

Max Charlesworth, The Existentialists and Jean-Paul Sartre, St. Lucia, QLD, Australia 1975

Interviews by Pierre Vicary with Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in two long programmes, broadcast on the ABC's Radio 2 early in 1975:

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Vicary (PV): When you look back over the Existentialist period, will it be seen as a philosophy that was rooted in the forties and the fifties – a philosophy that is relevant only to that period – or will it be seen as a philosophy that transcends that period, that has some sort of universal meaning?

de Beauvoir (SdB): Existentialism as such began long before then. The first Existentialists were Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Jaspers. Then came the Christian Existentialism of Gabriel Marcel and the atheistic Existentialism of Sartre. Like any other philosophy or ideology, Existentialism was closely linked to a certain period in time, but I would not say it was just a reflection of this period – this is a Marxist concept to which I am unable to subscribe – however, Existentialism obviously was influenced and shaped by its period.

Before we go any further we should examine the meaning of the word “Existentialism” as applied to Sartre’s philosophy. When he first started writing *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre didn’t call himself an Existentialist. The origin of the term was contingent and capricious. It was in fact Gabriel Marcel who first applied the term to Sartre, in the course of a discussion with a group of Dominicans at Le Cerf. At the time Sartre rejected this definition of himself saying that he was indeed a philosopher of existence but that “Existentialism” did not mean anything. But subsequently, Sartre and I, and his followers, were described as being Existentialists so often that we stopped objecting to this definition of ourselves. Finally we even agreed to define ourselves as such. And just after the war ended Sartre gave a lecture which he entitled “Is Existentialism a Humanism?” which shows how completely he had adopted this definition by himself.

So the origin of the term “Existentialism” may have been contingent, but the philosophy itself was not. It was the result of research in which Sartre had been engaged long before the war, and the essence of Existentialism was present in his mind long before it appeared as a philosophical system. The popularity of Existentialism just after the war and Sartre’s incentive to think along these lines, are both phenomena which can be explained by reference to the historical situation at the time. Both we and the people who read our works felt the need of an ethical system of norms and Existentialism served to reconcile history and ethics. But the solution proposed by Sartre was not always an easy one. Even so, his works – and I’m talking about his philosophy, not his novels or his plays – his works met with enormous success precisely because they met a specific need at a specific time. One of the reasons for the popularity of Existentialism was that it offered a reasonable alternative to Marxism to certain middle-class intellectuals who didn’t want to be forced into accepting Marxism because there was nothing else available. However, Sartrean Existentialism was not always easy for them to swallow because it was not a philosophy of despair and it aimed at shattering quite a lot of myths and illusions. And while the bourgeoisie was all in favour of having some ethical system, it didn’t want anyone interfering with its best-loved myths. This is why it was so astonishing that Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* should have been so popular at the time.

The term “Existentialist” soon began to be used very loosely, being applied to people who didn’t have anything to do with Existentialism as such – that whole curious race of people who inhabited St. Germain des Prés around 1947, for example, and all the young people who played jazz and danced in night clubs and dressed in a certain way. Now this loose application of the term “Existentialist” led to a great deal of confusion. The people who attacked the young people and their life-style imagined that they were attacking Existentialism, which, I repeat, had nothing at all to do with all that. Well, Sartre’s philosophy continued to evolve. His basic premises remained the same, but he began to investigate the philosophy of history. There was some evidence of this in *Being and Nothingness* but the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is his main attempt to critically define “praxis” and human history. Again, his work on Flaubert is a study applying principles drawn from the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, as well as from *Being and Nothingness*, to an individual case.

so while I feel that existentialism was very closely linked to certain historical events, to a certain historical context, I also believe that its relevance extends far beyond that. This is true of any

valid philosophy, be it that of Kant, Descartes or Hegel. Sartre's thought undoubtedly contains elements which will seem outdated in a few years, and the same could be said of Kant or of Hegel. However, I believe that Sartre's philosophy has made an important contribution in the realm of human thought and no philosopher will ever be able to disregard this contribution in the future. Therefore, it could be said that the significance of Sartrean Existentialism transcends the period from which it sprang.

2. (p. 24-27)

PV: Jean-Paul Sartre, there's a great deal of talk at the moment about the death of philosophy, the crisis of philosophy. How do you view the whole discipline of philosophy when you look at it?

Sartre (JPS): Philosophy is always in a state of crisis, since there are always philosophers who are considered worthless. New philosophers are born who criticize those who preceded them. So there will always be a "crisis". It is not like that in literature, where one accepts willingly one's predecessors, nor in other kinds of discipline. But it is the case in philosophy – the reason being that philosophy is not a body of knowledge which can be codified into indisputable and necessary rules.

The subject matter of philosophy is man-in-the-world and it must study men-in-the-world with the only means it has at its disposal, that is to say the disciplines that are available at any given period. Man-in-the-world as seen by Anaximander, for example, is not man-in-the-world as seen by Marx. Nevertheless that's the problem that has to be studied: man, the world-as-encompassing-man, the relationship of man with the world and of men with one another. That's the object of philosophy.

I don't believe that this kind of philosophy could ever disappear, despite all the crises it might suffer. Because a science that's capable of studying man-in-the-world and interhuman relations doesn't exist. If you take sociology, for example – sociology studies a certain image of man which is presented to you, which you study. But there is the sociologist himself which sociology doesn't study. There is a man outside sociology who is the man who makes it what it is. Therefore, there's always, in every scientific discipline, a category of Man who is left out.

Philosophy is precisely the discipline which studies man as a whole: man-in-the-world. And it's forced to do so because there lies, in the final analysis, the ultimate value of our asking the questions: What are we doing in a world that doesn't want us? Why are we in it? What is our relationship to people who don't want us either? And why do we manage to make them accept us, sometimes? There's no science that can deal with these problems. Philosophy alone can do it. Therefore, it's certainly important to be aware of the crises of philosophy, but they don't endanger its existence.

PV: How do you think Existentialism will be viewed historically? do you think it will be seen as a reflection of the immediate post-war period in Europe; as a philosophy that had only a passing importance, or a philosophy which had some very basic, fundamental things to say about the world we live in and which will last for far longer than just a passing moment?

JPS: I don't know. I believe that what we've tried to do is to guide man towards the idea of freedom: to give a definition of this freedom, of which each man is conscious, but which he disguises under false names: to remind people of freedom as the very definition of man. And this is maybe what will remain. But we're still far from it at this stage. I think that Existentialism, rather than remaining a closed philosophical system, will become mixed with certain tendencies of philosophical thought yet to come. But I don't think that there is a philosophy such as Existentialism that will disappear with me. The work I have attempted to do will be taken up again and developed.

PV: Simone de Beauvoir. Existentialism, as you see it, is alive, is a living thing, it's not a dead philosophy consigned to the history books. How do you think that you and Jean-Paul Sartre will be remembered?

SdB: One would have to be a prophet to answer that question. Everything will depend on posterity, the direction in which it moves, the lines along which it thinks, because there are always certain times in history when certain concepts fall from grace, or are simply lost from sight. And then they suddenly spring up again, fifty or hundred years later. And so it would be impossible for me to predict how Sartrean Existentialism will be regarded fifty years from now.

However, I strongly believe that Sartrean philosophy contains certain key notions which will help men comprehend the world as long as they continue to wish to do so, which is, in itself, an interesting question. One often wonders whether people will not be too devoted to power-seeking struggles to bother with wanting to understand the world. But, here again, I am optimistic because I feel that even in a period marked by man's aggression and his desire to dominate, there will always be, as there always have been, some men whose desire it is to understand, to comprehend. And as long as there is a desire to understand the world, philosophies have an equal chance of survival. And this holds, even for the most recently evolved philosophical system, which has been able to make its steps forward by taking things from all the philosophies which have preceded it. And perhaps in retrospect, certain philosophical systems will come to be seen as stepping stones which one has gone beyond; and this applies to all areas of human thought. Take Freudian psychoanalysis for instance. We have gone beyond Freud, but we couldn't have done so had Freud never existed. And the same will be true of Sartre. His philosophy will become out-dated, but Sartre himself will always be a fact to be reckoned with and he will remain an important milestone in the history of ideas.

3. (p. 30/31)

PV: Jean-Paul Sartre, you're widely read in America and obviously in the French-speaking world. But in England itself, apart from a few of your works, you don't seem to have had that same sort of success. Why do you think that is?

JPS: I think that there are people in England who know me, and books have been written about me there, but only a few, that's true. There are far more in America. I think this is due to the fact that the English are not very interested in philosophy, at least not in philosophy such as we practise it in Continental Europe. The English prefer sociology, literature, history, and since what I've been involved in is philosophy in the strict sense, I don't think they've been very interested.

4. (p. 58-65)

PV: You were saying that your philosophical view has changed considerably since you wrote *The Second Sex*. But, when you wrote it, it was seen as one of the first documents of feminism. Did this book spring out of your Existentialist period?

SdB: I had had the same opportunities as a man and I had been treated as an equal by men I knew, but I realized that all my education and my upbringing had conditioned me to think of myself as being specifically a woman. This realization led me to enquire into the myths we had about women and to ask myself how women accepted their lot in life. My philosophical perspective, in so far as I had one, was that of Existentialist philosophy, which meant that I did not define woman in terms of happiness and unhappiness, but rather in terms of personal freedom, since this is a basic Existentialist concept.

I also talked about "transcendence" and "immanence" and these are also Existentialist notions. I argued that real human freedom was the capacity to make plans, and this too undoubtedly derives from Existentialism. At the time I wrote *The Second Sex* I saw Existentialism in somewhat idealistic terms. I would probably modify this today, in favour of a more materialistic definition, although I would not reject the basic Existentialism contained in this work.

To give you an example of what I mean: in *The Second Sex* I tried to prove that "otherness" was an essential category of all human thought and action, and thus women were seen as being "other" by men. But I defined "otherness" by reference to the consciousness of the "other" as opposed to one's own consciousness of one's self. Today, I would define "otherness" in more materialistic terms by reference to what might be called a "dog-eat-dog" mentality, so as to show that any category of people strong enough to affirm itself will try to exclude others from it. It could thus be demonstrated that men, being a privileged group, have always tried to retain the status of privilege by relegating women to another category. One finds a similar situation in certain primitive societies where physical strength, and the privileges attendant thereon, are defined in terms of having or not having to bear children.

Today then, I would modify my Existentialism in favour of a more materialistic definition of "otherness", but this would make little difference to the basic premises of *The Second Sex*.

PV: What sort of relationship do you have with Women's Liberation people now; people like Firestone, Germaine Greer, Juliet Mitchell?

SdB: Well, because I live in France, I am obviously most closely involved with the French feminists. But I have read the books written by Greer and Firestone and Millet. I particularly like the notion put forward by Firestone, namely that the liberation of women would result in their children being liberated.

Kate Millet is the only American feminist I've met in person, but I keep well informed of all that's happening in the United States. I write to a lot of feminists in America, and they send me reviews and so on. I'm also in contract with feminists in other countries, such as Germany and Italy, and I read their reviews and we exchange letters. But for obvious reasons, most of my work is done in France. I first became involved some years back when a group of women decided to publish a document declaring that they had had abortions. This document was published in the press and the idea of these women was to confront the authorities with the problem of abortion, to see how they would react and whether they would dare to put the women in prison. Some of the 343 women who gave their signature to this document were well known public figures, but a very large number of them were quite unknown.

At first I thought that this was a rather curious way of drawing attention to a problem; but upon reflection it seemed an excellent idea to me, and this marked my first involvement with the women's movement in France. Right from the start, I felt at ease with these young women, and I liked the way they worked. They had inherited a lot of their tactics from student movements in May 1968 and they had none of the bureaucratic rigidity which characterizes the Communist Party. And they weren't like those middle-class ladies who are only concerned with defending their own professional interests. In point of fact, many of these women were from the bourgeoisie originally, but they weren't limited by their origins. One of the reasons that I had never been interested in women's movements before this – whether political or professional in aim – was precisely because I felt that their aims were too middle-class and too limited. But these women had a different approach to the problem; it was not pompous and it wasn't dictated by anyone. Their demonstrations were gay. They were enthusiastic. They were light-hearted. But this doesn't mean that they didn't care about class-division and the problems of the proletariat and so on. And I was very impressed by their approach to the problem.

Since my first involvement with the women's movement, we've worked together to organize several important demonstrations. One was meant to expose crimes perpetrated against women; another took the form of a Women's Day at the Bois de Boulogne. And then there was the instance I mentioned earlier, when we rallied around and supported the woman who was charged with aiding her daughter, her seventeen year-old daughter, to obtain an abortion.

Activities are extremely varied. We write books and tracts and pamphlets and so on. Recently, I've founded the League for the Defence of Women's Rights, through which I hope to obtain for women civil rights which other people have been granted in respect of their nationality. Perhaps you know that after the War a ruling was made according to which any racist remark directed against Jews could be taken to a court of law, and I hope to see the same ruling enforced in respect of sexist remarks directed against women.

I also hope that all other forms of discrimination against women will be forbidden. The civil Code contains an article which forbids the discrimination "on grounds of age, ethnic group, race, nationality" and so on, and I should like to see the clause "on grounds of sex" added to the list above. We also have a rather amusing little column in the journal *Les Temps Modernes* in which we collect all the sexist remarks and actions to which women have been subjected over the past month. It is often funny and it also serves as the basis for a more detailed analysis of women's problems which can be examined from a more ideological standpoint.

Recently, one entire issue of *Les Temps Modernes* was devoted to women's problems and to their claims for equal rights. All the articles in it were written by women. I myself wrote the foreword and I more or less organized it all. so you can see that my activities are extremely varied, but they're all linked to other aspects of the work which is currently being done by other members of the women's movement in other ways and in other places.

PV: What about the question of feminism in personal terms, things like cosmetics, the clothes you wear, the relationships you have with men? How has this aspect of feminism been discussed in France?

SdB: That's not something we talk about very much because it is not very important; it's purely a matter of personal taste. It was funny when American feminists started burning their bras but it was also an extremely useful publicity gambit, in as much as it drew world-wide attention to the fact that women were being exploited and treated as objects. But there is no general rule about things like make-up and dressing. There are lots of women in Women's Liberation who wear a lot of make-up, some don't wear very much, some don't wear any at all. I suppose it is the same sort of thing as men supporting the Left and dressing well or dressing badly – it is quite personal and you can't make any general rules about it, and people should be allowed to do exactly as they wish. There is no law which says to women: "Thou shalt not wear make-up, nor shalt thou go to the hairdresser, nor shalt thou dress in a certain manner." There is no Women's Lib. uniform; women dress exactly as they see fit.

PV: No, I meant it not quite in that sense. I meant it more in regard to what you were saying before about a law against sexism. Surely, if this sort of thing came about and a law against sexism was established, this would mean changes in sexist advertising, changes in the sort of magazines that are sold in the shops, and things like that wouldn't it?

SdB: Yes, that's different. We strongly object to advertisements which degrade and devalue women. This is something we're trying to expose and we hope to see it forbidden by law. An advertisement for a certain brand of tights, which depicts a woman down on her hands and knees, is obviously degrading, and we are fighting against this and similar sorts of degradation of the female image. But this is an extreme case and, in many other instances, the publicity gimmicks which are used are merely silly and in the long run fairly inconsequential and harmless.

PV: You have talked about the women's movement in France and your activities with it. When you look at the women's movement in a more general sense, in a world-wide sense, are you hopeful or are you pessimistic?

SdB: On a long-term basis, I'm optimistic. The present situation is unnatural and therefore cannot continue forever. What was originally a natural difference between the sexes has been magnified out of all proportion so as to assume an unreal cultural and social significance, and I am unable to believe that this situation can continue much longer. I believe that technological progress will lead to a realization that one must control nature and not be a slave to it, and it will therefore become impossible to keep women confined to their so-called "natural" role in life.

The situation of women today always makes me think of ancient Greece, which was one of the world's great democracies and had a highly developed sense of individual freedom and equality, and yet there were slaves in Greece. We find this quite shocking when we think about it today, but the Greeks didn't – not even people like Aristotle – and I tend to feel that men today have the same sort of blind-spot as regards women and their proper place in society. They're unable to see that it is scandalous that women should be treated as they are by any society claiming to be intelligent, sophisticated, modern and constructive. I believe that just as slavery no longer exists so too will the exploitation of women have to cease.

I said that I was optimistic on a long-term basis, because I foresee a long and difficult struggle in the immediate future. There are centuries of tradition to overcome: generations of mothers rearing their sons with notions about virility and being superior to women. This will have to stop or men will always, at least unconsciously, be prejudiced against women, simply because of their upbringing. And the same sort of unconscious conditioning goes on with little girls who have certain notions of femininity inculcated in their minds from the moment they are born.

A book entitled *Speaking of Little Girls* affirms that sex discrimination starts at birth and becomes more pronounced as the child grows older. And so a little girl of two who behaves in a distinctively "feminine" manner does so because of her conditioning for the past two years, and the same is true of little boys.

In progressive countries, like Denmark, discrimination between little boys and little girls is forbidden from kindergarten onwards. We hope that this will soon be the case in France too, but it won't be easy to achieve this, because as Françoise Giroud has pointed out, (and this is an idea which she took from the women's movement), in order to achieve this end all trace of sexual discrimination must first be removed from the books which are used in schools.

The same idea is prevalent in China where little boys are taught to sew on buttons and little girls are shown how to play with meccano sets and how to do minor electrical repairs. If boys and girls do exactly the same things, they feel the same.

Women's worst enemies are perhaps not men, but those women who so foolishly imagine that it is a great advantage to be given special treatment by men. We have trouble convincing them that it's not.

Another problem we have to cope with is trying to convince working-class women that they must not allow themselves to be exploited by their husbands any more than by their employers. Some of them are finally beginning to see the light and recently some women who had been on strike said in effect: "Well, now realize that I can achieve something and that I've got something to say about my situation. And so at home it won't be my husband who wears the pants all the time, because I'll have something to say about it if he tries ..."

I feel that there has been an emancipation of women in respect to their work and their employers which will ultimately lead to their being liberated in the home. I also believe that if women were freed of housework they would react quite differently to being exploited by their employers.

Housework is something we haven't yet mentioned despite the fact that it is so closely connected with the liberation of women. It is also one of the main reasons that society is so opposed to women being liberated because women constitute a large unpaid section of the work-force.

In France, and it's probably the same everywhere else, there are more hours of housework than anything else done in any one week and these thousands of hours of domestic work are done for nothing. Society manages to get the husband to support the wife, but this is obviously much cheaper than paying the woman on an hourly basis. The economic balance of society is such that it depends on getting women to do this work for nothing. This is one of the reasons that women must be conditioned to accept their situation. They have to be taught to accept the idea of doing housework, and as it would be difficult to convince them that washing floors and dusting furniture is rewarding, one extols the virtues of being a mother, because looking after children will keep a woman at home. And thus it is that a woman who is very happy to be a mother, will feel that it is right and proper for her to stay at home and look after her children, and she will automatically do all the unpaid work which society needs her to do for it to function.

An interesting solution to this problem has been arrived at in China where men and women are being taught to assemble and do the housework together. So one afternoon they will darn socks together, and another afternoon they meet in a block of flats, or on the street, or in a village, to do everyone's washing. and in this way, housework is not devalued, nor is it treated as though it were specifically the province of women. The net result is that women are relieved of the responsibility of housework because everyone does it together. We too have to find our solution to this problem if women are to be emancipated.

PV: I know this is a very difficult question, but how do you see your role within the women's movement? How important do you think were your work and the thoughts expressed in *The Second Sex* for the subsequent growth of the women's movement?

SdB: I received a lot of letters from women saying that *The Second Sex* had helped them in various ways, but I don't believe the book began the women's movement. However, I know that the book became something of a reference work, once the movement got underway. More than a million paper-back copies of the book have been sold in America and Firestone and Betty Friedan dedicated their books to me. And many other women writers were greatly influenced by it, even although there were some like Kate Millet who didn't refer to it specifically.

So while *The Second Sex* may not have started the women's movement, it has played an important role in its development, and it has become something of a reference work since the movement began. However, it was written quite some time ago now, and so it is probably a bit old fashioned in places. But I don't think this is true of its ideology and I think that what I wrote about myths is fairly definitive, as are my historical remarks. But the situation of women is somewhat different today, and so it would need to be analyzed somewhat differently. Marriage isn't altogether the same as when I wrote the book, nor is the sex-life of women. And these questions have now been treated in much greater detail in the many new books on the subject.

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PV: Your work has been very much concerned with the freedom of the individual – the rights of the individual man. And yet the philosophy of age is very much a philosophy of collectivism. do you find yourself in your writings going against the prevailing thoughts of the age?

JPS: I think indeed that a philosophy of freedom, of liberty, in one which runs counter to the intellectual tendencies of the last fifty, or even of the last seventy-five years. But then philosophy is often in opposition to science. (Bergson's belief in freedom, for example, was also in opposition to the sciences of his time). On the other hand, I think that in fact during these fifty years, and during the period which was influenced by the first world war, just like the one that was influenced by the second world war, freedom was a phenomenon that was denied, almost hated. But I believe that today in Left-wing movements, among young people, liberty plays a more important role; it opens up a new dimension of the world which is precisely that of a world inhabited by free men.

PV: You talk about the freedom of the individual and you admit that in some ways your thought is not going along with the prevailing thought of collectivism. And yet you've had dealings with Maoist groups, and you've had dealings with the Communist Party in the past. How does one reconcile your view of individualism and the Marxist concept of collectivism?

JPS: Well, I believe that I'm not an individualist. Certainly, it seems to me that it is easier for an individual to attain freedom. But one could conceive the idea of a collective freedom – a freedom realized by groups of free individuals and which as groups would be in possession of certain rights. So, granted this premise, I don't stand in opposition to Marxism. Marxism also refers to freedom. It gives it a sense which is slightly different from mine, that is as a state of affairs which will come into being once the revolution has been accomplished and completely assimilated.

As far as I'm concerned, that is also what I believe. I think that, after a social upheaval that is yet to come, it will be possible to create a society of free men. Therefore, there is no contradiction here either, even though the Marxist view of freedom is different from mine. The fact remains, nevertheless, that my view is determined by the idea that man understands and creates himself through his actions by his own efforts and not because of external or environmental factors.

PV: You talk about the difference between your view of liberty and the Marxist view of liberty. Is it because of those differences that you have tended to associate yourself more closely in recent years with the Maoists rather than with conventional Communist Parties?

JPS: It is not only that, but many particular incidents and a whole historical lifetime which led me at one stage to associate myself with the Communist Party. It was about 1952, at a time when the threat of war between the USSR and the USA seemed very real. Only I dissociated myself from it later on, about 1954-5. What made me lose all sympathy for the Communist Party at that time was Prague and Budapest. But what I'm saying is that all these details caused my change of attitude. If I did associate myself with newer movements like Maoism in France, for instance, it is because of another conception of Marxism, and among French Maoists, at any rate, of a new conception of liberty.

PV: And yet it is fair to say that your Marxism, or your view of Marxism, is different in many ways from the conventional, what some would call the bureaucratic, view of Marxism. Given your view, can one really call it Marxism, or does it have to be called Sartrean Marxism, or what?

JPS: I remain convinced of the importance of Marxist materialism as a basis for revolutionary thought, and of its conception of the economic basis as being most important in the development of a revolutionary force.

If I am in conflict with Marxism, it's in a connection with other questions. For instance, on the question of the relationship between the "superstructure" and the "infrastructure". But that would take too long to discuss here. But I don't think that, as far as I'm concerned at any rate, one can really talk of "Marxism" or even of "Sartrean Marxism". I think rather that the ideas I've developed come close on certain points to official Marxism; on others, they deviate from it. However, there is sufficient agreement to have made it possible, and to still make it possible, for me to follow a common course with certain Marxist elements such as the Maoist Party before its dissolution, for example. Today, still, it is the kind of people who align themselves with the young whom I consider to be likely to associate themselves with my ideas, while at the same time remaining Marxists.

PV: How do you view those countries that are nominally Marxist, like the Soviet Union, The People's Republic of China, Cuba, Yugoslavia? Are they "Marxist" States?

JPS: I don't consider the USSR to be a truly Marxist country. We're going to publish in next month's issue of *Les Temps Modernes* a very good article on Marxism in the USSR, where we show the vast difference which exists between Marxism and the Soviet regime. Cuba adopted Marxism while I was there and I saw the development of the first Marxist tendencies. But, in fact, at the beginning the Cuban Revolution didn't follow the Marxist pattern. It was really a rebellion against Batista and against the Americans, not a Marxist rebellion. Later on, the Communist Party, which had stood aside, became part of the Cuban community and Castro took up Marxism as a basic philosophy. His relationship with the USSR also had a lot to do with that.

On the other hand, as far as China is concerned, I consider that its conception, as far as one can know it, of Marxism and of political philosophy is quite remarkable. Chinese Marxism contains a certain number of ideas which seem to be to be very important for men and which are in opposition to those that were held by Russian Marxism.

PV: You seem in some ways to be like a modern theologian arguing that the Church is basically sound but that various churches have betrayed the thoughts of Christ.

JPS: Yes, I can be accused of that. It is indeed true that in my opinion Marxism, such as it remained officially at the end of the nineteenth century and during the Russian Revolution, didn't keep pace, didn't take into account the changing situation. I believe that a true and positive doctrine must evolve with the times. Therefore, modern Marxism must assimilate a number of new concepts. The Russians have hardly done that. In China, on the other hand, you find elements of Marxism which have been stressed by Mao Tse Tung and which are quite new compared to earlier Marxism.

PV: You talked at the beginning about your concept of liberty and the way that that concept of liberty can be rationalized with Marxism. Now your critics have argued that Existentialism and Marxism are two such different philosophies that they cannot be reconciled. How would you see the relationship between those two philosophies?

JPS: Their historical sources are of course quite different. Existentialism derives from Phenomenology, which is related to different streams of German philosophy, and also from Kierkegaard who is completely outside the arena of political thought. So I don't really think that the development of these two modes of thought is related. But I think that now, at a time when within the field of Existentialism there is a renewal of interest in certain propositions of Heidegger, for instance, or Husserl's Phenomenology, they must be brought into contact with the true and rich philosophy that Marxism is, to try and see whether Existentialism may have something to contribute, some part to play in that area.

PV: But you are in a way the best person to explain this relationship because you are the person who has really taken Existentialism towards Marxism. Are you saying that the two theories can be brought together or are you saying that you have now become a Marxist and have cast aside your Existentialism?

JPS: I still accept it. I wrote *Critique of Dialectical Reason* to show to what extent I am modifying certain notions in *Being and Nothingness*, and to what extent I stand by the whole of that book. I still uphold the realism of *Being and Nothingness* and its theory of consciousness, that is to say the theory of what Descartes called "mind", the cogito, and which since Descartes has been thoroughly analyzed by philosophers, particularly Husserl. So I still retain absolutely this conception of consciousness. But all men, and they are all endowed with a mind, are part of social institutions – existing ones, or those yet to come – either fighting against them or submitting to them. But they are part of them, and thus one aspect of Existential philosophy must be the study of the relationship between men and society.

PV: You accept the importance of your earlier work, and yet you have moved on towards Marxism. What were the sort of questions in your mind that you felt your earlier view of the world was unable to answer?

JPS: It was necessary, of course, to situate man in relation to other men within a society – that was essential. *Being and Nothingness* provided the basis of an Existentialist ontology, which established a connection between man as a free agent and another, or with other men equally free.

But it didn't establish a society. It didn't take society into account, for the simple reason that a plurality of men doesn't constitute of itself a society. I had to give up the idea of deducing from the principles I proposed in *Being and Nothingness* an entity such as that of society. I had to obtain it from somewhere else: in particular, in fact, from Marxism which examined societies and the internal class-relations within societies. This is where a way had to be found to pass from the knowledge of individuals, and their interpersonal relationships, to arrive at the idea of a society which brings together individuals or groups. And that is what I attempted to do in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

PV: And do you feel this caused you to modify your view of the supreme importance of the individual?

JPS: No. Besides, I haven't abandoned the idea of the individual's importance within the group. I think at the moment that the various parties, such as they're organized more or less everywhere, don't explain adequately the relationship of people with one another, because they're based on a kind of alienation of the individual from the group. Whereas I believe that soon we shall see the emergence of other types of groups which will be based on the concept of freedom. That is to say the militant will not then be a man who reproduces ideas created by others which have been passed on to him and which he must disseminate. He will be someone truly free who will only accept the ideas that will become his own ideas and who will only ever speak as an individual, as a person.

PV: You have talked about China and your hopes and your faith in China. Are you worried though by the whole collectivist approach in China? Do you feel that the individual there has been too much negated? do you feel that in a way culture has been negated by this very collectivism?

JPS: I'm not sure about this. I haven't been back to China since 1956, I think it was. Since then, many things have happened that I have followed through newspapers and articles and books, but not at first hand. However, I think that there is indeed among the Chinese a problem about collectivism and of the person as person. It seems to me that this problem hasn't yet been resolved. And I believe that collectivism will eventually be the relationship existing between free individuals.

6 (p. 127-128)

PV: Dr. R.D. Laing and his associates, and the whole of the anti-psychiatry school talk of the influence that you have had on their philosophy. What did you say that was relevant to the changes in the psychiatry?

JPS: I think that Professor Laing was looking for a theory which would put freedom first, so that mental illness, or what is known as mental illness, might appear as an aspect of freedom, and as a disease resulting from a malfunctioning of the brain or from some physical complaint. I think what he meant is that within society, such as I conceived it, one could understand the nature of an aberrant but persistent attitude which at present is known as madness, an attitude that prevents a real contact with others and which is nevertheless a consequence of freedom. I think this is what Professor Laing is getting at. That's to say, a new conception of mental illness seen as a mode of life as valid as our own, but which, however, is likely to lead to total inertia, for instance, or to unbearable pain. He takes men as they are, not as mad men versus sane men, but as men; some reaching a certain stage of distress, others avoiding that stage. That is, I presume, what Laing seemed to want to take from my writings. As a matter of fact, I'm completely in favour of anti-psychiatry, such as it is practised by Laing and by others in Italy and France.

7 (p. 137-144)

PV: In your later works, you have suggested that the classical conception of the role of the intellectual is no longer relevant. So you have said: "Today it's sheer bad faith hence counter-revolutionary for the intellectual to dwell on his own problems instead of realizing that he is an intellectual because of the masses, because of the working class, and that he has to dedicate his work – his whole attitude to life – to resolve their problems". Can you explain this?

JPS: I've already explained in one of my books, in the last section of *Being and Nothingness*, how ideas are always produced by an individual (or a group) who is conditioned by his social context, and that the intellectual in our society is a man who has a place within the bourgeoisie, in as much as he develops or simply observes the ideas of the majority, past or present, without attempting to find out whether those very ideas may not come from a different context, that is from a social context. I think that this conception of the intellectual makes him what he is and may be a relic of bourgeois thinking in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and not of popular thought. In other words, if we divide society roughly into two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the intellectual is a product of the bourgeoisie and he is therefore to a large extent bound to it. In particular he reflects a number of ideas or ideologies belonging to that class.

It seems to me that if one looks at what is going on at the moment, the time will come when the intellectual will be freed from this bourgeois class, that is to say when revolution or some other events put an end to its domination. Will he then be the people's intellectual? I doubt it. I think rather that the intellectual who is born of the bourgeoisie, or of the ruling classes of the past, must vanish from the ruling classes; then there will be only people belonging to a single class, the proletariat, who will then attain the human reality of persons and who will think freely. They will therefore play the part that the intellectuals of the past thought they were playing. And I believe that when that day comes, there will probably be within the proletariat men who at certain moments, either because they will then have a little less work to do or because they will be haunted by certain ideas, will want to make themselves heard, will want to make their ideas heard. They will no longer act as intellectuals, since they will at the same time be working men. They will perform the work that society demands of them, which they demand of themselves, but simply, it's in them that what is now called "the intellectual" will exist. They will create books, they will reflect upon things. And when I say "they", I mean anyone who wishes to do so. I think this is the way in which society must, after the Revolution, re-structure the problem of thought and of thinkers. One can not allow just a few men to be specialists in ideas, while the others would only have ideas derived from the former and would be virtually meaningless. It's essential, on the contrary, that all men, no matter who they are, or whence they come, be guided to think fully: to be fully aware of what they are thinking and to express it.

PV: That seems very much like the Chinese concept of the "unity of work and ideology" – that the working man takes his part in forming ideology, takes part in decision making. Is this what you are saying?

JPS: It's partly what I'm saying. Only, I think that the Chinese system sets things out to simplistically. It's still too early to describe adequately what will be happening. At present, there are still intellectuals in China – it cannot be otherwise. Perhaps later, much later, there will no longer be any intellectuals there at all. But we have not got to that stage yet. We can propose that situation as an ideal, but we can't as yet see the disappearance of the intellectual as a real fact. There are still intellectuals everywhere. Maybe in a hundred years time, there will no longer be any, but at this stage, they still have to disperse, become integrated with the working class, to instil in its members the desire for knowledge, for reflection. And what must be done is to transform this small number into a multitude.

PV: You are looking ahead to the time when the intellectual will vanish, when the intellectual will become part of the working class. But we are not in that situation at the moment; we are in a situation where we have intellectuals and they are of necessity bourgeois intellectuals. What does the intellectual like you do, the intellectual who understands his historical role, who accepts his bourgeois background but wants to be involved in the working class struggle? Your critics have said of you that when you have tried to put yourself at the disposal of the working class, as when you involved yourself in the Renault disputes in 1968, the working class were hesitant to give you their trust; they saw you as a bourgeois intellectual; they were a bit suspicious of you. How does one overcome that difficulty?

JPS: You must realize that quoting me as an example proves nothing at all. I'm too old to try to be a new intellectual. I'm an old-style intellectual, in the style of the last fifty years, who today has arrived at ideas which are somewhat different. But this hasn't affected my way of life very much. I have tried, of course, to speak with workers, to speak to workers. To speak with workers is easy. But to speak to workers, that's to say to a crowd of workers facing me, is more difficult, because as a crowd they are wary of the intellectual who speaks to them. When they stand as individuals, on the other

hand, they trust you. That is because workers have an image of the intellectual which is linked in their minds with that of the schoolmaster.

As for me, I have spoken with workers quite often. With some of my friends I've addressed workers; I've made friends with workers, Maoists, for instance, and I have been able to relate to workers. But there is no doubt that my status as an intellectual, formed by bourgeois schools and having practised a bourgeois profession, that of teacher, didn't predispose them in my favour. They often accepted what I told them as being right, but who was I?

It was difficult for them to understand it. I wasn't a worker like them. On the contrary, I'd been formed by bourgeois teaching institutions and therefore, theoretically, I was on the side of the bourgeoisie. Now it is a fact, not that I'm on the side of the bourgeoisie, but that I have been formed in bourgeois schools. What I have learnt comes from the bourgeoisie. The history of philosophy, for example, is a bourgeois discipline. Therefore it is natural that the proletariat should find it hard to see what it can expect from me. However, since 1968, things have been different. There's now a "New Left", small in number, still very divided, made up originally of students, but it has been able to find a common meeting ground among the workers. This New Left is attempting to find other principles to offer to the workers, to establish relationships between workers and intellectuals, quite different from those set out long ago by the communist Party.

The Communist Party separated intellectuals from the workers, bringing them together only on special occasions, meetings, etcetera, and breaking any relationship between them the rest of the time. This is not at all what the New Left is after. On the contrary, it seeks to establish real and constant relationships between the workers and the intellectuals like the ones that already existed in the nineteenth century when students very often had friends among the workers and a number of the great intellectuals had a real contact with the workers. But this contact slowly disappeared in France with the rise of the Third Republic, and the existence of the Communist Party did not help to restore it.

At present the intellectuals and the workers are apart. They do not speak the same language. But it is quite likely that in the initial phase which will precede the suppression of the intellectual as intellectual, there will be a reconciliation between the intellectuals and the workers. We have many proofs of this. During the industrial troubles in 1969 and 1970, many intellectuals who are friends of mine, went out to the provinces to speak to the striking workers and the workers began to understand them. They understood that they were people just like themselves: people who were trying to communicate with them. At Dunkirk, for example, this happened, and it happened elsewhere, thanks to these New Left groups.

At the moment there seems to be a slowing down in this but I can't tell you whether it is a kind of exhaustion or on the contrary a gathering of momentum.

PV: Your life has been very closely identified with the life of Simone de Beauvoir. You have lived together, and worked together. What influence has her view of the world, and her view of feminism, had on you? What effect has she had on your development?

JPS: I've always been in favour of feminism, but it was Simone de Beauvoir who clarified for both of us, and for herself particularly, the destiny of woman in the world in her book *The Second Sex*, which she wrote by my side while she was not yet the feminist that she afterwards became. I followed the development of her ideas and inevitably I was influenced by them and I accepted her conclusions fully. In this sense, if you like, I have I believe almost shed what is known as "male chauvinism". However, there are many women who are friends of Simone de Beauvoir and feminists who claim that I am still a male chauvinist. Well, I don't know. Maybe I am. But in any case on a number of points I am in complete agreement with the feminists. That is to say, I believe that modern-day societies are structured on the assumption that the "second sex" is inferior. and it is evident that the society that must come into being in the future will have to show the same regard for men and for women, to look upon them as complete equals, and that any attempt to place one sex under the domination of the other is an attempt which perhaps could last for centuries but is quite unjust.

Therefore, although not having enlisted in the feminist movement, for there are very few men who are tolerated by women feminists – and being simply tolerated I suppose because of my relationship with Simone de Beauvoir who is considered to be a feminist – I regard myself as having always been a feminist, in any case particularly so since reading *The Second Sex*.

PV: Simone de Beauvoir, like you, had a tradition in Existentialism. For you it got expression through Marxism, and for her it got expression through feminism. What was it in Marxism and in feminism that led on from Existentialism?

JPS: I think she would tell you that she is still an Existentialist, just as I have told you that I am still an Existentialist. Therefore the feminist element in her is something that can very well proceed, and it does., from Existentialism. Existentialism, defining man as a being conscious of freedom can make no difference between one man and another. It examines them on the same level. Simone de Beauvoir's feminism is linked in a certain way to Marxism, but one could not claim that it is Marxist, just as I did not make my Critique of Dialectical Reason a Marxist book. Therefore, what we have here is a meeting of Existentialism with doctrines of theories already in existence in the world of today, in society, on the level, as I explained, where we study social relationships. But Existentialism has an independent existence: that we must always insist upon. I did not become a Marxist – I rather welcomed into Existentialism the elements which were appropriate to it and which derived from Marxism.

PV: Tell me something about the things you are working on at the moment. I believe that you and John Gerassi are working on a biography of your life and that you are also involved in a series of "conversations" with Simone de Beauvoir.

JPS: Gerassi is preparing a book on my life, but from a rather special angle. It's my political life, my life as a political man and as a political philosopher; that is to say, he's trying to put into a systematic form my thoughts on various aspects of politics. Gerassi's book is not finished yet. He doesn't know at this stage what form he will give it. However, I consider it important enough to have had talks with him twice a week for a whole year for this project.

As for Simone de Beauvoir, she is also working on some dialogues with me which we are recording, but these have a rather different purpose. I can no longer read nor write, for my eyes are tired. Therefore I can't write books at the moment. Nevertheless, I can carry on discussions such as I'm doing here with a person who asks me questions and of whom I can ask questions in turn. So we are trying to write my biography. I'd like it to be our biography, that of our relationship as well as an account of all that has happened from 1905, the year I was born, until 1975.

PV: And your life together?

JPS: Yes. We would discuss our life together. I would like us to talk about it, She doesn't particularly like the idea because she has already covered all this in her autobiography, but I do because I think that the elements of our relationship have not been shown. She has done it, but we haven't done it together.

PV: You have told us a little bit about the literary things you're doing at the moment, the biography with Gerassi and your conversations with Simone de Beauvoir, but you are also involved in political activities. Tell us something about those.

JPS: Well, I'm leaving next Wednesday for Stuttgart jail to see the prisoner Baader, who is in this big jail with a number of his friends. Others are in Berlin, others elsewhere, and as you know one of them died last week. He¹ died as a result of a hunger strike. They have all been on hunger strikes for the last two and a half months. It's very dangerous. It's quite likely to kill them. At the moment, Ulrike Meinhof, one of the most important women members of this group, one of the most intelligent, besides being on a hunger strike, has begun to refuse to drink. She no longer drinks water. she doesn't eat. She is then like the others, in a very serious state, and she would like to see the conditions of their imprisonment changed. They are completely isolated, in rigorous solitary confinement, subjected to certain external stimuli. At night, for example, lights are switched on in their cells; they are subjected to various noises; they are awoken; they are not allowed to sleep. In short, they are in a state which, while it doesn't lead directly to physiological troubles, could drive them to madness.

These jails have been organized along such lines for several years now for political prisoners. It is what one can truly describe as a form of torture. When it was revealed under what condition the Soviets kept condemned men, no more serious allegation could be levelled against them with regard to the prisons. There were sometimes harsher and more violent forms of interrogation, but in the jail, being awakened at night, having lights switched on in your face, being exposed to certain smells,

¹ Holger Meins (A.B.)

made to drink certain drinks, these are all the things one finds in German jails, which in the final analysis continue a tradition which dates back to Nazism and to pre-Nazi days. So I am going there to Stuttgart to try and understand a little of what a German prison is and also to display a kind of solidarity for those who have been called the “Baader Gang” – that is to say people with whose methods I don’t agree, but who have certainly acted in accordance with Leftist principles and ideas. Therefore, though I might consider that they are mistakes, as a man of the Left I cannot refuse them my sympathy.

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PV: How do yourself want to be remembered? What would you like your epitaph to be? How do you want people to remember the name Jean-Paul Sartre?

JPS: I would like them to remember *Nausea*, one or two plays, *No Exit* and *The Devil and the Good Lord*, and then my two philosophical works, more particularly the second one, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Then my essay on Genet, *Saint Gene*, which I wrote quite a long time ago. If there are remembered, that would be quite an achievement, and I don’t ask for more.

As a man, if a certain Jean-Paul Sartre is remembered, I would like people to remember the milieu of historical situation in which I lived, the general characteristics of this milieu, how I lived in it, in terms of all aspirations which I tried to gather up within myself. This is how I would like to be remembered.