

# SARTRE'S WAR DIARIES:

## PRELUDE AND POSTSCRIPT

*The War Diaries (Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre)* were a prelude for Sartre, and for us they are a postscript. The *Diaries* are a medley. They combine, usually not in clearly distinct sections, narrative, reactions to people, to public events, and to books, introspective self-analysis and philosophical discourse. They are a unity only in that they are the recorded life of one man over a period of less than four months, but they are incomplete. They are physically incomplete; Sartre's notebooks originally covered the months from mid-September 1939 through March 1940 (with a few desultory entries after that), but only those for most of November-December and February-March have come to light and been published. They are designedly incomplete in two respects: Sartre wrote in them only at his post of duty and not when he was on leave. And he has deliberately omitted details concerning his relations with other people which are essential if we are to understand keypoints in the *Diaries*. Fortunately the published letters written by Sartre at the same date to Simone de Beauvoir fill in the background, and I will be making use of these here.<sup>1</sup>

Given this situation, it would be possible for us to look on the *Diaries* as a collection of disparate data which we might use to establish stages in the development of Sartre's philosophy or to augment what we already knew of his biography. Two significant revelations, however, compel us as philosophers to recognize that the *Diaries* offer more than an early rough sketch of what became

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<sup>1</sup>All translations are my own, but I am providing references for the *Diaries* both for the French text and for the English translation: *C* for the French text and *WD* for the English. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre. November 1939-March 1940*, ed. by Arlette Elkaim-Sartre (Paris: Gallimard, 1983). *The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre. November 1939/March 1940*, trans. by Quintin Hoare (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). At the time this paper was written, no translation of the letters had yet appeared. *Lettres au Castor et à quelques autres*, ed. by Simone de Beauvoir. *Vol. I, 1926-1939; Vol. II, 1940-1963* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

the philosophy of *Being and Nothingness* and should prevent us also from attempting to isolate the philosophical matter from the personal self-reflection. First, the *Diaries* testify absolutely to the fact that Sartre's initial intention was to work out an ethics; the ontology was ancillary so far as his original purpose was concerned. Second, the project to formulate a moral theory was, in Sartre's mind, inextricably bound up with his search for authentic personal morality to serve as a guide for his own life. I will speak briefly about the first point and then more at length regarding the second.

In early December Sartre writes to Beauvoir that he has been thinking about ethical questions since his mobilization in September. Now, he says, "I have *seen* that ethics which I have been practicing for three months without making a theory out of it—quite contrary to my usual habit." (I. p. 455) He goes on to quote to her from a passage he had just written in the *Diaries*.

I believe that I now understand and *feel* what a true ethics is. I see the connections between metaphysics and values, humanism and scorn, our absolute freedom and our condition in a life unique and limited by death, our insubstantiality as a being that is without God and is not its own author, our self-sufficient independence as an individual and our historicity. (C, pp. 121-122. WD, p. 95)

In the letter he adds, "All of this naturally revolves around ideas about freedom, life, and authenticity."

A bit later Sartre tells Beauvoir that he has worked out a metaphysics which is a natural accompaniment for his ethics. At this stage he uses "metaphysics," not "ontology" for his own theory, apparently because he wanted to contrast it with the philosophy of Husserl and of Heidegger.

What we wise little phenomenologists were doing up till now was ontology. You searched for the essence of consciousness with Husserl or for the being of existents with Heidegger. But metaphysics is an "ontic." You put your hands in the dough. You no longer think about essences (which gives an eidetic—sciences of possibles—or an ontology) but of actual concrete, given existences, and you ask why it is like that. This is what the Greek philosophers were up to—there is a sun, why is the a sun? Instead of "What is the essence of all possible suns, solar essence?" Or "What is the being of sun?" (II. pp. 49-50)

Sartre is not after questions of origin; of course. The "why" questions he will raise will be answered by a description of the purposive activity of an individual consciousness in the everyday world. Later in *Being and Nothingness* he wisely,































