
Emotion and Reality

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DISCUSSION

EMOTION AND REALITY

(In connection with Sartre's "The Emotions")*

§1. MAN CRIES IN ORDER TO BE SAD

Brilliantly Sartre opens his theory of emotions with an attack on various affect-theories. Physiological explanations of emotions cannot be satisfactory for the following reasons:

1. So different emotions as anger and joy are accompanied by nearly identical physiological conditions.

2. Physiological disorder cannot account for the organized (Gestalt-) character which emotions present.

3. James's thesis according to which emotion is the consciousness of physiological events, is incorrect, because it presupposes a relation between emotion and bodily condition which, phenomenologically speaking, does not exist. Man in emotion does not think of looking at his bodily condition. A scared child, for instance, is conscious of what he is afraid of, never (at least never primarily) of his physiological condition.

Sartre's counter-thesis is openly teleological: Emotions are not imposed upon man, but are meaningful performances . . . whereby he means: they are mobilized by man in certain situations, for definite purposes. Thus, in a way, they are free. Though performed, they are not what we usually call "conscious acts." When calling them "unconscious," Sartre does not mean the psycho-analytic concept of unconsciousness but, true to Husserl's analysis, the fundamental fact that acts are not conscious of themselves but of their respective objects.

In short, although emotion itself may look chaotic, the switch to emotion is nothing less than disorder. It represents a meaningful behavior. "The sick girl who cannot confess, sobs in order not to confess; not because she cannot confess."

While ordinary mortals believe they cry because they are sad; while James was sad because he was crying; Sartre cries in order to be sad.

The specific condition in which, according to Sartre, man chooses to switch (from his rationality and his soberly pragmatic attitude), to emotion, is, by principle, a situation that is too difficult, a *blind alley*, an

* *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory*, (New York, 1948), Translation: Bernard Frechtman. This book was reviewed in Vol. X, No. 1 of this journal.

impasse. Man is performing his switch in order to substitute the too difficult task (and the world in which such tasks arise), by an other "world" which presents less difficulty, or in which the task appears easier, or in which the emergency is blotted out altogether.

Let us stress this point, for it is of the greatest consequence: In emotion, man substitutes one "world" by an other "world": for, according to Sartre's thesis, the object of emotion is, in analogy to the object of sober experience, the *world*; or, more exactly: "*a*" world.¹

Surprisingly, Sartre gives this specific world a ready-made label, picked up in the works of Frazer, Levy-Brühl, and Cassirer: he calls it a "*magic world*." He chooses this term because, as he puts it, in emotion the world looks to man, as if his problems could be solved in a direct, short-circuit-like way (as by the magician who kills the enemy by his mere wish), thus: *without intermediate steps*.² "When the paths traced out become too difficult, yet we must act, we try to live as if the connection between things and their potentialities were not ruled by deterministic processes, but magic" (p. 55).

Thus, his theory (which, in classical existentialist tradition, is mainly illustrated by interpretations of anxiety and its variants) boils down to: *Emotion is the self-transformation of man by which he projects or posits a world in which the (insuperable) difficulties and dangers are made harmless or are even annihilated*. "Annihilated": for fainting is, so to speak emotion's extreme form: by blotting out the danger completely, it proves that the shift from rationality to emotion can correspond to that from "being awake to sleeping" (pp. 63 and 76); and that we are entitled to speak of "world" and "worldlessness" of emotions the same way as we speak of a "world of dreams or of worlds of madness."

This comparison with the pair "waking-sleeping" makes it quite clear that his theory implies dualism: "Thus, consciousness can 'be in the world' in two different ways. The world can appear to it as a complex of instruments so organized that if one wished to produce a determined effect it would be necessary to act upon the determined elements of the complex. . . .

¹ Historically seen, this thesis is the last stage of the long "history of rehabilitation of emotion". While, still for Leibniz, feeling was considered an "obscure perception," thus a non-specific faculty, Wolff gave it its right *sui generis* by treating it as intuition of a specific *object*: man's bodily condition. Ever since the specific nature of feeling and emotion was pretty generally accepted. Now Sartre crowns this history of rehabilitation by granting emotion even a "world" of its own, whereby he means that what appears in emotion differs "categorically" from the world in which we act as rational beings.

² We wonder whether his label is felicitous: wherever magic was practiced, it was meant as an exceedingly intricate technique, requiring at least as many intermediate steps as do our rational techniques.

But the world can also appear to it as a non-instrumental totality, that is, modifiable by large masses and without intermediary." In short: a *two-world-theory*; or, more correctly: a theory of man as "citizen of two worlds" (not Sartre's term). Yet the difference between his dualism and the more familiar types of dualism is obvious: For Sartre's Man is not, as for instance Kant's, citizen of the supra-natural "moral" order *and* "nature," but citizen of the rational order *and* the magic one. His is a dualistic theory, yet a theory without transcendence.

It is only too well understandable that this unique type of two-world theory cannot be maintained. As a matter of fact, Sartre has hardly decreed the rehabilitation of the specific emotional "world" when he *revokes its reality*: Emotion, although a specific and meaningful behavior, remains an absolutely *non-effective act*; the emotions' attempt to give the object a lesser or greater existence is to no avail, is mere illusion. Sartre never tires of stressing that our contempt for the unobtainable grapes does not make them actually sour; or that our fainting does not actually annihilate the approaching danger. Let us condense this most important point of his theory in the formula: *Emotions are futile*.

If we had to make a typology of affect theories, we would have to classify his thesis as the very antipode of the Stoic-Ciceronian theory. While, according to Cicero, man's emotions are *based upon delusive judgments*; according to Sartre, man is mobilizing his emotions *in order to make delusive judgments*. Self-delusion is their very meaning.

A very subtle type of theory, indeed, because it mixes positive and negative elements in the most unusual way. On the one hand, it is positively teleological: for it answers the question: "Do emotions have a meaning?" with an unequivocal Yes; on the other hand the telos itself consists of something negative: namely of self-delusion.

Despite his excursion into Dualism, Sartre is enabled by this refined mixture of positive and negative elements to maintain a certain monistic key: although he starts with the ontological claim that a "world sui generis" corresponds to emotion, the only world recognized as "real" remains the one that appears in rational pragmatic behavior. Mostly the word "world" (in the expression "world of emotions") remains iridescent. And hardly ever do we really know whether Sartre connects with it an ontological connotation or just a psychological one.

§2. ORIGIN OF THE THESIS. THE FISSURE IN HEIDEGGER'S SYSTEM BECOMES THE BLUEPRINT FOR SARTRE'S THEORY

A short remark about the immediate historical parentage of this dualistic theory will be all the more advisable because Sartre himself does not refer back to it; and because its origin is but slightly known here in America.

Heidegger without whose philosophical work Sartre's theory is unthinkable had fed the body of his philosophy elements of the most diverse origins. True, in a way, at least verbally, these elements grew together within his system; yet once one examines them outside the system, they immediately betray their mutually exclusive character.

This applies particularly to the two concepts "Zeugwelt" and "Stimmung"! While the concept "Zeugwelt" (the instrumental world constituted by man or the "Dasein") bears many features of Pragmatism and Historical Materialism, the category "Stimmung" (mood) stems from the "Lebensphilosophie" and its apotheosis of feeling as revealing the depths of life inaccessible to reason.

Now, Sartre must have been puzzled by this lack of connection in Heidegger's system. In a way, it is even Heidegger himself who had hinted in this direction. After all, his description of "Nichten" (the vanishing of the world in certain Dasein-conditions as, e.g., boredom), had clearly implied that the "world" does not always present itself as "Zeug-Zusammenhang". Sartre takes the exception seriously by proclaiming that for "*Dasein in emotion*" the world is no context of tools, but something *sui generis*. The fissure in Heidegger's system becomes the blueprint of Sartre's thesis. Thus, instead of Heidegger's one "to be in the world" he has two; two "Daseins" with two specific "worlds."

§3. APOTHEOSIS OF EMOTION—A CHILD OF RATIONALISM

In negative terms, emotion is, for Sartre, an act of *departure*: Man abandons his normal rational status, the behavior in which he used the world as "Zeug-Zusammenhang," in which he was able to take intermediate steps in the pursuit of his goals. Sartre never doubts that such "rational," "practical," "un-emotional" behavior is the normal condition of man. As a matter of fact, he uses this condition as a sort of zero point, the distance from which appears as something like an emotion-quotient. (Not S.'s term.)

Of course, it is not Sartre who has invented this equation between rational behavior and normalcy; the traditional "rational" Ego, from Descartes to Husserl, had claimed to represent consciousness; theory of man had made man a theoretical being. We cannot blame Sartre for European Rationalism—all the less, as it is Sartre who, by stressing emotion as the "other" possibility of man, is trying to limit the claim of rational behavior.

Nevertheless, by overemphasizing the counterconcept, Sartre is in a way confirming the very thesis which he is attacking. How?

Kierkegaard once remarked: It was Christian man who invented sensuality: By repressing it he made it something *sui generis*. The same dialectical turn, the same "production by omission" took place with regard to

emotion. Rationalism, by neglecting emotion, had made emotion something "entirely different." If, time and again, in the history of European thought, exaggerated theories of emotions have arisen (e.g., in the Romantic movement), it was Rationalism itself that had brought them into being. A criticism of Sartre's theory of emotions has to open with an attack on the concept of "normalcy" that he, too, takes for granted. In order to launch this attack, we have to close Sartre's book for a few moments.

§4. MOOD AS PRIMARY DATUM

What Kant has said about the "synthetic apprehension": that it "always accompanies my experience or my activity" applies just as well to emotion. There hardly exists any non-emotional perception; somehow, man's experience is always pervaded by a certain tonality. Illustration: With joy I smell the coffee in the morning, while simultaneously angered by the empty table on which I expected to find a letter . . . impossible to enumerate all voices of this emotional polyphony out of which the powerful fountain of emotion can surge.

Correspondingly, there is hardly any moment in which the world does not present certain "moods," weather-qualities, so to speak. Illustration: The room looks "queer" (even before I see table or benches); the sky looks foreboding; "it" smells suspicious. Although none of those characters belongs to what Sartre would call the rational or pragmatic attitude of man, they are all quite "natural" and far from "magic": being a creature eager and afraid, man is primarily interested in, and moved by absence or presence of, tempting or threatening forces; thus "being-in-the-world" could be circumscribed by the formula: being surrounded by things tempting and threatening (of course not according to Heidegger or Sartre). Since it is the tempting and the threatening qualities that matter most, they are the first "sense-matters" whereby we do not mean only that sense-data are "saturated" with mood-qualities, but that their embodiment in "object-like data" represents the second stage. Developmental Psychology corroborates this thesis.

Once one accepts this reversed order, it is not the (allegedly "magic") mood-character of the world that is puzzling, but, on the contrary, the fact that in certain (so-called "theoretical" acts) the world seems to shake off that character; or that man is able to disregard it and to handle the world unemotionally, in a rational way.

In short, the image of the "world" which Sartre takes for granted as the normal one is a late and derived type; it already requires abstraction. The philosopher's question should be: "How is soberness and rationality possible?"—not: "How can we understand emotion?" The attributes, which Sartre confers upon his allegedly "magical" world, are the attributes shown

by our everyday world. Neither are emotions as insular as Sartre represents them, nor do they "project" or "constitute" a world of their own, since the image of the world is always pre-constituted by them.

Obviously, it is not only Sartre's theory for which this criticism is meant, but all affect-theories which open with the idea of man's emotional *tabula rasa*-condition and with the identification of this condition with man's "normal" condition.

What Sartre is actually dealing with, are the extreme mood-qualities of the world, or the (undeniably existing) extreme and pathological emotional events which he sees as phenomena *sui generis* instead of tracing them back to the normal conditions which are their roots. Yet even the admittedly important emotions (as anxiety) do not "project" or "constitute" a second "world";³ they rather reveal the fact that the normal condition is also, though to a far lesser degree, a mood-condition.

However, when emphasizing the normalcy of emotional "in der Welt sein," I still had two other thoughts in mind.

§5. EMOTIONS AS MOTORS AND CONTROL-DEVICES

True, emotion changes the aspect of the world; yet, this aspect-transformation is a *positive* step taken in order to handle the world *successfully*: Emotions are motors of real action. Anger, for instance, is not just (as it appears in Sartre's book) an existential condition, "meaningful," because by choosing it, man satisfies himself with the futile image of a "simpler world"; its meaning is far more concrete: *It represents a preparatory step for real action, for instance, for real attack.* As a matter of fact, the actual attack derives its very momentum from it. When tribal warriors get themselves methodically into a fit of anger, they are doing it *in order* to actually increase their fighting-trim. Only those emotions confine themselves to being nothing but existential conditions which (for instance, for tabu reasons) do *not* discharge themselves into real action. Interpreting emotions as "such," is like explaining the rotating gestures of a man on a jumping board as compensations for actual swimming, although his movements are meant *for* his actual jump into the actual pool. Of course, *Sartre, too, sees "action": but not emotion as "going into action," but solely the action of going into the emotion.*

If Darwin⁴ saw emotion in connection with action, he was right, although he saw in it (at least in its expression) exclusively a *remnant* of an action.

³ Actual "constitution" of a "second world" takes place only in Art; e.g., in Music which is able to make the emotion itself an articulated process, and which "creates" objects whose "mood" coincides with their structure, thus actually combining the two features which Sartre has separated so energetically.

⁴ Surprisingly, Sartre never mentions Darwin's name. If anyone has ever connected "emotion" with "meaning," it was Darwin, in his work on the "Expression

However, emotion can just as well be a "Not Yet": a *potential* action, sustained in its potentiality . . . a condition in which man keeps himself put in order to start action *in case* it should prove necessary. Illustration: There exist odd emotional repetition-phenomena, in which Sartre is also deeply interested, as the continuous shaking of the fists in a fit of anger. Such phenomena lose much of their strangeness, when seen as the very practical sustained readiness for, or rehearsal of, the fist-blow which might never materialize.

Finally, the negation that is implied in the emotional gesture (the *not-attacking*, the *not-killing*) can have a third meaning, besides the "No more" and the "Not yet": It may prove the existence of a powerful counterforce within man which prevents him from actually launching his action. Yet such "control of action" is neither a "futile" action, nor does it project a second, a "magic" world; again it is a pragmatic behavior entered into in order to cope *successfully* with a given situation. Anger often remains just anger; yet such *anger is the positive result of the act of stalling the attack*. In such cases emotions are the results of self-mastery, thus of freedom. Compared to such acts of stalling actions, the control of emotions or of their expressions are features of secondary significance. This interpretation may sound paradoxical because, ordinarily, we see in emotion the condition in which man lets himself go. Yet the *fact that man shouts instead of killing*, already represents the first stage of self-control. Seen thus, emotion is even renunciation, a first stage of morality.

The importance of this immanent antagonism in emotion can hardly be underestimated. If, in front of her dead child, the mother tears her hair, she is acting simultaneously in two opposite ways: throwing herself down *and* calling herself back by inflicting pain upon herself. Calling this double-feature a "flight" or a short-circuit-solution would be a very incomplete description. If there is anything that prevents such emotion from becoming an "organized" gesture, it is its very antagonistic character; for many emotions are rather battles than "Gestalten."

of Emotions"; although, of course, he did it in a negative way, for Darwin considered expressions (and emotions with them) as rudimentary remnants of deliberate actions which, *once meaningful*, had fulfilled definite pragmatic functions. Had he been a true "Darwinist," he would have been compelled to examine the actual power of emotions and their expressions, because, otherwise, their *survival* would have been an argument against Darwinism. It is, nevertheless, highly interesting to observe that Darwin's and Sartre's interpretations do not lie so widely apart as they could be expected. While for Sartre anger is a metamorphosis which man enacts *in order to have the illusion of "cutting" the Gordian knot*, for Darwin this emotion had been the condition in which pre-historic man, acting directly, *actually had cut the Gordian knot*. Thus both are making a distinction between action and emotion; for Darwin the gap is a historical one, for Sartre a systematic one between effective and futile behavior. If Darwin had heard Sartre stress "emotional behavior is not effective" (p. 60) he would have added, "any longer".

§6. SOCIOLOGY OF EMOTIONS

If Sartre did not lay so much stress on the futility of emotions, it would hardly be necessary to emphasize the social significance of this control. It is, of course, very “practical” for the success of social life, that man confines himself to being just angry instead of resorting to violence. Thus, the *meaning of emotion is a social one, too*; and as such very effective, indeed.

Yet, the social meaning of emotions is ignored by Sartre altogether. It is this very omission which is presumably responsible for the strange fact that Sartre’s theory of emotions confines itself to but few observations about the *expression* of emotions, about what A’s emotions *look like* in the eyes of B, and what they *mean* to B. As a matter of fact, Sartre has limited himself to an almost solipsistic meaning of the expression “meaning of emotions.” Had he taken into account the fact that emotions are *visible* and *mean* to be visible, the idea of “futility” would hardly have occurred to him. Illustration: A’s fit of anger actually frightens B who is meant as target; frightened by it, B now undergoes an emotion on his part, for instance, that of anxiety. This effect has again an effect on A: B’s look of anxiety may now fill A with disgust or scorn. The emotions are flying to and fro. Thus, we can often observe continuous tennis matches of emotions. If such actions and inter-actions (which could be dealt with in a “Sociology of emotions”) are not “effective,” I really do not know what the word “effective” means.⁵

§7. DOES THE EMOTION “JOY” COMPLY WITH SARTRE’S PROVISIONS?

Obviously Sartre would meet with immense difficulties if he tried to interpret “scorn” with his key, which was made to measure for the one existentialist emotion “anxiety” and which, throughout the book, remains the model of anxiety in general. Nor can I see why A should be in “too difficult a situation” when he engages in deriding B. Isn’t his situation rather—*too easy*? For scorn mostly arises in the very moment in which B, the victim, is powerless, while A, the attacker, is his superior in rank or power or numbers. Even if it is the powerless individual A who derides the powerful B, B’s power is somehow impaired. What applies to scorn or derision, applies to laughing in general which breaks out when the world suddenly seems to lose its actual weight. Now, man can “take it easy,” easier than ordinarily; and this “taking it easier” does not at all fit Sartre’s

⁵ Yet even seen solipsistically, scorn is far from futile: it does not only actually injure the victim, it often gives the attacker a far more enduring “pleasure” than a real attack which, by immediately destroying the enemy, cheats the attacker out of his enjoyment. Very often the mocker *wishes* his emotion to be futile, the same way the torturer wishes his torture not to succeed too well, because the complete success (the victim’s death) would ruin his pleasure of playing with the victim.

example of renouncing the sour grapes; it is mostly justified by the actual power-constellation. No doubt, another choice of examples would have resulted in a theory of emotions totally different from the one which Sartre has sketched.

We have, of course, to admit that, at least once, Sartre has analyzed *joy*: the joy of the lover after he has heard the "Yes." Convincingly Sartre explains that, in real life, man is never allowed to enjoy or to have in one moment the totality of what this "Yes" implies; that, on account of life's temporal extension, the whole is torn to pieces, that thus, in a way, man is cheated out of the "whole." Now, Sartre describes the wild dancing of joy as the (again futile) attempt to "have" the whole from which actual life will exclude him.⁶—This interpretation is plausible, indeed. It is all the more surprising, as it is the concrete application of a Heideggerian thesis which, claiming a far broader generality, belongs to the most questionable points of Heidegger's philosophy. According to Heidegger, the "Dasein" is always afraid to miss its "wholeness" ("Gaenze des Daseins"), as, on account of its temporal extension, it can never catch itself as totality. In my article on Heidegger⁷ I have shown that, what he calls "die *Eigentlichkeit*," the authentic status of "Dasein," can be interpreted as the attempt of "Dasein" to deceive time, to transform the "extensive totality" into an "intensive one".

There can be no doubt that, in special situations, this urge to summarize the "whole" in advance, is overwhelming; and joy as well as extreme despair may represent such anticipations.

Yet can we accept this kind of joy as model for the understanding of emotions in general? Hasn't Sartre chosen a catastrophic eruption which is an exception rather than a normal case. *What about the joy of relief?* Does it comply with Sartre's criteria? Does it arise because the "world is too difficult"? Is it a flight into a world *sui generis*? Isn't it, again, caused by the fact that too great *difficulties are* disappearing or actually have disappeared? Isn't it connected with the feeling of returning to the reality of *this world*?⁸ Only deliberately paradoxical psychologists could interpret the

⁶ It is most interesting that, in music which, too, must content itself with unrolling the whole in time, various means have been devised to neutralize the succession-character: All fugato music gives us the chance of being simultaneously at the most different points of the same theme, as the several voices are singing the "same" yet in every given second every voice is at another point of the melody. To my knowledge the most ingenious device to give the "whole" despite the flux of time.

⁷ See: this journal, Vol. VIII, No. 3, "On the Pseudo-Concreteness of Heidegger's Philosophy".

⁸ There are even emotions which can be interpreted as break-throughs toward reality, as devices to lead man from futility to efficiency, not, as Sartre purports, from efficiency to futility. No one can deny that the love emotion leads the way

disappearance of difficulties as "too difficult a task". Only when life in general is seen as a desperate affair, as a task that, as such, is too difficult, only then do joy and happiness become variants of catastrophe, only then does the difference between happiness and unhappiness become a matter of minor importance.

Sartre's affect-theory is like the theory of an oceanographer who confines himself to the theory of tidal waves. No doubt, the tidal waves are so high that they exceed the normal sea-level. Yet, the ocean is in continuous motion, which motion belongs to its nature, and whose average defines the surface of the sea. Correspondingly, man is in continuous, non-catastrophic emotions. Only the presupposition that, in reality, the ocean is plain as a mirror, or the Ego an unemotional rational being, makes waves appear to be something *sui generis*.

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toward a (far from "inefficient") act, the one in which sex-life becomes reality. Here, the power of emotion corresponds to the power of the taboos which society has to erect. It is by means of the love emotion that the wall of taboos is ruptured, and reality is reached.