

Being and Choice

Raoul Moati, *Sartre et le mystère en pleine lumière*, Ed. du Cerf

by Michel Kail

Sartre promoted a new form of psychoanalysis that refused to relegate impulses to the unconscious and the infantile past. Neither deterministic nor arbitrary, human freedom is a “fundamental choice” that according to Raoul Moati must be thought in the light of realism.

Raoul Moati undertakes an analysis of Sartre’s thought in the light of his own realist stance whereby external reality has absolute value. Rightly so, since Sartre claims to be a realist himself. However, Moati notes that Sartre’s argumentation presents its own difficulty in that it predicates its realism on a reference to Husserlian philosophy. Now, as Moati emphasizes, this philosophy signals its fidelity to idealism, which grants only a relative validity to external reality, a validity relative to the representations that the subject forms of this reality.

Moati’s commentary unfolds in two stages. The first stage identifies the key concepts of Sartrean ontology based on a careful reading of *Being and Nothingness*, and the second is concerned with existential psychoanalysis, which Moati claims was neglected by the Sartreans¹ even as it fulfils the promises of ontology.

¹ This judgment deserves to be qualified. Moati himself cites the work of Betty Cannon, *Sartre and Psychoanalysis*, published in 1991 and translated into French by Puf as early as 1993, but seems to disregard, among others, the work of R. D. Laing and D. G. Cooper, *Reason and Violence: A Decade of Sartre’s Philosophy, 1950-1960*, published in 1964 with a foreword by Sartre and translated into French by Payot in 1972. However, these two authors are eminent representatives of the anti-psychiatry

Existential psychoanalysis is the analytical method that Sartre elaborated from *Being and Nothingness* onwards in order to apprehend human reality in its situatedness and singularity. Concerned with understanding what mode of relation a particular human being has established with the situation in which he or she has been immersed, Sartre notably applied this method to Baudelaire, Jean Genet, Flaubert, and to himself in his autobiographical novel *The Words*. In this sense, existential psychoanalysis is in line with Sartre's self-proclaimed realism and gives it its content. This method is also original in that it wants to be a psychoanalysis without the unconscious, which comes in direct contradiction with Freud's central hypothesis. This originality resembles, by way of the Barrèsian formula, a "mystery in full light," the mystery of the Sybil discovered by Barrès behind the altar of Auxerre cathedral who heralded the revelation of what had remained in the night of origins (Maurice Barrès, *Mes Cahiers*, XII).

"Is it because of the conceptual incongruity represented by the idea of a psychoanalysis of *consciousness*? Is this phrase not a contradiction in terms, which would explain why the development of Sartrean psychoanalysis was abandoned after Sartre's death? The present essay is devoted to answering these questions, which have been left dangling until now." (p. 14)

Such is the announced program of the book, whose unfolding I will now attempt to describe.

Sartrean ontology

The object of existential psychoanalysis is *human reality*, an expression which is vigorously rejected by the Heideggerians because it covers the reality of *Dasein* with a humanist veneer. But Moati takes this expression seriously, on condition that the very concept of reality is agreed upon. This allows him to maintain that the Sartrean notion

movement. Generally speaking, Moati leaves aside Sartrean studies. Apart from Cannon's book, he only refers to Vincent de Coorebyter's introduction to *La transcendance de l'Ego et autres textes phénoménologiques* (Vrin, 2003) (translated into English as *The Transcendence of the Ego*) and to Philippe Cabestan's *Qui suis-je? Sartre et la question du sujet* (Hermann, 2015). He thus constrains himself to engage in a careful reading of the Sartrean text itself, and consequently sometimes insists on points that Sartrean studies have already solidly substantiated. In any case, I take it that the initial stance, which Moati explicitly claimed, helps to highlight the stakes that underlie Sartrean philosophy.

of human reality remains incomprehensible if it is not seen as part of the strand of realism that Sartre embraced throughout his work.

Neo-realism is currently driven by authors such as Quentin Meillassoux, Jocelyn Benoist (director of the collection “Passages,” at Editions Le Cerf, in which Moati’s book is published), Maurizio Ferraris, and Markus Gabriel. All these authors denounce what the first refers to as “correlationism,” which denies the absolute value of reality. These various realisms share the same ambition of breaking with Kant, who is said to have condemned philosophy to move itself in the relative to the detriment of the absolute: Kant thus made the mistake of erasing the distinction between the properties of things, or primary qualities (length, width, depth, etc.), and the sensory properties, or secondary qualities (color, warmth, smell, etc.), which evidently imply a relationship between the subject and the thing. In so doing, Kant made any quality, whatever it may be, a quality relative to the subject, a quality therefore correlated to the subject, and he subjected the object itself to this relativism (as a phenomenon), such that the object offers itself as an object, as a correlate of the representations of the subject. Kant was no doubt aware that the phenomenon presupposes a thing-in-itself of which it is the manifestation, thus signaling a weak correlationism. However, this no longer applies to the Husserl of *Ideen I*, who generalized what might be called the phenomenal condition by identifying all real things with their “appearing to a subject”: Being, then, is nothing other than being relative, a correlate.

Now, from the Husserlian thesis—every consciousness is consciousness of something—Sartre draws a realist consequence. And while he distances himself from Husserl, he does not reject the advances of phenomenology. It is this paradox that arouses Moati’s interest in Sartrean philosophy.

In the introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre builds on the reality of intentionality, whose existence was recognized by Husserl. This reality makes consciousness a being anterior to reflection, in other words, a transphenomenal being, a being endowed with absolute reality, which, consequently, cannot be identified with its appearing. The fact remains that, at risk of contradiction, this consciousness is necessarily consciousness of itself, because otherwise one would have to posit a consciousness unconscious of itself—an “unconscious consciousness,” which is but a contradiction in terms. This does not, however, amount to re-establishing the pre-eminence of reflection, for self-consciousness is to be understood as non-reflective, non-positional. In this sense, Sartre uncouples self-consciousness from self-knowledge. He can then furnish what he calls the “ontological proof,” that is, the

transphenomenality of the perceiving being (the reality of intentionality) which implies the transphenomenality of the perceived being (the reality of the thing targeted by consciousness): If the thing were the product of the activity of consciousness, consciousness would not have to target it. In this sense, consciousness depends on a being that does not depend on it. This is a fundamental thesis of philosophical realism which Sartre fully assumes.

How can one determine this being that is not a disclosed being, an appearing being, but a condition of the disclosure, of the appearing? The determination of such a being is indispensable, because otherwise one would have to generalize the phenomenal condition, which comes into contradiction with the realist option. Moreover, this determination is possible if one understands this being as the condition of the disclosure: Insofar as this being is that to which consciousness relates, one can deduce that it is in-itself, identical with itself, or, according to Sartre's formulation, that it "is not a connection with itself. It is *itself*." It is not a connection with itself to the strict extent that it is that to which consciousness relates. It is "in-itself" because it is absolute reality, the reality value of which does not depend in any way on a connection with any subject. On the other hand, consciousness is "for-itself," because it is consciousness of itself, and so it is a connection with itself, and so it is relative to itself.

The constitutive process of the for-itself, or consciousness, described as a decompression of being, entails that consciousness relating to itself, in a pre-reflective manner then, apprehends itself as a being that is what it is not and is not what it is. In other words, the being of consciousness is the very opposite of a substantial subject: It is wholly absorbed in relating to the in-itself, in projecting itself, and in thereby projecting meaning onto the in-itself, which is then organized into a world. This world-constituting activity of self-projection is what Sartre refers to as freedom. As Moati rightly points out, the in-itself that precedes freedom, which is too often interpreted as a limitation of freedom, is in truth what allows it to emerge. To mark the originality of his analysis, Sartre introduces the notion of situation as complementary to that of freedom: Just as "there is freedom only in a situation [...] there is a situation only through freedom." Situation and freedom are inseparable, and so it is not so much exteriority that characterizes the situation with regard to freedom, but rather solicitation. Insofar as consciousness, or freedom, is intentional, it is, as Moati rightly notes, relational. The situation is constitutive of freedom, and vice versa. In my opinion, this is an advance of Sartrean philosophy which served as a foundation for its successive development.

Existential psychoanalysis

With its subsequent focus on existential psychoanalysis, Moati's commentary endeavors to show that Sartre's philosophy tends to embrace ever more reality: Having remained on the threshold of realism at which it aims, Sartrean thought now fully enters the realist domain.

In *Being and Nothingness*, each attitude of the for-itself relates to the particular manner in which the latter chooses itself as a negation of being, which is to say, as a being who is what it is not and is not what it is, and who as such brings about a meaningful world, as we saw earlier. This fundamental choice marks a particular way of existing in this world that endows each of the effective choices of the for-itself with its own style. Access to this fundamental choice pertains to understanding, by which existential psychoanalysis distinguishes itself from Freudian psychoanalysis. While Freud historicizes impulses, he does not relate the subject's actions to a free project in the world, but to a libidinal structure formed in early childhood, such that the past weighs on the present in a deterministic manner—hence the causal mode of Freudian explanation.

As Moati rightly points out, the rejection of determinism is a constant in Sartrean philosophy, even as the latter refutes the identification of the free with the arbitrary. This is because Sartre is careful to make a distinction between freedom and will, whereby the latter organizes means while the former sets ends. In contrast to freedom, which pertains to understanding, the will is normally subject to a deterministic explanation. Thus, in Sartre's view, the recognition of a greater influence of reality on human subjects is not adherence to determinism.

The notion of "fundamental choice" reflects a twofold requirement: Insofar as it is a choice, it conforms to the definition of human reality as a project and not as a substance that would express itself through a project (against determinism); insofar as it is fundamental, this choice confers on human reality the coherence of a style (against arbitrariness). These two requirements come together to form a singularity. Sartre modifies this conceptual arrangement, but does not call it into question.

In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), human reality is described as *praxis*, as immersed in a socio-material environment overdetermined by scarcity and as engaging in work for the purpose of survival. This transformed, humanized, or mundanized environment organizes a set of products intended for the restoration of

the body, a restoration that no longer proceeds strictly from *praxis* since the aim is to take advantage of this humanized world in order to meet needs: *Praxis* thus degrades into *hexis*, into “passive activity.” Sartre specifies this moment by the term “practico-inert”: The products of human activity in turn condition this activity, assigning it tasks that *praxis* cannot fail to perform for the purpose of survival. *Praxis* becomes “passive activity” in the sense that it meets the requirements embedded in the worked matter.

Although deeply interested in Marxism, Sartre continually criticizes it for neglecting concrete humans. As he powerfully writes in *Search for a Method*: “Valéry is a petty-bourgeois intellectual, no doubt about it. But not every petty-bourgeois intellectual is Valéry.” Marxism explains the way Valéry lived and wrote by the unquestioned fact that he belonged to the petty bourgeoisie, but it cannot understand how he belonged to that class. This so-called dialectical method becomes confused with pure, simple, and very poor deduction. In the three volumes of *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857*, Sartre offers the example of a truly dialectical method, of which Moati gives an enlightening account.

This method, then, seeks to signify what it means, in the particular case of Flaubert, to belong to the bourgeois class. As Sartre observes, Flaubert did not become bourgeois randomly, but through the mediation of a determined family environment in which he experienced his social class, in which he experienced “the universal as particular.” The meaning of the human project is no longer so much the impossible synthesis of the in-itself—the full being—and the for-itself—the negation of being—or that of being and existence, as suggested in *Being and Nothingness*, but is defined by personalization, understood as the free way of assuming one’s non-chosen condition, as a way of making of oneself what has been made of oneself.

Whether it is a question of “fundamental choice,” “practico-inert,” or “personalization,” no concession is made to determinism and arbitrariness.

Moati has written a stimulating book, which can be read profitably so long as one is already familiar with the Sartrean texts. My reservation concerns the term around which the philosophical reflection revolves: realism. While realism is unquestionably the cornerstone on which the ontology of *Being and Nothingness* is built, this ontology subsequently opens up to a materialist analysis. The materialist program, as announced by Lucretia, is a philosophy of freedom that aims to free itself from all illusions, from religious illusion of course, but also from those promoted by the dominant to ensure and perpetuate their authority and power. It is to the

realization of this program that the combined works of Sartre and de Beauvoir are dedicated.

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