Abstract: In his 1945 lecture, Jean-Paul Sartre defends Existentialism against the ‘charges’ of being a philosophy of pessimism, despair, nihilism, anarchy, vulgarity, baseness, ugliness and last but definitely not least the ‘charge’ of amorality since Sartre, restating the position of Dostoyevsky affirms the humanistic starting-point of Existentialism: ‘Si Dieu n’existe pas tout est permis.’ The alleged Sartrean ‘starting point’ of the Cartesian cogito, the maîtrise of the ‘je pense’ as the isolated presence of a pure subjectivity was considered by both Communist and Christian critic alike to preclude any form of concrete action in, or social solidarity with, the outside world.
1945 – 2005, Existentialism and Humanism sixty years on
Debbie Evans

In his seminal work, *Le Siècle de Sartre* published in 2000, Bernard-Henri Lévy states that Sartre ‘is not a humanist’. In this opinion he was joined by the Communist Jean Kanapa, one of Sartre’s former pupils who wrote a work in 1947 entitled ‘*Existentialism is not a Humanism*’. So the question I first want to address is, ‘Is Sartrean philosophy a humanist philosophy’, and specifically should we understand by Sartre’s use of the term ‘humanist’? Does it have any contemporary relevance for us today?


Sartre also appears to parody a certain type of humanist which takes man as an end in himself, through the character of the ‘self-taught man’; the Autodidacte. Roquentin, who wants to avoid being labelled at all costs, finally declares in these well-known words : ‘Je ne veux pas qu’on m’intègre...je ne commettrai pas la sottise de me dire “anti-humaniste”. Je ne suis pas humaniste, voilà tout.’ (N.167)

However, Sartre is more than Roquentin. The Second World War proved a decisive catalyst in the development of the thinking of the young philosopher. Sartre’s experiences of capture, internment, and finally liberation left an indelible mark on his evolution of his thought, marking a rite of passage from youth to maturity.

In a letter to Simone de Beauvoir dated 4 September, 1939 Sartre writes, ‘on a appris la déclaration de guerre et c’était comme si un mur se dressait derrière moi pour me couper de ma vie passée.’  

In October 1945 he gave a lecture at the Club Maintenant in Paris entitled, ‘*L’Existentialisme est un humanisme*’. This relatively short *exposé* of existential thought was destined to change forever the course of twentieth century philosophy. The lecture had two main aims. One was to popularise certain aspects of existential philosophy contained his recently published *magnum opus* : *L’Être et le Néant* (1943). However, the lecture was simultaneously an attempt by Sartre to stave off numerous potentially damaging allegations

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specifically made against existentialism as a humanist philosophy. To be an existentialist, Sartre claimed, had become such an abused term it had come to signify nothing at all.

Sartrean existentialism was not short of its critics. Pope Pius XII condemned its ‘terrifying nihilism’ and censored Sartre’s work by placing it on the Index List in 1948, where he joined such illustrious names as Nietzsche, Laurence Sterne, Voltaire, Daniel Defoe and Honoré de Balzac. But existentialism was no less pilloried by secular critics who charged it with being a philosophy of isolation, pessimism, despair, anarchy, vulgarity, baseness, and even ugliness. Last but definitely not least, existentialism was charged with amorality, since Sartre restating the position of Dostoyevsky affirmed the humanistic starting-point of existentialism: ‘Si Dieu n’existait pas, tout serait permis’.3 If there are no universal values, no God whose commandments we must obey, we can all behave exactly as we like. We cannot judge the actions of others since all actions are equally valid. In this scenario, how can Sartre, seizing on the opportunity to popularise existential philosophy and to sketch some of its ethical implications, avoid the twin pitfalls of anarchy and social amorality, implied in Dostoyevsky’s statement?

A further ‘problem area’ of Sartre’s thought in both L’Être et le Néant and L’Existentialisme est un humanisme concerns Sartre’s alleged starting-point of the Cartesian cogito. The maîtrise of the ‘je pense’ as the isolated presence of a pure subjectivity was considered by both Communist and Christian critic alike to preclude any form of concrete action in, or social solidarity with the outside world. The existentialist was considered to live in a Kierkegaardian world of ‘inwardness of thought’. To certain Communist critics singled out for particular attention by Sartre, existentialism appeared nothing more than an abstract Bourgeois ideology.

How could such a misunderstanding have arisen? Sartre’s reply to the various charges of anarchy, amorality, pessimistic nihilism and despair is definitive. He does not set out to prove the inexistence of God, but merely affirms even if God did exist nothing would change. We are délaissés, abandoned, ‘thrown’ into the world. But far from engendering a humanistic philosophy of despair and pessimism, this very abandonment is the source of metaphysical optimism since human beings now become the source of all values and meanings. To illustrate this point, Sartre cites the example of the student who asks his advice as to whether he should stay with his dependent mother or abandon his mother and go off to war. Of course, Sartre cannot give a ready-made answer to this moral problem; there is no a priori moral stance which can justify either course of action: « Vous êtes libre, choisissez ». In this sense, existential philosophy is a direct correlate of a metaphysical humanism which seeks in the human subject an absolute foundation for all knowledge and values. But in this knowledge and in these values lie anguish. ‘Nous sommes seuls, sans excuses’ says Sartre. We have no justification for our existence. None

whatever. As Sartre famously put it, we are ‘condemned’ to be free. More than this, however, we are precisely the sum total of our freely-chosen actions in any given situation. A coward “is” not, if you like (we can even place that “is” in Husserlian parentheses, by literally “suspending” its meaning) because each coward is nothing more than a coward by virtue of their own particular actions, each is responsible for his or her own cowardice. In other words, we ‘create’ ourselves. There is no a priori determinism, no in-built ‘character’; we are never the hapless victims of our own passions. In a word we are not only free, we incarnate freedom itself, we ’are’ freedom, and it is this “non-essentialist” concept of freedom which Lévy prizes above all as Sartre’s legacy to the twentieth century. However, perhaps a non-essentialist view of human being is not totally incompatible with a certain humanist tradition which places “Man” as a generic category at the centre of philosophic enquiry. As Sartre famously remarked: ‘Nous sommes sur un plan où il y a seulement des hommes.’ (EH.36)

What would Nietzsche have made Sartre’s conception of freedom? In Beyond Good and Evil he states: ‘For the desire for ‘freedom of will’ in that metaphysical superlative sense which is unfortunately still dominant in the minds of the half-educated, the desire to bear the whole and sole responsibility for one’s actions, and to absolve God, world, ancestors, chance, society from responsibility for them, is nothing less than the desire to be that causa sui and with more than Münchausen temerity, to pull oneself out of the swamp of nothingness by one’s own hair.’ 4

However, the charge of the ‘isolated subjectivity’ of the existentialist was to prove difficult to refute. The alleged Cartesian origin of Sartre’s thought, beginning with the pure subjectivity of the ‘je pense’, has provoked over the course of the last half century a vast amount of critical attention; particularly from Anglo-Saxon commentators. In this context I think it would be helpful to maintain the distinction which Sartre maintains throughout his lecture, between on the one hand Cartesian philosophy, and on the other the philosophy of Descartes. Cartesian philosophy is concerned with the rationalistic analysis of the structures of individual human thought or consciousness, as is L’Etre et le Néant. As Sartre remarks in this work: ‘Le seul départ possible était le cogito cartésien.’ 5 He takes up this theme again, this time with a humanist emphasis in L’Existentialisme est un humanisme:

‘Notre point de départ est en effet le subjectivité de l’individu... parce que nous voulons une doctrine basée sur la vérité... Il ne peut pas y avoir de vérité autre, au départ que celle-ci: je pense donc je suis, c’est là la vérité absolue de la conscience s’atteignant elle-même... cette théorie est la seule à donner une dignité à l’homme, c’est la seule qui n’en fasse pas un objet.’ (EH.63-5)

However, Sartre is never content to merely follow. As Nik Farrell-Fox states in his excellent recent book entitled, *The New Sartre,* 'Sartre’s attachment to the Cartesian *cogito* in his early work is never a complete or exhaustive one.' The later Sartre tries to distance himself from an overtly Cartesian emphasis on his early work, and his comments made during the 1960’s seemed to resonate with the times when he said it was never his intention to 'reiterate Cartesianism'. But what exactly do we understand by this term Cartesianism, specifically from a humanistic perspective? Sartre avoids the substantiality of the subject by creating the pre-reflective *cogito* as the foundation to its Cartesian counterpart. As he puts it very succinctly in *L’Etre et le Néant,* ‘Il y a un *cogito* préréflexif qui est la condition du *cogito* cartésien.’ (EN.19) First described in *La Transcendance de l’ego,* the pre-reflective *cogito* challenges some fundamental assumption made by Descartes. For Sartre, Descartes assumes the subjective, isolated presence of the *cogito* which exists at a specific moment in time: the instant or now. And it is this aspect of the Cartesian *cogito* which Sartre is of course, is anxious to challenge. He does this in two main ways. Firstly, in order to get outside this problem of instantaneity, the *pour-soi* is constructed as a non-material, temporal being. It is itself this process of temporalisation by which the past and present ‘ecstases’ are continually transcended towards an ‘open’ future. Secondly, to refute the charge of subjectivity, while at the same time distancing himself somewhat from his erstwhile mentor, Husserl, the “ego” is made transcendent to consciousness. It does not ‘inhabit’ the *pour-soi*. Then, in a further radical move for phenomenology, the Sartrean *cogito* is called into question by the presence of the Other. The existence of the Other is as certain as our own existence, and a condition of it. In this way, the charge of ‘subjective isolation’ implied in the Cartesian *cogito* is counterbalanced by Sartre with Hegel’s intuition of the Other, in other words, counterbalanced by the ontological significance of alterity. Only the Other has a power to confer value to my own subjectivity. I may consider myself to be good, bad, cunning, out-going, generous etc. but I cannot confer these values on myself outside of the presence of others.

Nevertheless, Simone de Beauvoir was clearly unhappy with critics’ understanding of *L’Etre et le Néant,* particularly in connection with Sartre’s use of the term ‘useless passion’ to describe the *pour-soi:* the knowingly futile attempt of self-consciousness to become its own foundation. One of the principle aims of her 1947 essay *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté* is precisely to re-examine the term ‘utile’ opening it up to the fundamental ambiguity of existential meaning: ‘au niveau de description où se situe *L’Etre et le Néant,* le mot utile n’a pas encore reçu du sens….Dans le délaissement original où l’homme surgit, rien n’est utile, rien n’est inutile.’ In a parallel trajectory to Sartre’s lecture then, the aim of Beauvoir’s essay was to give a lively defence of certain

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7 Simone de Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté,* Paris: Gallimard, 1947 p.17
allegations made against existentialism; in particular that it was a philosophy of the absurd, that it gave rise to a ‘sterile anguish’ and an ‘empty subjectivity’. These charges are in Beauvoir’s typically brusque manner, publicly rebuffed.

Although Sartre’s relationship to the Cartesian tradition has long been the object of much critical scrutiny, it is Sartre’s relationship with Heidegger which over the course of the last sixty years or so has arguably caused the most controversy. Sartre places himself squarely in the tradition of atheistic existential thinkers, and further implicates Heidegger in his ‘humanist’ project. Lévy rightly asserts that: ‘Sartre n’est pas le Heidegger français’. However, Sartre’s relationship to Heidegger is fundamentally problematic. It begins with his implicit acceptance of Henri Corbin’s translation of Dasein (meaning literally ‘Being-there’) as ‘human reality’. Jacques Derrida famously denounced ‘human reality’ as a ‘monstrous translation’ of Dasein in his essay ‘Les fins de l’homme’, a symptom of a false anthropological reading of Heidegger’s Being and Time. Heidegger will of course, refute any suggestion that the ontology contained in Being and Time is humanistic. His well-known ‘Letter on Humanism’ published in 1947 was his ‘reply’ to Sartre’s L’Existentialisme est un humanisme. ‘isms’ writes Heidegger, ‘have for a long time now been suspect.’ Non-metaphysical, non subject-based, post-structuralist theorists throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s, Barthes, Foucault and Derrida amongst others have taken this aspect of Heidegger’s thought through to its logical conclusion: literally the ‘de-struction’ of the subject or what we could call in Derridean terms the ‘dis-placement’ of the subject.

Heidegger in particular criticises what he perceives to be Sartre’s philosophical ‘starting-point’, Cartesian subjectivity for failing to adequately address the question of Being. He writes, ‘Da-sein ist je meines’: Dasein is mine. However, this is merely one way of being as ‘Man’ in the world, one part of Dasein, because Heidegger also states,‘Welt ist auch Dasein’: the world is also Dasein and has its own particular way of being. Heidegger stresses the co-being of ‘existence’ and the ‘essence’ of man. Dasein contains within itself both existence and essence; ‘Da’ meaning ‘there’ or existence and ‘sein’ meaning to be or essence. Existence is even re-written ‘Ek-sistence’ as the ‘standing-out’ of Man into the truth of Being. Furthermore, Heidegger continually talks about bringing man back ‘to his essence’. Corbin’s translation of Heidegger which stated that for ‘human reality’ ‘existence precedes essence’ is in this sense doubly flawed. No-where does Heidegger use this formula. Yet Sartre pays him tribute for this existential ‘insight’ in both L’Etre et le Néant and L’Existentialisme est un humanisme to the degree that the expression becomes the absolute foundation of Sartre’s existential humanism. For Heidegger, on the contrary, the ‘humanity’ of man lies in his ‘essence’. In a sense the mistake is colossal. Yet, arguably, Sartre’s

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misinterpretation gives rise from a humanistic perspective to the most fecund strand of existential thought. I make this claim because I think the slogan ‘existence precedes essence’ provides Sartre with possibly the only basis for an existential ethics based on freedom of choice and responsibility.

The distinction between ‘existence’ and ‘essence’ and their mutual separation has appeared in works of metaphysical enquiry from ancient times to the modern day. Heidegger himself is the first to admit that ‘Sartre’s key proposition about the priority of existentia over essentia, does, however, justify using the name « existentialism » as an appropriate title for a philosophy of this sort (meaning here a sort of philosophical metaphysics), although (he continues) « it has nothing at all in common with the statement from Being and Time. » (BW.232) However, for Sartre, the ‘humanism’ of existentialism comes from the fact that we have no given ‘essence’. We are consequently free to choose our actions in the context of a certain situation. Because unlike Heidegger who talks of human ‘destiny’, Sartre takes human freedom as an ontological absolute. Man is ‘not what he is’ but a pro-ject of being. Through our actions, we ‘make ourselves’ what we are. For Lévy this challenge to human ‘essence’ is what makes Sartre a philosopher of freedom rather than a humanist, in the sense that man is not taken as an end in himself.

However, as always when reading philosophy, Sartre reads Heidegger with the eye of a literary writer as much as with the eye of a philosopher. The neat formula ‘existence precedes essence’ immediately provides him with a basis for a phenomenological ethics. ‘Si en effet l’existence précède l’essence…l’homme est libre, l’homme est liberté.’ (EH.36-7) Sartre seizes on the opportunity to oppose a long line of literary and philosophical figures such Diderot, Voltaire and Kant who argue that ‘essence precedes existence’ due to the fact that we all possess a ‘universal’ human nature. Sartre inverses the term. I do think we need to remember here for a moment that this idea of ‘human nature’ does not just refer to a type of ‘cultural tombstone’. Today, for example, Noam Chomsky advocates that scientific knowledge, without reference to a type of ‘human nature’ would be impossible. However, for Sartre, the attraction of turning several hundred years of philosophical enquiry on its head must have been enormous. And then, what could be more readily comprehensible to the general public than to associate the notion of the ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ taken from Heidegger, with both ‘existence’ and ‘essence’. The ‘inauthentic’ on this reading would be associated with an ‘essentialist’ reading of human subjectivity, whilst the ‘authentic’ would be a correlate of that raw, nauseating experience of human existence, tinged with anguish, describing that fundamental existential state of ‘being-in-question’, found in La Nausée, Les Chemins de la Liberté and in certain sections of L’Être et le Néant. Authentic existence is based on freedom of choice, responsibility, the perpetual transcendence of consciousness in the project of being, the perpetual mise en question of our being. Inauthentic existence is based on a denial of choice, responsibility and human freedom. It
is rooted in stagnation and immanence and conveys all the characteristics of the *en-soi*. Like the *salauds* of *La Nausée*, the *mauvaise foi* of inauthentic existence means openly embracing the formula ‘essence precedes existence.’

For Sartre on the contrary, we are ‘not’ what we are; we ‘make ourselves’ to be. An understanding of the concept of the continual ‘becoming’ of consciousness, that is, the time of ‘authentic’ existence, is crucial to an understanding of Sartre’s humanistic project. This ‘becoming time’ of existence finds an echo in the work of three major philosophers: Kierkegaard, Bergson and Hegel, yet only one of the three, Hegel, is an acknowledged source in *L’Être et le Néant*. Although Sartre begins to incorporate certain aspects of Hegelian dialectical temporality into the structures of the *pour-soi*, a fuller exploration is found in the dialectic of *Les Chemins de la Liberté*, in the *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960) and in the posthumously published, *Cahiers pour une morale* (1983). However, for Sartre at this largely individualistic stage, as for Kierkegaard, ‘subjective thinking invests everything in the process of becoming.’

Bergson gives a similar view in *L’Evolution créatrice* (1907). In particular, Bergson’s insistence on the future as a possibility of being was to become a crucial concept in Sartre’s re-appropriation of Heidegger.

For Sartre, Man ‘is’ what he makes himself in the pro-jection of himself towards the sum of possibilities that he is. In this way he is no longer bounded by finitude and death. Heidegger, on the contrary, emphasises our ‘freedom-towards-death’. The ‘authentic’ future, given through ‘resolute anticipation’ is a ‘coming-towards’. That is, ‘Zu-kunft’ (the future) is interpreted as ‘zukommen auf’; a coming-towards or coming up to. This is an inverse relation to the temporalisation of the *pour-soi*. However, Heidegger also states that *Dasein* is always ‘ahead of itself’ (‘sich vorweg’) and Corbin with characteristic ‘artistic licence’ interestingly translates this aspect of *Dasein* as Man’s being an « ‘être des lointains »: a being who is distant, far-away or remote. Sartre uncritically takes on board this translation, perhaps again as it appeals to him by appearing to reinforce his idea of an ‘always open’ future. In *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* he goes one step further and refers to the ‘virgin’ future which awaits man and which he ‘makes’.

(EH.39) For Sartre it is the perpetual ‘becoming time’ of the present (as *néant*) which gives the future its possibility of being. Arguably, it is only an ‘always open’ future that can provide Sartre with an absolute basis for a philosophy of freedom, at the time so desperately needed by so many people under the German Occupation. Metaphysics and political history embrace one another. That is to say, a metaphysics at least in part shaped by political forces. If, for Sartre’s generation, the future is ‘une notion confuse’ that is because the war has taught them that the future is unpredictable, it carries within it a perpetual ‘lack’ of being; what Valéry termed ‘le creux toujours futur’.

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Sartre’s approach to the question of human freedom in his lecture is later mirrored in his biographical writing, and I would now like briefly to compare the ‘authentic’ future with Sartre’s brilliant depiction of its antithesis in his study of Baudelaire (1947). The poète maudit by an ‘original choice’ decides in a particular situation what he will be and who he is. «Sentiment de solitude, dès mon enfance. Malgré la famille – et au milieu des camarades, surtout – sentiment de destinée éternellement solitaire.» 

Although these lines may strike us with their quasi-autobiographical tone for Sartre, nevertheless, Baudelaire’s action is of course for Sartre, a supreme act of bad faith because the poet has decided on his own destiny: not only to live in isolation from others, but also to see himself as an ‘other’; to look on himself through the eyes of a stranger. In other words, Baudelaire’s future has become cut off from the project of human transcendence, just as later the scenario is repeated in Sartre’s study of Jean Genet, the man whose ‘original choice’ is to label himself a ‘thief’. However, Sartre emphasises that the original choice of one man never affects just one individual. The ‘morality’ of existentialism is that in choosing for himself, man chooses for the whole human race. In this context, Beauvoir cites Dostoyevsky as the preface to her second novel, Le Sang des autres, ‘Chacun est responsable de tout devant tous.’

Arguably, this epigraph could equally well apply to recent events in Iraq where clearly the ‘original choices’ and actions of individual men have had world-wide media coverage and global repercussions. In choosing to go to war, for whatever the reason, Bush and Blair in their ‘individual choices’ have chosen ‘for the whole of humanity’ and a new generation is discovering the meaning of Sartre’s humanistic emphasis on the interrelated existential terms of ‘anguish’, ‘despair’ and ‘abandonment’. These terms underlie the relevance today of existential humanism because we will always live in a ‘human’ universe. We could modify Sartre’s comments in L’Existentialisme est un humanisme to read: ‘nous sommes toujours sur un plan où il y a seulement des hommes.’

What of philosophy today? Edward Said wrote shortly before his death in September 2003 that there is ‘always something radically incomplete, insufficient, provisional, disputable and arguable about humanistic knowledge that gives the whole idea of humanism a tragic flaw that is constitutive to it and cannot be removed.’ With Said, it could be argued that the word ‘humanist’ has, over the course of the last half-century become so over-used it has literally become ab-used. The metaphysical horizon of ‘Humanism’ indicates the semantic chain: ‘humanity’, the ‘humane’, the human, the being and ‘name’ of ‘Man’ (homme, homo), ‘Man’ as the truth of being, ‘Man’ as disclosing the truth of being. Although for Sartre the subject is continually called into question,

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11 Jean-Paul Sartre, Baudelaire, Paris: Gallimard 1947 p.19
perpetually deferred and fissured, the philosopher’s interest, the writer’s interest, is still this incomplete but totally human subject who, as a presence in the world, bears witness to the world. Even in Questions de Méthode when Sartre affirms, ‘Je n’aime pas parler de l’existentialisme’, which he describes in quite scathing terms as ‘cette protestation idéaliste contre l’idéalisme’, his overriding concern is still to examine the nature of existence in a human universe. Rejecting ‘un humanisme idéaliste’, what attracts Sartre to Marxism is precisely an examination of ‘la réalité du marxisme, la lourde présence, à mon horizon, des masses ouvrières, corps énorme et sombre qui vivait le marxisme.’ (CRD I. 28) Sartre never lost sight of the ‘human’ in humanism.

What of politics, today? The future as a ‘possibility’ of being still holds a profound moral and ethical value as a source of human freedom. The terrorist attacks of the new millenium, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq mean that we have all recently felt the pressure of history just as surely as did Sartre when he wrote L’Être et le Néant or later when he wrote about the Soviet labour camps, the Hungarian invasion or the Algerian war. ‘Nous sommes seuls, sans excuses.’ Ourselves and our leaders are ‘condemned to be free’, alone, unjustified, we are never free not to choose – to choose not to act may in a certain situation even carry greater weight than the choice to act. Both Bush and Blair have focused on the need to ‘liberate’ both Iraq and Afghanistan. Both need to remember the history lesson that Sartre has taught us, that ‘liberty’ is a process and not a commodity.

« The freedom genie is out of the bottle in the Middle East » informs a recent US headline. Certainly, we are living in historic times: the prospect of women being given the vote in Saudi Arabia, the prospect of Syria’s withdrawal from a part of Lebanon, the prospect of free elections in Egypt and perhaps most surprisingly we have all witnessed the recent large turnout in the Iraqi elections. Each of those Iraqi voters have been faced with perhaps the ultimate existential ‘situation-limite’. Their ‘original choice’ to vote has inevitably been accompanied by fear and anguish in the ever-present threat of death. From an existential perspective, hope for their future, which is also hope for our future lies in a commitment to furthering the cause of human freedom – a freedom expressed not just through the ballot box, but in re-affirming each and every individual’s right to freedom of speech and social justice. Will the Iraqi voters of today experience history as alienation or the affirmation of individual choice? In exercising our freedom of choice, we need to remember with Sartre that there is no freedom without responsibility and that our freedom engages the whole of humanity in the future course of world politics.

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