



## **FRENCH EXISTENTIALISM. Consciousness, Ethics, and Relations with Others. (Value Inquiry Book Series 87) (Value Inquiry Book Series, V. 87)**

*By James Giles*

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This book is a critical appraisal of the distinctive modern school of thought known as French existentialism. It philosophically engages the ideas of the major French existentialists, namely, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Marcel, Camus, and, because of his central role in the movement, especially Sartre, in a fresh attempt to elucidate their contributions to contemporary philosophy.

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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

JAMES GILES is Acting Lecturer at the University of Copenhagen, and Tutor at Madingley Hall, University of Cambridge. He has also taught at the Hawaii College of Kansai Gaidai University, Japan, Aalborg University, and the University of Edinburgh. He is author of *No Self to be Found: The Search for Personal Identity* (1997), *A Study in Phenomenalism* (1994), *A Theory of Sexual Desire* (forthcoming), and editor of *Kierkegaard and Freedom* (forthcoming).

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### THE ETHICAL CONCEPT OF "ASSUMING" IN THE EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY OF SARTRE AND BEAUVOIR

Terry Keefe

What might reasonably be understood by the "existential" philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir is the early philosophy associated with the period up to the end of the 1940s; that is, before it begins to be reasonable to call them in some sense Marxists. This is part of the period that has recently come to be seen as that of Sartre's first ethics, for French and American commentators now commonly refer to Sartre's two ethics, and in many cases to a third that was emerging at the end of his life. His second ethics, however, is seen as dating from the early to mid 1960s, whereas his "existential philosophy" refers to positions adopted much earlier in his career-positions, essentially, that either lead up to Being and Nothingness in 1943, or develop more or less directly out of it. Many aspects of, and questions about, Sartre's first ethics-not least the way in which it is complemented, completed, or modified by the writings of Beauvoir-are by now familiar, some of them having been extensively and almost continuously discussed, in one form or another, from the mid-1940s onwards. But the concept of "assuming" has been badly neglected, although it plays an extremely important, even crucial, role in the moral thinking of both Sartre and Beauvoir from late in the 1930s until at least the end of the 1940s. In a general way, "assuming" might, in any case, be thought to be a key existentialist concept, linked with the injunction to assume responsibility for ourselves rather than handing it over to others, or to fate. Or, again, expressing the idea of facing up to reality rather than escaping from it into some kind of *mauvaise foi* or bad faith. The crucial terms in French-the verb "assumer" and the noun "assomption"-are obviously just two of a whole cluster of expressions used by Sartre and Beauvoir in this area, some of which do the same and related work, and others of which serve as points of contrast. These expressions include "bonne foi" and "mauvaise foi," "sincrit," "authenticit" and "inauthenticit," and so on. Two specific preliminary points about the terms "assumer" and "assomption" themselves are worth making. First, the noun "assomption" has little currency in non-technical French (except in its religious sense), yet Sartre uses it fairly commonly in his particular way. Second, dictionaries commonly give the verb "assumer" as having the basic meaning of "taking on," or "taking up"-as in taking on responsibilities or a particular role or office-then go on to refer to a second sense categorized as a neologism, and one that they often associate with Sartre himself. In other words, there is already a kind of *prima-facie* case for believing that Sartre and Beauvoir may be doing something special and distinctive with the terms as such, something that involves forging for themselves what I call a "concept of assuming."

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