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Sartre's Theory of the Emotions

For those who are interested in the philosophic basis of Existentialism as distinct from its literary and journalistic expressions, and are shy of setting out on the seven hundred finely printed pages of *L'Être et le Néant*, there is an introduction of a sort in a psychological essay of Sartre published in 1939 in the *Actualités Industrielles et Scientifiques* (no. 838). In the *Esquisse d'une Théorie des Emotions* Sartre is chiefly trying to show how psychological interpretations of the emotions can be bettered by resorting to the methods of Husserl and Heidegger: he describes it as "an experiment in phenomenological psychology." But this "experiment," though restricted in scope, has some important implications for a general theory of consciousness and of man.

Sartre's position is summarized in a paragraph toward the close of the essay:

Thus consciousness may "be-in-the-world" in two different ways. The world may appear to it as a complex formed of instruments in such a way that if a determined effect is to be produced, it will be necessary to act on the determined elements of the complex. In this case, each instrument refers to other instruments and to the totality of instruments, and there is no absolute action nor radical change which can be immediately introduced into this world. One particular instrument must be modified by means of another which refers in turn to other instruments, and so on to infinity.—But the world may also appear to consciousness as a non-instrumental totality, or as being *modifiable* without intermediary and in great quantities. In this case, classes of the world will act immediately on consciousness; they are present to it *without distance* (for example, the face which frightens us through the window: it acts on us *without instruments*, and does not require the opening of a window, the leaping of a man into the *room* or his walking on the *floor*.) Reciprocally consciousness aims at combatting these dangers or at modifying these objects without distance and without instruments by absolute and massive modifications of the world. This aspect of the world is entirely coherent, it is the *magic world*. We will call emotion the sudden plunge of consciousness into magic. Or, if you prefer, there is emotion when the world of instruments vanishes suddenly and the magic world takes its place. It is false, then, to see in emotion a fleeting disorder of the organism and of the mind which would disturb psychic life *from without*. It is, on the contrary, the return of consciousness to the *magic attitude*, one of the great attitudes

that are essential to it, with the appearance of the correlative world, the magic *world*. Emotion is not an accident, it is a form of existence of consciousness, one of the ways in which it knows (in Heidegger's sense of "Verstehen") its "Being-in-the-world."

Though the monograph is in large part a "technical" psychological treatise, this description obviously outruns the scope of traditional psychological concepts: it illustrates Sartre's aim of building a "phenomenological psychology," which examines essential structures of human consciousness *in* their essential structure, instead of collecting scattered and therefore non-essential "facts." "Facts" are always, according to Sartre, many, disconnected, and fragmentary: they will never add up to a unified conception of human nature. Moreover, "facts" are non-significant: they are *merely* there: whereas human existence is significant—every structure in the human psyche essentially involves, and, in particular, *means* something about the whole of consciousness. Or again, "facts" of psychology are apprehended by the psychologist as if he were himself quite outside their scope—whereas the essential peculiarity of human consciousness is that it signifies *itself*; there is no science of human nature to which the humanity of the scientist himself is irrelevant. For this will-of-the-wisp of statistical objectivity, then, Sartre would substitute a more complex and difficult, but also more unified account of human nature—like that of Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*. In such a context emotion, for example, appears to be not an accident of human nature superadded to an account of sensation, locomotion, etc., as it is for the classical psychologist, but as the passage quoted indicates, an essential function of consciousness, a basic way in which it grasps, i.e. "comprehends" its world. And psychology in general becomes, in this interpretation, the consequence of, not the prelude to what Sartre calls an "anthropology", a phenomenological account of the "essence of man."

This may look like the very opposite of Existentialism, which asserts that man has no single essence, that every man creates himself out of his unique situation. But the contradiction is presumably only a verbal one. Of course the fact that a man has no single essence is an *essential* aspect of man's nature—and it is just as possible to discover this essential uniqueness in individual human beings as it is to discover the essential sameness (for us at least) of the members of some other classes, like seashells or cabbages.

Moreover, the particular concepts in terms of which Sartre here describes man-in-his-world have far-reaching implications, for instance, for the traditional philosophical problem of the relation of "reason" and the "passions."

According to Sartre, an emotion is a transformation of the world in which consciousness moves suddenly from the technical to the magical apprehension of its world. So, for example, in the patients described by Janet, hysteria or

MARJORIE GRENE

fainting was a way of banishing the fearful object from consciousness when it could not be got rid of in any other way: the world, too difficult to be subject to alteration by techniques, had to be changed, magically, by consciousness itself. Similarly, anger is a way of evading difficulties that cannot be overcome by the roads open on an instrumental level. Now, as Sartre says, the joy of a lover whose mistress has just assured him of her love is a kind of possession by incantation, overcoming magically in one bound all the small external actions that remain for him to accomplish. In all these cases it is an "incantation", using the body, that transforms the world. In other cases it is the world itself that suddenly appears as magic without our active agency. That is so, for example, when one is suddenly horrified by the appearance of a face at the window: one is startled out of a routine technical handling of a situation into the immediate confrontation with something unknown and unexplained—the familiar world of action gives way to the strange one of fright. But in either kind of "transformation" it is the sudden shock of a descent (*chute*) from technique to magic that constitutes an emotion.

Now, obviously, this distinction between the technical and the magical puts the whole problem of the relation between thought and emotion in a radically new light. For one thing, according to Sartre, both action—which externalizes the technical manipulation of means and ends in reasoning—and emotion operate principally on a non-reflective level of consciousness: He says earlier in the same essay:

The subject attempting to solve a practical problem is exteriorized in the world. He grasps the world at each instant, in the course of all his actions. If he fails in his attempts, if he becomes angry, his irritation itself is still another mode in which the world appears to him. And it is not necessary for the subject, between the unsuccessful action and his anger, to return into himself and intercalate a reflective consciousness. There can be an unbroken transition from the non-reflective consciousness "acted world" (action) to the non-reflective consciousness "hateful world" (anger). The second is a transformation of the first . . . We tend too much to the belief that action is a constant transition from the non-reflective to the reflective, from the world to ourselves. In this process, we would become aware of the problem (non-reflection—consciousness of the world), then of ourselves in the role of having the problem to solve (reflection); starting from this reflection, we would conceive an action to the extent that it should be held by us (reflection) and we would redescend next into the world to carry out the (non-reflective) action, at this point considering only the acted object. Then, all the new difficulties, all the partial setbacks requiring a retightening of our adaption would direct us back to the reflective level. From this, a constant back-and-forth play that would constitute action.

Now, it is certain that we can reflect on our actions. But an opera-

tion performed on the universe is more often than not carried through without the subject leaving the non-reflective plane. For example, at this moment, I am writing but I am not conscious of writing. Shall we say that habit has caused me to be unconscious of the movements made by my hand in writing the letters? This would be absurd. Perhaps I have the habit of writing, but not at all that of writing *certain* words in a *certain* order. In a general way, one should mistrust explanations by Habit. In reality, the act of writing is not at all unconscious, it is an immediate creation of my consciousness. Only it is not conscious of itself. Writing is becoming actively aware of the words as they are born under my pen. Not of words as they are written by me: I apprehend intuitively the words in so far as they have the structural quality of coming *ex nihilo* and yet of not being creators of themselves, but of being passively created. At the very moment when I trace one, I do not pay isolated attention to each one of the strokes formed by my hand: I am in a special condition of waiting, creative waiting, I am waiting for the word—which I know in advance—to borrow my hand as it writes and the strokes that it traces in order to be brought into being. (pp. 30-31).

If this is sound, the Aristotelian account of deliberation, in which reason weighs instruments to an end set by desire, is incorrect and irrelevant. Nor in the light of the distinction between the two types of non-reflective consciousness, technique and magic, does the Humian-pragmatic account, in terms of impulses succeeding one another, fare much better. For the handling of instruments in situations calling for technical mastery is in this view a totally different matter from the magical *Verstehen* which characterizes the emotions—and in fact all direct apprehension of one consciousness by another. The difference is clear in the example of the face at the window: in instrumental terms the face is so many paces away, the other side of the windowpane, etc.; emotionally, it is there, immediately, present without space to the horrified consciousness. It would be equally absurd, if this theory is right, to ask reason to “control” the emotions and to interpret logic as a kind of faded impulse-sequence. The latter alternative neglects the genuine difference of the two modes of apprehension; the former fails to recognize the constitutive character of the emotions. Sartre defines emotion as the sudden collapse of consciousness from technique to magic—or he describes it as a kind of diminution of consciousness. That would make one think the technical the normal, the other a kind of falling off from it. Yet in *L'Être et le Néant* Sartre makes it clear that the individual becomes the project that he is essentially through his relation to other individuals, with whom, in Sartre's view, he enters into conflict. If, then, the relation of one individual to another is fundamentally magical, non-technical, the instrumental sort of *Verstehen* would seem to be, though sometimes on a higher or more reflective level of consciousness, less

MARJORIE GRENE

basic to the peculiar character of each individual life. It would seem even to operate principally in the interstices of *le monde magique*.

The revolutionary character of this conception appears if one looks at what is in a very real sense *the* philosophic system of the modern European tradition: the grand expression of the supremacy of reason, i.e. the *Ethics* of Spinoza. Despite the obvious difference between instruments and efficient causes, there is a strange resemblance, in a way, between Sartre's technical world with its indefinite series of instrumental causation and Spinoza's system of mediate finite modes linked in an infinite series of mechanical causes. And in each case this apprehension within an infinite series of organized cause and effect relations is supplemented by a more direct understanding of and through wholes. But how different in all its human and metaphysical implications is Sartre's mass-movement of magical understanding from the unification of Spinoza's world in the third kind of knowledge. It is a principle entirely at variance with reason and formal cause that, in Sartre's account, supplements the world of utensils. Yet it is, perhaps, a principle of more direct and ample human significance, for us at least, than the reason that found its most perfected philosophic expression in the *Ethics*.

On the other hand, there is always the suspicion, with Sartre's theories, that they are a bit too apt—or at least too clever, in a flashy way, to be quite true. In this case at least, as Sartre himself says, there is the necessity of trying to apply this definition of emotion to the analysis of other examples. In particular, for example, there is the question of how what Sartre apparently calls *sentiments* are related to emotions: that is, long-time, continuous emotional attitudes which appear to sustain the world rather than transform it.