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CHAPTER 5

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

ANTHONY HATZIMOYSIS

Biographical Sketch

The most famous French philosopher of the twentieth century, Jean-Paul Sartre, observed with an unflinching eye the moving generosity and the common duplicity, the existential revelations and the mundane self-deceptions, the intriguing varieties of the ordinary, and the pathological engagement with the world. Born in Paris in 1905, he entered the *École Normale Supérieure* in 1924, where he majored in philosophy, while showing systematic interest in psychology: he paid regular visits to patients at St Anne's Psychiatric Hospital, studied Jaspers's *General Psychopathology*, and volunteered as a subject in psychology experiments whose results formed the backdrop of his 1927 dissertation on "The Image in Psychological Life: Its Role and Nature."

Initially drawn to philosophy as a resource of ideas for his fiction writing, he dedicated himself to phenomenological research at the prompting of Raymond Aron, who arranged for Sartre's visit at the *Institut français* in Berlin: from September 1933 to June 1934, Sartre studied Husserl's major works, expanded the draft of his philosophical novel, *Nausea* (Sartre 2000), and composed his seminal essay on "Intentionality" (Sartre 1970). There follows a decade of phenomenological writings, including *The Transcendence of the Ego* (2004a), *The Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (2004b), and *The Imaginary* (2004c), characterized by the originality of Sartre's critique of idealism, as well as by the novelty of the topics he chose to explore.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Sartre was posted in the meteorological corps of the French army, and then incarcerated as a prisoner of war from early 1940 until his escape in the summer of 1941—during which he kept a diary that bears clear witness to the existentialist turn of his phenomenological thinking (Sartre 1984). 1943 sees the publication of Sartre's *magnum opus, Being and Nothingness*, which culminates his involvement with phenomenological ontology and sets the context for the political, aesthetic, and broadly construed psychoanalytic projects he undertook until his death in 1980: he wrote the script for a cinematic biography of Freud (Sartre 1984), participated in public debates over the status of psychoanalysis (Cannon 1991), and concluded his career with a voluminous exploration of the formative years in the life of a concrete individual, Gustav Flaubert (Sartre 1981). However, even the most abstract of his philosophical works involve vivid psychological portraits delivered with magisterial strokes which make a lasting impression in the reader's mind.

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Critique of the Reification of Psychic States

For Sartre, consciousness is a movement of fleeing oneself: to be conscious is to transcend oneself toward something. The world encountered in experience is value-laden: "it is things which abruptly unveil themselves to us as hateful, sympathetic, horrible, loveable" (Sartre 1970: 5). Accordingly, our sentiments are attuned to changes because they are a kind of perceptual state of those aspects of reality relevant to our concerns; they are "ways of discovering the world" (Sartre 1970: 5).

Consciousness is primarily a *positional* consciousness of a certain object, in the sense that consciousness sets before itself the object as a target of its intentional activity. When one is positionally conscious of an object, one is also *non-positionally* conscious of being conscious of that object. Pre-reflective consciousness is thus non-positionally aware of itself as being directed toward its objects. On the ground of those distinctions, Sartre raises a forceful critique on the traditional conception of the "Ego," a cover-term for the referent of the first-person pronoun. For Sartre, the "I" could not be residing inside consciousness since consciousness has no inside. If the "I" exists, it can only exist "outside, *in the world*" (Sartre 2004a: 1; emphasis in the original).

Sartre asserts that the "I" appears in reflection, it presents itself to us, it is given to our intuition; hence, it could not be easily dismissed as an accident of our grammar, or a figment of cultural imagination. He effectively undermines, though, the view that the ego is always present in our mental life, lurking behind every conscious move: the "I" arises when consciousness turns its attention to its acts, and thinks of a particular being as the locus of certain passions or actions. The overall point of his discussion is that if consciousness is to be a genuine transcendence toward the world, then the ego of philosophical tradition ought to be transcended. The unity of our consciousness as a whole is found not in an ego, but in the temporal interplay of our sensations, thoughts, and affects: "consciousness refers constantly back to itself, whoever says 'a consciousness' means the whole of consciousness" (Sartre 2004a: 39).

When it is narrated, our experience is considered under certain headings, such as "qualities of character," "acts," and "states." A psychic state appears when a reflective consciousness turns its attention on past conscious activities and surveys those consciousnesses under the heading of particular concepts. However, in a reversal of actual priorities, the reflectively created state is taken to underlie one's feelings, thoughts, and actions. The state misleadingly appears as the principle that ties together various activities of consciousness, and holds the meaning of one's relation to the world. The analysis of that relation becomes an exploration of the allegedly hidden meaning of conscious experience. Our feelings, thoughts, and actions provide clues to the mechanics of each psychic state that acts on the agent as a physical force, accounting for her past attitude and conditioning her future stance. Hence, the alleged aim of the scientist is to uncover the meaning of the state through the psychoanalysis of verbal and physical behavior. On this point, cognitive psychology and classical psychoanalysis concur in their view of psychic states as entities to which the agent can have only restricted access, and over which she may enjoy very limited control. The vocabulary of passivity that permeates much of the folk and scientific discourse on emotions reflects a conception of human beings as governed by entities dwelling somewhere between the

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spontaneous activities of the stream of consciousness, and the bodily constitution of our interaction with the world. That space in between the mental and the physical is that of the psychological, whose dual character speaks to the paradoxical nature of psychic states: passive yet purposive, involuntary but intentional, evaluative no less than physiological. A further, and even deeper problem, for Sartre, is that zooming in on psychic states produces theoretical short-sightedness: psychic states cannot be studied independently of human nature and the world, since the psychic facts that we meet in our research are never prior: "they, in their essential structure, are reactions of man to the world: they therefore presuppose man and the world, and cannot take on their true meaning unless those two notions have first been elucidated" (Sartre 2004b: 7–8).

The Phenomenology of Emotional Experience

Sartre's critique of the reification of psychic states paves the way for his original account of emotional experience. An emotion is not a clog of mental machinery, but how the whole of consciousness operates in a certain situation. During an emotional episode, one's relation to the world is "magically" transformed by means of one's body. The world is understood as a totality of phenomena linked by a complex network of references to each other. In the world of daily activity, we experience reality as a combination of demands and affordances; the link between them is experienced as ruled by deterministic processes between causes and effects. The "instrumental world" of action is captured in the "pragmatic intuition" of the situation that makes certain moves available for the subject, while denying her others. For Sartre, the world encountered in emotional experience—what we characterize as a "hateful," "joyful," or "bleak" world—is distinguished from the instrumental world. The agent's response in an emotional episode engages the overall stance and physiology of the body not to effect material changes in the world, but to alter her perception of reality, and, through that, her relation to the world: "during emotion, it is the body which, directed by the consciousness, changes its relationship to the world so that the world should change its qualities" (Sartre 2004b: 41).

To appreciate the significance of Sartre's phenomenological approach to emotions, it is important to grasp Sartre's argumentation against two prominent alternative accounts, on the one hand, the James-Lange reductively naturalistic model and, on the other, the classical psychoanalytic view of emotional phenomena.

Critique of Reductive Naturalism about Emotions

Sartre conceives of his sketch for a theory of the emotions as an experiment in phenomenological psychology. Its subject matter is the human being in her situation, and its objective is to identify the essence of emotional phenomena by showing how embodied consciousness constitutes their meaning.

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The meaning of an emotion is the main casualty in the first classic theory Sartre examines. The "Peripheric" theory is thus called because it locates the source of the emotion in the periphery of mental activity, namely in the body. According to the reductionist version of that theory, as put forward by William James and Carl Lange, the feeling of somatic changes as they occur is the emotion. The reductionist theory maps emotions to bodily feelings. However, the model is subject to the charge of irrelevance: even if the bodily changes occurring in feeling jealous, for instance, are a synthesis of all the bodily changes occurring in feeling angry, sad, disgusted, and afraid, it is not on the basis of being (positionally) aware of such bodily changes that one is (non-positionally) aware of feeling jealous. Rather it is by focusing on the manifest features of the world—the smirk in her face, her unpersuasive excuses—that one is attributing betrayal to the other, and jealousy to oneself. If jealousy should be identified with perception it would be the perception of her dismissive gesture, not of the change in the location of your diaphragm.

The distinction between the two types of awareness shows the force and the subtlety of the Sartrean critique. Sartre's complaint is not that, for example, in feeling jealous one is not undergoing any bodily processes. His criticism is that when one is focusing on an emotion, one finds "something *more* and something *else*" than mere physiological processes (Sartre 2004b: 15; emphasis in the original). Something *more*, since however much information one accumulates about the mechanics of bodily events, one is none the wiser as to which, if any, of the emotions these events pick out, in the absence of any information about how the agent perceives, evaluates, or responds to the salient features of a situation. And something *else*, since however much a bodily state is perturbed in an emotional occurrence, the physiological disturbance cannot account for the disturbing character of emotional experience. For instance, part of the explanation for the discrepancy between a (positional) awareness of pulse rate, and a (non-positional) awareness of terror is that the former is exhausted by the perception of modifications in one's body, while the latter denotes a "relation between our psychic being and the world." That relation is not an arbitrary product of "quantitative, continuous modifications of vegetative states," but the realization of an "organised and describable structure" that involves the human being in a situation (Sartre 2004b: 17).

The Peripheric theory locates emotion on the inner side of bodily experience, at the cost of leaving the agent's relation to the world outside the theory's preview. Cut off from the rest of reality, emotion becomes a self-enclosed, private, internal affair of someone who is subject to bodily perturbations. Hence, emotion is deprived of its significance: the theory accounts neither for what the emotion indicates for the life of the person who is angry, jealous, or joyous, nor for what his anger, jealousy, or joy is really about (Hatzimoysis 2011: 41–77).

Critique of the Classical Psychoanalytic Metatheory

Sartre's phenomenological discourse is opposed to a major principle of classical psychoanalysis: the postulation of unconscious emotions, or other non-conscious states, as explanatory entities of human phenomena. The importance of interpretations generated during

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the psychoanalytic process is not questioned by Sartre. What he doubts is the validity of the meta-psychological interpretation of the practice. As Sartre understands it, the psychoanalytic theory dissociates the phenomenon analyzed from its signification. What the phenomenon allegedly signifies is the repressed state that, unbeknownst to the subject, produces the behavior under consideration. The relation between the behavior and its signification is supposed to be that between an effect and its cause. The former depends on the latter for its production, but, like all causally related items, they are distinct things that may exist separately from each other. It is claimed by classical psychoanalysts that the repressed desire that causes the behavior lies outside the domain of conscious engagement with the world. Accordingly, an examination of how an agent experiences a situation will not enable us to understand her behavior without invoking a meta-theory of causal connections that designates fixed relations between the events under consideration and their alleged sources.

Whatever the metaphysical credentials of a theory of psychic causality, the problem is that it undermines the very practice that it is supposed to sustain. Viewing human conduct as passively produced by forces that lie outside the domain of meaningful activity is in clear tension with the analytic practice of looking into the particular features of a situation, as these are conveyed by the analysand's communication, in order to interpret her behavior. And it is precisely this tension, between the practitioner's search for meaning and the theoreticians' postulation of fixed causal relations that erodes the foundations of the psychoanalytic approach to emotions: "The profound contradiction in all psychoanalysis is that it presents at the same time a bond of causality and a bond of understanding between the phenomena that it studies. These two types of relationship are incompatible" (Sartre 2004b: 32–33).

Meaningful behavior cannot be interpreted satisfactorily by an appeal to unconscious causes, not so much because they are unconscious, but because they are causes. However, casting doubts about the unconscious need not be followed by a declaration of mental transparency. Sartre only asserts that the signification of an emotional phenomenon should be sought in our engagement with the world. This does not mean that "the signification must be perfectly explicit. There are many possible degrees of condensation and of clarity" (Sartre 2004b: 31–32).

Existential Psychoanalysis

Bringing our ever present, yet non-thematized, self-awareness into the light, articulating our pre-reflective consciousness into an explicit narrative about how we view the world, is a task for existentialist psychoanalysis, that is Sartre's invention of a therapeutic method grounded on his ontology of conscious being (Sartre 2003: part IV).

Consciousness is non-positionally conscious of itself, it is a "being-for-itself," a being that is a presence to itself, and thus, a being that is always at a distance from itself; that distance is impossible to cross, precisely because—not being some physical distance—it is nothing. That *nothingness* is the hallmark of our way of being, which—contrary to the reifying metaphors of both idealist and materialist metaphysics—is not a thing, but a consciousness *of* things. A being-in-itself, such as a table or a chair, is a plenitude of being, identical to itself, always being what it is; a conscious being, marked by a distance to itself, is a lack of being, non-identical to what it is (Hatzimoysis 2011: 23–39).

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The constant striving of acquiring identity, of becoming one with oneself, not as an inert object, but as a free agent, marks each conscious being's unique way of being, and constitutes her fundamental project—what she makes herself to be in and through the way she responds to the world. Each person's fundamental project is a unique and freely chosen way of becoming oneself, in her unceasing attempt to solve the problem of how to be something complete and at one with oneself, while being a free agent, always throwing herself out of her past toward the future.

The responsibility that comes with the realization that we are free, that even not to choose, in certain circumstances, is just the choice to not choose, is for many people too much to bear, and is thus masked through attempts to live in bad faith. Often assimilated to the epistemic phenomenon of self-deception, bad faith could be better understood as a project of falsely identifying oneself either with one's *facticity*—whatever about one's past, one's body, or one's historical reality cannot be otherwise—or with one's *transcendence*—the ability to constantly move beyond one's present being, toward an as yet unformed self. Identifying with one's facticity allows one to think of oneself not as an agent, but as an overdetermined subject, thus rescinding any responsibility for how one lives. Alternatively, identifying oneself with pure transcendence allows one to pretend that one's choices are unrelated to the economic, social, political, or cultural facts of one's actual situation.

Existentialist psychoanalysis aims to help the analysand grow out of her immersion into bad faith, and toward an authentic way of being (Sartre 2003: 94n). As a therapeutic method, it purports to help the patient move away from impure reflection—that is the common tendency to conceive oneself as an object, with fixed properties, which supposedly determine the course of one's life, and toward a purifying reflection that makes the agent recognize the network of rationalizations, convenient oversights, and deliberate exculpations, which have led the patient to gradually trap herself into a distorted self-image.

We have to acknowledge that we are normative beings, that our identities are formed by the commitments we undertake to act, think, or respond affectively in certain ways—to acknowledge that a conscious being "*has to be* what it is" (Sartre 2003: 21; emphasis in the original). We also have to face up to the particular commitments each one of us has, as these can be revealed by an opening to our own experience of the phenomena, to the way the world—with its challenges, affordances, and rewards—appear to ourselves, given the projects in which our situated freedom unfolds (Webber 2009).

That opening to the phenomena forms the ground of existentialist psychoanalysis, which, according to Sartre, differs from traditional psychoanalysis in at least three respects: it encourages flexibility, as it denies that there is a fixed therapeutic protocol, serviceable for all types of patients, irrespective of the particularities of their situation; it promotes the collaboration of analyst and analysand, so as to undermine the myth of the patient's passivity, while increasing awareness of the shared responsibility for what transpires in a therapeutic context; and, finally, as the therapy progresses over time, it gives the subject's own "intuition" of her experience an important role, over the ready-made interpretations supplied in the analyst's textbooks (2003: 594).

Training in existential psychoanalysis is itself a demanding process, requiring no less than a secure grasp of phenomenological analysis of the concrete existence, that is, the embodied "human being-in-situation," in its three ontological dimensions of being-in-itself, being-for-itself, and being-for-others (Sartre 2003: 27).

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The overall principle of existential psychoanalysis is that each agent is a totality and not a collection, and thus she expresses herself even in the most insignificant or superficial of her behaviors: "there is not a taste, a mannerism, or a human act which is not revealing . . . A gesture refers to a *Weltanschauung* and we sense it" (2003: 479). Its goal is to decode and interpret the behavioral patterns, so as to articulate them conceptually. Its point of departure is the pre-reflective awareness of lived experience. And its overall goal is to reach not some past psychic complex, but the choice that renders meaningful how one lives—so that the analysand achieves authenticity, owning up to the projects through which she, as a situated freedom, is making herself into the person she is (Sartre 2003: 589–593).

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