

PRAXIS, NEED, AND DESIRE IN SARTRE'S LATER PHILOSOPHY; AN ADDENDUM TO EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

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In Sartre's later philosophy, he substitutes *need* for *desire* as a description of the basic relationship between human beings and the world. Some have taken this substitution, along with Sartre's description of human reality as *praxis* rather than as *consciousness* or *Being-for-itself*, to be an abandonment of his earlier ontology. While it is certainly true that the new terminology indicates a new emphasis on social awareness and action in the socio-material world, the idea that Sartre the Marxist has abandoned his earlier philosophy of freedom proves not to be the case. Sartre himself says in an interview that his philosophy "underwent a continuous evolution beginning with *La Nausée* all the way up to the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*."¹ In any case, although there is no abandonment of the earlier ontology, there is certainly a shift in emphasis and the introduction of new ideas in the later philosophy—new ideas which will have consequences for Sartre's conceptualization of social science theory in general and for existential psychoanalysis in particular. Here I would like to investigate the significance of Sartre's usage of the terms *need* and *praxis* (and its contrary, *hexis*) as these might relate to a Sartrean view of human development and to existentially oriented psychotherapy. In doing so, I will make use both of ideas

¹This quote is from an interview with Michel Rybalka and others in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1981), p. 17.

from the *Critique* and of ideas set forth in an unpublished manuscript from the mid-nineteen sixties² which suggest a link between Sartre's earlier discussion of desire and his later discussion of need to argue that desire is socially shaped need. I believe that the usefulness of this conceptualization can be demonstrated in Sartre's own description of Flaubert's early childhood development as well as in the case histories of existentially-oriented psychotherapists like myself.

Let us begin with *praxis*. Praxis, in *Search for a Method* and the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, is human goal-directed activity. More precisely, Sartre defines praxis as "an organizing project which transcends material conditions towards an end and inscribes itself, through labour, in inorganic matter as a rearrangement of the practical field and a reunification of means in the light of the end."³ Actually, despite this new socio-material orientation, praxis has much in common with nihilating consciousness as described in *Being and Nothingness*. Praxis, like the nihilating movement of Being-for-itself, is predicated on a relationship with the world as a perceived *lack* of future fullness. Like the for-itself, praxis is self-explanatory and transparent to itself, though Sartre adds that this intelligibility is "not necessarily expressible in words."⁴ Sartre still insists, in a sentence which might have come straight out of *Being and Nothingness*, that "consciousness, as apodictic certainty (of) itself and as consciousness of such and such an object" is the starting point for dialectical reason.⁵ Praxis is human freedom, though not in the voluntarist sense of freedom without limitation. Even in his early philosophy, Sartre had always conceived of freedom as *situated* freedom.

²The section on need and desire comes from 589 pages of unorganized notes from the middle of the nineteen sixties. This manuscript is discussed by Robert Stone and Elizabeth Bowman in an article published in *Sartre Alive*, ed. Ronald Aronson and Adrian Van Den Hoven (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991, pp. 53-82) and also by Juliette Simont in "Morale esthétique, morale militante: au-delà de la faribole," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, vol. 87, no. 73, February 1989, pp. 23-58. The paraphrase here is my own and is based on the original manuscript.

³Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso/NLB), 1982), p. 734. This will hereafter be referred to in these notes as *Critique*.

⁴*Critique*, p. 93.

⁵*Critique*, p. 51.

The difference is that in Sartre's later formulation the "situation" inevitably involves work on the socio-material world which is designed, at the most basic level, to produce organismic survival; at the same time, praxis is inextricably interlinked with its socio-material milieu. Sartre therefore insists that "in an individual life, each *praxis* uses *the whole* of culture and becomes both synchronic (in the ensemble of the present) and diachronic (in its human depth)."⁶ The later Sartre is concerned to dissociate himself from some of his more radical earlier statements about the fact that one is free in any situation whatever. Although this is ontologically true, one must distinguish between an ontological freedom which allows one to freely live out the sentence which a society has passed on one and the kind of real freedom which more genuinely human society might provide for everyone. Nonetheless, Sartre still insists in the *Critique* that dialectical reason, in attempting to elucidate human praxis, must not reduce change to identity; because praxis is not reducible to the material objects and social relations which it internalizes, it is capable of producing novelty. As Sartre notes, if we do not "distinguish the project, as transcendence, from circumstances, as conditions, we are left with nothing but inert objects, and History vanishes."⁷

Transcendence remains the key to Sartre's later philosophy as well as to his ethico-political position. In the *Critique*, however, Sartre wishes to locate transcending praxis at a much more basic level than that allocated to consciousness in *Being and Nothingness*. He therefore no longer terms the fundamental relationship between consciousness and its objects *desire*; instead he designates this relationship as one of *need*. Lest the reader think that the later Sartre has embraced some kind of instinctualism, however, we must hasten to add that need according to Sartre's conception is a human future-directed relationship with the world rather than an instinctual force. Far from a "*vis a tergo* pushing the human labourer," need is "the lived perception of a goal aimed at, and this goal is, in the first instance, simply restoration of the organism."⁸ It is this "first instance" which distinguishes need in the *Critique*

⁶*Critique*, p. 55.

⁷*Critique*, p. 92.

⁸*Critique*, p. 90

from desire in *Being and Nothingness*. The original negation of the negation is very simply involved with survival itself.

Actually, as Sartre himself admits in the unpublished manuscript referred to above, need *never* appears in the already socialized human world in its pure form—except perhaps at birth. Otherwise, need is already socialized. And socialized need, as Sartre points out, is desire. It does not involve mere *reproduction of the organism* but *production of a self* at a more advanced level of the dialectic. It is the self as value which is the object of desire rather than the simple continued existence of the organism. And Sartre maintains that while pure need is *practical* in the sense of being survival-oriented, desire is *ethical* in the sense of being value-making. But just as the organic individual founds and limits the socialization of the serial individual and the common individual of groups, while never appearing in a pure unsocialized state, so need, though nowhere to be found in its pure form, founds desire. Even in the *Critique*, Sartre had been careful to point out that need is always socialized. For example, he notes that "the labourer's work, his manner of *producing himself*, conditions not only the satisfaction of his need, but also the need itself."⁹ As Robert Stone and Elizabeth Bowman point out in an article, however, this founding of the Sartrean dialectic on organismic need as the bedrock of desire is important because it "makes complete interiorization of impotence impossible."¹⁰ There is a point in oppression at which the slave must revolt.

One can, however, go a long way toward distorting and denying needs before this revolt will occur. Throughout the *Critique* Sartre points out that it is possible to turn praxis into *hexis*,¹¹ changing transcendence into mere reproduction of the past/support of the status quo. In a sense, this recreation of the past is an activity of free praxis, but it is an activity which undermines that freedom in that people find themselves caught in the "passive activity" of

⁹*Critique*, p. 95.

¹⁰Robert Stone in collaboration with Elizabeth Bowman, "Dialectical Ethics: A First Look at Sartre's Unpublished 1964 Rome Lecture Notes," *Social Text*, vol. 13, no. 4, winter-spring, 1986, p. 208.

¹¹Sheridan-Smith uses *exis* in his translation, but Hazel Barnes reminds me that the breath mark, *exis*, in the original makes the correct rendering *hexis*.

obeying the exigencies inscribed in matter and the socio-material order. And while this turning of praxis into hexis is an inescapable aspect of being human, since it arises with the creation of the practico-inert which is an inescapable outcome of the objectification process itself, Sartre objects to its overabundance in a world dominated by scarcity. In such a world, needs are often denied or distorted through this transformation, despite the fact that the creation of the practico-inert is in the first instance intended to be need-satisfying. Sartre cites the example of certain semi-employed day laborers in the south of Italy who, constantly malnourished, live their hunger as hexis. They only expect one meal a day or every other day and degrade their vitality accordingly to live in a state of semi-starvation.¹² Only the denial of that one meal, we might surmise, would be likely to arouse revolt against a situation which is otherwise deemed normal. Similarly, Sartre notes in the unpublished manuscript and in his biography of Flaubert, ordinary children from middle class households may learn to deny or distort their needs—turning praxis into hexis.

Before we can fully appreciate this insight, however, we must first understand further how need, through relations with others in the socio-material world, is transformed into desire. This idea is especially significant for existential psychoanalysis, as it will allow us to begin to conceptualize a kind of Sartrean developmental theory. In the unpublished manuscript mentioned above, Sartre discusses how organismic disturbances which in their pure form are referred to as needs get transformed through interpersonal encounters into desires. From the beginning of life, the responses of others to an infant's organismic needs unveil that infant's *being* to him or her. To the infant's appeal, the adult caretaker responds by giving or withholding satisfaction. Gradually, through this interaction, *appeal* to the Other is transformed into *demand* or right over the other. The infant comes to expect its cries to bring satisfaction in the form of mother's ministrations.

Sartre also explains that needs become intermixed—and symbolic of each other—in the context of the family. Alimentation, for instance, becomes sexual and sexual need becomes a way of eating. Artificial desires abstract themselves from cultivated needs. For instance, smoking may refer to eating, nursing, sexuality. By the time a person reaches adulthood, no need appears in its pure form. All have been transformed into desires. Take, for instance, eating. Neither

¹²*Critique*, p. 95.

the gourmet nor the ascetic experiences hunger as simple need. The gourmet subsumes simple hunger in an elaborate social ritual with an end which is not mere organismic survival, but a particular kind of satisfaction which has aesthetic as well as nutritional goals; nor can the ascetic with simple bread and bowl escape living hunger as desire, since the ascetic's choice is ethical (value-making) rather than merely nutritional. As for sexuality, it is always much more complex than simple satisfaction of an organismic urge. Sexual desire involves a transformation of such organismic disturbances through language and fantasy into a demand to *be* (this or that kind of person) through (this or that kind of) sexual possession of (this or that) object.

The responses of the first care-givers are extremely important to the way in which an individual comes to live his or her needs/desires in the world. If the mother or primary care-giver responds with joy, acceptance, and understanding, then need, as Sartre contends in the Flaubert biography, will be transformed into a desire which is felt as the perpetual possibility for action validating—or "valorizing," to use Sartre's own term—oneself and one's needs/desires in the socio-material world.¹³ But if, Sartre points out in the unpublished manuscript, the primary care-giver responds with irritation, disdain, or hostility, then need will tend to posit itself as illegitimate or culpable need. The infant's need will have been socialized as a kind of primal *being guilty*—and this being guilty will come to be felt as an essential aspect of my being since each time organismic need is reborn (as it is perpetually reborn) my being guilty will be reborn. Not only my present, but my future (as need which has to be fulfilled) is implicated in the reproduction of guilt. For example, I am guilty for being hungry, sick, "needy" in general—and I am ashamed of my needs/desires. Such guilt is a response to my *being there*, my very existence as a needing organism, which is reflected back to me as undesirable in this way or that by the original others. In psychotherapy, we constantly encounter such ontological guilt.

Sartre's example in the manuscript we are citing is anorexia. The anorexic, Sartre hypothesizes, displays the desire for a guilt-free need which must be relieved of culpability by the Other's demand and supplication to eat. What the anorexic wants, Sartre tells us, is to experience a need which is *wanted* by the

¹³Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, vol. one (1971), trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 133-34. This will hereafter be referred to in these notes as *Family Idiot*, vol. 1.

Other—as the anorexic's original need was apparently unwanted by the original others. The problem is that only a universal supplication could erase the original guilt—and this is impossible. The meaning of anorexia thus lies in the movement of desire as a *rejection of need in order to be supplicated*. Similarly, forbidden desire may look for a satisfaction which simultaneously punishes it and thereby purifies it—as happens in masochism and various other forms of self-destruction. Failure also is an example of need transformed into desire, in this case the desire to prove, by the impossibility of living, that there is an inverse to this impossibility—fulfillment in a more human world.

Obviously, though Sartre's examples are mostly negative, the transformation of need into desire can involve positive as well as negative development. On the other hand, therapists mostly encounter situations in which development has been painful and Sartre's descriptions are extremely helpful here. Nor is Sartre, in the manuscript cited above, unaware of the difficulties involved in a person's attempting to change the fundamental attitude formed in earliest infancy. This is so partially because the very eyes with which one will see new experiences have been clouded by this earliest experience, which must be retotalized each time one encounters something new. The past is surpassable, but only as taken into the detotalization and retotalization as a significant aspect of what is now practico-inert. As my original being there, this first experience of need as shaped by others into desire is very difficult to surpass in the sense of overcoming my guilt.

This is true because in objectifying myself I reproduce myself and this reproduction in the first instance means culpability (if I have experienced a negative response from the original others; otherwise, it means myself as gift, as possibility). My culpability gains the intimate force of need itself. The violence of my hunger, for instance, is the violence of my guilt. What I demand of the satisfaction of my desire is therefore a return to innocence—a restoration of an innocence which in a sense I never had, since in discovering my need I discovered myself guilty before the original others. What I want is recognition of myself as innocent in the world of the Other; but this recognition is impossible, first because even though the Other might change this would be for other reasons than to validate me and secondly because I at present structure reality in such a way that I probably could not see the change. Thus Sartre says that a long work on the part of the Other is required to free me of my guilt.

Presumably this is a part of the work of psychotherapy. Its aim is not unsocialized need, but need/desire freed of the original condemnation.

Sartre's own approach to the Flaubert biography includes a description of the transformation of need into desire (or rather its failure) along the lines set forth in the unpublished manuscript. In *The Family Idiot*, Sartre attempts to show how an unvalorized child, Gustave Flaubert, came to live his need more as hexis than as praxis and thereby to adopt the mode of "passive action" as an integral part of his fundamental project. According to Sartre, Flaubert, as an "underloved" child, experienced as an infant the dutiful but cold ministrations of his mother. Madame Flaubert, Sartre hypothesizes, provided only the best physical care for her son, often anticipating in overly protective fashion his needs before they even had a chance to manifest themselves. But in doing so she treated her son as an *object* rather than as a subject, depriving him of the opportunity to develop an active sense of himself as affecting the world. At an "age when hunger cannot be distinguished from sexual desire" and when "feeding and hygiene condition the first aggressive mode of behavior," Sartre believes that Flaubert was deprived of a sense that he could aggressively satisfy his own needs/desires.¹⁴

This early passivity was not remedied by Flaubert's encounter with a father who acted the *pater familias* and expected obedience. Even that part of Flaubert's interaction with his father which might have been expected to support him as an agent, his father's insistence on an active furtherance of the Flaubert family glory, escaped Gustave. He simply could not imagine what it meant to act in any real sense; instead he play-acted, dutifully producing the gestures which were expected of him by others. He also disappointed his father by his failure to learn to read easily like his older brother, a failure which Sartre attributes to the fact that reading requires an active participation of which the young Flaubert was little capable. As an escape from the adult world where he was other to himself, Gustave sank into passive ecstasies in which a pantheistic union with nature had the real meaning of obliterating self and world together—a state in which, as Sartre says, "the soul *wants* nothing, *feels* nothing, *desires* nothing."¹⁵

¹⁴*Family Idiot*, vol. 1, p. 48.

¹⁵*Family Idiot*, vol. 1, 32.

Later on, as an adult, Flaubert would complain of a "secret wound," which Sartre identified as the "passive constitution" which resulted from his earliest interpersonal relations, and of an ennui which never left him. Describing himself as an adolescent, Flaubert wrote that he was a "mushroom swollen with boredom."¹⁶ He would envy less talented souls who were able simply to feel and to act, and he would develop a sexuality which revolved around a fantasy of passive ravishment and which found its fulfillment in sporadic adventures with prostitutes and a long distance relationship with the volatile Louise Colet rather than in real mutuality or commitment. As a mature writer, Flaubert would show a preoccupation with gestures, ceremonies, and objects rather than with reciprocal relations and with actions. Though he transformed his early project through an (imaginary) relationship with art which Sartre also deemed inauthentic, Flaubert was never able to overcome the passivity and isolation which derived from his original relationship with others. He was never able to turn hexis into praxis or to learn the lessons of an active desire or positive reciprocity.

Actually, such people as Sartre describes Flaubert as being are not uncommon in therapy. I think especially of a client with whom I have worked whose life might be described as a kind of epitome of hexis. This client's mother, apparently an extremely self-centered, narcissistic woman, had consistently responded to him in ways which seemed designed to block the development of an active desire. In effect, she never heard anything which he asked of her. Instead she substituted her own suppositions about who he was and what he needed or wanted for any communications he might have given her on the subject. This client describes himself as being a very passive, "good" child as far back as memory goes. A particularly poignant memory involves a Christmas at home at about age eight. My client had dutifully, but not very hopefully, made out a Christmas list. As custom had it, he and his brother were allowed to select one gift for opening on Christmas Eve. My client selected a small package, which he imagined to be a toy car he had requested. When he opened this gift, his dismay at discovering "corn spears" (spears for holding corn on the cob) instead of the desired vehicle was greeted by the uproarious

¹⁶*Family Idiot*, vol. 1, p. 142. Hazel E. Barnes, in *Sartre and Flaubert* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 33, translates this phrase as "a mushroom stuffed with ennui."

laughter of his mother. Not only could she not hear, but her not hearing appeared to malicious. "From that time on," he told me sadly, "I decided never to put anything on my list which I really wanted—or probably even to *want* anything."

This man's difficulties were very similar to those which Sartre describes for Flaubert. Although he did not become a writer like Flaubert (he *was* interested in writing), it was evident that he used reading as an escape from the real world. Asked about the fact that he had hidden himself away in a world of books from a very young age, he replied, "Oh, yes, I *read* in order not to *be*." In his relationships with women, he was even more avoidant than Flaubert. After ending a marriage which was largely sexless according to his wife's desire, he attempted to establish relations with other women. What he discovered was an extreme reluctance to even feel sexual desire in a woman's presence. On a rare occasion when he established a short sexual relationship with a woman, he described himself as lacking any feeling in his penis after penetration. "I was only aware of *her* and not of myself at all." His lack of desire showed up in other areas of his life as well. For example, he reported having to force himself to eat regular meals despite the fact that he had no idea whatever of what he might *want* to eat. Also, even though he was a successful consultant in a technical field, he reported having no earthly notion about what he might want to do with all the money he made.

A seemingly casual remark which this client made one day in therapy provided an opening into his dilemma. He commented that when people telephoned him, they frequently waited a moment after he answered "because they think I'm an answering machine." "Even you," he went on to say, "mistook me for an answering machine when you called the other day." I realized that what he said was true. And it occurred to me that the quality in his voice which caused him to be mistaken for an answering machine was a quality I often experienced there—the quality of not expecting an answer. His childhood had foreclosed the possibility of his learning to appeal to others for an answer or to expect/demand that his needs be met. At this point, this client began to remember rather vividly what a "desert" (his word) his childhood had been. He had learned there so well how to transform praxis into hexis that the whole world now appeared to be a similar desert in which he embraced the anti-value of "never desiring anything." As praxis began to be reawakened, he began to experience the pain, the humiliation, and the extreme loneliness which he had

previously avoided by deadening himself and curtailing his desires. Unlike Sartre's Flaubert, he was finally no longer bored.

I think we can now understand the interconnection between organismic needs and relational "needs" or desires. It is only when organismic needs are met and shaped in a hospitable human environment that desire develops as a viable and real relationship with the world of objects and other people. Of course, as we know from Sartre's earlier philosophy, demand must be relinquished as a right over others if one is to develop relations in good faith. But unless the infant comes first to experience agency in being able to bring about the fulfillment of needs by the original caregiver, then to the extent that agency is denied that infant will have learned to live need as hexis rather than as praxis. The young child in such a situation will learn to experience his or her being in the world of desire as a being passive. Such a child will be more object than subject, and what will develop is something akin to the "false self" described by psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott. The problem, however, is that there is no "true self" to be uncovered; the release of spontaneity will require extensive work to experience in a new way those needs which are perpetually reborn to be perpetually denied. The fact that they are perpetually reborn, however, allows existentialist therapy to claim that a radical reorientation of oneself as a needing/desiring praxis is possible. The client in therapy must find a way within the therapeutic relationship to transform hexis into praxis—thereby discovering a viable real future which that person has never before experienced. In this respect, on the individual if not on the group level, existentialist therapy might be conceived of as revolutionary praxis.

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