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The Sartrean Self: Ambivalent or Paradoxical?

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Although I am in substantial agreement with many of the questions that are raised in Judith Torrey's interpretation of a central feature of Sartre's conception of the self, there are a number of points she makes with which I would have to disagree. In general, the characterization of the self in Sartre's thought as "contradictory" is also disputable even though it must be said, in all fairness, that Sartre himself sometimes suggests such a notion.

It is ironic, in a way, that Freud's conception of the splitting of the self is described as a form of psychological Manicheism. For, if anyone has Manichean tendencies of thought, it is Sartre. But his tendency to think in terms of radical dualities is primarily found in his distinction between repulsive "beings-in-themselves" (or what others call material beings or things) and the transcendent purity of the "for itself" or consciousness. Relying basically on Sartre's reference to the role of contradictory concepts in bad faith, Ms. Torrey assumes that this means that the self described by Sartre is "contradictory" and relates this assumption to the psychological conception of ambivalence. It is precisely this concatenation of ideas that is questionable.

Ambivalence, as I understand it, is a psychological state in which an individual experiences uncertainty because he or she is unable to make a choice or because he or she has a simultaneous desire or proclivity to say or do opposite things. This general definition of ambivalence has a more specific application to psychoanalytic thought: it is the coexistence of positive and negative feelings towards the same person, object, or action. In terms of either a general or specific notion of ambivalence, it is difficult to see why it should be construed as analogous to logical contradiction. A love-hate relationship certainly has contradictory tensions and conflicting desires or attitudes that are disquieting; but neither are contradictory in a strictly logical sense. Having positive and negative feelings towards someone or something is an understandable psychological state, and it does not violate the law of contradiction. It is for this reason that I believe that much of what is said about Sartre's ostensible notion of an ambivalent self is questionable.

The ambivalent self that Torrey describes as a kind of living logical contradiction, one that is determined to act by nothing, seems to be more her creation than Sartre's. And the suggestion that Sartre holds that the self is radically free

because it is 'ambivalent' is, at least, misleading. For Sartre, the self that has been (one's past) is not free; it is a "facticity". The self that exists for others is an objectified self, a being for others that is petrified not only by "the look," but by evaluation and judgment as well. In terms of the inwardness of consciousness, the 'self' is dynamic, in process, "surging" (in Sartre's metaphorical language) towards what it is not yet, but may become. We are free, for Sartre, for the simply stated, but metaphysically complex, reason that, as consciousness, we are not beings in the world: we are an undetermined no-thing. We are radically free because, in Sartre's view, our present consciousness is not determined by anything, not even our own past. So, if my interpretation of Sartre is viable, the point of the ambivalence of the self is irrelevant to his defence of freedom. Between our past series of choices, decisions, and actions and a present choice, there is what Sartre calls a caesura, a break, a pause or, in more dramatic language, "nothingness". Given his rather daring theory of the 'structure' of consciousness, Sartre has the basic ingredient for his defence of radical freedom. Ambivalence may impede or inhibit choice and action, but once an act is undertaken (in Sartre's account of the matter), then we are subject to the universal causal nexus of physical events. What I have elsewhere called the idea of abstract freedom rooted in the ontological structure of consciousness is central to Sartre's conception of the origin of freedom. Even the most ambivalent of persons cannot act concretely in an 'ambivalent' way. And an action, despite the Marxian belief in ontological 'contradictions' in nature or society, cannot be literally construed as contradictory.

In regard to the issue of deception of others, I agree wholeheartedly with what Judith Torrey has said on the matter. The deceiver of others must, obviously, know what he is not telling others. The corporation executive who tells a group of workers that if they increase productivity, then they will probably forestall future staff reductions is deceiving them if he knows that there will be inevitable reductions in the workforce with or without increased production. The cunning deceiver, of course, usually only implies or suggests something which he knows will not take place. Deception is lying; but it is also sometimes misleading others, offering veiled promises, manipulating the feelings of others, and much more.

Self-deception, as Torrey correctly shows, is somewhat more complicated. While it does seem to entail a kind of duality, it is not necessarily a duality in the self. It is one and the same person who tries to disguise or hide his or her true motives, beliefs, or feelings from himself or herself. Freud is quite competitive with Sartre on this score. Especially in his analysis of the "defence mechanisms" that people commonly use, he is insightful. In rationalization, for example, we present for public consumption an acceptable reason for our behavior which disguises a rationale that may not be too

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flattering. A person makes a generous contribution to a popular charity out of pure generosity (he says to others and to himself), but, in his subjective consciousness, he knows that he made the contribution purely for self-interested reasons (to display public service for some anticipated gain, to obtain a substantial reduction of taxes, etc.). Of course, since these motives for behaving in a certain way may not be acceptable to the image or self-image of such a person, he endeavors to obscure them from his own view by "pushing them into the unconscious mind." Less esoterically put, one could say that the self-deceiver engages in "selective forgetting." The subjective transformation of a motive or rationale may, as Freud affirms and Sartre denies, involve something very much like "unconscious" patterns of thinking. Certainly, as Torney points out, this process would probably be more complicated in cases of genuine ambivalence. But, again, I see no reason to assume a 'split' or division in the self to account for this. When we act out of a state of ambivalence, we may honestly say that we do not actually know why we performed a certain act. That is, in the case mentioned above, if a person desires to be generous and to seek personal gain through generosity, the action may, indeed, proceed out of conflicting motives. This testifies to the complexity of self, but not to its logomorphic 'structure'.

It is not, as is said, the condition of ambivalence that creates an "emptiness" in the self, for Sartre. In a strict sense, consciousness is not the "self" in Sartre's view. Consciousness is the primordial origin of freedom, possibility, and hence, choice, decision, and action. The self is what we become through action. As Sartre says in his popular essay, "Existentialism as Humanism," a "man is the sum of his actions." The realization of one project entails the negation of competing projects. Ambivalence in regard to competing choices is only resolved through decisive choice and subsequent action. While deliberation is an act of consciousness, it does not entail concrete action. If we were able to remain in a state of ambivalent immobility or indecisiveness, then we could not strive to realize a "project" and, hence, in Sartre's view, we would neither act nor exist in the strong sense of that word. The tension in human existence that Sartre refers to in regard to "bad faith" has to do primarily with a tendency to deny our freedom by trying to become an object, a "being in itself." The waiter, in Sartre's example in Being and Nothingness, who thinks of himself wholly and entirely as a "waiter," as a kind of "waiter-in-itself," is not ambivalent towards his behavior and he is not in a state of ambivalence. He is consciously willing to present himself as, and think of himself as, a waiter by denying his "transcendence," his freedom. Self-deception is immanent in such a situation because this project cannot be completed. . . because the person (or consciousness) who endeavors to be a waiter only is aware that, as a free consciousness, he is above or outside what he is trying to be.

Torrey is right when she says that self-deception requires what Sartre calls the "art of forming contradictory concepts." The person playing the social role of "waiter" in "bad faith" knows that he is trying to exhaust his entire being in the role of "waiter" and he is quite aware that he is not, in a strict sense, solely a waiter. By trying to become the "facticity" of being a waiter, the person thinks, "I am a waiter." However, as I understand Sartre's position here, the same person also knows, as a free consciousness, that "I am not a waiter." This is the paradox of "bad faith": as long as man has the nature of both a bound facticity and a totally free consciousness, he cannot achieve authentic self-deception insofar as he is consciously aware of acting in "bad faith."

The analysis of bad faith in Being and Nothingness and the correlative analysis of self-deception is one of the most subtle arguments in a work replete with sophisticated philosophical arguments. Briefly stated, Sartre argues that no one can claim to be, wholly and entirely, what he is and no one can claim to be entirely what he is not. I cannot, to take Sartre's example, think of myself as a total coward, as an absolute coward, because I cannot determine myself as a finished, complete entity, as a being in itself. For, my consciousness of intentionally determining myself as a "coward" is a free act of a free consciousness that eludes my cognitive determination of myself as a "coward." No one can be a total coward any more than anyone can be an "honest person." With sufficient knowledge of someone after his or her death we may say, "He was a coward." This is possible because the person referred to is now a complete facticity. In the hell in which three characters live in No Exit, the characters suffer from the full illumination, without excuse, of their being, their facticity shaped through their actions in life. For one who has lived in "bad faith" or who has tried to do so, this is, indeed, hell. As long as we are actively involved in the process of life, however, we are paradoxical beings comprised, essentially, of transcendence (freedom) and facticity (determination). It is this duality, and not states of ambivalence, that make the project of bad faith possible, but unattainable.

If it were genuinely possible, which it is not, literally to be (let us say) courageous, then the projects of bad faith and self-deception could be carried out. If one were completely courageous, then one would have become a complete being, a finished human product, an object like others. Living in bad faith, as Sartre describes it, positively requires that my project to be courageous be impossible. A non-conscious object cannot be in "bad faith" because it is what it is. It has no alterity in itself; it cannot be what it is not. The purity and perfection of works of art, especially sculptures, is espoused by Sartre precisely because of his consistent ontology. A fine piece of sculpture is complete in itself, perfect of its kind, a pleasing, beautiful, aesthetically perceived facticity. If we ask why Sartre maintains that no one can be totally sincere or completely immersed in bad faith,

we must turn, as Torrey almost does, to his ontology of human being. At this point, of course, temporary states of ambivalence, as well as the "ambivalent self," are left behind.

In concluding portions of the paper under consideration, it is said that human existence must be described in terms of contradiction presumably because the self has a contradictory nature. Admittedly, this is an interpretation that Sartre himself sometimes seems to invite. However, it is misleading. Without getting into the intricacies of Sartre's unusual ontology and some of its internal conceptual difficulties, we can safely say that Sartre's phenomenology moves from a description of consciousness, its being and its acts, to a description of being-for-others and finally to concrete action in a world comprised of "instrumental complexes," cultural objects, and the ever-present, slightly menacing, "others." In a sense, we have to read Being and Nothingness forwards, but understand it backwards. For, what Sartre presents serially, out of phenomenological necessity, is really experienced all at once in the dynamics of actuality. The concrete freedom and concrete action mentioned at the conclusion of his work entails an interaction of consciousness and facticity, an interaction that is explored in Critique de la raison dialectique. Aside from the artificial descriptions of a phenomenology of human reality, existence takes place in a causal network comprising "the world" and, in that world, consciousness is immanent in man's facticity. The living self is neither consciousness nor facticity: it is created, for better or worse, through the action of what may be called a "consciousness-body." As ironical as it sounds, given Sartre's preoccupation with the internal processes of consciousness, the self is a public entity, something that exists for others. It is for this reason that he says that Marcel Proust is the author of Remembrance of Things Past and other works, the person known by others who lived his life in a certain way. Proust is not what, in imagination, he may have thought he was; his dreams, his fantasies, his unfulfilled plans, his hopes, all of these are evanescent and irrelevant to what, finally, he was. This view of the self is what accounts for Sartre's tendency to present individuals in what seems to be a harsh, unescapable, total illumination. Put simply, we are what we become in our lifetime through the realization of our projects, no matter how humble or grandiose they may be.

The incomplete self, the self in process of formation, the self we are ineluctably becoming through our projects, our choices, and our actions, this self is paradoxical, but not ambivalent. The formula cited at the end of "The Ambivalent Self" should have been cited at its beginning. For, it is the key to Sartre's understanding of the becoming of the self. Although some philosophers in the Anglo-American, linguistic analysis camp have found this conception of human reality "untidy," Sartre knows exactly what he is saying. From Kierkegaard, in the first instance, and from Heidegger, Sartre

has adopted the fundamental ontology of man that conceives of him as a dynamic synthesis of what Kierkegaard called "necessity" and "possibility" and Heidegger called Faktizität and Möglichkeit. In terms of what an individual has done up to the present and in terms of what he or she has endured up to the present, the individual's being is characterized by facticity. Only what has already occurred is 'necessary' or has been empirically determined. If man were only what he has been or is now, he would be analogous to a mere being (Seiende) or an être-en-soi. However, as Kierkegaard first said and later William James asserted in the name of a "Danish thinker," man "lives forward." What a person has done or has undergone cannot be effaced or negated. But a person's potentialities or existential possibilities have "not yet" been realized. If they may or may not be realized in futuro, then they are contingent possibilities. Since thinkers as diverse as Aristotle and Hampshire have insisted that man has unique potentialities, then, in this sense, potentiality is part of the being of man.

Translating the above into Sartre's paradoxical idiom, we see that he holds that man is not what he is (i.e., is not his necessity or his already determined empirical actuality) and is, in a sense, what he is not (i.e., is his potentialities or his possibilities). An individual is construed as living towards future, as yet unrealized, possibilities (or projects) and being motivated in his behavior by what Kierkegaard accurately described as a "subjective teleology." The person exists, in a sense, at the ontological intersection of facticity and possibility and is not truly either, but a paradoxical synthesis of both. This, I believe, is what Sartre means in his often cited formula for the nature of human reality. In this sense, the self that is in process of becoming cannot be entirely determined because it is volatile, dynamic, or undergoing change. The self is in the process of creation, for better or worse, throughout a person's lifetime. It is not analogous to a logically self-identical concept and it is not a living "contradiction." Ambivalent sometimes, but essentially paradoxical. In fact, as Kierkegaard once said, if man were not paradoxical in his being, then he could not change, could not strive to realize possibilities, could not, in a strict sense, exist. Sartre says that it is through man that "nothingness" (=consciousness) enters the world; he might just as well have said that in human existence possibility enters the world. Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre all acknowledge "objective possibilities" in the world as much as the dedicated empiricist does. However, given their philosophical concerns, they are more interested in examining subjective possibilities.

Contradiction in thought and being that Torrey attributes to Sartre's ostensible conception of the "ambivalent self" are really paradoxical features of the dynamic nature of the self that Sartre defends. It does not take a genius to show us that individuals are subject to conflicting motives, ambivalent

feelings, and conflicting goals. But these subjective states of being are not testimony to the ambivalent nature of the self. Even in the most common choices we make we are, as Kierkegaard insightfully put it, "in-between" possibility (a projected possibility of choice and action) and actuality (our empirical actuality up to and including the present). An ambivalent self such as Torrey depicts would suffer the paralysis and immobility that she aptly describes. But this 'self' is actually only a potential self, a character who is unable to resolve the problem of opposing possibilities of choice or action, who is indecisive. This is virtually a portrait of the character "A" in Either/Or, a character who is compared to a pawn surrounded on a chessboard that is unable "to move." Such a person is paradigmatically living an inauthentic mode of existence.

Central to the existential 'therapy' of Sartre (and his predecessors) is the attempt to encourage them to become decisive in their lives, to liberate them for genuine choice. The appeal to von Wright's notion that temporal processes are both p and $\neg p$ brings us back to an Hegelian conception of actuality. And this, in turn, brings us back to Aristotle's idea that change requires a transition from a potential state to an actual state. This, of course, is where Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre enter the picture. But they prefer to point to the paradoxical tensions of human existence rather than using the logical model of what seems to be a kind of existential contradiction in the self. To be sure, there are opposing tendencies in the self, even dialectical oppositions, but man is not subject to a living, logical 'contradiction.' The simple reason for this, especially in Sartre's case, is that man is not interpreted in accordance with the model of logic. A person is never logically self-identified and never logically self-contradictory. It is Sartre's phenomenological ontology of human reality that determines his rather complex analysis of the self, self-deception, and "bad faith." Needless to say, it is decidedly not a logomorphic ontology. If it is sometimes a psychologist ontology of human existence, this is because Sartre believes, with good reason, that the psychological states of, and psychological experiences of, man are relevant to a full understanding of how man experiences himself, others and the world. How we can talk about man and his experience without impinging on the deep psychological dimension of human life is difficult to understand. Ambivalence is, indeed, part of that experience; but it is not the basis of Sartre's conception of the self.