

SARTRE'S DEBT TO ROUSSEAU:

FREEDOM, FAITH AND FULFILLMENT

I. Introduction

A title is a promissory note, to be redeemed at the end of a paper, not at the beginning. Yet something about it must be said immediately. Sartre's "debt" to Rousseau is not like his debt to (e.g.) Husserl, Heidegger or Hegel. (For a detailed study along such lines, see Schroeder [1984].) There is no work by Sartre devoted to an exegesis on Rousseau, nor does Sartre explicitly avow Rousseau's influence on his thought. You won't find Rousseauian doctrine or jargon in any of Sartre's major treatises, nor does he quote Rousseau at length. Yet these omissions are telling, for it is inconceivable that Rousseau had no effect on Sartre, no matter how seldom he mentions him. Indeed, Sartre's best biographer quotes him as saying that "Rousseau fascinated us" when he and Paul Nizan were young (Gerassi [1989], 75). However, Sartre never translated fascination into speech, except in college, and when he studied for exams (*ibid.*, 90). Later, he made phenomenology a household word in Paris, conveying lived experience in terms that no one had ever imagined. Sartre taught French philosophy to speak German, yet his mother tongue was still French, and the Swiss borders stayed open long enough for Rousseau to bear witness to Sartre's own political conversion (cf. Sartre [1988b], 101), from complacent bourgeois to embattled radical.

Granted, Rousseau's impact on (Western) culture is so pervasive that Sartre could have absorbed it anywhere. As a dead writer, Rousseau remains a live option (cf. Sartre [1988b], 44), because he asks questions that have no (good) answers, despite two centuries of human retrogress. Here is where comparisons are in order. Both Sartre and Rousseau were painstakingly, sometimes brutally honest [men]. Both went to extremes, not only in their lives but in describing intimate thoughts and feelings, mental episodes that we dare not admit, even to ourselves. Both were architects of revolution, of social

change, be it real or make-believe, imminent or far-off. Both pondered whether we can ever understand, let alone count on (or enjoy) each other while we're on earth; whether we can join any group without losing our identity or being swallowed up in an anonymous whale. And both wondered whether we will ever gaze up at the face of God, and if so, who will flinch first. Does the presence of the Absolute sicken us unto death? Or only the absence? That was the question they raised for us. That is the issue we will examine on their behalf.

To compare Sartre to Rousseau, one need hardly know anything about either of them. A few clichés, a few formulas and a few aphorisms will do, at least for openers. For instance, Rousseau says we are "forced to be free" (Cress 150), while Sartre says we are "condemned to freedom" (BN 623). Is this resemblance striking or just superficial? In Rousseau's case, coercion results from making everyone abide by majority rule (as a political principle). In Sartre's case, it stems from the inescapability of individual choice. Yet both men support democracy in theory, and free will in practice. Both long for a society that will let us be ourselves; in the meantime, we must act as if it already existed, either to help bring it about or to save our own souls.

After World War II, Sartre preached that existence precedes essence. Yet every time he changed his views, he fled his own anguish (BN 711) by turning existence into an essence. The more he denied the slogan, the more he verified it. The more he defied it, the more he became its exemplar.¹ Like William James in "The Will to Believe," Sartre insists that "not to choose is. . . to choose not to choose" (BN 619). Ergo, to analyze the meaning of choice is a karma, from which "the Socrates of our century" (Solomon [1987], 274) couldn't escape. When Sartre declined the Nobel Prize, he did so to avoid becoming an institution, thereby becoming an institution. Whatever Sartre did, once he was famous, he was trapped. Yet he would be the first to say that that's no excuse, that we are responsible even for the grammar of the language we

¹Since slogans are deceptive, we must look deeper. Rousseau never said "existence precedes essence," but (like Thoreau) he admired self-sufficiency, which does away with conformity and makes each of us our own boss. *Autarkeia* is not a useless passion so long as we don't let it frustrate us. Instead it promotes moral integrity. We must be free to reject society in order to live in it without making (too many) compromises. Such a freedom is a "perilous reef" (BN 530), yet we have no choice but to choose it (BN 619), since in the end we cannot live apart from the world. Thus 'anarchy' in the strict sense is (like solipsism) self-defeating, because we can't even mention it without addressing those whom we feign to exclude.

use, as though we had invented it (BN 663). Such gratuitous heroism (or masochism) merely confirms Sartre's fixed status as an icon of authenticity.

The more philosophers change, the more they stay the same, if not in their world then in ours. Like Socrates at his trial, the more they fail to persuade us, the more their salvation lies in defeat. "Loser wins," just as in the New Testament (or in Charlie Chaplin films). And Sartre always loses big. Indeed, his autobiography sounds suspiciously like Kierkegaard's famous "over against God I am always in the wrong" in *Either/Or*: "I always preferred to accuse myself rather than the universe, not out of simple good-heartedness, but in order to derive only from myself" (W 235). Thus spake Sartre the adult about Sartre the child. Yet it is not a false memory. For even the grown man believes that we all want to be God (BN 724), and that our desire is futile (BN 784). To those who regard Sartre as a god, as well as to those who don't, the dilemma is not merely about him but about us (cf. King [1974], 46).

Like God, we must create our world *ex nihilo*. Yet nothing ever came from nothing, and each world differs from its neighbors (not to mention its predecessors). Hence Sartre's version of autonomy combines the will to power with the brute necessity of events beyond our control, without reconciling them. How else can Sartre assume that we are so free that we can't help but choose ourselves (BN 616), no matter who and when we are? Both we and God must manufacture ourselves, and once we do, we are stuck with the results (cf. King [1974], 104). For a changing essence is no essence at all, except (as Bergson taught) as an institution of pure flux. Hence we tremble at our own power, since we can only use it once.

This seems to contradict the existential axiom that we are always free to chart our own destiny. But that destiny never leaves us in peace, nor can we deny our past without lying to ourselves. This is how posterity views (or stereotypes) philosophers. For Sartre insists that René Descartes is ". . . an absolute upsurge at an absolute date and is perfectly unthinkable at another date, for he has made his date by making himself" (BN 669). If so, we can't imagine Descartes being other than he is, or living at any other time. Surely this is odd, given Sartre's own career as a writer of fiction, a creator of possible worlds, all of which (as he says about Mallarmé) might have been true but none of which are (Sartre [1988a], 146). Yet the counter-factual character of human history (cf. Elster [19678]) indirectly supports Sartre. How often do we explain events by comparing them to roads not travelled, forking paths that remain uninhabited or

unrealized molecular possibility. 'If Hitler hadn't been so irrational, he would not have invaded the Soviet Union, thus starting a two-front war in 1941.' But if Hitler weren't so irrational, he wouldn't be Hitler! Likewise, if the ice age (or the comet) hadn't hit, dinosaurs might yet roam the earth. But then we wouldn't be here to shake our heads in cosmic relief (cf. Gould [1987]). So too, the (wo)man who didn't marry me "wasn't right for you." But if (s)he had accepted my proposal, (s)he would have been ideal! Thus our world lines are just what they ought to be, though if they were different, they would be exactly the same. Laplace's demon should be happy with that, but if he's not, he can always protest that he couldn't predict the swerve of the atom (or the birthday of Heisenberg).

Let's test our probiter dictum by applying it to Sartre's subject. Would Descartes still be a dualist today? Would he give up the vortex theory after Newton refuted it? Would he change his mind about minds and bodies, abandon the pineal gland hypothesis, or regret what became of mechanism? In 1943 Sartre warned us not to ask such questions, let alone answer them. For Descartes exists in just one possible world, and in that world he determines his own destiny, just as we do in ours. Therefore, freedom and fate coincide. Hence dialogue with the dead is as futile as life with the living. Hell is other philosophers, not to mention their ghosts. And beware of shadows in the academic inferno.

Two centuries ago, Rousseau exposed civilization as a sham and a fraud. Between the ending of the second *Discourse* and the opening of *Social Contract* (Cress 141) he too became a celebrity, "entombed" in his own fame after 1762 (C II, 229). When he wasn't hounded by priests, chasing (or chased by) ardent women, or pursued by his own angst, Rousseau (who never used the catchphrase 'noble savage' but became a prisoner of its popularity) stressed the need to live simply and naturally, without rules or artifice. Yet as a superb ironist, Rousseau also knew just how impossible his demands were, even as pure fiction. (Perhaps this is why he abandoned his own children to the orphanage, without ever knowing them). As a model youth, Emile is supposed to learn, not from books but from experience. Yet we cannot teach him (or ourselves) unless we read *Emile*. Meanwhile, Emile's tutor follows him around to make sure he doesn't get into any mischief, proving that you don't have to be either Jewish or a mother to be a real Jewish mother. And in the end, Emile is not innocent but ignorant, as the unfinished sequel (in which Emile loses Sophie to another

man and is himself enslaved) demonstrates. (Cf. Okin [1979], 169-72, 194). If Emile is unhappy, what hope is there for the rest of us? And if he isn't self-sufficient, despite his textbook upbringing, then even an infant must agree with Sartre that "man is a useless passion" (BN 784), albeit ". . . one which is necessary as long as man exists" (Craib [1976], 228).

Multiply examples of useful labor and useless protest, and the odds against *autarkeia* mount. No wonder Rousseau inveighs against "organized degradation" and institutional hypocrisy, while Sartre rails against the dichotomy between private and public lives, which makes both pillars of bad faith. Rousseau traces (the cause of) inequality back to private property (Cress 60, 68), Sartre to the division of labor imposed by scarcity (CDR 140 ff.). The common denominators in each case are greed and fear. Rousseau is no feminist, yet he is the first thinker in modern times to admit that the relations between men and women are not ideal, that injustice causes sexual tension (and vice versa), and that when parents fight, children suffer. From Emile (and Sophie) it is but a step to Sartre's depiction of the woman worker who mutely serves the machine, who has an abortion because she can't feed herself, let alone afford to raise children (CDR 232-35). Her plight repeated a million-fold is misery writ large. And when the five o'clock whistle blows, her troubles don't end; they barely begin.

Exploitation means that workers don't own the means of production, don't enjoy the fruits of their labor and (therefore) don't control their own destiny. But who does? Not capitalists; they too are subject to "iron laws" which place them in iron cages. Hence everyone is alienated, not just a chosen people or an economic class. Like the priest or the shaman, the engaged writer supplies what the multitude lacks: symbols, especially symbols of hope. This is as true of *Mein Kampf* as it is of *Common Sense*. And engagement is a craft(y) tradition, too. Thus it should not astonish us that Karl Marx's arresting image of workers throwing off their chains is reminiscent of the first sentence of the *Social Contract*, and his moral furor harks back to the conclusion of the second *Discourse* (" . . . a handful of people gorge themselves on superfluities while the starving multitude lacks necessities," Cress 81).

When hope backfires, the engaged writer must invent an explanation, lest (s)he be blamed for what went wrong. No one has infinite patience to suffer infinite defeat. Conversely, Sartre worries lest a successful revolution betray its own ideals by turning individuals into robots and slaves of the state. "Thus do the analytic demands of Rousseau interfere. . . with the synthetic demands of

Marxism" (Sartre [1988b], 263). So, damned if you rebel, doomed if you don't. But this is no excuse for fatalism: for waffling, hesitating or supporting the *status quo*. Courage requires perception without paralysis. It also requires the ability to see the gray without seeing red, so that we can do what's right without turning decisions into dogmas. Hamlet's job isn't easy, especially when you're not a prince. Yet we mustn't be discouraged, or quit when we're behind. Paradox aside, loser never wins.

Fortunately, neither Sartre nor Rousseau needs our succor. Both writers give oppression its due, without letting it oppress them. And if the machine "becomes its own idea" (CDR 241, orig. in ital.), inverting us to serve its needs (CDR 207), we can do the same, to turn the world right side up again. Until then, Sartre will not give socialism his blessing, and vice versa (Stern [1967], 258). To be an existentialist to the last is to renounce systems and isms, including one's own (cf. Charlesworth [1975], 142).

Anthropology teaches us to beware of reified explanations. Scarcity is artificial, not natural, and it is recent, not age-old (cf. Aronson [1980], 255). Yet once it is imposed on us, we experience it not as "objective" but as alienating, not as the *Entäußerung* of creation but as the *Entfremdung* between (e.g.) wicked masters and servile slaves. Is there a way out of this morass? For those who pledge allegiance to the fiction of an original contract, yes. Thus John Rawls cautiously assures us that the rational agents who know little about each other would never harm anyone, especially if it meant hurting themselves. Behind Rawls' celebrated veil of ignorance, or even before it, membership has its privileges if and only if everyone (hence no one) is privileged. But this is merely a tautology. Moreover, it reduces rationality to self-interest, hardly a promising beginning for a (sense of) community. By contrast, Rousseau distinguishes between self-respect (*amour propre*) and selfishness (*amour de soi*). The latter is destructive, but without the former there can be neither affection nor mutual respect (without which, *we* perish or degenerate into a group of sheer *I*'s). Self-esteem is natural, whereas egotism is social; self-love is instinctive, conceit(edness) learned bad behavior. But the corruption of "civilized" mores is such that self-regard means looking out for Number 1 while caring nought about the self-regard of Numbers 2, 3 and *n*. The result is an infinity of lost souls. The devil can't help but take the hindmost, for we are all devils.

Any political arrangement or (written) constitution that entails or endorses such policies is both inconsistent and intolerable. Yet it can stay afloat permanently, while we drown in our own perversity. Can we avoid making the same fatal mistake as our ancestors? That depends on the logic of our original will—and the will to be logical. For (as Spinoza knew) without compassion reason cannot defeat rival affects. Instead it becomes its own worst enemy, turning means into ends, brains into bombs, and life into death. Conversely, it follows that a just society can only be based on love and devotion to each other, not on self-aggrandizement or even on the idea of justice itself. That (devotion) is both abstract and concrete, or in Sartre's Hegelian terms, a singularly universal cause. It is worth dying for, provided we have the opportunity to live for it: one among many, people who care about each other. Sartre's last words express a vain hope for the future collectivity (Aronson [1981], 706), and his critics charge that he could not forsake the individual to embrace the group (Desan [1966], 288). But Rousseau, living before the deluge of mass industrial social waste, had higher hopes and grander designs, albeit on a smaller scale of human fellowship (e.g., in Corsica and Poland).

In Rousseau's case, the fellowship of one for all and all for one corresponds to the fervor of "the fused group" (CDR 345-404), but it has the dignity of a moral law. Like Kant's categorical imperative, it awakens us to our true (noumenal) selves, which feel the intense bonds that pure reason commands. How to keep such emotions high is the problem all revolutionaries must face. No wonder Plato deported everyone over the age of eleven from his ideal city, while Jefferson mandated seventeen year limits on constitutions, to prevent (any) new governments from becoming an old habit. Unfortunately, such rituals of renewal do just the opposite of what they demand (which is why they only exist, or succeed, on paper). Moreover, as soon as the general will is less than solid, it is up for grabs. "Once someone says *what do I care?* about the affairs of state, the state should be considered lost" (Cress 198, ital. in orig.). And once it is less than unanimous, the "will of all" becomes a contest between rival factions, who must be policed but not suppressed (cf. James Madison in *Federalist* 10), lest democracy commit instant suicide.

To avoid mayhem, the compromise we make is to accept majority rule, though Rousseau begs the question by insisting that in a well-ordered state, such problems would never arise (Cress 204). Everything is what it is and not another thing, unless it is another thing—like Descartes born in 1996 or Adam created

in a garden of monads (BN 603, 689). Hence we must bow down to the tyranny of the majority, or in some cases, of a willful minority.² Yet Rousseau is undaunted. By intuition and by definition, the general will "is always right" (Cress 162), but it won't work unless the public isn't "tricked" or deceived (Cress 155), which means, never. (Lincoln was wrong; you can fool all of the people all of the time. And the best way to do it is to pretend that you can't.) So we can't expect people to know or do what's best for them. Like Emile, they must be led, for their own good. But self-rule turns sour whenever it curdles paternalism.

Apart from being misled, citizens don't always concur. If only consent were unanimous, instead of (at best) majority rule, groups wouldn't conflict with their own members, and the general will would never elude or "evade" us

²Aronson ([1981], 692) maintains that "we can only *imagine*" what someone other than Stalin might do to unify the USSR in the 1930's. Surely this carries Sartre's own equation between freedom and fate a bit too far, for we can do more than imagine; we can be less cruel ourselves. Stalin wouldn't be Stalin if he weren't (close to) a monster; but we needn't duplicate his essence in fashioning our own. If we were in Stalin's shoes, would we do exactly what he did? Not unless the clothes make the (wo)man. Aronson rightly blames Stalin ("not the objective situation") for Stalin's deeds. But we are not all assassins, nor would we become them if only we had a chance. Granted, this relies on faith rather than reason. But at least it is good faith.

While we're on the subject of universal moral law, let's clear up a misunderstanding which has dogged (if not betrayed) Sartre since 1946. When I "legislate" for humanity I act as if the fate of the world were in my hands. But I have no right to decide for others or to usurp their autonomy. A Sartrean imperative is categorical for its owner, but no one else. The only universal law that binds everyone is to formulate your own. Thus ethics is both relative and absolute, both mine and thine. Seen in this light, the horrifying counter-examples disappear. Can a "conscientious Nazi" will to exterminate us? No, because a conscientious Nazi is a contradiction in terms, not (just) because he's a Nazi but because he relies on *Nazism* to justify himself. You can't face the abyss if you're faceless. Morality and mobs are mutually exclusive. Of course, the Nazis did will to exterminate us—but they had no conscience. And that was their demented essence.

The consequences of Sartre's commitment to our free duty to commit ourselves are easy to state but hard to uphold. As he told an interviewer after his most famous lecture, you can't give someone "practical advice" unless ". . . he has already chosen his answer." Like the young slave in Plato's *Meno*, we must exercise our own freedom to decide (and discover) the truth on our own. Consequently, Sartre cannot tell us what to do without being in utterly bad faith. *And we cannot obey him without being far worse, even if he can predict what we will do* (Sartre [1947], 91). Ironically, none can think for themselves unless they pay negative tribute to Socrates by ignoring his warning about the unexamined life. That is hardly Sartre's fault, but follows illogically from the paradox of (anti-)authority. Therefore, every singular universal being must legislate all and for once.

(Cress 204). But, since it does, we are forced to be free (Cress 150), to participate in a scheme that we as individuals (might) reject. Thus democracy is based on paradox. Like education, it cannot renounce authority without reinstating it. Rousseau claims that "sovereignty is inalienable," that "power . . . can be transmitted, but not the [collective] will" (Cress 153, parenthetical added). This is gallant but wrong, as the noble savages whom Rousseau sought to protect from European colonists learned the hard way when their wills became chattel. We do not have to read or even spell Weber to grasp that there is only a hairline distinction between power and will, and that both are arbitrary. What Rousseau defends is not a fact but an ideal. But ideals are fragile, and the best of all possible worlds is one in which ideals are unnecessary, because everyone lives by them so instinctively.

Of course Rousseau's point is much simpler than that. Might does not make right. Rather, it destroys right. Conversely, "natural" inequality is irrelevant to rights, for ". . . those who command are [not] necessarily better than those who obey" (Cress 38; parenthetical added), though slaves must be discreet in the presence of their cruel masters. Like Socrates in *Euthyphro*, Rousseau is not impressed by the claim that the gods love piety, unless we can define what piety is. But if the gods don't love piety, why should we? And if we don't, who will? Alas, love can't be commanded. But cops we can always hire. And without (widespread) fellow feeling, cops are all we've got. As Hobbes argued, we must back up the covenant with the sword. But if the covenant obliges us to be gentle and sweet and [therefore] to give up the sword, we're in big trouble, unless love rapidly replaces laws. Even among people of good will, the general will cannot survive unless it's enforced. Hence it dies by its own (s)word, which compels it not to use violence. As Rousseau ruefully observes, "all institutions that place man in contradiction with himself are of no value" (Cress 223). His own thought experiments are no exception. They reduce society to well-earned absurdity, leaving us with nowhere to go, and nowhere to be from. This makes us exiles, who live in the steamy city, long for the tranquility of the country, but belong nowhere. (Compare Hannah Arendt [echoing Edmund Burke] on the fate of displaced moderns after 1793 [the Declaration of the Rights of Man]). As "rootless cosmopolitans" (an ugly euphemism for wandering Jews) we are on the outside looking in. Yet there is no inside to look out from, and everyone's nose is pressed to the glass.

Given our expulsion from the very heavenly city we tried to reach on paper, we have no recourse but to find a reason why we have no citizenship, no roots and no identity except as pariahs. No wonder Rousseau denounces private property as the source of all injustice (Cress 127, 132). It is both because it is neither: because it serves Rousseau's purpose to mythify property, both as original sin and as a return to Eden. The inconsistencies in Rousseau's account are not his own but those of myths in general, which reconcile us to our misery while b(l)inding us to each other in grief. (For this view of myth see Levi-Strauss; for myth-making in relation to Sartre, see Charmé [1984], 149-57).

Hence we err if we take Rousseau's ideas as a blueprint for utopia, or as prescriptions for a just society. They're pure nostalgia, not precise norms. As a lit wit, Rousseau reworks the Book of Genesis, to dramatize how far we have fallen from a social grace we have never attained (for an explicit reference to the fall, see BN 384). That is the hidden link between Rousseau and Sartre. Paradise (not just politics) is what they have in common. The evidence for this in Sartre's texts is both verbal and conceptual. When Sartre refers to man as a useless *passion* we may be forgiven if we think of Christ on the cross, at least as a precedent. When he says (repeatedly) that we are failed gods, we are tempted to cite Lucifer as a fellow traveller. And when he recalls a Kafkaesque episode in his childhood in which he imagined himself as a dead fly (W 247-48), he also hears the Holy Ghost whispering to him to "rescue" humanity by becoming a writer, which he does so well that ". . . I don't mind if my fellowmen forget about me the day after I'm buried. As long as they're alive I'll haunt them, unnamed, imperceptible, present in every one of them just as the billions of dead who are unknown to me and whom I preserve from annihilation are present in me" (W 249-50). Of course this is playful, but that makes it doubly serious. Like Rousseau, who knew that his name was "destined to live" (C II, 51), Sartre lived to witness his own immortality. And the child was father to the man.

Of course Sartre doesn't want us to equate him with God, yet that is the inference we inevitably draw. Like Cusan opposites, good faith and bad faith coincide where the creator of engagement lives. So even when he deflates his ego, Sartre reinflates it, which is a consequence of being a public figure with a reputation to maintain. (Though he claims he doesn't care what others think, by thumbing his nose at society Sartre's prestige increases. Thus the iconoclast becomes holier than the establishment of which he is now a part.) Sartre

describes himself as "a whole man, composed of all men and as good as all of them and no better than any" (W 255). A magnificent gesture, one worthy of Jesus, but just as condescending toward those whom he seeks to elevate and enlighten through transcendent art.³ For as Sartre admits, "I treat inferiors as equals: this is a pious lie which I tell them in order to make them happy. . ." (W 33). Scratch the intellectual or the revolutionary and you'll find the Grand Inquisitor underneath. Scratch Him and you'll find the original vanguard party. Yet Sartre catches himself in the act of *noblesse oblige*. Mindful of Stalin, he urges "totalization without a totalizer" (CDR 805), which means: no God, not even Sartre, may dictate policy to us. Yet who will help us if he won't? And isn't his refusal to run our lives a subtle(r) form of mental tyranny?⁴ It's no consolation (*sic*) to be told that we are each condemned to be free (BN 623). For who condemned us? And why did he choose Biblical topoi to condemn us with? This choice of language is (like everything else in Sartre's freely

³Sartre repeated the same line at age seventy, when he was feeble and blind (Aronson [1980], 354). By then it had become a stock phrase, but all the more incapable of lowering him to the masses. In Sartre's case as in Genet's, self-abuser wins. Whereas, Rousseau is quick to laud his own works as "masterpieces of diction" (C II, 108), to predict his ultimate ". . . triumph over the conspiracies of men" (*ibid.*, 208), and to take credit for his friend's success (*ibid.*, 241). Such obnoxious candor is no less artful than Sartre's self-defeating pose, and equally calculated to please. If so, why do we call them honest? Because they wear their masks so well, and because they never disown them as their own. In a world of roles, we are what we play, like the woman who lets herself be seduced or the waiter in the café (BN 96-7, 101-02). And who knows it better than the puritan(ical) *poseur* who (following Plato's lead) condemns acting as "counterfeit" and banishes it from his not-so-ideal republic? (Rousseau [1968], 79, 116) (Our thanks to Aubrey Rosenberg for noting the connection between 'the look' and the lie, both on stage and in the poorly rehearsed pseudo-drama of everyday life.) For the masks we wear in public and private, see Goffman [1959]. For 18th century (di)versions, or the visual games rich people played, see Fried [1980]. For the theory of dramatism, see Burke [1969]. For empirical tests of its validity, see Turner [1974]. For deeper history and greater insight, see Huizinga [1955] and Hesse [1969].

⁴Scriven ([1984], 114) reports that Sartre proposed writing a mammoth biography of Robespierre, but abandoned the idea in favor of one on Flaubert. The latter tried to ". . . communicate with the Absolute through the illusion of the image" (King [1974], 144), whereas Sartre's *summa* (Collins [1980], 182) lifts the veil to disclose a material world in which nothing is ever consummated, yet nothing is completely destroyed. The permanence of the practico-inert is analogous to the first law of thermodynamics, though that is not enough to generate a philosophy of nature (nor does Sartre make the effort).

determined moral universe) no accident; on the contrary, it "reveals" (BN 727, 770) who Sartre is and (like Descartes incarnate) must be: an absolute upsurge of secular sin, an I who is accountable to all the we's of the world (cf. Gerassi [1989], 34). That is the unholy (but wholly human) family to which Sartre (like the rest of us) belongs. That is also why "in spite of his atheism. . . Sartre. . . is the most pious of all those who do not believe in God" (Stern [1967], 250). Or the least pious of those who believe in Man.

Granted, Sartre *is* an atheist, albeit one who borrows freely and greedily from the tradition he inherits (cf. Charmé [1984], 124). But that august literary tradition includes Rousseau, whose influence on Sartre is so obvious that it is rarely discussed by scholars of either 18th or 20th century thought (but see Knee [1987] for a deft treatment of "marginality" as an authorial stance in both writers). The quick and dirty version of what they share begins with civil religion (which does away with superstition and is intolerant of intolerance; cf. Cress 224-26) and ends with Nietzsche's belated announcement of the death of God. But if God dies there can be no community, only "personal salvation" (Starobinski [1988], 121) or lost souls. That is why Julie dies, while her faithless yet faithful husband (Wolmar) lives, an "unbeliever" whom she loves but cannot understand (LNH 348). Her last request concerns her children: "do not make scholars of them, make benevolent and just men of them" (LNH 407), an irony not wasted on either the Encyclopedists or the clergy, who publicly and with orgiastic flourishes burned Rousseau's books as soon as they had finished them (lest they corrupt scholarly eyes). Yet what will the children grow up to be if Wolmar is in charge of them? Chances are they will become skeptics, free-thinkers and *philosophes*, convinced that their lives are "foundationless" (BN 776) yet committed to facing despair (while forcing us to face it, too). So the line of descent from Rousseau to Sartre is clear. One gets rid of bigotry, the other of divinity. One is "all but" secular, the other refuses to worship the state as a substitute for the almighty. One replaces sectarian churches with republican virtue; the other abhors even civil religion as a paragon of bad faith.

Yet there is a difference. Rousseau is modern, which means that he still believes in meaning. Whereas, Sartre is "post-modern," which means that he

doesn't believe in anything, not even his unbelief.⁵ Nothing is more meaningless than the very word for it. But even willful self-stupefaction has its limits. "Thus it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations" (BN 797). It's not the same, or Sartre wouldn't bother to compare them, let alone champion drunks and underdogs. On the contrary, he prefers the company of the derelict who knows that his acts are his alone, and therefore worthless as moral propositions, to the ravings of mad leaders who hide behind a bankrupt past, and [then] pretend that their values are valid for everyone. To "refuse to refuse" (BN 647) is to live for yesterday as though it were today, as though change were an illusion and our ancestors [were] infallible. We don't want to accuse them of failure, lest we fail, too. So we give up the search for truth and declare it found. That is the fallacy of treating old works as "monuments" which we dare not criticize, let alone surpass (Nietzsche [1983], 67 ff.). It is one thing to revive the dead, but another to make anything but praise taboo. For as Sartre notes, "of course the dead choose us, but it is necessary first that we have chosen them" (BN 694). We must respect the dead but not venerate them. Otherwise, why bring them back to life? Neither as idols nor as ogres, but only as silent partners in infinite dread do they compel us to remember and honor them.

When the drunk has slept off his stupor, he can either get drunk again and wallow in self-pity or see his problems as part of a larger whole. Hence the mature Sartre spots a counterpart to his own misery in the plight of the laborers. The "alienated" worker who toils under conditions (or threats) of scarcity (CDR 153 ff.) and who is reduced to a thing (CDR 306*n*) is a wage slave, who ". . . does not give himself; he sells himself, at least for his subsistence" (Cress 144). Rousseau understood this at an early age, perhaps soon after he was locked out of his native Geneva by the city fathers. Whereas, the bourgeois scholar living in a Paris flat needed many years (even after the Occupation) to arrive at the same insight. But arrive at it he did. For the young Sartre, influenced more by the 20th century than by its philosophers, change is the only constant. For the old Sartre, like the wizened Lear, we never learn from our mistakes, and even the way we confront death is not original but dull and repetitive. What dawned

⁵Post-modernism begins with Turgenev and Nietzsche, not (e.g.) with Foucault and Derrida. Hence we are not guilty of anachronism. But the post-modernists are. For the origins of p-m and its long career as nihilism, see Payne [1950].

on Sartre in the 1950's was that history shapes us more than we shape it. Hence, like every eternal falsity, even ecstasy is a useless passion. It follows that the more Sartre changes, the more he stays the same. Only now he views alienation as gradual rather than cataclysmic, as a process rather than as a given, and as the work of historical forces, rather than the schism of Being or the *a priori* destiny of feckless bipeds. To adopt his jargon, the fused group becomes statutory, then organized, and finally diffuse. The seriality of the bus queue (CDR 256) is both the beginning and the end of every major upheaval. When fatigue sets in, anomie takes over, and (surprise) history repeats itself. That's Sartre's theory of social devolution. As in nature, loser thins.

Thus "fraternity and fear" (CDR 428) go hand in hand, and right becomes might (CDR 438). Hence even a worker's paradise isn't ideal, though it takes a Messiah to lead us to the promised planned. Besides, as Marx himself emphasized, a classless society does not mean the end of history, but only of economic oppression. We cannot even tell what it would look like, much less what new struggles we would confront once we entered it. Yet who besides an apologist for the state's woe can resist its allure? Or compromise with the absolute, having glimpsed it in those rare moments of togetherness that people and parties enjoy when love triumphs over hate (as it did when the Berlin Wall crumbled)? We are not free; but we must act as if we were free, so that someday freedom will be more than just hypothetical. In the meantime, we must remain human, like Hoederer in *Dirty Hands*, who refuses to be a mere functionary even when his life is at stake, and who sees through the ideologues (like Hugo) who are dirtier than thou. The rhetoric of class conflict is a means, not an end. Even in bourgeois society, people are ends, not means. And 'bourgeois ethics' (=respect for persons) is still the rational basis for whatever supersedes it.

Long before Marx, politics was considered the art of the possible. Now, thanks to our utopian dreams, it dares to be the science of the impossible, including our awareness that "if mankind disappears, it will kill its dead for good" (W 250), though nature will only shudder for a moment once we are extinct. Luckily, we do not need nuclear war, ecological disaster or millennial hopes to inspire renewal. Our individual death and our being with others who are bound to die, too, is quite enough. My life is irreplaceable, but so is yours. Consequently, every time I act I realize (or tacitly affirm) that I am mortal, that

all of my projects die with me unless others revive and sustain them. That is so for them, too, which makes intersubjectivity a blessed curse.

"The Wall" is graphic in conveying Sartre's point. Pablo [Ibbetia] calls his life "a damned lie" (WOS 11), because he is spared execution by a firing squad. His release is as mysterious as his arrest. No logic, no purpose, no malice, nor even a bureaucratic imperative to explain his near-miss. Like Kafka's *The Trial*, nothing makes sense. So Pablo becomes indifferent to his own fate. After coming that close to death he says ". . . several hours or several years of waiting is all the same when you have lost the illusion of being eternal" (WOS 12). Without "reciprocity" (CDR 109) or acknowledgement by others, I am dead, even if they don't pull the trigger and let me go. For I define myself not as apart from everyone else but in relation to them. Even a hermit does this, by default. That's why Roquentin [in *Nausea*] is so intrigued by the self-taught man, who despite his name can't get along without books, libraries or young boys to prey on behind the shelves. Our needs tell us who we are. They also tell us we can't go it alone. Being (a) god never had a chance. Interdependence is All.

The consequences of this are no less dramatic. If hell is other people, there is no heaven without them. "'Hell is ourselves'" (Aronson [1980], 185), as Milton's Satan told himself every second. And Sartre can't bear to suffer alone, or else he wouldn't repeat what Descartes told him. Here we revert to the Cartesian form. The *cogito* is both solitary and social, both personal and universal, both private and public proof of my (current) existence. It measures my complete separation from others and my nearness to them (cf. BN 767, 769, 789). Like death, it is unique to me yet the common fate of everyone. Hence there is joyous symmetry in contemplating myself, for when I am alone I am also by yourself. Our worlds overlap, leaving each of us just enough room to be who we are. The abyss of despair can't sever our bonds; it can only swallow them up one by one.

Because we are human we are made in each other's image (to vary Scripture slightly). The sadist denies this, but his actions betray him (BN 526). "There is no non-human situation" (BN 708), nor one that is innocent (BN 780). Yet we all yearn for something we can't have. That too is part of our birthright, even as we hasten toward death. Since we can't be perfect, we must learn to accept the fact that we can't accept being imperfect. The alternative is to turn thought into a thing (BN 740), and congeal ourselves into objects (BN 741).

Thus we interpret Sartre as crying for help, as pleading for a world in which tears will not be signs of weakness, and as effing the ineffable through "revelations of being" (BN 765) that connect the personal with the political, using the eschatological as a master trope.⁶

Likewise, Rousseau's generous anger, his sharp wit, his mock confessions, coupled with his rigorous analysis of what but woe is missing from life, set the moral tone for Sartre's work, as it surely did for all latter-day critics of society, from William Blake to Norman O. Brown, from young Werther to old Roszak. Even feminists, who often complain (Lange [1979], [1983]) that citizen Rousseau is nothing but an undisguised patriarch miss the point of his barbs, which entail that no one can be *happy* unless everyone is *free*. Hence no one is either happy or free, least of all in nations that pay lip service to both ideals.

Sartre's debt to Rousseau is so huge that it can't be repaid. But who is worried about it? Rousseau is not about to collect, since he despises wealth (and luxury) as decadence. As a moral creditor of humanity, his interest is not in usury but in us. Copyright laws notwithstanding, literary property belongs to us all. Since we're mortal that's only fitting, and it may create the community that revolution has yet to establish, despite Sartre's misgivings about the redemptive power of [his] prose. The only thing we ask in return is the right to interrogate the deceased in good faith—that is, based on the conviction that their words still have some life in them, and conversely, that their lives still have some words in them. (If not, why bother to read and write at all?) The *cogito* "is necessarily true each time I pronounce or conceive it" (*Meditation II*, 3rd paragraph). Hence if it falls on deaf ears, it is as good as dead to the world I cannot shut out of my

⁶Sartre rejects "negative theology" (Howells [1988], 198-201) but accepts "corporate salvation" (King [1974], 186-91) as its objective correlative. Don't wait for this to happen soon, though it is bound to happen at or after the end of time. Historical inevitability is both true and trite. But since the dialectic is infinite, Hegel wins every argument before it starts. Yet even Hegel needs us to grant him victory *in absentia*.

ears. So we must forge new links in the chain of thought, without breaking it, or [else] fail to heed each other's voices. Criticism is sacred, for it keeps Sartre alive long past his demise. And that means we're not dead yet.⁷

University of Texas/Austin
University of San Diego

TODD DARNELL
DENNIS ROHATYN

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