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The early philosophy: the necessity of freedom

As philosopher, dramatist, novelist, critic and moralist Sartre's major preoccupation was, throughout his life, always the same – freedom, its implications and its obstacles. It is a critical cliché – and Sartre himself contributed to its dissemination – to view the progression of his thought as moving away from a conception of absolute freedom towards a mature position which takes into account the constraints and conditioning of the external world. But such a picture is over-simple. Sartre was concerned from the outset with the relation between freedom and non-freedom, whether the latter be seen in terms of destiny or alienation or simply human finitude: the inescapable conditions of life, that is to say death, work, language. The early Sartre (for convenience, up to the mid-1950s) is concerned primarily with the individual, his situation and his facticity¹; the later Sartre with society, 'pre-destination' and the 'practico-inert'² – in all cases it is against a background of inalienable ontological liberty that these limiting concepts operate. Depending on the perspective chosen, philosophical or political, Sartre may be viewed as an optimist converted to pessimism (this picture of his evolution focusses on individual freedom and its apparent progressive erosion), or as a pessimist converted to optimism (this view centres rather on Sartre's early passive descriptions of freely alienated liberty and his later activist stance which strove to 'change the world'). In fact, however, Sartre's thought does not develop in a linear fashion: freedom is posited initially as both a fact and a goal, and from 1936 to his death in 1980 he was concerned both to define more closely the significance of the fact and to explore the conditions of possibility for the achievement of the goal.

Freedom, then, is the pivot of Sartre's writings, not simply in the domain of psychology or ethics where the question is most explicitly elaborated, but also in his aesthetics and literary criticism whose central focus is the creative imagination as synonymous with the freedom of human consciousness; in the paradoxes of his ontology: man's essence is defined as his liberty; and in his epistemology where he seeks to avoid both idealism and realism and to establish

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an interdependence of man and the world without privileging either a constituting subject or a pre-constituted universe.

The self

The first area in which Sartre reveals freedom in action is not the outside world but rather the more intimate area of the self. His earliest published works show the way in which we choose not only our actions but also our characters and even our emotions. It is perhaps in our *self*-constitution that we are necessarily most free but feel it least: the resistance of the outside world or other people to our projects is somehow experienced as an external constraint which leaves our freedom unharmed in its essence; the resistance of our own personalities to change may be lived as an internal necessity over which we have little or no control. This, Sartre would say, is because we *desire* to experience our characters as stable: psychological essentialism is reassuring and obviates the effort which would be required to transform the patterns of behaviour and response which we have already established. The idea of an inner self – source of action, feeling, thought and emotion – is deep-rooted and intuitive: it is nonetheless, or perhaps consequently, the first butt of Sartre's existential attack. In *La Transcendance de l'Ego* (1936) Sartre will argue that rather than innate, the self is an imaginary construct, outside consciousness, object not subject of consciousness, a continuous creation held in being by belief. The self or ego, the 'I' and the 'me', are synthetic products of consciousness, unified not unifying, transcendent not immanent. A potential terminological confusion may be forestalled at this stage. Sartre is arguing against Husserl that the ego is transcendent not transcendental. A *transcendental* ego would be a personal core of consciousness, an original unitary subject, source of meaning, centre of personality, interior foundation for my sense of self. For Sartre only consciousness is transcendental, and it is, properly speaking, originally impersonal or at least pre-personal.³ (In his later writings Sartre will drop the term 'transcendental' entirely, possibly because of its Kantian overtones.) The *transcendent* ego, on the other hand, is external to consciousness, an ideal totality of states, qualities and actions, a construct which I tend to imagine as a source of my feelings and behaviour but which is in fact rather a synthesis. The ego is transcendent in the same way as so-called 'states' such as love or hatred, which are, as we shall see, illusory

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12157-6 - Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom

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unities imposed on the perpetual flux of consciousness in our desire to give 'depth' and 'durability' to our feelings.

The 'I', then, is not a unifying force; it is rather consciousness which makes the unity and personality of the 'I' possible (*TE*, 23). Indeed, not only is the ego external to consciousness, it is not even permanently present to consciousness. Sartre's essay starts by agreeing with Kant that 'le Je Pense *doit pouvoir accompagner toutes nos représentations*'⁴ (*TE*, 13), which he interprets as meaning that consciousness can always become reflexive, or in other words that self-consciousness is a perpetual possibility, the condition of possibility of experience. But it is the reflexive act itself which, for Sartre, brings the ego into being: 'il n'y a pas de *Je* sur le plan irréfléchi' (*TE*, 32): when I am reading or running for a train I am conscious of the book or the train to be caught, not of myself reading or running, though I may become self-conscious at any moment. Consciousness is always intentional,⁵ that is to say it always has an object; much of the time its object is the outside world, but occasionally I will turn my attention on myself. If this is momentary or incidental ('What are you doing?' – 'I'm reading'), the ego will appear fleetingly in the act of reflexion. But if I want to capture that Ego and analyse it I am doomed to disappointment. The self may be an object in the world, but unlike other objects it can be perceived only obliquely, I cannot ever observe my own ego at work: 'L'Ego n'apparaît jamais que lorsqu'on ne le regarde pas . . . par nature l'Ego est fuyant' (*TE*, 70). Since my self is not *in* consciousness I cannot discover it by looking inwards – introspection meets only a frustrating emptiness and opacity. By attempting to focus on the ego, consciousness passes necessarily from the simple reflexive mode in which the ego appears ('I'm reading'), to a complex but nonetheless *non-reflexive* mode which tries vainly to concentrate on an object which has already disappeared. This means that I can never *know myself* in any real sense (*TE*, 69); I have no privileged knowledge of myself: my self-knowledge is exactly equivalent to my knowledge of other people – that is to say a result of observation and interpretation of behaviour. And moreover, to take an external view of myself is necessarily to take a false perspective, to try to believe in a self which I have myself created: 'aussi l'intuition de l'Ego est-elle un mirage perpétuellement décevant' (*TE*, 69). I may be an object for others, I can never be an object for myself. In fact, of course, a fixed, objective self would entail 'la mort de la conscience' (*TE*, 23). Instead of being a source of riches, an inner life would weigh

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down my consciousness, deny its freedom. But total freedom is disquieting, awareness of spontaneous *ex-nihilo* existence causes anguish and is perpetually refused in the name of permanent (imaginary) structures of personality. I surprise myself when I do not act in accordance with my self-image: 'Moi, j'ai pu faire ça!' (*TE*, 62). It is more comforting to see myself as acting 'out of character' than to recognize my perpetual potential for change. Sartre is laying here the foundations for the study of bad faith which he will elaborate further in *L'Être et le Néant*.

The emotions

It is also in *La Transcendance de l'Ego* that the study of emotion to be developed in *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* (1939)⁶ is begun. Sartre's major interest is in our freedom or lack of it with respect to our emotions, and he distinguishes between emotion, sentiment and passion in terms not so much of the strength of feeling as of the reflexive attitude towards that feeling. Emotion differs from sentiment in so far as the latter involves a state of equilibrium when the feeling experienced is adapted to the reality to which it responds. Emotion on the other hand is not a rational response to a situation, it is a way of apprehending the world which aims to *transform* it. Sartre's examples are predominantly negative: hatred, anger and fear. What does it mean to claim that I hate Pierre? All I can really maintain with certainty is that I feel repugnance for Pierre at this moment, but this does not satisfy me: I want to commit myself for the future too.⁷ A decision always to find Pierre repugnant would be transparently fragile and unstable, so I invert the process and envisage my hatred as the source of my feeling of repulsion. In my anger I believe I hate Pierre because he is hateful; only an act of purifying reflexion (difficult in the throes of bad temper) would rectify the picture: I see Pierre as hateful *because* I am angry (*TE*, 48).

A problem arises when we compare Sartre's analysis of hatred with his brief discussion of love in his essay on Husserl in 1939: 'Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: l'intentionnalité'.⁸ There Sartre argues in apparently contradictory fashion that if I love a woman it is because she is lovable. Part of the answer would seem to lie in Sartre's polemical strategy: in the *Transcendance de l'Ego* and the *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* he is contesting the traditional conception of emotions as a passive (and causally determined) response to stimuli; in the essay

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on intentionality he is expounding the theses of Husserl and refuting (Proustian) subjectivism, dismissed as ‘la philosophie digestive de l’empirico-criticisme, du néo-kantisme’ (*Sit I*, 29). In fact, in Sartre’s view, neither love nor hatred are independent of their object, but nor are they *caused* by it: ‘La conscience et le monde sont donnés d’un même coup: extérieur par essence à la conscience, le monde est, par essence, relatif à elle’ (*Sit I*, 30).⁹

In fact, love and hatred are not properly speaking *emotions* at all (the emotions involved are affection and desire or anger and repulsion), they are rather a synthesis of repeated experiences, a *choice* of attitude. Like the ego they are transcendent. Emotions proper, then, are not enduring sentiments nor states adapted to reality. Emotion is compared by Sartre to magic: it is a temporary response to a situation which I am unable to deal with in real terms. The examples given are familiar: I cannot outwit an opponent in an argument but rather than admit defeat I become angry; I cannot solve a mathematical problem so I tear up the piece of paper on which it is written; I cannot bring myself to confess a misdemeanour so I burst into tears (*E*, 30–1). The reality has not altered, but I have the illusion of escaping from it momentarily. Sartre’s examples may suggest that he sees emotional behaviour as insincere, but this is not the case. There are, he recognizes, false emotions when I perhaps feign a joy I do not feel or exaggerate my distress (*E*, 51). But real emotion *believes* in the transformed world it has created for itself. It is not self-conscious: this is not to say that it is unconscious¹⁰ but rather that it is unreflexive, or, in Sartre’s terminology, ‘consciente d’elle-même non-thétiquement’ (*E*, 42). This means that although the object of consciousness is the world it has subjectively transformed, a reflexive consciousness which would recognize itself as source of its own degradation in emotion is always possible. ‘C’est dans cette mesure et dans cette mesure seulement qu’on peut dire d’une émotion qu’elle n’est pas sincère’ (*E*, 54). If emotion is a game, it is a game in which I believe (*E*, 44). The qualities I project onto objects are not recognized as my projections: ‘les qualités intentionnées sur les objets sont saisies comme vraies’ (*E*, 52). This also throws further light on the *boutade* already referred to: ‘Si nous aimons une femme, c’est parce qu’elle est aimable’ (*Sit I*, 32). Emotion may be chosen, it is nonetheless undergone. ‘L’émotion est subie. On ne peut pas en sortir à son gré, elle s’épuise d’elle-même mais nous ne pouvons l’arrêter’ (*E*, 52). We are enthralled: ‘envoûtés, débordés, par notre propre émotion’ (*E*, 52). Consciousness becomes its own captive, victim of its own trap as in dreams or hysteria (*E*, 55).

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All this provides an important corrective to a certain facile view of Sartrean freedom which attributes to him an implausible ideal conception of liberty quite at odds with our experience. Sartre has indeed a radical view of human freedom and responsibility: this does not mean that he analyses consciousness as if it were disembodied and unsituated. Indeed the body is described as representing 'le *sérieux* de l'émotion' (*E*, 52). Real emotion involves not only a certain kind of behaviour, but also physiological changes; the former may be revoked by an effort of will, the latter escape my control: 'On peut s'arrêter de fuir; non de trembler' (*E*, 52); 'Mes mains resteront glacées' (*E*, 53); 'La conscience ne se borne pas à projeter des significations affectives sur le monde qui l'entoure: elle *vit* le monde nouveau qu'elle vient de constituer' (*E*, 53). The bodily transformations form part of a significant behavioural whole without which they would be meaningless, but they constitute a hard-core of somatic response irreducible to interpretation in terms of the freedom of consciousness. Sartre will elaborate his conception of the relation of the body to consciousness in *L'Être et le Néant*; for the moment he merely alludes to the dual nature of the body, 'd'une part un objet dans le monde et d'autre part le vécu immédiat de la conscience' (*E*, 53).

The origin of emotion may, then, be spontaneous, the experience of it is passive: 'L'origine de l'émotion c'est une dégradation *spontanée* et *vécue* de la conscience en face du monde' (*E*, 54). Emotion necessarily tends towards its own self-perpetuation, in part for physiological reasons, but more importantly because I cannot *simultaneously* posit the world as, say, fearful or hateful and as neutral or positive. 'Il ne faut pas imaginer la spontanéité de la conscience en ce sens qu'elle serait toujours libre de nier quelque chose au moment même où elle poserait ce quelque chose' (*E*, 55). 'La conscience s'émeut sur son émotion, elle renchérit' (*E*, 55). Nonetheless, there is still room for manoeuvre. Since I am my own captive I can release myself, but not without a struggle: 'la libération doit venir d'une réflexion purifiante ou d'une disparition totale de la situation émouvante' (*E*, 55). Purifying reflexion would recognize that it is I who have constituted the emotional world in which I find myself trapped. But this kind of reflexion is rare. Reflexive consciousness is more often *complice* than *purifiante*, inclined to justify my emotions by looking for fresh evidence in the object which has 'provoked' them, rather than recognizing their affective, value-laden charge as a projection. Indeed, Sartre concludes, *réflexion complice* may transform emotion into passion (*E*, 63). This allusive comment seems

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to dismiss passion as an intense, unadapted emotional state prolonged indefinitely by irrational, indulgent reflexion. As a conclusion it is resolutely anti-Romantic.¹¹

The *Esquisse* clearly represents a careful and subtle attempt to account for a complex phenomenon. It would be easy to extract from it apparently contradictory statements concerning the status of emotional behaviour with respect to human freedom, in so far as it is *both* actively chosen *and* passively undergone. But Sartre manages to avoid both incoherence and compromise in his description of a psychological state which may initially produce bodily reactions but which is in its turn perpetuated by them. In his later writings Sartre will enjoy the effects of paradox and self-contradiction which he can obtain by playing with and subverting the binary oppositions of analytic reason and its permanent ally, common sense;¹² in 1939 his philosophical strategy is perhaps more conventional, and he prefers to explain and reconcile the problematic rather than using its full potential to shake the reader from her complacent confidence in the capacity of analytic reason to explain the world.

Phenomenology

The subtitle of *La Transcendance de l'Ego* is *Esquisse d'une description phénoménologique*; the subtitle of *L'Imaginaire* (which we shall examine shortly) is *Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*; that of *L'Etre et le Néant* is *Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*.

There is plenty here to puzzle the reader: not only the unfamiliar notion of 'phenomenological ontology' to which we shall return, but also the unexpected synthesis implied in 'phenomenological psychology'. Sartre gives a useful brief definition of phenomenology:

La phénoménologie est une description des structures de la conscience transcendente fondée sur l'intuition des essences de ces structures.¹³

That is, a description of transcendental consciousness investigated through an intuition of essences. The terminology of phenomenology is perhaps more disorientating than its practice. Unlike psychology, which takes as its object situated consciousness, or the individual *psyche*, phenomenology aims to give an account of consciousness stripped of its empirical, personal irrelevancies. The object of phenomenology is *transcendental*, not in any mystical sense but rather in so far as it is not identified with any particular individual. And transcendental consciousness is reached by what is

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known as the *epoche*, or phenomenological reduction: that is to say the putting aside or 'bracketing off' of the contingent and personal to reveal the underlying universal structures.¹⁴ The phenomenological method is intuition – not in the general sense of insight, but in the philosophical sense of what is apprehended by the mind as immediate evidence. It studies phenomena in the literal sense of '“ce qui se dénonce soi-même”'; ce dont la réalité est précisément l'apparence' (*E*, 15). Intuition differs radically from psychological introspection: introspection is the examination of one's own mental processes – it is necessarily personal, it is also, in Sartre's view, necessarily inauthentic, in so far as it attempts to objectify what is not properly speaking an *object* at all. (We have already seen the inability of introspection to observe the ego since the ego is not *in* consciousness.) Phenomenological intuition¹⁵ seeks to determine the essence of the structures of (transcendental) consciousness – the essence not in any Platonic sense but simply in the sense of the necessary conditions of, say, an image or an emotion. The opposed attitudes of psychologists and phenomenologists towards the role of experimentation and example may usefully elucidate their differences. For the psychologist, experiments provide individual items of evidence which may cumulatively convince him of a particular theory. The phenomenologist works very differently – she seeks the essential conditions of a particular structure such as an image through an intuitive examination of a single example. The same essence necessarily underlies each of its manifestations. The empirical inductive psychologist can only ever reach *probable* conclusions – fresh evidence could always falsify his theories. The phenomenologist works in the domain of the certain – her object is immediately given to her, her material is always ready to hand, it is present in an experience which precedes all ratiocination or experimentation. Sartre pinpoints the difference by playing on the two senses of *expérience* in French: he argues that phenomenological enquiry, being directly concerned with the conditions of experience (*expérience*), has logical and methodological precedence over psychological experiment (*expérience*). 'Ainsi Husserl sait tirer parti de cette proximité absolue de la conscience par rapport à elle-même, dont le psychologue n'avait pas voulu profiter' (*E*, 13). But the phenomenological method sounds deceptively simple: to describe, without preconception, what appears to consciousness. For in fact our ways of thinking are so permeated by what we have always taken for granted that it is no easy task to learn to reflect or observe, as it were, naïvely. In the case of imagination, for example, Sartre writes:

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La méthode est simple: produire en nous des images, réfléchir sur ces images, les décrire, c'est-à-dire tenter de déterminer et de classer leurs caractères distinctifs.¹⁶

If phenomenological reduction were as natural and straightforward as this suggests, the numerous 'false' theories of the image which Sartre decries would surely not have held sway for so long – they would have been seen to be at odds with immediate experience.

How then does Sartre propose to link phenomenology and psychology?

Les sciences psychologiques . . . étudient la conscience de l'être humain, indissolublement liée à un corps et en face d'un monde . . . La réflexion phénoménologique . . . cherche à saisir les essences. C'est-à-dire qu'elle débute en se plaçant d'emblée sur le terrain de l'universel. (I, 139–40)

The object of psychology is man-in-the-world, not (transcendental) consciousness *per se*; what Sartre has against it is that it is a positivistic science and the truth it reveals is scientific not human. (We will return later to this distinction.)¹⁷ It studies man as an object not a subject, evacuates all value and deals only in the hypothetical, the experimental and the *a posteriori*. In so far as it pretends to be objective, psychology, in Sartre's view, ignores the fact that in the so-called 'human sciences' man is both object *and* subject of study.¹⁸ But if Sartre, in the name of phenomenology, points out the shortcomings of psychology, he is nonetheless not content to remain in the domain of pure phenomenology. Like the psychologist's, Sartre's major preoccupation is man-in-the-world, and this means that both human facticity and the world that has been 'bracketed off' by the *epoché* must be brought back into play. The phenomenological method is used to enrich and transform psychology, it enables the psychologist to interpret his findings in terms of their human significance: to study, for example, the *meaning* of emotional behaviour. Far from being an incoherent hybrid, phenomenological psychology reinstates the object of psychology with the human significance artificially removed from it, and restores to the object of phenomenology the concrete specificity of its individual manifestation.

Imagination

The study of the imagination both inaugurates and closes Sartre's philosophical writings: from *L'Imagination* in 1936 and *L'Imaginaire* in 1940 to *L'Idiot de la famille* in 1971/2, it is Sartre's

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constant preoccupation. Identified with the freedom of consciousness, it is the imagination which permits Sartre to relate his literary productions and aesthetic theories to his philosophical and political radicalism. But his attitude towards the imagination is from the outset ambivalent: both the essence of freedom and yet a permanent temptation to escape from the real and contingent into a fantasy world which would temporarily allay desire without satisfying it (*I*, 162). Source of change – moral, social and political – but also potential substitute for change, the imagination is the pivot around which many of Sartre's paradoxes turn and on which his later anti-Hegelian dialectics are arguably founded.

To understand this fundamental ambivalence we must turn to the early theoretical writings. *L'Imagination* prepares the ground for *L'Imaginaire*: it is a critique of previous theories of imagination, culminating in Husserl whom Sartre sees as having made a major advance in the field, marred by certain relics of the traditional conception of the image as an 'impression sensible renaissante' (*Im*, 152). Sartre attacks the pre-phenomenological views of the image as naïve and metaphysical, based on an *a priori* conception of the image as a copy of an object: a 'chosisme naïf' (*Im*, 4–5) which necessarily falsifies the interpretation of both experience and experiment. Sartre gives brief accounts of the theories of Descartes, Leibniz and Hume; Taine and the Associationists; Bergson and the Würzburg School. In all he finds the same tendency to conceive of the image as a weak perception, a content of consciousness. Husserl's notion of intentionality according to which consciousness is always *of* something outside itself, a direction of attention rather than a receptacle, refuses any view of the image as *immanent*. Imagination does not involve dwelling on a psychic content, it is rather one of the ways in which consciousness relates to the outside world. It is distinct from perception, not merely a poor relation or a weaker version. In *L'Imaginaire* Sartre will start where Husserl leaves off and elaborate a full-scale phenomenological psychology of the imagination. The work is divided into two sections: 'Le Certain', which establishes the essence of the imagination in so far as it may be determined by eidetic reflexion – this is the progressive phase of pure phenomenology; and 'Le Probable', a complementary regressive phase of experimental psychology which is no longer purely descriptive but rather involves hypotheses and their 'confirmation': 'ces confirmations ne nous permettront jamais de dépasser le domaine du probable' (*I*, 76).

Sartre's starting point is his opposition to what he calls the