

Consistency in the Sartrean Analysis of Emotion¹

Anthony Hatzimoysis

In his *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, Sartre analyzes emotions in terms of their role in conscious agency. What is rarely noted is that Sartre gives a counterexample to his own theory: “the immediate reactions of horror and wonder that sometimes possess us when certain objects suddenly appear to us” is not explained by the theory developed in the main body of the monograph.² That critical remark is followed by a diagnosis for the apparent failure of the theory to account for those cases, and a proposal as to how they could be accommodated in a phenomenological account of emotions.

Sartre’s proposal, though, might be found unsatisfactory. Sarah Richmond has claimed that there are two lines of reasoning in the *Sketch*, that are in clear conflict with each other.³

I will argue that the *Sketch* is open to a different reading, which avoids attributing an inconsistency to Sartre’s theory. Let me first explicate how the problem arises. The alleged inconsistency lies in how ‘magic’ figures in the discussion. Emotional experience is explained in terms of magical behaviour, which purports to change one’s situation not by effecting changes in the world, but by changing the meaning of the situation; the behaviour is ‘magical’ because the agent, by means of his body, affects the way the situation is laid out before him, without acting on it. Instead of engaging directly with the case, he stands towards it as if “the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes but by magic” (30). In the last five pages of the main text, though, Sartre claims that in horror, terror, and wonder “it is the world that reveals itself suddenly as a magical environment” (57). According to Richmond, that ‘new’ view of magic, is inconsistent with (and better than) the previous one, since it treats emotional experience as ‘disclosing’ the world to us.⁴

I, on the contrary, believe that there are strong reasons for accepting the consistency between the two views presented in the *Sketch*. The first reason is simple enough. Sartre does not claim to put forward two different theories of a single kind of thing, but to analyze two different kinds of thing: “there are two forms of emotion, according to whether it is we who constitute the magic of the world to replace a deterministic activity which cannot be

¹ Published in *Analysis* 74 (1), 2014: 81-83.

² (1939): 51 -- henceforth *Sketch*, page references in brackets.

³ Richmond (2010): 147-151.

⁴ Richmond (2010): 153-155.

realized, or whether the world ... reveals itself suddenly as a magical environment" (57). The common feature in both cases is the presence of magic.

Yet, the objection may persist, if the role of magic is so different in the two cases, there is no overarching theory of two kinds of case, but two different theories applying themselves to separate cases.

In answering that objection, consider the example: "a grimacing face suddenly appears pressed against the outside window; I am frozen with terror" (55). Sartre asserts that in this case the emotional apprehension of the corresponding quality is immediate, and is not manifested in action; we may even think that that emotion does not afford talk of "appropriate behavior" and, thus, that it is an emotion with "no finality" (56). But, one may ask: 'Why are we frozen with terror?' Initially, it seems that there is nothing informative to respond: we just do. Attending to the particulars of the case, though, might give us a more interesting answer. "That face which appears at the window is presented, motionless though it is, as acting at a distance" (57). And how does the subject respond to this fact? He is "frozen with terror". I submit that, by rendering himself totally inert ('frozen'), the subject might wish that the whole scene, including the threatening presence outside the window, 'freezes' with himself. He aims to cancel the threat by cancelling its acting at a distance: what is 'frozen' is not only oneself in terror, but also the apparently imminent threat.⁵

Sartre asserts that "in the very act of catching sight of [the face], window and distance are emptied of their necessary character as tools. They are grasped in another way"; and that way is explicated in terms of his main account of the transformation of the instrumental into the emotional world (39-41).

Therefore, in all its explanatory essentials, the discussion in the final pages of the Sketch is consistent with Sartre's main analysis of emotion.

REFERENCES

- Hatzimoysis, Anthony 2010. 'Emotions in Heidegger and Sartre' in P. Goldie (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 215-235.
- Richmond, S. 2010. 'Magic in Sartre's early philosophy', in J. Webber (ed) *Reading Sartre*, Routledge: 145-161.
- Sartre, J.-P. 1939. *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, Routledge Classics, 2004.

⁵ None of these happens in cool head, as calculated steps for the realization of a prudential goal. Emotion is neither the deliberate employment of means to an end, nor a play that fakes inaction so as to secure particular benefits; cf. Hatzimoysis (2010).

