***Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* – Jean-Paul Sartre**

Introduction

Traditional psychology amounts to the collection of relatively isolated facts about mental states, which therefore fails to hit upon anything truly essential. Sartre makes the very Kierkegaardian claim that such an approach amounts to putting aside the essential as something “that is for later on, when we have collected enough facts” (p.17). It is, Sartre says, “just as impossible to attain the essence by heaping up the accidents as it is to arrive at unity by the indefinite addition of figures to the right of 0.99.” (pp.17-8) What Sartre is saying is that rather than getting to the essence of the emotions by investigating the structures of human reality that make emotion possible, the psychologist is content to note that we have emotions and proceed cataloguing or describing them. This guarantees that emotions will never be more than a sterile, disconnected fact for the psychologist and will certainly never take their place in a broader understanding of human-reality in general; “even when duly described and explained, the emotion will never be more than one fact among others, a fact enclosed in itself, which will never enable anyone to understand anything else, nor to look through it into the essential reality of man.” (p.21) This goes to Sartre’s broader claim that “the aim of the sciences of nature is not to know *the world*, but the conditions under which certain general phenomena are possible.” (p.18)

Sartre goes on to recommend the phenomenological method as the most appropriate place to begin. Emotions (like all psychic facts) have their essential structure in two terms; man and the world. “If we want to found a psychology we must go beyond the psychic, beyond the situation of man in the world, even to the very source of man, of the world and of the psychic; to the transcendental and constitutive consciousness that we attain through a ‘phenomenological reduction’, or ‘putting the world in brackets’. (p.22) It is the consciousness we want to interrogate because, given its central role, emotion must eventually appear as an “organized type of consciousness.” (p.23)

Sartre distinguishes phenomenology from introspection because the latter “meets with nothing but facts” (p.24) and my comprehension of human reality through introspection is “dim and inauthentic.” (p.24) He also reiterates the point that in starting from the “synthetic totality that man is” (p.25), he is starting from a position opposite to that of psychology. Phenomenology proceeds on firmer foundations than psychology because it studies phenomena, not facts. And what is the phenomenon? It is “that which announces itself” (p.25).

Sartre references Heidegger and Husserl here who both note that a proper account of the emotions will lead to a full account of the human being in total. “Heidegger thinks that, in every human attitude – in emotion, for example… we can rediscover the whole of the human reality, for emotion is the human reality assuming itself and ‘emotionally-directing’ itself towards the world. Husserl, for his part, thinks that a phenomenological description of emotion will reveal the essential structures of consciousness, seeing that an emotion precisely is a consciousness.” (pp.25-6)

Phenomenology views emotion (as every other human fact) as something *significant*. “To signify is to indicate something else; and to indicate it in such a way that in developing the signification one finds precisely the thing signified.” (p.27) The problem with psychology is that it treats emotions as *accidental* facts. From the start this renders them non-significant. Phenomenology, on the other hand, recognises from the beginning what emotion signifies; namely, “an emotion signifies *in its own manner* the whole of the consciousness, or, if we take our stand on the existential plane, of the human reality.” (pp.27-8)

Sartre ends the introduction noting that this essay is not intended to be a phenomenological study of emotion. Rather, his aim is to show that psychology can benefit from the phenomenological approach. With that he asks we treat this as an “*experiment* in phenomenological psychology. We shall try to place ourselves upon the terrain of signification, and to treat emotion as a *phenomenon*.” (p.31)

The Classical Theories

The first theory Sartre dismisses is William James’ peripheric theory in which it is the physical manifestations of emotion that produce the mental state. Sartre notes many problems with this theory, including its inability to distinguish one emotion from another and its failure to account for the facts of emotional experience. Next comes Janet’s theory, which restores consciousness to a more central position by treating the emotions as a “behaviour of defeat.” (p.35) Emotions are the less well-adapted way we respond to external situations which are too difficult for us to handle. His example is a patient who tries to confess something to him but cannot because she breaks down in tears. The problem is that for Janet, the ‘behaviour’ of defeat takes place automatically, mechanically, and is therefore “less like a behaviour of defeat than a lack of behaviour.” (p.37) Nor is there a defeat; “…if the defeat takes place automatically, then there is no defeat... all that happens is the replacement of a kind of behaviour by a diffusion of organic manifestations.” (pp.37-8) In order to overcome these problems, consciousness and signification must appear somewhere. Wallon extends Janet’s theory by speculating that emotions are essentially behaviours learned in infancy as “primary organic adaptation[s]” (p.38) which we revert to as adults when confronted by a new and difficult situation. Clearly this, being pure physiological in nature, hasn’t really reintroduced the ‘psychic’ into emotion, nor has it explained “why there are *various* kinds of behaviour in defeat; why I may react to a sudden aggression by fear *or* by anger.” (p.39)

Finally, Sartre cites Lewin and Dembo as having brought us to the verge of a complete theory of the emotions. They understand emotion as the abrupt solution of a conflict, per Janet, but one that isn’t instinctual, habitual, or a calculated action. Rather, “it is we who put ourselves into a state of total inferiority, because at that very low level our demands are smaller; we satisfy ourselves at less cost. Being unable, in a state of high tension, to find the delicate and precise answer to a problem, we act upon ourselves, we abase and transform ourselves into a being for whom the grossest and least adapted solutions are good enough (for example, tearing up the paper on which a problem is stated).” (p.45) So, we have explained emotion with the “form-psychologists” as a break-up of one form and the re-constitution of another. But what is it which brings the new form into being? It must be consciousness and more broadly the “relation of the world to the self” (p.47). It is this final aspect which needs to be fleshed out.

The Psychoanalytic Theory

The organised behaviours that we have seen constitute emotion can be explained by appeal to either consciousness or the unconscious. In the latter “the conscious phenomenon [i.e. emotion] [is] the symbolic realization of a desire repressed by the censor.” (p.51) Given that consciousness is unaware that the realisation of the desire is actually symbolic of something else (for consciousness, emotion is just emotion) it follows that “the signification of our conscious behaviour lies wholly outside that behaviour itself or, if one prefers it so, what is signified is entirely cut off from the *signifying*… In a word, the conscious fact is related to what it signifies, as a thing which is the *effect* of a certain event is related to that event…” (p.51) This reduction of consciousness to a mere passive thing implicated in a causal chain it has no meaningful role in is anathema to Sartre and amounts to a rejection of the Cartesian *cogito*.

The thing for Sartre is that consciousness precisely *is* the signification. Indeed, there can be no signification without consciousness. In the absence of consciousness nothing symbolises anything. Everything just is. Since “symbolization is constitutive of the symbolic consciousness” (p.53), this means that there must be a “bond of *comprehension* between the symbolization and the symbol.” (p.53) Sartre goes on to add that “consciousness *constitutes itself* by symbolization. In that case there is nothing behind it, and the relation between symbol, symbolized and symbolization is an intra-structural bond of consciousness.” (p.54) If this is true, the claim that consciousness is merely a passive, causal player in emotion amounts to a contradiction.

Outline of a Phenomenological Theory

Sartre begins here by noting the difference between reflective and non-reflective consciousness and emphasising that “emotional consciousness is at first non-reflective… [and therefore] is primarily consciousness *of* the world.” (p.56) The fact that emotion is always directed towards an object means that “the emotional subject and the object of the emotion are united in an indissoluble synthesis. The emotion is a specific manner of apprehending the world.” (p.57) Turning this engaged, pre-reflective consciousness into a reflective consciousness is, of course, possible, but unnecessary and furthermore, turns emotion into something different.

We tend to think of action that it requires a “constant passing from the non-reflective to the reflective, from the world to oneself.” (p.58) We grasp the problem non-reflectively, take it up and conceptualise it (reflective), conceive of an action to resolve it (reflective), then carry out the action in the world (non-reflective). This is false. Sartre uses the example of writing to explain what he means here. When we write, we are not conscious of ourselves writing, but it would be absurd to claim our writing is therefore unconscious. “To write is to maintain an active awareness *of the words* as they come to birth under my pen. Not of the words inasmuch as they are written *by me*: I apprehend the words intuitively inasmuch as they have that structural quality, that they emerge *ex nihilo* and yet do not create themselves, that they are passively created.” (p.59)

Sartre describes our non-reflective actions in the world as taking place in a “‘hodological’ chart of our *Umwelt*” (p.62), which is basically the way “the world of our desires, our needs and of our activities [*Umwelt*], appears to be all furrowed with strait and narrow paths leading to such and such determinate ends…” (p.62) Emotion, then, can be understood as “a transformation of the world. When the paths before us become too difficult, or when we cannot see our way, we can no longer put up with such an exacting and difficult world. All ways are barred and nevertheless we must act. So then we try to change the world; that is, to live it as though the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes but by magic… To put it simply, since the seizure of one object is impossible, or sets up an unbearable tension, the consciousness seizes or tries to seize it otherwise; that is, tries to transform itself in order to transform the object.” (p.63) Sartre gives the example of looking for a gun in a picture puzzle. With the governing intuition being the search for a gun-shaped object, one “scrutinizes the trees and posts that are seized upon as ‘possible guns’… Through a change of intention, as in a change of behaviour, we apprehend an object, new or old, in a different fashion.” (p.64) It is this same change of intention and behaviour which characterises emotion. The impossibility of finding a solution serves as the motivation for “the new consciousness which now grasps the world differently, under a new aspect, and imposes a new behaviour – through which that aspect is grasped…” (pp.64-5)

Although emotion is an attempt to change the world, it is not directly *effectual*. It doesn’t try to “act upon the object as it is, by the interpolation of particular means.” (p.65) Rather, “during emotion, it is the body which, directed by the consciousness, changes its relationship with the world so that the world should change its qualities.” (p.65) Sartre uses the example of fear directed towards a ferocious beast coming towards one. The emotional response is to turn pale and faint; i.e. that of *escape*. Now, in fainting, one is not trying to save oneself. Such a rational, calculated intention could only take place on the reflective plane. Instead, “being unable to escape the danger by normal means and deterministic procedures, I have denied existence to it. I have tried to annihilate it.” (p.66) Were one instead to flee, far from being a rational calculation, as is typically believed, it would be an attempt to do the same thing; “we flee because we are unable to annihilate ourselves in unconsciousness. Flight is fainting away in action; it is magical behaviour which negates the dangerous object with one’s whole body, by reversing the vectorial structure of the space we live in and suddenly creating a potential direction on the *other side*. It is a way of forgetting, of negating the danger.” (p.67) This prompts Sartre to note that fear is “a consciousness whose aim is to negate something in the external world by means of magical behaviour, and will go so far as to annihilate itself in order to annihilate the object also.” (pp.67-8)

Sartre analyses passive sadness in the same way. Sadness is characterised by dejected behaviour, a withdrawal from the world, inactivity. Imagine one is sad because one is financially ruined. I still have to act in the world, but now I have to do so without the many conveniences and tools I formerly had at my disposal. Sartre talks about having to ride the bus instead of taking a private car. The problem is that I don’t want to do this. “My melancholy is a method of suppressing the obligation to look for these new ways, by transforming the present structure of the world, replacing it with a totally undifferentiated structure. What it comes to, in short, is that I make the world into an affectively neutral reality, a system which is, affectively, in complete equilibrium.” (pp.68-9)

What about joy? In joy, the subject is not defending him or herself against anything, so how can Sartre account for this? First, we have to distinguish between a joyful feeling, which is characterised by a certain equilibrium, and *emotional* joy. Behaviour in the case of the latter is marked by a sense of impatience. “He [the person experiencing joy] cannot keep still, makes innumerable plans, begins to do things which he immediately abandons etc.” (p.71) Sometimes joy will even make the subject dance and sing. So, what brings joy about? Joy arises because a desired object is about to be, or has been, attained. However, no object is ever able to be fully and completely possessed. Instead, it will “yield itself to us only through numberless details and, as it were, *abschattungen*… Joy is magical behaviour which tries, by incantation, to realize the possession of the desired object as an instantaneous totality.” (p.72) Sartre’s example here is of a man to whom a woman has just said she loves. He dances and sings for joy, in effect turning “his mind away from the prudent and difficult behaviour he will have to maintain if he is to deserve this love and increase it, to gain possession of it through countless details (smiles, little attentions etc.)… For the moment, he is possessing the object by magic; the dance mimes his possession of it.” (p.73)

It’s important to note that while every emotion is reducible to the constitution of a magic world, every problem and every emotional behaviour to cope with that problem is different. “To grasp the signification and finality, one would have to know and analyze each particular situation.” (pp.73-4)

Emotion is always accompanied by belief. “The qualities ‘willed’ upon the objects are taken to be real.” (pp.75-6) This means that we don’t *control* our emotions, as such. Rather, Sartre says “the emotion is undergone. One cannot get out of it as one pleases; it fades away of itself, but one cannot put a stop to it.” (p.76) In a nice phrase concerning the importance of belief, Sartre talks about the way that we must be “spell-bound and filled to overflowing by our own emotion…” (p.76)

The centrality of belief ties in with the synthetic nature of emotion. The purely physiological phenomena of emotion (cold hands, trembling, etc.) must arise in combination with the emotional behaviour (running away, dancing and singing, etc.). “Emotion… is not mere deportment, but the deportment of a body which is in a specific state: the state itself would not give rise to the deportment, the deportment without the state is play-acting; but the emotion appears in a disordered body carrying on a certain kind of behaviour… The form we have to do with is indeed synthetic: *to believe* in magical behaviour one must be physically upset.” (p.77)

Sartre also emphasises the dual role played by the body in understanding emotion. The body is an object in the world but it is also that which is “immediately *lived* by the consciousness.” (p.77) In emotion, the latter capacity of the body is paramount because consciousness doesn’t just project “affective meanings upon the world around it; it *lives* the new world that it has thereby constituted…” (p.78) Sartre even likens a consciousness becoming emotional to a consciousness falling asleep. Both slip into a different world and transform “the body as a synthetic whole so as to be able to live and to perceive this other world through it.” (p.78)

So, “the origin of emotion is a spontaneous debasement lived by the consciousness in face of the world… And the bodily disturbance is nothing else than the belief lived by the consciousness, as it is seen from outside.” (p.79)

Sartre makes a couple of points next that we must keep in mind. First, “consciousness has no thetic consciousness of self as abasing itself to escape the pressures of the world: it has only a positional consciousness of the degradation of the world…” (p.79) Of course, the final end of emotion is no more unconscious for this than the absence of a thetic consciousness of me writing makes my writing unconscious. Secondly, “consciousness is caught in its own snare. Precisely because it is living in the new aspect of the world by *believing in* it, the consciousness is captured by its own belief, exactly as it is in dreams and hysteria.” (p.80) This is why the magical world emotion constructs is so resilient and so captivating; because it is “of the essence of consciousness to transcend itself… It *knows* itself only in the world… Thus, when consciousness is living the magical world into which it has precipitated itself, it tends to perpetuate that world, by which it is captivated: the emotion tends to perpetuate itself… Liberation can come only from a purifying reflection or from the total disappearance of the emotional situation.” (pp.80-1)

Next, Sartre expands on this discussion of the magical world of emotion to apply it to social relations. The way we have described it here, the magical is “an inert activity, a consciousness rendered passive.” (p.85) This is, by necessity, precisely how we appear to others. As Sartre will explain in more detail in *B&N* “consciousness can only be a transcendent object by undergoing the modification of passivity. Thus the meaning of a face is, first of all, that *of the* consciousness (not a sign of the consciousness) but of a consciousness that is altered, degraded – which precisely is passivity.” (p.85) It is in this context that Sartre says, “man is always a sorcerer to man and the social world is primarily magical.” (p.85) Of course we can build rational superstructures upon this primarily magical social world, but “it is those structures that are ephemeral and unstable, it is they that crumble away as soon as the magical aspect of faces, gestures and human situations becomes too vivid.” (p.85) When this happens because of an object that is disagreeable, the experience is *horror*; if it is precipitated by an agreeable object, it is *admiration*.

This magical aspect of the world isn’t limited to the human. On the contrary, it “extends to things also, inasmuch as they may present themselves as human (the disturbing impression of a landscape, of certain objects, or of a room which retains the traces of some mysterious visitor) or bear the imprint of the psychic.” (p.87)

This essay then has revealed two forms of emotion. In the first, “it is we who constitute the magic of the world to replace a deterministic activity which cannot be realized” (p.86), while in the second, “the world itself is unrealizable and reveals itself suddenly as a magical environment.” (p.86)

In bringing things to a close Sartre points out that “emotion is not the accidental modification of a subject who is surrounded by an unchanged world.” (p.88) The only way emotions can be properly understood is “against the background of a complete alteration of the world. For an object to appear *formidable*, indeed, it must be realized as an immediate and magical presence *confronting* the consciousness.” (p.88) To see a face at the window as a threat “is possible in an act of consciousness which destroys all the structures of the world that might dispel the magic and reduce the event to reasonable proportions.” (p.88) The window is not that which ‘could easily be broken’ and the distance is not that which ‘is easily traversed’ because these are rational explanations. Under an emotional aspect “window and distance are emptied of their ‘usable’ and necessary character. They are grasped in another way. The distance… is grasped as the *background* united with the horrible. The window… is grasped simply as the *frame* of the frightful visage.” (p.89) In short, “the horrible is *not possible* in the deterministic world of the usable… to experience any object as horrible, is to see it against the background of a world which reveals itself as *already* horrible.” (p.89) The same is true for emotion in general.

Sartre has then with this essay also revealed two different ways consciousness can *be* in the world. In the first, the world can appear as “an organized complex of utilizable things… [in which] each ‘utensil’ refers one to other utensils and to the totality of utensils…” (p.90) However, the world can also appear as “one non-utilizable whole… In that case, the categories of the world act immediately upon the consciousness, they are present to it *at no distance*… this is the *magical* world. Emotion may be called a sudden fall of consciousness into magic; or, if you will, emotion arises when the world of the utilizable vanishes abruptly and the world of magic appears in its place.” (pp.90-1)

Conclusion

This essay has borne out what Sartre claimed in the introduction; namely that “the significance of a fact of consciousness came to this: that it always pointed to the whole human-reality which was *making* itself emotional, attentive, perceptive, willing, etc.” (p.93) Emotion has verified this inasmuch as it refers to what it signifies and “what it signifies is indeed, in effect, the totality of the relations of the human-reality to the world. The onset of emotion is a complete modification of the ‘being-in-the-world’ according to the very peculiar laws of magic.” (p.93)

So should phenomenology replace psychology? No. Rather, the two disciplines should work together. Phenomenology is able to take us to the essence of the psychic topic under consideration by understanding it in the context of human-reality, but it requires recourse to the empirical which can identify the particular forms the psychic phenomena might take. Concerning the emotions, we have seen how phenomenology can lead to a complete understanding by reference to the lived experience of a consciousness in the world, but “it will be impossible for it to show that the human-reality must necessarily manifest itself in *such* emotions as it does. That there are such and such emotions and not others – this is, beyond all doubt, evidence of the *factitious* character of human existence.” (p.94)