Intolerable Human Responsibility

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Sartre's notoriety hangs as a thick cloud of distrust between his writings and many who might otherwise confront them seriously as possible contributions toward the clarification of fundamental moral issues. Two apparent failures take shape in the collective image: the gap between promise and fulfillment, and the apparent betrayal of individual freedom to collective oppression. And the two pieces fit quite nicely together. The existentialist philosopher, reacting against an intolerable social and political milieu, valiantly affirms the inviolability of individual freedom as the unique source of all values. But, when he comes to the task of elaborating a concrete moral philosophy on such a basis, the results achieved reveal the inadequacy of their foundation by failing to stand up to philosophical analysis. Therefore, the persistent moralist attempts to seek shelter under an objective morality founded upon collective sources of value: the class struggle of Marxism.

Such an explanation is too neat to avoid suspicion, too remote from Sartre's own philosophical earnestness to be accepted even provisionally. It combines the apparent pointedness and obvious superficiality of a caricature. Therefore, this essay will disregard the straw man and enter with Sartre into the issue which he has raised: that of drawing provisional glimpses of a theory of responsibility from phenomenological ontology. The aim is to appreciate critically the internal philosophical roots both of the ambiguity of Sartre's results and of the need to transcend the stratum of phenomenological ontology toward a careful analysis of the genesis of social institutions. The procedure
will be, first, to display some puzzling features which result from taking in an ordinary sense Sartre's statements concerning responsibility and, secondly, to illumine their extraordinary roots in the phenomenology of Husserl.

I. The Weight of the World

Two baffling ambivalences pervade Sartre's discussion of responsibility in Being and Nothingness. First, Sartre assures us that he takes the word "responsibility" in its ordinary sense, yet his discussion quickly introduces some very extraordinary implications into that ordinary sense. Secondly, Sartre insists that responsibility is entirely human; yet, he describes it as overwhelming, intolerable. How can that which is utterly human overwhelm man, or be intolerable to man?

"We are taking the word 'responsibility' in its ordinary sense as 'consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object'" (BN 553). This preliminary explanation of the term seems ordinary enough, and acceptable enough. After all, if I am the author of an event or of an object, then I am responsible for it. I am responsible for my words, my papers, my lectures, my children. But this mild statement is surrounded by apparent hyperboles. "The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being" (BN 553). How extraordinary! Ordinarily, Atlas is considered as cutting quite a heroic figure by bearing the weight of the heavens on his shoulders. But what is Atlas compared to me, who bear on my shoulders the world and myself? "I carry the weight of the world alone without anything or any person being able to lighten it" (BN 555). Does this transformation of the ordinary understanding of responsibility violate its ordinary sense? No, it takes it seriously and prolongs the extent of my responsibility beyond the ordinary range only by prolonging the extent of those objects and events of which I am conscious (of) being the incontestable author. I may not have noticed yet, but I have become the author of heaven.

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1 Tr. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) [Hereafter, BN].

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