

Sartre as a Critic of Camus

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Jean-Paul Sartre as a critic has been harshly judged in Western Europe, indeed he is one of the more notable victims of cold war mental attitudes. This is well illustrated by the quarrel with Albert Camus brought into the open by Jeanson's harsh review of 'L'Homme Révolté' in 'Les Temps Modernes', a quarrel in which a very large number of western readers have taken Camus' side. Camus is seen as the upholder of human dignity and values, over against Sartre, the system builder, infatuated with the marxist myth of history. This attitude very much undervalues Sartre's contribution—he points out clearly the essential weakness in Camus' position. Moreover the whole debate is an excellent illustration of the difficulty involved in building any coherent, materialist system of ethics.

This difficulty is rooted in their common ground; both start from the atheism of Nietzsche and its consequence the absolute freedom of man. Yet both belong to the long line of French moralists and are passionately concerned with what a man ought to do, granted this double premiss. However they begin to differ even in the ways they accept this atheism. Sartre is very matter of fact, for him the death of God is so self-evident that there is no point in talking about it. Towards the end of 'Le Sursis' Mathieu receives a letter from Daniel in which the latter very interestingly explains his half-conversion to catholicism. Mathieu reads part of the letter, loses patience with its to him utter irrelevance, and throws it into the waste paper basket. This contrasts sharply with Camus' interest in the way the individual accepts atheism. Thus in 'L'Homme Révolté' there is a fascinating short chapter on Ivan Karamazov, to whom human suffering and death are intolerable:

Il affirme que la condamnation à mort qui pèse sur eux est injuste. Dans son premier mouvement au moins, loin de plaider pour le Mal, il plaide pour la Justice, qu'il met au-dessus de la Divinité. Il ne nie donc pas absolument l'existence de Dieu. Il le réfute au nom d'une valeur morale.¹

But this is not all: having accepted that there is no God, there is no immortality, no good and no evil. Everything is permitted and Ivan finds that the pedestal on which he has stood to reject the divine has been

¹*L'Homme Révolté* (Gallimard, Livre de Poche), p. 75.

pulled from underneath him. This difference in approach runs through all their work. Sartre believes very much in social action, and one must have the greatest admiration for his concern, in practice as well as in theory, for bettering the lot of ordinary men and women. Camus, as the extract above shows, is much more interested in the choices which a particular man makes, even to the extent of sometimes retreating into an ivory tower. We must now examine the salient points of their ethics separately.

There are apparent and sometimes real contradictions between the pre-war ethical and psychological ideas of Sartre, as elaborated in 'L'Être et le Néant' (published 1943), and what he has written and said on the same subjects since 1945. Without doubt his experiences first as a prisoner of war and then as an active sympathiser with the resistance explain this shift from an individual-centered position in 'L'Être et le Néant' to one of close co-operation with the communist party, and more recently to that of neo-marxist sociologist in 'Critique de la Raison Dialectique'. In the third part of her autobiography Simone de Beauvoir describes the situation in which she and Sartre found themselves after the war.

Dans notre jeunesse, nous nous étions sentis proches du P.C. dans la mesure où son négativisme s'accordait avec notre anarchisme. Nous souhaitions la défaite du capitalisme, mais non pas l'avènement d'une société socialiste qui nous aurait privés, pensions nous, de notre liberté. Again speaking of the effect of his imprisonment:

Les rigueurs et la chaleur de la camaraderie dénouèrent les contradictions de son anti-humanisme: en fait, il se rebellait contre l'humanisme bourgeois qui révère dans l'homme une nature; mais si l'homme est à faire, aucune tâche ne pouvait davantage le passionner. Désormais, au lieu d'opposer individualisme et collectivité, il ne les conçut plus que liés l'un à l'autre.²

This new interest in man-in-society gave a completely new dimension to Sartre's ethics, which he outlined in a post-war lecture 'L'existentialisme est un humanisme'. The emphasis was still on man's freedom, but not now considered in isolation. In this lecture Sartre went far beyond his early position that every relationship between conscious beings is essentially one of conflict. Now he argued that I cannot make my own freedom my aim unless I make the freedom of others equally my aim. More elaborately: all men realise their aims through particular projects, the fully self-aware man must act to increase his own freedom—that is to widen the field of possibilities for action. But if he is in 'good faith' he

²*La Force des Choses* (Gallimard), pp. 15-16.

must realise that freedom does not belong to him alone, but to all men. So in choosing a particular course of action as one likely to increase his own freedom, he must choose it as one likely to increase the freedom of all men. In other words, in saying this is right for *me*, he says, this is right for *all*. Now Sartre is not very original in this, he is really describing Kant's categorical imperative: 'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.'

A corollary which he draws from this is the need for 'engagement'. To further the cause of freedom for the mass of mankind, I must not act alone, since then my action is almost certain to be useless, but in co-operation with some group working on some particular project-for-freedom. This duty of 'engagement' applies equally to the intellectual and to the factory worker, the only difference being that the former must hold himself in some measure aloof so as to be able to analyse and comment on the efforts of the group. This by and large has been Sartre's own position with regard to the French communist party, although the relationship has never been an easy one.

This marxist adaptation of Kant is genuinely a materialist system of ethics, and probably one of the best elaborations yet of the general humanist aim into a coherent system. But in opting for social improvement through *effective* group action (that is, in the present historical situation through support of the communist party) Sartre finds himself in a dilemma. In the context of the late forties the future of socialism was bound up with that of Soviet Russia and the People's Democracies. Yet in these countries, ruled by a party dedicated to achieving freedom for all men, forced labour, censorship and rigged trials were commonplace. Simone de Beauvoir recounts what personal agony this cost him:

Il avait été acculé, l'an dernier, à choisir hypothétiquement, au cas d'une occupation russe, entre deux solutions, l'une impraticable—rester, sans s'asservir—l'autre odieuse: partir; il en avait conclu à l'impossibilité d'être ce qu'il était et il n'y avait pas moyen pour lui de continuer à vivre sans la dépasser; ainsi rejoignait-il dans l'urgence le projet qu'il avait toujours suivi: bâtir une idéologie qui tout en éclairant l'homme sur sa situation lui proposât une pratique.³

This recipe for action was to be an elaboration of the ideas contained in the 1945 lecture, and volume one of the 'Critique de la Raison Dialectique' is part of its formal presentation. But Sartre for all his lucidity has never really been able to escape from the dilemma in which the Stalinists have placed him.

³*ibid.*, p. 275.

Softness towards the crimes of Stalin and his associates was what Camus held most against Sartre. To him they were such an affront against some eternal truth about human nature that any system which appeared to condone them was for this reason inadmissible. But the problem was to find this truth without appeal to the supernatural or to any rigid system like the marxist. This was a problem which Camus never solved systematically, although 'L'Homme Révolté' is given over to the attempt. As a whole it is an unsatisfactory book, some of the incidental literary and historical criticism is however very interesting. One defect is the way in which it discusses the ideology behind political rebellion since 1789 in the abstract. Ideas are everything, they are never seen as rationalisations of a revolution brought about primarily by social and economic change; consider for example the passages on St Just and the execution of Louis XVI in the third section. This indicates a certain aloofness from the world of real political problems, but a more serious criticism is the absence of any convincing conclusion to the book. The last section, 'La pensée de midi', cannot be said to propose any system of action or indeed any answer to the dilemma of the revolutionary. It is a meditation on the good, balanced life of the mediterranean, which had such an attraction for Camus.

Au midi de la pensée, le révolté refuse ainsi la divinité pour partager les luttes et le destin communs. Nous choisirons Ithaque, la terre fidèle, la pensée audacieuse et frugale, l'action lucide, la générosité de l'homme qui sait. Dans la lumière, le monde reste notre premier et notre dernier amour.⁴

This is a magnificent image of the good life, but it will hardly do as a basis for moral choice and action, even when coupled with the notion of 'mesure' treated in the same section. As a concrete example one has only to think of the vivid description in 'Noces' of the girl dancing on a summer evening in an Algiers café. Twenty years later the same woman would probably have supported with enthusiasm the methods used by General Massu to cow the Casbah during the battle of Algiers. Camus could himself be a victim of his own images—to talk of the freedom of the French press in Stockholm when he received the Nobel prize was to say the least to equivocate. In this he was guilty of the same charge that he had levelled at Sartre a few years earlier, and with rather less defence. What gives the work of Camus its value is not the rather woolly theorising, but the way in which he marvellously highlights, particularly in his early work, situations and emotions which are common to us all. But

⁴*op. cit.*, p. 366.

his books lack the moral drive that we find in Sartre, none of the plays for example has the intensity of 'Le Diable et le Bon Dieu'. There is some evidence that Camus himself was unhappy in the moral quicksand, in which he found himself after 'L'Homme Révolté'. Certainly there is much less specious moralising in his late short stories, and but for his premature death he might have moved a long way from it.

In rejecting formal religious belief the humanist finds himself confronted with the moral dilemma of Ivan Karamazov. He feels in his bones that certain things are intrinsically right and others wrong, but it is hard for him to justify this feeling. If he rejects *a priori* complete personal autonomy, and the primitive urge towards praise and blame is very compelling, on what standard can he base his moral decisions? Hume's notion that our moral sense is of the same kind as our sense of humour is as unsatisfactory to most people as that of personal amorality. A self-aware and honest man surely reacts in qualitatively different ways from reports of genocide in Rwanda and from a bad joke. Sartre's achievement as a thinker is to have given the humanist a yardstick for moral decisions: act in such a way that if everyone were to copy you the domain of human freedom would be increased. And part of his attraction as a man is the way in which he refuses to be a prisoner of his own thought. He did speak out against Stalinist terror and against the repression of Hungary, even at the price of being accused by communists and non-communists alike of double-think. In trying to elaborate a coherent ethical system he never forgets the deep indignation against oppression from which he starts. His dilemma is inescapable, but he does not pretend that it is unreal.