



Basic Writings

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Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the most famous philosophers of the twentieth century. The principle founder of existentialism, a political thinker and famous novelist and dramatist, his work has exerted enormous influence in philosophy, literature, politics and cultural studies.

Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings is the first collection of Sartre's key philosophical writings and provides an indispensable resource for all students and readers of his work. Stephen Priest's clear and helpful introductions set each reading in context, making the volume an ideal companion to those coming to Sartre's writings for the first time.

Basic Writings Details

Date : Published December 19th 2000 by Routledge (first published June 1962)

ISBN : 9780415213684

Author : Jean-Paul Sartre , Stephen Priest (Editor)

Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Nonfiction, Psychology, Cultural, France, Literature



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From Reader Review Basic Writings for online ebook

Cameron Macdonald says

This is an excellent book that summarises a number of Sartrean pieces offering access to his work that in its rawest form is difficult to access by those not familiar with Sartre's style and stable of philosophy.

Charlane Brady says

I've been meaning to read this for years after buying the book in Paris per a friend's suggestion.....

the gift says

230613: i found this selection excellent, each commentary by priest very helpful. i have never studied sartre but this could be used in pedagogical way. i found this easy perhaps read this or that part before but understood some better, easy in having read so much sartre and phenomenologists...

not too critical, each intro does place sartre's thought. well organized, starting from his early thoughts but not entirely chronological, each section leads to and supports the next, even if sartre himself might not have drawn so visibly the connection: first 'in the world' a sort of mini bio. existentialism, phenomenology, imagination, emotion, being, nothingness, self, temporality, freedom, responsibility, bad faith, others, psychoanalysis, writing, work of art, politics...

covers all the many topics sartre took up for his analysis, perhaps nothing i had not previously read, metaphors familiar, little stories, quotes, all in context. all seems consistent to me, even when trying to reconcile determinism of man in marx with absolute freedom of man in existentialism, priest introduces sartre's attempts- but i do not know if sartre manages this...

you can probably read this after some survey intro like cox's guide for the perplexed, not too heavy in jargon, not too convoluted logic requiring neologisms etc. but this is possibly good to get a taste of sartre and decide to accept or reject adventure of reading his works...

Trevor says

And here I must start by saying that although this is a summary of Sartre's major ideas, I'm going to advise you to only read about three of four chapters of this book and to not bother with the rest. Others will probably disagree and say that you should plunge in and follow the twists and turns and maddening syncopation that is the more 'philosophical' of these pieces – the chapter on Being, say, or the chapter on phenomenology – but my advice is that that way madness lies.

Take this as an example:

“Being is equally beyond negation as beyond affirmation. Affirmation is always affirmation of something; that is, the act of affirming is distinguished from the thing affirmed. But if we suppose an affirmation in which the affirmed comes to fulfill the affirming and is confused with it, this affirmation can not be affirmed—owing to too much of plenitude and the immediate inherence of the noema in the noesis. It is there that we find being-if we are to define it more clearly-in connection with consciousness. It is the noema in the noesis; that is, the inherence in itself without the least distance. From this point of view, we should not call it “immanence,” for immanence in spite of all connection with self is still that very slight withdrawal which can be realized—away from the self. But being is not a connection with itself. It is itself. It is an immanence which can not realize itself, an affirmation which can not affirm itself, an activity which can not act, because it is glued to itself. Everything happens as if, in order to free the affirmation of self from the heart of being, there is necessary a decompression of being. Let us not, however, think that being is merely one undifferentiated self-affirmation; the undifferentiation of the in-itself is beyond an infinity of self-affirmations, inasmuch as there is an infinity of modes of self-affirming. We may summarize these first conclusions by saying that being is in itself.”

Too much of this book is written in precisely that style – I like to think of it as a kind of Jazz vocalisation. I’m sure that if I applied myself more I might even get something more meaningful out of it than the sounds of the words, but the problem is I suspect (admittedly, perhaps entirely without justification) that I would probably go insane before I would understand it.

But when this guy decides he has something interesting to say and that it is worth saying in, you know, clear prose – he is remarkable.

The chapter on Existentialism, which is, in fact, the whole of *Existentialism and Humanism*, is a fascinating read. The chapters on bad faith, others, writing and the work of art are all brilliant.

Each chapter of this book starts with the editor giving a thumbnail sketch of Sartre’s main ideas from what is to follow. Except for the chapters I’ve mentioned in the previous paragraph and the very first chapter, an introduction to the whole thing, I’d only read those and skip Sartre entirely.

The problem, for me, with existentialism – born out of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, that is, born out of an obsession with individualism – is that it tends to ignore the part played by the world around us in shaping and directing our individual wants and needs. This excess of individualism – which Sartre maintains in his notion of extreme responsibility – seems to run up against a problem when we begin to recognise the other. It also makes it difficult to see how groups of people can have projects – such as national liberation, class liberation and so on, projects which Sartre also sought to endorse. What I’m not saying is that Sartre was self-contradictory in stressing individual responsibility while also calling for emancipation. I’m also not saying that he saw himself as an individual, but everyone else as automatons. Rather, I think the dialectical relationship he was seeking to explain via Marxism was perhaps better explained by Marx than by him. That is, that people make their own history, but that they do not do so with whole cloth, but rather with what is at hand. Our individual freedom and therefore our individual responsibility are always constrained. But likewise, it is only through our individual actions that we can effect any change at all.

One of the ideas I found particularly interesting was that he felt it was impossible for a truly great novel to be written that is anti-Semitic. No, that’s not quite what he says, he concedes that such a novel might be possible, just that it has never happened so far and he doubts it is ever likely to happen. He says this because great literature is based on a recognition of the essential defining character of ‘the other’ in helping us to define ourselves and therefore literature is by its nature humanistic. As such a novel which called for the death of Jews or for their subjugation would fundamentally violate what it means to be literature.

Like I said, there are bits of this that are particularly interesting and really do deserve to be read – there are other bits that I felt were more like a maze – and simply not a maze I was interested in following until I made my way back out again.

Riku Sayuj says

Too haphazard a collection. The commentary is decent, but the selections don't stand so well on their own. Readers would do better to take up the original works and come back to this only for the introductory essays on each topic.

Furiousball says

this was a fine introduction into Sartre's view of the ontological and phenomenological world. I think the editor did a decent job gathering snippets from Sartre's various writings like : Existentialism and Humanism, Being and Nothingness, and Transcendence of the Ego.

lita says

And, when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men...(p.29)
