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APPREHENSION, MAGIC AND INCARNATED BELIEFS: A DISCUSSION OF SARTRE'S THEORY OF THE EMOTIONS

THE PRE-REFLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

There are some foundational features in Sartre's philosophy which first have to be considered. The most important, I claim, is his concept of consciousness. In his historical introduction to the phenomenological movement Herbert Spiegelberg claims: "For Sartre, existence does not simply coincide with human consciousness in the world. One of his most important additions to earlier phenomenology is his enlarged conception of consciousness. There is for Sartre such a thing as a 'non-conscious' consciousness under the name of pre-reflective consciousness. Even for Husserl, though possibly not for Descartes, not all consciousness is reflexive. He knows a naive consciousness, directed straight ahead (*geradeaus*) toward objects of our daily or scientific concerns, which differs essentially from its reflective modification, in which this naive consciousness becomes thematic."¹

The difference between reflective and pre-reflective consciousness is still not particularly clear, and Sartre's conception of consciousness also changes over time and is not consistent in itself. Spiegelberg compares the pre-reflective consciousness with the psychoanalytical unconscious, but that is a concept Sartre himself rejects.² We most of the time live at the pre-reflective level

¹ Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), vol. II, 482.

² *Ibid.*, 487. For some other comments on this issue, cf., Sander H. Lee, "Sense and Sensibility: Sartre's Theory of the Emotions", K. Hoeller ed., *Sartre and Psychology* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), 67. See also: Stephan Strasser, *Phenomenology of Feeling: An Essay on the Phenomena of the Heart* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1977), esp. 75-79, Mary Warnock, Preface in *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* Herbert L. Dreyfus & Piotr Hoffman, "Sartre's Changed Conception of Consciousness: From Lucidity to Opacity", in Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle: Open Court, 1981).

where also the emotions occur. If someone for instance is living a full-blown emotion of fear, the frightened person is completely occupied by the object for her fear. Although we might be aware of emotion as a fact of consciousness, fear or any other emotion does not begin as consciousness *of* being afraid. To put it in another way: emotional consciousness is not consciousness of itself as when we are saying “I am afraid” or “I am angry”. Emotional consciousness is primarily consciousness of the world, a specific kind of perception. Still, there seems to be an awareness of being aware which we have when perceiving something, according to Sartre. This is, as Mary Warnock says: “what Sartre sometimes calls the *prereflective cogito*. It does not take the self as an object. It is not reflective, but simply goes along with, or accompanies my perceptions.”³ Reflective consciousness is conversely directed on itself. Reflecting is being conscious of one’s own consciousness, turning consciousness into its own object. Reflecting over one’s anger is for this reason one way for consciousness to be released from emotion according to Sartre. Sartre is definitely not a romantic in his investigation of emotions. The fact that philosophy has traditionally neglected the emotions, does not obviously mean that a discussion of this topic must lead to a consideration of emotions as something elevated and noble. In fact, Sartre claims that emotions appear as spontaneous degradations of consciousness, tied directly to bodily expressivity and action. Plunging into the magical world of emotion is often a regression to an infantile mode of behaviour. Emotion then, is an extreme experience in which consciousness is totally transformed from its regular condition. But let us continue with Spiegelberg for a while. He develops his analysis with an interesting although a rather odd notion: “In pre-reflective consciousness our reflecting actually coincides with that upon which we reflect. Thus to Sartre it makes no sense to distinguish between pleasure and our (pre-reflective) consciousness of pleasure: pleasure is essentially conscious.”⁴ In pre-reflective consciousness then, affection and object merge. Pleasure is being conscious of something pleasurable, *not* being conscious of oneself feeling pleasure.

³ Warnock, Preface in *Sketch for a Theory*, 8.

⁴ Spiegelberg, 483. (It is the first of these sentences which appears rather odd as he actually talks about pre-reflectiveness as an act of reflection. I assume the problem is that we simply lack words for this, so that we have to use “old” words in a metaphorical way.)

THE FUNCTION OF EMOTIONS

His early writing on emotions published as *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, is according to Sartre an experiment. He concludes the introduction as follows: "May the following pages be kindly regarded as an *experiment* in phenomenological psychology. We shall try to place ourselves upon the terrain of signification, and to treat emotion as a *phenomenon*."⁵ What is of special interest for him, is whether emotion is a phenomenon that signifies. From the beginning, his thesis is that emotions refer to something outside themselves, that they fulfil some kind of purpose. He has already said that emotion is a mode of consciousness, and that human reality realises itself in the form of emotion. Emotion then "has its own essence, its peculiar structures, its laws of appearance, its meaning".⁶ Emotion is, with Sartre's words "an organized form of human existence", with a meaning of their own.

He begins his investigation with a critical analysis of some classic theories. Among them he criticises William James's theory most of all. James's theory of emotion is, briefly put, the idea that the emotions are primarily physiological feelings. We do not cry because we are sad for some reason, but on the contrary, we are sad because we are crying, we are afraid because we tremble, angry because we strike and so on.⁷ In James's opinion then, physiological disturbances actually cause the emotion, i.e. tears cause sadness, which then becomes consciousness of this disturbance. As everybody knows, tears might flow on occasions when someone is deeply moved or happy as well as in grief, and James allows no possibility of distinguishing between these emotions. There is, as Warnock notices, too great an element of thought in an emotion to be analysed as the presentation to consciousness of a physical change.

INCARNATED BELIEFS

Although Sartre claims that emotion is a mode of consciousness, he is not neglecting the body, or what he speaks of as physiological disturbances. James's fundamental mistake he says, was that he considered them in isolation and not

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (London: Methuen, 1962), 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ William James, "From What Is an Emotion?", in Chesire Calhoun & Robert Solomon, eds., *What Is an Emotion* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 128.

as a synthetic form combined with behaviour.⁸ It seems as if James, in Sartre's view, at one and the same time pays too much and too little attention to the significance of the body in his theory of emotions. Too much, when he says that physiological disturbances *are* the emotions, and too little as he is occupied only with the *biological body*, something he discusses independently from the *lived body* which is the basis for Sartre's reasoning. Or, as Glen Mazis puts it: "Comprehension as emotional is bodily, not as psycho-physiological, but as *an inhabiting* of a situation."⁹ Emotion is a transformation of the world according to Sartre. When we cannot act in an ordinary way, emotions turn the world into a magical place, where conduct is not effective: "In a word, during emotion, it is the body which, directed by the consciousness, changes its relationship with the world so that the world should change its qualities."¹⁰ According to Sartre, there is a clear connection between emotion and action, and here the body often plays a significant role. In emotion, the body may for instance eliminate consciousness through fainting. This is what happens in what Sartre calls passive fear, where the body in a temporary and, one must say, rather inferior way solves a troublesome situation. He imagines himself being attacked by a ferocious beast and continues: "my legs give way under me, my heart beats more feebly, I turn pale, fall down and faint away."¹¹ He then chooses to magically transform the world into a place in which danger can be avoided by eliminating consciousness of that danger.¹² In active fear though, one would rather start to run away from the dangerous situation. But one would not run away in order to find protection, Sartre says. Flight is all that remains if one cannot obliterate oneself through fainting. If one cannot through magic make the object non-existent. Sartre gives another example to explain how the emotional structure works: "I lift my hand to pluck a bunch of grapes. I cannot do so; they are beyond my reach; so I shrug my shoulders, muttering: 'they are too green', and go on my way. The gestures, words and behaviour are not to be taken at face value. This little comedy that I play under the grapes, therefore conferring this quality of being 'too green' upon them,

⁸ Ibid., 76-77. Cf., Bruce Baugh, "Sartre and James on the Role of the Body in Emotions", *Dialogue*, 1990:29, No. 3, 358.

⁹ Glen Mazis, "A New Approach to Sartre's Theory of the Emotions", *Philosophy Today*, 1983: 27, No. 3, 195. See also David Weberman, "Sartre, Emotions, and Wallowing", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1996:33, No. 4, 394.

¹⁰ Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory*, 65.

¹¹ Ibid., 66.

¹² Cf., Lee, "Sense and Sensibility", 68.

serves as a substitute for the action I cannot complete.”¹³ He acts the whole scene in order not to get disappointed, and his gestures and other bodily movements help him to believe and to be convinced. On another occasion, emotion might serve to switch a troublesome discussion on to another plane. When I fail to be witty enough, I perhaps become angry at my interlocutor as a type of problem-solving behaviour.¹⁴ And again, I do not become angry as a result of reflecting on the situation. Rather, I apprehend the situation as troublesome and embarrassing and so become angry, living my anger in order to find my way out. To have a full-blown experience of horror, for instance, is to get captured and totally filled with one’s own emotion. This is not a condition we can just get out of as it pleases us, Sartre says. We believe that we are threatened, and we believe it so strongly that we tremble and perhaps even start running away. Now, the trembling in this example is not some kind of reaction that follows a cognitive state of mind. Trembling, Sartre claims, is nothing less than the phenomenon of belief itself, representing the genuineness and seriousness of the emotion.¹⁵ Still, as already noted, the physiological phenomena must not be separated from behaviour, which was James’s mistake. Viewed in isolation, they signify nothing. Together with a person’s behaviour, aims and awareness though, they assume symbolic significance.¹⁶ But although they are entwined, they are not reducible to each other, as he says “one can stop oneself from running, but not from trembling”.¹⁷ But what about the inverted case? Well, we may get triggered by our own behaviour Sartre claims. Emotions are, or at least could be, in some sense self-generated in a prolongation. Or, as Sartre puts it: “The more one runs away the more one is afraid.”¹⁸ Emotions according to Sartre are this synthetic whole. Behaviour without disorder is empty, in order to believe in magical behaviour we need to have bodily feelings, to be physically upset. This reasoning gives us a specific perspective on the idea of emotions and cognition. Belief as something incarnated, cognition appearing as flesh, a felt meaning. And yet, we must not forget how the emotional process *proceeds* from consciousness, that the bodily disturbance is the belief *lived by* consciousness. “In other words, the

¹³ Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory*, 65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁶ Cf., Ilham Dilman, “An Examination of Sartre’s Theory of Emotions”, *Ratio* 1963:5 no 2, 201.

¹⁷ Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory*, 77.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43

consciousness changes its body, or, to put it another way, the body — considered as the point of view upon the universe immediately inherent in consciousness — adjusts itself to the level of the behaviour,” Sartre says.¹⁹ Briefly, Sartre also talks about false, or spurious, emotions which are nothing more than behaviour and for that reason something we do not believe in: “If someone gives me a present in which I am only half interested, I may make an outward show of intense delight; I may clap my hands, jump or dance. This however is only play acting.”²⁰ Still, this is something other than when an actor is imitating for instance joy, “for his behaviour is addressed to a fictional world. He imitates behaviour but is not himself behaving”.²¹

RESTRICTIONS

What then is the most frequent critique of Sartre’s theory? A well-known problem with his theory is the difficulty to apply it to anything other than negative emotions. Why should anyone try to escape from happiness or faint from enthusiasm for instance? Sartre anticipates this objection and tries, in a brief discussion, to make the phenomenon of joy fit into the description. In order to solve this problem, he needs to make a distinction between what he calls “sentiment of joy” and “emotional joy”. This, we could perhaps interpret as the distinction between long-lived affective states, which does not necessarily have a distinct object, and short-lived episodic ones, which embrace an object. The theory, he claims, is only applicable to the emotion, which “is characterised by a certain impatience”. By this he means that a joyful person is behaving very much like a man in a state of impatience. His discussion of joy is not particularly convincing though. He pictures a man who has just been told by a woman that she loves him. The man, Sartre says, immediately starts to dance and sing, turning his mind away from the more “difficult behaviour he will have to maintain if he is to deserve this love”. When dancing, he will even turn away from the woman herself, in order to give himself a rest. Sartre seems not to be particularly content himself with this example. Sartre’s intention is not to formulate a theory that encompasses the whole range of emotions, but

¹⁹ Ibid., 78.

²⁰ Ibid., 74.

²¹ Ibid., 75.

rather to reflect on some particular phenomena. It is not obvious though how we should interpret his claim that physiological disturbances are beliefs as embodied. This account shows another limitation of the theory. We can easily agree with Sartre that the bodily symptoms make the emotion more serious in some way, but it is still possible, for instance, to be sad without crying. We have to accept that with emotions it is always a matter of degree. They are more or less acute and present. Emotion then, according to Sartre, is to take a magical stance to the world, and this is something we do voluntarily, he says. But how is a voluntary choice of emotion compatible with the statement that emotion is a "degradation of consciousness" – a statement which must be considered as having clear negative connotations? One possible answer may be given in terms of the purpose of the emotion. An emotion, as we have seen, has often a more or less clear purpose. Anger can for instance be a sound reaction to a situation we interpret as humiliating. But anger can also be a strategy for manipulating one's environment. In that case, choosing anger, although in an unreflective and nondeliberate manner, would be the smartest thing to do for some people.

MEANINGFULNESS AND VALUE

But there are also reasons connected with meaningfulness and value for a person. In *The Psychology of Imagination* published one year after the Sketch, Sartre's approach to the topic is somewhat different. He is obviously not concerned with situations in the same way. His terminology is more evasive as he talks about affects and feelings, although he seems to use "feelings" here in a broader sense. Joy and sorrow are kinds of consciousness, and a feeling is always a feeling of someone or something. He attempts here to grasp the specific way feeling presents itself as a species of knowledge. To become conscious of someone as for instance hateful, is to confer upon this person a new quality, to construct him along a new dimension.²² These kinds of qualities constitute the sense of the object, they are its affective structure. Here we can clearly see the close relation between emotion and perception in Sartre's philosophy. He claims that if he loves the long, white and delicate hands of a woman, this love can be considered to be one of the ways the hands have appeared to his consciousness. His love, directed towards these qualities, makes

²² Jean- Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1983), 77.

delicacy, whiteness and vivacity appear to him in a certain way, a certain kind of knowledge. But it is not, he claims, intellectual knowledge. The feeling rather projects a certain tonality on the object, which he calls the affective sense of that delicacy and of that whiteness. Feelings, Sartre argues, give our world a certain depth and quality which constitute the sense of the objects, lending to them specific meaningfulness. To apprehend surroundings in a sensitive way is not necessarily the same thing as to live a full-blown emotion in a specific situation. To love someone's hands in the way described above, does not mean that the whole person must be the object of one's love. But yet, the affective attention of someone's hands might gradually lead to an emotional consciousness, that is, falling in love with the entire person. This movement includes at the same time my hope, fear, desire and concern, sensitive awareness which suddenly turns into foolishness, to talk with Sartre. Emotion thus, seems to be a kind of joke, but nevertheless a joke that we believe in. And the world of magic is a world of meaningfulness.²³

²³ See also my dissertation: *Emotions as a Mode of Understanding: An Essay in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Uppsala, Department of ALM, Aesthetics and Cultural Studies, Uppsala University, 2001).