology. Its only concern is the study of the 'what is', the 'known' as it appears to be or as it presents itself to itself. Sartre says, "Ontology abandons us here; it has merely enabled us to determine the ultimate ends of human reality, its fundamental possibilities and the value which haunts it".<sup>17</sup>

The fact that Sartre wanted his ontology to be strictly 'human' and 'wordly' should not be lost sight of. He never intended it to be supernatural or transcendental or mystical. He did not like to bring the notions like "ideal being" "self-fulfilment", "supreme happiness" into its frame-work. On the contrary, he wanted it to be entirely unorthodox and anti-speculative to the core. Indeed, Sartre's ontology is a consistent presentation of the primacy of the world of human experience to the world of the so called contemplative experience. For Sartre, the only reality that matters is the reality of human subjectivity. For him, "There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity".<sup>18</sup>

It must be admitted that the inability to understand human existence in purely non-metaphysical terms is a grave impediment to the correct estimate of Sartre's ontology. The task of Sartre's ontology is to understand human predicament in purely 'human' terms without postulating a God. It is to tell man that his life is not tied to any pre-ordained "soul" or "being" which is believed to dictate terms of his conduct. It is to set man free from the cage-like existence of his inauthentic self of bad-faith and give him the place given to God by Descartes. It is to make man truly reflective and fully conscious of himself and to give him the lost dignity. "In replacing God with man, Sartre is careful to define what kind of man is necessary; for Sartre, it is man of good faith, one who is reflective, conscious, aware of self and his identity. This man is free. The man of bad-faith, on the contrary, is half-conscious and deceptive; he fails to reflect about himself and his role in the world. He lives sluggishly in the swam depths of self-deception; he may accept what he should reject or he may reject what he should accept".<sup>19</sup>

What the orthodox critics fail to see is that Sartre's ontology is highly insightful within its frame-work. The instructive insight it gives is that there is no God and man is absolutely free and responsible for what he is and for what the world is. The missionary spirit of Sartre's stark atheistic ontology is to enable man to live life directly and deeply without escaping into believing in God and "spirit of seriousness."<sup>20</sup> Its sincere intention is to help man face the reality of existence without hiding it behind the protean disguises of bad-faith which necessarily blur the sharp edge of existence. For Sartre, true life begins on the far side of despair. That is, it is only when life is apprehended in complete freedom that one can 'exist' it. His aim in rejecting God and describing life as tragic is not to depress his readers but to enrich them to live life authentically and devoid of all

authority, to teach that each man is an authority for himself and man's subjectivity is the only absolute that is there in the world. His atheism does not lead to despair. It does not preach the life of licentiousness and irresponsibility. Instead, it is pregnant with moral implications in that it sets a high premium on man's honesty with himself. It reveals the fact that man's responsibility in a world without God is overwhelming. Freedom—responsibility surrounds man always and everywhere. Everything in this world is 'human.' Man is the only being through whom the world comes into existence. There is no non-human situation in the world. Man is the incontestable author of every event in the world. Even the event like justice or war is 'human' through and through. Sartre has very well substantiated this theme in his play *The Flies*, the epitome of his atheism. The hero of the play Orestes says, 'Justice is a matter between man and man, and I need no God to teach me it'.<sup>21</sup> Speaking about war, Sartre says that man is not 'destined' to fight wars. War is neither a divine compulsion nor a geographical tempest. Contrary to it, war is entirely 'human'. It is man who brings about war. Therefore he is free either to fight or avert it. War is never an accident but a matter of man's choice. There are no innocent victims in war. We have the war we deserve. Sartre says, "If I am mobilized in a war, this war is 'my' war; it is in my image and I deserve it. I deserve it because I could always get out of it by suicide or by desertion".<sup>22</sup>

Above all, Sartre's ontology teaches man that he is 'alone' in this world. He is the only savior of himself and the world. He has to shoulder the entire responsibility without shifting it to the fictitious idea of God which he has fabricated in his own image. To stress the point further, Sartre goes to the extent of saying that the very belief in God is evil, for it is harmful to human freedom. It acts as a restrictive force on man's freedom to be good

unconditionally. For Sartre, evil is that which is harmful to freedom and good is that which is useful to it. Belief in God holds man as not being free whereas disbelief sets him free. For Sartre, the disbeliever is more free to be authentic than the believer. He contends that the relation between two disbelievers is more sincere than that of the two believers, for the disbelievers are more free than the believers in the quest for the good.<sup>23</sup>

To conclude, Sartre's ontology, though attacked as being nihilistic, commands our reverence. Though atheistic and anti-idealistic, it is highly instructive and optimistic. Its very failure to offer an idealistic solution to human predicament is its success. In the absence of God and absolute values, it 'enlightens' man on his condition here and now. In making man atheistic, it makes him authentic and self-reliant. It enables him to disentangle himself from every vestige of belief in God and re-build his life and the world. It declares in clear and categorical terms that man is irremediably and absolutely free and responsible and therefore condemned to transvaluate the existing values and create new values for and by himself. Thus Sartre's ontology can as well be called an ontology of "negative enlightenment" and it is impertinent to denigrate it as having no significance.

Department of Philosophy  
Sri Venkateswara University  
TIRUPATI-517502 ( A P. )

G. VEDAPARAYAN

## NOTES

1. Sartre's atheism is of two kinds : 1) Idealistic, 2) Materialistic. The atheism as we see in the second phase of his philosophical career is idealistic whereas the atheism of his third phase is materialistic. Sartre changed his idealistic atheism into materialistic one when he converted his thought radically from existential and phenomenological ontology into marxist sociology.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Trans. Hazel, E. Barnes, 9th Printing, Washington Square Press, New York, 1977, p. 724.
3. Sartre uses the term "being-for-itself" to represent the reality of man. For him, the terms "man", "human reality", "consciousness", "freedom" and "nothingness" are synonymous and can be used inter-changeably. As against it, he uses the term "being-in-itself" to represent the reality of things which are unconscious and determined. Just because the two realities are qualitatively opposed to each other, the reduction of the one to the other or their union is out of the question.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 784.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 789.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 792.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 797.
15. Wilfrea Desan, *The Tragic Finale - An Essay on the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 187.
16. Sartre clearly differentiates between ontology and metaphysics. For him, ontology concerns itself with the study of Being which is non-supernatural. It confines itself to the study of "the structures of being of the existent taken as a totality" and the conditions by which "there is" a world and human reality. It only deals with the questions like "how" and "what" of human existence. Whereas metaphysics concerns itself with the problem of "why" concrete existents are as they

are. It indulges in speculative and explanatory hypotheses in its attempt at answering the question "why there is anything rather than nothing"? Sartre says that metaphysics is to ontology as history is to sociology. See, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 395.

17. J. P. Sartre, *Op. cit.* p. 784.
18. J. P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, Trans. Philip Mairet, 9th Printing, Methuen, London, 1970, p. 55.
19. Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamalian (Eds.) *The Existential Imagination from de Sade to Sartre*, Pan Books Limited, London 1963, p. 17.
20. The "spirit of seriousness" is the view that man is an object of and subordinate to the world. It is also the view that values have an absolute existence independent of man. It considers values as transcendent given independent of human subjectivity. Sartre repudiates "spirit of seriousness" through his technique of existential psychoanalysis. See, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 796.
21. J. P. Sartre, *Altona, Men Without Shadows, The Flies*, Penguin Books, London, p. 293.
22. J. P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 708.
23. Simone de Beauvoir, *Adieux - A Farewell to Sartre*, Trans. Patrick O'Brain, Penguin Books, Guillimard, 1981, p. 432.

## BOOKS RECEIVED

- 1) *The Theory of Concepts*  
M. M. Agrawal ; Philosophy and Social Action, M-120  
Greater Kailash-1, New Delhi-110 048, First Edition 1980,  
pp 104.
- 2) *Philosophical Enquiries*  
Margaret Chatterjee; Motilal Banarasidass. Delhi, First  
Edition 1988, pp. x + 204; Rs. 90
- 3) *Vādanyāya : The Nyāya-Buddhist Controversy*  
Mangala R. Chinchore; Sri Satguru Publications, 40/5,  
Shakti Nagar, Delhi-110 007, First Edition 1988,  
pp xix + 213; Rs. 150.
- 4) *Philosophy of Social Science*  
M. R. Nandan; The Bangalore Philosophy Forum,  
Maharani's Arts College, Bangalore, First Edition 1987;  
pp. xvi + 267. Rs. 80.
- 5) *Śabda Pramāṇa : An Epistemological Analysis*  
R. I. Ingalalli; Sri Satguru Publications, 40/5 Shakti Nagar,  
Delhi-110 007, First Edition 1988; pp. xii + 160; Rs 140
- 6) *Original Sin in Augustine's Confessions*  
Paul Rigby; University Ottawa Press, Canada; First Editon  
1988; pp. xxx 137; \$ 17.95 (Can.)