

SARTRE'S LAST PHILOSOPHY:

A FEMINIST INTERPRETATION

Sartre's writing power - his ability to spawn several thousand words a day at a feverish pace, and to write books such as *The Family Idiot*, whose three published volumes number several thousand pages - is legendary. When a stroke left him in quasi-blindness in 1973, he became extremely despondent because of his inability to finish the fourth Flaubert volume. His colleagues at *Les Temps Modernes* saw this as the demise of his philosophizing.

Sartre's despondency was short-lived however: he soon found a new mode of expression, the dialogical format of the interview, which corresponded to, and helped express the ideas of what turned out to be one of the most creative periods of his life. Sartre's colleagues seem to have ignored the new ideas which Sartre formulated in the numerous interviews of that period, probably regarding them as innocuous because they did not conform to what they construed to be Sartrianism. This was the case with the eight-hundred-page text *Pouvoir et Liberté*, which was the result of six years of work, that is innumerable hours of dialogue between Sartre and Benny Lévy, which Sartre planned to publish in the fall of 1980. For, Sartre's *confrères* viewed Lévy as Sartre's hired reader - not his intellectual equal.

When, however, Sartre decided to publish passages of the *Pouvoir et Liberté* text - under the title of *Hope Now* - in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, in March 1980, and his colleagues took cognizance of the plan, they all went up in arms and tried unsuccessfully to stop its publication. They were first of all appalled by the extreme familiarity with which Lévy treated Sartre publicly, addressing him with the intimate *tu* (whereas they all, including Beauvoir herself, addressed him with the formal *vous*).

They also perceived the text to be unSartrian, and accused

interview - in great contrast to the "hopeless passion" of "man" in *Being and Nothingness*. There, it was "man"s desire to be God and the fact that he could not achieve this which had led him to despair (HN 54). But Sartre now admits to Lévy that he himself never actually experienced despair! Sartre tells Lévy in the first interview, we do so in the hope lies in the fact whenever we undertake an action, we do so in the hope that it will be successful. And he insists in the last interview that although the growing chasm between the rich and the poor might well lead him to despair, he will die in hope, in a hope which is rooted in his vision of solidarity and a new humanity.

"Man's desire for society" is an essential aspect of this new vision and Sartre really believes that once "man" becomes conscious of his "fellowman", everything "will fall into place" (HN 61). This means that it is the establishing of human relations which makes us human, or "the striving to live beyond ourselves in the society of human beings" (HN 69). This is in complete opposition to *Being and Nothingness* where (as Sartre tells it now) consciousness had "no reciprocal - no other" and was therefore "too independent" from the other. Rather, he now sees each individual as dependent on everyone else. "Each consciousness is necessarily linked to and often engendered by the presence of another" (HN 71).

Moreover, in "Self-Portrait at Seventy", Sartre attributes "transparency" to this new future intersubjective consciousness. This implies a reciprocal self-gifting, without the withholding of any secret whatsoever³. Sartre tells his interviewer Michel Contat, that "transparency should be substituted for secrecy", so that each's subjective life is yielded to the other along with their objective life (HN 11), and he explains candidly to Constat that, at this point in time, it is distrust, ignorance and fear which keeps us from being "as translucent as possible" (HN 12); that he himself has difficulty yielding his subjectivity to him because there are still in him things which "refuse to be said", such as "the sexual and erotic relations in my life" (HN 13, 1).

And in lieu of *Being and Nothingness* Is state of

³ J.P.Sartre. "La Gauche et le Désespoir". Interview par Catherine Clément-. Le Matin, Nov. 1979

romantic interpretation of the past. According to his own messianism, it is in the future only, in another world, that "men" will love each other in true "fraternity" (HN 106). But Sartre believes that messianism - "the replacing of the present society" by a juster society in which human beings can have good relations with each other - "can be used by non-Jews for other purposes" (HN 107). This open link of Sartre's to messianism scandalized Beauvoir and the Sartrians.

2. Sartre's Evolution from a Masculine to a Feminine Economy.

What made Sartre change so radically from *Being and Nothingness* to *Hope Now*? Was he really bamboozled by Lévy as the Sartrians liked to believe? And how viable is Sartre's new thought? These questions are difficult to answer - for Sartre wrote all kinds of works between 1943 and 1980, was politically involved in many ventures, and his itinerary is therefore perplexing to track and to understand - unless we have a compass and a guide to help us discover his direction and the final goal of his journey.

The distinction which H el ene Cixous makes between masculine and feminine economies gives us exactly the compass we need to comprehend and follow Sartre's itinerary. Her metaphorical presentation of the story of Eve and the apple enables us to comprehend concretely the first criteria she uses in her distinction. As she tells it, the story is simple: on one side there is the law "which is absolute, verbal and visible", and which is not. Facing it, there is "the apple, which is, is, is"⁶. It is a struggle between the absence, the negation, the abstraction of a masculine economy, and the presence, the affirmation, the concreteness of a feminine economy. One's path through life in one economy or the other, or partly in both, depends on one's relationship to the law and to pleasure.

Cixous's second set of criteria is/are the two attitudes one can have towards giving. The proprietary attitude within a

⁶ H el ene CIXOUS. "Extreme Fidelity", in H el ene Cixous Reader, ed. Susan Sellers. New York: Routledge, 1994, 133

learn that Poulou reacted to his fear of incest by making a ritual of playing at Pardaillon, the hero who killed the hundreds of enemies who attacked him. The stiffening of his body in mock battle protected him from his vulnerability to incest. But we may well ask how does this predicament compare to that of other boys who develop Oedipus complexes within a patriarchal society? First, they have fathers, not only to contend with, but to eventually emulate, but Poulou's father had died when Poulou, was an infant. Secondly, most boys join other boys in their aggressive games, but Poulou was never accepted by a single group of boys playing at Pardaillon in the Luxembourg gardens. This means that he was never able to experience the fraternity boys feel when fighting together.

Thirdly, boys search for symbolic freedom in the social world. This way was available to Poulou under the guise of writing which his grandfather Schweitzer helped him to discover at the age of eight. Nausea and *Being and Nothingness* can be looked at as essential to his search and to his attempt to repress the incestuous taboos of the masculine economy. Nausea is thus the allegory of Poulou and young Sartre's own struggle against his desire for abandon to his mother. For Roquentin, the sudden uncontrollable giving in of his body to passivity/abandon is a completely negative experience, accompanied by strong nausea. The abandon of "all things" which "gently, tenderly, were letting themselves drift into existence"¹¹, is a lure and a veneer, Roquentin thinks. When this veneer melts, what remains are "soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder - naked in a frightful, obscene nakedness"¹². Only the stiffening of his body, as for activity (like Poulou/Pardaillon stiffening against his enemies), makes nausea temporarily vanish for a short while¹³. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's struggle against his fear of incest, and his attempt to be in control of himself and of reality, is at once more metaphysically couched than in *Nausea*, and closer to Cixous's basic metaphorical opposition between the apple and

¹¹ J.P. Sartre. *Nausea*. New York: New Directions, 1964. Trans. by Lloyd Alexander. La NaUBée. Paris: Gallimard, 1938, 172.

¹² Loc. cit.

¹³ Ibid. p. 38.

Here, instead of running away from his fear of abandon to his mother, he acknowledges it. There are no more fears to repress. There is no more need of Pardaillon games for Poulou/Sartre because there are no more "bad guys" (fear of abandon to the body and to feelings). There is therefore no need of violence to fight the "bad guys". Now "men" are "brothers" in action because of their relationship to a(n) (m)other. This enables Sartre to move away from the closed society of the patriarchy with its primarily rational order or the law and its acceptance of violence, and to go back to "the original primary relationship" with its emphasis on feeling and solidarity.

He has almost fulfilled his 1947 *Notebooks* ideal of "getting rid of one's ego", which coincides so well with Cixous's vision of de-selfing or de-egoisation. He has joined up with what Cixous terms "a universe without fear or remorse"¹⁷. And he wants to extend this feeling to all of "mankind". Thus he finds great similarities between Lévy's messianism which is about "the beginning of the existence of men who live for each other" (HN 110), and his own vision in which human beings will live more humanely in relation to each other.

3. Validity of Sartre's Vision.

One of Sartre's critics, Dominick Di Capra, looks at Sartre's last philosophy - especially his ideal of transparency - as an ill-conceived "visionary utopia". He sees the total transparency eulogized by Sartre as a "totally blind" approach, leading to the possibility of "total power and control", or to a society as "unlivably hellish as an opaquely closed society".¹⁸ Eléonor Kuykendall, on the other hand, looks at the notion of transparency most favorably. She contrasts it sharply with the controlling look in *Being and Nothingness*. For, she explains, transparency means abandon of reflective control. "In transparent interpersonal relationships, there is no question of

¹⁷ H el ene Cixous. "Extreme Fidelity". Op. cit. p. 135.

¹⁸ Dominick Di Capra. "Sartre and the Question of Biography-", in *Sartre's Life, Times and Visions du Monde*, ed. by William McBride. New York: Garland, 1997, 178.

It is Sandra Lee Bartky who, in her article on Scheler's "Mitgefühl" or "fellow-feeling", in which she speaks of "the utopian vision... of a new heaven and a new earth", which is basic to the women's movement, best validates Sartre's final vision, as well as my suggestion that it belongs to a feminine economy.²² Her acceptance of the "emotional identification" with another's feelings - which Scheler rejects as inauthentic - certainly jibes not only with Nel Noddings's view on caring to which she refers, but to Sartre's view on transparency. For while according to Noddings, caring means receiving "the other into myself" and seeing and feeling with the other²³, for Sartre, transparency begins to take place when two persons in a deep conversation not only hold the same view, but "see into the depth of themselves from this point of view".²⁴

And Bartky's interpretation and approval of Scheler's genuine "Mitgefühl- as "a yearning for a more solidary world in which one might love others and be loved by them in return"²⁵, is certainly also very close to Sartre's yearning for "fraternity" with all members of humanity. But she wonders why our "Mitgefühl- is so often narrowed down to a few friends, our family and the occasional "beached whale".²⁶ And she ponders how we could learn to extend it to the "wretched of the earth"²⁷. She is obviously not willing to accept Bergson's verdict according to which our modern societies are „closed", for their members "hold together, caring nothing about the rest of humanity ; 2' and there is no possible passage to an "open society" embracing all of humanity²⁸, which is only "a dream dreamt".²⁹

²² Sandra Lee Bartky. "Sympathy and Solidarity: On a Tight Rope with Scheler", in *Feminists Rethink the Self*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers .Boulder: West View Press, 1997, 181.

²³ Nel Noddings. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 30

²⁴ J.P.Sartre. "La Gauche et le Désespoir". Op. cit.

²⁵ Bartky. Op. cit., 187.

²⁶ Ibid., 193.

²⁷ Loc. cit.

²⁸ Henri Bergson. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. New York: Doubleday, 1935, 266.

²⁹ Ibid., 267.

But Bartky would surely be elated to learn that there is a way to widen the scope of one's love of friends and family (which is by nature quite proprietary and closed, and which bases its morality on abstract rational laws). As Cixous tells it, and as Sartre lived and wrote it, this way is long and arduous; it is the way of de-selfing or loss of ego, which leads to openness to the other and the possibility of authentic reciprocal sifting, at the core of Cixous's, Bartky's, as well as Sartre's visions. Sartre has not only evolved towards a vision similar to that of feminist economics, but he is well able to participate in the clarification of that vision.

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