INSTRUMENTALISM, CONFLICT AND THE

TEMPORALITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN

SARTRE'S PHILOSOPHY

In *Being and Nothingness* [1] Sartre claims that the essence of relations between human beings is conflict. (BN, 555) [2] In his posthumously published essay, *Truth and Existence* [3], Sartre seems to allow for a wider variety of human relationships. I will argue here that this greater variety is available to human beings because, according to the way Sartre describes consciousness in *Truth and Existence*, our awareness is less tightly identified with our projects than certain sections of *Being and Nothingness* would seem to suggest. How is such a lessening of identification possible? My thesis here is that, if we reconsider Sartre's notion of consciousness as a temporal synthesis of past, present, and future, then we can see how we need not be tightly identified with our projects because the temporal dimension of the past has a tendency to pull us back from such an identification.

Finally, I will argue that the specific kind of conflict that derives from the attempt to reduce both ourselves and others to the status of a pure instrument might be avoided. I will attempt to show how Sartre describes an alternative attitude that he characterizes in Truth *and Existence* as one in which we "enjoy Being." (TE, 30) While such an attitude does not permit the elimination of all kinds of conflict[4],

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[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Pocket Books, 1966. p. 555. Henceforth - BN.

[2] See also Ronald Aronson, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Philosophy in the World*. London: NLB, 1980, p. 133, and Thomas Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics*. Chicago: Open Court, 1993. p. 27.

[3] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Truth and Existence*. Original Text established and annotated by Arlette Elkaim-Sartre, trans. Adrian van den Hoven, ed. Ronald Aronson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Henceforth - TE.

[4] For a description of positive conflict based upon reciprocity and independence see Adrian Mirvish, "Sartre and the Problem of other (Embodied) Minds," p. 83, n. 48, *Sartre Studies International*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1996.

If we attempt to dispense with the notion of ends from Sartre's conception of consciousness, we immediately run into problems. My consciousness is, for Sartre, not a magic lantern (BN, 171), a term of Sartre's which I take to indicate a kind of enigmatic illumination which expands across my landscape for no apparent purpose. In Sartre's model of consciousness, I misunderstand myself if I conceive of my awareness as a passive *milieu*.[5]

I would argue that Sartre's understanding of the role that ends play in the operation of my consciousness is best understood when connected to his understanding of temporality. My consciousness, for Sartre, is nothing without a unifying temporal synthesis.[6] As I engage in this synthesis I am, in a sense, always outside of myself, always already in my future, and always already in my past.[7] According to Sartre's understanding of temporality in Part Two, Chapter Two of *Being and Nothingness*, I am not conscious unless I am aware of some kind of past. (BN, 198) "Birth", he says, "is the upsurge of the absolute relation of Pastness as the ekstatic being of the For-itself in the In-itself." (BN, 199)

To be born, then, is to be born with a past in the sense that to be conscious is always to be conscious of a past. My consciousness is not completely subordinated to its ends because the world does not disappear f or me as my ends change or as my possibilities collapse. The way the world looks in the absence of a viable project is well described by Sartre in a footnote to *What is Literature?*, written during the same period that he wrote *Truth and Existence:*

When the instruments are broken and unusable, when plans are blasted and effort is useless, the world appears with a childlike and terrible freshness, without supports, without paths."[8]

How is it that I can apprehend the world with this "childlike and terrible freshness" in the absence of an ensemble of ends and means deployed in the present moment? I would argue that such an appearance is possible because even in the face of change and failure, my past remains, and what Sartre calls the this-objects and the that-

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[5] See Manfred Frank, *What Is Neostructuralism?*, trans. Sabine
Wilke and Richard Gray. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) p. 195.
[6] Franck, Ibid.
[7] Franck, Op. Cit., p. 196
[8] *What Is Literature?*, trans, Bernard Prechtman. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 334, n. 4.

include relations which appear in ways other than as possibilities. Returning to *Being and Nothingness*, we find Sartre arguing that I view the other as another instrumental complex that arises within my own complex and needs to be surpassed. (BN, 428) Given the notion of temporal synthesis, however, if I can view other people as futures which are separate f rom mine, I also should be able to view them as pasts and presents which are equally separate. since, according to Sartre, I can only conceive of the future in connection with past, and present, then I should also only be able to view other people's distinct futures in connection with equally distinct pasts, and presents. The alternative would be that I could somehow view the temporality of others in a way that I cannot view my own temporality, namely, as pure future. Because I can view other people as having a past as well as a future, I can view them as beings who are not reducible to either their own possibilities or to mine.

Even supposing that other people would attempt to subordinate themselves to me as pure tools, the temporal unity of consciousness should render this extremely difficult. If the pasts of other people pull them back from a complete identification with their own projects, then those pasts should equally pull them back from a complete identification with mine. Whether they attempt to identify with my plans for them or to resist such an incorporation, the undertow of the past prevents them from becoming pure possibilities situated within any particular instrumental complex, whether it be mine or theirs.

While Sartre does assert in Being *and Nothingness* that instrumentality is primary (BN, 428), his assertion does not necessarily follow from the rest of his ontology. Part Three, Chapter Two of *Being and Nothingness* does not completely square with Part Two, Chapter Two. In Part Three, Sartre seems to unnecessarily promote the third *eckstasis* by claiming the primacy of instrumentality, whereas in Part Two he seems to argue that the permanent elevation of one temporal moment is not possible.

Showing what consciousness need not do, however, is not the same as showing what it can do. When I say that I do not have to attempt to reduce the Other to a mere means to my own ends, I say nothing about what other kinds of relationships I might engage in with that person. In *Truth and Existence*, sartre enables us to think more clearly about these possibilities by arguing that the drive towards utility is not inexorable. He also provides material that suggests alternatives

Nothingness that human reality is a useless passion. (BN, 784)

Instead, he attempts to show that the structure of consciousness, as he understands i-t, creates the necessary preconditions for enjoyment. (TE, 29) My relationship to the world around me, he says, is both irritating and voluptuous. (Ibid.) The pursuit of my goals, he argues, is irritating because my anticipated achievement of them suggests a unity which is denied me. (TE, 29) My effort to appropriate my goal is bound to fail, in one sense, because of the permanent distance between me and my object which is required by consciousness.

This "taste for Being", however, while it contains an unavoidable amount of frustration, also could entail a particular kind of enjoyment which is not possible without the *nihilating* activity of consciousness. While Sartre does not use the term *nihilation* in *Truth and Existence*, his description of the distancing activity of consciousness appears to be the same as the activity he describes by that same term in *Being and Nothingness* as an ontological characteristic of human reality. (BN, 58) The term, therefore, would seem to be applicable. To love my goals, according to Sartre, is to experience a kind of "absolute proximity." (TE, 30)

Given Sartre's understanding of consciousness, this relation of absolute proximity would be impossible without the activity of *nihilation*. A relation of proximity requires a distance, however small, between subject and object. In order for that proximity to be absolute, that distance must be irreducible. Since *nihilation* is, for Sartre, the indispensable distancing activity of consciousness (BN, 68), it should follow that this activity is necessary for the relation of absolute proximity.

If I accept this absolute proximity as unavoidable, I can also accept my goals, and the horizon that surrounds them as being, in an ultimate sense, inappropriable. I acknowledge that, however intensely I strive towards them, the irreducible distance between my consciousness and my goals always remains as a transparent wall. I can recognize that, when I attempt to completely appropriate the goals that I aspire towards, I ignore the enjoyment that comes from being present to them.

Sartre does not offer a proof that the experience of being present to something is sufficient in itself to constitute enjoyment. His implicit argument, however, seems to be that, since *nihilation* is a necessary condition for awareness because of the distance it creates between

Thus, if I believe that I am engaged with another person in a long-term, committed relationship, and the possibility arises for me to discover that the other person does not share either the long term preference or the intensity of the commitment, I wish to know this, even though my knowledge will probably mean the end of the relationship. Sartre uses the example of a marriage (TE, 31), but the characteristics he describes could equally well be associated with a wider set of possible on-going, cooperative relationships.

Such a knowledge is catastrophic to the goal of creating and maintaining the particular desired relationship. Since I have already chosen it as my goal, I am, up to the point of my discovery, operating within the framework of a specific instrumental complex with its "coefficients of adversity." (TE, 31) Such coefficients, in this case, might include making sure that the time which I could have used for another purpose is set aside for the activities involved in that relationship, and that resources that I could have invested in other pursuits are devoted to meeting the requirements of mutuality and cooperation.

When I discover, however, that the desire for the relationship is not mutual, the coefficients of time and resources become meaningless within the framework of that particular instrumental complex. The end which united that ensemble of relations has vanished in the light of my newly acquired knowledge. If, however, I am committed to the project of verification, I will choose to acknowledge the truth that the desire for such a relationship is not mutual. My field of action, in this particular situation, has disappeared, and my project is canceled.

The possibility for a kind of enjoyment that is not dependent upon that project, however, remains. Granted that this is not the same kind of pleasure that often accompanies a successful venture, one of the implications of Sartre's thinking in *Truth and Existence* is that my projects are never quite as successful as I would like f or them to be. Therefore, my enjoyment of success is never complete. The quest for merger that Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness* (BN, 784) does not seem to have disappeared in *Truth and Existence* because the irritation of absolute proximity remains. The source of this irritation, I would suggest, is the continuing desire for merging with my goal.

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love of the real person from my experience of a mere image," and to "the experience of excitement and challenge which are necessary for dealing with a real, truly loved person."

obscured by the overlay of an instrumental grid. I am now in a better position to become aware of those characteristics of the other person which, while not necessarily useful, render her or him concretely unique.

The other person could also appear to me as more substantial and less ethereal than before because she or he appears as more temporally three-dimensional. The person now more clearly appears as someone who has a past, a present, and a future which are not mine. In view of this recognition of separateness, I can now begin to disentangle the appreciation that I have for the person as a result of their distinctiveness from my past enthusiasm over the uses that she or he might have served.

This is not say that any plans that I might have which involve other people are *a priori* bad, but simply to suggest that such plans always risk becoming temporally one-dimensional. The same could be said for plans involving myself, and the danger of my lapsing into a one-dimensional attitude towards my own life. Sartre's argument on the relation of ends and means in *Truth and Existence* imply that neither I nor my associates are reducible to a program, and that the attempt to make it so will inevitably generate conflict. His description of the verifying project suggests that there are many other enjoyable activities for me to engage in besides attempting to reduce other people to the status of tools.

Ronald Santoni argues, based upon his reading of Sartre, that to affirm my own freedom and the freedom of the other person is the necessary precondition f or authentic human relationships.[14] Yet, authentic human relationships may f ail. Sartre reminds us that such relationships are made and unmade on a daily basis. (TE, 32) An authentic attitude would be one in which I remember and am prepared to accept the fact that even authentic relationships can unravel. Sartre's discussion of enjoyment can be seen as an attempt on his part to show why I might want to continue to attempt to increase my awareness of myself, the world, and the people in it even in the harsh light of failed efforts, and to develop new plans and perspectives. In *Truth and Existence*, unlike *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre attempts to show that there is something genuinely enjoyable about the activity of

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[14] Ronald Santoni, *Bad Faith. Good Faith, and Authenticity in Sartrels-Early Philosophy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. p. 165.

consciousness itself, as well as something irritating. He seems to be intimating that the enjoyment of consciousness can carry us across the chasm that opens up between blasted plans and new projects.

In *Truth and Existence*, there is a nuance in Sartre's writing to the effect that consciousness itself is a worthwhile activity. Granted, he does not provide indubitable proofs[15], and his arguments lack the attempt at basic and extended demonstrations that one finds in *Being and Nothingness*. In spite of this, his arguments in *Truth and Existence* on the relation of ends and means, and the implications of those arguments for human relationships, seem to better square with his more demanding discussion of temporality in Part Two, Chapter Two of *Being and Nothingness* than does his discussion of instrumentalism in Part Three, Chapter Two of the same work. For Sartre, at least as he writes in *Truth and Existence*, it would seem that free human relationships depend upon our ability to experience and survive the failure of our plans and to develop new ones in the light of our recognition of the freedom of others. This insight does not tell us what other kinds of mutual obligations are entailed in relationships based upon an ethic of freedom, and it certainly does not suggest that there are no such obligations, but it does warn us against the assumption of a false sense of potentiality based upon our implicit attempt to view other people as conveniently useful rather than as inconveniently free.

Loyola University   ROGER WHITE

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[15] See Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 59-64 for a discussion of the problems involved in Sartre's ontology for making fundamental valuations of any kind.