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Sartre's Critique of Freud's Conception of Emotions²

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to reconstruct Sartre's critique of selected elements of Freud's psychoanalysis as far as the emotions theory is concerned. I am analysing those assumptions of Freud's teachings which became subjected to Sartre's critique and why. I also point out the fact that some of the elements of psychoanalysis were emphasised by Sartre as important for the development of the emotions theory. My deliberations are based largely on Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotion*.

Keywords:

Sartre, emotions, psychoanalysis, Freud, censor, unconsciousness, phenomenology

1. INTRODUCTION

Jean-Paul Sartre's early work remained under a strong influence of Husserl's phenomenology which, in his view, enabled the transcendence of the rigid frames of neo-Cartesianism, neo-Kantianism and idealism that were dominant in French philosophy of the 1930s, which Sartre referred to as consumptionist philosophy

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(Sartre, 1965). The works of Lalande and Brunshvicq became to Sartre symbols of the philosophy of spirit, the activity of which downgraded the potency of cognitive powers and as a result, annihilated the wealth of reality understood in a broad sense as an object of possible cognition. Husserl's phenomenology became an antidote for the ills of such a stance, and particularly the intentionality principle, which was formulated as part of it. Sartre did not uncritically or passively accept Husserl's system. He used his own version of German researcher's philosophy to analyse the structure of emotion, among others. He presented the effects of his research in an early discourse published in 1939 titled *Sketches for a Theory of the Emotion*. In the discourse, young Sartre rejected classical conceptions of emotion by James, Janet, and Dembo.³ The French existentialist did not hold in great esteem the assumptions of Freudian psychoanalysis either.

The purpose of this article is to reconstruct Sartre's critique of selected elements of Freud's psychoanalysis. I will make an attempt at pointing out which assumptions of Freud's teachings became subjected to Sartre's critique and why. I will also draw attention to the fact that some of the elements of psychoanalysis were emphasised by Sartre as important for the development of the emotions theory. My deliberations are based largely on the *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotion*. By doing so, my analyses will be restricted to the emotions theory by Sartre and Freud.

At the very beginning of his book *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotion*, Sartre criticises the psychology of his contemporaries which, as he claims, became a mathematical and natural science after it separated from philosophy:

Psychology is a discipline which claims to be positive; that is, it tries to draw upon the resources of experience alone. We are, of course, no longer in the days of the associationists, and contemporary psychologists do not forbid themselves to *interrogate* and to *interpret*. But they try to confront their subject as the physicist confronts his. (...) The psychologist tries to make use of only two well-defined types of experience: that which is given to us by spatio-temporal experience of organized bodies, and the intuitive knowledge of ourselves which we call reflective

³ James's theory, also referred to by Sartre as peripheral or visceral, perceives the source of emotion in the tension of muscles and changes in internal organs. According to James – Lange's psychophysiological theory, when emotions reach a certain degree of tension they will be accompanied by certain bodily changes such as muscular tension, cry, rapid breathing. Janet in his research assumed behavioural methodology according to which the measurement of psychological processes requires focusing on the analysis of the observable behaviour. According to Janet's basic assumption of behaviourism, the main object of examining emotions is their external symptoms. Lewin and Dembo look at the emotion through the prism of its functionality. In emotions human beings are brought down to a lower level where the world is easier, simpler, and less challenging.

experience. (...) their enquiries should begin first of all from the facts (Sartre, 2003, pp. 14–15).

A psychologist only focuses on the facts which are supposed to result in yielding new knowledge after they are gathered and sorted. This research attitude is unacceptable for a phenomenologist. Gathering facts will not give us a general, objective theory as there is no such thing as a 'pure fact'. Sartre argues that:

And if we ask ourselves what is a fact, we see that it defines itself in this way: that one must meet with it in the course of research, and that it always presents itself as an unexpected enrichment and a novelty in relations to the antecedent facts. We must not then count upon the facts to organize themselves into a synthetic whole which would deliver its meaning by itself (Sartre, 2003, p. 15).

The essence of collecting facts will be dependent on the theory propagated by a given psychologist. Thus modern psychology will never be in a position to provide us with the definition of the word 'man' or analyse his emotions in an appropriate manner.

The notion of man that it accepts is quite empirical: all over the world there is a certain number of creatures that offer analogous characteristics (...) But the psychologist does not commit himself: he does not know whether the notion of man is arbitrary. It may be too *extensive*; there is nothing to show that the Australian primitive can be placed in the same psychological class as the American workman of 1939. Or it may be too *narrow*; nothing tells us that there is an abyss separating the higher apes from any human creature⁴ (Sartre, 2003, pp. 15–16).

In an attempt to prove the assumption of classical emotions theories wrong, Sartre summarises and criticises their selected examples, starting with James's peripheral conception. I will not provide a summary of all the conceptions of emotions that Sartre refers to. I will only mention that the object of Sartre's fundamental accusations addressed at the classical researchers listed at the onset of this article is the assumption that the emotion is perceived as a certain bodily disorder. Nor are the theories analysed by Sartre enough to answer the questions about the passage from the physiological symptom to a mental state (James), how the diversity of emotions can be explained (Janet) and what it means that the emotion consists in changing the form (Lewin and Dembo). The common denominator of the understatement indicated by Sartre is the assumption that psychologists do not

⁴ Heidegger raised a similar criticism where he defined the words 'man' and 'world' as meta-physical notions. According to the German philosopher, psychology claims the right to discuss that which is ontic (what is felt by *Dasein*) This claim, however, is unfounded as that which is ontic can be felt directly by *Dasein* and cannot be revealed to any external perception. Thus psychology is positioned within the ontological (*Seiende*).

reflect on the existence and role of active consciousness, which in Sartre's theory would play a key role. Before I move on to Sartre's critique of psychoanalysis I will briefly summarise the manner in which Sartre understands one of the types of consciousness called emotion.

2. SARTRE'S THEORY OF EMOTIONS

According to classical theories an emotion is born in consciousness when the human body is disturbed resulting in the appearance of the sense of threat. James, who was under Sartre's critique, claimed that:

Our natural way of thinking about these standard emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My thesis on the contrary is that the *bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion (...)* we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble (James, 1884, pp. 189–190).

In contrast to such an approach Sartre claims that the emotion that we call fear, for example, constitutes all the things that instil terror. Thus one may say that there is a close relationship between human consciousness and the emotion of fear. In order to accurately examine emotional experience, one must link all of its elements: fear-oriented consciousness, physiological changes, and behaviour. The essential statement of Sartre's theory of emotions is the proposition that emotional consciousness is a non-reflective consciousness of the world:

I'm angry, I am afraid, etc. But the fear does not begin as consciousness *of* being afraid, any more than the perception of this book is consciousness of perceiving it. The emotional consciousness is at first non-reflective, and upon that plane it cannot be consciousness of itself, except in the non-positional mode. The emotional consciousness is primarily consciousness *of* the world (Sartre, 2003, p. 56).

Similarly to perception, notion and thought, it is one of the ways to formulate the world. One may say that for Sartre the emotion is a 'quality in itself' which is non-reflective and by heading towards the world it 'moves it'. For example, when I am happy I just know it; I do not need any reassurance from my consciousness because it is I who is happy. I – entity, situated between my actions which bring me a particular gain, and happiness which comes about as a consequence, do not need to return to myself or integrate a reflective consciousness between the deed and the emotion. 'I' (*Dasein*) comprehend the world through my presence in it,

and particularly by my actions. If I am happy, then my happiness is a manner in which this world is revealed to me. Similarly, if I am irritated in a given moment, my irritation is way of comprehending the world at a given 'moment', a stretch of reality which appears to me as irritating. A consciousness changed by the emotion causes the object which is in the course of being constituted to acquire peculiar qualities. Emotions create, as Sartre puts it, 'a magical world'.

We can conceive what an emotion is. It is a transformation of the world. When the paths before us become too difficult, or when we cannot see our way, we can no longer put up with such an exacting and difficult world. All ways are barred and nevertheless we must act. So then we try to change the world; that is, to live it as though the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes but by magic (Sartre, 2003, p. 63).

Sartre illustrates the thesis above by the following example: let us imagine that I am reaching out for a grape but I cannot pick it. At the same time I come to a conclusion that it must be unripe and I clear away. Magically, I ascribe a certain quality to the grapes. I play out what Sartre calls a 'comedy'. If for example this situation additionally brings about the feeling of irritation, then a magical world tinted with emotion will unfold before me. Thus understood emotion is accomplishing a certain goal in human existence – it is not a bodily disturbance but a way to exist in the world.

3. SARTRE'S POLEMICS WITH THE ASSUMPTIONS OF FREUD'S PSYCHOANALYSIS

None of the classical theories recognised emotions as a consciousness whose meaning is contained within themselves. When continuing his explorations the French researcher reached out for the new science which was originated at the turn of the 19th century by Sigismund Freud, the psychoanalysis. Before I proceed with the discussion of Sartre's opinions on Freud's teaching I will briefly revise how Freud defined the whole of the human psyche. It is important on account of the fact that Sartre channels his critique to that basic assumption. A revision of the tripartite approach to the psyche, which was introduced by Freud, will enable a better understanding of the accusations made by Sartre. It must be emphasised that Freud did not create any separate theory of emotions. He focused in his research on the consequences of emotional problems. Freud distinguished three such consequences: the obligation of repetition, internal conflict, and emotional trauma (Freud, 1955). However, for the purposes of this article I will focus on the

Freudian conception of the unconscious mind to which Sartre relates and which has an enormous impact on the psychoanalytical explanation of psychological phenomena, including those which interest me the most, namely emotions.

According to Freud, personality or the absolutely predictable pattern of behaviour in a given situation is composed of two, or more precisely, three elements: conscious, unconscious, and preconscious. We read:

The division of the psychical into what is conscious and what is unconscious is the fundamental premise of psycho-analysis; and it alone makes it possible for psycho-analysis to understand the pathological processes in mental life, which are as common as they are important, and to find a place for them in the framework of science. To put it once more, in a different way: psycho-analysis cannot situate the essence of the psychical in consciousness, but is obliged to regard consciousness as a quality of the psychical, which may be present in addition to other qualities or may be absent (Freud, 1949, p. 2).

The conscious element consists, in simple terms, in being conscious i.e. a competent integration of all the external stimuli which have an effect on sense organs and the appropriate reaction to the environment. The unconscious element is comprised by all the displaced or forgotten memories which determine our behaviour. Apart from consciousness and unconsciousness there is also room for preconsciousness in the psyche which is comprised by all the psychological content that is temporarily unconscious. Human behaviour is steered by instinctive drives which have their source in psychological energy and their most powerful element is libido. It should be emphasised that the Scientist from Vienna developed the second theory of dividing the psyche. According to the said theory, personality has the following tripartite division: the biological sphere, *id*, which covers the said drives, desires and the content of the system of unconsciousness, *ego* sphere, which is placed in between primeval drives based on physiological needs and the requirements of the worlds in which we live. “We shall now look upon an individual as a psychical *id*, unknown and unconscious, upon whose Surface rests the *ego*” – Freud writes in *Ego and ID* (Freud, 1949, p. 10). The role of the *ego* sphere is to satisfy drives in a manner that can be socially accepted. The last of the spheres is called *superego* and refers to the value system and morality.

Sartre in his theory of emotions underlined the fact that in order to understand an emotion one must search for a meaning in itself. In the part of *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotion* which is devoted to the critique of psychoanalysis he underlined that “psychoanalysis was the first to lay the emphasis upon the significance of psychic facts: that is, it was the first to insist upon the fact that every state of consciousness stands for something other than itself” (Sartre, 2003, p. 50). For

Freud this means that our behaviour has been shaped by the past understood as that in which we lived directly, i.e. the period of childhood, and the past understood as the history of humankind where the first rituals and prohibitions were shaped. Sartre's philosophy of man was about the principle of being thrown into the world and the assumption that each situation in which I am has an impact on me and I, a free and active entity, have an impact on my environment.

What is essential in psychoanalysis is the relation between the conscious and the unconscious. According to Freud, conscious phenomena are a symbolic implementation of a desire which is suppressed by a censor. This desire is not contained in its symbolic implementation but it is situated outside the entity. This, according to the Viennese researcher, means that "the meaning of a symptom is found in its relation to the experience of the patient" (Freud, 2010, p. 237). Psychoanalytical theory points to a close relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. When interpreting the relationship between what is conscious and unconscious, Sartre claimed that "the signification of our conscious behaviour lies wholly outside that behaviour itself or, if one prefers it so, what is signified is entirely cut off from the signifying" (Sartre, 2003, p. 51). Therefore, the French researcher criticised the conscious-unconscious relation and asserted that the essential problem is to provide a definition of this relation understood as a transfer of some psychological content into the other. The primary accusation addressed at psychoanalysis was therefore related to the division of human psyche into the conscious and unconscious. For Sartre it was a superfluous complication. In *Being and Nothingness* the French researcher asserted that "By the distinction between the 'id' and the 'ego', Freud has cut the psychic whole into two. *I am* the ego but *I am not* the id" (Sartre, 2003, p. 74). The Viennese researcher underlined the role of unconsciousness which, according to Sartre resulted in the assertion that consciousness ceases to be a place of sense and meaning. More, sense, which is constituted on the level of unconsciousness, is distorted within the consciousness. It comes as no surprise that for the French philosopher, who originates from the tradition of the Cartesian *cogito*, the assumption that what we know about ourselves may not be true, was shocking.⁵ Sartre posed the following question: how can you separate conscious content from unconscious content. According to Freud this role was played by a censor who was defined by the Viennese scholar as a barrier between the consciousness and unconsciousness. Sartre was not convinced by this theory. He came

⁵ The phenomenon of coming into contact with the psychoanalytic conception of the entity was described by Ricoeur: "For someone who was shaped by phenomenology, existential philosophy, rekindling interest in Hegel, linguistic investigations, a contact with psychoanalysis is shocking" (Ricoeur, 1975, p. 149).

to the conclusion that censor did not refer to a human being but to a conscious self-delusion. In *Being and Nothingness*, in the context of deliberations related to bad faith, Sartre wrote about the censor:

A person can *live* in bad faith, which does not mean that he does not have abrupt awakenings to cynicism or to good faith, but which implies a constant and particular style of life. Our embarrassment then appears extreme since we can neither reject nor comprehend bad faith. To escape from these difficulties people gladly have recourse to the unconscious. In the psychoanalytical interpretation, for example, they use the hypothesis of a censor, conceived as a line of demarcation with customs, passport division currency control, etc., to re-establish the duality of the deceiver and deceived (Sartre, 2003, p. 73).

According to the French researcher one may not unconsciously displace anything from the consciousness as one is conscious of this displacement. Dividing the human psyche into two spheres, including unconsciousness, which has an explanatory character, is pointless. If we assume the psychoanalytical approach, Sartre concluded, we must then assert that a sexual maniac who commits a goofy theft, as a consequence of which he will most probably be caught, is not concerned about the theft itself but a self-punishment. Another example discussed by Sartre in the *Essay on the Theory of Emotions* is a woman who is fainting at the sight of a laurel: the reason for that is not the laurel itself but what it throws back to, for example a sexual incident in childhood which is in some way related to the laurel (Sartre, 2003, p. 49–53). Freud analyses much more complicated cases but in Sartre's opinion it is difficult to notice a cause of particular disease symptoms in them. In the *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, the Viennese researcher analyses a case of a woman who is suffering from a particularly disturbing obsession: she runs to the room next door, stops, always at the same spot, and calls in a maid to send her for a trifling errand, and then runs back to her room. The situation is repeated several times in a day. During the talks with the patient Freud discovered that her behaviour was related to a certain embarrassing incident that took place on her wedding night. Her much older husband proved to be impotent and many times that night he ran from his room to her bed in order to make several attempts to consummate the marriage, which all failed. In the morning, shaken by the event, he spilt red wine on the sheets in order to conceal the fact of his sexual impotence from the maid. Freud discovered the relation between the events from the past and her present obsessions. As it turned out, when she called in the maid she made sure that the maid could see the spilled red wine on the tablecloth. This way Freud connected the incident from the wedding night and the present symptoms of the patient asserting that "neurotic symptoms carry just as much meaning as do

errors and the dream, and that they are intimately connected with the experience of the patient” (Freud, 2010, p. 327). In other words, on one hand Freud was not looking for meanings in the content, but in the sphere of the unconsciousness, complex, childhood trauma, fear from authority, etc. For Sartre, yielding to such a theory was a peculiar act of bad faith because, although we cannot know the true meaning of our psychological content, we deny ourselves such knowledge as we become entangled in convoluted analyses of the unconscious instead. On the other hand, however, the purpose of psychoanalysis was to find a justification for an activity, which, was completely pointless at first glance (like the example of the woman and spilt wine), which could be thrown back to the past of that person. And this purposefulness was found and exposed by Sartre. According to the French researcher, psychoanalysis, although with a mistakenly assumed existence of the unconscious, provides a certain foundation for the creation of an emotions theory which could be based on the idea of purposefulness, and such a theory would be the goal of Sartre's research. The purpose of emotions in psychoanalysis was for example the relieving of tension. However, Sartre emphasised the fact that psychoanalysis is looking for meanings of particular phenomena beyond themselves on a cause-effect basis. Therefore, the emotion is meaningful information which needs to be determined and examined.

In a word, the conscious fact is related to what it signifies, as a thing which is the *effect* of a certain event is related to that event: as, for example, the ashes of a fire extinct upon a mountain are related to the human beings ego lit the fire. Their presence is not *contained* in the remaining cinders, but connected with them by a relations of causality: the relations is *external*, the ashes of the fire are *passive* considered in that causal relations, as every effect is in relations to its cause. A consciousness which had not acquired the necessary technical knowledge could not grasp these remains as *signs*. At the same time, the remains are what they are; that is, they exist in themselves, irrespective of all significant interpretation: they *are* fragments of half-calcinated wood, and that is all (Sartre, 2003, pp. 51–52).

On the one hand, Freud focused on the intentional character of the emotion which was much to Sartre's liking, however, on the other hand, he limited the process of cognition only to the cause-effect path, which was rejected by Sartre. Sartre did not approve of the principle of causality for a simple reason. The French researcher argued that consciousness does not draw meaning from the outside but contains it within. In Sartre's conception meaning constituted a certain structure of consciousness, and one of its types was the emotion. The meaning of emotion must be sought in itself and not, as Freud would expect it, on the basis of external causality principle: “The consciousness, if the *cogito* is to be possible, is itself the

fact, the *signification* and what is *signified*” – Sartre emphasised (Sartre, 2003, p. 53). Psychoanalysis explains the phenomenon of emotion as a symbolic implementation of a desire stifled by a censor. Of course, for the consciousness this desire is not contained in its symbolic implementation. A psychoanalytical significance of emotion must then refer to an external cause, in this case it is something that exists beyond the consciousness, for example a complex that originated in childhood. This relation will always be symbolic and a psychoanalyst will have to decipher the unconscious but true content of the symbol which is entailed by this external cause, as:

Being conscious is in the first place a purely descriptive term, resting on perception of the most immediate and certain character. Experience goes on to show that a psychical element (for instance, an idea) is not as a rule conscious for a protracted length of time. On the contrary, a state of consciousness is characteristically very transitory; an idea that is conscious now is no longer so a moment later, although it can become so again under certain conditions that are easily brought about. In the interval the idea was – we do not know what. We can say that it was latent, and by this we mean that it was capable of becoming conscious at any time (Freud, 1949, p. 3).

Psychoanalysis makes an erroneous assumption: it views the relations between the examined phenomena in terms of causality and relates to the relations of understanding between the phenomena that it examines. According to Sartre, these two relations cannot be reconciled. The function of the censor which was emphasised by Freud, in Sartre’s opinion falsifies the true meaning of the emotion by entangling symbolism within it. Sartre argues that:

Here the emotion is a flight from the revelation to follow, as sleep is sometimes a flight from a decision to be taken, and as the illnesses of certain young women are, according to Stekel, a flight before marriage. Naturally, emotion is not always an escape. We already have indications from the psychoanalysts of an interpretation of anger as a symbolic gratification of sexual tendencies (Sartre, 2003, p. 50).

When examining the emotion Freud separates the signified from the signifier and analyses like any other fact of the external world. For Sartre, placing the cause outside the consciousness was a blatant error as it is inside the consciousness that we have to look for meaning and sense, whereas the signified and the signifier must be presented as an integral whole. One cannot accept the fact that the phenomenon of the emotion exists just as an object exists in relation to its meaning, i.e. accept the existence of an outside meaning. For Sartre that would mean that consciousness could constitute the meaning without being aware of its meaning, and this would lead to an erroneous assumption of the abandonment of the Cartesian *cogito*:

But in that case we must finally give up the Cartesian *cogito* and treat consciousness as a secondary and passive phenomenon. In so far as a consciousness *make itself* it is never 'nothing but' what it appears to (...) It only means that we should not interrogate the consciousness from outside, as one would study the remains of the fire or the encampment, but from within; that we should look into *it* for the signification. The consciousness, if the *cogito* is to be possible, it itself the *fact*, the *signification* and what is *signified*. (Sartre, 2003, p. 52–53).

The emotion, as he mentioned at the beginning of this article is not an unconscious fact for Sartre. The emotion affects a particular goal in human existence, adding colour to it. It is not a disturbance but a manner of being in the world.

We must not, therefore, see in emotion a passing disorder of the organism and the mind which enters and upsets them *from outside*. On the contrary, it is the return of consciousness to the magical attitude, one of the great attitudes which are essential to it, with the appearance of the correlative world – the magical world. Emotion is not an accident it is a mode of our conscious existence, one of the ways in which consciousness understands (in Heidegger's sense of *Verstehen*) its Being-in-the-World (Sartre 2003, p. 91).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Sartre postulated that a research of consciousness as a place where facts acquire meaning should be performed. He therefore rejected the structure of unconsciousness and at the same time, biologism which is connected with these facts. It is worth adding that in his *Being and Nothingness*, the French researcher tried to integrate psychoanalysis into the existential perspective, (Sartre, 2003, pp. 578–596) however, this project came to be criticised by other researchers⁶ (Pacaly, 1980, pp. 37–65; Doubrovsky, 1961, p. 883) who postulated that Sartre's psychoanalysis stopped being psychoanalysis at all, as it rejected basic assumptions of Freud's teachings, e.g. the existence of the unconscious. "Existential psychoanalysis rejects the hypothesis of the unconscious; it makes the psychic act coextensive with consciousness" – Sartre describes (Sartre, 2003, p. 591).

Earlier in his life Sartre was interested in psychology. The French researcher, as I intended to demonstrate in this article, was critical of the selected theories of

⁶ Pacaly claims that Sartre's psychoanalysis project is naïve. Doubrovsky defines existential psychoanalysis as a psychoanalysis depsychoanalysed.

classical psychology and psychoanalysis. However, negative points of reference led him to develop his own project of phenomenological psychology, and in his later works, a non-deterministic conception of man and his ability to act freely.

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