



palgrave▶pivot

Sartre, Existentialism, and the New Age of Nausea

Stuart Sim

palgrave
macmillan

Sartre, Existentialism, and the New Age of Nausea

Stuart Sim

Sartre, Existentialism, and the New Age of Nausea

palgrave
macmillan

Stuart Sim
English and Creative Writing
Northumbria University (retired)
Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

ISBN 978-3-031-90773-9 ISBN 978-3-031-90774-6 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-90774-6>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2025

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks go to my editors at Palgrave for all their work in helping me get this project into shape, and to the readers of both the proposal and the eventual manuscript for their invariably sound advice as to how to improve it. As ever, special thanks are due to my wife, Dr. Helene Brandon, for listening to me going on about the project (often at great length, apologies) over the course of the writing period, and persuading me that it was worth persevering with.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction: Fellow-Travelling with Jean-Paul Sartre	1
2	Political Authoritarianism	19
3	Climate Crisis	37
4	Universal Theories	53
5	A Somewhat Despairing Conclusion on Human Weakness	69
	Index	87



Introduction: Fellow-Travelling with Jean-Paul Sartre

Abstract The objective of this introductory chapter is to demonstrate the increasing relevance of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy to the contemporary socio-political landscape. The focus will be on Sartre's early novel *Nausea*, which will be utilised to address pressing issues in our culture such as political authoritarianism, climate change, and the uncritical belief that lies behind these fuelling conspiracy theories as it goes. That the growing influence wielded by the far right represents a major threat to Western democracy will be a central theme overall, and nausea seems an entirely appropriate reaction to this very worrying development. Sartre's main philosophical concepts, such as bad faith and authenticity (as outlined in works such as *Being and Nothingness*), will constitute a major point of reference for the book's arguments, and he will be identified as a fellow-traveller for our troubled times.

Keywords Jean-Paul Sartre • Existentialism • *Nausea* • Bad faith • Authenticity • Democracy • Climate change • Authoritarianism • Conspiracy theory

'Things are bad! Things are very bad: I've got it, that filthy thing, the Nausea'.¹

A newspaper editorial recently referred to Blaise Pascal as a ‘fellow-traveller’ for our times, claiming that his thought still had considerable relevance to us several centuries on.² It is a point that can be made of a wide range of thinkers drawn from the Western philosophical tradition, whose theories continue to be applicable to addressing the major social and political issues of our culture in giving us valuable insights into how to deal with these. Karl Marx may be far less important now than he has been, but he is an outstanding example none the less of how philosophy can be turned to account in that manner by committed adherents (for good or ill depending on your ideological persuasion in this instance). I have deployed the work of the poststructuralist thinker Jean-François Lyotard to similar effect on several occasions over the past few years, and he will appear again at several points in this study.³ What I want to argue here is that a particularly compelling case can also be made in that respect for Jean-Paul Sartre and the philosophy of existentialism that he developed. In an era where political authoritarianism has asserted itself so powerfully, and malignantly, internationally and where climate change has revealed the shortcomings of the political class so sharply, existentialism has much to offer as a worldview and source of ideas. The sense of a world order falling apart as crises multiply connects us strongly to Sartre’s situation in the Europe of the 1930s and 1940s, when fascism was doing its utmost to dominate the political scene and human rights were under severe pressure as a direct result. Sartre responded with such works as his novel *Nausea*, which resonates only too meaningfully in the current socio-political climate to anyone positioned on the liberal democratic or social democratic scale—the more so the more left-wing one considers oneself to be. In both cases we are confronted by what can be called the ‘politics of prejudice’, with the far right concentrating on arousing our very worst instincts, as in their cynical campaign against ‘woke’ attitudes (basically, a belief in social justice and in having a social conscience, although you would not suspect that from listening to the far right, who make it sound like an attack on personal freedom prosecuted by the self-proclaimed politically correct). *Nausea* alone would make Sartre a fellow-traveller therefore, his later fiction and large-scale philosophical projects building on this designation.

Commentators on existentialism often remark on the difficulty of pinning down exactly what the term means, but Sarah Bakewell has usefully summed it up as a philosophy where the main focus is on ‘*individual, concrete human existence*’.⁴ Sartre’s main influences are to be found in

phenomenology, as in the work of Edmund Husserl and, particularly, Martin Heidegger, philosophers similarly concerned with the nature of being. For Sartre ‘existence precedes essence’, by which he means ‘that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards’.⁵ Each individual is free therefore to make choices, and those choices will define what they become. The goal is to be authentic, facing up to reality as it is rather than deceiving ourselves as to its true nature, which would be bad faith on our part. Sartre rejects both religion and determinism of any kind, arguing that ‘[m]an is nothing else but that which he makes of himself’ and has to take responsibility for that process and the effect it will have on others.⁶ One can see how important the politics of the world around us would be on our development in that case.

Existentialism readily lends itself to such concerns and that has always constituted a significant part of its appeal. Sartre himself was politically very active throughout his life, being instrumental in founding, and then editing, the influential journal *Les Temps Modernes*, for example. This is a philosophy designed to deal with the everyday world, rather than with metaphysical abstractions of the kind that we find in theories such as Marxism and the tradition of dialectical philosophy behind it. Aside from his philosophical writings Sartre was also a novelist and dramatist of note, and as those fictional works have themes relating to his philosophy (very much so when it comes to *Nausea*) that helped to give existentialism much wider public exposure.

My intention is to demonstrate the relevance of Sartrean existentialism to the contemporary socio-political landscape and a specific set of problems that is emerging from this and causing considerable unease. This will involve looking at Sartre’s fiction, with particular reference to *Nausea*, as well as the *Roads to Freedom* trilogy that followed it, in terms of how they can be utilised to address issues such as political authoritarianism, climate change and the uncritical belief that lies behind these fuelling conspiracy theories in its turn.⁷ *Being and Nothingness*, where Sartre’s main philosophical concepts are outlined in his version of phenomenology, will also be a major point of reference for the book’s arguments.⁸ I will be arguing that the worldview this body of work promotes remains very much valid for turbulent times such as our own. Sartre will be read through these, emphasising the renewed importance of the concepts of absurdity and authenticity to the contemporary geopolitical situation, where we find bad faith in the ascendant across both our political and corporate culture,