

SUBJECTIVITY AS BODY AND MIND

It can be said that Jean Paul Sartre has never stopped to theorize on subjectivity, more or less implicitly. The question to pose is whether he conceives of it in a Hegelian or post-Hegelian way. The chrono-logical setting leaves no doubt that Sartre is indeed a post-Hegelian, but it must be specified how his theory confronts the Hegelian system. How Sartre conceives of subjectivity and what role he assigns to it is the aim of these pages, which comment on a lecture presented by Sartre in 1961 at the *Istituto Gramsci* in Rome.

The first question that Sartre poses is whether subjectivity is of interest to a Marxist philosophy, or whether it should be left to other specialized disciplines and separate schools of thought. After having stated that subjectivity must not be confused with the Hegelian dichotomy of subject and object, Sartre specifies that subjectivity implies an "internal action," a "system in interiority" that excludes an unmediated contact with the subject. He criticizes some Marxist positions that end up by denying any role to subjectivity, labeling them idealistic, naive, and tied to a fetishization of commodities, not unconnected to an easy and potentially misleading symbolism. Then Sartre goes on to reiterate that subjectivity cannot be accounted for without taking transcendence into consideration.

Transcendence must not be given an idealistic or, even worse, a theological meaning. It must instead be conceived of as tied to the "psychosomatic unity" of the organism that needs, works, and enjoys. Psycho-somatic unity is caught in an objectivity that as such escapes knowledge and has consequences that can be unpredictable. This not-knowledge constitutes, or helps to constitute, the opposite of transcendence, what Sartre calls interiority. By means of the organism, this interiority mediates the transcendence of work, forming a materialistic-dialectical system. Pure subjectivity, on the other hand, is the result of our ignorance of a duality within exteriority.

Praxis itself is the product, the subject-object, of a subjectivity that ignores itself. Granted that Sartre denies a dialectic of nature, or at least delimits its range, either because it is unknowable, or because he conceives of nature as unchangeable and unaffected by a purely idealistic approach. He states that once subjectivity has been affected by the object, it will go through constant change. This is praxis, though not

necessarily a conscious one.

The next question that Sartre poses to his listeners is how we can know praxis. The epistemological question comes to the fore when we pose the question of a subjectivity that is in constant transformation (a transformation that is also due to the technological changes of the working psychosomatic unity). Subjectivity and truth are in a dialectical relation, and neither--Sartre says--is an object. This debatable conclusion will be challenged by structuralists and post-structuralists, whose purpose is to deconstruct the notion of subject. But Sartre's text does not speak of subjectivity as being all-pervasive in that he denies it to nature as such. Subjectivity relates to the object (if we grant for a moment that the object is objective) in a subjective way, but in order to become an object itself. In this case, Sartre says, subjectivity is exterior, it has externalized itself, it has become objectified, either in work or in other activities in which it is engaged.

The first example he gives, taken from medicine, concerns the case of a hemianopic, a person who suffers loss of vision in half the visual field. This person is not affected by a specific disease, but by a symptom that may be a manifestation of several conditions, among them inflammation of the optic nerve. In this symptom, according to Sartre, subjectivity is "not-knowledge by definition," manifesting its being at the biological level, in a dialectical relation between the individual and the organism. It would be interesting to know whether Sartre would have generalized this theory of his to all symptoms, or at least whether he conceived of diseases as always being psychosomatic in origin, as some psychoanalysts, among them Georg Groddeck, have maintained. On his part, Jacques Lacan agreed with Sartre at least on this issue, when he wrote that the symptom is a metaphor, a subjective and creative answer inscribed in the body of the analysand. Moreover, the metaphor is for Lacan tied to the Symbolic register or order, the conscious or unconscious order of linguistic elaboration, which in its turn establishes an equally conscious or unconscious ethics. However, we cannot forget that for Sartre even not-knowledge can become an object of choice, whereas for Lacan this becomes a highly improbable event. Sartre speaks in fact of the hemianopic person as choosing his own symptom, his own inertia, his own conduct, manifesting them in his body, which then becomes "an elementary perceptible conduct." Conduct incarnates itself, it produces, it manifests itself without disregarding the conditioning factors that may be present in a given situation. Certainly Lacan does not deny the subjective side of a disease, but it is doubtful that he would have agreed that a person consciously chooses his own diseases.

In abstract philosophical terms, Sartre says that subjectivity internalizes the changing external reality and makes it into an ought-to-be, in order subsequently to externalize it thanks to "organic energies." This violent process, or project, implies a reconstituting of the organism, a process not devoid of moral and ethical implications, not to mention the political ones that engaged Sartre at the time. The French philosopher therefore does not subscribe to an idealistic notion of subjectivity: He knows full well that the subject is also the result of conditioning, an unconscious process that forces the subject itself to a form of repetition. Repetition is not simply foreseeable, it can be spontaneous and can generate surprise; but, when subjectivity is externalized, Sartre says, it leads to institutionalization. When this happens, "the subjective person" becomes a "set of duties."

Sartre mentions psychoanalytic theory only *en passant*. Yet he is well aware of its theoretical and practical importance, recognizing that psychoanalysis is a praxis. Sartre considers the psychoanalysis of the subjective person who faces his past with the help of memory; but he is not interested in the past itself. He says in fact that the past must be kept at a distance, and this implies a retotalization. In other words, the past must be reinterpreted. Repetition, which is a mark of subjectivity, is therefore intertwined with retotalization. Such a situation would be an impasse if Sartre did believe that repetition is the only mark of subjectivity. But another factor intervenes, and this is invention. Again, the two aspects are in a dialectical relation. The person projects his being on the outside, but the environment does not allow simple repetition because the environment changes and, in the process, forces the person to change. In other words, the new is possible.

This not necessarily optimistic stand shows at least, if there were any need, that Sartre allies himself with progressive thinking and practice. Human invention is reached, or can be reached, thanks to subjectivity, and human invention needs praxis. But according to Sartre, praxis is far from being the product of a "clear consciousness." Creativity, or invention, needs an obscure factor, which consists in repetition. Subjectivity is the resulting vector of these two aspects of the person: repetition and invention. And the implications of such a theory are important and far-reaching when applied to historical events, psychoanalysis, and Marxism.

In order not to generate confusion, we must take one step at a time. Sartre is interested in creativity in that the repetition-invention of the person is a constant transcending project. Moreover, it is essential that subjectivity know itself only from the outside, in its products.

Otherwise--if it becomes too self-conscious and too self-reflecting--it loses itself. This is why Sartre says that subjectivity is not an object and should not be reduced to one.

We must not forget that here Sartre is speaking to his audience in 1961, a year after the publication of Critique of Dialectical Reason, and therefore he is eager to present and discuss his theory as it has been applied in this work. Needless to say, the audience itself must have expected such an application. The question then becomes one of asking whether subjectivity is necessary in order to know dialectically the social reality. The answer that Sartre gives is in the positive, but this point must be qualified carefully. Men constantly mediate and project their class-being, but they face (or they are the product of) the practico-inert in their daily life at work or at home. If the practico-inert prevails (but we know that this is not Sartre's last word, or at least not his imperative) the singularization (that is, the division) of class-being is lived blindly. And here intervenes the subjective moment, the inner mode of struggle, which is in part the result of the objective, historical moment. This subjective moment is necessary for any progressive development, both in social life and in history--understood, of course, in a dialectical, nonmechanical way.

A few considerations are in order to help us understand what Sartre has told us up to now. It is clear that he was not looking for a servile imitation and literal interpretation of the Hegelian system. However, Sartre was well aware of the necessity to incorporate Hegel's thought at least in part, since both men conceive of history and the person in dialectical terms. The same holds true, of course, for Marx's thought. How much Sartre has taken and accepted from Hegel and Marx can be outlined here only in a summary way. What is clear is that Sartre is looking for a subjective system, just as Hegel does. (Hegel's famous dictum that the substance is subject must be called to mind here.) And Sartre also incorporates Marx, who, among other things, was looking for a class system that would guarantee the political and economic dignity of the working class. Unlike Nietzsche--for example--Sartre is not looking for a unique system, whose impossibility is all too clear to any biographer of Nietzsche.

In Sartre, subjectivity is central. It includes interiority and an organism that absorbs the environment so as to attain objective knowledge. This is no mere passive process. Sartre includes activity at the heart of his system--never forgetting the passivity involved in the process of absorption. Very succinctly he states that "we are forced to be our being." To know oneself thus means to change oneself, in a self-transcending way.

This conclusion, however tentative it may be, leads us back to the problem of psychoanalysis. Sartre is explicit on this issue: He asserts that psychoanalysis implies a bad metaphysics and that he is personally opposed to the analytic experience for lack of political will. He is also skeptical about the accomplishments that psychoanalysis can offer and, moreover, is uncommitted to such a process in that the Sartrean system implies living in a state of "absolute presence." In other words, Sartre accuses psychoanalysis of implying, not only a bad metaphysics, but a bad subjective system.

Above all, Sartre wants a verification against objective conduct, believing that only in this way is it possible to achieve self-knowledge. Moreover, he rejects psychoanalysis because he has already rejected desire. Having subscribed to the Marxian need-work-enjoyment triad, he does not include desire in his later theorizing. Desire instead is central to any psychoanalytic school that does not ignore the individuality of the person. In addition, maybe, Sartre saw in psychoanalysis a compromise that he was not willing to accept. In fact, according to Freud, unconscious desire, as expressed in dreams, serves two masters. Such a contradictory state must necessarily resolve itself in compromise, which entails dirtying one's hands, something that Sartre was unwilling to accept. We are not saying this in order to discredit Sartre's theory, even less to discredit the man himself. We are simply trying to understand why Sartre consciously rejects the notion of the unconscious, while himself falling victim to it.

But there is another consideration. Existence for Sartre has nothing mysterious in it, and his humanism rejects both Heidegger's solitary path and the objectifications of psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, he does not deny the psychosomatic reality of the individual. And he is careful not to reduce Marxism to a simple consideration of need-work-enjoyment, without including psychic reality. Only this constitutes a whole. But, Sartre adds, this reality must be given the proper order and priority. For Marxian thought, need comes first, while enjoyment is mediated through work. Psychoanalysis, in contrast, certainly does not deny the biological needs of the individual. But it is less prone to ignore the fact that the adult has not only needs but desires, and that these also must be satisfied or fulfilled, directly or indirectly. According to Lacan, for instance, desire is metonymy, a dynamic process that, if mastered and understood, leads to metaphoric substitutions such as sublimation. Neither Freud nor Lacan excludes what is, in Sartre's words, a "subjectivity that makes itself by creating objectivity." In other words, psychoanalysis does not ignore praxis or creativity, and there is no need

to be afraid of a reductionist approach when subjectivity is taken into consideration. Therefore, psychoanalysis does not ignore synthesis. On the other hand, Sartre criticizes the Hegelian system as implying a philosophy of reflection in which Mind grasps itself in an idealistic, Aristotelian way. Instead, Sartre proposes a theory that, through analytic regression, leads to a synthetic progression, to history, in which subjectivity has its place, as it should have. He excludes from consideration a philosophical and dialectical study of nature; if this dialectic were possible, and it is not excluded on principle by Sartre, subjectivity would be part of nature.

A last consideration concerning desire: Sartre speaks of choice and not of desire. But choice is desire, even though still abstract. It is perhaps for this reason that we do not know their consequences.

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