

Book Review

Drake, David, *Sartre*¹ and Bernasconi, Robert, *How to Read Sartre*²

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Sartre by David Drake and *How to Read Sartre* by Robert Bernasconi offer short but informative introductions to Sartre's life and philosophy. On the one hand, *Sartre* by David Drake offers a short, yet comprehensive, biography of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). On the other hand, Robert Bernasconi's *How to Read Sartre* presents a readable introduction to some of the popular, but elusive, Sartrean concepts. These books can be read side by side by beginners and enthusiasts alike; this review is a demonstration of how beginners in Sartre's philosophy could complementarily read these two books as well as critically engage with their authors.

Upon reading Drake, one understands that Sartre's idea of freedom was influenced by his realizations after his experience of being called up to serve the war. Sartre's ideas on choice and free will can be understood in the existential statement that he has "created" himself.³ It is also obvious that Sartre's personal relationships are related to his philosophy. His relationship with Beauvoir, for example, shows how Sartre values freedom; this can lead to the understanding of how they both agreed to stay together while having convenient affairs with others and why they chose to establish their relationship based on loyalty but not fidelity.

It was in 1929 when Sartre met Simone de Beauvoir. Drake mentions that Beauvoir was Sartre's privileged companion.⁴ One could, however, argue that Sartre was also as privileged as Beauvoir. Sartre considered Beauvoir to be intelligent and sensitive and admits that he had found in her exactly everything he could desire in a woman.⁵ Their relationship, however, was not always smooth sailing, and this too resonates in their writings. Sartre's relationship with Olga Kosakiewicz, for example, inspired the writing of *She Came to Stay*, Beauvoir's attempt at fictionalizing the love triangle. Sartre's way of

¹ London: Haus Publishing, 2005. 194 pp.

² London: Granta Books, 2006. 116 pp.

³ It should be made clear, however, that Sartre understands the term "create" in the existential sense; his statement that he has created himself, therefore, does not necessarily mean that he was not influenced by his academic peers or the European philosophical tradition. Sartre's thinking was, of course, profoundly shaped by the ideas of Descartes, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, etc.

⁴ Drake, *op cit.*, 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

abandoning friendship with other people can also be understood as a result of his views on bad faith. His later stand on Communism and the French Leftist movement was so abrupt; one can understand this particular stand by going back to Sartre's life during and after the war.

Drake's book appears to be a grand project which has not served its purpose at the end. There was no mention of what he really wanted to offer his readers, whether he wanted to present Sartre's biography or philosophy or both. Numerous accounts about Sartre were given, and then later on not being able to provide enough information to support these accounts. There appears to be an assumption on the part of Drake that the reader is somewhat familiar with Sartre's life and philosophy. His presentation of *Socialisme et Liberte* and *Les Temps Modernes* for example lacks further details that could have shed some light on the entire objective of the group and their significance in Sartre's movement against the revolution. Sartre lived through the First and the Second World Wars, the experience of living in war-torn Europe has profoundly influenced his writings. He was called up to serve the military in 1929; it was around this time when Sartre realized that authenticity means being responsible for one's own being in any situation. Contrary to his former claims of individualism and freedom, the time he spent in the camps showed him the impossibility of a real private life. His indifference towards movements changed; The Second World War made him aware of the fact that one must actively act when faced with difficult situations. This was the reason why upon his return to Paris, in 1941 he organized *Socialisme et Liberte*,⁶ and in 1945 he founded *Les Temps Modernes*.⁷ This was the beginning of Sartre's active participation in several movements, communist and revolutionary. This has prompted him to create several acquaintances with leftist leaders like Fidel Castro and Che Guevarra. In Drake's account, however, even Sartre's war experiences were presented without giving enough background about the war. Sartre's political development was not given proper discussion. Drake mentions that Sartre detested discussions about politics and refused to join the Young Socialists because he disliked hierarchical organizations and felt that he lacked the necessary information of what was going on around him.⁸ After this account, one would have to trace Sartre's development by himself because there was an abrupt end in Drake's discussion.

Meanwhile, Bernasconi's book is an unambiguous presentation of Sartre's philosophy because the author has clarified his aims at the outset of the book. Bernasconi states early on that he only intends to provide an introduction of the philosophy of Sartre, which the book accomplishes. His

⁶ *Socialisme et Liberte* is a resistance group "which has two purposes: to fight for our freedom now and to do so in the hope of establishing a new collective society in which we would all be free because no one would have the power to exploit anyone." John Gerassi, *Sartre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁷ "*Les Temps Modernes* is a monthly journal co-founded by Sartre after the Second World War" which "promoted democracy and opposed revolution by force." Bernasconi, *op cit.*, 4, 72.

⁸ Drake, *op cit.*, 20.

comprehensive commentaries on the passages he cited are helpful to those who are just beginning to read Sartre. Basic Sartrean concepts such as bad faith and freedom are thoroughly discussed by Bernasconi.

The discussion of Sartre's concept of freedom and bad faith are found in Bernasconi's presentation of *No Exit* and *Being and Nothingness*. "Nothing is more important than others for our understanding of ourselves, then if our relations with others are warped or depraved, then hell is others."⁹ This is Bernasconi's perspective on Sartre's notion of hell is other people. Sartre is not suggesting a literal connotation of the idea of hell. In this particular passage, what he is trying to show us is that if we are no longer aware of our freedom and when we are consciously adhering to what others want of us, and without qualifying what we truly want for ourselves, then we are in *bad faith*, it is only in this instance that hell is other people. In other words, the other takes our freedom away from us. This, of course, is related to Sartre's existentialist dictum, "existence precedes essence," of which Sartre believed to have taken on himself. Man, for Sartre, is capable of willing his own actions. Bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* is self-deception. If one is not yet able to realize the essence of sincerity by denying to other and to himself what one truly wishes to happen; moreover, when one postpones certain actions and delays the realization of one's authenticity, then one is in bad faith. Freedom in *Being and Nothingness* is characterized by how a person is able to choose and actualize his own projects. Freedom, moreover, is coupled with anxiety or anxiousness, because in one's projection one tends to be anxious of the unknown. Thus, the concept of anxiety for Sartre should not be taken in a totally negative manner; instead, it must be taken positively because anxiety is an assurance that one is open to numerous possibilities for action.¹⁰

Bernasconi also discusses Sartre's essay "Existentialism is a Humanism"¹¹ and gives an insight on the significance of Sartre's emphasis on the concept of freedom. In this part, however, individual freedom is not the only concern, Bernasconi also discusses the possibility of freedom for others. Sartre argues that we are all condemned to be free. Hence, each and every one of us is responsible for the freedom of others, and this can happen through one's consciousness of the other and the self. One's actions should not limit his freedom and the freedom of others. We act in bad faith if we get in the way of another person's freedom.

Despite the shortcomings of Drake's *Sartre*, it is still worthwhile to read these two books together. As a matter of fact, Bernasconi's lucid discussions could fill up the gaps in Drake, while the latter providing some

⁹ Bernasconi, *op cit.*, 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43-52. Sartre writes: "Anguish is the reflective apprehension of the Self as freedom, the realization that nothingness slips in between my Self and my past and future so that nothing relieves me from the necessity of continually choosing myself and nothing guarantees the validity of values which I choose. Fear is of something in the world, anguish is anguish before my Self." *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 2001), 29.

¹¹ Bernasconi, *op cit.*, 53-55.

historical context, albeit very basic, for the former. As one reads through the work of Bernasconi, one can go back to Drake to corroborate the development of ideas with facts. Future readers may use this method, especially those who are just starting to acquaint themselves with Sartrean philosophy. Both books appear to be significant for beginning students of philosophy because they could initiate further, and more serious, engagement with Sartre.

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References

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