

History and Human Existence

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An essential result of the previous investigations is that, according to Sartre, the individual human being is the subject of history. This has the consequence of rejecting a superhuman totaliser of history. When history theory speaks of God, world spirit, progress, nature or class struggle, these terms are to be understood in a problematising sense.

The problem lies, above all, in the connection of this fictitious superhuman totaliser with the existence of the individual human being. Thus, although Sartre rejects the existence of God, he recognises the existence of a god problem in relation to the concrete human being. Such a god problem exists because, according to existentialist axiomatics, existence precedes essence, so the individual in abandonment is condemned to invent himself.

In other words, he must be the cause of himself and is doomed to failure precisely in this respect. This is the problem of God within human existence based on existentialist axiomatics. In this way, the concept of God becomes intelligible for Sartre. The intelligibility of this fictitious superhuman totaliser called "God" thus lies in linking this imagination with the structures of human existence.

It is the same with the other superhuman totalisers, for example, the concept of nature. The Marxists invoke natural sciences with their dialectical materialism. In doing so, they pretend that natural sciences provide a comprehensive explicative metaphysics. However, in Sartre's understanding, they can only offer a partial knowledge of nature based on hypothetical theories. For Marxists, complete dialectical materialism is thus the philosophical basis of historical materialism. On this basis, the concept of nature, understood as an all-encompassing and all-explaining entity, also called the cosmos or universe, is the actual totaliser of history. The unity of history, seen in this way, would lie in the unity of nature.

In this context, the significance of the concept of *intelligibility* for Sartre's philosophy becomes visible. If one were to use the word "God" in the sense of Christian dogmatics, for example, by referring to biblical tradition, then the concept of God would not be intelligible in the sense of Sartre's phenomenological ontology. In contrast, the problem of God introduced by Sartre is understandable because it is transparent in the sense of phenomenological ontology. One can understand how, based on existentialist axiomatics, the idea of the existence of God can arise in man and what anthropological basis this idea has.

The same applies to the word "nature". It is understandable that man must try to maintain his life confronting his environment. In this sense, he shapes his environment by transforming the given molecular scatteredness of things into a practical field adapted to his needs. One can, therefore, speak of the unity of the practical field in a comprehensible way because man has produced this unity to counter the ever-present threat of death.

Seen in this way, the unity of the practical field is nothing other than the unity of man in his struggle for survival. The totaliser of the practical field is thus the working and struggling

individual cooperating with his fellow humans and in the struggle against the counter-human.

For Sartre, the concept of the unity of the practical field is intelligible in the sense of his phenomenological ontology because this concept is directly related to human existence. The situation is different with the concept of the unity of nature, which goes far beyond human practice and, for this reason, is intransparent, that is, not intelligible. Therefore, Sartre must problematise the concept of the unity of nature within the framework of his critique of dialectical reason and cannot make it a fundamental concept of his dialectic, as is the case with Engels.

For this reason, it is not intelligible to want to recognise in nature a superhuman totaliser of history. It is rather the case that human culture cannot be comprehensively interpreted from the concept of nature, at least not on the basis of present knowledge. It is precisely in this context that the concept of freedom is to be located:

What we call freedom is the irreducibility of the order of culture to that of nature. (Sartre, Marxism and Existentialism, p. 121)

It is the case that at least *natural science* must be understood as an expression of human culture. The language of natural science is mathematics, says Galileo Galilei, and mathematics is, of course, a product of culture and, thus, a manifestation of human freedom. One does not find numbers, functions, straight lines, or circles in nature. These are ideal entities whose basis is *human freedom*.

The concept of *intelligibility* is central to Sartre's philosophy in the sense explained. In his Critique of Dialectical Reason, for example, he distinguishes between the Analytical Reason of the sciences and the Dialectical Reason of practice. An essential distinguishing feature for him is that the sciences are not intelligible, whereas dialectics *must be* intelligible.

The explanation for this determination lies in the following: Intelligible in the sense of Sartre's phenomenological ontology are only the structures of human existence, for example, the statement that existence precedes essence or that human consciousness is temporality, that is, an ecstatic unity of past, present and future. The fact that human beings have to counter the permanent threat of death by metabolising their environment, i.e. by eating and drinking, is also one of these intelligible truths.

In contrast, the sciences, for example, are not intelligible because they try to avoid anthropomorphisms from the outset; in other words, they ignore what is at the centre of dialectics for Sartre: The structure of human existence. In this sense, Sartre also agrees with Popper's thesis that an essential characteristic of the natural sciences is that they can only provide hypothetical insights. They must always be discussable and falsifiable. In contrast, the insights of dialectics in Sartre's sense are not hypothetical but apodictic.

At this point, a fundamental problem in the theory of science becomes apparent. If one reads the texts of certain science theorists, for example Max Planck's or Albert Einstein's, one is struck by their objectivism. This objectivism consists, above all, of the rejection of anthropomorphisms. Sartre expresses a differentiating view in this regard:

It is legitimate for the natural sciences to free themselves from anthropomorphism, which consists of endowing inanimate objects with human characteristics. But it is absurd to want to carry this rejection of anthropomorphism into anthropology by analogy; for what more precise, more decisive thing can be done in the study of man than confer human peculiarities upon him? (Marxism and Existentialism)

Sartre thus makes a sharp distinction between the natural sciences and the sciences that have to do with human beings as cultural beings. The natural sciences see themselves as objectifying sciences, and an essential method for realising their kind of objectivity is the avoidance of anthropomorphisms.

However, if one is dealing with the human being, insofar as a cultural being, as the object of research, it would be contradictory to dispense with anthropomorphisms, that is, with the human. Objectivity here consists precisely in taking anthropomorphisms into account. For example, in the study of history, it would probably be a grave mistake not to attribute objective significance to the human-all-too-human for the course of history. Would the homeless Adolf Hitler have become the dictator Adolf Hitler if he had been admitted to study at the Academy of Arts?

This is the reason for Sartre's distinction between the Analytical Reason of the sciences and the Dialectical Reason of practice. Analytical Reason systematically dispenses with anthropomorphisms and instead seeks mathematical structures and technological applications.

The special significance of mathematics in the natural sciences lies precisely in that it is believed to be a particularly effective way of avoiding anthropomorphisms. Seen this way, mathematics is a window for humans to the superhuman, a bridge from the human-all-too-human to the objective world-eye of God. In contrast, dialectical reason brings precisely anthropomorphisms into play and thus makes the plausible claim that one cannot do without the human to illuminate human reality.

Historical science and myths are also features of culture and, thus, results of human freedom. Sartre writes:

In HISTORY, too, existence precedes essence. The idea of HISTORY enters as an active factor in the determination of HISTORY. The HISTORY is what it is made to be. (Sartre, Outlines for a Moral Philosophy, p. 70)

How is this quotation to be interpreted? Obviously, Sartre wants to say that history is an aspect of *human* reality. This also fits with the existentialist axiomatics he analyses in SN. The essential characteristic of the for-itself is temporality, which is, in turn, the basic structure of history. One can even say that for Sartre, temporality and freedom are the same thing:

Thus, freedom, choice, nullification, and temporalisation are the same. (Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 806)

Further, Sartre writes:

The for-itself is the being that has to be its being in the diasporic form of temporality. (Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 275)

My interpretation of this quote is:

The diasporic form of the for-itself is temporality. The diaspora is understood as the dispersedness of the Jewish people. Correspondingly, temporality is the scatteredness of the self, the fact of being a being that finds itself elsewhere, in the future that is not yet or in the past that it once was. More precisely, Sartre describes temporality as a unity that multiplies, as a structure of selfhood that is a unity of being of permanence and diversity. (Alfred Dandyk, Sartre's Realist Perspectivism, p. 170)

Sartre's use of the word "diaspora" for the temporality of the for-itself is telling. This word initially refers to the expulsion of the Jews from their homeland, to the disintegration of the identity of this people and the separation and distance from its very origin.

The structure of this diaspora corresponds precisely to the lack of identity that Sartre identifies as the essential characteristic of the for-itself. Just as the Jewish people suffer from this lack during their exile, so the for-itself suffers from its lack of identity, expressed by the word "temporalisation", and just as the Jewish people strive towards their roots. Hence, the for-itself seeks to regain its original identity of being itself.

Perhaps the metaphor of the diaspora can also be applied to the affinity of the history of the individual to the history of humanity. The individual is in search of the identity of his or her self; humanity is in search of the meaning of its history. In both cases, the aim is to attain being on and for oneself. One strives to be what one is.

If Sartre is right, then both movements are doomed to failure in terms of achieving the goal. It will be a matter of formulating adequate goals without denying the aforementioned aspiration. In both cases, it is obvious that the search for identity is subject to temporality; that is, it is historical. To know who I am, I must examine my history. If humanity wants to know who or what it is, it must also look at its history. The history of humanity is inextricably linked to the history of the individual.

In a way, history is given to man. It belongs to the past. Gaius Iulius Caesar was assassinated on 15 March 44 BC; that is a fact; nothing can be done about it. But the *essence of* history, its *meaning*, is not given to man; man has to invent that meaning in a certain way, just as he has to invent himself. In both cases, it is a matter of realising a *longed-for* identity.

In this sense, the existentialist slogan "existence precedes essence" applies to the human individual and history. It should be borne in mind that for Sartre, the word "history" always means "history of man". A natural history, in the sense that it would be independent of man, is an aberrant conceptualisation for Sartre.

The following sentence of the above quote is particularly important:

For the idea of HISTORY enters as an active factor in the determination of HISTORY.

In other words, Sartre recognises that the mere idea of history is a determinant of history. Again, there is a close parallelism between history and the individual: the mere idea of itself is a determinant factor for itself.

It may also be that the mere conception of history and the mere conception of oneself are closely linked. If, for example, one develops the idea of history as the history of class struggles, then it may not be far from the self-design of wanting to fight as a communist to realise the empire of freedom.

This example makes it plausible that the essentiality of the concrete individual for history and the importance of history for the individual cannot be dismissed out of hand. When Hitler developed the idea that he was an instrument of God's providence, this was automatically associated with the idea that he was an instrument for the historical realisation of this providence. The determinant effectiveness of this originally pure fantasy can hardly be denied.

Sartre even assumes an "identity" of history and the individual. He writes:

The locus of our critical experience is nothing other than the fundamental identity of a single life with human history (or, in methodological terms, the "reciprocity of their perspectives"). Strictly speaking, it is precisely the identity of these two totalising processes that is to be proven. (Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, p. 73)

At this point, another of Sartre's essential concerns becomes visible. To prove that there are two totalising processes, the dialectic of the individual and the dialectic of history and that these two processes are fundamentally identical. In methodological terms, Sartre says, it is a question of tracing the interchange of the perspective of the individual and the perspective of human history. History incarnates itself in the individual and the individual objectifies itself in history.

However, it must also be emphasised that history is a teeming mass of ideas, whereby one can speak of a relative separation of these consciousnesses. Thus, while one can assume a *unity of individual consciousness*, this only readily applies to the teeming mass of consciousness that makes up history. Thus, it happens that history never coincides with the idea one has of it precisely because many other ideas of history do not coincide with my idea. So it is the existence of the Other and the relative separation of individual consciousnesses that brings out the problem of the unity of history:

But in consciousness, there is an agreement between being and the consciousness of being. The separation in HISTORY causes it never to be quite what one thinks it is. (Sartre, Outlines for a Moral Philosophy, p. 70)

This also follows from the fact that every idea about history itself becomes a part of this history, and thus, there can never be a coincidence between such an idea and history. As soon as I develop a conception of history and try to objectify this conception, this realising conception changes history and thus becomes something other than what was originally imagined. In this sense, the history of humanity eludes a final definition.

There is a clear difference between the structure of individual existence and history. The individual, insofar as it is temporality, finds its end in death. Its being-for-itself transforms into being-in-itself and into being-for-others. In this respect, the individual has a predetermined destiny. Whether history has an end or not, the answer to this question lies in the opacity of not-knowing.