

---

# Existentialism's Hidden God: Submission and Revolt in the Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus

*Johan Viljoen*  
*University of Pretoria*

---

## **Abstract**

*This article examines the way in which certain fundamental elements constituting the Christian religion manifest themselves in the writings of French writers and philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, authors marked by their inscription within the same existentialist post-war literary tradition. In the case of both Sartre and Camus, this tradition is particularly characterised by a literature seeking to affirm itself as resolutely atheist on the one hand, yet infused with an unshakeable moral imperative on the other, obliging a continuous effort by the two authors to justify it in the face of their maintained conviction that the universe has neither creator nor existential meaning. The contradiction between these two characteristics, and particularly the fact that the first cannot be logically derived from the second, allows for the proposition that the atheism affected by both writers might not be as absolute as it seems, and that, despite all efforts to reject the notion of divine existence, the moral imperative both support with such fervour is actually derived from a lingering Christian faith.*

## **Introduction: Thank God I'm an Atheist**

In her introduction to a collection of critical essays on the writings of Albert Camus, Germaine Bree suggests that any commentary on Camus must inevitably transform itself into a commentary on Sartre as well (Bree 1962: 2), a notion which is primarily based on such similarities as exist between their writings in terms of themes and thoughts expressed in repetitive, even obsessive, manner. In this regard one identifies for instance their shared, militant atheism, which is rarely content to serve as a wordless basis or backdrop to a purely naturalistic literary or philosophical construct. Instead, it insists via endless repetition on being explicitly recognised, and is even employed as the central theme in a number of works. Indeed, sometimes it

appears as though Sartre and Camus find themselves in the midst of writing a sort of “anti-gospel”, giving themselves over to the denouncing of religion and any other form of spirituality as a valid means of interpreting the world and human existence with an almost missionary zeal.

Another characteristic shared by the two authors is their insistence on the ethical responsibility of the individual in the world. Both take as given the necessary existence of moral principles for regulating human conduct, and they take great pains to try and justify this point of view in a universe from which they have expelled all presence of the divine. If we consider by comparison another French writer and advocate of atheism, the Marquis de Sade, it is clear that he indulges no similar notions, but instead amuses himself by following the argument posed by his refusal of all divinity to its logical conclusion – at least in writing – namely a total, willed and perfectly justified immorality. But neither Sartre nor Camus is willing to accept this kind of moral nihilism as the natural consequence of their own unbelief. On the contrary, both spend a large part of their literary and philosophical careers constructing arguments and intellectual vantage points of which the goal is no more or less than the achievement of a synthesis between their ferocious atheism and the moral imperative of which neither seems able to rid himself. As a result, their writings are saturated with themes one traditionally associates with ethics, yet more often than not these are presented in terms or via images of purely religious, and specifically Christian, origin. In other words, themes dealing with notions such as innocence and guilt, sacrifice, expiation, forgiveness and salvation, the implication being that the moral imperative which the two authors are so incapable of escaping is in fact directly linked to the same religious impulse they are constantly trying to deny. As a result, the notion of religion haunts their writings like an apparition, hidden but undeniable, leading me to pose the question: could it be that the two notorious atheists were in fact believers despite themselves? Could they have been believers desperately trying to rid themselves of a religious faith which did not conform to their intellectual conceptualisation of the universe? Or could it be that their declared atheism was born from resentment at some former, unfulfilled spiritual hope or ambition? In order to respond to these questions, let us take a closer look at the primary philosophical preoccupations of Sartre and Camus as expressed by the two authors themselves, as well as at the intellectual evolution each underwent in the course of his career.

## **Foundation and Evolution of Sartrian Existentialism: The Faults Not In Our Stars But In Ourselves**

At the start of his career Sartre is associated with the post-war French existentialist movement, of which he was one of the founders and of which

the most important ideological characteristic is the refusal to recognise the possibility of material existence being preceded by anything else (Sartre 1956: xlv). As such, this type of existentialism not only denies the existence of God, but also of all manner of spirituality or psychology capable of influencing human behaviour or preventing the exercise of free will (Ibid.: 435). Thus Sartre's existentialism imagines human beings as being entirely responsible for themselves, both their character and state the direct result of conscious and fully-aware choices and decisions (Jolivet 1965: 43). However, according to Sartre, man is naturally fearful of such absolute liberty of choice, so in order to escape his responsibility he invents a range of imaginary causes which he tries to convince himself are really responsible for his actions, whether it be God, the subconscious or whatever. In this way he tries to free himself from the obligation, imposed by his own decisions, to accept the consequences of these as being the result of his own free will and desire (Ibid.: 23). This strategy constitutes a sort of voluntary self-deception of which the inescapable consequence (Sartre 1956: 48) is a perpetual sense of inexplicable guilt and a lack of authenticity (King 1974: 32), since one can never fully escape the recognition of one's own self-deception. In the long run, Sartre imagines that this guilt and this lack of authenticity will lead the existentialist to a willing rejection of his self-made illusions and will send him searching for a full understanding of his true freedom (Anderson 1979: 46), as opposed to the non-existentialist, who persists in living a lie even in the face of his own, steady moral degeneration. Accepting one's freedom, on the other hand, allows for the recognition of the contingency of all existence (Jolivet 1965: 67) and, as a result, the devaluation of all traditional values (Anderson 1979: 44), leaving only freedom itself capable of providing meaning to human life (Ibid.: 42). However, Sartre also believes that individual freedom cannot attain its full expression if its attainment does not form part of a general movement of human liberation (Ibid.: 86-9). Hence his existentialism is also a form of humanism, manifesting itself in active participation in socio-political causes on behalf of the earth's poor and disadvantaged (Ibid.: 102-3).

This conclusion represents a significant development of Sartre's existentialism, since its original conceptualisation as expressed in "Being and Nothingness" is instead based on the necessary objectification of the world by human consciousness (Jolivet 1965: 39). As a result, human interaction is presented from a rather pessimistic and misanthropic point of view. According to Sartre, the gaze of the Other transforms the Self into an object (Ibid.: 44), while at the same time imposing on the Self an arbitrary value which the latter is incapable of altering or influencing in any way (Sartre 1956: 364). Thus the gaze of the Other robs the Self of its freedom of self-determination and obliges it to resort to an objectification of the Other in turn, as this is the only means by

which the Self can recuperate its freedom, that is, its subjectivity (Ibid.). Hence all human interaction takes the form of mutual antagonism (Jolivet 1965: 122), with the participants inevitably trapped in a battle of objectifying consciousnesses. Even in relationships supposedly based on love, friendship or kindness man cannot escape this constant combat, since even our attempts at tenderness and affection ultimately boil down to strategies aimed at objectifying the Other and thus reclaiming our own subjectivity (Sartre 1956: 364-79). It is this subjectivity, or at least the sense of it, which allows the Self to ignore its own ontological superfluity and to maintain the illusionary conviction that its existence is somehow necessary rather than contingent (Ibid.: 364). However, once the illusion is destroyed, the Self is beset by an existential crisis such as that symbolised in "Nausea" by a physical ailment periodically suffered by the novel's protagonist. Thereafter the Self can only escape from this crisis by consciously recreating itself as an object of its own free will, via the creation of a work of art for example, in this way affirming its own subjectivity in relation to itself and eternally safeguarding itself from the menacing gaze of the Other (Sartre 1956: 247).

We see then that the evolution of Sartre's existentialism actually takes the form of a complete inversion, and this inversion not only addresses itself to the function and value of subjectivity, objectivity, subjectifying and objectifying, but also to those of human relations on an emotional level. At the start of his career Sartre barely allows for the existence of altruism or the possibility of human interaction outside the framework of perpetual opposition, but after the war his writings undergo a change which reflects a growing recognition of the influence of external events on the determination of individual human destiny (Sartre 1970: 289), as well as the positive nature of human interaction when individuals join in a common cause (Anderson 1979: 107). At this time Sartre explores the idea of self-sacrifice as a means of forcing the Other to pass a favourable judgment on the Self (Sartre 1948: 238)<sup>1</sup>, thus rendering the latter capable of manufacturing its own absolution from the guilt that arises from the sense of its own freedom (Sartre 1947: 230). Greatly influenced by Marxism, Sartre reinterprets a big part of his original ontology in a socio-political context, and replaces the existential terror comprising a natural part of the human condition according to his former theories with the notion of guilt born instead of social inequality (Anderson 1979: 101; Jeanson 1963: 36). Basing himself on the dialectic model of history propagated by Marxism, he further replaces the judgment of the Other by that of the ideal proletarian society set to appear at the end of history (Sartre 1948: 331)<sup>2</sup> and so, ten years after the publication of "Nausea" and only five years after that of "Being and Nothingness", Sartre replaces his original strict rationality with a quasi-mythological idealism.

## **In the Valley of the Shadow of Death: Foundation and Evolution of the Philosophical Preoccupations of Albert Camus**

In contrast to the philosophical evolution of Sartre, that undergone by Camus is much easier to trace, passing as it does through a series of well-defined stages (Costes 1973: 47), each marked by a basic conceptualisation expressed within a primary text, namely "The Myth of Sisyphus", "The Rebel" and a proposed work never to be written, "The Myth of Nemesis". The first of these stages is that of the absurd, in which the author introduces the problem of the rational man confronted by a universe lacking any discernable reason for existing (Camus 1942: 55) and where human reason itself demarcates the stark and fundamental difference between the apparent immortality of nature and the human being, constantly haunted by the knowledge of his own inevitable demise. As he indicates clearly in particularly his first novel, "The Outsider", Camus experiences the awareness of this absurdity as a type of rejection of his existence by nature itself, yet he scorns any suggestion that this rejection should be dealt with via a negation of that existence, i.e. via suicide (Bree 1962: 61). On the contrary, he advises a strategy of courageous acceptance (Camus 1951: 16) and the seeking of happiness and value within the very absence of existential meaning (Mailhot 1973: 16, 166). In this regard he bases his reasoning primarily on his own quasi-mystical love of nature (Camus 1959: 172) and opposes the ultimate futility of both being and action via the simple joy of a purely corporeal life and its concomitant physical activities (Camus 1951: 20).

However, a corporeal existence remains under the constant shadow of death and suffering, meaning that those who, unlike the protagonist of "The Outsider", do not know the exact date and time of their own extinction, are obliged to devise some sort of strategy allowing them to face up to these destructive forces. It is this need, crucial for achieving any kind of genuine happiness, which ultimately leads the author to the second stage in his philosophical evolution, namely the stage of revolt. At the time he places great emphasis on the rejection of any and all ideological or religious ideas serving to distract man from the full recognition of his own mortality (Camus 1942: 75), and instead makes an effort to situate the meaning of life in an active moral opposition to this ineluctable fate (Camus 1951: 284), which he designates as a monstrous injustice committed against the whole of humanity (Camus 1942: 121). For Camus, resisting death in the most stubborn way possible, free from both the hope of salvation on the one hand (Ibid.: 137) and crushing hopelessness and self-loathing on the other (Gadourek-Backer 1963: 196), constitutes what he calls an "appeal" to the

very notion of true justice, while making such an appeal in itself serves to affirm human dignity and to give value to our existence.

Upon entering the third stage in his artistic development, Camus turns with greater attention to the question of ethics, drawing on his long-standing admiration of Hellenism (Bree 1962: 67) to come up with the idea, first expressed by the ancient Greek philosophers, that limitation constitutes the ideal measure of all morality (Camus 1959: 159). In this regard he postulates the existence of natural limits or boundaries inherent in all things, whether substances or actions, man or nature, and he advocates strict adherence to these limits as a general rule for moral behaviour (Fitch 1982: 51). Finally, in the novella "The Growing Stone" he suggests that the communion of men is in fact the most meaningful of human activities, as well as the only truly effective rampart against the dread of suffering and death (Camus 1947: 246). As a result, much like Sartre, Camus ends up promoting self-sacrifice as a means by which the individual can earn his inclusion in the group (Camus 1957: 188)<sup>3</sup>, and thus partake of the comfort and compassion it has to offer.

### **Philosophical Contradictions and Attempts at Resolution: The More Things Change...**

Despite the initial efforts by the two authors to justify the persistence of a moral imperative in their philosophical points of view, the contradiction between this feature and its situation within a universe supposedly lacking both divinity and reason remained largely unresolved. The idea advanced by Sartre, namely that freedom as the only true objective value demands by its very nature the promotion of the freedom of the Other is not particularly plausible, given the very subjectivity of this theory itself. On the other hand, Camus' exaltation of revolt against the "injustice" of death makes little sense in the absence of a transitive object sufficiently conscious to appreciate the opposition. The truth is that neither notion serves effectively as the foundation of an ethical system based on the logical progression of a reasoned argument, but instead is little more than reasoning superposed on a moral imperative constituting such a large part of the personal or psychological frame of reference of the two authors that neither one ever managed to separate it from his philosophical speculations. As a result, once the artificial superposition proved untenable, both ended up drawing inspiration from their childhood religious education in order to construct a more reasonable basis upon which to erect the edifice of their persistent sense of personal morality. Of course both continued to present these new schemes as the result of strictly secular philosophical reasoning, but in reality their religious, and specifically Christian, origins are easily identifiable. In

both cases the authors situate their analysis of the human condition within the framework of a kind of original sin leading from a state of innocence to one of culpability. In Sartre's case, this "Fall" manifests itself in the discovery, by the individual, of his own subjectivity, leading to a perpetual feeling of lacking authenticity, whereas for Camus it is instead the awakening of human reason which deprives the individual of the feeling that he shares a deep connection with nature and thus partakes of its apparent immortality. In either case, man feels himself "expelled" from a kind of metaphorical Eden, obliged to find a means of expiating the imperfection having led to this expulsion. In other words, both Sartre and Camus feel a need for purification, one of his sense of lacking authenticity and the other of his mortality, and to be judged worthy of existence, in the case of Sartre, and of acceptance within a community as supporting and comforting as the nature having rejecting him in the case of Camus. As within the Christian religion, purification operates via the mechanism of sacrifice, and specifically self-sacrifice for the sake of others, whether in the form of a group or the whole of human society, man in both cases imitating the archetype of Jesus in order to earn a favourable judgment from a higher authority. For Sartre this authority is the proletarian society, while Camus contents himself with the authority of any community of people. Thus, in the same way as Christian believers are supposedly divinely pardoned for their sins following the sacrifice of Jesus and accepted into Heaven, for Sartre a favourable judgment from the proletariat can extend a pardon to the bourgeois for his inauthentic past, following which he too may be admitted into the pantheon of formerly-advantaged citizens having forsaken their privileges and joined their worker class comrades in their struggle. For Camus on the other hand, always more concerned with the here and now, the communion of men itself constitutes the Paradise to which his sacrifice provides access, a shield of friendship and support against the onslaught of suffering and death.

### **Conclusion: A Brief Discussion on the Psychology of Religious Revolt**

It is clear that a large part of the writings of Sartre and Camus is little more than a secular reconstruction of a Christian philosophical scheme, in which God is merely replaced by a human society or community. The fact that both authors have recourse to this scheme can most probably be explained by their religious education on the one hand (Fitch 1982: 39; King 1974: 13), and their hailing from a cultural tradition almost wholly constructed on the Christian religion on the other (Legendre 2004: 23). However, given that both Sartre and Camus feel themselves obliged to employ arguments drawn from Christian sources in order to justify a moral imperative of which the

origins can surely be none other than this self-same Christianity, one may wonder why they at the same time feel obliged to reject in such a ferocious manner any spiritual value as inhabiting their childhood faith. Put another way, why does the rejection of religion by Sartre and Camus not lead either to a simultaneous rejection of the moral values to which the very same religion gave birth, as in the case of the Marquis de Sade? In order to respond to these questions, I decided to refer specifically to the discipline of Freudian psychoanalysis and to the notion of the Oedipus complex as set forth by Freud himself and by the psychoanalyst Alain Costes in his book on Camus, "La Parole Manquante". Following the latter's reasoning, I would suggest that the inability of Sartre and Camus to rid themselves of the idea of divinity arises from the fact that this represents for both some domineering influence in their lives, thus rendering it literally undeniable. In Sartre's case the idea of God represents his grandfather (Jeanson 1963: 116), while for Camus it represents his grandmother (Gadourek-Backer 1963: 13), both these figures exercising an inordinate influence on the two authors as a result of the absence of a father, who normally occupies the most important position in the life of a young boy. This absence has as result the irresolution of the Oedipus complex and the creation, in both of them, of a significant inferiority complex. In Freudian terms, feelings of inferiority allow the superego to operate an excessively repressive function in the individual consciousness vis-à-vis its various socially less acceptable and unacceptable desires. Ordinarily the superego is created based on the example of paternal authority (Freud 1971: 34), and its function as internal censor often manifests itself as a feeling of divine judgment (Ibid.: 37). Indeed, when this feeling is strong enough it can even be exteriorised by consciousness, which then represents the superego to itself as an objective divine presence in the world. Obviously such exteriorisation takes place more readily if the creation of the superego occurs within the framework of a religious education, as is the case for both Sartre and Camus. What is more, when the superego operates in an exaggerated manner, as is also the case for the two authors, it lends itself even more to exteriorisation of this type. However, because the only example of paternal authority present in the lives of Sartre and Camus is an illegitimate one, provided by the grandfather and grandmother instead of the actual father, the exteriorisation of the superego in their case resulted in their conceiving of it as an equally illegitimate divinity. The recurring presence of the divine in the writings of the two authors can thus be explained by the fact that God represents for both of them the influence of an illegitimate father-figure who at the same time is so domineering that neither is able to divest himself of it...which also explains their resentment of this influence, and thus of this God. In other words, while the origin of the philosophical principles underpinning the writings of Sartre

and Camus is undoubtedly the influence of the Christian religion, the reason why they feel obliged to base their theories on these principles is purely psychological. In the same way their atheism, which at first glance appears to be little more than a hostile reaction to a Christian upbringing, in fact represents in itself a psychological defence against a profound feeling of inferiority, born from the irresolution of the Oedipus complex. This atheism is not, therefore, the expression of a "natural" irreligiousness, and contrary to the notion expressed by the famous historian-philosopher Marcel Gauchet in his book "Le Désenchantement du Monde", namely that in the modern world the gods still persist while only their power wanes and dies (Gauchet 2005: 11), in the case of Sartre and Camus it is rather the opposite which is true, at least in a metaphorical sense: God may be dead, but his power persists.

- 
1. "Les Mains Sales"
  2. "Qu'est-ce que la Littérature?"
  3. "L'exil et le Royaume"
- 

## **Bibliography**

- ANDERSON T C. 1979. *The foundation and structure of Sartrean ethics*. Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas
- BREE G. 1962. *Camus : A collection of critical essays*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- CAMUS A. 1942. *Le mythe de Sisyphe*. Paris: Gallimard
- CAMUS A. 1947. *La peste*. Paris: Gallimard
- CAMUS A. 1951. *L'homme révolté*. Paris : Gallimard
- CAMUS A. 1957. *L'étranger*. Paris: Gallimard
- CAMUS A. 1957. *L'exil et le royaume*. Paris: Gallimard
- CAMUS A. 1959. *Noces / L'été*. Paris: Gallimard
- COSTES A. 1973. *Albert Camus ou la parole manquante*. Paris: Payot
- FITCH B T. 1982. *Camus et la religion*. Paris: Lettres Modernes Minard
- FREUD S. 1971. *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth
- GADOUREK-BACKER J. 1963. *Les innocents et les coupables : essai d'exégèse de l'œuvre d'Albert Camus*. The Hague: Mouton & Cie.
- GAUCHET M. 2005. *Le désenchantement du monde*. Paris: Gallimard
- JEANSON F. 1963. *Sartre par lui-même*. Paris: Seuil
- JOLIVET R. 1965. *Sartre ou la théologie de l'absurde*. Paris: Fayard
- KING T M. 1974. *Sartre and the sacred*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- LEGENDRE P. 2004. *Ce que l'Occident ne voit pas de l'Occident*. Paris: Fayard
- MAILHOT L. 1973. *Albert Camus : où, l'imagination du désert*. Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal

- SARTRE J-P. 1938. *La nausea*. Paris: Gallimard
- SARTRE J-P. 1947. *Théâtre*. Paris: Gallimard
- SARTRE J-P. 1948. *Les mains sales*. Paris: Gallimard
- SARTRE J-P. 1948. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?* Paris: Gallimard
- SARTRE J-P. 1956. *Being and nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*.  
New York: Philosophical Library
- SARTRE J-P. 1970. *The reprieve*. New York: Random House