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A Brief Discussion of Satre Existentialism

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Abstract – The philosophical career of Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) focuses, in its first phase, upon the construction of a philosophy of existence known as existentialism. Sartre's early works are characterized by a development of classic phenomenology, but his reflection diverges from Husserl's on methodology, the conception of the self, and an interest in ethics. These points of divergence are the cornerstones of Sartre's existential phenomenology, whose purpose is to understand human existence rather than the world as such. Adopting and adapting the methods of phenomenology, Sartre sets out to develop an ontological account of what it is to be human. The main features of this ontology are the groundlessness and radical freedom which characterize the human condition. These are contrasted with the unproblematic being of the world of things. Sartre's substantial literary output adds dramatic expression to the always unstable co-existence of facts and freedom in an indifferent world.

Keywords: Satre, Existentialism, Literature

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INTRODUCTION

Sartre's ontology is explained in his philosophical masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness*, where he defines two types of reality which lie beyond our conscious experience: the being of the object of consciousness and that of consciousness itself. The object of consciousness exists as "in-itself," that is, in an independent and non-relational way.

However, consciousness is always consciousness "of something," so it is defined in relation to something else, and it is not possible to grasp it within a conscious experience: it exists as "for-itself." An essential feature of consciousness is its negative power, by which we can experience "nothingness." This power is also at work within the self, where it creates an intrinsic lack of self-identity. So the unity of the self is understood as a task for the for-itself rather than as a given.

In order to ground itself, the self needs projects, which can be viewed as aspects of an individual's fundamental project and motivated by a desire for "being" lying within the individual's consciousness. The source of this project is a spontaneous original choice that depends on the individual's freedom. However, self's choice may lead to a project of self-deception such as bad faith, where one's own real nature as for-itself is discarded to adopt that of the in-itself. Our only way to escape self-deception is authenticity, that is, choosing in a way which reveals the existence of the for-itself as both factual and transcendent. For Sartre, my proper exercise of freedom creates values that any other human being placed in my situation could experience, therefore each authentic project expresses a universal dimension in the singularity of a human life.

The analysis of nothingness provides the key to the phenomenological understanding of the for-itself (chapter 1, Part Two). For the negating power of consciousness is at work within the self (BN, 85). By applying the account of this negating power to the case of reflection, Sartre shows how reflective consciousness negates the pre-reflective consciousness it takes as its object. This creates an instability within the self which emerges in reflection: it is torn between being posited as a unity and being reflexively grasped as a duality. This lack of self-identity is given another twist by Sartre: it is posited as a task. That means that the unity of the self is a task for the for-itself, a task which amounts to the self's seeking to ground itself.

This dimension of task ushers in a temporal component that is fully justified by Sartre's analysis of temporality (BN, 107). The lack of coincidence of the for-itself with itself is at the heart of what it is to be a for-itself. Indeed, the for-itself is not identical with its past nor its future. It is already no longer what it was, and it is not yet what it will be. Thus, when I make who I am the object of my reflection, I can take that which now lies in my past as my object, while I have actually moved beyond this. Sartre says that I am therefore no longer who I am. Similarly with the future: I never coincide with that which I shall be.

Temporality constitutes another aspect of the way in which negation is at work within the for-itself. These temporal ecstases also map onto fundamental features of the for-itself. First, the past corresponds to

the facticity of a human life that cannot choose what is already given about itself. Second, the future opens up possibilities for the freedom of the for-itself. The coordination of freedom and facticity is however generally incoherent, and thus represents another aspect of the essential instability at the heart of the for-itself.

The way in which the incoherence of the dichotomy of facticity and freedom is manifested, is through the project of bad faith (chapter 2, Part One). Let us first clarify Sartre's notion of project. The fact that the self-identity of the for-itself is set as a task for the for-itself, amounts to defining projects for the for-itself. Insofar as they contribute to this task, they can be seen as aspects of the individual's fundamental project. This specifies the way in which the for-itself understands itself and defines herself as this, rather than another, individual. We shall return to the issue of the fundamental project below.

Among the different types of project, that of bad faith is of generic importance for an existential understanding of what it is to be human. This importance derives ultimately from its ethical relevance.

SATRE EXISTENTIALISM

Sartre's analysis of the project of bad faith is grounded in vivid examples. Thus Sartre describes the precise and mannered movements of a café waiter. In thus behaving, the waiter is identifying himself with his role as waiter in the mode of being in-itself. In other words, the waiter is discarding his real nature as for-itself, i.e. as free facticity, to adopt that of the in-itself. He is thus denying his transcendence as for-itself in favour of the kind of transcendence characterizing the in-itself. In this way, the burden of his freedom, i.e. the requirement to decide for himself what to do, is lifted from his shoulders since his behaviour is as though set in stone by the definition of the role he has adopted. The mechanism involved in such a project involves an inherent contradiction. Indeed, the very identification at the heart of bad faith is only possible because the waiter is a for-itself, and can indeed choose to adopt such a project. So the freedom of the for-itself is a pre-condition for the project of bad faith which denies it. The agent's defining his being as an in-itself is the result of the way in which he represents himself to himself. This misrepresentation is however one the agent is responsible for. Ultimately, nothing is hidden, since consciousness is transparent and therefore the project of bad faith is pursued while the agent is fully aware of how things are in pre-reflective consciousness. Insofar as bad faith is self-deceit, it raises the problem of accounting for contradictory beliefs. The examples of bad faith which Sartre gives, serve to underline how this conception of self-deceit in fact involves a project based upon inadequate representations of what one is. There is therefore no need to have recourse to a notion of unconscious to explain such phenomena. They can be accounted for using the dichotomy for-itself/in-itself, as projects freely adopted by individual agents. A first consequence is that this represents an alternative to psychoanalytical accounts of self-deceit. Sartre was particularly keen to provide alternatives to Freud's theory of self-deceit, with its appeal to censorship mechanisms accounting for repression, all of which are beyond the subject's awareness as they are unconscious.

The reason is that Freud's theory diminishes the agent's responsibility. On the contrary, and this is the second consequence of Sartre's account of bad faith, Sartre's theory makes the individual responsible for what is a widespread form of behaviour, one that accounts for many of the evils that Sartre sought to describe in his plays.

That a for-itself is defined by such a project arises as a consequence of the for-itself's setting itself self-identity as a task. This in turn is the result of the for-itself's experiencing the cleavages introduced by reflection and temporality as amounting to a lack of self-identity. Sartre describes this as defining the `desire for being~ (BN, 565). This desire is universal, and it can take on one of three forms. First, it may be aimed at a direct transformation of the for-itself into an in-itself. Second, the for-itself may affirm its freedom that distinguishes it from an in-itself, so that it seeks through this to become its own foundation (i.e. to become God). The conjunction of these two moments results, third, in the for-itself's aiming for another mode of being, the for-itself-in-itself. None of the aims described in these three moments are realisable. Moreover, the triad of these three moments is, unlike a Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad, inherently instable: if the for-itself attempts to achieve one of them, it will conflict with the others. Since all human lives are characterised by such a desire (albeit in different individuated forms), Sartre has thus provided a description of the human condition which is dominated by the irrationality of particular projects. This picture is in particular illustrated in *Being and Nothingness* by an account of the projects of love, sadism and masochism, and in other works, by biographical accounts of the lives of Baudelaire, Flaubert and Jean Genet.

With this notion of desire for being, the motivation for the fundamental project is ultimately accounted for in terms of the metaphysical nature of the for-itself. This means that the source of motivation for the fundamental project lies within consciousness. Thus, in particular, bad faith, as a type of project, is motivated in this way.

DISCUSSION

Consequently, an understanding of what it is to be Flaubert for instance, must involve an attempt to decipher his original choice. This hermeneutic

exercise aims to reveal what makes an individual a unity. This provides existential psychoanalysis with its principle. Its method involves an analysis of all the empirical behaviour of the subject, aimed at grasping the nature of this unity.

In the first short discussion of desire, Sartre presents it as seeking a coincidence with itself that is not possible (BN, 87, 203). Thus, in thirst, there is a lack that seeks to be satisfied. But the satisfaction of thirst is not the suppression of thirst, but rather the aim of a plenitude of being in which desire and satisfaction are united in an impossible synthesis. As Sartre points out, humans cling on to their desires. Mere satisfaction through suppression of the desire is indeed always disappointing. Another example of this structure of desire (BN, 379) is that of love. For Sartre, the lover seeks to possess the loved one and thus integrate her into his being: this is the satisfaction of desire. He simultaneously wishes the loved one nevertheless remain beyond his being as the other he desires, i.e. he wishes to remain in the state of desiring. These are incompatible aspects of desire: the being of desire is therefore incompatible with its satisfaction.

In the lengthier discussion on the topic "Being and Having," Sartre differentiates between three relations to an object that can be projected in desiring. These are being, doing and having. Sartre argues that relations of desire aimed at doing are reducible to one of the other two types. His examination of these two types can be summarised as follows. Desiring expressed in terms of being is aimed at the self. And desiring expressed in terms of having is aimed at possession. But an object is possessed insofar as it is related to me by an internal ontological bond, Sartre argues. Through that bond, the object is represented as my creation. The possessed object is represented both as part of me and as my creation. With respect to this object, I am therefore viewed both as an in-itself and as endowed with freedom. The object is thus a symbol of the subject's being, which presents it in a way that conforms with the aims of the fundamental project. Sartre can therefore subsume the case of desiring to have under that of desiring to be, and we are thus left with a single type of desire, that for being.

Sartre also looks at his phenomenologist predecessors, Husserl and Heidegger. Husserl's account is based upon the perception of another body from which, by analogy, I can consider the other as a distinct conscious perspective upon the world. But the attempt to derive the other's subjectivity from my own never really leaves the orbit of my own transcendental ego, and thus fails to come to terms with the other as a distinct transcendental ego. Sartre praises Heidegger for understanding that the relation to the other is a relation of being, not an epistemological one. However, Heidegger does not provide any grounds for taking the co-existence of Daseins ('being-with') as an ontological structure. What is, for Sartre, the nature of my consciousness of the other? Sartre provides a phenomenological analysis of shame and how the other features in it.

When I peep through the keyhole, I am completely absorbed in what I am doing and my ego does not feature as part of this pre-reflective state. However, when I hear a floorboard creaking behind me, I become aware of myself as an object of the other's look. My ego appears on the scene of this reflective consciousness, but it is as an object for the other. Note that one may be empirically in error about the presence of this other. But all that is required by Sartre's thesis is that there be other human beings. This objectification of my ego is only possible if the other is given as a subject. For Sartre, this establishes what needed to be proven: since other minds are required to account for conscious states such as those of shame, this establishes their existence a priori. This does not refute the skeptic, but provides Sartre with a place for the other as an a priori condition for certain forms of consciousness which reveal a relation of being to the other.

CONCLUSION

Sartre sees important implications of this movement from object to subject and vice-versa, insofar as it is through distinguishing oneself from the other that a for-itself individuates itself. More precisely, the objectification of the other corresponds to an affirmation of myself by distinguishing myself from the other. This affirmation is however a failure, because through it, I deny the other's selfhood and therefore deny that with respect to which I want to affirm myself. So, the dependence upon the other which characterizes the individuation of a particular ego is simultaneously denied. The resulting instability is characteristic of the typically conflictual state of our relations with others. Sartre examines examples of such relationships as are involved in sadism, masochism and love. Ultimately, Sartre would argue that the instabilities that arise in human relationships are a form of inter-subjective bad faith.

Sartre's existentialist understanding of what it is to be human can be summarized in his view that the underlying motivation for action is to be found in the nature of consciousness which is a desire for being. It is up to each agent to exercise his freedom in such a way that he does not lose sight of his existence as a facticity, as well as a free human being. In so doing, he will come to understand more about the original choice which his whole life represents, and thus about the values that are thereby projected. Such an understanding is only obtained through living this particular life and avoiding the pitfalls of strategies of self-deceit such as bad faith. This authentic option for human life represents the realization of a universal in the singularity of a human life.

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