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Jean Paul Sartre

RALPH B. GEHRING

I

IN Paris, patroness of arts and letters, of fashions, philosophies and pleasures, and in the very year of that city's liberation from the Nazi domination, two Frenchmen organized the *Club Maintenant*. It was not the usual sort of Paris club. Had it, *per impossibile*, applied for membership at that time in a club owners' association of Manila or Quezon City or Pasay, its application would almost certainly have been rejected. Yet its founders, Marc Beigbeder and J. Calmy, knew exactly what they were doing in Paris when they decided to offer its war-starved public a program of literary and intellectual excitement. They also knew what they were doing when in October of the same year they billed a lecture by Jean Paul Sartre.

M. Sartre proposed the question: "Is existentialism a humanism?" The lecture he delivered in reply gave the *Main-tenant* an international reputation, for it was the first popular exposé of Sartrean philosophy and it was taken on tour to other cities of France, to Germany, even across the Atlantic. The philosopher may even now be willing to bring it to Manila, supposing suitable remuneration. After all, Sartre could not be insensible to the "gigantic success" of one of his plays so far from France,¹ and he is an apostle of his opinions. It

¹ *Huis-Clos* ("No Exit") was presented by the U.P. Dramatic Club, 22 July 1956, and by the U.E. Dramatic Guild, 29 and 30 August 1957.

is doubtful however if he ever reproduced or could again produce the effect of his first appearance.

The *Maintenant* lecture opened with an expression of Sartre's intention of defending existentialism against a certain number of "reproaches." These reproaches had been addressed to it by communists and by Christians, and in the audience (described as an "immense concourse") there were representatives of both groups. That audience however was so closely packed together that "women and even men fainted rhythmically at the feet of the master."² Obviously conditions were not favorable to an after-lecture open forum, but M. Sartre's discourse was later "repeated in private to give the adversaries of his doctrine the possibility of expressing their objections." Later still, in February 1946, these objections and Sartre's replies were printed as an appendix to the text of the lecture itself, now revised, developed, and somewhat edulcorated. But the appendix contained only Communist objections. Either the Christian critics had not been invited to the repetition or their interventions were not considered worthy of printed notice. Or perhaps they had scorned to attend.

No longer problematic, the lecture's title now was *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Existentialism is a humanism). Its publication satisfied the long-felt wish for a vulgarization of Sartrean philosophy, and its sales must have been extremely gratifying to both publishers and author. It was not however a case of joy unalloyed. In spite of the popular welcome, many of M. Sartre's philosophical peers took a dim view of the latest existentialist phenomenon. The concluding remark of A. De Waelhens' review may serve as example: "The present work," he wrote, "will one day appear as an unfortunate accident in the career of its author."³

² Charles Moeller, *Littérature du XXe siècle et Christianisme* (Tournai and Paris: Casterman, 1957) II 38.

³ *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* XLIV (May 1946), 300.

Sartre himself came to regret the lecture's precipitous publication. Of course there had been extenuating circumstances. In the lecture he had

merely set himself the task of answering certain criticisms of a moral order. Hence his need to accentuate strongly an existentialism which he has not yet finished and for which he has so far produced only the essentialist preparation. And naturally, therefore, all who are going to reply on this work alone will be inclined to reproach him with a perfectly crude pseudo-morality. And such indeed is the opinion of Sartre who, in this respect, considers his own lecture as an error...⁴

Just why, even in reply to critics, the philosopher had to stress unfinished aspects of his philosophy, is still not entirely clear. Neither does it seem excusable when one finds, in the printed version, complaints against misconceptions of the Sartrean doctrine, and the author's explicit claim to be expounding his doctrine "on a strictly philosophical plane." In sum, the only error Sartre seems to have acknowledged in connection with his *Maintenant* lecture is what may be called a tactical error, i.e., over-emphasis on certain aspects of his moral philosophy. Certainly he acknowledged no error in that moral philosophy's "essentialist preparation."

Yet it was precisely against that essentialist preparation, as propounded in earlier works and entirely retained in the lecture, that Christian critics had raised their most decided objections. It was because of that preparation that Christian critics claimed and still claim that Sartrean morality, when and if given a definitive expression, will be an immorality. Nor do they admit themselves guilty of the least un-Christian charity in thus pre-judging the moral philosophy Sartre promised as early as 1943 (in *L'Être et le Néant*) but which has not been published. In his work before the lecture, as in those since, there is abundant evidence of the direction which that moral philosophy will take, if it ever does appear. Strongest indication

⁴ Francis Jeanson, *Le problème moral et la pensée de Sartre* (Paris: Editions du Myrte, 1947), p. 46. To this work Sartre contributed a prefatory letter. In it he says that Jeanson is the only critic, up to that date, to give an exposition of Sartrean philosophy in which Sartre could still recognize his own thought.

of all, from the Christian point of view, is Sartre's oft-repeated statement: there is no God.

II

God's non-existence is one of Sartre's fixed ideas. Its importance to him has been well brought out by his quasi-biographer, the Marc Beigbeder already mentioned. Atheism, says Beigbeder, is fundamental in Sartre. It exudes from all his pores. Moreover, he so often returns to it in the oral or written exposition of his ideas that it is no betrayal of them to make it the first point in their discussion. Sartre himself has often adopted such an order of presentation in popular lectures, though he has not yet developed this atheism systematically. To piece together its "complete and logical visage," says Beigbeder, one must page through all Sartre's literary and doctrinal works.⁵

Perhaps one must. And perhaps it is precisely because the present writer has not done so—there are many thousands of Sartrean pages, and many as nauseous as the title of their author's maiden novel (Mauriac is said to have called Sartreanisms an "excrementalism")—that the logic of that atheism has sometimes escaped him. But with Mr. Beigbeder's assertion of atheism's fundamental role in Sartrean thought, it seems impossible to disagree, and critics, particularly Catholic critics, have not done so. In general they have found atheism as fundamental to Sartre as did his biographer. Thus Frederick Copleston, writing after the *Maintenant* lecture, calls Sartre's atheism "an initial assumption, a *point de départ*," and Pedro Descoqs, writing before the lecture and therefore on the basis of earlier works, says: "From his starting point, Sartre presents himself as atheistic. . . [Atheism] is the fundamental postulate, as it will be the conclusion of the system."⁶

⁵ Marc Beigbeder, *L'Homme Sartre. Essai de dévoilement préexistential* (Paris: Bordas, 1947), p. 27.

⁶ Frederick C. Copleston, "Man Without God" *The Month* CLXXXIV (July-August 1947) 22; Pedro Descoqs, "L'Athéisme de J. P. Sartre," *Revue de Philosophie* (special number 1946) p. 43.

Now no philosophic system can postulate its own conclusion without sacrifice of that rigor of reasoning which Western philosophy in general professes and which Sartre in particular pretends to observe in his exposition of existentialism. The present article, however, while bringing out the reasons for Descoqs' assertion, is not primarily concerned to involve Sartre in a begging of the question, in a vicious circle. Rather, it intends to show the peculiar form that Sartre's atheism takes. The Sartrian orchestration of the atheistic theme is somewhat *sui generis*, and these orchestrations are evident enough in the *Maintenant* lecture, Sartre's one and only popular philosophic exposition of his existentialism. The lecture, accordingly, is an apt example of his views on the subject of God's existence, and this article will closely follow its order and its argument. Sartre's thought will not thereby be betrayed; if the lecture was an "error" in the exposition of his moral philosophy, it was not an error in the exposition of the "essentialist preparation" for that moral philosophy, and of this preparation atheism is part.

III

It must have taken Sartre little time; in October 1945, to list the Christian and the communist "reproaches." In nine scanty initial pages of the printed lecture he outlines them, defines existentialism and professes his atheism. Existentialism is a humanism, for it is "a doctrine which makes human life possible." Moreover it is "the least scandalous, the most austere" of doctrines, "strictly intended for technicians and philosophers." What complicates matters is that there are two species of existentialist, the Christian on the one hand and the atheist on the other, to which latter species belong "Heidegger, and the French existentialists also, and myself." The common ground of both groups, however, is "simply the fact that they think existence precedes essence, or, if you like, that one must start from subjectivity."⁷

⁷ *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (Paris: Les Editions Nagel, 1946), pp. 16-17.

Now if existentialism must start from "subjectivity" or a "precedence of existence over essence," it does not seem that Sartre's point of departure can be atheism. What, however, is this precedence of existence over essence? Sartre explains, but finds it advisable to begin his explanation from the opposite precedence, namely, of essence over existence, and from the notion of that very God who is denied by half the existentialists. (Their Christian colleagues, incidentally, have already received the first and last mention Sartre makes of them in his printed lecture.)

When we think of a creator God, says Sartre, most of the time this God is conceived by us after the fashion of a superior craftsman who knows exactly the sort of thing he wants to make, and whose knowledge completely determines its nature and its purpose—in other words, defines its essence, before it exists. Hence the individual man is conceived after the fashion of the artisan's product. He is supposed to realise a certain concept in the mind of the creator God. He is a particular example of a universal human nature, the same for the man of the woods and a man of the bourgeoisie. His essence precedes his historic existence. And this putative priority of essence to existence obtained even in the atheism of the XVIII century philosophers who suppressed the notion of God. But—

The atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more coherent [than the position of the XVIII century philosophers]. It declares that if God does not exist, there is at least one being with whom existence precedes essence, one being which exists before being able to be defined by any concept, and that this being is man or, as Heidegger says, the human reality. What does existence precedes essence mean here? It means that man exists first . . . and is defined later. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is not definable, it is because he is nothing at first. He will be only later, and he will be such as he makes himself. Thus there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Man is only, not merely such as he conceives himself, but such as he wishes himself, and such as he conceives himself after existence — as he wills himself after that *élan* toward existence; man is nothing but what he makes himself. Such is the first principle

of existentialism. It is also what is called subjectivity, and what we are reproached with, under this very word⁸

This then is the meaning of the priority or precedence of human existence (or subjectivity) to human essence. Theists or atheists, the existentialists allegedly recognize this as common ground. Indeed, one may say that even non-existentialist critics of Sartre, at least if they be Christians, are not entirely opposed to it, for they admit a certain priority of human existence over human essence. They admit a certain incompleteness of the individual man till that last moment of death when, after so many exercises of his terrifying liberty, he puts to his self or subjectivity the finishing touch, and is forever exactly what, for better or worse, he made himself.

Sartre declares, in the passage cited, that "if God does not exist, there is at least one being with whom existence precedes essence," namely, the human being. Already, in the lecture, he confessed himself an atheist, and in no previous publication did he ever show himself other than apodictic on the point of God's non-existence. The "if" of the present passage, therefore, does not indicate any doubt. It seems to be only a maladroit syntactical link between Sartre's own position and that of the XVIII century philosophers who failed to couple with their atheism the thesis of the precedence of existence to essence. The connection would have been better rendered by "although." Perhaps, too, the conditional mood was partially due to a desire to conciliate persons of an opposite conviction; Sartre's second "if" ("If man, as the existentialist conceives him . . .") can be understood in this way, though it too indicates nothing that Sartre holds dubious. He is everywhere insistent that man is "nothing at first" and that man exists only when and in so far as "he makes himself."

But somewhat past the middle of the passage cited, Sartre's reasoning makes a leap which is by no means lyrical but, apparently at least, illogical: "Thus there is no human nature, *since there is no God to conceive it.*" Atheistic existentialists, already acquainted with Sartre's thought, may not balk at this

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 21-22.

hurdle, but the ordinary reader thinks he has missed something; he re-reads the passage, and re-reads the whole lecture up to this point, but remains unsatisfied. Everything before it seems clear; here the light fails. Is Sartre saying that God's non-existence is a necessary presupposition to the precedence of human existence over essence ("there is no human nature, *since . . .*")? If so, atheism is indeed a premise to his existentialism, and Descoqs and Copleston were right on this point. But what is the force of the word "thus" ("*Thus*, there is no human nature . . .")? Taken with the preceding context, it indicates a conclusion from the fact of man, the one being whose existence allegedly precedes his essence, and precedes it *whether or not there is a creator God to conceive him*.

Sartre's thought seems to need supplementation here, or at least fuller expression. The troublesome passage must be understood as follows: Thus there is no human nature (or antecedent essence of man), since no God could conceive man without contradiction of the absolutely free, self-making subjectivity which, in Sartre's view, man is. An antecedent nature or concept to which the individual man conformed would, according to Sartre, imply that man is a thing, an artifact, antecedently and completely determined, without liberty, without responsibility for what he is or becomes. But man is not such. He "makes himself," and he makes himself as he alone and individually wishes. He is completely free, he is "liberty," and that "creator God" whose concept would determine him does not exist. Atheism is thus an implication of the precedence of existence over essence.

It is clear that the theistic species of existentialist does not arrive at such an atheistic position. This is remarkable if, as Sartre says, the precedence of existence over essence is common ground for existentialists. How can it be a premise, a point of departure, a first principle for both theism and atheism? Sartre of course does not think it can be so logically. "The atheistic existentialism, which I represent," is not only more coherent than the position of the XVIII century atheists; it is also, thinks Sartre, more coherent than the positions of

existentialist theists such as Kierkegaard the Lutheran and Marcel the Catholic. He obviously supposes that they interpret the precedence of human existence to essence exactly as he himself does, namely, as an absolutely free and self-creating subjectivity which a creator God's existence would contradict.

IV

But let us get on with the lecture; the complete and logical visage of Sartre's atheism may become clearer. Man's making of himself, says Sartre, means only that he has a dignity greater than that of a stone or a table. Nothing is written in some intelligible heaven before man projects himself toward that freely chosen future which, through himself alone, he will be. On the human individual rests the entire responsibility for what he makes himself, and a responsibility likewise for all men, since he cannot surpass the human subjectivity. In creating the man he individually wishes to be, he creates an image of the man he thinks *should* be, "for we can never choose evil." Thus man's single choice engages not himself alone, but humanity entire, and it is this fact which "permits us to understand what is covered by words, a bit grandiloquent, like anguish, dereliction, despair."

Anguish is the state of man when faced with the responsibility of choice, of the self-commitment which legislates for all humanity. But when dereliction is spoken of

we wish only to say that God does not exist, and that it is necessary to draw all the consequences. The existentialist is very opposed to a certain type of lay morality which would like to suppress God with the least possible cost. [About 1880 certain French professors attempted to show that moral] values exist just the same, written in an intelligible heaven, although God does not exist... The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very annoying that God does not exist, for with him disappears all possibility of finding the values written in an intelligible heaven; there can no longer be any *a priori* good, for there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to conceive it... we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky had written: "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted." The point of departure of existentialism is there. For, in fact, everything

is permitted if God does not exist, and therefore man is abandoned, because neither in nor out of himself does he find a possibility of clinging [to anything]. First of all, he finds no excuses. If, indeed, existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain by reference to a given and fixed human nature; in other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom. If, on the other hand, God does not exist, we find before us no values or commands which will legitimate our conduct...⁹

The reader will pardon the length of this citation, for Sartre is certainly interesting and it would besides be wrong to deny him this much of a hearing. But the reader must also pardon a return upon the passage, to indicate its logic and its merits. The merits are plain enough. In rejecting the attempt to found a "lay morality" Sartre is entirely correct, and his scorn for moral values written in a heaven without God is easily shared. Such moral values, however, like Sartre's own, do not directly concern this article, which is interested in his atheism. What is its connection with the Sartrian interpretation of the precedence of existence over essence? Sartre's manner of speaking inclines one again to ask whether his atheism is a premise to the thesis of precedence, or its conclusion. Or is it, as Descoqs said, both premise and conclusion, both start and finish?

A paraphrase of the passage cited above, omitting non-essentials, may help. When we atheistic existentialists speak of abandonment or dereliction, says Sartre, we are merely saying that there is no God, and that one must take the consequences. One must create one's own values and accept the responsibility for them. The point of departure of existentialism is in the fact that everything is permitted to man if God does not exist but man be abandoned to his own resources, to the making of himself; to the precedence, in other words, of existence over essence. We are really sorry that God does not exist—his non-existence puts us to such trouble—but it can't be helped, for man's nature is not given to but created by man: existence does precede essence.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 33-37.

Has Sartre's point of departure shifted? Earlier he said that "one must start from subjectivity," i.e., from the precedence of existence over essence. Now he says that the starting point of existentialism is in the fact that "everything is permitted..." But the shift is only apparent. When Sartre says that everything is permitted to man, he means exactly the same thing as when he says that man makes himself; the same thing as when he says that existence precedes essence. Atheism, however, is still intimately connected with the starting point; Sartre never seems to start without it. It is true that he again throws it into a hypothesis: everything is permitted *if* God does not exist.

But the priority of existence to essence is likewise thrown into the conditional, though existentialism affirms nothing less categorically. The "ifs" of this passage, therefore, like those of the passage already analyzed, should not mislead. They indicate no Sartrian doubts. They are for the vulgar and for all who resist the Sartrian light, shirking responsibility in order to live on in "bad faith." Such persons, even when they disbelieve in a creator God, persist in belief in that appanage of deity—moral values not of man's creation. They must be cured of this cherished illusion; they must be taught that the human reality is only as moral as man makes it; that man creates his own values. And in this task of creating his own moral values, adds Sartre, "the existentialist does not think that man can find help in any given sign upon the earth which will orient him; for he thinks that man deciphers the sign as it pleases him." No religion, therefore, and no moral dogmas such as those of Christianity can help man. "Man is the future of man... But if one understands by this that the future is written in heaven, that God sees it, then it is false, for it would not even be a future."¹⁰ Man, in other words, would again be antecedently determined and not a completely free, self-creating subjectivity.

By this time, the reader of *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* feels he quite sufficiently understands the religious

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 38.

and the moral implications of atheistic abandonment or dereliction, and Sartre's case analysis (he cites the case of a former pupil who consulted him about joining the French resistance movement, and analyzes the vocation of "a rather remarkable man who was a Jesuit") serves only to confirm him in this opinion.

Despair, however (the third grandiloquent word) remains to be explained, and Sartre obliges.

As for despair, this expression has an extremely simple meaning. It means that we shall limit ourselves to reliance on what depends on our will, or on the ensemble of probabilities which render our action possible... From the moment that the possibilities which I consider are not rigorously engaged by my action, I must cease to interest myself in them, for no God, no plan, can adapt the world and its possibilities to my will. At bottom, when Descartes said "Conquer yourself rather than the world," he meant the same thing: act without hope...¹¹

Thus despair too involves the rejection of God and, curiously enough, is attributed to the Father of French philosophy, René Descartes, in spite of the latter's well-known and explicit derivation of the existence of God from the *cogito*. Sartre of course wishes to keep for atheistic existentialism the authority of Descartes' name, and is basing his attempt on an interpretation of Cartesian ethics, which were in large part a christened Stoicism. On the one hand he is effectively rejecting the leap from the *cogito* to the divine existence as illegitimate (which it really was) and asserting that Descartes never got out of his own mind to a God or a divinely planned world; on the other, he is saying that even the Cartesian interest in such a world or God was misdirected. And, lest anyone in his Parisian audience or elsewhere think he undervalues the Father of French philosophy, Sartre later returns to Descartes, asserting that the Cartesian point of departure is the starting point of the existentialists.

Our point of departure is indeed the subjectivity of the individual, and this for strictly philosophical reasons. Not because we are bourgeois, but because we want a doctrine based on truth, and not an en-

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 49-51.

semble of beautiful theories, full of hope without real foundation. There can be no other truth, at the point of departure, than this: I think, therefore I am. It is the absolute truth of consciousness attaining itself...¹²

From the "absolute truth of consciousness attaining itself"—in other words, from the Cartesian *cogito* interpreted à la Sartre—the lecturer goes on to answer more "reproaches," but these answers do not affect or even concern his atheism. They are therefore omitted here, and the reader's attention is immediately called to the last five pages of the printed lecture. In these pages Sartre ends where he began, namely, at atheism, and he sees it as fundamental to his existentialist humanism. He is careful to say that his existentialism is not a humanism in the sense which he had earlier condemned in *La Nausée*, nor yet a humanism which takes man as the supreme value and goal, either declaring that man is amazing, or worshipping humanity after the fashion of Auguste Comte. But there is another humanism, the deep meaning of which is that man is the liaison of "transcendence" and of "subjectivity," and "this is what we call existentialist humanism. Humanism, because we remind man that there is no other legislator than himself, and that it is in dereliction that he will decide for himself..." It is therefore clear "that nothing is more unjust than the objections [of a moral order] which have been made against us. Existentialism is nothing but an effort to draw all the consequences from a coherent atheistic position..."¹³

A coherent atheistic position? Yes, Sartrean existentialism can be called that, in the sense that it is atheistic throughout and that its moral philosophy, at least foreshadowed in this lecture, does not contradict its atheism. But what of this atheism independently of Sartre's moral philosophy? At the beginning of the lecture, no notice was taken of reproaches directed specifically against atheism; for Sartre, as well as for the communists present, the question of God's existence or non-existence was already settled, and what Christians might have had to say upon the subject was passed over. And if

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 63-64.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 93-94.

the reader, while perusing those sections of *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* which touch upon the connection of atheism with the Sartrian priority of existence over essence, thought that Sartre was exerting himself to justify his atheism, the reader was mistaken. Whatever justification of atheism may be contained in the lecture is to be considered incidental to the main theme. Indeed, says Sartre, any justification of atheism, even atheism itself, is a side issue: the principal philosophic problem is elsewhere.

Existentialism is not so much an atheism in the sense that it would exhaust itself to prove that God does not exist. It declares rather: even if God existed, this would change nothing; there is our point of view. Not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the problem is not that of his existence; man must find himself again and persuade himself that nothing can save him from himself, even were it a valid proof for the existence of God...¹⁴

V

For one who takes the point of view that God's existence would make no difference, Sartre shows a surprising amount of interest in God. If God indeed is "dead" and His very notion "obsolete," why worry so much about Him? Is it solicitude for the rest of humanity that animates the Sartrian pursuit of a non-existent Being? No, there seems to be something other than pure charity here, and other than a pure love of truth. In Sartre's rejection of God there is a personal quality, a relentlessness, an obstinacy; one might almost say a vindictiveness. One wonders whether he did not, at some time in his life, think himself personally hampered or deluded by the idea of God. And one also wonders whether Sartre, even now, is entirely easy without God.¹⁵

Not, of course, that anything in the extant Sartrian corpus proves the existence of a wavering Sartrian faith in the super-

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 95.

¹⁵ Sartre's case, though that of a mature man, is reminiscent of that of the young people of Sigrid Undset's generation. "Quite honestly," she wrote in an essay after her conversion, "we weren't atheists, we were angry with God, we suffered from theophobia."

natural, or the existence of a well-intentioned groping of its author for the light. The works of Sartre inculcate disbelief, even when they make use of what may be called supernatural material.

Huis-Clos ("No Exit") is a case in point. Its three main characters are condemned to a "compartment in hell," which is exactly where Christian morality would place them, but it would be folly to think that Sartre put them in hell to warn against the terrors of an eternal punishment after death, for he does not believe in such punishment nor in personal immortality nor in a spiritual soul. The compartment in hell simply serves a dramatic purpose, and *Huis-Clos* itself, like each of the author's plays and novels, is but an illustration, an attempt at sensible proof, of the doctrinal theses of atheistic existentialism. In the present case the main thesis is that "Hell is other people." This key line from the play serves two purposes. It implicitly rejects the Christian hell, and it excellently summarizes Sartre's analysis of intersubjective or personal relations.¹⁶

Of this analysis, as for Sartre's thought in general, Sartre's audiences are probably little aware. For them, the play is the thing, and not its philosophy. Some persons, influenced by their own Christian climate of religious opinion, may have considered *Huis-Clos* a "morality in modern dress," and thought each main character "the sum of his acts, and fixed in hell according to his ruling passion," as James Collins well said.¹⁷ Those audiences, however, were (in the Philippines) largely student audiences, and it is very doubtful that many of their members possessed the penetration of a Collins or were capable of making his reservations, or were even remotely familiar with the playwright's purpose. Many therefore must

¹⁶ In Sartre's view, as developed in *L'Être et le Néant* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1943), pp. 431-503, all human relations are ultimately reducible to a species of conflict or hell, and human love, if it implies the least degree of disinterestedness or benevolence, is something which does not exist.

¹⁷ "The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre", *Thought* XXIII (March 1948) 83.

have succumbed to the "persuasive power of art and emotional appeal" in this drama of three gravely immoral personages, as Sartre intended that they should. They must have unconsciously consented to the play's occasional ridicule but constant perversion of the Christian notion of hell and, assimilating Sartre's psychology without formally recognizing it, accepted his despicable Garcin, Iñez and Estelle as normal human beings rather than base. Such acceptance, of course, is facilitated by common prurience, to which *Huis-Clos*, like most of Sartre's literary work, appeals. All, however, is grist to the Sartrian mill, and the miller does not hesitate to use it. Why should he do otherwise, while professing a philosophy which proclaims man sole creator of values? Prurience will lend enchantment to his atheistic thesis.

This thesis, though veiled and implicit in *Huis-Clos*, is plain enough in the *Maintenant* lecture. In spite of the occasionally hypothetical form in which it is sometimes proposed, it is held categorically: the creator God does not exist. This position is not new. What is peculiar to the Sartrian variations of the atheistic theme is their connection with a certain conception of man, of human freedom. Man's choice, thinks Sartre, is such that it is incompatible with man having a creator, for a creator would possess a completely predetermining knowledge of his creature, and such predetermination would contradict the liberty which man, the alleged creature, actually possesses. There is therefore no God, and man, in his state of dereliction or Godlessness, and in despair of outside help, must anguish over the responsibility of his choices.

VI

It is obvious that Sartre's atheism stands or falls with his analysis of human liberty. It is equally obvious that it depends upon proof of the predetermining character of the divine foreknowledge. Such proof is not supplied by an appeal to the analogy of the divine craftsman. However, the figure of a craftsman lends itself easily to another Sartrian error, his misconception of the necessary relation between creator and crea-

ture after the moment of creation. A creator God, thinks Sartre, could divorce Himself from further interest or influence, once man were created, and His creature could go merrily (or despairingly) on without Him. Indeed, the nature of human liberty is such that man *must* go on without God (Sartre has exploited this idea in *Les Mouches*), and so God's existence would make no moral difference anyway. But this argument ignores or misconstrues the very nature of a created being, which is not only completely dependent on its creator in the initial moment of its existence but remains so. At no instant of a creature's existence can its bond of dependence in being be severed from its creator, for at no moment does it cease to be a contingent, a non-necessary being. The influence of the Creative Cause therefore perdures, and His interest too, unless one is to suppose Him capable of imperfection. And if Sartre makes this further supposition, it too demands proof.

A final word. There is provocation enough for Descoqs' assertion that atheism is both postulate and conclusion of the Sartrian system, and the provocation is supplied by Sartre's own frequent manner of presenting his views. One cannot expect to escape the charge of vicious circle when it is argued at one time that God does not exist because man is free, and at another time that man is free because God does not exist. But it would be better, perhaps, to regard both these theses as one, i.e. to consider the Sartrian notion of human liberty and the Sartrian atheism as obverse and reverse of the same coin. "When Sartre says, 'man is free,' it is exactly the same as when he says, 'God is not'."¹⁸

¹⁸ Robert Campbell "Existentialism in France since the Liberation", *Philosophic Thought in France and the United States*, ed. Marvin Farber (Buffalo, New York: University of Buffalo Publications in Philosophy 1950) p. 139.