

# BOOKS

## SARTRE: HIS PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

by Alfred Stern\*

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I MUST ADMIT that I began Dr. Stern's book with considerable prejudice. Like most Americans, I knew existentialism only at second hand from reviewers and references in serious magazines, plus having read one of Sartre's novels and having seen the film based on his novel *The Chips Are Down*.

These inadequate sources had given me a distorted picture of the whole existentialist movement, again probably the view of most Americans. Neither the pessimism nor the obscenity which characterizes much existentialist thought had bothered me particularly, and I had even become accustomed to regarding nausea as something of profound meta-

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physical significance. What I had felt, however, was that the movement was basically a war-born phenomenon, and that like all such phenomena had to be judged strictly within that narrow historical setting.

This volume of Dr. Stern's has not only convinced me of my error, but has made me recant to the degree that I now regard existentialism as a really significant development in European thought.

While Stern points out how much of Sartre's thought is derivative, and quite properly chides him for not acknowledging the sources he uses so heavily, the fact remains that this remarkable Frenchman, while still in his thirties, was able to give voice to the feelings and ideas of innumerable younger Europeans. And it seems to me probable that his writings will continue to reflect these feelings and ideas for more than the one generation which produced them.

Would Sartre's philosophy have been produced if there had been no World War II? Since the general outline of his thought was in existence before the war, the answer seems to be yes. Would he have found the audience he did had there

been no war, or at least if France had not known German occupation for several years? Possibly not; at least it seems unlikely he would have found his audience so quickly. Are the pornography and the emphasis upon physiological function an essential part of his philosophy? Apparently the pornography is not really essential, but certainly bodily functions and states (e.g., nausea) are basic to his thinking. And certainly no contemporary thinker has revealed so clearly both the basis and the metaphysical-ethical implications of *anxiety*.

It is of course now quite fashionable to acknowledge that this is an age of anxiety, that anxiety is the most pervasive psychological problem of our day, and so on. But Sartre, it seems to me, reveals unique insight in his treatment of anxiety as central in modern living, particularly among free men. He shows that anxiety is the inevitable price which we pay for freedom and intellectual emancipation, and, unlike most writers (particularly psychologists) who discuss anxiety, he sees no cure for it.

In this sense (as in several others) his philosophy is pessimistic, and as Dr. Stern points out, his psychoanalysis is anything but a therapy. At most the existential psychoanalyst would merely try to get his patients to accept anxiety as normal, and perhaps try to aid them in learning to live with this state.

But exactly what is existentialism—what are its fundamental ideas and frames of references? Well, that is Dr. Stern's story—and in my opinion he tells it admirably. Whether Sartre will have any new converts as a result of this book is doubtful; certainly Dr. Stern is not out to make converts, and he points out the inadequacies, even the failures, of Sartre's thought very plainly.

But reading this volume will increase almost anyone's understanding of an important part of European thought. One can only wish it were required reading for those persons in our government who are in charge of our efforts to keep France within the European defense community and to persuade the younger generation of Frenchmen that their destiny lies outside the Soviet orbit. Sartre is not a Communist, and not even a fellow traveler, as Dr. Stern shows. But a perusal of this book makes some American efforts to keep France securely on our side seem as naive as those traditional stories about the birds and the bees.

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