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Inconsistency in Sartre's analysis of emotion

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Anthony Hatzimoysis disagrees¹ with my claim, set out in Richmond 2010, that Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (hereafter *Sketch*)² offers two lines of reasoning about emotional experience that are in clear conflict with each other. He argues that we can and should read Sartre's text in a way that avoids attributing inconsistency to Sartre and he goes on to show how – in his view – this can be done.

Although Hatzimoysis offers an interesting way of expanding on something that Sartre says, his suggestion about how one might read the text does nothing to remove the central inconsistency that I have discussed: with respect to *that* aim, Hatzimoysis's suggestion is a red herring. *Pace* Hatzimoysis, the inconsistency remains.

To recap my claim: in the *Sketch*, Sartre's *dominant* line of thought about emotion is that it is a 'magical' strategy, to which people resort when they encounter practical difficulty, to escape that difficulty. They do this by changing its appearance, i.e., by making it disappear. And these difficult appearances are altered by altering the *consciousness* of them.

Sartre puts it like this:

[Emotion] is a transformation of the world. When the paths before us become too difficult, or when we cannot see our way, we can no longer put up with such an exacting and difficult world. All ways are barred and nevertheless we must act. So then we try and to change the world; that is, to live it as though the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes but by magic.³

For Sartre, emotion is not something that the subject passively undergoes; it is a purposive, irrational and escapist strategy. The 'purpose' of emotional

1 Hatzimoysis 2014.

2 Sartre 1939.

3 Sartre 1939: 39-40.

consciousness is to alter the way the world appears to consciousness. And the way the subject does this is *through his body*.

Sartre illustrates this theory with a number of examples. Faced with a 'ferocious beast', he says, I may respond like this:

my legs give way under me, my heart beats more feebly, I turn pale, fall down, and faint away. No conduct could seem worse adapted to the danger than this, which leaves me defenceless. And nevertheless it is a behaviour of *escape*; the fainting away is a refuge... being unable to escape the danger by normal means and deterministic procedures, I have denied existence to it, I have tried to annihilate it. And in the event I have annihilated it so far as was in my power. Such are the limitations of my magical power over the world: I can suppress it as an object of consciousness, but only by suppressing consciousness itself.⁴

Sartre's critical discussion of existing psychological and psychoanalytic accounts of emotion, which precedes this example in his text, makes the extent of his debt to them clear: many of the elements in his view – the description of the physiological features of emotion, the idea of the degree of adaptation to a situation, the claim that there are various possible interpretations of the visual field, etc. are borrowed from the theories with which he was familiar. Most clearly of all, we can see that emotion, in Sartre's account, has the *wish-fulfilling* function that Freud ascribes to fantasies, dreams, etc.

Sartre introduces his *minor* line of thought in the following sentences:

This theory of emotion does not explain the immediate reactions of horror and wonder that sometimes possess us when certain objects suddenly appear to us. For example, a grimacing face suddenly appears pressed against the outside of the window; I am frozen with terror.⁵

According to this line of thought, however, magic is not 'an ephemeral quality that we impose upon the world according to our humour'; rather, there is an 'existential structure of the world which is magical' (56).

This claim offers an account of magic's *source*, which is different from the view we have just examined: whereas, on the first view, 'magic' is a way of characterizing the emotion's strategy – it is something which the perceiving subject deploys in order to 'conjure up' a different appearance to the world – Sartre now suggests that sometimes it can be discovered by the perceiving subject, to be there – 'in the world' – *anyway*, and independently of that

4 Sartre 1939: 42.

5 Sartre 1939: 55.

subject. Sartre thinks that admitting cases of this kind will not cause trouble for his theory – but he is wrong.

Sartre's choice of the example – which involves catching sight of another person's face – is not accidental. Throughout his early philosophy, Sartre argues that there is something transformative, alienating, non-natural or – as he puts it here – *magical* about the appearance of the Other, and his effect on me. Sartre claims that 'man is always a sorcerer to man' (56) and, in the *Sketch*, he mentions two ways in which, when we perceive another person, magic is part of *what is perceived*. First, he quotes Alain's definition of magic as 'the mind crawling among things' (56) and suggests that the sight of another person *is* that of a mind crawling among things (we see a mind, as it were, from 'outside', incarnate in a thing-like body); second, he tells us that in seeing an Other, I also experience the 'magical' phenomenon of 'acting at a distance' (57). The thought here (which gets more fully spelled out in Sartre's later account of the look, in *Being and Nothingness*) is that I am affected, 'across a distance', merely *by being seen* – which is why the encounter with another person's *face* will be especially horrifying.

The trouble with this new type of example is that it conflicts with Sartre's negative estimate, in the dominant line of thought, of emotion's *epistemic value*. In that line of thought, as we have seen, emotion wish-fulfillingly alters appearances in order to 'escape' them. The upshot is a *misrepresentation* of reality. Recall our first example: when the subject becomes fearful the 'ferocious beast' is *still there*, it is just that the subject has entered a state of emotion that destroys his ability to see it. But now Sartre is saying that emotional apprehension of the world can be a veridical response to the genuinely magical phenomenon of the other. Emotion, in this new line of thought, now plays a *disclosing* role with respect to the world, rather than a *distorting* role.

How does Hatzimoysis attempt to remove this conflict? He elaborates this sentence from Sartre's example – 'For example, a grimacing face suddenly appears pressed against the outside of the window; I am frozen with terror.' – by fastening on the words after the semicolon. If 'I am frozen with terror', Hatzimoysis suggests, perhaps it is because *even here* I am resorting to the magical strategy central to Sartre's dominant line of thought. As Hatzimoysis puts it: '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.. also the apparently imminent threat'.⁶

However, this only shows that we can construct a narrative example that includes both sources of 'magic', and – beneath the surface – both of Sartre's lines of thought, in succession. Hatzimoysis suggests that the

6 Hatzimoysis 2014: 82.

subject reacts to the sight of the magical and threatening Other by working some *further* magic of his own in an attempt to escape it, emotionally affecting his own body by ‘freezing’ it with terror. This juxtaposes the two lines of thought, without removing their inconsistency as explanations of emotion.

We can see that the inconsistency in Sartre’s account of emotion – centrally, with respect to its epistemic credentials – is still there, by asking this simple question: is the subject’s emotional consciousness accurately *disclosing* the world or wish-fulfillingly *distorting* it?

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Creationism and cardinality

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Creationism about fictional entities is the doctrine that fictional entities come into existence when the fictions about them are composed: it may be contrasted both with a more platonist view according to which all potential fictional entities have always existed, and eliminativist views according to which there are no merely fictional entities. Creationism is alleged to have a number of advantages over platonism. Three important ones are parsimony, since we do not need to postulate quite so many kinds of fictional entities; a more naturalistic flavour, because the created entities are plausibly thought to be dependent on concrete goings-on; and a better fit, at least in some respects, with ordinary talk, since we talk as if, for example, Conan Doyle is the creator of Sherlock Holmes, as well as the Sherlock Holmes stories.

Creationism, however, suffers from paradox, and straightforward formulations of creationism lead to contradiction. Specifically, we will argue, straightforward creationist theories suffer from cardinality paradoxes, providing inconsistent answers to the question of how many fictional objects there are. This is not much of an advantage for platonism about fictional