

**PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICISM:
ESSAYS AND REVIEWS**

BY JASPER HOPKINS

THE ARTHUR J. BANNING PRESS

MINNEAPOLIS

Reprinted online by permission
of
Banning Press

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 93-74285

ISBN 938060-44-9

Printed in the United States of America

Copyright© 1994 by The Arthur J. Banning Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota
55402. All rights reserved.

CHAPTER SIX

SARTREAN PHILOSOPHY AND EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Not many years ago Carl Jung levelled the charge of “crackpot psychology” against the philosophical writings of Hegel.¹ There is, of course, an element of truth in Jung’s stricture; for one has only to read again the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in order to realize anew that the conceptual matrix of this work is an account of the self’s psycho-social development. Thus, both Hegel’s notion that the Other is a necessary condition of my self-identity and his account of the master-slave relationship draw upon psychological insights which become transformed into metaphysical utterances in the doctrine that the Logical Idea must pass over into Nature—that Nature, as other than Idea, is estranged Idea.

Though Jung’s criticism is intended negatively, it serves positively to point up the interrelationship that has often (though not always) existed between philosophy and psychology—the former paying house calls (not sick calls) to the latter. In recent years psychology has returned the visit. A growing group of psychologists have turned to philosophy in order to borrow categories for interpreting various patterns of neurosis and psychosis. And here and there isolated voices have accused them of “crackpot philosophy.” I am referring, of course, to the school of existential psychotherapy, which has by and large adopted Heidegger’s categories of being-in-the-world, facticity, thrownness, care, temporality, lived-space, authenticity, everydayness, project, freedom, anxiety, utensility, and being-unto-death as ready-made schemes for focusing neurotic and psychotic syndromes.

Such reliance upon Heidegger’s existential analysis of human reality has tended to minimize the use of Sartre’s philosophy.

This minimization seems all the more curious since Sartre has explicitly developed a viewpoint which he calls "existential psychoanalysis." In addition to the general philosophical points which it incorporates from Heidegger, Sartre's philosophical psychology (so to speak) consists of six programmatic themes:

- (1) Denial of the unconscious.
- (2) Development of the notion of bad faith.
- (3) Teleological explanations of emotional behavior.
- (4) Doctrine of completely free choice.
- (5) Theory of an original choice.
- (6) Description of the essence of various emotions and attitudes.

Why has Sartre's attempt at outlining the task and scope of existential psychoanalysis met with such little success in the eyes of psychologists, so that they have not tended to utilize his philosophy in the way they have utilized Heidegger's? There are two reasons, I think—one of them peripheral, the other central.

I

In *Being and Nothingness*² Sartre commits himself to a number of false psychological observations, a series of self-contradictions, and a plethora of paradoxical language. Let us look briefly at five examples.

(1) "No longer to see the objects in my room because I have closed my eyes is to see the curtain of my eyelids" (*BN*, 319). Surely Sartre is misled. If I close the door, I see the back of the door. But if I close my eyes, I do not see the back of my eyelids. Empirically construed, his claim is false; linguistically construed, his statement is objectionable because it makes no sense to use the verb "to see" in this way.

(2) "If I examine the movement of one body toward another first with the naked eye and then with the microscope, it will appear to me a hundred times faster in the second case; for although the body in motion approaches no closer to the body toward which it is moving, it has in the same time traversed a space a hundred times as large" (*BN*, 307). Here again Sartre is

wrong. For not only would the space increase by the power of one hundred but so also would the size of the object set against the spatial background, so that the relative speed of the object will not appear to change by this factor. (It may, however, appear to change slightly—but not for the reason Sartre gives.)

(3) “Even torture does not dispossess us of our freedom; when we give in, we do so *freely*” (*BN*, 524). But giving in under torture is a paradigmatic case of a non-free response. In rejecting such a paradigmatic case, Sartre loses any meaningful distinction between free and unfree choice.

(4) “I must at once both be and not be totally and in all respects a coward” (*BN*, 66). But this statement asserts a self-contradiction, since I cannot both be and not be something totally and in the same respect.

(5) “Thus the being of value qua value is the being of what does not have being” (*BN*, 93). This assertion is either self-contradictory or obscure.

Some psychologists have been put off by passages like these. They have assumed blankly that if Sartre is so egregiously wrong or confused at these places, then his philosophy as a whole must be unintelligible. However, their reasoning is overly hasty and fundamentally misrepresents the brilliance of his writings. Moreover, this way of thinking serves to keep psychologists from delving further into Sartre's overall position and from examining the six themes mentioned above. In other words, this approach views problems which are really peripheral as if they were central. Sartre's statement about torture, for example, is not crucial to his view of freedom *if* that view can be formulated less radically; and his statement about seeing one's eyelids can be eliminated with no essential damage to his systematization. What *is* crucial, though, is to ascertain whether or not his philosophy is defensible with respect to its fundamental theses.

In this chapter I do not plan to undertake a general survey of Sartre's ontology; rather, I want to examine one aspect of his thinking, in order to show that the failure of his position at this

one point jeopardizes the position's systematic availability to theorists of existential psychotherapy. The point of jeopardy is what I have termed Theme 6: namely, the description of the essence of various emotions and attitudes.

II

If we look closely at Sartre's phenomenological characterization of love, hate, generosity, and indifference, we see immediately that in attempting to describe the nature of these emotions and attitudes, this characterization misrepresents human reality.

1. *Love*. When Sartre discusses love, he has in mind love as desire which seeks to possess the conscious devotion of the Other. Love, so conceived, most naturally expresses itself in bodily union but is not primarily to be defined as physical possession. The lover desires that the beloved freely and lovingly choose absolute submission to him. He wants to be "all the world" to the beloved, to be the ultimate goal of her life. She in turn demands that the lover, her beloved, choose her as an absolute in terms of which all else becomes relative.

The woman in love demands that the beloved in his acts should sacrifice traditional morality for her and is anxious to know whether the beloved would betray his friends for her, "would steal for her," "would kill for her," etc. (*BN*, 369).

The goal of love, therefore, is self-contradictory, with the result that love precipitates its own destruction; for love pursues simultaneously both the absolute enslavement of the Other and the Other's freedom. As ardent pursuit of an impossible goal, love is subject to perpetual insecurity. The beloved, acutely aware that at any moment the lover is free to transfer his affection, withdraws inwardly in an effort to consolidate herself over against this possibility. Should the lover experience this withdrawal as a loss of affection, insecure brooding over the contingency of the relationship may set in. "Then if I had not come into a certain city, if I had not visited the home of so and so, you would never

have known me, you wouldn't have loved me?'” (BN, 370). An inner dialectic works the demise of love. Doomed to failure, love wanes amid conflict and pantomime.

But, let us ask, what is it to give a description of the essence of love? Is there, after all, an *essence* to be described? And if so, has Sartre's phenomenological approach succeeded? I think that even if the nature of love *could* be clearly apprehended, still Sartre's approach would be fundamentally misdirected. He shows not that all love is self-defeating but, at most, that *neurotic* love contains the seeds of its own destruction. Love which esteems the Other as an absolute goal, which broods over the contingency of initial acquaintance, which insecurely demands total sacrifice and incessant pledging of affection—such love characterizes the neurotic.

Sartre is not simply depicting abnormal or extreme situations and holding them forth as vivid portraits which cast normal circumstances and feelings into new perspective. Freud, for instance, used abnormal features of personality to elucidate the tendencies inherent in normal personality. Sartre, however, presents the *nature* of love as consisting in those very features which Freud deemed characteristically neurotic. In this way he abrogates the very distinction which psychotherapy insists upon.³ Sartre would do better to discuss love in its multiple facets than to feign vision of love-as-such and to dignify his “findings” as phenomenological reports.⁴

2. *Hate*. According to Sartre hate is the desire for the total destruction of the Other. Genuine hate is directed toward obliteration of the Other as such, and is not merely a wish to change or remove some particular feature of his being. Moreover,

hate is the hate of all Others in one Other. What I want to obtain symbolically by pursuing the death of a particular Other is the general principle of the existence of others. The Other whom I hate[,] actually represents all Others (BN, 411).

Hate does not merely (and on occasion) reach the limiting point of willing the Other's complete negation. Rather, it is by nature

the wish for the destruction of all others. For this reason, it too is a failure, thinks Sartre. "Its initial project is to suppress other consciousnesses. But even if it succeeded in this—i.e., if it could at this moment abolish the Other—it could not bring it about that the Other had not been" (*BN*, 412). Sartre here fails to distinguish neurotic (psychotic) hatred from more normal patterns commonly referred to by the very word "hate". For only psychotic hate would feel thwarted in not being able to bring about the logically impossible. That is, only someone psychotic could be upset about not now being able to bring it about that someone else should not have been born in the past. I might normally hate another person enough to kill him or enough to wish he had never been born. But I could not normally "count as failure" my not being able *now* to prevent his having been born. Only a psychotic could intromit such a goal. Sartre's ontological phenomenology appears gauchely oversimplified; one wonders what connection his *a priori* descriptions have with the range of manifestations that we ordinarily call hate.

3. *Generosity*. Sartre's understanding of generosity furnishes another example of the problematical nature of his treatment of emotions, dispositions, and attitudes.

Generosity is above all a destructive function. The craze for giving which sometimes seizes certain people is first and foremost a craze to destroy; it is equivalent to an attitude of madness, a "love" which accompanies the shattering objects. But the craze to destroy which is at the bottom of generosity is nothing else than a craze to possess. All which I abandon, all which I give, I enjoy in a higher manner through the fact that I give it away; giving is a keen, brief enjoyment, almost sexual (*BN*, 594).

To be sure, generosity often does mask an undercurrent of hostile, destructive feelings, as Nietzsche strikingly points out. But granted the ordinary meaning of "generosity," it cannot be shown that all generosity has destructiveness as its source. And even if all forms of generosity were to involve self-interest (as psychological egoism teaches), still it would not follow that

these elements of self-interest necessarily aim at manipulating or harming the Other. Sartre goes so far as to write:

If ... existential psychoanalysis encounters evidence of *generosity* in a subject, it must search further for his original project and ask why the subject has chosen to appropriate by destruction rather than by creation. The answer to this question will reveal that original relation to being which constitutes the *person* who is being studied (*BN*, 595).

Neurotics and psychotics are frequently unable to express non-ambivalent feelings. The therapist can detect beneath their outwardly beneficent behavior inner streams of malice, anger, and resentment. To a lesser degree these same ambivalences are potentially present in non-neurotic individuals—or else are actually present to a lesser degree. But we cannot from this fact conclude that generosity normally expresses (or even symbolizes) negative feelings, or that it represents the destructive attempt to woo and enmesh. Sartre treats the abnormal case as if it were a description of human personality as such. He does not focus on the abnormal in order to illuminate the normal; rather, he treats the one as if it were the other—and thus loses any meaningful distinction between the two.

4. *Indifference*. The relationship between ontology and psychology is not clear in Sartre's works. Here and there he gives the impression of developing ontological categories from psychological insights. At other places he seems to begin with an *a priori* account of human reality and then to pause and note how this ontological viewpoint can be correlated with psychological truth (cf. *BN*, 368, 440, 565). His account of indifference raises just such puzzles. Is he describing human reality as it actually is, or is he formulating some ideal type which may or may not have factual correlates?

Indifference is the attitude wherewith

I practice . . . a sort of factual solipsism; others are those forms which pass by in the street, those magic objects which are capable of acting at a distance and upon which I can act by means of determined conduct. I scarcely notice them; I act as if I were alone in the world. I brush

against "people" as I brush against a wall; I avoid them as I avoid obstacles I do not even imagine they can *look* at me Those "people" are functions: the ticket-collector is only the function of collecting tickets; the café waiter is nothing but the function of serving the patrons This state of *blindness* can be maintained for a long time, as long as my fundamental bad faith desires; it can be extended—with relapses—over several years, over a whole life; there are men who die without—save for brief and terrifying flashes of illumination—ever having suspected what the *Other* is (*BN*, 380f.).

The last sentence seems to indicate that Sartre is talking about real people and not about ideal types. If so, then his philosophic enterprise is dubious. For who but a madman could practice the factual solipsism outlined in the foregoing passage? Once again—so at least it seems—Sartre is taking the abnormal as *definitive of* a given attitude. In so doing, he is implicitly suggesting that all other forms of indifference are accidental modifications of the one nature.

In Hegelian fashion Sartre appears to be offering some version of the inner dialectic which governs feelings and attitudes. Love gives rise to hate, hate to indifference, and so on. However, Sartre does not formulate a linear progression of movements in the way that Hegel does. For love may pass over into masochism, and hate may not pass over into indifference.

One cannot make much sense out of Sartre's procedure if it is construed exclusively as illuminating essences which give information about the whole range of human responses. In *Emotion in the Thought of Sartre* Joseph Fell writes:

A "phenomenological" theory of emotion is therefore one which claims to provide a comprehensive and adequate description of human emotion based solely upon an alleged immediate experience. This description will be "psychological" but not "psychologistic"; it will claim that an individual's own subjective evaluation of his experience, not quantitative, objective, causal, or genetic explanation, holds the key to the nature of emotional reactions.⁵

Sartre's phenomenology may be *based upon* immediate experience, as Fell suggests. But when it goes beyond immediate

experience, it can no longer be construed as a *description* of human emotion—neither of Sartre's personal emotions nor of human emotion in general.

One can make sense of Sartre's "dialectic of emotion" only insofar as it can be construed as a literary rather than a phenomenological technique. The value of Sartre's approach would then be like the value of a novelist who depicted archetypes that were not in every case intended to describe real people. For instance, Camus' picture of Meursault in *The Stranger* is not the picture of a man one would ever expect to meet. Nor is Camus portraying a character who is to be thought of as schizophrenically withdrawn from life. The categories "normal" and "abnormal" are inappropriate because Camus makes no pretense of being true to some introspectively or empirically identifiable syndrome of behavior. He has no desire to depict a man who is true to psychologically established configurations and patterns (such as these be).⁶ Camus is introducing the image of a man who, in being without subjectivity, serves as a paradigm for the non-existentialist attitude. Meursault feels no grief at his mother's funeral, no real love of Marie, no guilt over the Arab's murder. Camus creates a powerfully consistent image which conveys something impressionistic about human possibility for matter-of-factness amidst a world for which one assumes no responsibility and over which one exercises little control.

Perhaps, then, Sartre's psycho-dialectical account of indifference (to take one example) should be re-expressed along the foregoing lines. This re-expression would not be an attempt to interpret Sartre but to salvage him: he would be viewed as using phenomenological insights to help him fashion (literary) archetypes that have a revealing power. It would not then matter whether or not a man could actually live "without ever having suspected what the *Other* is." And Sartre's approach would not then be open to the charge of treating the abnormal as the normative. The existential psychotherapist interested in analyzing the many-sided nature of man might then glean insights from

Sartre in much the way that one does from the novelist. This manner of dealing with Sartre does not rule out the possibility of applying his archetypes illuminatively to real-life case studies. Indeed, Sartre seems at his best in his biography of Genet, where the categories from *Being and Nothingness* are exemplified.⁷ At the age of seven Genet is taken from the orphanage and placed with foster parents. All that he has he receives from them.

Every minute a gift is put into his hands at the whim of a generosity that leaves its mark on him forever. Every minute Genet moves a little further away from his foster parents. All this bounty *obliges* him to recognize that they *were not obliged* to adopt him, to feed him, to take care of him, that they “owed him nothing,” that he is *obliged* to them, that they were quite free not to give him what he was not free not to accept, in short, that he is not their son.⁸

In this passage Sartre illustrates his notion that generosity contains elements of destruction. We can have no quarrel with this particular case history, which does indeed attest to the injury and personal damage too often associated with situations of giving and receiving.

At age ten Genet is caught stealing. The child perceives himself as transformed in his parents' eyes, as fallen from their grace. Having committed theft, he is defined as a thief. He senses acutely the discrepancy between the self which he is for others and the self which he is for himself. He will resolve this discrepancy by choosing to be the thief which crime has made of him. This *original choice* will help to explain his subsequent criminality and homosexuality. Imprisoned and alone, he will be indifferent to society in a way that society cannot be indifferent to him. Unfailing in self-hatred, he will fail in permanent love. Betrayed by the evil of saints, he will betray evil in order to become a saint.

Sartre's biography of Genet bears witness to the possibility of providing concrete translations for the categories of existential psychoanalysis developed in *Being and Nothingness*. In the suc-

cessful extension of these translations will lie the prospect for future *rapprochement* between Sartrean philosophy and contemporary existential psychology. Whether such *rapprochement* can be achieved—whether, indeed, it is worth achieving—is a question that only the psychologist can answer. But in weighing his answer, he should keep in mind that Sartre's categories may retain a kind of validity even where they abrogate the distinction between neurosis (or psychosis) and normalcy.

IV

We have seen that certain types of contradictions and unclarities are extraneous to the overall scheme of Sartre's philosophy. Turning to the six themes that uniquely characterize his program of existential psychoanalysis, we focused upon his account of love, hate, generosity, and indifference—unmasking his pretense at having found their essences. The indefensibility of this particular theme, however, does not imply the unviability of the five remaining themes. But it does raise a serious question about one important aspect of Sartre's programmatic version of psychoanalysis. And it does raise doubts as to whether Sartre's categories can ever be of systematic use to psychology in the way that Heidegger's have been. Yet, these doubts should not discourage psychologists from taking a second look at *Being and Nothingness*. For whatever the ontological merits or demerits of this work, it will still contain those psychological insights which in one way or another are typical of novels and biography. And these insights do not in any way constitute "crackpot psychology."

NOTES TO EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

**This article appeared originally in the *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, 10 (1970), 83-92.

1. H. Read, *et al.*, editors, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* (New York: Pantheon Books), Vol. 8 (1960), 169-171 [Vol. 8 translated by R. Hull].

2. J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956). Referred to hereafter as *BN*.

3. Admittedly this distinction is hard to draw dearly. But even if the differences between neurotic and non-neurotic behavior-patterns are only differences of degree, still differences of degree if extended far enough become differences of kind.

4. See also the criticisms by A. J. Ayer in 1945 in "Novelist-Philosophers. V.—Jean-Paul Sartre," *Horizon*, 12:808.

5. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp. 6f.

6. So too, the film *Sundays and Cybele* is untrue to actual patterns of deviant behavior. Yet, we do not insist upon "psychological truth," because the film does not present itself to us as a case study in deviancy but as a symbolism of pure love.

7. J.-P. Sartre, *Saint Genet*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Mentor Books, 1963).

8. *Ibid.*, p. 18.