

## THE SHADOW OF GOD IN JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S METAPHYSICS

Tatyana Lifintseva

**ABSTRACT:** The author in this manuscript tries to show that the latent intellectual and spiritual basis of some schools of Western philosophy was Christianity, and Western philosophy is often correlated to it in one way or another (sometimes paradoxically) – be it religious, atheistic or non-theistic. That is true for Jean-Paul Sartre's metaphysics. The concepts of subjectivity and personality are inseparably connected with the Western culture and philosophy, which were (among other) intrinsically generated by the intentions of religions of the “Bible root” – Christianity, in this case. As the “core” of existential philosophy in general are the problems of personality (“being-to-death”, “the border situations”, human freedom, choice, guiltiness, responsibility, alienation etc.) – so, its ideas are at the uttermost correlated to Christian anthropology. Nevertheless parallels of Sartre's texts with Christian mystical and ascetic practices were not clearly demonstrated in any research yet. The author also demonstrates that contrary to his heralded “atheism” Sartre's existentialism latently implies the ontological “melancholy for God” and that the “absence of God” was the cardinal principle for the composition of the whole Sartre's metaphysics and his concepts of being, subjectivity and consciousness.

**KEYWORDS:** Consciousness; Phenomenon; Corporality; Alienation; Freedom; Neantization; “Nausea”; “Being-for-itself”; “Being-in-itself”; Guiltiness; Responsibility; “Melancholy for God”; “The missed God”

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I am going to examine the latent Christian foundation in the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>1</sup> Many investigations were dedicated to Sartre's

---

<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to define the concept "existentialism" especially as "the existentialist" among the thinkers of this philosophical current only Sartre in his works of the 1940th —1950th named himself. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century so distinct thinkers as M. Heidegger, J.-P. Sartre, A. Camus, K. Jaspers, G. Marcel, M. de Unamuno, J. Ortega y Gasset, N. Berdyaev, L. Shestov, M. Buber, F. Rosenzweig, N. Abbagnano, P. Tillich, K. Bart, R. Bultmann and many others were referred to “existentialism”. At first sight, the

“atheism”. As Ronald E. Santori wrote: “Atheism appears to have become one of the trademarks of Sartre’s philosophy for both his admirers and critics, for both marginally informed readers and inquiring scholars of Sartre.” ([6] P. 62) Santori himself tries to show that Sartre’s initial basis for rejecting the existence of God was pre-philosophical, non-discursive, and flippant; that this rejection was rooted in an unreflective childhood intuition that “God does not exist”. Much has been said about Sartre’s idea of God as the ideal but contradictory and impossible synthesis of “*being-in-itself*” and “*being-for-itself*”.<sup>2</sup> And while there has been some work on religious themes in Sartre’s writings,<sup>3</sup> I will explicitly demonstrate the

---

characteristics of this philosophical current are highly various. For example, Marcel and Sartre (as well as many others of the named thinkers) could hardly reach agreement at least on one important question. Therefore, to define the concept "existentialism" by means of a set of philosophical formulas would be incorrect. Any formula, rather extensional for the description of all tendencies of existential philosophizing, can be empty and senseless for the concrete example. More likely, saying "existentialism", we most often mean exactly "existential philosophy". The last concept is much more extended and also does not assume the accurately fixed program, credo, a conceptual framework etc. How in such situation is it possible to build the "family tree" of existential philosophy? Most likely, so: there are several repeating subject matters which are not necessarily connected with each other, however in the history of thought getting to a certain community. These subject matters are as follows: 1) personality and system; 2) intentionality of consciousness; 3) "temporality" of consciousness; 4) being and nothingness; 5) absurdity; 6) freedom 7) nature and value of choice; 8) the role of boundary experience (boundary situation); 9) alienation. The subject matter of being and nothingness in the context of religious and non-religious existential philosophy is the most important. Existential philosophy revived ontology as opposed to gnoseology, logic and epistemology prevailing in the philosophy of the 2 half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the point of view of “classical” religious existential philosophy (K. Jaspers, G. Marcel, M. Buber, P. Tillich, K. Bart, N. Berdyaev, L. Shestov, etc.) the transcendent is God. According to Heidegger, Sartre and Camus, the transcendent is *nothingness*, acting as the deepest mystery of existence. Existential thinkers sought to understand being as spontaneously given and strived to overcome both rationalism, and empiricism of traditional philosophy. Being, according to existential philosophy, is neither the “idea”, or the intelligible essence of idealistic philosophy, nor the empirical reality given in the perception. The main definition of being as it is opened for us, our own being, existence, is its finitude, mortality, "being-to-death". The person is the only entity in the world to whom his mortality, and together with it being is known.

<sup>2</sup> The introduction of terms follows in the course of paper.

<sup>3</sup> We consider the most profound research in this aspect Mark Meyer’s article *Liminality and the problem of Being-in-the-world: Reflections on Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*. [4] We also agree with ideas of frustrating “absence of God” in Sartre in Stephen A. Dinan’s paper *The Tanatizing Absence of God* [1] Most impressive in our context is the research of Steven W. Laycock *Nothingness and Emptiness: Exorcising the shadow of God in Sartre* [3]. It is necessary to mention also: (2014) Gillespie, John ‘*Sartre and God: A Spiritual Odyssey, Part 2*’ // Sartre Studies International 20(1); (2013) Gillespie, John ‘*Sartre and God: A Spiritual Odyssey, Part 1*’ // Sartre Studies International 19(1); (1981) Howells, Christina (1981) ‘*Sartre and Negative Theology*’ // Modern Language Review 76; (1974) King, Thomas (1974) *Sartre and the Sacred*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; (2015) Kirkpatrick, Kate ‘*Sartre: An Augustinian Atheist?*’ // Sartre Studies International, 21(1); (2013) ‘*Jean-Paul Sartre: Mystical Atheist or Mystical Antipathist?*’ // European Journal for Philosophy of Religion, 5(2); (2009) Wang,

parallels of Sartre's texts and Christian ascetic and mystical practices in this article. I also try to show that against his proclaimed "atheism" Sartre's philosophy implicitly embraces an ontological "melancholy for God" and that the "absence of God" was the primary principle for the formation of Sartre's metaphysical system, including his concepts of being and consciousness. At the "core" of existential philosophy (be it religious or non-religious, theistic or non-theistic) there are problems of personality ("being-to-death", "the border situations", human freedom, moral choice, guiltiness, responsibility, etc.), and through my reading of Sartre I will show that these ideas are rooted in and connected to Christian anthropology.

## 2. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF J.-P. SARTRE'S METAPHYSICS

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980) was a renowned French philosopher, writer, publicist, playwright, cultural critic, and one of the outstanding representatives of existential philosophy. Sartre drew on and developed the idea of Husserl's phenomenology, Heidegger's "fundamental ontology", and also Hegel's philosophy – mainly through Alexandre Kojève's interpretation. The key themes of Sartre's philosophy were: consciousness, human existence and action. The analysis of consciousness was undertaken by Sartre from a specific perspective: it is not consciousness as a "cognitive" capacity, but *being* of consciousness. This approach meant that Sartre was critical of the previous and dominant philosophical traditions, both rationalistic and empirical, which unjustifiably, in his opinion, "gnoseologized" philosophy. According to Sartre, consciousness is a special type of being; it is a specific reality "concerned" with its own existence. Starting with Kierkegaard, existential thinkers claimed that the person had no purpose or essence which was given to him by God or set by nature; each of us has to choose who we are and what we are going to be. Sartre paraphrases Descartes: "I am. Therefore, I think". ([8] p. 39) General view of the Medieval nominalists is reproduced here in some sense: i. e., that existence precedes essence. Sartre's interpretation of Husserl's phenomenological reduction allowed him also to make away completely with the Enlightenment concept of "human nature". The latter was "put outside brackets" irrespectively of in what look it

appeared: our “universal capability of thinking”, our “universal capability of perception”, the “moral law”, the “will to power” or the “libido”.

Sartre develops his ideas about consciousness and human existence in his opus magnum: "*Being and Nothingness*" – (1943). In this text, the classic dualistic relations between being and thinking, nature and spirit, matter and consciousness, object and subject, world and human being, external and internal, signified and signifying, and natural and artificial are transferred to a plane of two “regions” of Being: “being-in-itself” (*l'être en-soi*) and “being-for-itself” (*l'être pour-soi*). In such a way Sartre is trying to overcome the traditional dualisms and oppositions in Western philosophy. “Being-in-itself” is “self-identical”, “non-decomposed”, “dense”, “massive” and “compact”. It is an absolute passivity; it is what it is, no more than that, and any definitions are incapable of describing it. It is indiscernible, undifferentiated, deprived of any qualitative definiteness and it is self-sufficient; it does not even comprise any distinction between “this” and “that”. This means that only the consciousness (“being-for-itself”) introduces distinctions and identities into the world: discreteness, plurality, causality, variability, movement, quantity, quality, form, space, time (and, accordingly, mortal destiny), sense, meaning, good, harm, evil, etc. All of this descends from the consciousness which is equal to the subject. (It is true for the “formed” Sartre, since his “Being and Nothingness”).

Sartre’s “phenomenal” account of consciousness was developed through rejection of Kant’s conception of a “noumenal” realm. Kant believed that we have no direct way of perceiving the external world and that all we have access to – it is our ideas of the world, including what our senses give us. Kant distinguished between phenomena, which are our perceptions of things or how things appear to us, and noumena, which are the things in themselves, which we have no knowledge of. Against Kant, Sartre argues that the appearance of a phenomenon is pure and absolute. The noumenon is not inaccessible—it simply “is not there”. Appearance is the only reality. From this starting point, Sartre contends that the world can be seen as an infinite series of finite appearances. Such a perspective does away with the above dualisms, especially the duality that contrasts the inside and the outside of a human subject. Consciousness is not reduced to knowledge. “Consciousness is not a mode of particular knowledge which may be called an inner meaning of self-knowledge; it is the dimension of trans-phenomenal being of the subject.” ([7] p. Ix).

Paraphrasing Heidegger, Sartre wrote: "Consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question." ([7] p. 172) The life of consciousness in Sartre's description appears to be a permanent negation of external being and its own past, its previous conditions. Being "Nothing", Sartre's person "secretes this Nothing as a gland secretes hormones". ([7] p. 103) Sartre draws on descriptions of consciousness as negativity in earlier European philosophy. He quotes Spinoza's aphorism – "Any determination means negation" ("*Omnis determinatio est negatio*"). Hegel admired this saying, and reformulated it into the judgment "The Spirit is negativity". Sartre's version of a person's being as negativity may sound this way: in the world there is freedom thanks to the existence of Nothingness in it – that is the human being. Sartre writes: "We set out upon our pursuit of being and it seemed to us that the series of our questions had lead us to the heart of being. But behold, at the moment when we thought we were arriving at the goal, a glance cast on the question itself has revealed to us suddenly that we are encompassed with Nothingness. The permanent possibility of non-being outside us and within, conditions our questions about being." ([7] p. 5) This means (among other things) that there's no predestination for a person. If there is no predestination, then the subject of a choice is always burdened by the realization that from a set of potential opportunities he has to choose one without knowing if it is really the right one. Owing to this uncertainty, the subject always suffers of anxiety – the implicit understanding that he could act differently while the preferred choice is not guaranteed to be the best. By means of denial the human reality claims that it is what it is not, is not equal to itself, is not self-sufficient, is endured as anxiety. Anxiety in this case is the dread of a person before his own freedom. "It is in anxiety that man gains consciousness of his freedom, or, if you prefer, anxiety is the mode of being of freedom as consciousness of being; it is anguish that freedom is, in its being, in question for itself" ([7] p. 29). There is no escape from this freedom because all our acts are essentially undetermined, they can *always* be different. What is more, choosing one opportunity involves the negation of all other opportunities. The Nothingness of our negating consciousness and opposite to it "being-in-itself" make an aprioristic ontological "framework" in which Sartre's person deconstructs his subjectivity. The permanent creativity of consciousness means simultaneously the permanent choice and non-choice of oneself in the world. The choosing act of consciousness is a transformation into "Nothingness" for every new choice neutralizes the previous experience. Consciousness appears to be a set of free acts of self-

determination by a person in his being. The theme of human freedom is the axis of all Sartre's doctrine and it can be traced throughout his writings: it is melancholic in the novel "*Nausea*", it has a stoical firmness in "*Being and Nothingness*", it is linked with a heroic apathy in "*The Roads of Freedom*", and it is exemplified by passionate criticism in "*The Critic of the Dialectical Reason*" (1960).

Consciousness is in contact with being not through cognition, but through certain direct experiences. Sartre wrote: "Being will be disclosed to us by some kind of immediate access – boredom, nausea, etc." ([7] p. xlvi) In the same time, the permanently negating consciousness itself becomes the "total emptiness". In "*The Transcendence of Ego*" (1936) Sartre regards the relation of empty transcendental consciousness to mental and psychic as to something external. All this will be explained in detail in the following subsection.

Sartre's definition of consciousness as "being-for-itself" means "not-in-itself": it is not equal to itself, but is instead directed towards something external to consciousness – a table, a chair, a tree, a rat's tail, Hegel's Absolute Idea, lost youth, actual infinity, self-consciousness etc. – everything one can think about. Consciousness is *intentional* (in this aspect Sartre follows Husserl). The fact that consciousness is directed towards "something" means that it is not that "something"; put otherwise, consciousness is "Nothing", or it is "*empty*". The analogy with the Christian mystic theology following the neo-platonic tradition (Jan van Ruysbroek, Johannes Tauler, Meister Eckhart, Jacob Böhme, Angelus Silesius etc.) that defined God as "none of created things", as "Nothing", is rather transparent here. "For God is Nothing: not in the sense of having no being. He is neither *this* nor *that* that one can speak of. He is beingless being." ([2] p. 316-317)

The world as "being-in-itself" is absolutely indifferent to consciousness, or "being-for-itself". Within a person, the world's indifference generates a double attitude concerning the world: either a disgust ("*Nausea*"), or a painful envy ("*The Roads of Freedom*")<sup>4</sup>; and either case produces a "feeling" of an absolute alienation and rejectedness.

Ascetic practices of "consciousness devastation" are present in almost all religions (especially in mystical currents), be it Christianity, Judaism (Kabbalah, Hasidism), Islam (Sufism), Brahmanism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc. In this essay I will focus on Christianity, particularly Meister Eckhart's (1260 – 1328) treatise

---

<sup>4</sup> Such painful envy Albert Camus also described in his novels ("*The Stranger*", 1942)

"On Detachment".<sup>5</sup> Meister Eckhart considered the detachment to be the most important of virtues, and he described what he believed to be the signs of the implantation of this virtue within the soul. So:

“Only pure detachment surpasses all things, for all virtues have some regard to creatures, but detachment is free of all creatures.

You should know that true detachment is nothing else but a mind that stands unmoved by all accidents of joy or sorrow, honor, shame, or disgrace, as a mountain of lead stands unmoved by a breath of wind. This immovable detachment brings a man into the greatest love to God.

You must know that to be empty of all creatures is to be full of God.” ([2] p. 566-567)

For Sartre, consciousness "is devastated" *not* for the sake of perception of God, but for the sake of "pure nihilation"; this "defect" ("defect" from the point of view of Christian anthropology) generates within the person "melancholy" and "anxiety" – from the fact that consciousness is absolutely free, "omnipotent", sovereign and unconditioned, it does not find any “worthy” "object of filling" (which God in Christian mysticism is). Just God (who does not exist!) could have been such “object”... Therefore we can say that ontological "melancholy" of Sartre is a hidden melancholy for God.

Many researchers think Sartre's innovation entails a synthesis of Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophy. What distinguishes Sartre from Heidegger is the introduction of the notion of “I think” into his analysis of human beings. For Sartre, the possibility of an "exit" to the “world”, from which Husserl's transcendental subject was brought, is opened thanks to the fundamental characteristic of transcendental consciousness – the intentionality, which was already spoken about above. And unlike Husserl's appeal to pure representation, from Sartre's point of view, the collision between consciousness and the "dense" and "intractable" material world, opposite to consciousness, is most important. The material world appears to the person as alien and hostile. Sartre wrote in the “*Critique of Dialectical Reason*” (1960) that every moment we feel material reality as threat to our being, as resistance to our work, as a border of our knowledge. The person is surrounded with the world without which it cannot exist; he looks for supports in things, but does not find it. The thing has a quiet, self-sufficient

---

<sup>5</sup> Some of researches think that the text of treatise was prescribed to Eckhart.

condition of being, to it "the anxiety of future" is not known, "being-to-death" is not known.<sup>6</sup>

The realization of the "anti-platonism" project in Sartre's metaphysics was implemented by him through the supreme "desubstantivation" of consciousness. Unlike Plato for whom the measure of being of a thing was defined by the degree of its participation in the Ideas and presence in the human mind, at Sartre being ("being-in-itself") is absolutely "denuded of ideas" and is defined just by the resistance degree which it renders to the "neantizing activity" of consciousness. The atrocity with which consciousness neantizes the world implicitly indicates the superfluity of being of the material world and the continuous threat proceeding from it. The anti-platonic tendency of Sartre's metaphysics is described in *Nausea* as the contact of consciousness and the material world which is disembarassed from a verbal "peel". The consciousness of the hero of the novel Antoine Roquentin "tears off varnishing" from things (we can call this varnish the form, the idea of a thing or its definite contours). This "tearing off" occurs *beyond* any volition of the subject – it is the difference from the ascetic practices of different religions. Thereby a shapeless lot of material being appears which readily "assumes" any generation of Roquentin's consciousness. The material being shows itself as matter, as naked materiality. It is perceived as something dense, massive, but soft and viscous, as impassable as a marshy jungle. In *Nausea* it is possible to draw strict analogies to Christian ascetics: nausea in Sartre's anthropology as if substitutes the Christian ascetic disgust for all that is carnal and material. The reaction of nausea, described in detail in the novel, is the subjective experience of encountering with naked materiality of the outside world. Nausea is not the empirical, but the ontological relation of consciousness to material being (*res extensa*). Sartre writes: "We must not take the term *nausea* as a metaphor derived from our physiological disgust. On the contrary, we must realize that it is on the foundation of this nausea that all concrete and empirical nauseas (nausea caused by spoiled meat, fresh blood, excrement, etc.) are produced and make us vomit." ([7] p. 338-339) Nausea as an ontological measurement of consciousness demonstrates the superfluity of the material and

---

<sup>6</sup> One of the ways of disposal of this anxiety consists in narrowing as much as possible the circle of your opportunities. So the character of Patrick Süskind's novel "The Pigeon" Ionathan Noel behaves himself. By the way, the story is written under the strongest influence of Sartre's writings.



corporal per se... The “anti-platonic” strategy releases a person “from above”, according to Sartre.

This is what Monsieur Roquentin endures: “Things have divorced their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic and it seems ridiculous to call them or to say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenceless; they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me. ... I could no longer stand things being so close. ... So I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I could not remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me. ... The roots, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that has vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder – naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness”. ([8] p. 125-127) Here we see, I suppose, that the “protean” matter appears to Roquentin's look in absolutely other guises than it is “habitual” or “standard”: the chestnut seems ... anything, but not the “chestnut”! This is the “anti-thing” project in Sartre's metaphysics which releases the person “from below”. The deprivation of the world of its “concreteness”, “objectness” or “thingness” for the consciousness of an ordinary (“secular”) Western person who is not engaged in ascetic practices, is extremely traumatic. About it, for example, E. Cassirer in his “Philosophies of symbolical forms” wrote much, and in psychiatry such syndrome has the name “agnosia”.<sup>7</sup>

One more quote from *Nausea* illustrating the “agnosia” that Roquentin endures: “I lean my hand on the seat but pull it back hurriedly: it exists. This thing I'm sitting on, leaning my hand on, is called a seat. They made it purposely for people to sit on, they took leather, springs and cloth, they went to work with the idea of making a seat and when they finished, that was what they had made. They carried it here, into this car and the car is now rolling and jolting with its rattling windows, carrying this red thing in its bosom. I murmur: “It's a seat,” a little like an exorcism. But the word stays on my lips: it refuses to go and put itself

---

<sup>7</sup> See also: Sacks, Oliver *The man who mistook his wife for a hat and other clinical tales*. Touchstone, 1998.

on the thing. It stays what it is, with its red plush, thousands of little red paws in the air, all still, little dead paws. This enormous belly turned upward, bleeding, inflated—bloating with all its dead paws, this belly floating in this car, in this grey sky, is not a seat. It could just as well be a dead donkey tossed about in the water, floating with the current, belly in the air in a great grey river, a river of floods; and I could be sitting on the donkey's belly, my feet dangling in the clear water.” ([8] p. 124) And such "visions" could play a positive role even in the Western secular world – for example, to serve inspiration for surrealist artists such as René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst etc.

Parallels between Sartre and Christian ascetics can further be seen by looking at St. John Chrysostom.<sup>8</sup> He wrote: “The groundwork of this corporeal beauty is nothing but phlegm, and blood, and humor, and bile, and the fluid of masticated food. For by these things both eyes and cheeks, and all other features, are supplied with moisture; and if they do not receive that moisture, daily skin becoming unduly withered, and the eyes sunken, the whole grace of the countenance immediately vanishes; so that if you consider what is stored up inside those beautiful eyes, and that straight nose, and the mouth and the cheeks, you will affirm the well-shaped body to be nothing else than a whited sepulchre; the parts within are full of so much uncleanness. Moreover when you see a rag with any of these things on it, such as phlegm, or spittle you can not bear to touch it with even the tips of your fingers, nay you cannot even endure looking at it; and yet are you in a flutter of excitement about the storehouses and depositories of these things?!” [7] The reader may say: "Well, here it is spoken about overcoming of the desire to women's flesh and female beauty, but not about disgust for "material" (res extensa) as such." Certainly. But the principle of disgust from "fleshness" (not only in aspect of sexual desire) is undoubtedly present in the Christian ascetics (as that we saw in the example of Meister Eckhart).

---

<sup>8</sup> St. John Chrysostome (c. 349 – 407), the Archbishop of Constantinople, was one of the most important Early Church Fathers. He is known for his preaching and public speaking, for his denunciation of abuse of authority by both ecclesiastical and political leaders, “*The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*” and his ascetic sensibilities (which are so important for us, in this context). The epithet “Chrysostomos” means “golden-mouthed” in Greek and denotes his celebrate eloquence. St. John Chrysostom was among the most prolific authors in the Early Christian Church exceeded only by St. Augustine (c. 354 – 430) in the quality of his surviving writings.

Perhaps, Hamlet's maxim is also similar to Sartre's *Nausea*:

“O, that this too too solid flesh would melt  
 Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!  
 Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
 His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!  
 O God! God! How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,  
 Seem to me all the uses of this world!” [11]

Hamlet's thoughts hardly stay directly in line with Christian anthropology and the doctrine of the Fathers of the Church, but in this case the feeling of "superfluity" of the carnal ("this too too solid flesh"), the desire "to melt" (dissolve) it, feeling that "all the uses of this world " are "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable" – it is quite comparable with Sartre's "nausea".

#### 4. ME AND OTHER: THE FAILURE OF DIALOGUE

Together with other definitions, for the Christians God is the most intimate and loved person. Here primarily a problem also rises in existential philosophy: what is other person? What is, according to Sartre, the "Other" for me and me for him? These relations first present themselves in the form of the Look. The primary attitude of consciousness towards another I is a pure and simple denial: just as "being-for-itself" is self-defined negatively towards "being-in-itself" it also finds the Other as "not being me". Generating inter-mutual denial from another I, the consciousness of Sartre's person enters a struggle which originally proceeds as a wearisome fight of Looks. The role of a Look is ambivalent. On the one hand, the Look of the Other awakens my consciousness about myself: the person is present before his own consciousness to the extent that he is an object for the Other. Sartre again paraphrases Descartes: "I am seen, therefore I am". ([9], p. 407) But the primary abnegation by means of which the subject reduces himself to "naked" objectivity generates a protest in him because the Other, by turning me into the object of consideration, alienates me from my world and my opportunities. The Other "alienates my freedom", I am depicted in his eyes in a certain "static character" as a fragment of "being-in-itself"; the Other is "the hidden death of my possibilities" ([7] p. 264), says Sartre. As one of the characters in Sartre's drama "No exit" Garcin says: "Hell is other people". ([9] p. 31) The point here is that the Other knows about your offense or crime and it is forever imprinted in his Look: you will never be able to change it, you are not free any

more, you "fossilate". Sartre thinks this is the true meaning of the myth about petrification through the look of Medusa Gorgona.

Here we see in Sartre a Biblical image of *Original Sin*<sup>9</sup> and God's "Look" – the "Look" of the Other in his absolute measurement. "The shame appears in the profane, psychologized version of Fear rooted in an "original sin" and described by Kierkegaard in his "The Concept of Anxiety". The shame is the feeling of an Original Sin not because I had made this or that offense, but just because I "*am thrown*" into the world, into the environment of things and that I need the mediation of the Other to be that what I am; bashfulness and in particular fear to be seen naked are only the symbolical specification of the initial shame; the body symbolizes our defenselessness and objectness here. To put on cloth – means to hide your objectness, to assert the right to see, without being seen by the Other, that is to be a pure subject. From here the biblical symbol of falling after original sin arises; it defines that Adam and Eve "know that they are naked"." ([7] p. 289)

We will now examine one more important subject matter in Sartre. For Sartre, in human relationships the desire, and particularly sexual desire, appears to be the main thing. Contrary to Freud, Sartre brings desire out of the area of unconscious and ontologizes it as a mode of consciousness, "being-for-itself". And what to do with human body, with "flesh"? Sartre cannot (and does not want) to deny that consciousness cannot exist out of the body. But then there is a danger of "physiologism" which Sartre rejects initially, – in favor of "ontologism". Sartre finds a way out: he considers a body at the ontological level as "an initial body" or "an ontological body", and at the psychological level – as "a psychic body". Thus in Sartre, as well as in Christianity, the human being becomes the arena of struggle of physiological / psychic and mental mechanisms (passions and spirit, in Christianity). Sartre insists on the triumph of reflection in which neantizing ecstasy the "initial" (ontological) body approves its freedom, that is tears away the psyche, as well as physiology, outside, into "being-in-itself".<sup>10</sup> We can compare Sartre's "overcoming of corporality" with Christian ascetics as this "overcoming"

---

<sup>9</sup> Some of XX century Protestant theologians interpreted the Original Sin as the state of human total alienation (Paul Tillich) or as the "ungenuine (*uneigentlich*) existence" (Rudolf Bultmann, following Heidegger).

<sup>10</sup> Here the parallel also with the Brahmanist and Buddhist ascetics where the world of individual psyche is considered the "thin corporality" which is subject to elimination is rather obvious.

is some kind of imperative included in Sartre's concern for a metaphysical release of a person from the body as the body and even the psyche represent a real threat for freedom of consciousness. (Just like in Christian ascetics where the body, flesh and passions represent a threat for human spirit's freedom and its intention towards God).

Nevertheless, having denied "being-in-itself", "being-for-itself" tries to build a "bridge" to it again due to "desire" and also the fact that consciousness is always the denial, including the denial of its own previous states. The search for self-sufficiency in which the Cartesian God or Spinoza's Substance stay means the aspiration to synthesis by merging two initially separate regions of being: "being-in-itself-for-itself". Alas, it is impossible: consciousness ("being-for-itself") gets "bogged down" and "sinks" in matter: "It symbolizes the sugary death of the "for-itself" (like that of the wasp which sinks into the jam and drowns in it)." ([7] p. 609) The failure of such human enterprise in a metaphysical sense is inevitable because "being-for-itself" is always equal to Nothing. This synthesis, Sartre emphasizes, is impossible also because in trying to prove himself as being, and not "nothing", the person would destroy himself as a person, as *freedom*. An ideal of consciousness which would be the basis for its own "being-in-itself", according to Sartre, could be called God. The impossibility to become God also turns the person into what Sartre called "unavailing passion" or "frustrated God". Sartre wrote: "Everything happens as if the world, man, and man-in-the-world succeeded in realizing only a missing God. Everything happens therefore as if the "in-itself" and the "for-itself" were presented in a state of disintegration in relation to an ideal synthesis. Not that the integration has ever *taken* place but on the contrary precisely because it is always indicated and always impossible." ([7] p. 623)

There is one more parallel between Sartre and Christian theology – now of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sartre says: "If I posit God as the absolute unity of the subject *which can in no way become an object* (italics mine – T. L.), I thereby posit the eternity of my being-as-object and so perpetuate my shame. This is shame before God; that is, the recognition of my being-an-object before a subject which can never become an object. By the same stroke I realize my object-state in the absolute, and hypostasize it. The position of God is accompanied by a reification of my object-ness. Or better yet, I posit my being-an-object-for-God as more real than

myself; I exist alienated and I cause myself to learn from outside what I must be.” ([7] p. 290) In this context Sartre's views correspond to some extent to views of many modern Christian theologians. For example, Paul Tillich (1886 – 1965) claimed that the question of existence or non-existence of God does not make sense as God in principle cannot be a “thing”, an object – even the “highest” object, being “above” all other objects. Tillich sought to keep himself separate from classical Christian theism.<sup>11</sup> He wrote: “If you start with the question whether God does or does not exist, you will never reach Him; and if you assert that He exists, then it will be even more difficult for you to reach Him than if you denied His existence. God about whose existence or non-existence you can argue is a thing beside others objects within the universe of existing things. [...] Therefore the question of is quite reasonable whether this thing exists, and the answer is so reasonable that it does not exist”. [8]

In his work “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1946) Sartre says: “The existentialist finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good *a priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. It is no-where written that “the good” exists, that one must be honest or must not lie, since we are now upon the plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky once wrote: “If God did not exist, everything would be permitted”; and that, for existentialism, is the starting point. Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence “*thrown*”, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man *is* freedom. Nor, on the other

---

<sup>11</sup> Classical theism is the philosophical and theological doctrine which postulated God as the absolutely metaphysically ultimate being in contrast to other conceptions such as pantheism or polytheism. Whereas most of “classical” theists agree that God is, at a minimum, the all-knowing, all-mighty and completely Good, some classical theists go further and conceive God as completely transcendent (totally independent of all entities) and having such attributes as immutability, impassibility and timelessness. Classical theism (both Christian, Judaic and Islamic) was, historically (until the 20<sup>th</sup> century), the mainstream view in theology and philosophy and was associated with the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus (neo-platonism in general), St. Augustine, St. Anselm, Maimonides, Averroes, St. Thomas Aquinas etc.

hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimize our behavior. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. – We are left alone, without excuse.” ([10] p. 8) Here in Sartre we can see paradoxically a Christian connotation of “thrownness”, “fall” into the world<sup>12</sup> and also God-rejectedness at Fathers of the Church (*desolitudo, deseritudo*). If God does not exist – so, only a person himself, according to Sartre, becomes responsible for all acts and events in the world regardless of any circumstances. He is responsible also for his being, for his tragic absolute freedom. And again there are allusions to the Gospels, to the Via Dolorosa of Jesus: “to shoulder one’s own being”, “to bear being” ...

I will now return to what I began with: the idea of ontological “incompleteness”, freedom and opportunity for the person to change radically at any time, inherent in all existential tradition and Christian anthropology. In general, the “metanoia” (repentance) can happen in any direction: it is possible to transubstantiate from Saul of Tarsus to Paul the Apostle or “to transverse” on a Cross an instant before death as the Penitent Thief Dysmas. But it is possible also vice versa. “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” [I Cor. 10:12] And Sartre says: “There is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero.” ([10] p. 25)

The implicit dependence on God in Sartre is everywhere. The melancholy for God “exudes” from Sartre’s texts – as water on the dried-up water meadow: it is not visible, until you step on the grass... He writes: “All of us are guilty, all are entriable”. ([7] p. 557) Here we see again a Bible (Christian) image of an Original sin and – the idea of God “guilty in His absence”.

Steven W. Laycock in his paper “Nothingness and emptiness: Exorcising the shadow of God in Sartre” (1991) demonstrates that “the shadow of God” which is “exorcised into the door” (by means of rationalistic speculations) comes back “through the window” – in a form of the melancholy for God (which is not always explicitly expressed) and a total dependence of a subject from the “Absent God”. Laycock writes: “The very notion of God in Sartre is deeply aporetic. Like the collision of matter and anti-matter, the alloyage of the two radically antagonistic

---

<sup>12</sup> See also Heidegger’s “*Geworfenheit*”.

attributes is cataclysmic, leaving, not a world without center, though a world without “positive” God, to be sure, the “center” remaining a vacuous reference point, the “eye” of a hurricane, ground-zero for a universal explosion. At the center lies an absence, not a presence. This absence, this “shadow”, is the inversion of God, a “negative” God, an evacuated God. And the man must comprise the great and momentous Absence of God, the Absence which *is* God”. ([3] p. 396-397)

Existential philosophy, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrated, is neutral between religion and atheism. Everything depends on the perspective of the particular thinker (or reader?). It is beyond doubt that one of the primary spiritual and cultural origins of the Western culture is Christianity, and that Western philosophy is related to it – be it religious, atheistic or non-theistic. And since existential philosophy is concerned in the problems of the personality (freedom, guiltiness, responsibility, “being-to-death”, choice etc.), it is connected to Christian anthropology. All this is applicable to Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy. Sartre’s concept of consciousness opposed to a material world which threatens it is similar with Christian mystical and ascetics practices. Sartre's metaphysical rebelliousness testifies to his aspiration to total release of the person and together the acceptance by the person on himself “the burden of the world”, the responsibility for “everything”. This situation comprises the latent and great “melancholy for God”.

School of Philosophy  
Faculty of Humanities  
Higher School of Economics  
National Research University  
Moscow  
Russian Federation  
tlifinceva@hse.ru,  
lifintsevatanya64@gmail.com

## REFERENCES

1. Dinan S. A. The Tanatizing Absence of God / *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* V. 65, 1991. Pp. 87-98



2. Eckhart M. *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. Translated and Edited by Maurice N. Y., O'C. Walshe, 2009. Pp. 316-317, 566-567
3. Laycock S. W. Nothingness and Emptiness: Exorcising the shadow of God / *Man and World*, 24 (1991). Pp. 395-407.
4. Meyers M. Liminality and the problem of Being-in-the world: Reflections on Sartre and Merleau-Ponty / *Sartre Studies International* V. 14 (1), 2008/ Pp. 78-105
5. Santori R. E. Sartre's adolescent rejection of God / *Philosophy Today*, V. 37, Issue 1. Spring 1993. Pp. 62-71
6. Sartre J.-P. *Being and Nothingness*. Transl. from French by Hazel E. Barnes. N. Y., Washington Square Press, 1966.
7. Sartre J.-P. *Nausea*. Transl. from French by Lloyd Alexander. L.: Hamish Hamilton, 1979.
8. Sartre J.-P. "*No exit*" and three other plays. N. Y.: A Division of Random House, 1989.
9. Sartre J.-P. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Transl. from French by Philip Mairet. New Heaven, Yale University Press, 2007.
10. Shakespeare W. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. 100-101.
11. St. John Chrysostom. *On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises, Homilies and Letters, Homilies on the Statues* / The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996. Pp. 103-104.
12. Tillich P. *Theology of Culture*. N. Y., Oxford University Press, 1959. Pp. 4-5.