

Reading Sartre

In this volume, Joseph S. Catalano offers an in-depth exploration of Jean-Paul Sartre's four major philosophical writings: *Being and Nothingness*, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and *The Family Idiot*. These works have been immensely influential, but they are long and difficult and thus challenging for both students and scholars. Catalano here demonstrates the interrelation of these four works, their internal logic, and how they provide insights into important but overlooked aspects of Sartre's thought, such as the body, childhood, and evil. The book begins with Sartre's final work, *The Family Idiot*, and systematically works backward to *Being and Nothingness*. Catalano then repeats the study by advancing chronologically, beginning with *Being and Nothingness* and ending with *The Family Idiot* and an afterword on Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Readers will appreciate Catalano's subtle readings as well as the new insights that he brings to Sartre's oeuvre.

Joseph S. Catalano is Professor Emeritus at Kean University of New Jersey and a former Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at the New School University for Social Research. He is the author of *A Commentary of Jean-Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness"*; *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's "Critique of Dialectical Reason"*; *Good Faith and Other Essays: Perspectives on a Sartrean Ethics*; and *Thinking Matter: Consciousness from Aristotle to Putnam and Sartre*.

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JOSEPH S. CATALANO

Professor Emertius at Kean University, New Jersey



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For Marisa

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I have tried to do the following: To indicate the limit of psychoanalytical interpretation and Marxist explanation and to demonstrate that freedom alone can account for a person in his totality.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*

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Preface

About forty years ago, I was introduced to Jean-Paul Sartre's thought as a pure accident of a teaching career in philosophy. For reasons that are too complicated to mention here, the late Dean Ruben Abel of the New School for Social Research in Manhattan asked me to teach a series of courses in Existentialism. Neither my undergraduate nor graduate training in philosophy prepared me for the subject matter; but the challenge came at a time in my life when I was looking for a change. I found it. But I did not know at first that I would keep returning to the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, particularly to the four works I consider here, namely, *Being and Nothingness*, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, and *The Family Idiot*. I offer no excuse. These works continue to nourish my own thinking about the world.

One might nevertheless ask whether my personal interest in Sartre justifies another book about his thought. I could answer that these four works give the substance of Sartre's philosophy as it developed from his first essay on the imagination published in 1936 until the appearance of the last volume of *The Family Idiot* in 1972, and that I do not think many people have had either the leisure or the commitment to study these long and difficult books. Perhaps, then, it is sufficient to say that I simply wish to share the fruits of my labor.

Because I am mainly concerned with presenting my understanding of Sartre's thought, it is appropriate for me to admit that this text is not a critique in the usual sense of that word. I seek understanding rather than criticism. On the other hand, I would not have spent so much of my life reading and thinking about Sartre's thought if I did not think that it is, for the most part, true. This truth, however, is not something closed; it is itself an invitation. You may wish to read more deeply about Sartre yourself, and even in these brief reflections, you may discover that Sartre can help you, as he has helped me, understand more fully our place in this strange and wonderful world in which we live.

As my invitation to you, I think I should expand briefly about the quality of my own effort. I do not feel comfortable in thinking philosophy in any language other than English. Others are able to go from one language to another with fluency and precision, and clearly literary writers have this ability, Samuel Beckett for example. I, however, need to situate philosophy in my home language, English, and indeed, American English. One of the reasons is that when I was much younger I was rather fluent in the Latin of Thomas Aquinas. Now I wonder about it all; my competence seems to dilute itself when I attempt to rethink terms such as *per se* in English. That Latin, however, was well defined, and it made sense as long as one did not go outside the fixed framework. Sartre, on the other hand, uses the rich vocabulary of the entire French language into which he situates technical terms such as the “for-itself” and the “in-itself” borrowed from the German of Hegel. For the most part, however, Sartre uses commonsense words such as “consciousness” and “man,” and he then slowly gives these ordinary words new meanings. Sartre is helpful in the numerous examples he gives, and I try to follow him by giving examples of my own.

Granting that I rethink Sartre in English, one may be concerned whether this attempt alters his philosophic thought. That is difficult to say. Sartre himself held that prose writing is aimed at communication, and that, unlike poetry, it can be adequately translated. There are errors in translation, of course; some I have been able to spot, when comparing the English with the French. I must confess, however, that I have never found any fundamental enlightenment in this pursuit. Of course, we get closer to the actual text that Sartre wrote, but every thinker who writes a great deal nods as the pen moves on. But the real task is to make sense of the text, whether it is given to us in the original French or in English, and, in that respect, nothing helps except a dedication to grasp the underlying structure of his entire philosophy. This has always been my goal.

Nevertheless, the reader should be aware that I sometimes take a gamble with a text. I am not referring to the vast amount of material that I do not examine, but to my expositions themselves. Some of the text is very difficult, but I have never felt right about skipping these passages. When a particularly difficult section appears, and I am confused about its exact meaning, I will inform the reader. When I faced the task of writing about Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* – and thus producing a companion to my commentary on *Being and Nothingness* – the book was reviewed in *Les Temps Modernes* and praised for being an original study. Every writer likes to be regarded as original, but I was just trying to be clear.

In the first part of this text, I work backwards from the almost-three-thousand page study on Gustave Flaubert, *The Family Idiot*, to the earlier six-hundred-page work on ontology, *Being and Nothingness*. I should note that, in both parts, I make an exception to the chronological order, namely, Sartre’s study of Genet, which I keep close to the study of Flaubert, whereas

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his study of history, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, should come between these two works.

As Hazel Barnes aptly remarks, *The Family Idiot* is a “synthesis” of all of Sartre’s philosophy. Of course, this synthesis signifies also a development of Sartre’s thought over the years, and I will point this out as I proceed. My task in this first part is to sketch an overview, and thus I frequently move from the end of a work to the beginning.

In the second part, I retrace my steps in a more chronological order, moving from *Being and Nothingness* to *The Family Idiot*. Here I am more attentive to internal logic and the philosophic style that operate within each work. Sartre writes books and he expects his readers to read whole books, even if they are several hundred or a few thousand pages long. He loves to expand and he is not in any way a stingy writer. Still, matters will fall in place. You must be patient. You may have to wait twenty, thirty, or more pages before he reminds you of the context of his remarks, and, in the meantime, the discussion – which may not give Sartre’s own views on the matter – will continue without qualifications of the sort, “as we see from this perspective,” or “in this view,” or “according to so and so.”

Then too, Sartre calls a spade a spade. He writes that the just are in bad faith. We would like him to qualify by writing, “the seeming just” or “those who consider themselves just but who are not truly just.” But is the qualification needed? Those who are *indeed* just question their own justice, and those who are in good faith wonder about their own good faith. Philosophy engenders wonder and questioning, while our society aims to smother both in an anxious pursuit for security.

There is another potentially disturbing aspect to Sartre’s style – the constant use of man for humanity and the general use of the masculine. But then Sartre is a male and he frequently uses himself as an example. What is more important, Sartre is concerned with oppression on all levels. He is aware of the oppression of women and he refers to the work of his life-long companion, Simone de Beauvoir. He might have thought of substituting the pronoun “he” with “she” or with she/he. But the attempt to avoid the masculine would be distracting, when his aim is to reveal the distinctive oppression of the Indian untouchables, African American blacks, the poor, the hungry, the criminal class of the world, and the oppression of children by adults, perhaps the most singular type of oppression that Sartre examines after writing *Being and Nothingness*. I am aware that feminists would object that, in each group, women are more oppressed than men. Perhaps this is formally true. Still, there is a vast concrete difference between the oppression of a middle-class African American man of today when compared to a middle-class white woman, or, in general, of a starving man when compared to a woman of means, or of the man in prison when compared to any woman who is, at present, outside of prison.

Nevertheless, I grant that the constant use of male terminology is alienating, as is much of our vocabulary. Sartre explicitly notes that, since World War

II, we continue to use words that are too old for us. Sartre's ontology has its own alienating terms; for example, to refer to "being" is somewhat archaic, belonging more to an earlier thinking pattern. Still, if we are to communicate, we sometimes have to use alienating masculine terms as well as terms that seem to reach too far. On a more philosophic level, we can refer with Martin Heidegger to "Dasein," and with Karl Jaspers to "the encompassing which is us," instead of referring to man. In the issue of choice of vocabulary, I have always been sympathetic to Martin Buber, whose philosophic views are close to Jaspers', but who preferred to give ordinary words new meanings, referring simply to "I-Thou."

On the other hand, I also grant that the attempts to eliminate masculine terms from our discourse, as well as the effort to clarify thinking by inventing new terms, can be appropriate as a specific effort, one among many. Efforts are efforts; let us not demean them. They are all valuable if they help us think more clearly and more honestly about ourselves. It is in this spirit that I present this work.

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Works Frequently Cited

The nine chapters of this book as well as the Afterword all deal with specific books. Thus, when quotes are given that refer to these books, the citation will only give the page number and the volume number, where appropriate. The specific edition and complete titles will be given in the text and in footnotes. This is particularly important in the English editions of *Being and Nothingness*, because the hardback and paperback pagination do not agree. I have used a hardback edition, which to the best of my knowledge, seems to exist in only one edition, and I have made a special attempt to give the part, chapter, and section, for easy identification no matter what English edition the reader may be using. Because one of the purposes of my writing this book is to show the interrelation of Sartre’s principle philosophical works, I will frequently refer to all four works in a particular chapter; for example, I will refer to *Being and Nothingness* in a chapter on *The Family Idiot*. With the exception of *Being and Nothingness*, which I think is clear as BN, I have chosen citations as follows:

BN	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>
Genet	<i>Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr</i>
Critique	<i>Critique of Dialectical Reason</i> , 2 vols.
Method	<i>Search for a Method</i>
Family	<i>The Family Idiot</i> , 5 vols.
Notebooks	<i>Notebooks for an Ethics</i>

Other works, such as *Transcendence of the Ego*, will be cited including their full titles.

Main Secondary Sources: Full references given in notes

Aronson	<i>Sartre’s Second Critique</i>
Barnes	<i>Sartre & Flaubert</i>

xvi	<i>Works Frequently Cited</i>
Catalano, BN	<i>Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness</i>
Catalano, Critique	<i>Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason</i>
McBride	<i>Sartre's Political Theory</i>