

The Problem of the will

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IN AN EARLY SKETCH FOR THIS paper, Dr. Dyrud commented that it is awkward to send advanced drafts of his papers, since he never knows how they will come out until he is finished. I can understand why this would be so, since his papers have the quality of a kind of play, an arrangement and rearrangement of ideas, now this way, now that way, to reveal and highlight new angles, new relationships. Unfortunately, this spontaneity of thought and writing style makes it difficult to plan a discussion. Since I knew that Dr. Dyrud's paper would be an essay on Sartre, Sullivan and Freud, and their relationships to psychoanalysis, I thought that the best way to plan a discussion was to play, in my own fashion, with the same figures, and that is what I am going to do.

Sartre (1974) characterized his relationship to psychoanalysis as that of a "critical fellow traveller;" he drew heavily on Freud's work, but objected strenuously to Freudian psychoanalysis largely because of a single issue—the question of the will—a problem which has reappeared in various manifestations throughout western intellectual history. Freud, Sartre and Sullivan each position themselves differently around this issue, and I would like to explore the approach each takes, some of the reasons for their approaches, and suggest a possible framework for integrating these different perspectives on the same problem.

As Sartre and, more recently, Schafer point out, personal agency is largely invisible in Freud's vision of mental processes. For Freud, the mind operates according to the principle of psychic determinism—each mental event is caused directly by the mental events and stimuli immediately preceding it; psychodynamic motivation is causally closed. Within this metapsychological framework, the person never generates his or her own causal impact on the chain of psychic determinism; will and choice have no status in this theory. Freud depicts human experience as driven by forces largely unknown, a direct and unwitting product of internal pressures and compromises.

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Sartre's critique of psychoanalysis centers almost exclusively on this issue of agency. In his early, purely existential writings, Sartre argues that the human mind has no content intrinsic to it. There is no human essence—nothing is given. Being is a process, a temporal phenomenon, a consciousness which continually creates and recreates itself. Because the mind is empty and is continually self-generating, being hovers always on the brink of nothingness. Because being a person, in Sartre's view, is a lonely and terrifying business, there is a great temptation to claim for oneself a particularity, an essence, some given and enduring content. In clinical terms, the patient claims some structural properties, an enduring diagnostic nature, for example, as a rationale for his or her choices. I am the way I am because my mother was such-and-such a way, or my father did such-and-such to me. For Sartre as for Fromm, such claims constitute "bad faith," whose purpose is to remove the subject from the dizzying freedom which human consciousness allows, which the human mind is. For Sartre, Freud's concepts of psychic determinism and repression, his vision of man as lived through by external and internal forces, is a theory in bad faith, or, in Schafer's language, a theory of disclaimed actions. It characterizes human lives and choices, but leaves out personal responsibility, ascribing these choices, these patterns, to impersonal forces. Sartre, like Schafer, does not challenge the content of Freud's analysis of motives—Sartre's biographies of Baudelaire, Genet, Flaubert

and his own autobiography are filled with depictions of psychosexual and aggressive motives and an emphasis on early infantile experiences. What he does challenge is the elimination of personal agency, the failure to recognize the architect of the life in question, the person who chooses to be motivated by this or that event, circumstance, longing. Existential psychoanalysis, as Sartre characterizes it, is "a methodology designed to bring to light, in a strictly objective form, the subjective choice by which each living person makes himself a person." (1953, p. 58)

Freud's model of mind emphasizes content and meanings; Sartre's model of mind emphasizes choice. Where is Sullivan within these polarized approaches? I believe that Sullivan occupies something of a middle position. In one sense, Sullivan's system is as determinist as Freud's; in fact, he goes out of his way at several points to deride the concept of will and to emphasize his belief in the causal determinism of mental phenomena. All behavior, in Sullivan's view, is the sum of the various motives impinging on the person at any particular moment. The sense of choosing, or personal agency, is merely an epiphenomenon, a reflection in awareness of the convergence of various motives pertaining to needs for satisfaction and security, the sum of which is given and not subject to alteration by any deluded sense of willful direction.

"I know of no evidence," Sullivan insists:

of a force or power that may be called a will, in contradistinction to the vector addition of integrating tendencies. Situations call out motivation; if there is conflict of motivation outside of awareness, a compromise or a temporary domination of behaviour and suppression of the weaker motive occurs. If the conflict is within awareness, the self-system is involved, with the corresponding element of insecurity. In these cases, more complex products result, but these too are vector additions, not interventions of some sort of personal will-power. (1940, 191–2)

Yet, Sullivan also presents a way of understanding the repetitiveness of psychopathological patterns which avoids the mechanical quality of Freud's concept of the repetition compulsion and provides at least a way of thinking about choice. For Sullivan, the self-system operates on the basis of foresight and recall. The self-system steers the person in the direction of the least anxiety; the evaluation of the likely level of anxiety resulting from any particular option is based on recall of past similar experiences. Like Sartre, Sullivan portrays choice; yet, like Freud, Sullivan sees these choices as completely determined. For Sullivan, the person is a product of past interpersonal integrations, preserved in memory and continually restructured through foresight, an automatic scanning activity, projecting past situations into the present and future. The crucial question which Sullivan does not consider, is whether one can choose whether or not to exercise foresight, or choose to forsee one particular set of circumstances and consequences rather than another.

Why do Freud and Sullivan both emphasize causes, while Sartre emphasizes choice? I would like to consider several among the many factors which bear on this complex question.

The central metaphor one draws on in conceiving of mind seems important here. Mind, which the philosopher Suzanne Langer

(1972)¹ characterizes as "the greatest of all the wonders of nature" is a most peculiar, mysterious and elusive phenomenon to try to characterize. For psychoanalysts, the most prevalent metaphors within our cultural tradition, physiological metaphors or the equation of mind with brain, and religious metaphors, or the equation of mind with a supernaturally derived soul, are both insufficient. Freud and Sullivan both draw on physics for metaphors, Freud on 19th century Newtonian mechanics, Sullivan on 20th century field theory. Yet, personhood, that elusive, insubstantial phenomenon, is not graspable in terms of physical laws, and thus metaphors drawn from physics seem to lead inevitably to a deterministic frame of reference. Sartre's major metaphor, by contrast, is largely political. The most important life experience of his young adulthood was the Nazi occupation of France and his role in the French underground. To collaborate, to hide, to resist—these were profound choices—the past referents for which seem inconsequential in the face of the actuality of the choice itself and the chooser's personal responsibility for his

¹Langer, S., (1972) *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Volume II, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

actions. The central experience of the war was dramatic and heroic, which, as Sartre was later to realize, is not necessarily representative of life in general. The political metaphor, while highlighting freedom and the will, leaves unexamined the textured meaning and symbolic referents of choices.

Further, it is not possible to theorize in a vacuum; all theorists, like all analysts, are participant observers, operating in an interpersonal field, a social and intellectual milieu, in which one theory is in response to others, in which the development of concepts takes shape in dialogue and opposition to others. The predominant scientific theory of mind prior to Freud's contribution was one in which the mind and consciousness were seen as coterminous. What I know about myself is all there is to me, in the 19th century Victorian vision, and I can shape myself into whatever I want through strength of will and mental discipline. Happiness and the good life are moral achievements; unhappiness and neurosis are moral failings, weakness, or a product of bad nerves, faulty equipment. Freud saw how little in fact we do know of ourselves, and it was precisely these unknown features which he gave prominence to—hidden motives, unsavory self-perceptions, etc. Freud wanted to discount the arrogant claims of Victorian will-power to self control. Not only is conscious self-control not all of mind, Freud stressed, it does not even maintain hegemony over the mind's other regions. Sullivan's position vis-à-vis the will was addressed to a similar, if more Americanized Victorian vision, blended with the Catholic ideal of mind control. Sullivan's vector analysis of motives and stress on the power of circumstances are also steeped in a deep sympathy for the economically and interpersonally impoverished, as are his trenchant jibes at the arrogant claims of the self-system to control over the mind.

Sartre's thinking operates in a different context, with different antagonists. For Sartre, western philosophy has been dominated by various attempts to assign man an essence, and, since the Platonic-Christian tradition has been the dominant influence on our images of ourselves, that essence has been generally negative—man is fallen, bestial, passion-driven, etc. In this respect, Freud's drive theory is simply the latest version of the Platonic-Christian image of man as a fallen angel corrupted by a lower nature, and Sartre opposed the determinism of Freud's drive theory as vigorously as he opposed other pre-existential philosophies.

The influence on Sartre's approach to the will which intrigues me the most, however, is more personal. Sartre's father died during his infancy, and he was raised in the home of his maternal grandfather, a powerful figure, under whose sway Sartre's mother remained a fettered child. Much of Sartre's characteristic ways of thinking took shape in his relationship with his absent father, whose missing features could have only been filled in by the overpowering, omnipresent visage of the grandfather. Sartre sees fathers in general as crushing and oppressive, squeezing the independence and very subjectivity out of their children, particularly their sons, in an effort to mold them according to their own will.

"There is no good father, that's the rule, " says Sartre in his autobiography.

Don't lay the blame on men but on the bond of paternity, which is rotten. To begat children, nothing better; to have them, what iniquity! Had my father lived, he would have lain on me at full length and would have crushed me. As luck had it, he died young. Amidst Aeneas and his fellows who carry their Anchises on their backs, I move from shore to shore, alone and hating those invisible begetters who bestraddle their sons all their life long. (1964, p. 11)

Consider Sartre's characterization of the impact which Flaubert's father had on the novelist and his older brother.

The bitter curse which until the end of his life keeps the younger son in a state of childhood, to his misery and glory, originates in the crushing benediction that makes the elder into an adult by breaking his back. (1981, p. 99)

Sartre's approach to the issue to the will might be characterized as a massive defiance of influence. Man creates himself over and over, Sartre argues. To assign psychical causes and determinants is to make oneself into an object, to hoist Anchises, the father, upon one's back, to surrender autonomy. Fatherhood, the philosophical tradition, society, the analytic relationship are all experienced by Sartre in terms of submission, a crushing of the will by a

higher authority. The dread of being a son, the dread of the constraints of circumstances and motives, must reflect, I suspect, a deep conflictual longing on Sartre's part for the missing father with the features of the grandfather, a longing for surrender as the price for a father. In his later years, Sartre admirably came to understand something of his defensive need to see himself as self-created.

The past had not made me. On the contrary, it was I, rising from my ashes, who plucked my memory from nothingness by an act of creation which was always being repeated ... I was often told that the past drives us forward, but I was convinced that I was being drawn by the future. I would have hated to feel quiet forces at work within me, the slow development of my natural aptitudes ... I transformed a quiet evolutionism into a revolutionary and discontinuous catastrophism ... the characters in my plays and novels make their decisions abruptly and in a state of crises ... Of course! Because I create them in my own image; not as I am, no doubt, but as I wanted to be. (1964, p. 148–9)

It seems to me that Sartre never worked through this deep conflict between the defiance of influence and a longing to surrender to it. His later conversion to Marxism, for instance, has the quality precisely of a submission to a higher authority, to which he surrenders his own mind. He characterizes the relationship of Existentialism to Marxism as follows: Existentialism "... is a parasitical system living on the margin of Knowledge (i.e. Marxist knowledge), which at first it opposed but into which today it seeks to be integrated." (1967, p. 8)

Alfred North Whitehead once remarked that the only ideas opposed schools of thought have in common are their tacitly accepted presuppositions, which are fallacious. A tacit and fallacious presupposition held by most psychoanalytic and existential schools in their approaches to the issue of the will is that influence and choice are opposed, and inversely proportional to each other. Either actions are determined by prior causes, or chosen free of constraint. I think that these ways of thinking about the problem are poorly framed, because their metaphors, drawn from physics and politics, are insufficient to the task. In my view, the processes underlying the patterns which make up a human life are more usefully compared to the creation of a work of art.

One of the central functions of mind is the generation of a world of subjective meanings, the creation of a textured, symbolic order of representations in which the person locates and identifies him or herself. Where does the content of this subjective world come from? It is neither invented out of thin air, nor it is simply provided by the external world. The creation of a subjective world of meanings is an interactive process; pieces of experience are selected, refashioned, and organized into patterns. Even in the simple perception of sensory events, stimuli from the external world are worked over; perceptions are created by an active organism. Even more so is the emotional life in which we reside, our images of self and others, our sense of life and its nature and possibilities, actively assembled from bits of experience, significant others, cultural surroundings, social class values and vistas, and one's physical sensations. We might say that these are the materials, the media out of which a life, a self is created, through a whole range of processes both within and outside of awareness.

Consider the constituents of artistic creation. If a work of art is to be more than an idea, it must have actuality, i.e. it must employ a medium, be made out of materials, derive from some stylistic tradition. The medium, the materials, the tradition offer possibilities and impose limitations. Beethoven's piano sonatas, for example, were created at a particular point in history, at a specific moment in the traditions of western music, employing the sonata allegro form at an advanced point in its evolution, and written for a relatively new and dramatic instrument whose possibilities had barely been tested. A full appreciation of the creative process must take into account both the active imagination of the artist, as well as the constraints and possibilities of the context and materials with which he works.

The error of the determinist is to assume that the product is reducible to, understandable in terms of, the materials, that the choices which constitute a life are the direct, causal product of a particular set of experiences such as, depending on the theory, drive tensions, anticipations of anxiety, economic interest, etc. This would be like arguing that a work of art is predictable from a thorough analysis of its circumstances and the qualities of the materials, that, if one takes into account the features of the piano, the history of music during the classical era, an appreciation of the beginnings of romantic movement in the various arts, and the characteristics of the sonata allegro form, one could predict, account fully, for Beethoven's piano sonatas. Certainly, Beethoven's choices were not limitless; his instrument, form, place in history, personal values, audience, etc., each posed constraints, and our

understanding of his work is enriched by an appreciation of them. Nevertheless, the work of art is not a direct product of its materials and forms; there is also the artist. Similarly, the self is created out of meanings assigned to experience; one cannot begin to understand a life, a person, without an appreciation of those experiences and what they provided in terms of possibilities and constraints. But the meaning of those experiences is not given; it is composed, created. The life, the self is not produced by motives and causes; there is also the creative will of the person. Clinical work which does not take this into account becomes an intellectual exercise in explanation and rationalization, rather than an experience which provides an increasing responsibility for one's past and present choices, choices made both with clarity and deliberation as well as choices clouded by self-deception and distraction.

The error of the radical existentialist of the early Sartrean variety is to assume that the product is unconstrained by and unrelated to the materials, that the meanings and choices which constitute a life are generated independently of the circumstances and experiences within which that life has been lived. Beethoven's sonatas could not have been composed by Bach, nor could they have been written for the dulcimer. Similarly, a life, a self, is a fabric of meanings created out of circumstances, experiences, and a deep understanding of that life must include an appreciation of those circumstances and experiences. Clinical work which does not take this fabric of meanings into account becomes an exercise in blaming and moral posturing, rather than an experience which provides the possibility for genuine self-understanding and meaningful change.

The framework I have sketched out would make it possible to view the psychoanalytic exploration of meaning and the Sartrean illumination of freedom and choice not as inevitably mutually exclusive models of mind, but as partial accounts of a process which encompasses both. The psychoanalytic determinist explicates the materials and leaves out the artist; the radical existentialist depicts the artist but leaves out an understanding of his context and medium. The creation of a work of art constitutes a struggle by the artist *with* his materials, cliched art mimicking prior work and convention and surrendering to the constraints of the medium, great art challenging conventions and stretching the possibilities of the medium. Similarly, a human life is a creation of symbolic meanings from the circumstances of its interpersonal context, conventional lives borrowing meanings and constraints from popular culture, great minds like Freud's, Sullivan's and Sartre's stretching conventions of thought to give birth to new possibilities.

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