

The Liberation Psychologist: A Tribute to Jean-Paul Sartre

Richard Pearce

Abstract *In this chapter I describe how Jean-Paul Sartre's unswerving commitment to non-conformism and to the cause of the disadvantaged is linked to an existential philosophy that can provide the foundations for a coherent and practical psychotherapeutic approach. Occasionally using personal anecdotes, the chapter reflects on his investigation of what it means to be human. Key components of this investigation are reviewed, including Sartre's understanding of consciousness; the meaning of 'the other' in individual and social contexts; and the dialectic of interior and exterior interactions. The socio-political foundation of Sartre's thought implies that psychotherapy must recognise the political underpinnings of such social interventions. The concluding part of the chapter, therefore, makes a plea for acceptance of this political dimension.*

Some Initial Thoughts

In this chapter I will describe the circumstances that first drew me to the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, and what led to his thought providing an inspiration for my work as a psychotherapist later in my life. This was a relatively late career decision for me, and I was drawn to an existential training largely as a result of the iconic figure that Sartre had represented in an early, formative period of my life. Even so, that training, while recognising his importance laid relatively little emphasis on his oeuvre, and I felt that I pursued a lone furrow in viewing him as the major figure in existential psychology. As is common in European circles, it is his early work, particularly, *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1956) that receives attention, while the equally important later work, including the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre, 2004) and the Flaubert study, *The Family Idiot* (Sartre, 1981), scarcely get a mention. Yet, I believe that this more mature work, where he attempted a synthesis of Marxism and Existentialism, equally informs my work as a psychotherapist.

I first became aware of Sartre's work many years ago, long before I trained as a psychotherapist. Not the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* (*B&N*), but of May '68 and the struggles for 'third world' emancipation that he championed in his later years. Perhaps foremost of his work during this period would be the first book of the *Critique*, in particular the forward '*Search for a Method*' (Sartre, 1968). Even now, the latter small book remains for me the most inspiring and important tract that he wrote. This represents the essence of the 'political Sartre', the methodology of his synthesis of Marxism and Existentialism, and it was this human, non-functionalist, non-determinist Marxism rather than Existentialism that first drew me into his work. But why did this happen? Why should I have been drawn into and inspired by Sartre's Marxism and later by his Existentialism? In order to develop this theme I introduce an autobiographical note. I will begin with a brief vignette of my origins, drawing on the world I was born (thrown) into, and the way I responded to it, in order to demonstrate both why I was inspired and drawn to Sartre's work, as well as the value of his thought for me now as a psychotherapist. I will return to this theme briefly in my conclusion. In addition, I hope to show that when I engage with others in my role as a psychotherapist, I am carrying out a political act.

A Brief Review of my Early Years

I was born into a harsh, patriarchal and petit-bourgeois society of small-scale tenant farmers and, as an only son, was expected to take my place in providing continuity for its traditions. Sartre's notion of 'fundamental project' suggests that the extent to which we seek authenticity and the way we seek it, are initially (and sometimes wholly) determined in the place that we first learn to 'be' in the world, where our relatedness and separateness are first experienced, both with regard to ourselves and to others. More often than not it is within the family and its mode of existence that the parameters that shape our early existence are defined, and where the foundations from which our search for 'authenticity' unfolds.

But the family, however it is constituted, does not exist in a vacuum. It is, in many ways, a microcosm of the broader social groups within which it is situated. It is the role of the family to spawn and develop future members of the dominant society, so that the values and 'ways of being' associated with the prevailing culture will be perpetuated. It is thus an instrument of social reproduction and an exercise in social control. It has two roles: to nurture and to foster. It must ensure that its offspring are sufficiently cared for, physically, socially and emotionally, so that they might grow to be productive members of that society. At the same time it must inculcate its offspring with the values and attitudes that are acceptable to that society. These roles are paradoxical. On the one hand they promote free-will and autonomy, on the other they exercise control and discipline.

My parents spawned me in a post-war world, one that was different to the one they were raised in, and in which their certainties no longer held. They brought to me much of their own worlds, but in a changing socio-cultural context. My father was an only child. I have little recollection of his mother, but I am told that she was a gentle woman, very much overshadowed by her husband. He was an archetypal Victorian patriarch: strong and unyielding; certain of his own correctness and extraordinarily domineering. He dominated (and outlived) my father. He died at the age of 98 when he was still subtly commanding of those around him. My father accepted the values and certainties of his father, but struggled, often in vain, to assert his own identity within them. My mother was the third of four children whose father died when she was aged 4. Consequent poverty meant that she, in common with her elder siblings, was 'farmed' out to relatives, and brought up with a cousin. An unusually beautiful child and young woman, she grew up with a constant sense of insecurity and social inferiority.

Although both my parents, in their different ways, brought with them into their nuclear family an acceptance of the cultural and social values from which they came, there was uneasiness at this acceptance, an unspoken questioning: a vestige, I believe, of the lack of autonomy that their respective family experiences had left them. The world post the watershed of the 1939-45 war was changing, and with it ways of relating; and while they would have wanted to respond to this, they did not know how, and would generally retreat into a conservative defence of the world of their childhood.

Born an only son, I was raised in the expectation that I would continue the family traditions. I remember the warmth and security of my mother's love, and the feelings too of insecurity around this love. My mother had difficulty in having children, and

was ill for long periods during those years. Born by caesarean and bottle-fed from birth, I experienced a succession of childminders about whom I remember very little, except a predominant feeling of guilt, that I had not been 'good enough'. My mother's health returned as I got older, probably from the age of 6 onwards, and I recall clinging to the warmth and security she provided, possibly from a fear that she would disappear. While my very gentle and loving mother did not withhold unconditional love it felt, because of the context, somehow conditional and insecure.

My parents were relatively poor and there was always a pervading atmosphere of struggle. I was given the impression that my father worked very hard and I should be grateful for what he provided. He was quite distant and preoccupied, but always gentle. Nevertheless, I grew up with a sense of trepidation towards him, a fear of the world he represented and of retribution if I failed it. And I always felt I would fail it, because I did not identify with that world. I was not afraid of my father, only of the world he represented within the family. This world seemed hostile and threatening, something difficult and incomprehensible. As far back as I can remember, back to early childhood, I felt this vulnerability in the face of the 'other'. And I think my father felt it.

My teenage rebellion was keen, but easily crushed, yet the sense of rebellion never left me. It was not until many years later (during therapy) that I realised that I still carried a desire to be different, but that it was neither the conservatism of my village, nor the authority of my parents that I was rebelling against, but the lack of autonomy, the closing off of possibilities. I left school at 15 and went to work for my father. Although he suggested I could choose another path if I wished, it never seemed like a real option. My future had long been decided, not to live that future was unthinkable. For ten years I tried hard to fit into that world, and be a part of it, but in the end I failed. I was always an outsider, or felt myself to be. I stayed because I perceived myself to have no other world, no other way of becoming in the world, no other potential 'identity' (I had a strong rapport with animals, which made it easier). This was a time of enormous conflict for me. There were many rites of passage traversed, initiations into the worlds of 'sex, drugs and rock n' roll', but all this happened surreptitiously, privately; like my inner conflict, this private world could not be revealed to the family I still strove so hard to please. But the search for authenticity over time became more focused. Eventually I went to night school and gained access to university. No-one tried to stand in my way once I had decided on my pathway, but the rupture felt quite traumatic and I suffered what would now be described as a 'clinical depression'. Looking back on this episode, I see it as a manifestation of the guilt I felt at deserting my parents and their world. Without me the *raison d'être* of their world disappeared: the continuity that is so much a part of that tradition was broken; there was no-one left to carry the myth.

It was this person that became attracted to the icon that was Jean-Paul Sartre. At that time he represented the intellectual champion of the oppressed, those whose struggle was to assert their freedom and self-expression; whether those who struggled were groups defined by race, class, sexuality or gender, or indeed everyone that was marked by difference with respect to the world of the ruling elite of white, bourgeois males. I felt a sense of common cause and identity with these oppressed. But while I was interested in existential notions of freedom and authenticity, it was to Sartre's anti-authoritarian Marxism that I was principally attracted. Nevertheless, when many

years later I was to train as a psychotherapist, it was that early experience of Sartre that drew me to existential psychotherapy, and within that tradition to his earlier work. Now, working as a psychotherapist, I find his later work not only provides a continuity of thought, but also a constant source of inspiration.

A Review of Some Concepts

In his two major philosophical tracts Sartre moved from the individual to the social. In *B&N*, he analysed concrete personal relations, before moving to the social and historical context in the *Critique*. Here I will briefly review key concepts from both of these. I emphasise, however, that not only there is continuity in thought throughout, but that the later, now neglected work has at least as much to offer psychotherapy.

The distinction between pre-reflective and reflective consciousness underpins most of what follows: Sartre was, unarguably, a philosopher of consciousness. We are aware, have an understanding or sense of ourselves, pre-reflectively: a way of holding, a tacit understanding of what is lived, or what is experienced. Reflection elicits knowledge; we place order on experience so that it is 'knowable' in an indirect way; as such, knowledge is not 'of ourselves' in the way that pre-reflective understanding is, but external to us. To put it simply: pre-reflective understanding is *felt*, reflective understanding is *known*. Pre-reflective awareness 'engenders' a sense of existence; reflection allows us to 'make' sense of existence. We hold a sense of ourselves in the world prior to reflection, and it is through that pre-reflective sense that we engage with the world, that we aspire towards a sense of 'identity'. Furthermore, that engagement is not random or accidental according to Sartre. We are aware of ourselves pre-reflectively, not in a self-conscious way, but through a non-directed awareness that is always intentional; it is towards something, towards that which comes into awareness, whether physical, imagined or psychological.

Sartre's description of pre-reflective consciousness provides a framework for understanding subjectivity, and the contradiction between subject and object. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his discussion of the 'look' (Sartre 1956), a concept that in turn provides a framework for understanding the experience of the 'other' and 'being with others', or human relations. The experience or realisation that we can become an object for the other, that our subjectivity is denied, can be manifest at both a pre-reflective and reflective level. But here I am most interested in that experience at the level of pre-reflective awareness, because it is that sense of otherness, the feeling of potential subjugation and humiliation or, at the very least, non-acceptance as a result of being 'seen', whether concretely or in imagination, that has such a profound influence on our relations with others. This led Sartre to apparently very pessimistic conclusions regarding human relationships, a view that he modified in later, unpublished work where he allowed for the possibility of reciprocal appreciation of subjectivity (e.g. Sartre, 1992).

The framework of Sartre's psychological philosophy that is relevant to psychotherapy begins with the notion of the 'fundamental' (or original) project: a value-based framework that makes sense of a life. It provides both a guide to living and an aspiration. It is a notion that accrues early in life, when we pre-reflectively feel accordance with a sense of ourselves in the world. This sense describes how we choose to relate to the world, both in terms of human relations, and with respect to our physical and social environments. It is the closest we get to the idea of 'self' or

'identity'. We may try to grasp this notion objectively through reflection: 'this is who I am', but this is always a fruitless struggle. Nevertheless, that pre-reflective awareness of ourselves allows us to sense when we are acting in accordance with that project. We *choose* this project, Sartre argues, at some point early in our lives. The pathways we follow may change, but these are superficial changes and do not necessarily alter our project. Change in the original project is possible, but often only after 'life-changing' events (conversion). A sense of authenticity is gained through living life in a way that feels consistent with this project.

So how do we make a choice regarding our 'fundamental project'? In his several profound psychological and biographical studies, Sartre elaborates on this in considerable depth (Sartre 1963; 1967; 1981). Sometime in our early life, a sense of self 'adheres'. I use this word to describe the gradual assimilation of a pre-reflective set of values that describe our way of feeling 'accordant' with ourselves in the world. That is not to say that this sense describes the 'thing itself'; the way we are, the 'who we are'; rather, it describes our aspiration and sense of coherence. When we act according to that immanence, we feel that we are 'moving in the right direction'. It is important to reiterate, however, that what adheres does not do so in a reflective sense, for the most part it remains at the pre-reflective level. We know it in one sense, but as awareness rather than knowledge. It is one of the invariable tasks of therapy to increase self-perception, to make the sense of self more visible, often to facilitate the discarding of misleading notions of identity, and sometimes to work towards a shift in this fundamental project.

Later work and the Sartrean Dialectic

The project is emergent through a dialectical process that engenders an aspirational way of being in the world, a sense (no more) of self or identity that carries with it also a sense of how to *be* in the world in relationship with others. But the *Critique* extends this person-to-person relationship into the social field and the possibility of both an external as well as an internal dialectic.

The idea, sometimes gleaned from *B&N*, that this pre-reflective self is immutable is modified by Sartre's later work. There is the possibility of change, but this would be part of a dialectical process. But when we make this initial (and pre-reflective) choice, it is our engagement with the 'other' in the broad sense that is determinant: an engagement not only with *other* people, particularly significant people, but also with our social and physical environment, and with our history. We are part of a historical and cultural process and when we engage with the world we are a part of that dialectic. Sartre's depiction of the 'look' describes a powerful process; it describes how we meet others, the anxieties associated with being and observing the other as an object. His descriptions in *B&N* evoke a sense of this tension, the vulnerabilities and anxieties around acceptance reflected in the non-acceptance of objectification.

An important part of the experience of project emergence is the encounter with others, of being-for-others and the relations between subject and object. But these are not found solely in concrete personal relations, but also in relations with our social and physical context. While Sartre developed a more flexible view regarding the possibility of change of the fundamental project in his later work, perhaps this possibility is best understood in relation to the Sartrean Dialectic, a concept he derived from those of Hegel and Marx. Although the dialectic was apparent in *B&N*,

Sartre developed its central importance in the *Critique*. At its simplest, it describes a process, a movement of change. Viewed subjectively: an impression is formed by an event that can give rise to a predisposition to receive similar events in the same way. An experience that contradicts such an impression, however, sets up a process that leads to an adjustment in the way future similar experiences are received that allows for both the original and the contradiction. The movement is ceaseless and the title of the *Critique* echoes his belief that to reflect dialectically is to reflect rationally. Most importantly, some sense of the original experience is always present in the new: nothing is lost. It is a developmental process based on the resolution of contradiction.

The dialectic of consciousness is apparent in *B&N*, but not explicitly stated. We first experience something pre-consciously, a myriad of sense impressions form an awareness of something. This may then be objectified through reflective consciousness, but in this process the something becomes objectified. This process in turn may modify the pre-reflective awareness and the movement continues. There is a dialectic of the internal and external, of subject and object within consciousness itself.

In the *Critique*, Sartre sought to integrate the role and perspective of the individual and subjective, with the social and historical perspective of 20th century Marxist political economy. Key to this approach is the regressive-progressive method outlined in his *Search for a Method* (Sartre, 1968). It describes a process of 'interiorisation', when experiences of the individual's 'world' are absorbed and held. Her 'world' describes the totality of her social, physical and relational environments at any moment. The individual may then respond to that which is interiorised, in a process of interaction or exteriorisation. Consequently, the individual is both changed by interiorisation and changes her world through exteriorisation. These processes are dialectical processes, reflecting a movement through which interacting forces are changed by encounter, each containing the influence of the other in a new blending. But the precursor of these processes is the tension of contradiction. If what is held of the experience of her world causes no grounds for reflection, then the individual is unchallenged. Similarly, if what is interiorised is not acted upon through reflection and action, then the status quo, or what Sartre termed the 'practico-inert' remains unchallenged.

Need and Scarcity

Need and *scarcity* are terms that Sartre uses to ground the development of his theory. In his early work, Sartre talks of 'desire'. Consciousness (being-for-itself), in differentiating from nature or what-is (being-in-itself) senses an unfulfilment or 'lack'; a bounty of possibility that is the negation of what-is: hence the root of desire. The later Sartre talks of 'need' rather than 'desire'. As social beings, we have socialised desires or felt requirements that we act towards. Need arises through our interaction with the world, and at its most basic is the desire to survive, to reproduce one's existence. Scarcity may be a condition of the material world, so that the ability of some to meet these basic requirements may become constrained; in particular, constrained by others. This creates hierarchy, class, domination and oppression --the stuff of history. But need is a social concept as is scarcity and beyond survival they become defined by social norms: they become subject to choice. Such reasoning Sartre took from Marx, but he added a different dimension. Need becomes socialised desire. Desire becomes social in the act of interaction with the external world: thus need and desire often become undifferentiated. And when need is socialised it is

embedded in reproduction not only in terms of survival, but also in terms of the 'self', or at least a sense of self.

What is critical is that Sartre grounded the social and historical dimension of Marxism in individual consciousness. The individual's subjectivity through the dialectical processes described above, becomes a pivotal actor in the historical sweep of social and physical environments. An interesting exposition of Sartre's attempts to bring subjectivity to the core of Marxism can be found in his lecture *Marxism and Subjectivity* (Sartre 2014). Subject and object are enmeshed in a constant dialectic. In describing the way in which the individual subject becomes pivotal in this regard, Sartre introduces further key concepts that describe her interaction on the social plain. The movement of the dialectic is permeated by *praxis*, a term used to describe an active engagement with the world. Through praxis, the subject engages with the world in order to change it, an engagement guided by her pre-reflective fundamental project. The expression can be linked in a vehicular sense to that of 'being-for-itself' or consciousness in *B&N*: subjectivity in the act of engagement. The material world itself is a worked process, which without praxis, remains static, in inertia, as the 'practico-inert', which can be perceived as a social manifestation of 'being-in-itself' or facticity. But we may not engage with the practico-inert merely to initiate change; we may also seek to deny our needs, our desires, making them subservient to those of others. This is a denial of the aspirational future orientation of the fundamental project; he termed such a movement as *hexis*, implying conscious engagement that leaves the practico-inert unchanged in the context of contradiction.

This dialectical reasoning sets out a series of constantly interacting processes involving the subject and her external world. Part of this journey for Sartre involved a critique of the more deterministic and mechanistic view of the human subject promulgated by the orthodox Marxism of that time. He perceived the subject as part of an ever-interactive dialogue with the social in the making of history. But he retained the emphasis on human freedom and choice that is so passionately expressed in *B&N*, even if the social determinants and limitations are made more explicitly part of the picture. So the subject existed not in the splendid isolation as portrayed in *B&N*, but as a 'totalisation', an interactive unfolding or movement described by the dialectic of the internal, the external and their mutually interactive processes. Rather than an 'individual', therefore, Sartre speaks of the 'singular universal' in describing the subject whose 'lived experience' underpins the social movements and expressions of history.

From the basis of his interaction with a non-deterministic Marxism, Sartre rooted the concepts of freedom and subject-object dialogue espoused in *B&N* in the social context of history. His 'singular universal' through a dialectical relationship with the world as it is in any given moment (the practico-inert), a relationship founded on praxis (or hexis), a movement based on a 'totalisation', becomes the unwitting architect of history. At the centre of praxis is the 'fundamental project', or pre-reflective, but always dematerialising, sense of self. But the *Critique* was concerned primarily with the social group, and placed that sense firmly within the dynamics of collective action. It is from the vantage point of that dynamic that we best observe the political implications of his work.

The Political Dimension

Sartre's politics was above all a politics of liberation. He played a minor role in the resistance during the German occupation, [which] was a precursor to an active political life in the post-war period, an activity that continued until his death, although this involvement became more muted after he lost his sight in 1970. He campaigned always for the underprivileged, the persecuted and the oppressed. He was active in the anti-colonial movement, and harshly critical of the many 'unjust wars' that became so prevalent after the war of 1939-45 (Cohen Solal, 1987). He became an icon for struggles of liberation from oppression of all kinds, and it is this icon that first aroused my interest in his work.

He pursued his political agenda partly through his editorship of the weekly journal: *Les Temps Modernes* and other journalistic enterprises. Among his publications, one that stands out as a political tract is the small but profound work, *Anti-semitism and Jew* (Sartre, 1948). His analysis of the roots of prejudice, and his understanding of how the process of persecution arises, makes a valuable and insightful contribution to understanding a contemporary western world that is currently living in the wake of the near collapse of finance capitalism. A world characterised by constant subjection to the fear of the stranger, epitomised by rising anti-immigrant fervour; an increasing persecution internationally of minorities such as gays and bi-sexuals; and the rolling back of female emancipation. We live in a world increasingly characterised by an apprehension of difference.

In *Anti-semitism and Jew* Sartre, describes a trajectory of unthinking and irrational prejudice. It must be noted, however, that anti-semitism and notions of racial and cultural supremacy that characterised the colonial period and still permeates European culture, are group responses, and are the collective reinforcements of individual prejudice. But in looking at the roots of prejudice we find also the source of vulnerability and anxiety.

The issues that bring people to therapy are rooted in concerns derived from relations with the 'other', whether (as is usually the case) other people, or the 'other' in terms of social, cultural or physical environments. When the 'other' is not known sufficiently it leads to existential uncertainty. Such uncertainty generates anxiety, which if unresolved or too strong to be held, turns the subject towards what Sartre describes as irrational responses, often projections of blame, anger or guilt onto the 'stranger' (or the 'strange phenomenon'), because not to do so would generate a sense of self that is not acceptable, would undermine the fundamental project. These are not responses grasped from nowhere, but often poorly rationalised and emotional responses to experiences of perceived or real suffering.

The individual may equally project that (initially) pre-reflective sense of non-acceptance inwards, they interiorise the experience, (a more common occurrence I suggest for those who come to therapy), a process that undermines (or in some particularly difficult cases overdetermines) the ephemeral sense of self that is described by the fundamental project. I would add, however, notwithstanding the interiorisation of such alienation, the dialectic ensures that there is a response in terms of either praxis or, more possibly, hexis as the way in which the individual's interactions with society are reinforced. She may also respond to the possibility of group activity (a process of exteriorisation), and adhere to collective manifestations of

prejudice, or hostility towards the 'stranger', such that the dialectic engenders a self-reinforcing process of non-acceptance towards the 'other'.

Whether the individual responds to an experience by directing the response outwardly or inwardly makes no difference to the potential for an inauthentic response. At the same time what is authentic is also the acceptance of freedom and with this an acceptance of responsibility for one's actions. As Sartre states in *Anti-Semite and Jew*:

If it is agreed that man may be defined as a being having freedom within the limits of a situation, then it is easy to see that the exercise of this freedom may be considered as authentic or inauthentic according to the choices made in the situation. (Sartre, 1948, p.90)

Arguably, we are free because we choose, and in making choices we create the opportunity to express our subjectivity in our interactions with our world. So, too, does the 'other'. To deny our own freedom is to deny our subjectivity and is the ultimate deception. From this notion of 'freedom and authenticity', it is possible to conceive of an ethical framework and a political agenda.

Any discussion of the political nature of psychotherapy, pre-supposes an ethical perspective. After writing *B&N* Sartre was intent on addressing the topic of an existential ethics, a task he was never to complete. The posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics* is little more than an organised collection of notes, although containing much insightful material (Sartre, 1992). Although he did not complete his ethical framework, he wrote enough for others to fruitfully develop this theme.

What these notes did suggest was a movement away from the pessimistic view of human relationships that emerged from *B&N*, towards the possibility of reciprocity. This notion essentially forms the bedrock of 'good' as opposed to 'bad faith'. Sartre had argued in *B&N* that being-for-others involved ultimately either surrendering subjectivity in order to capture the other through submission, or objectifying and subordinating the other to one's own subjectivity. He described this as denying one's own freedom or that of the 'other', through either voluntary or wilful submission of subjectivity. Freedom is an expression of the subjective. To deny one's freedom is to be in 'bad faith'. It is possible, within this rubric, to assert the possibility of a mutuality of interest or reciprocity of knowing in human relationships. If we are able to meet the other not as an object, with the implicit threat described in the 'look', but as a subject to be affirmed and accepted, then the possibility of reciprocity (and intimacy) is present. We are free to choose, while accepting the freedom of the other to do likewise.

Existentialist thought in part arose through the rejection of the conception of the human being as merely mechanistically determined. As a conscious being she is set apart from both inanimate objects and other animals and plants. This debate is even more intense today, although the voices against this fundamentalist view of science are unfortunately a minority. The question remains: are we totally determined beings, both physiologically and concomitantly psychologically, or is there some point where we are able to break out of past conditioning and act as free and conscious agents? The message of *B&N* emphasised the latter: 'being-for-itself', effectively consciousness, was always free to choose. Even in passivity we inexorably choose

who we are. The notion of praxis highlighted in the *Critique* reinforces the possibilities created by conscious choice, even though in this later work Sartre was to clarify the limitations of choice, and recognise the weight of conditioning, especially of the early, formative years. The latter is in fact implicit in *B&N* in Sartre's adherence to the view that the fundamental project is unchanging once chosen. There remained, however, a window for freedom and choice; without that window, how can we be held responsible for our actions? how can history not become formulaic? In the *Critique*, Sartre not only remained true to the existential tradition in this respect, but also attacked mechanistic and deterministic thought within Marxism. The starting point for an existential ethics remains the concept of existential freedom.

A Note on Psychotherapy

I came to psychotherapy as a profession relatively late in life, as a third 'career'. From the beginning, my interest was fuelled by a fascination of what it meant to be human, and the hope that I might learn something of myself, as I work with others.

I was trained as an existential psychotherapist, but my view of what this means has grown with my practice, with my encounters with these 'others' that have braved the therapy room with me, as well as with my increasingly deep encounter with the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. I believe that the breadth of Sartre's psychological thinking allows for a broader and more inclusive approach to psychotherapeutic practice than is described by the narrow thinking of much that passes for 'existential psychotherapy'.

I believe the profession often makes a profound mistake in arguing for particular techniques that should be followed for 'true' or 'authentic' practice within a particular 'modality' of therapy. Often this smacks of arrogant elitism, the need to differentiate from the 'other' in order to aggrandize one's chosen path (or training). In my view, techniques may vary (and undoubtedly should, given the uniqueness of each individual), but what is important is our understanding of these core aspects of how the human exists in the world. In this respect, I feel an increasing debt to the thought of Sartre and the framework of existential analysis that he provides. Although I do believe there is a divide between approaches to therapeutic work, the fault line, in my view, does not correspond to current divisions within the profession, but to the divide between those who perceive human action to be grounded in human agency and reflective of conscious choice, and those who view behaviour to be mechanically determined and therefore subject to 'correction'.

In addition, I suggest that the underlying philosophical framework that Sartre elucidated shows the practice of psychotherapy to be a *political* act, one that is orientated towards both freedom and authenticity in the manner in which the individual (or singular universal) expresses her dialectical interaction with the world.

Psychotherapy as a Political Act

In order to justify this statement I will draw some threads together from previous deliberations. I will define a political act as a purposive intervention that impacts, in some way, on the totality of relationships that constitute a social context; and one that is premised on an ethical perspective. I understand that within the therapeutic context the individual has a perspective, of a varying degree of concreteness, of themselves that is based on a dialectical relationship between the world as she perceives it, and

the felt sense of self described by her fundamental project. From within that process emerge the manifestations of anxiety that are her way of responding to her world. I suggest that in the context of psychological trauma, of whatever degree, there is a response that is a denial of freedom in some form, a loss of authenticity in her relations with the world, either through negation of her own freedom or that of the 'other'. The role of psychotherapy is to enable the individual to draw down the blinds of 'fear and loathing'; to achieve a heightened awareness of her transient self; and to know and accept her own subjectivity as well as the subjectivity of others.

Acceptance of the freedom of the 'other' is a quintessential part of this. Acceptance of one's own freedom also implies acceptance of responsibility: we choose our freedom and concomitantly accept responsibility for that choice. But in doing so we recognise and accept the freedom of the 'other', since such acceptance is the premise upon which one's own freedom is based. As Sartre emphasises:

I am obliged to will the freedom of others at the same time as I will my own. I cannot set my own freedom as a goal without also setting the freedom of others as a goal (Sartre 2007, pp. 48-49).

As outlined above, developments of Sartre's work suggest that relationships (of whatever form) are not stable unless based on reciprocal acceptance, and that the achievement of the latter is the experience of freedom. It is a psychological liberation. Such an act of liberation, because we are social animals, because our praxis can and does change the world, even in an infinitesimal way, is a political act. The dialectical processes, which are an unalienable consequence of our touching of the world, engender a response and counter-response to our praxis (or hexis). They also contribute to a progressive politics, since where there is mutual acceptance there is no space for a hierarchy of needs, and the concomitant aggrandisement and exploitation; or the exaggeration of difference and rejection of the stranger that characterises the politics of fear and hate. Rather it is a politics that recognises the mutual interdependence of social relationships, one premised on egalitarian values. It is the politics of freedom and liberation, a cause that Sartre promoted for much of his life.

An Addendum: Making Sense of Myself

That I was drawn towards what I believed Sartre represented at an early and pivotal juncture in my life is, perhaps, unsurprising, although it is only much later when I was to study his work in more depth, that I began to understand why this was the case. Feeling stifled by my social context, therefore rejecting of the social attitudes and cultural framework of that context, I was open to the oppositional mores of the time. But there was more than this, and this relates to the idea of project choice.

I grew up with loving parents, but in my early years their love was not expressed as much as I needed, due to my mother's ill-health and the apparent reticence in my father's show of feeling. I recall feelings of vulnerability and insecurity associated with a fear of loss. But this fear was accentuated if not fostered by a contingency broader than that of my immediate family: that of village society. Even in those early formative years I recall a sense of trepidation concerning the possibility of wider disapproval, of being found wanting by the 'others' of the community; a sense reinforced by my parents shared feelings. Yet there was a foundation of care; and a

strong connection to nature and animal life as something to be fostered and cherished rather than exploited, even to the point of our pecuniary detriment.

I suggest that many characteristics of the way that I engage with the world were formed in that pre-adolescent period. There were contradictions present: between being shamed into potential conformity by the fear of non-acceptance (a combined force of social authority and familial insecurity) and a sense of compassion and belonging stemming from parental love and a connection to nature. These contradictions were sharp enough to inform a sense of restlessness from an early age, a profound insecurity engendered by the exterior world, accompanied by an adequately secure base within the family that facilitated the desire to challenge that exterior world.

It is worth repeating that a characteristic of Sartre's later thinking is that it allows a 'putting into context' of the early concepts, thus emphasising the social context of individual experience. Additionally, the notion of a liberation psychology is built on the interface between free will and material conditioning. In this respect, I see the choices and pathways that followed my early development as influenced by that early project choice. Through the dialectic process that ensued I 'chose' a sense of myself that was to inform the patterns of decision-making that followed in a changing landscape of possibility. At times, I have chosen future pathways on the basis of that sense of myself that felt, in my pre-reflective consciousness, both liberating and authentic – but not always, and I have felt too the contradictions of both entrapment and inauthenticity. But I have carried with me at all times, some ethical sense, part of the sense of self that pre-reflectively adhered in my early years, that still makes me as a psychotherapist the libertarian socialist that I have always been.

References

Cohen-Solal, A. (1987) *Jean-Paul Sartre: a Life*. Canada: Random House Publishers.

Sartre, J-P. (1948) *Anti-Semite and Jew*, New York, Schocken Books Inc.

Sartre, J-P. (1956) [1943]. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. New York, Philosophy Library.

Sartre, J-P (1963). *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*. New York, George Braziller Inc.

Sartre, J-P (1967) [1950]. *Baudelaire*. New York, New Directions Publishing Company

Sartre, J-P. (1968). *The Search for a Method*. New York: Vintage Books.

Sartre, J-P. (1981). *The Family Idiot, Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857: Volume 1*. London, University of Chicago Press.

Sartre, J-P (1992) [1983]. *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press..

Sartre, Jean-Paul. (2004) [1960]. *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume 1*. London: Verso.

Sartre, J-P. (2007) [1946]. *Existentialism is a Humanism*, New York, Yale University Press.

Sartre, J-P. (2014) [1961]. *Marxism and Subjectivity*, New Left Review 88, July-Aug.