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Mihai ANDRONE*

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The Influence of Jean-Paul Sartre's Philosophy on Peter Singer's Ethics

Mihai ANDRONE[1]

Abstract

Peter Singer is one of the best known contemporary thinkers, and his work has been stirring vivid debates, being carefully researched by philosophers, ethicists and theologians. Although it is generally known that Peter Singer has been concerned with the field of practical ethics, and he has been a promoter of animal rights, however the present article aims at evincing an interesting aspect, i.e. the extent to which Sartre's philosophy made a real impact on Peter Singer's ethics, and the effects of this impact. The present article starts from the premise that there are numerous common points between the opinions of these two authors. In any case, in his work Peter Singer repeatedly mentions the French existentialist philosopher, sharing the latter's passion for man's freedom to choose and follow his own path in life, beyond any traditional axiological points of reference of Judeo-Christian extraction. To Peter Singer freedom means choice, ethics is natural and not supernatural, and man does not dispose of an essential nature able to condition his future and thus the repertory of his personal moral options. In other words, Peter Singer agrees with Sartre's statement in Existentialism is a Humanism, according to whom our existence precedes our essence. Just like Sartre, Peter Singer does not believe in absolute, immutable truths, and so his ethics and anthropology have a specific secular profile confirming in fact a certain reality, viz. the postmodern dissolution of the sacred.

Keywords: *Peter Singer, Jean-Paul Sartre, ethics, freedom, choice.*

[1] Associate Professor, PhD, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania, e-mail: mihai.androne@ugal.ro.

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Corresponding Author: Mihai ANDRONE
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1. Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre and Peter Singer are two renowned contemporary thinkers whose works in ethics and philosophy have been stirring countless debates and polemics in academic environments. Although the French atheist existentialism and the Australian utilitarianism each dispose of their own identity, both philosophers concerned, despite coming from different cultural environments, share the passion for human freedom unconstrained by traditional ethical-religious values and norms, specific to Western spirituality. The ethical and anthropological doctrines of both thinkers may be seen as typical products of the pluralist, relativist and atheist postmodern era. But the similarities between their doctrines cannot be exclusively explained if we choose as a starting point the spiritual and cultural characteristics of the contemporary period. It is the premise we used for the present article in order to prove that Peter Singer had a genuine affinity for Sartrian philosophy.

2. Theoretical Background

There are many important works, mainly written in English and French, analysing the philosophical and ethical conceptions of Jean-Paul Sartre and Peter Singer, but not the influence that French existentialist philosophy might have exerted on the anthropological and bioethical ideas of the Australian philosopher Peter Singer. As a result, the present original article aims at identifying the area of compatibility between the doctrines of the two authors, reviewing certain common points in their works. However, we have to clarify that the following papers may help the readers acquire an accurate image of the characteristics of Sartrian philosophy, the compatibility between the doctrines of Sartre and Peter Singer, and, at the same time, the impact that atheist existentialism had on today's ethical theories.

The following enumeration is not supposed to be exhaustive. It is our opinion that the anthropological valences of Sartre's work are duly highlighted in Joseph H. McMahon's book, *Human Beings: The World of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 1971). In his turn, T. Storm Heter aims at unveiling *Sartre's Ethics of Engagement* (London-New York: Continuum, 2006), and Thomas C. Anderson refers to *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Chicago-La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1993). William L. McBride enlarges the framework of analysis, editing

Existentialist Ethics (New York-London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997): this book is somehow a sequel to the studies of Mary Warnock, who also wrote, half a century ago, a book entitled *Existentialist Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1967).

We would also like to mention Christine Daigle: she edited a book including the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre among the thinkers who had a notable influence on contemporary ethics: *Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006). Also, Pierre Verstraeten's book, *Violence et éthique: Esquisse d'une critique de la morale dialectique à partir du théâtre politique de Sartre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) highlights the fact that Sartrian literature possesses an undeniable ethic dimension. These bibliographical suggestions may enable readers to identify new aspects of the issue tackled in the present article.

3. Argument of the paper

The present article aims at showing that there are many common points between the doctrines of the two philosophers and ethicists, and even more, that it would not be exaggerated to speak of the influence that the French existentialist atheist exerted on the famous defender of animal rights and promoter of controversial atheist practices such as abortion, euthanasia, and infanticide. The paper also intends to highlight once more that Sartrian philosophy is the philosophical framework able to explain the main theses of Peter Singer's ethics. Therefore, the present article aims at arguing that the association of the two thinkers is by no means arbitrary and devoid of real foundation, although Jean-Paul Sartre was not predominantly concerned with ethics, and Peter Singer has never been acknowledged as an existentialist philosopher or ethicist.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

So, what unites Jean-Paul Sartre and Peter Singer? Their common interest in Marx? Their overt atheism? The nihilism, relativism and desire to be the creators of a new moral – reflection of an exacerbated subjectivity and individuality able to undermine social harmony? The passion for an unlimited freedom constituting the premise for an engagement devoid of concrete content and a responsibility impossible to determine accurately? An anthropological conception in perpetual search for a changing, chameleonic human nature? The divorce from the past, and first and foremost, the Judeo-Christian tradition? Are both thinkers typical products of our postmodern

era and therefore its major representatives? How close is the resemblance between the theories of the two philosophers and ethicists?

Sartre is included, in point of doctrine, among the existential atheists, i.e. among those who believe that "*existence* comes before *essence*" [1 p26]. In Sartre's case the departure point of all philosophical approaches is *subjective* and at the same time the idea that man is not the product of a divine creator. Sartre separates himself from the Christian, as he does not believe that man is a divine creation and thus his essence would precede his existence.

19th century atheism proved inconsistent, as it removed the idea of divinity, but not the idea that the essence of man is prior to his existence, says Sartre in *Existentialism and Humanism*. The philosophers of the time continued to erroneously believe in the existence of a "human nature" that would be found as such in every man; they continued to believe that human essence would precede man's historic existence. Anyway, Sartre intends, in fact, to right the wrongs of such a type of atheism, and consequently show that "if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence" [1 pp27-28]. That privileged being, lacking a pre-established nature, is man: his existence precedes and determines his essence, his life experiences constitute his "nature", define him, grant him his specific identity.

Thus, Sartre intends to evince that man disposes of an entirely special identity, and his identity "formula" is diametrically opposite to the one belonging to a mere handcrafted object. First man exists, he is oriented towards the future, has projects, life goals, wants to be something in a conscious manner: man truly exists only when he manages to be what he planned to be in full awareness, writes Sartre in *Existentialism and Humanism*. Consequently, only man is in charge of the trajectory of his life, and existentialism aims at making man self-aware, the genuine master of his own life by the decisions he takes in a sovereign manner, by the free choices he makes, thus influencing his peers. Man chooses for himself and for others, as by his choices man shows all others what he considers as good and valuable, worthy of being taken as an example to follow: the commitment made by any man is in fact "on behalf of all mankind" [1 p30].

Such a man who sovereignly decides for himself and for others is completely responsible for himself and all the others – such a man who is permanently confronted with a plurality of possibilities and responsibilities is full of *anguish*, *abandonment* and *despair*. *Anguish*, as every man is a reference point for the others. *Abandonment*, since by no longer taking God into account, the practical man no longer cares for traditional values, e.g. those specific to the Judeo-Christian tradition, he no longer believes in their validity, in their intelligible, normative character: "There can no longer be

any good *à priori*, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it" [1 p33]. By losing God, man loses in fact the entire axiological foundation, and any moral certainty and safety. Man is in position to reinvent, in a sovereign manner, at will, good and evil, the positive and the negative, the entire range of moral options, as the old interdictions have vanished. And in so doing, man reinvents himself.

Sartre agrees with Dostoyevsky's assertion: "if God did not exist, everything would be permitted" [1 p33]. Upon so learning, man discovers that he is alone, *desperate*, unhappy, without excuse, overwhelmed by his unlimited freedom and the lack of a human nature able to condition his choices and actions, justifying them at the same time. The man portrayed by Sartre does not possess a clear, pre-established identity; the man described by the French atheist existentialism is merely freedom and nothing else, he is "condemned to be free" [1 p34]. There is no more authority to validate his behaviour, just like there is no more superhuman power to validate his acts. Being absolutely free, man is terrified to find out that he is alone, left to the will of uncertainties, abandoned in an absurd world, devoid of clear reference points and doubtless, generally valid meanings.

Sartrian philosophy helps us better understand the postmodern dissolution of duty addressed, among others, by Gilles Lipovetsky. However, the French philosopher openly acknowledges at one point that the morality of duty was never his interest point, as he had rather searched for a *freedom* above *morality* [2 p82], above a certain given human nature. And this freedom placed *above* morality and a constraining human nature is also specific to Peter Singer. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, when he deals with the topic of "ethics", Peter Singer criticizes Aristotelian ethics, refusing to admit that the investigation of human nature could reveal man's duties and responsibilities. The universe we live in is not hierarchically organized, orderly and in possession of a profound meaning, and human existence is nothing more than "the result of a blind process of evolution. […] Thus, human nature cannot, without further moral premises, determine how human beings ought to live" [3 p70].

Just like Jean-Paul Sartre, Peter Singer refuses to build his ethics on a given human nature. The existence of a human nature was questioned in the 20th century, and like Jean-Paul Sartre, Peter Singer "also tends to see belief in the existence of a human nature as tied to theism" [4 p35]. Thus, Peter Singer, like Jean-Paul Sartre, institutes a total departure between human nature and ideals: although his ideals are not based on human nature, he seems to hope that one day it will be possible for human nature to take his ideals as reference points [5 p95].

To Peter Singer, human nature is irrelevant from a moral point of view. It is irrelevant, on the one hand, if one takes into account its diversity [6 p288]. It is irrelevant, on the other hand, if one takes into account the fact that men are merely evolved animals [7 p6], i.e. limited beings, but in this case, logically speaking, the perfectibility of human nature would represent nothing short of "an impossible goal" [8 p300]. The Darwinism of the well-known Australian philosopher and ethicist, his manner of distinguishing between *humanity* and *personality* in order to morally "justify" abortion and infanticide, all these take him even closer to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy: to Peter Singer human existence precedes personal, rational essence. The newborn is not a person as it has not lived enough to be considered as such, and just like with Sartre, the child's existence precedes essence, and as it does not dispose of self-conscience, it does not dispose of any kind of personal identity [9 p7].

Peter Singer is an apologist of human freedom, of its lack of dependence on any traditional and constraining value: "We are free to choose what we are to be, because we have no essential nature, that is, no given purpose outside ourselves" [10 p5]. This freedom glorified by Sartre constitutes for Peter Singer the supreme expression of man's freedom, his detachment from any ethical certainty.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

The similarities between the doctrines of the two philosophers and ethicists dealt with in the present paper cannot be random, nor exclusively justified by today's postmodern mentality. Peter Singer is knowledgeable in Sartrian philosophy, he mentions the famous French philosopher more than once in his works.

6. Dismantling the arguments against

This type of epistemological and moral uprooting we are witnessing today is undoubtedly reflected on the pedagogical and anthropological plane. Once the absolute has been removed from the axiological field, and moral is emptied of substance, man himself is surprised to discover that he no longer disposes of a certain nature, compatible to stable behaviour and attitude standards. The freedom (of choice) and the harmony we are assiduously trying to impose in postmodern society transform reality into a convention: "there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a

practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions" [11 pxlii].

To pretend that moral values and principles are purely human conventions and have a historic value only empties them of any power, transforming them into shadows or figments of imagination, and thus deprives them of the ability to make a real difference in the world we live in. Evacuating the religious from the public sphere to the private sphere, the *disenchantment of the world* [12 p308], the symbolic erosion of moral duty and the birth of a minimal postmoralist ethics [13 p15] are phenomena that dispose not only of intellectual, academic, doctrinarian consequences. They have the most serious repercussions on the manner in which man looks upon life and implicitly his neighbors. In our postmodern society virtue was turned lay, just like responsibility was turned lay, secularized, completely emerged into the mundane, the desacralization process knows no bounds anymore: "the ethics" of the secularized world preaches the empty shell of a commitment and a responsibility that is to be filled by every individual with the contingent choices he makes in life.

7. Conclusions

There is a real similarity between the ideas of the two philosophers and ethicists spoken of in the present article. Peter Singer sympathises with several of Sartre's ideas, and, just like the French existentialist, professes to be the adept of human freedom unconstrained by absolute norms and values. Both thinkers, by their atheism and Darwinism, reject the idea that there might be a certain human nature, and from this point of view, Sartrian philosophy undoubtedly constitutes the perfect framework able to explain some of Peter Singer's philosophical and ethical intuitions.

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