Chapter Twenty-One

Sartre as a Social Critic

Both the highly general and the completely specific are deeply moving; the metaphysician who traces the ambiguities and alienation of human nature as such and the novelist who portrays this one definite individual in his particular, detailed circumstances both excite us. But, by contrast, the middle ground of sociological inquiry, occupied by statistics of occupation and mortality, by cautious and limited historical generalisations, often appears dull. It is because there is no middle ground in Sartre that he is such an exciting writer; but it is also because there is no middle ground in Sartre that his arrival as a social theorist has been at once brilliant and disastrous.

A properly philosophical approach

Sartre is important because we need urgently a properly philosophical approach to sociology. Inquiring what kinds of concepts are appropriate in the tasks of describing and explaining human life is urgent in a discipline where it is all too easy to borrow the concepts of the physical sciences uncritically. Moreover a need for conceptual awareness in the human sciences arises in a special way. The way people think about things, about the physical world, is appropriate or not,

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depending upon the nature of the things in question. The way people think about people, about themselves, is part of the reality about which they are trying to think in appropriate ways. The concepts which I employ to grasp what I am become part of what I am.

Sartre has been aware of these matters for a long time, and the themes of his latest book on social theory are most easily made intelligible by looking back to *L’Etre et le Néant*. There the matter is put dramatically in terms of an individual psychology. We are all acting parts, said Sartre. This man, who is a waiter, is acting the part of a waiter. This other, who mourns, acts out the role of sadness.\(^2\)

It is not part of their essence to be a waiter or to be sad, for a man has no pre-existent essence determining what he must be. He constructs himself out of his choices, out of the concepts which he chooses to grasp himself with. At this point of the argument, Sartre makes a false move. He begins by connecting this feature of human life with certain kinds of anxiety and doubts about identity. So far, so good. But he then proceeds to assimilate the (conceptual and necessary) facts that everybody has to comprehend themselves under descriptions and by means of concepts which they did not make to the (psychological arid contingent) facts that some people cannot identify with their roles, others indulged in dramatisation or pretence and so on. So he concludes that we not only all are but must be in bad faith. We are all acting parts, pretending. Sometimes it seems that there is no escape, whatever this situation. Sometimes, and less coherently, at marginal chance of escape by means of an *acte gratuit* is offered.\(^3\) But throughout Sartre’s novels and plays no clear and unambiguous example of salvation from bad faith is portrayed.

This confusion involves Sartre in a contradiction in his social and moral attitudes. On the one hand, Sartre’s analysis must lead him to say that we are all necessarily in bad faith all the time. ‘Bad faith’, that is, appears as yet another of the pseudonyms under which ‘original sin’ continues to make appearances. On the other hand, Sartre has always wanted to say that some people are in bad faith in a sense in which others are not. The class of people who are not has varied. The working class, the Communist Party, Jean Genet, and Sartre himself have all at one time or another either by direct statement or by implication had this status suggested for them. The class of people who are in bad faith has been unvarying: the bourgeoisie. Why Sartre hates the bourgeoisie is not

\(^3\) Sartre 1957, pp. 69–70.