

21. Existential Psychoanalysis (part one).

EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

One of Sartre's aims in *Being and Nothingness* is to formulate a new approach to psychoanalysis ...

... one that will differ in certain key respects from the classical Freudian approach.

As we have seen, Sartre thinks that behaviour is explained in terms of our responses to the values and demands that the world seems to present us with ...

... and that these are present only as a result of the projects we pursue ...

... which means that behaviour is explained ultimately in terms of our projects, but via the way we see the world.

(And remember: this explanation is non-deterministic.)

Our character is therefore a matter of our projects ...
... and so existential psychoanalysis aims to uncover these.

PROJECTS

We will better be able to see what Sartre means by 'project' if we consider one of his examples ...

... one that 'aims at choosing myself as inferior in the midst of others (what is called the inferiority complex)' (B&N: 493 / 471).

Notice that:

* unlike some projects, such as the project of writing a book about Sartre, this is not a project that aims at bringing about some specific state of affairs;

* it rather aims at continually persuading myself that something is the case, and will cease to be successful whenever I cease to persuade myself of this.

* it is not something I could ever admit to myself is my project, it is a project that 'dare not speak its name', because of course if I recognise my ruses to convince myself as ruses, they will fail.

AWARENESS OF PROJECTS

Sartre does think that projects are nevertheless CHOSEN ...

... how can he maintain this and also hold that the so-called 'inferiority complex' cannot involve me knowing that this is my project?

The answer is that his model of the pursuit of projects employs his distinction between:

* THETIC awareness (or, knowledge); and

* NON-THETIC awareness.

The subject is always non-thetically aware of the projects being pursued, but need not have thetic awareness of them ...

... and so need not be able to acknowledge that this is the project being pursued, or report it or formulate beliefs about it.

AWARENESS OF PROJECTS

Here we can see why there should be a role for psychoanalysis:

* the subject can lack explicit, thetic awareness of the projects chosen and pursued, and yet still pursue them;

* the pursuit of these projects can create problems

– e.g. to persuade oneself of one's inferiority requires that one pursue various aims in a way that seems to oneself wholehearted;

– and that one not achieve these aims, thereby bringing about feelings of frustration and failure.

An individual might therefore want to uncover the source of their problems, of which they are already in some sense aware ...

... and might seek the help of the psychoanalyst in order to do this.

AWARENESS OF PROJECTS

But why should the patient seek the help of the analyst?

If consciousness is translucent, if everything is in principle accessible to the subject, why would anyone need the help of someone else in order to uncover their projects?

Two reasons:

* the project might involve the refusal to become explicitly aware of it even though this is possible, because acknowledgement of it might undermine it (e.g. inferiority);

* the subject might be so convinced by this as to be sure that whatever the problem is, it is not something they can work out for themselves.

PROJECTS AND THE FUNDAMENTAL PROJECT

Sartre talks in various places of the 'fundamental project' which he also calls 'original', 'global', and a 'choice' ...

... which implies that for each person, there is some one basic project that underlies all their behaviour.

But in other places, he uses more pluralistic language, talking of the individual person as an 'ensemble' or 'integration' of projects.

How are we to understand the relation between these idioms?

Various commentators have pointed out that Sartre leaves the relations between projects very unclear ...

... and some have claimed that this is because he did not have a settled view on the matter ...

... but I think that we can think of some projects as determinations or specifications of other projects.

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DETERMINABLES AND DETERMINATIONS

We can cast the Sartrean picture in terms of the philosophical vocabulary of determinables and determinations ...

... which has nothing whatsoever to do with determinism!

A determinable is a kind of thing that can be determined in one way or another ... meaning there are various ways in which it can be the thing that it is.

Example: COLOUR is a determinable, of which RED is a determination (as are blue, green, yellow, and so on).

But : RED is also a determinable, of which SCARLET and CRIMSON are determinations.

Something is a determination only with reference to a specific determinable, and something is a determinable with respect to a class of determinations.

DETERMINABLES AND DETERMINATIONS

Another example: there are (infinitely) many ways in which something can be a number, so 'number' is a determinable ...

... one of the ways is to be an odd number, so that is a determination of the determinable 'number' ...

... but it is also a determinable, because there are (infinitely) many ways of being an odd number ...

... one of which is to be a prime number ... and one way of being prime is to be a prime single-digit number ...

... and one way of being a prime single-digit number is to be the number 7.

Notice: being the number 7 is not only a determination of the determinable 'prime single-digit number', but also of all the other determinables mentioned here ...

... and that it is not a determinable: there are no varieties of 7.

DETERMINABLES, DETERMINATIONS, AND PROJECTS

If you have the project of convincing yourself of your inferiority, there are many ways in which you might try to do this ...

... so that project does not determine (in the sense of determinism) exactly how you will behave ...

... but it does set restrictions!

You might choose to try to learn to play the piano without any tuition or any systematic approach ...

... and in finding that you get nowhere, affirm your inferiority.

In this case, the project of learning to play the piano is a determination of the larger determinable of convincing oneself of one's inferiority ...

... a determination that one freely chose, but which (given the deeper project to do with inferiority) was constrained to be pursued in a way that would be unsuccessful.

DETERMINABLES, DETERMINATIONS, AND PROJECTS

Similarly, the relation between one's projects and one's actions is in this way quite loose ...

'To relieve my fatigue, it is indifferent whether I sit down on the side of the road or whether I take a hundred steps more in order to stop at the inn which I see from a distance. This means that the apprehension of the complex, global form which I have chosen as my ultimate possible does not suffice to account for the choice of one possible rather than another.'

— B&N: 492 / 470

While out hiking, I might wish to relieve my tiredness, but this (albeit minor) project does not determine precisely how I will behave.

If we think of projects as related to one another as determinables and determinations of them ...

... then perhaps we should think of the 'fundamental project' as the determinable that is not a determination of anything else.

22. Existential Psychoanalysis (part two).

EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

In the last lecture, we saw that:

- * Sartre wants to formulate a non-Freudian, 'existential' kind of psychoanalysis;
- * this aims to uncover the projects that we are pursuing in our everyday behaviour;
- * we must have some awareness of these projects in order to pursue them, of course, but this could be mere non-thetic awareness and need not be full, explicit, thetic awareness ('knowledge');
- * as Sartre understands projects, these need not be obvious to the person pursuing them, and may even require that the subject does not explicitly think about them (e.g. 'inferiority complex').

EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

And we also saw that:

- * projects are related to one another as determinables and determinations;
- * Sartre sometimes refers to a 'fundamental', 'original', or 'global' project or 'choice' that underlies all of one's other projects and hence actions;
- * though, of course, it does not determine them, but merely sets constraints on the kinds of projects that one will pursue.

In this lecture, we are concerned with:

- * further ways in which existential psychoanalysis differs from the classic Freudian model;
- * whether we can understand more about this 'fundamental' project.

THE UNCONSCIOUS

One fundamental difference between Sartre and Freud, of course, is that Freudian psychoanalysis aims to uncover what is going on in the dynamically unconscious region of the patient's mind ...

... that is, to uncover the complex (or complexes) of beliefs and desires that have been repressed and that continue to direct the patient's behaviour in sublimated ways.

And, as we have seen in lectures 15 and 16, Sartre rejects this model of the mind ...

... and his rejection is based on the observation of 'resistance' in psychoanalytic treatments ...

... which seems to indicate that the conscious part of the patient's mind, the part that understands and acts upon the environment ...

... is aware that the analyst is approaching the truth about what drives the patient's behaviour, which implies that it is not dynamically unconscious at all.

THE UNCONSCIOUS

Sartre returns to this theme in explicating his theory of existential psychoanalysis:

'The subject guided by the psychoanalyst does more and better than to give his agreement to an hypothesis: he touches it, he sees what it is. This is truly understandable only if the subject has never ceased being conscious of his deep tendencies; better yet, only if these drives are not distinguished from his conscious self. In this case as we have seen, the traditional psychoanalytic interpretation does not cause him to attain *consciousness* of what he is; it causes him to attain *knowledge* of what he is. It is existential psychoanalysis then which claims the final intuition of the subject as decisive.'

– B&N: 595 / 574

What psychoanalysis has traditionally understood as making the patients aware of the deep reasons for their behaviour is in fact ...

... bringing them from being merely (non-thetically) aware of it to having knowledge of it.

PROJECTS AS CHOSEN

Sartre sees the goal of psychoanalysis as to uncover the projects that the patient has chosen to pursue, rather than uncovering any unconscious complex that the patient has been saddled with ...

... and this not only means that the subject must be in some way aware of what it is that the analyst is trying to uncover ...

... it also means that two other aspects of classic Freudian analysis must be abandoned:

Existential psychoanalysis 'thereby abandons the supposition that the environment acts mechanically on the subject under consideration. The environment can act on the subject only to the exact extent that he understand it; that is, transforms it into a situation. Hence no objective description of this environment could be of any use to us.'

– B&N: 593

PROJECTS AS CHOSEN

This is: since humans respond not to their objective environment but to that environment as it appears to them, and since this is conditioned by the projects they are pursuing ...

... we cannot understand people purely by looking at the objective facts of the environments to which they have been exposed, as though there is some mechanical relation between these objective facts and their responses ...

... but first need to understand how they see the world ...

... and this requires understanding the projects they are pursuing.

The second impact of understanding people in terms of chosen projects follows, Sartre thinks, from this one ...

... and it is that the Freudian idea of interpreting dreams and even behaviour in terms of symbols with meanings that are equally true for everyone must be wrong ...

22. Existential Psychoanalysis (part two).

PROJECTS AS CHOSEN

'By renouncing all mechanical causation, we renounce at the same time all *general* interpretation of the symbolization confronted. Our goal could not be to establish empirical laws of succession, nor could we constitute a universal symbolism. Rather the psychoanalyst will have to rediscover at each step a symbol functioning in the particular case'

– B&N: 593-4

Freud argued that the dynamically unconscious aspects of mental life that are repressed seek to be manifest in consciousness and in behaviour ...

... and so are 'sublimated' in order to evade the censor, which is why they appear symbolically in dreams and in other behaviour.

The behaviour of a kleptomaniac might symbolically represent some repressed sexual desire, for example, and the content of dreams generally does so.

PROJECTS AS CHOSEN

Sartre's objection here is not to the idea of symbolism as such ...

... he is happy to allow that behaviour and dreams can have symbolic meaning, but thinks that:

'we must always be ready to consider that symbols change meaning and to abandon the symbol used hitherto ... Our concern here is to understand what is individual and often even instantaneous. The method which has served for one subject will not necessarily be suitable to use for another subject or for the same subject at a later period.'

– B&N: 594 / 573

But exactly what is it that this psychoanalysis aims to uncover? Is it just the projects pursued by the subject? Is it the 'fundamental project'? And what is that?

PROJECTS AND THE FUNDAMENTAL PROJECT

As we have seen, projects are related to one another as determinables and determinations.

One's project of learning to play the piano, for example, might be a determination of the determinable of convincing oneself of one's inferiority to others ...

... which means that this larger project will manifest itself through the ways in which one attempts to learn the piano, and will ensure that one chooses bad learning strategies ...

... but the same larger project could have been manifested in any of a number of other projects, and once the piano ruse has been abandoned it probably will be.

The existential psychoanalyst will presumably want to uncover projects of this kind, as underlying the patient's failures and frustrations in life ...

... but might the psychoanalyst want to go further and ask why this person has chosen that project?

PROJECTS AND THE FUNDAMENTAL PROJECT

Is there any further to go, in Sartre's theory?

We cannot look for a mechanical reason why this person has chosen inferiority ... we cannot point to a particular traumatic event in childhood, for example, and say that this caused it ...

... because this is ruled out by the very idea that one's situations are interpreted in the light of one's projects.

Might inferiority be a 'fundamental project', and so not explicable in terms of anything deeper?

Sartre says too little about this concept to say anything about his views on the matter with much confidence ...

... but our model of projects as related to one another as determinables and determinations suggests that this is not a 'fundamental project' ...

... why? ...

PROJECTS AND THE FUNDAMENTAL PROJECT

This last line suggests that the pursuit of inferiority is one way of trying to establish for oneself a fixed nature that individualises one and that establishes one as having *being* ...

... it suggests, therefore, that it may be a manifestation of the fundamental project of Bad Faith: the waiter pursues this project by being a waiter in a certain way, others might pursue it in a different way.

And this suggests that there might be only two fundamental projects that we choose between ...

... to affirm the true nature of the human condition (Authenticity) and to deny it (Bad Faith).

This would explain why he occasionally talks of a 'radical conversion' from Bad Faith ...

... it involves abandoning the most deeply held project we have.

PROJECTS AND THE FUNDAMENTAL PROJECT

Because the fundamental project must be a determinable that is not itself a determination of anything else ...

... and must therefore be something very general (like 'colour' or 'number'), where the project of inferiority seems not to be general enough.

In discussing this project, Sartre writes:

'I can persist in manifesting myself in a certain kind of employment *because* I am inferior in it, whereas in some other field I could without difficulty show myself equal to the average. It is this fruitless effort which I have chosen, simply because it is fruitless – either because I prefer to be last than to be lost in the mass or because I have chosen discouragement and shame as the best means of attaining *being*.'

– B&N: 494 / 472