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'Unappropriable' Freedom Santoni, Sartre and the Question of Authenticity – a Response to Karsten Harries

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According to Harries, 'Sartre ... has to reject whatever belongs to facticity as binding my freedom in an essential way.'¹ Indeed, he argues that Sartre's commitment to such a radical freedom results in a profound misinterpretation of the human condition that places consciousness at odds with its own embodiment, ultimately demonstrating the sensuous. This misinterpretation is exacerbated by Sartre's insistence that human freedom is destined to the futile task of producing the missing synthesis of consciousness and being, a destiny that sends consciousness on the impossible quest of providing its own foundation. The 'fundamental project', as Sartre calls it, appears to be ruled by the demand for complete self-possession, even if that unrealisable demand renders human being a 'useless passion'. This, in turn, provides the basis for Harries's provocative claim that Sartrean existentialism expresses the 'spirit of revenge' about which Nietzsche speaks. Furthermore, Harries concludes that Sartre's commitment to 'a freedom that refuses to be bound' by any contingency precludes the possibility of an 'existential' ethics: 'this leaves us only with a freedom so abstract that, far from generating what one might call moral imperatives, it does not even allow for a robust sense of self' (Harries p.35). Sartre's conceptions of freedom and responsibility therefore lack the concreteness and measure required to ground authenticity and morality.

In his recent book on Sartre, Ron Santoni picks up these matters by a different handle.² There he carries out a series of patient and thoughtful readings of texts from Sartre's early philosophy that culminate in a refined treatment of the concept of authenticity that subtly works to recognise the ways in which Sartre both binds freedom to facticity and displaces the fundamental project of human existence. Authentic existence is understood here as an affirmation of human

freedom in which we each take responsibility for our actions and for the situation. As Sartre himself frequently acknowledges, this means that freedom is 'situated' and never exists independent of a situation. To refuse or flee one's freedom in relation to the situation is inauthentic (BFGF 101). But Santoni also claims that, for Sartre, authenticity expresses a 'true fidelity' to oneself that involves 'living one's freedom'. Consciousness may enact a decisive break with such inauthenticity by refusing any quest for being and reflectively assuming its freedom. At the heart of this searching interpretation lies the claim that authentic existence requires 'embracing freedom as its value' (BFGF 94). This implies that 'freedom - always situated - becomes a primary value, always practiced in "concrete circumstance," and this valorization is the *sine qua non* of authenticity' (BFGF 159-60). Thus Sartrean authenticity, as Santoni understands it, involves a 'conversion' from the 'natural attitude' of bad faith that leads to a 'genuine self-recovery'. In order to achieve such authenticity he argues that 'for Sartre it is possible to deliver oneself from the tormenting ontological "hell" of consciousness's *original (bad faith)* project of attaining self-coincidence, identity, from the project of being *Causa Sui* or "God".' (BFGF 188-89). Here the original (bad faith) project is superseded by the authentic project of self-recovery in which consciousness affirms its situated freedom as the primary value. For Santoni, 'freedom here already replaces "God"' (BFGF 169).

This interpretation of authenticity - and the displacement of the fundamental project it involves - has profound implications for our reception of Sartrean existentialism. After all, the coincidence of the For-Itself and In-Itself provides the ultimate, if nonetheless impossible, *telos* of human existence in *Being and Nothingness*.³ The desire to be God stands astride the masterwork of Sartre's early philosophy as a great colossus that pervades the entire treatise, subtending virtually every analysis. Harries concurs. Inasmuch as 'a full self-affirmation demands that we free ourselves from what Sartre calls the fundamental project,' he writes, 'this demand makes sense only if we reject the claim that the project is indeed fundamental, i.e. constitutive of human being' (Harries, p.31). In his view, however, such a rejection would demand that we 'substitute for Sartrean authenticity an understanding that recognizes that we are truly ourselves only when we are able to discover rather than create meaning in the world, and that means, first of all, when we also recognize the other' (Harries, p.32).

In Santoni's view, it appears that no such substitution is necessary if one interprets authenticity as a conversion in which consciousness

embraces freedom as its primary value. According to this interpretation, I suggest, the fundamental project would remain constitutive of human existence but *not* determinative of it. This can be understood along the lines laid out by the 'existential analytic' in *Being and Time*. Analogous to Heidegger's understanding of *Dasein*'s 'average everydayness,' the fundamental project would appear to characterise the initial condition ('natural attitude') of human existence as 'fallen' into the world of things.⁴ Proximally and for the most part' fleeing from its freedom, consciousness seeks to absorb itself in being, to coincide with itself. Authenticity would then be the counter-movement by which human existence would reclaim its freedom and recover itself. Since one will never be released from the 'draw' or 'pull' exercised by the fundamental project, one can never claim one's freedom once and for all; authentic existence is never finally won, but must be constantly reaffirmed.

Santoni recognises that 'Sartre's analysis of conversion is not ... entirely unlike Heidegger's views on "resoluteness" in relation to authenticity' (BFGF 157-58; BT 341-58). Confronted with the 'perpetual failure' of the project of the For-itself to be In-itself, consciousness is 'solicited' to rise to the level of 'pure reflection' and 'question the meaning' of its acts. The structure of this relation is similar to Heidegger's analysis of the 'call of conscience', the authentic response to which is a 'resoluteness' that assumes one's guilt/responsibility at being the 'null basis of a nullity' (BT 312-48). For Sartre, the authentic response to such inevitable failure is a 'pure or non-accessory reflection' that decisively breaks with the fundamental project and the self-alienation it entails. Through such reflective conversion consciousness resolves to assume responsibility for its own freedom and thus substitutes the existential project of authenticity for the fundamental project of self-coincidence. But, in a footnote, Santoni hints at an important difference between the two conceptions of authenticity (BFGF 225-26, n. 114). While for Heidegger authenticity culminates in a resolve to appropriate oneself by seizing upon one's 'ownmost' possibilities, Sartre appears to underscore the 'non-appropriateness' of authenticity.⁵ In what is perhaps the deepest of his many insights in this book Santoni remarks that 'in conversion human reality, by renouncing the impossible and bad faith project to be "god" (in-itself-for-itself), *unversteht* the "unappropriate," existential dimension of human living, and decides, radically, to live "in accordance with" itself; that is, consistently with its being an unstable, evanescent freedom on which all meaning and values depends' (BFGF 156). Authenticity thus affirms its 'unappro-

priable' freedom as the sole foundation – albeit a foundationless foundation – of all meaning and value.

Here, it seems to me, Santoni hits upon a conception of freedom while pre-empting the profound pathos of Sartre's philosophy. Moreover, it is an interpretation that may have further implications unexplored by Sartre himself. Santoni intimates such possibilities where he writes that 'in conversion, human reality, initially disposed to bad faith, now "unveils" itself to itself, takes up its mode of being, "diasporic being" ... and takes on a new, nonappropriative relation to itself, the world, its body and other people' (ibid.). Although the book does not pursue this matter, the comment intimates that such an understanding of authenticity would ultimately require taking up again all of the key topics of Sartre's existential philosophy, but now from the perspective of an authentic existence that takes over responsibility for its 'unappropriate' freedom. For if the 'desire to be god' now functions analogously to the 'horizon of everydayness' in Heidegger's existential analytic, then the break with this project (and its bad faith) opens up another modality of human being, a horizon of authenticity, that would decisively modify the structures of existence preliminarily worked out within the scope of the fundamental project. Released from the project of self-coincidence, there is no reason to assume that an existential analysis of authentic existence would have to repeat Sartre's gestures of self-aggrandizement. For example, despite its problematic overtones, Sartre's analysis of shame basically concerns the vulnerability we experience when exposed before the other. But what modifications would be introduced by reviewing this basic structure of our being-with-others from the standpoint of authenticity as a 'nonappropriative relation'? If authentic existence acknowledged the vulnerability that each of us shares with all others as a situated freedom and embraced the frailty of our embodied existence and its exposure to suffering, would it not be open and responsive to the other in gestures that recognise and affirm the other's freedom as well as its own?

The crux of this debate, however, concerns the question as to whether authenticity is moral. While Harries agrees that authenticity requires that human existence accept 'its inability to be its own foundation', he remains doubtful whether positing freedom as a value can provide the measure and guidance for action in concrete situations (Harries p.33). After all, I may choose to bind my action to this or that value, but that choice itself is grounded in my freedom and hence ultimately unjustifiable. As the foundation of value, freedom

resists its own re-appropriation as a value. But, according to Santoni's account, it is precisely as such a situated, yet 'unappropriate', freedom that authentic existence assumes responsibility for itself. This becomes an on-going and concrete responsibility for how one lives out the meaning of that freedom through one's active engagement with the world. The project of authentic existence orients itself by embracing freedom as a value not in order to re-appropriate itself, but in order to realise itself as a situated freedom. Such realisation, of course, is never complete; freedom, as a lived condition, is never finally achieved. Here we do well to recall that Sartre defines value by its very lack of being (Cf. BN 133–47). To embrace freedom as a value is what enables the project of authenticity as one in which freedom is effective as the exigency of an unspecified demand the realisation of which is forever deferred. By assuming responsibility for its freedom, authentic existence discloses the situation as one in which freedom is at stake. What freedom demands cannot be known in advance, but can only be decided there in the particular circumstances where the concrete possibilities of freedom are disclosed to us as appeals for action. While this view of authenticity may not lend itself to an ethics, it may nonetheless describe our moral predicament.

Notes

1. See this publication, pp.25–38, Karsten Harries, 'Sartre and the Spirit of Revenge'. Subsequent references in the text are all to this article.
2. Ronald E. Santoni, *Bad Faith, Good Faith and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. [Hereafter: BFGF].
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Washington Square Press, 1966, pp.785–95. [Hereafter: BN].
4. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, pp.210–24. [Hereafter: BT].
5. However, Heidegger's concept of authenticity need not be understood as a project of appropriation. John Sallis, for instance, interprets Heidegger's analysis of being-toward-death as 'an operation of disownment'. See John Sallis, *Echoes: After Heidegger*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, pp.118–38.