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Review of Paul Crittenden, *Sartre in Search of an Ethics*

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All too often, an awkwardness has pervaded discussion concerning the place of ethics in Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905–80) work. At times, commentators have attempted to confine 'ethical implications' in Sartre to the periphery, as if the brief appendix devoted to a proposed ethics in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) represented his own view of the rightful place of ethics in his philosophy. Others have, admirably, devoted entire studies to Sartrean ethics, but have become mired in debate as to how the available works comprising Sartre's multiple attempts at an ethics ought to be understood and then organised. Difficult questions—'Which of Sartre's writings *count* as ethically oriented?', 'How should we distinguish between a first, second, or even third ground for an ethics discernable in his work over time?' 'What can be said of the *Hope Now* interviews with Benny Lévy?'—necessarily face anyone seeking to put forward such a survey. Happily, Emeritus Professor Paul Crittenden (University of Sydney) offers a way out of this impasse. *Sartre in Search of an Ethics* sees Crittenden argue that Sartrean ethics cannot be understood as a self-contained aspect of his oeuvre, distinct from his broader body of philosophical and literary efforts. Instead, ethical issues in Sartre become a constant on Crittenden's view, a thread that can be traced back to his earliest published essays, right through to his final weeks in 1980. This does not mean, of course, that the effort Sartre put towards an ethics, and the great difficulty he encountered in *realising* that effort, is brushed aside in favour of viewing the totality of this body of work over time as constituting a successful 'completion'. After all, the title of the work emphasises the extent to which, from Sartre's point of view in particular, these efforts were an ongoing struggle never resolved to his satisfaction. Nor does Crittenden argue that the varied ways in which Sartre came to think and write on ethics should be understood as a set of material that is somehow self-ordering or self-organising, and therefore not subject to the difficult logistical questions we began with. Rather, he concisely distils Sartre's efforts in a way that preserves the experience of the grappling involved in such a

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task, while also placing it in context by way of an over-arching chronological narrative.

In giving a very broad overview of the various 'moments' comprising Sartre's ethical search, Crittenden initially sets comments made by Sartre towards the end of his life against those made more than thirty years earlier. In 1948, Sartre declared that he was 'searching for an ethics for the present time'. This positioned his views on ethics at that stage of his career as concerned with a system of ethics immersed in the 'concrete' situatedness of living one's freedom against the backdrop of the historical *milieu* of the present time, and therefore of the socio-political reality of the emerging post-war situation in France. By the time of his final interviews, the publication of which would prove most controversial, Sartre had begun to conceive of his search as an almost mystical undertaking, as seeking after a 'moment', the advent of which would herald an ethics defined by its concern to represent '... simply and truly the way in which human beings live in relation to one another'. In between these two book-ends, Crittenden places a 1964 lecture in which Sartre defended an inherently political (and therefore Socialist) perspective on the form an ethics might take, stating that the prevailing situation represented the 'historical moment' for 'Socialism to rediscover its ethical structure, or rather to unveil it'. It may be said that *Sartre in Search of an Ethics* represents the unfolding of these distillations of the ambiguous mix of change, as well as continuity, which would come to characterise Sartre's search in an overall sense.

Part One (1939–1956) concerns Sartre's attempt to develop an ethical framework to partner the 'phenomenological ontology' established in *Being and Nothingness*. By the time he compiled the *Notebooks for an Ethics* in 1947–48, Sartre had come to render his existential ontology in evocative, indeed, theological terms. The view he previously advanced in *Being and Nothingness* was now understood in retrospect as an ontology 'before conversion' in the sense that it detailed a 'hellish' perspective on the situation of human consciousness, cast adrift and alone in its freedom. This worldview was pictured as one mired in bad faith, fractured human relationships, an unquenchable desire for absolute transcendence and various forms of alienation and oppression. The *Notebooks* gesture, therefore, to an ontology 'after conversion'. Just as a newly baptised convert is 'reborn' into their situation, rendered free of their accrued worldly sin, on Sartre's account, one's situation is revalued, and thus re-predicated upon authenticity, and is therefore made synonymous with authentic ethical engagement and action, attended by the recurring thematics of generosity and love. Crittenden's broad-ranging approach means that Sartre's major works apart from this central attempt at an ethics are also integrated into the discussion, with particular attention paid to ethical themes raised in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946), *What is Literature?* (1948), the play *The Devil and the Good Lord* (1951), and *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr* (1952). Certainly, Sartre's attempts to explore ethical implications for his philosophy spilled over into his other projects, and this meant in turn that his search was diversified, such that the *Notebooks* alone need not serve as the ultimate basis for claims of Sartre's success or failure in his attempts during this initial 'epoch' of his search. Yet, Crittenden reminds us, this view was not shared by Sartre himself, as he was unsatisfied with his efforts in the *Notebooks*—considering the sketched 'redemptive' ontology to be too idealistic—to the point that he abandoned work on them entirely. As far as he was concerned, abandoning this work

meant putting the general project of an ethics aside in turn; he would not return to making another 'formal' attempt at an ethics until over a decade later.

In the years surrounding the publication of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), Sartre's monumental, historicised account of the impact of inhuman necessity on basic social phenomena as seen through a Marxist-Existentialist lense, he was spurred to consider an ethics as a 'stand-alone' project once more. It is this period to which Crittenden devotes Part Two (1957–1980) of *Sartre in Search of an Ethics*, considering Sartre's works in context both prior to, and after, the publication of the *Critique*. While the *Critique* does not, in and of itself, constitute an ethics, his new-found enthusiasm for such a project was cognate with the dialectical, anti-materialism stance advanced therein. This general shift in approach can be further discerned, for instance, in the notes for a lecture series given at the Gramsci Institute at Rome in 1964 during a conference on *Ethics and Society* where Sartre saw the 'becoming' of a Socialist society as being in mutual accord with the present epoch, as we saw earlier. Of course, this new approach is only available to us in glimpses here, since the notes have not yet emerged published in their entirety. Yet, the notes for an intended lecture in 1965 at Cornell University discussed under the title *Morality and History*, and ultimately cancelled by Sartre at the last minute in protest against the Vietnam War, were published in 2005 to mark the centenary of Sartre's birth. The intent informing the so-called 'Cornell notes' is essentially identical to that expressed in the so-called 'Rome Lectures.' As such, Crittenden duly notes that both of these works emphasise the need for a historicising of the nature of our experience of normative moralities, and the various problems that these systems have encountered over time. This historical-analytic explanatory mechanism also serves to contextualise Sartre's various writings from the period spanning from around 1957 until his death, allowing Crittenden to consider, among other works, Sartre's preparatory dialectical essay *Search for a Method* (1957) and the existential-psychoanalytic preoccupations he explored in the context of moral development during childhood, in the first volume of his study of Flaubert entitled *The Family Idiot* (1971), in a new light, conditioned by the presence of the 'dialectical' themes and foundational underpinnings employed in them. Crittenden is further guided in his exposition by the complexities and difficulties encountered by Sartre in attempting to discern the form of, and implications for, a relationship between ethics and history, understood in dialectical terms. Ultimately, Sartre's goal here was to produce an ethics that would function as the product of a mutually sustaining union between an ethically centred understanding of history, coupled with an historically situated understanding of ethics, united by the thread of Sartre's Marxist-Existentialism. This would, in turn, allow for a perspective on history as tending toward the satisfaction of human basic needs in terms of promoting human fullness, positioned in perpetual antithesis to the inhuman satisfaction offered by other moral systems. Crittenden again notes, however, that Sartre was not satisfied with this approach, either. Although he would state in a 1972 interview with life-long companion Simone de Beauvoir that he had essentially written two ethics, 'one between 1945 and 1946 [actually 1947–8] completely misled [...] and then some notes around 1965 on another system of ethics, [dealing] with the problem of realism and that of morals', he had not been able to truly realise these efforts as culminating in anything like the kind of major philosophical work represented by the *Critique.* As such, Sartre's search was again

postponed, and while he had claimed a few years prior to the interview with de Beauvoir that his dialectical ethics needed only to be written, having already been composed in his mind, Sartre turned again to other projects, most readily to composing his massive tome on Flaubert, and then his health deteriorated sharply, due in no small part to the merciless pace sustained through his work-ethic, coupled with the use of amphetamine to aide his writing rhythm.

Crittenden devotes the final chapter of *Sartre in Search of an Ethics* to what came to be the final consideration given to ethics by Sartre, ultimately published despite the protestations of his inner circle and at his insistence, only a month before his death. The format here is that of a series of interviews with a young Benny Lévy, Talmud scholar and some-time Maoist. Given that, at times, Lévy appears to lead a severely weakened Sartre to answers echoing his own perspective, commentators have often either completely discounted the interviews (since published as *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*), or adopted a polar opposite stance by insisting that that the interviews in fact represent a sketch for a 'third ethics' informed by a sort of death-bed conversion on Sartre's part, to Messianic Judaism. Admirably, Crittenden avoids either of these extremes, concentrating on the ethical subject-matter presented in the discussion, and as always, contextualising it in relation to Sartre's search up to that point. He notes in particular the recurring theme of hope, particularly in relation to the thought that a common humanity obtains, and the further anticipation that it may serve as a precursor to a society in which 'relations among human beings are truly ethical.'

In assessing the overall value of Crittenden's survey of Sartre's fraught search for an ethics, it may be argued that Crittenden is too sympathetic in his reconstruction of the broader body of Sartre's work as a means of re-thinking the credence given to Sartrean ethics. Certainly, the almost-polemical insistence of other commentators on positing only a highly specific cross section of Sartre's literary and philosophical corpus as appropriate for ethical discussion is missing from this work. Yet, for any Sartre scholar, or even those of us relatively new to Sartre's work and the study of ethics in general, the possibilities presented to us by the chance to re-consider the fundamental bounds of enquiry in this field are made vivid in a way not previously available to those wishing to enter the discussion. In this respect, the reader is bound to welcome Crittenden's not un-timely omission of the stricture and the 'second-guessing' of Sartre's authorial intent in seeking out an ethics, present in other accounts.

Paul Crittenden is an emeritus professor of philosophy and former dean of the faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney. He is the author of Learning to be Moral: Philosophical Thoughts about Moral Development (1990) and has recently published a memoir Changing Orders (2008).