

CHRISTINA HOWELLS

Introduction

This collection of essays, by some of the foremost interpreters of Sartre from Europe and the United States, was composed specifically for the new series of Cambridge Companions to Major Philosophers. None of the essays has been published previously elsewhere. The contributors range from the most senior and established Sartrean scholars to some of the most promising and lively of the younger generation of critics. As editor, my task was to commission a broad range of essays, covering the major aspects of Sartre's philosophical work and its implications, in line with the purpose of the new Cambridge series. What struck me most forcibly on receipt of the typescripts, was the originality, density, and cohesion of the interpretations. They not only present a generous and balanced view of the wide variety of Sartre's philosophy, but also all make a contribution to the "new" Sartre, that is to the view of Sartre which has been gradually emerging since his death in 1980, as a figure whose diversity was far from being mastered, who could not, without distortion and impoverishment, be identified with the "classical existentialist" of the 1940s, and whose relationship to Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, as well as to psychoanalysis, Marxism, and literary theory, was far more complex than had been generally supposed. Suffering, since the 1960s, from the backlash of rejection that exceptional popularity and fame brings in its wake, Sartre was commonly used as the humanist target against whom nascent Structuralist, Marxist, and Deconstructionist critics could test their arms. But their weaponry was not furnished with quite the anti-Sartrean ammunition that they imagined: Sartre's gradual incorporation of Marxism since the 1950s was not exhibited solely in his difficult and little read *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), nor could his rela-

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tionship to Freud be reduced to the critique to be found in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) or to the elaborate Freud scenario, relic of his abortive collaboration with John Huston. The *Idiot of the Family* (1971–2) is certainly the text that reveals most clearly the extent and fruitfulness of Sartre's constantly evolving relationship with the other major thinkers of his age. Its implications are only now starting to be thought through, and its mark is evident in many of the essays in this collection. But this is still only half the picture. Not only did Sartre's critics of the sixties and seventies attempt, unwittingly perhaps, to fossilize him in the classical works he had himself by then outgrown, but they did not accord those works themselves a fair reading. The decentered subject, the rejection of a metaphysics of presence, the critique of bourgeois humanism and individualism, the conception of the reader as producer of the text's multiple meanings, the recognition of language and thought structures as masters rather than mastered in most acts of discourse and thinking, a materialist philosophy of history as detotalized and fragmented, these are not the inventions of Lacan, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss and Derrida; nor are they to be found merely in Sartre's later works such as the *Critique* (1960), *Words* (1966) or the *Idiot of the Family* (1971–2) where it could be argued that they should be attributed to his receptivity to the major trends of his age (though the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* would still predate most of the French Structuralists' major works). The notions are, rather, present from the outset: in the *Transcendence of the Ego* (1936), in *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (1940), in *Nausea* (1941), in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), and even in his most polemical theoretical work, *What Is Literature?* (1948). This preoccupation with the deconstruction as well as the reconstruction of the human is also to be found in the posthumously published works, ranging from the early *Cahiers pour une morale* (1983), *Carnets de la drôle de guerre* (1983), and *Vérité et existence* (1989), through to the notes for volume IV of the *Idiot of the Family*, the second volume of *Critique*, and the later meditations on ethics. All these have informed, and indeed in some cases form the focus of, the contributions to this *Companion*.

Part I of this book concentrates primarily, but not solely, on the works of the thirties and forties. Hazel Barnes gives an illuminating presentation of Sartre's ontology, with a particularly subtle account

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of the relationship between consciousness, being-for-itself, and nothingness, as well as of that between consciousness and body and consciousness and world. She draws primarily, of course, on *Being and Nothingness*, but also makes use of the *Critique*, *The Psychology of the Imagination*, the *Idiot of the Family*, the *Carnets*, and the *Cahiers*. A substantial and controversial final section is devoted to the role and reality of the ego. Here Professor Barnes goes beyond what has until now been Sartrean orthodoxy, to argue that the ego is not merely an inevitable fabrication, but a necessary and healthy part of personal existence, a bulwark against irresponsibility and meaninglessness. The systematic reader who compares the opinions held by the various contributors to this book will not fail to note that this view is somewhat different from my own interpretation in the final chapter, which aligns Sartre's attitude to the ego with Lacan's well-known hostility to ego psychology. But Professor Barnes's paper certainly led me to reconsider my interpretation, and think out how I would defend it, and I hope the reader of this *Companion* will relish the heterogeneity and occasional heterodoxy of its contributions as a sign of the lively state of Sartre studies in the 1990s.

Robert Cummings's essay on Sartre and Husserl focuses on their respective interpretations of role-playing as a base for a wide-ranging analysis of the specificity of Sartrean phenomenology. The chapter starts, naturally, from *The Psychology of the Imagination*, and includes not only the *Transcendence of the Ego* and *Being and Nothingness*, but also *Saint Genet*, the *Critique*, *Words*, the *Carnets*, and a considerable section on the *Idiot of the Family* as well as several references to Sartre's fiction. The analysis of the role of affectivity and affective meaning for Sartre is used to show his difference from as well as his debt to Husserl, and concludes with a sharp reminder of the inappropriateness of attempting to discuss Sartre's philosophy in isolation from his creative literature. Professor Cummings's own work has certainly avoided that pitfall in both its judicious intermingling of primary texts and its excursions outside philosophy into psychoanalysis, drama, and Marxism.

Leo Fretz's chapter traces the development of the notion of the individual in Sartre's philosophy from the *Transcendence of the Ego* through *Being and Nothingness* to the *Critique*, and argues that the "epistemological break," if there is one, should be located not, as is generally thought, between *Being and Nothingness* and the *Cri-*

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tique, but rather between the *Transcendence* and *Being and Nothingness*. In the *Transcendence of the Ego* consciousness is individuated but impersonal, at least on a primary level; the attempt in *Being and Nothingness* to follow Heidegger and locate consciousness in the world gives consciousness a personal structure as *pour soi, ipséité*, and, Fretz argues, poses afresh the problem of solipsism. The *Critique* resolves this problem by envisaging the *cogito* as dialectical and “historical man” in necessary relation to other men. Fretz sees this final position as synthesizing the two different kinds of transcendental consciousness of the *Transcendence* and *Being and Nothingness*. In an unexpected and provocative conclusion he returns to the last page of the *Transcendence*, where Sartre states that the conception of the ego as a transcendental object in the world lays the foundation for an ethics and politics that are entirely positive. In the light of Hazel Barnes’s rehabilitation of the ego this relating of the ego to ethics is particularly suggestive.

Part II of the *Companion* continues the ethical meditation opened by Leo Fretz’s chapter. David Jopling’s essay on Sartre’s moral psychology gives a lucid and sympathetic account of the implications of the existential conception of freedom for morality. He focuses on the issues of self-determination and self-knowledge – how we make of ourselves the kinds of people we want to be – rather than on the more popular and contentious questions of free choice of action and the rejection of absolute moral laws. He explores some of the most fundamental questions raised by the radical claims of *Being and Nothingness*, in particular with respect to the project, arguing that, in its all-embracing nature, it is ultimately at odds with Sartre’s claim that we are all self-determining agents. How can we ever change at all, if our whole lives are globally governed by our project, which can only be altered by a “radical conversion”? Jopling shows how the answers to questions such as this are to be found in Sartre’s later works, in the *Critique* and more especially the *Idiot of the Family*, in which a Marxist theory of social conditioning together with a theory of childhood development and of social “predestination” mean that we are no longer envisaged as making ourselves “from the ground up” as it were, but rather as reworking and integrating already existing dispositions, character traits, emotional patterns, and so on. In this way self-determination still involves total responsibility, but it is rather that of *assuming* responsibility for ourselves – selves to whose characteris-

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tics, coherence, and purpose we have contributed, but on the basis of the given, not, like gods, *ex nihilo*.

Rhiannon Goldthorpe continues the emphasis on the importance of the *Idiot of the Family* as a response to the questions posed by Sartre's early works, this time in the domain of literary commitment. She also draws on a wide range of other texts, from *What Is Literature?* and *Saint Genet* to the posthumously published *Engagement de Mallarmé*, the *Cahiers*, the *Carnets*, and volume II of the *Critique*. She uses *Search for a Method*, with its theory of the individual as a kind of *universel singulier*, totalizing and totalized by his or her epoch, to supplement and resolve some of the uncertainties of the earlier, unsystematic *What Is Literature?*, in particular with respect to the relationship between subjective and objective and to the problem of alienation. One of the most intriguing aspects of her essay is the discussion of Sartre's debt to Dilthey's notion of *verstehen* (*compréhension*), which envisages understanding as a form of hermeneutic circle moving between complex wholes and their parts in a continuing attempt at totalization. In the domain of literary commitment, *compréhension* further suggests the possibility of transcending conflict by grasping the other as subject rather than object, a notion that is vital to works such as *Saint Genet* and *Black Orpheus*, and which allows poetry to come into its own as an indirect suggestion of what prose fails to say. Flaubert is perhaps a test case of this in several senses; and Goldthorpe shows the complexity of Sartre's conception of the novelist's commitment, culminating in an analysis of *Saint Julien l'hospitalier* as concentrating in itself the social, historical, and personal contradictions of Flaubert's life story. Here Sartre's own reading is shown as a dynamic transcendence of the contradictions of the *Esprit objectif*, and itself a form of *littérature engagée*.

Juliette Simont completes this section with a chapter centrally devoted to tracing the development of Sartre's ethical positions. Her essay is bold and comprehensive, drawing not only on *Being and Nothingness*, *Saint Genet*, the *Critique*, and the posthumous *Cahiers pour une morale*, but also on the as yet unpublished notes, dating from 1964–5, for lectures given at the Gramsci Institute in Rome, and for a lecture scheduled for Cornell, but canceled in protest against American bombings in Vietnam. Simont traces the fortunes of the notion of *value* from the 1940s to the 1960s. *Being and Nothingness*

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asks if value is necessarily alienating, or if it only produces alienation when it is imbued with the *esprit de sérieux*. The *Cahiers* argue that value itself is not alienating, alienation comes from other people, from value transformed into obligation, and from the counterfinality of the material world, which distorts one's intentions. The *Critique* continues the opposition between value and obligation, now described as imperative, but with a reversal of interpretation: The imperative is perceived as external and can therefore be potentially resisted, value is now seen as more noxious because it is obligation internalized and imperceptible. The Rome and Cornell lectures shift the locus of opposition to that between need and desire: *Desire* involves alienation to the others on whom it makes me dependent, *need* might provide the foundation for a materialist, humanist ethics that would involve the rejection of all behavior that increased human alienation to the practico-inert.

Like Leo Fretz and David Jopling, Juliette Simont sees in the works of the sixties not merely a radicalization of perspective under the influence of Marxism, but also, and more surprisingly, a humanist materialism that, in its recognition of objective alienation, makes possible a moderate optimism concerning the possibility of a positive historical ethics.

The third part continues the focus on Sartre's later and posthumously published works. Tom Flynn's essay on the poetics of history takes the unusual approach of using Sartre's philosophy of the imagination to illuminate his philosophy of history. Just as Juliette Simont showed Sartre in the forties envisaging the work of art as a paradigm for ethical structures, so Tom Flynn shows him likening the intelligibility of history to that of an art work in so far as both are products of creative freedom. His chapter is wide-ranging, focusing in detail on *The Psychology of the Imagination*, the *Carnets*, the *Cahiers*, the *Critique*, and the *Idiot of the Family*. He discusses the question of understanding (*verstehen*) in respect of history, which picks up Rhiannon Goldthorpe's analysis earlier in this collection, and uses Sartre's distinction between *sens* and *signification* to show how the *meaning* of history may be understood in an aesthetic sense as the product of human totalization. The problem, of course, remains of how individual totalizations may themselves be totalized: Can there be a grand totalization without a totalizer? This question is raised in both the *Idiot* and the first volume of the *Critique* and its

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discussion continues in volume II of the *Critique* as the problem of “enveloping totalization.” Flynn describes Sartre’s ideal as existential and committed history, but one that, it seems, remains in some sense imaginary. His massive study of Flaubert is, we are reminded, “a novel that is true.” Since, for Sartre, truth is always human, history too, in this sense, must be a *roman vrai*.

Ronald Aronson’s essay continues the analysis of Sartre’s theory of history, focused now on the precise question of the nature of progress. He draws primarily on the *Cahiers* and volume II of the *Critique* as well as on *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, *Search for a Method*, and the *Idiot of the Family*. Aronson traces the complexities of Sartre’s position, analyzing the early outright rejection of the myth of progress that Sartre still maintained in the *Idiot of the Family* (where progress is described as a ruling class mystification designed to stave off social change) in conjunction with his acknowledgment of scientific and technological progress. The chapter explores Sartre’s meditations on detotalized totalities (which mean that progress, like history, can have no single subject) and examines the undoing of progress by alienation and the practico-inert. Ronald Aronson not only guides the reader through the evolving intricacies of Sartre’s argument, and shows the implications for it of other aspects of his theory of history, he makes a contribution of his own in the final section, which uses Sartre’s thinking in a way he did not perhaps foresee, with the suggestion of progress as a *positive* practico-inert, embodied, for example, in civil rights legislation or other forms of democratization.

Peter Caws’s exploration, in his controversially titled essay, of the relationship between Sartre and Structuralism, also argues that there is considerably more to be made of the notion of the practico-inert for twentieth-century social philosophy than has so far been realized. His chapter contains an excellent portrayal of the “new Sartre” which I referred to at the beginning of this Introduction. For it shows a Sartre who is not necessarily at odds with Structuralism, a Sartre who was perhaps driven to oppose it both by public pressure and by the more outlandish of Structuralist positions but whose own work showed plentiful evidence of an understanding, and indeed serious use, of Structuralist theory. The major disagreement concerned the question of *agency*: Were structures originally produced by subjects, or not? Caws sides with Sartre in seeing the objective, impersonal vision of radical Structuralism as a non-sense: It is

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surely more implausible to attribute agency to structures than to people. How can myths “think themselves” or produce themselves in any real sense? And he sees Sartre’s own positions in the *Critique* and the *Idiot of the Family*, especially volume III, as exemplary of the best kind of Structuralism, one that does not attempt to ignore the human subject but takes fully into account its inability to control the complex, semi-inert structures that traverse it. This is the moment for a renewed study of the practico-inert and the *esprit objectif* of volume III of the *Idiot*, seen now not merely as restricting but also as potentially liberating and facilitating. Peter Caws concludes with a convincing call for not only a renewed picture of Sartre, but also a renewed vision of Structuralism, one that would not reject everything because of the excesses and aberrations of a few.

The reconsideration of Sartre’s relationship with Structuralism continues in my own chapter, focused specifically on the question of the subject, and extending also to Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction. In it I pursue a double line of argument, showing first that the subject for Sartre is not the autonomous, self-sufficient foundation his opponents portray it as, but rather divided, non-egoic, never self-identical, and second that the major opponents of a philosophy of the subject in France are now withdrawing from their previous radical positions and attempting to construct a notion of subjectivity that would be compatible with what has been learned from Structuralism and Deconstruction. I argue that their efforts so far are producing a subject that is remarkably, though unacknowledgedly, akin to that of *Being and Nothingness*. The disregard of Sartre’s early writings on the subject constitutes an intellectual blind spot that undermines the insights of much recent French philosophy.

There is, in fact, notably no contribution from a French philosopher in this *Companion*, though there are two by French speakers, Juliette Simont and Pierre Verstraeten, and the latter closes the collection with a dense essay on Sartre and Hegel. That contribution appears in an appendix because it exhibits a degree of technical complexity unlikely to be assimilable by nonspecialists, for whom, in part at least, this book is intended. However, it provides precisely a striking example of a certain kind of French philosophy, carried out here moreover by a Belgian, for few serious philosophers in France in recent years have concerned themselves with the exegesis of Sartre.

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Pierre Verstraeten undertakes a comparison of Sartre and Hegel through an interpretation of their conceptions of the difficult notions of infinity and limits, and the better known question of being-for-others, and argues that the affinities between them in these significant areas are far closer than Sartre himself would have been prepared to admit. Verstraeten focuses the references to Hegel dispersed throughout previous essays in the collection – notably in Goldthorpe, Simont, Flynn, and Aronson – and provides a concluding reminder of both the still insuperable differences between Anglo-American and French philosophy, and of Sartre’s own continuing resistance to recuperation.

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