

Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions - Jean-Paul Sartre¹

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1. Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) wrote one of the first philosophical treatises of the twentieth century to bear the word ‘emotion’ on its title. Published in 1939, the *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* culminates in an extended “Outline for a Phenomenological Theory”, whose aim is to do justice to the signification of the emotion, by revealing which aspects of reality are signified, in what way, and to what purpose, when one is emotionally engaged with the world.

I shall offer an overview of the Sartrean theory of emotion, focusing mainly on the account delineated in the *Sketch*. My overview will draw as well on certain texts immediately preceding and following that monograph, so as to provide a more rounded picture of the Sartrean theory. Those texts, as their subtitles emphasize, are placed under the heading of phenomenology. They include three books: *The Transcendence of the Ego: Outline of a Phenomenological Description* (1937), *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (1940), and *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (1943). To those books we should add a seminal article, composed around 1934: “A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenology: Intentionality”.

Reading the *Sketch* in the midst of those works might help us avoid two misunderstandings. One is to think that Sartre overlooks affective phenomena which could not be easily identified as emotions. The other is to assume that what Sartre says about emotions is intended to apply to all types of affective phenomena.

Another preliminary remark is due regarding the relation of the Sartrean theory to the phenomenological tradition. It might be thought that Sartre’s interest in emotion arose through his reading of some classic phenomenological texts, which include important ideas about the nature of affective experience. Given that Sartre begun drafting his views about emotion around the time of studying those texts, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that his theory builds upon the views encountered in Husserl’s texts, elaborated with a pragmatist twist, found in

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Heidegger's work; that hypothesis, though, is inaccurate. Let me recount some pertinent facts about Sartre's reception of phenomenology.

2. Sartre's Encounter with Phenomenology

The *Sketch* is a product of Sartre's systematic work on conscious activity in its perceptual, conceptual, imaginative, and affective exemplifications. That work began to acquire its shape around 1934, when Sartre studied in the original Edmund Husserl's published monographs, including the *Logical Investigations*, the *Lectures on Inner Time Consciousness*, the *Ideas*, and the *Cartesian Mediations*. However, Sartre's reading of Husserl should be placed in a proper context, if we are to appreciate both Sartre's serious debt to the Husserlian *opus*, as well as the originality of Sartre's reconception of the practice and range of phenomenological inquiry. My understanding of that issue is that while Sartre's encounter with phenomenology was an eye-opening experience, the way he read—or, arguably, misread—Husserl's own work, depended heavily on the intellectual concerns that occupied Sartre before that encounter, and which subsequently flourished thanks to Sartre's unique talent of making lived experience resonate through even some of the most demanding pieces of philosophical writing (the "Introduction" of *Being Nothingness* is a case in point).

From September 1933 to June 1934, Sartre is a visiting researcher at the Institute Français in Berlin, with a view to explore, as stated in his candidature dossier, "the relations of the psychological to the physical". That project was to develop an issue already discussed in Sartre's 1927 dissertation on "The Image in Psychological Life: Its Role and Nature". Hence, when Sartre embarks on the study of Husserlian phenomenology, he is already familiar with some of the research in the analysis of consciousness, mainly from three sources. The first is the attendance to the fluid character of human experience, intuitively given to the first-person perspective, as detailed in Bergson's writings. The second is the field of cognitive psychological experiments, especially on perceptual and imaginative processes, for which Sartre would frequently volunteer as a subject. The third is the domain of pathological phenomena, about which he read in Karl Jaspers' *Allgemeine Psychopathologie*, and in which he kept a live interest during the 1930s, as testified by his regular visits, as an observer, at a major clinic in Paris, St Anne's Psychiatric Hospital.

Even more prominent than the scientific approach to psychological events, though, was Sartre's preoccupation with the narrative understanding of human experience. That preoccupation bore two fruits. The first was a series of essays on the work of Sartre's favourite novelists: "With the American writers, with Kafka and with Camus in France, the contemporary novel has found its style" (1947, 220). The theme that runs through those essays is how consciousness lives its body through one's interaction with both the human and the inanimate world.

The second fruit was the completion of Sartre's first novel—and one the most widely read works of 20th century literature—whose subject matter is an affective phenomenon: *Nausea* (1938).

3. Affectivity in *Nausea*

Although it used to be taken as the entry-point to Sartre's thought, *Nausea* does not figure large in contemporary discussions of Sartre's philosophy. That is to an extent justified by the need to keep separate things which should not be confused, such as prose fiction and rigorous argumentation. However, when it comes to the Sartrean view of emotion, *Nausea* remains an invaluable source of insights into the phenomenology of affective experience. We may restate, in summary form, some of those insights as follows.

As experienced by the subject, the qualities characteristic of an emotional experience are not freak mental occurrences, sprung up without reason, and which are then spread out onto a neutral world; rather, during an affective experience, it is a value loaded world that comes in contact with the affected subject: "Now I see; I remember better what I felt the other day on the sea-shore when I was holding that pebble. It was a sort of sweet disgust. How unpleasant it was! And it came from the pebble, I am sure of that, it passed from the pebble into my hands. Yes, that's it, that's exactly it: a sort of nausea in the hands." (1938, 22).

The affective state is not some internal affair, cut off from the external world, since it encompasses elements of the experienced environment. Two features of surrounding objects are particularly pronounced in the affective experience recounted in the novel: colors and contours—here is a characteristic extract: The bartender

“is in shirt-sleeves with mauve braces (...) which can scarcely be seen against the blue shirt; they are (...) buried in the blue, but this is false modesty; in fact they won’t allow themselves to be forgotten, they annoy me with their sheep-like stubbornness, as if setting out to become purple, they had stopped somewhere on the way without giving up their pretensions (...) His blue cotton shirt stands out cheerfully against a chocolate-colored wall. That too brings on the nausea. Or rather it is the nausea. The nausea isn’t inside me: I can feel it over there on the wall, on the braces, everywhere around me.” (1938, 34–35).

Sartre appears to push that thought to its anti-subjectivist extreme. In a reversal of traditional priorities, the novel’s hero denies that the affective state dwells inside himself: nausea “is one with the café, it is I whom am inside *it*.” (1938, 35).

Of particular significance for the subsequent development of Sartre’s theory of emotion, is the way that the novel’s hero responds to the onset of nausea:

“It is out of laziness, I suppose that the world looks the same day after day. Today it seemed to want to change. And in that case anything, *anything* could happen (...) An absolute panic took hold of me (...) [But] as long as I could fix objects nothing would happen: I looked at as many as I could (...) my eyes went rapidly from one to the other to catch them out and stop them in the middle of their metamorphosis (...) I tried to reduce them to their everyday appearance by the power of my gaze.” (1938: 114-115).

It might be thought that trying to affect the constitution of things, or to halt oncoming events “by the power of one’s gaze” is not sensible, since it is nothing sort of relying on magic. And yet, as we shall see, that involvement of magic into the constitution of an emotional experience, is a crucial aspect of the phenomenological account of emotion that Sartre will draw in the *Sketch*.

Another phenomenon explored in the novel is that of feeling something *as* felt by others, even when that is as unusual an intentional object as a particular stretch of time: “I could feel the afternoon all through my heavy body. Not my afternoon, but theirs, the one thousand citizens of Bouville were going to live in common. At this moment, after their long copious dinner, they were getting up from the table and for them something had died. Sunday had spent its light-hearted youth.” (1938, 76–77). The narration of such experiences brings to the fore the elusive

character of what—in contemporary philosophical literature—goes by the name of ‘atmosphere’: “I don’t like these peculiar days: the cinemas put on matinees, the school-children have the day off; there is a vague holiday feeling in the streets which never stops appealing for your attention but disappears as soon as you take any notice of it.” (1938, 91).

It is worth mentioning, finally, one out of the several instances of the narrative’s attention to certain aspects of cognitive phenomenology: “if only I could stop thinking, that would be something of an improvement. Thoughts are the duller things on earth (...) They stretch out endlessly and they leave a funny taste in the mouth.” (1938, 144).

Nausea offers a vivid narration of affective phenomenology, in the sense of what it is like for a subject to have an affective experience. However, Sartre is also intent to articulate a phenomenology of the affective, in the sense of a systematic analysis of the structure of consciousness during an emotional episode. Let us see the main elements of that phenomenological analysis.

4. Aims and Methods of Phenomenological Analysis

The philosophy of Sartre is characterized by certain methodological and conceptual distinctions, which inform his analysis of emotions. Methodologically, Sartre highlights the importance of the perspective from which an affective phenomenon is approached, for example whether our outlook is that of an involved agent, or of a disengaged observer. Conceptually, he works with different modalities of conscious awareness, such as unreflective *versus* reflective, positional *versus* non-positional, and thetic *versus* non-thetic, whose distinct character helps us capture what is distinctive about the different ways in which one is affectively related to the world.

Blurring the limits between different notions of consciousness, or running together methodological standpoints that are clearly different, is an error whose frequency in the history of philosophy is not coincidental. According to Sartre, that theoretical error has important practical implications, since it sustains a picture of the human being as a passive spectator of psychological events for which he cannot hold himself accountable. On the contrary, Sartre brings questions of accountability to the forefront of his phenomenological agenda, by approaching affectivity in terms of how one responds to the demands and affordances of a situation; he thus invites us to look at an emotional episode in light of a subject’s affective project. To take a rather simple case: in having a headache “I can discover in myself an

intentional affectivity directed toward my pain in order to ‘suffer’, in order to accept it with resignation, or in order to reject it, in order to value it (...) in order to escape it” (1943, 356). What constitutes the emotional aspect of each of those experiences, what the subject himself experiences as an instance of resignation, or of despair, or of pride—or, more accurately, of proud suffering—is not the ache as such, localized in the head, but how one engages with it; and that engagement is part of (and thus can only be made intelligible in light of) the subject’s fundamental project—what he makes himself to be in and through the way he responds to the givens of his situation (1943, Part I, chap. 2; Part II, chap. 1; cf. Barnes 1984; Cabestan 2004).

The normative character of each person’s fundamental project is evident not only in the way the person responds emotionally to his situation, but also in the way he himself conceives of that response. The traditional conception of emotional response is as the manifestation of psychical forces that live in mind’s netherworld. Affective states supposedly lie dormant in one’s psyche, waiting for an external trigger that would let them loose; hence, the grammar of passive voice (‘my anger was triggered...’, or ‘my hate was awakened...’, etc.), and the literature on the human heart as a field of untamed forces, which move independently of each other, pushing around the human subject, which is sometimes successfully, sometimes vainly, trying to resist their power; the most a subject can do is watch, record, or ruminate about the upheavals, the turbulences, and the tribulations of those states. That conception casts affectivity as an internal, self-referential occurrence, disengaged from the world: it, thus, results in a misrepresentation of lived experience, which is actually an unceasing engagement with a value-laden world (correcting that misconception is one of the primary aims of existential psychoanalysis; cf. Sartre 1943, 578–595). A phenomenological account needs to reestablish our connection to reality, by achieving two explanatory ends: (i) it ought to show how exactly in an emotional episode our consciousness finds itself out there, in a welcoming, or menacing, in a joyful, or horrible world (Sartre 1934, 44), and (ii) it should do justice to the ways we are both affected by, and effecting changes to a situation (Sartre 1939, 40–52). That double aim partly accounts both for the richness and the tensions that characterize the Sartrean approach.

5. Consciousness and the Structure of the Affective Domain

Sartre’s phenomenological account begins at the plane of affective experience before one’s reflection *upon*, and theorizing *about*, that experience takes off. Pre-reflective consciousness is

the ordinary consciousness of objects in the world; reflective consciousness is the consciousness of being conscious of an object. Pre-reflective consciousness is a positional consciousness of a certain object, in the sense that consciousness posits, sets before itself, the object as a target of its intentional activity. However, when one is positionally conscious of a particular object, one is non-positionally conscious of being conscious of that object. Pre-reflective consciousness is thus non-positionally aware of itself as being directed towards its objects. For Sartre every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself (1937, 9–16; 1943, 9–12).

When we think and talk about our experience, the life of consciousness is represented under certain headings, such as ‘qualities of character,’ ‘physical acts,’ and ‘affective states’ (1937, 21–26). Those headings impose some order into past conscious experience, transforming continuous instances of conscious activity into isolable states. However, according to Sartre, this picture presents conscious experience the wrong way round. In reality, what comes first is the conscious activity directed at the world; the psychological state follows, as the outcome of grouping—by means of reflection—several activities under one heading. That grouping generates psychological categories which transcend consciousness, in the sense that those states appear as fixed entities with set boundaries, which share nothing of the fluid and luminous character of conscious experience. Those transcendent psychological states are then erroneously conceived as pre-existing members of one psychological whole, which embraces and governs every aspect of our conscious life.

Sartre asserts that affective states make their appearance when one reflects on one’s past mental or physical activities, on one’s actions, judgements, or feelings. Take for instance the relation between the feeling of lust and the state of love. Feeling lust at the sight of a particular person is an experience absorbed with the attractive qualities of that individual. Experienced as a direct engagement with the world, the upheaval of a particular feeling towards someone marks the intentional connection between my consciousness and that being. The feeling of lust is a conscious activity occurring instantaneously or through a limited time span, and one that meets Sartre’s absolute principle of consciousness, i.e., to be an instant of lust and to feel as an instant of lust are one and the same thing: there is no gap within the ‘consciousness (of) lust’ between appearing and being (1937, 22–23).

The genitive construction ‘consciousness (of) lust’ might give the impression that in the course of ordinary encounter with the world, there is a thing called ‘lust’ to which consciousness pays attention. That interpretation is misleading. Lust is not an object for consciousness; it is consciousness itself as it experiences its intentional object. The genitive participle ‘of’ is put in brackets so as to signal that the grammatical construction purports to characterize what a particular consciousness is (namely, lust), not what the consciousness is about (its intentional object, the particular person who has arrested my sexual attention).

However, if we were to move from the level of emotional encounter with the world, to the higher level of reflection upon that type of encounter, our consciousness could take in its purview the emotion-consciousness. At that level, lust or other emotional experiences would themselves become an object of conscious examination and, thus, the locution ‘consciousness of lust’ (free of internal brackets) would denote the second-order activity of (reflective) consciousness focusing upon its (pre-reflective) conscious activities. The confusion of the first-order level of the (lustful, despairing, or joyous) experience of the world, with the second-order level of the consideration of such an experience by the (reflective) subject is a major source of difficulties for the adequate analysis of affective phenomena.

A feeling, according to Sartrean phenomenology, is a distinct manner in which consciousness is directed at the world, while a state is the reflective product of consciousness' taking purview of its past activities. To the activity of feelings, we may contrast the passivity of states. Affectivity is first and foremost a consciousness, and all consciousness is directed at an object. Sartre's account of feeling is premised on those two claims. "Feelings have special intentionalities," they represent a way of consciousness' transcending itself towards the world. "To hate Paul is to intend Paul as a transcendent object of consciousness." (1940: 69) Or, as Sartre put it in his very first essay on phenomenology, affective consciousnesses are ways of "discovering the world" (1934: 45).

6. Emotion, Meaning and Function

Feelings and psychological states form an important part of our affectivity. They have not, though, attracted as much attention, nor have they enjoyed so detailed philosophical exploration, as emotional episodes. Sartre's account of emotions is justly celebrated for the original and

ingenious way it attempts to account for the significance of emotion. Emotion for Sartre is not an optional clog of mental machinery that can be added to, or subtracted from the traditional list of psychological faculties. Emotions is neither an aggregate of various parts—physiological, conceptual, perceptual, volitional—each of which has a fixed meaning, identifiable independently from what goes on in the rest of the agent’s conscious engagement with reality. Rather, emotion for Sartre, is the synthetic totality of a human being in a situation: “it is that human reality itself, realizing itself in the form of ‘emotion’” (1939, 12).

In the *Sketch*, Sartre presents emotion as the conscious transformation, by means of one’s body, of a situation: what changes is how the world is experienced by the subject and, consequently, how the subject responds to a thus transformed world (1939, 34–61). The world is understood as a totality of phenomena linked in a network of mutual references. The way in which each phenomenon relates to others defines the type of world encountered by the subject. We should, thus, distinguish between at least two worlds: the world of action and the world of emotion (1939, 74–78). In the former, we experience reality as a combination of demands and affordances; the link between them is itself perceived as governed 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 him others. The emotional apprehension of the world, on the other hand, hooks on to those qualities or aspects that carry affective meaning for the agent. The joyful, hateful, or bleak world, far from being identical to the world of action, is clearly distinguished from the instrumental world. What appears to bring forth the emotional stance towards the world, is that the situation presents the agent with demands that he is unable to meet—and his emotional response (be it joyous, angry, or sad) consists in a pattern of cognitive and physiological changes which reduce the urgency, lower the intensity, or neutralize the force of those demands.

The *Sketch* purports to analyze affectivity in terms of the functions served by our emotive reactions to a situation: “We cannot understand an emotion unless we look for its signification. And this, by its nature, is of a functional order. We are therefore led to speak of the finality of emotions” (1939, 28). Faced with a situation that makes strong or unbearable demands, the agent responds not in order to effect changes in the world (that would be a practical response), but with

a view to alter the evaluative parameters of the situation, so that the demands raised by the situation are diffused:

“We can now conceive what an emotion is. It is a transformation of the world. When the paths before us become too difficult, or when we cannot see our way, we can no longer put up with such an exacting and difficult world. All ways are barred and nevertheless we must act. So then we try to change the world; that is, to live it as though the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes but by magic (...) Emotional behaviour seeks by itself, and without modifying the structure of the object, to confer another quality upon it, a lesser existence or a lesser presence” (1939, 39–41).

At the center of this transformation is the living body—or what in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre calls “the body as being-for-itself” (1943, 330)—“during emotion, it is the body which, directed by consciousness, changes its relationship with the world so that the world should change its qualities” (1939, 41). Our bodies are the “instruments of incantation” (1939, 47), and that is why “to believe in magical behavior”—as opposed to merely feigning an emotion—“one must be physically upset” (1939, 50).

Emotional consciousness lives the new world it has thereby constituted, “lives it directly, commits itself to it, and suffers from the qualities that the concomitant behavior has outlined” (1939, 51). Within that emotionally transformed world, the qualities that make up one’s social environment are not recognized as one’s projections, but as genuine features of the situation, which exercise a pull on the agent: “the man who is angry sees on the face of his opponent the objective quality of asking for a punch on the nose” (1943, 248).

7. The Emotional Transformation of the World

Since the changes effected in an emotional episode do not alter the material constitution of things, nor do they concern a prudential choice of some alternative course of action, which would result in different practical outcomes, Sartre calls the transformation brought about by emotion ‘magical’. Relatedly, in the final section of the *Sketch*, emotion is characterized as a fall: “an abrupt fall of consciousness into the *magic*” (1939, 60).

The exact role of magic in Sartre's theory has recently been at the center of an intense scholarly debate. In spelling out his conception of emotional world as a world of magic, Sartre appears to offer two different, and at a first reading, equally compelling, accounts of how a subject may experience affectively a situation. On the one account, that is prevalent in most of the *Sketch*, it is the emotive subject which transforms the world through the transformation of his non-reflective consciousness of the world; an emotion is thus understood as a process of constitution of a magic world, by making use of one's body as instrument of incantation (1939, 47). On the other account, during an emotional episode, the subject apprehends the world as already magical: "the magic and the meaning of the emotions came from the world and not from ourselves (...) magic [is experienced as] as a real quality of the world (...)" (1939, 58). The difference between the two accounts is crucial, as it concerns how and why the relations between objects are changed. According the former account, "it is we who constitute the magic of the world to replace a deterministic activity which cannot be realized"; according to the latter account, "the world itself is unrealizable and reveals itself suddenly as a magical environment" (1939, 57). Whether, and if so, how exactly the two accounts can be rendered compatible is a matter of some controversy (Hatzimoysis 2014a makes a case for the coherence of Sartre's different remarks, whose consistency is astutely put into question by Richmond's (2010) seminal discussion of magic in the Sartrean *corpus*; cf. Richmond 2014. Hartmann (2016), and Elpidorou (2016), purport to resolve that debate, by offering alternative detailed readings of Sartre's conception of emotion; cf. Vanello 2019).

It might facilitate the analysis of that issue to draw certain distinctions, which might lead to an approach that is perhaps more complicated, yet also more faithful to the phenomenology of affective experience.

One distinction concerns the emotions upon which each of the two Sartrean accounts, applies: hence, the first account (where magic is effected by bodily consciousness) might be taken to concern only cases of fear, joy and sadness, while the second account (where magic is encountered as being already in the world) may apply to cases of horror and wonder. That division among emotion types sounds reasonable, and enjoys textual support, as indicated by Sartre's claim that the "there are two *forms* of emotion" (1939, 57, emphasis added). However, it is not obvious that it also enjoys phenomenological support—at least, it is not clear that a subject would himself distinguish his pre-reflective experiences of fear, horror, panic, or terror, in

anything other than intensity of feeling, or the amount and imminence of perceived threat (cf. Hatzimoysis 2014 for related psychological research).

Another distinction that deserves our attention is between two aspects of the Sartrean theory, that Sartre himself tends to present at one breath: the transformation of the world, on the one hand, and the arising of emotion as a distinct way of resolving a problem faced by the subject, on the other. It might be argued for instance, that, in contradistinction to most emotions, horror and wonder consist in experiences of a magic world, yet no attempted solution of a practical problem takes place. However, although that proposal sounds independently plausible, it seems to be in tension with Sartre's explicit insistence on the *finality* of emotions. If there are affective phenomena, which, according to that proposal, serve no end, then it is hard to see how their occurrence should be accounted for in the functional terms singled out as the hallmark of emotion (1939: 28).

Perhaps the above difficulties, encountered in the interpretation of the *Sketch*, are indicative of the character of Sartre's classic text as a work in progress. They also point to Sartre's gradual transition from delineating a phenomenological psychology of emotions (1939, 62), toward articulating a full-blown phenomenological ontology of the human way of being (1943, 18-23). Hence, the questions raised through the study of Sartre's highly original take on affective phenomena, may help the reader appreciate the significance of the remark, placed near the beginning of the *Sketch*, about the enormity of the task involved in articulating a systematic theory about the facts that we encounter in our research into emotions: "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 the two notions have first been elucidated" (1939, 7-8).

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