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On Sartre's Pursuit of a Marxist-Existentialist Integration

Over 50,000 people attended his funeral, many had called him *the* philosopher of individual freedom, and upon his death, a newspaper headline would even state that France's consciousness had died with him. And yet despite his posthumous praise, during his lifetime, Jean Paul Sartre would proclaim that Marxism, and its eventual assimilation of his phenomenological existentialism, was the philosophy of our time. In turn, although he was acclaimed for his defense of the individual, Sartre's eventual legacy would be his attempt at integrating his existential freedom into the largely deterministic ideology that is Marxism. Furthermore, when looking at Sartre in this light, the lingering question that resides is not only whether he succeeded in that attempt, but rather whether he retained freedom in so doing it.

Before embarking on an exploration of Sartre's project, however, one should first become familiar with his own background and the development of his thought. Sartre was born into a protestant bourgeois family France, leading to childhood alienation in a largely Catholic country. Nonetheless, he went on to pursue his childhood aspiration of becoming a writer, with his first novel, *Nausea*, being published to great critical acclaim in 1938. The novel in itself is a philosophical working out of his own experience as he dealt with his developing ideas on what would become his existentialism. After going into military service in 1939 and then captured in 1940, he began work on his monumental *Being and Nothingness*, a tome that was largely influenced by his prison time exposure to Kierkegaard. After nine months in prison, he was released and joined the Resistance movement in France as a journalist and playwright, writing the resistance yet poignant existential pieces, *The Flies* and *No Exit*. In 1946, Sartre published

the transcript of his *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, a speech he had given in Paris wherein he would embrace the label of an existentialist and, in a relatively crude manner, expound his phenomenology as found in *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness* to be considered a humanistic ideology—a perception that following the Second World War, was crucial to gain for intellectual longevity. Following this speech, however, Sartre, found himself mildly ostracized by leading existentialist thinkers such as Heidegger, who refused to accept both his plain explanation of the philosophy in the speech, as well as the label of "existentialist." Nonetheless, around this time, he, like many of his colleagues, would find himself turning to Marxism, forming a political periodical, *Les Temps Modernes*, and trying to find his niche among the political groups of the time. Herein it should be noted that Sartre never joined the French Communist party and would eventually be considered a follower of libertarian socialism. Nonetheless, he would go on to at first pledge his support to figureheads such as Stalin, Castro, Guevara, and eventually Mao. This isolation he found himself in is vital to understanding his attempt at a synthesis between Marxism and his existentialism—an ideology that by 1960 he considered to be a parasitic system that had lived on the fringes of Marxism and by then sought to integrate itself. Yet this chronology of ideas and events is not beneficial either without first giving an overview of Sartre's thought.

At its most basic level, Sartre' existentialism boils down to the notion that "man is condemned to be free..because , once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." [1] It is this notion that is inscribed into the characters of Sartre's early novels and plays, presenting an image of a rather oppressive freedom, one that, as Roquentin, the protagonist of his *Nausea*, would find out, "turns your heart upside down and everything begins to float...[this freedom] is what those bastards... try to hide from themselves with their idea of their rights. But

1 Sartre, Jean Paul. Existentialism and Human Emotions (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 1985) 23.

what a poor lie: no one has any rights; they are entirely free... they cannot succeed in not feeling superfluous." [2] Within this passage, one finds, albeit in a quite condensed form, the precursors to one of Sartre's seminal works, *Being and Nothingness.* Sartre, largely influenced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, differentiates between ontology and metaphysics, noting that the former is descriptive while the latter attempts to be explanatory[3]. In turn, he proposes two categories for being: the in-itself (*en-soi*) and the for-itself (*pour-soi*). The former, the in-itself, is passive and inert—it exists and cannot change what it is. On the other hand, the for-itself, associated to human consciousness, is dynamic, ever changing, and aware of both its existence and ability to change, while at the same time being dependent on, and the negation of the in-itself. As Sartre scholar Thomas Flynn would put it, "this duality is cast as "facticity" and "transcendence." The "givens" of our situation such as our language, our environment, our previous choices and our very selves in their function as in-itself constitute our facticity. As conscious individuals, we transcend (surpass) this facticity in what constitutes our "situation." In other words, we are always beings "in situation," but the precise mixture of transcendence and facticity that forms any situation remains indeterminable, at least while we are engaged in it. Hence Sartre concludes that we are always "more" than our situation and that this is the ontological foundation of our freedom. "[4]

Given this explanation we can return to Roquentin and understand his apparent despair at his newly realized freedom, for it does indeed seem a condemnation that human existence is free, for this implies that there are no rules or predetermined conditions, we transcend the circumstances of our situation, and as for-itself, find ourselves aware of both our own consciousness, which is in turn nothingness, and the impregnability and apathy of the in-itself

2 Sartre, Jean Paul. Nausea (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp, 1964) 131.
3 Flynn, Thomas. "Jean-Paul Sartre." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2004 http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sartre/
4 Ibid.

towards our consciousness, leading to a dire view that, to once again put it in Roquentin's words, leads us to feel that "when I say "I," it seems hollow to me. I can't manage to feel myself very well, I am so forgotten. The only real thing left in me is existence which feels it exists... A pale reflection of myself wavers in my consciousness... and suddenly the "I" pales, pales, and fades out." [5] Herein, Roquentin not only exemplifies the anguish that burdens the for-itself as it realizes that due to its being aware of both its existence, and in turn, of the superfluousness of its choices as it strives to become in-itself, passive and confident in its being, that it cannot achieve the synthesis of the two, for as long as it is conscious of what it is it can never truly be *what* it is. This burden, which Sartre refers to as "bad faith," is more clearly represented in the often cited example, out of *Being and Nothingness,* wherein he proposes that "if man is what he is, bad faith is forever impossible and candor ceases to be his ideal and becomes instead his being. But is man what he is? And more generally, how can he *be* what he is when he exists as consciousness of being?... for example, this waiter in the cafe. His movement is quick and studied, a little too precise, a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly... he is playing *at being* a waiter in a cafe... the waiter in the cafe cannot be immediately a cafe waiter in the sense that this inkwell *is* an inkwell...he knows well what it "means" [to be a waiter]... he knows the rights which it allows..."[6], yet the waiter cannot truly be a waiter for due to his awareness of what he is attempting to be, he notices that he is trying to become in-itself as a waiter, but his awareness of the situation, and in turn the freedom associated with it, forces him to realize that he is only a waiter "in the mode of being what [he] is not," [7] for he is acting the part as he has experienced a waiter to be, never truly knowing what a waiter is as his consciousness exists for-itself, leading to a conundrum wherein he strives to become an in-itself that can retain awareness of the for-

5 Sartre Nausea 170.
6 Sartre, Jean Paul. Being and Nothingness. Basic writings of existentialism Ed. Gordon Marino. (New York: Modern Library, 2004). 385-387
7 Ibid. 388

itself, but fails as he ends up, once again, only play acting the part, and trying to negate his awareness of the situation through personal dishonesty, bad faith.

To follow the waiter example, in a similar sense that Sartre catches the waiter in his exaggerated performance, so he introduces, through an analysis of shame, and the way one interprets it upon encountering an Other, another sentient individual. “By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the other...shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me.” [8] Here we find that through an encounter with the Other we, as Sartre would put it, realize ourselves as objects to another subject's experience. While the Other appears to us as an object in our experience, by revealing, to continue on the same example, shame within us, it establishes a new type of being different from the for-itself, for not only do we not notice it till we encounter it, but it also does not make us aware of what we are, but rather, objectifies us and alienates us as we become aware of the other as a separate subject. Therefore, we find ourselves as being for-itself, wherein we are fully aware of what we are while never being able to truly become it due to our awareness, interacting with object that are in a state of in-itself, passive objects that exist as they are, and yet, upon encountering other sentient beings, being for-Others when we realize that we are objectified as an external entity to a foreign subject in a looking/looked-at relationship. In this way, Sartre provides a method for the individual to be both free and aware while at the same time allowing interpersonal interactions to occur with a degree of connection different from relations with objects. However, at this point, Sartre, as he would put in his 1944 play *No Exit*, seems distrustful of the relationship as he notes that by objectifying us, and in turn engaging in the looking/looked at relationship with us, our interactions with the Others often pan out in such a way that those involved, perhaps out of shame and in self denying

8 Ibid. 392

bad faith, act for the other in a way that leads to a torturous conflict characterized by the words of the character Garcin, “Hell is other people.” [9]

How then, with such a poignant claim about social relations, can Sartre attempt to create an existentialist social philosophy with which to integrate his existentialism with Marxist doctrine? If “Hell is other people,” and we are, like Roquentin, completely free and fully responsible for our choices and interactions with the objects around us, do we operate within a system based upon collective class systems, economic determinism, and impersonal forces which alienate us from ourselves?

Sartre's attempt to answer this question can be seen in a rather early stage in the transcript of his 1946 speech, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, wherein he begins to carve out a sense of moral responsibility for the individual by stating that “If existence really does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him... that he is responsible for all men.” [10] This claim weighs heavily, in turn, as a social ethic, for it attempts to provide a universality to the consequences of man's actions. Nonetheless, this slight inclusion of a collective sense, while it does indeed grant Sartre's philosophy a humanist touch, is far from a bridging of his work and Marx's.

The work that would attempt to connect the two theories would be his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Published in 1960, the work introduces a new method through which Sartre analyzes human involvement in history and society, he defects from a Kierkegaardian to a Hegelian-Marxist dialectic consisting primarily of his discovery of mediating factors in

9 Thody, Philip, and Howard Read and Richard Appignanesi, Ed. Introducing Sartre. (Australia: Icon Books, 2005). 63-64.

10 Sartre Existentialism and Human Emotions 17

experience that both separate and unite individuals. [11] Moreover, with the *Critique* he attempts to outline the logic of a Marxist anthropology, utilizing a proper understanding of the Marxian notion of praxis, that is, man's activity in the world, including his work and and rational intention in the material universe.[12] He initiates his argument by asserting the Hegelian notion that history discloses the truth about man and his role in the world; the disclosure then being reason, albeit one that has a "casual acceptance of many truths and many histories." [13] At this point Sartre expands upon his work in *Being and Nothingness* by introducing mediations that contort our personal freedom as for-itself. The main restriction being that of the practico-inert, a condition that affect the for-itself by restricting freedom , and which can be seen as "all social forms... in the relations among agents mediated by such "worked matter" as natural languages, rituals of exchange, or physical artifacts."[14] This restriction on freedom can then, in turn, be seen rather as a basic form of sociality, the underlying foundations which we are born into, and in turn the initial source of personal and social alienation as we work out our praxis. From here it can be seen that this notion of the practico-inert shaping our praxis by directly opposing itself to it, works as a limit to it. Moreover, it is in the practico-inert conditions of our existence that Sartre also manages to further weave in his system into Marxism; as Thomas Flynn puts it, "since it is practico-inert mediation through the capitalist relations of production which gives rise to interest/destiny, [interest being defined as "being-outside-oneself-in-a-thing in so far as it conditions praxis as a categorical imperative"[15] and destiny being "an irresistible movement that draws or impels the ensemble toward a prefigurative future which realizes itself through it"[16]] liberation will consist in neutralizing this mediation by socializing these productive relations—

11 Flynn, Thomas. Sartre and Marxist Existentialism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). 88
12 Lichtheim, G. "Sartre, Marxism, and History." History and Theory, Vol. 3, No.2. 1960: 225
13 Ibid., p. 228.
14 Flynn, Thomas. Sartre and Marxist Existentialism 94
15 Ibid.102
16 Ibid.103

the standard Marxist remedy."[17] Nonetheless, while these practico-inert conditions placed into societal structures do indeed limit freedom, they at the same time help create what to Sartre is the "collective field," a form of sociality wherein individuals are bound not by praxis or choice but rather circumstance and a false commonality—i.e, a TV audience are part of that "whole," despite the commonality being at most trivial. It is by the same notion of collectivity that class systems exist—practico-inert conditions of the capitalist system that induce a sense of belonging to an economic class, despite lack of commonality and for that matter lack of necessity. Furthermore, it is out of these conditions that the individuals are grouped through basic needs when faced by environmental scarcity, in turn, creating a system for a time sequence to explain the development of class struggles; the primitive tribe grouped in this collective not by an active interaction of praxis' but rather through a common need for food, and then in turn, the conditions for grouping repeat themselves until the current capitalist system is reached, still riddled with false societal boundaries, and still limiting of freedom. [18]For in Sartre, as in Marx, these conditions are not permanent, for out of this practico-inert field can be borne the common field, an active group that arises through negating the practico-inert and working out their praxis with an aim for, to put in Marxist context, revolution.[19]

Furthermore, once the conditions for societal structures to develop, and in turn social groups have risen, the state itself is born. In Sartre, one finds the state arising when an authority figure emerges from the group—lending himself as a mediator— "thus the chief is produced at the same time as the group itself, and produces the group which produces him, so much that in this elementary moment of experience, the chief can be anyone." [20] The ultimate source of sovereignty is in turn neither a social contract or a divine appointment, it is the working out of

17 Ibid.103
18 Lichtheim, G. 234
19 Ibid p 94
20 Sartre, Jean Paul, Critique of Dialectical Reason. 586 in Lichtheim, G. 241

the praxis of an individual who reorganizes his point of reference to match goals of and activities of his choosing.[21] With the creation of a figurehead, class systems, history rises. Yet, Sartre shows that because the for-itself is indeed free, albeit constrained to a degree by the practico-inert boundaries, it creates history—in other words, in the same way that man creates who he is, so too man creates his interpretation of the world, and by utilizing his freedom to enact his praxis, creates his history and projects his being and consciousness forward and into the past.

At this point the question becomes why then has what could be perceived as an apparent solid social theory almost been faded out, with "only a few timeless "works" stand[ing] out to sustain his claims before [his self determined] "prosperity:" *La Nausee*, [*Nausea*], *L'Etre et Le Neant*[*Being and Nothingness*], *Huis clos* [*No Exit*]... while consigning the topical works to the near oblivion of doctoral dissertations and specialist studies?"[22] Contemporary critics of Sartre, such as G. Lichtheim said, that "in the end the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* establishes itself as the legitimate successor of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: not because Sartre intends to remain in the Kantian tradition, but because Kant's (and Descartes') manner of posing the problem is also his own... instead of asking "How is experience possible?"... he asks "how is the dialectic possible?"... in fact his empirical excursions largely boil down to a kind of self-questioning about the reliability of the principles from which he proceeds." [23] Lichtheim then continues to say, "Sartre has overreached himself and fallen between the positions he seeks to transcend," giving Sartre credit only for apparently validating the study of history: "whatever he may have failed to do, Sartre has... demonstrated that if "historicism" is pushed to its limit it becomes a self-consistent philosophy and thus has to be taken seriously." [24] Others would follow suit, notably

21 Lichtheim, G. 241
22 Aronson, Ronald. "Sartre and the Dialectic Purposes of Critique, II" Yale French Studies, N. 68, *Sartre after Sartre*, (1985) 85
23 Lichtheim, G. 232
24 Ibid. 246

Walter Kauffman would state about the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* that "In a way, this is the epitaph of existentialism. Jaspers and Heidegger had sought to dissociate themselves from existentialism as soon as Sartre made it world famous after World War II. This is not the place to discuss Sartre's Marxism, which is at least as eccentric as Kierkegaard's Christianity. But he no longer writes under the banner of existentialism; nor does any other major figure. In a sense, then, "Marxism and Existentialism" marks the end of existentialism." [25] On the other hand, there are those like Thomas Flynn, who devotes a book to tracing the beginnings of collective responsibility from the looking/looked at relationship of *Being and Nothingness* and its evolution through post war essays such as *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, eventually proposing that Sartre's social theory as seen in the *Critique* is consistent with his previous works, noting that the for-itself to in-itself relationship as well as the encounter with the Other still exists in the *Critique*, and if anything by integrating this phenomenology to create an ontological social theory, Sartre does indeed surpasses Marx by including a plausible social psychology, which is missing in Marx. He concludes, "it should be clear that Sartre has established himself as a social theorist without abandoning his existentialist commitments. Indeed the genius of his pivotal concepts is precisely to bring these values to bear on the "impersonal" domain of social causation. Still, the slope of his thinking continues toward the individual. That is why we should characterize him as a "Marxist" *existentialist*... [For] What Sartre's theory lacks most basically is an ontology of relations. But that is absent from most contemporary social theories. It is missing in Marx as well" [26]

With three drastically differing views on his work, it is no surprise that the relationship between Sartre and his interpretation of Marxism is still debated. While to some extent Flynn

25 Kauffman, Walter. Existentliasm 221 in "Existentialist Primer: Jean Paul Sartre." http://www.tameri.com/csw/exist/sartre.shtml

26 Flynn, Thomas. Sartre and Marxist Existentialism 206

correctly argues that despite the flaws it may have, the system laid out by Sartre does in actuality, as noted by Flynn's conclusion, albeit not perfectly, reconcile personal freedom and societal structure, while still allowing for both the creation of history and in turn the progression of Marxist class struggle with a "destiny" for Proletariat revolution, it does not fully incorporate Marxist doctrine as Marx and Engels set it down. By using his own dialectic of the for-itself to the in-itself, of being and consciousness, Sartre strips Marxism of its dialectical materialism, making his task easier but at the same time sharpening the contrast between his existentialized Marxism and that of the orthodox and semi-orthodox followers. [27] Furthermore, his dialectic interpretation of history, by not allowing it to propel men forward in a predetermined direction, bur rather allowing man to through his praxis and consciousness utilize his freedom to create history, "means that *the future is already present* inasmuch as men are able to throw off the dead weight of past historical accretions. We anticipate the future(the desired end) by shaping our circumstances in accordance with our desires... 'the dialectic as a movement of reality collapses if time is not dialectical, that is, if one refuses a certain action of the future as such.'"[28]

With this in mind, despite Flynn's attempt at validating Sartre's synthesis, one must realize that the synthesis Sartre created might be a viable social theory by itself, as a projection of personal freedom onto society, yet it does not fit with Marxism, as pointed out above. Rather, Sartre sheds layers of what Marxism is in order to accommodate himself within it, while at the same time being forced to create a constraint for his condemning freedom, the practico-inert, which leads to the ultimate conclusion, that not only did Sartre fail at this synthesis, but furthermore, in the midst of it, he also gave up some of the freedom he was so highly revered for.

27 Lichtheim, G. 228
28 Ibid. 231