

New Perspectives on Sartre

New Perspectives on Sartre

Edited by

Adrian Mirvish and Adrian van den Hoven

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

New Perspectives on Sartre,
Edited by Adrian Mirvish and Adrian van den Hoven

This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2010 by Adrian Mirvish and Adrian van den Hoven and contributors

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2228-0, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2228-2

To my Family
—Adrian Mirvish

To my family and especially my youngest grandsons Elliott and Auguste
—Adrian van den Hoven

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	xi
-----------------------	----

Introduction	1
Adrian Mirvish and Adrian van der Hoven	

Chapter One: Sartre and Children

The Future in the Child.....	12
Kenneth L. Anderson	

Becoming with Child: Pregnancy as a Provocation to Authenticity.....	25
Sarah LaChance Adams	

Autism and Sartre's 'Look': A Philosophico-Psychiatric Analysis.....	37
Lissa Rehtin	

Chapter Two: Sartre and Religion

Sartre and Christianity

Atheistic and Christian Existentialism: A Comparison of Sartre and Marcel.....	44
Thomas C. Anderson	

Sartre and Lonergan on Consciousness	64
Elizabeth A. Murray	

Sartre and Judaism

Sartre, Fraternity, and Jewish Messianism: At the Crossroads of Ontology and Metaphysics.....	77
Adrian Mirvish	

Reflections on the Yellow Star: Jean-Paul Sartre, Édith Thomas, and Jean Paulhan	95
Dorothy Kaufmann	

Sartre and Eastern Thought

Self Awareness in Vijñānavāda Buddhism and Sartre's Existentialism..	104
Anindita N. Balslev	

Chapter Three: Sartre and Ontology

Phenomenology and Freedom	114
David Detmer	
Sartre on Limited and Conditioned Freedom	124
Matthew Eshlemann	
Sartre on Consciousness: Remembering the Gestalt Psychology Context	142
Katherine Morris	
Realism and Contingency: Elaborating a Viable Sartrean Response To Rorty's Anti-Realism	161
Steven Hendley	

Chapter Four: Sartre and Women

Living with Mother: Sartre and the Problem of Maternity	178
Benedict O'Donohoe	
Sartre and Women: The Place of Lena Zonina.....	191
Jean-Pierre Boulé	

Chapter Five: Sartre, Aesthetics and Literature

Sartre and Painting	214
Sophie Astier-Vezon	

Sartre: Bodily Experience as a Guiding Thread to the Relationship between Phenomenology and Literature	230
Noémie Parant	
Contemporary Perspectives on Sartre's Theater	246
Dennis A. Gilbert	
<i>Bariona</i> : Sartre's First Play Features a Jewish Village Chief who Saves the Christ-Child at his own Peril	251
Adrian van der Hoven	
Art is an Appeal to Freedom	260
Heiner Wittman	

Chapter Six: Sartre and Value

Sartre after Marxism	270
Ronald Aronson	
Oppression and Violence in Sartre's Thought	286
Menachem Brinker	

Chapter Seven: Sartre and the French Connection

Sartre, Fondane, and Kierkegaard: In Search of the Roots of French Existentialism	296
Bruce Baugh	
Sartre and Merleau-Ponty on Structuralism, Language, and Communicative Life	315
Thomas W. Busch	
Between Writing and World (Sartre, Blanchot)	330
Hannes Opelz	

Chapter Eight: Sartre and History

World War Two Reconsidered: From <i>Men Without Shadows</i> to <i>The Condemned of Altona</i>	368
James Brydon	
Rethinking German Identity after the Nazi Experience: French Memories of Germans in Sartre's Trilogy <i>The Roads to Freedom</i>	384
Manual Bragança	
Sartre and the Meaning of History.....	403
William L. McBride	

Chapter Nine: Sartre and Psychology

Nothingness at the Heart of Being: Existential Psychoanalysis and Gestalt Therapy.....	412
Betty Cannon	
Contributors	428
Index	436

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank California State University, Chico for providing funds that enabled part of the editing process for this volume to take place. In this regard, thanks go to Jeanne Platt for the efficient formatting of the texts. An especial thanks go to Nicole Hobbs (Adrian Mirvish's teaching assistant) who, besides her share of editing, went beyond the call of duty on a number of occasions; from dealing with the obscurities of correcting diacritical marks for (Romanized) Sanskrit to helping assiduously with articles that needed to be retyped into the computer.

INTRODUCTION

ADRIAN MIRVISH
AND ADRIAN VAN DEN HOVEN

The impetus for this volume started with a meeting of the North Americans Sartre Society which was held in 2006 at the Manhattan campus of Fordham University, one year after the centenary anniversary of Sartre's birth. The project quickly grew beyond the scope of the conference and led to this collection of twenty-eight articles which represent the full gamut of contemporary research on Sartre.

Most salient for us in editing this work is the vitality of the contemporary literature on Sartre, a fact which testifies to what was an enormous talent so that today this figure, who during his lifetime so captured the public imagination, is able to inspire a broad range of intellectual endeavor in philosophy, literature, psychiatry, psychology, history and political thought. As suggested by the title, *New Perspectives on Sartre*, this anthology contains a number of new topics, issues that have not previously been dealt with systematically in the literature, namely, "Sartre and Religion" and "Sartre and Children." Beyond this, however, it should also be emphasized that in this volume Sartre's ideas are examined in terms of diverse issues of current interest, e.g. Rorty's pragmatism and the phenomenon of autism. In addition, there are fresh approaches to the topics of Sartre and freedom, and his relation to ethics and Marxism. Finally, when it comes to the issue of the thinker and his context, there are articles that emphasize Sartre's background in terms of historical factors – both general and those that are specifically French - that were crucial in shaping the development of his *oeuvre*.

In attempting to best represent the topic of new perspectives on Sartre, we have, first, covered an extremely wide range of topics. Second, instead of adopting the standard taxonomy in the literature which emphasizes the early as opposed to the later Sartre - i.e. *Being and Nothingness* and works prior to this as opposed to what comes after – we have deliberately emphasized what we would like to term a 'middle' and 'final' period as well, since these are developmentally and conceptually distinct and should

not be integrated into the standard two categories. Thus, as representative of the middle period, there is an emphasis on *Notebooks for an Ethics*, while *Hope Now* is treated as being philosophically novel and significant in its own right. Third, even with what amounts to more standard categories that deal with Sartre's work, e.g. "Sartre, Aesthetics and Literature", "Sartre and Ontology" and "Sartre and Psychology", we have made sure to provide the reader with new points of view. So, for example, Heiner Wittman explains how an important and refined view of freedom can be found by examining Sartre's work on aesthetics. The article of Kathryn Morris on non-positional consciousness shows how Sartre is able to integrate fundamental ideas from Gestalt psychology into his own ontology, thereby explaining what was previously an apparently mysterious phenomenon in terms of discoveries from experimental psychology. Betty Cannon's article shows how Sartre's views on existential psychoanalysis can dovetail with findings from clinical versions of Gestalt therapy, so helping to provide a theoretical underpinning for the latter.

There are nine book chapters that have been designed to cover a wide spectrum of topics, viz. children, religion, ontology, Sartre's relation to women, aesthetics and literature, ethics, history, Sartre's intellectual background and psychology. In the first chapter there are three articles where it is made clear that what Sartre has to say about consciousness and embodiment must be understood in the context of his, certainly for the time unorthodox, treatment of consciousness as a childhood phenomenon. In the first of these, Ken Anderson shows how Sartre finds the relation between child and adult caregiver problematic when it comes to the phenomenon of freedom. Although Sartre's views evolve, Anderson explains how in *Notebooks for an Ethics*, the "Rome Lectures" and in *The Family Idiot* Sartre's respective analyses in all three cases entail so-called "unsolvable situations." Anderson adapts Levinas' idea of "election" to deal with this difficulty. In the second article, Sarah LaChance Adams explains that Sartre's insights about authentic relations can shed new light on the experience of pregnancy. While it is certainly true that a woman's sense of selfhood can be profoundly upset by the intrusion of the fetus into her bodily boundary, by her inevitable immersion in this developing corporal process, plus the increasing awareness that she is no longer a free and single entity, material from *Notebooks for an Ethics* allows LaChance to argue that if the mother can allow herself to become fully aware of the fetus' presence within her, this upheaval can create a more dynamic experience of herself and contribute to the growth of her own authenticity. In the third article, child psychiatrist Lissa Rehtin shows how Sartre

never clearly distinguishes between social aspects that form an integral part of the look as opposed to the look as an ontological phenomenon; where this latter allows Sartre to argue against solipsism. Although children suffering from autism show a wide variety of behaviors, which include an equally wide variety of ways in which they can relate to others, what autism in general allows us to see is that there is a profound phenomenological distinction between a pre-social look that does provide some link to others, versus a social look of the type that is implied by attachment theory. This distinction, besides being important in and of itself, helps to clarify the significance of the look for normal human interchanges as these are illustrated by Sartre.

Sartre's ingenuity, plus his ability to draw in admirers and detractors alike, also becomes clear in the second chapter of the book, one which may at first appear to be an unlikely topic. For it's to Sartre's credit that – discounting his old age at the time of *Hope Now* – as a champion of atheism he has managed to attract the attention of a number of important religious figures of the twentieth century. This is not just because his thought is so rich and intricate but also because it is so alluringly contentious. Indeed, it is fascinating how some religious thinkers have been drawn to his ideas even if only insofar as there is the need ultimately to refute them. The section of the book dealing with Sartre and religion has been divided into three, viz. Sartre's thought in relation to Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism.

In the first article, Thomas Anderson discusses similarities and differences between Sartre and Marcel, arguing that many of Marcel's best critiques of Sartre apply only to his early ontology and ethics. Anderson then shows that a good number of these objections were in fact acknowledged and so defused by the later Sartre who had very much modified many of his own earlier positions. Anderson also addresses some major, irreconcilable differences that remain between the two thinkers. In a second article, Elizabeth Murray discusses some of the common conceptual roots between Sartre and the Jesuit thinker, Bernard Lonergan. She argues that both have been inaccurately characterized by post-modern writers as being representatives of modernism. Drawing on Lonergan's Jesuit background, Murray shows that despite one being a seminal Catholic theorist and the other an avowed atheist, there are nevertheless close similarities, or what she terms 'Ignatian characteristics', between the Sartre and Lonergan, and that the latter has been influenced by the former – sometimes by contraposition – when it comes to their respective analyses of consciousness, self-awareness and knowledge.

In the section on Judaism, Adrian Mirvish shows that *Hope Now* - a dramatic text for an already dramatic life - is the work of Sartre still acting and thinking qua anti-disestablishmentarian. For three weeks before his death Sartre could, characteristically, promulgate what amounts to another major shift, this time about a new relation between his thought and Judaism. Mirvish argues that *Hope Now* does constitute a distinctly new phase of Sartre's work, but that although he has been profoundly influenced by three basic principles of Judaism, Sartre's final thoughts are still the distinct product of his own prior work. Also in the section on Judaism, an article by Dorothy Kaufmann discusses Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Kaufmann raises the issue of authenticity, both regarding the Jew as portrayed by Sartre and as regards Sartre's own activities during World War II. The criticisms voiced against this text, viz. that Sartre defines the Jew merely in terms of his being a product of the anti-Semite, are by now well-known. However, Kaufmann shows that in 1942 the historian and journalist Edith Thomas wrote a story entitled "The Yellow Star", plus a series of questions and answers about the situation of the Jew in France, and all this material very closely parallels major ideas of Sartre in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. This provides an interesting and new perspective on the issues in question. Finally, in the section on Sartre and Buddhism, Anindita Balslev argues that when it comes to describing the phenomenon of self-awareness there are astonishing similarities in the arguments offered by Vijnanvada Buddhism and Sartrean Existentialism. Balslev shows that both this branch of Buddhism and Sartre advocate a 'no-ownership' theory of consciousness and that epistemological claims regarding self-awareness are in each case based on an ontological schema where the notion of a stable self is rejected.

The third chapter deals with ontology, and here Sartre the conceptually precise, academic philosopher comes to the fore. As the first article in this section, David Detmer argues that it is easy to misunderstand Sartre when he makes apparently outrageous claims about freedom being absolute, for example, that the slave is as free as his master. Detmer makes the point that once we understand that Sartre is not giving us a speculative metaphysical theory but instead a phenomenological account in which he is concerned with our actual or immediate experience, freedom can indeed be seen to be an absolute and pervasive phenomenon. Specifically, the fact is that we do directly experience: (a) a lack of coincidence with ourselves, (b) that what is directly given in experience is in itself unable to dictate an unequivocal meaning to us, (c) the insufficiency of motives to determine what we will do, and (d) our anguish. Once explained, all of these factors entail the experience of an unending task in which we all - slaves included

- have to choose and accept responsibility for our choices. On the topic of ontology, it is also true that in spite of his conceptual rigor Sartre's texts are sometimes rushed, with little concern at best for editing, so that the possibility for misinterpretation is rife. Thus Mathew Eshleman argues that Sartre's view of freedom in *Being and Nothingness* remains misunderstood since, without ever indicating it to the reader, Sartre shifts his view of consciousness. Starting with an essentially Cartesian view he then moves to one in which consciousness is embodied and thus in a material situation so that, in the latter case, freedom finds its limits in social forces. Not only does Sartre not to inform his reader of this major shift, but in addition the move is effected in a piecemeal fashion, with the author moving back and forth from one position to another as the text progresses. Eshleman's analysis helps to clarify the contentious issue of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, explaining that not all of Sartre's views in this work are as extreme as they may at first appear to be. In her article for the section, Katherine Morris describes how Sartre's idea of non-positional consciousness of consciousness at first appears to be obscure, never having received a satisfactory explanation in the literature. Morris argues, however, that once one uses key ideas, which Sartre takes over from Gestalt Psychology and Husserl, the concept in question becomes clear. Specifically, the apparent obscurities in question are solved by mapping: (a) the idea of non-positional consciousness of consciousness onto the model of non-positional consciousness of backgrounds and horizons, and (b) the relation between consciousness of something and the non-positional consciousness of that consciousness onto the model of the relation between consciousness of the foreground and background-consciousness. Finally, in an article comparing Sartre and Richard Rorty, Steven Hendley shows how Sartre though committed to an ontological realism, an approach that stresses the non-conceptual character of reality, at the same time maintains a view that emphasizes the perspectival character of human knowledge. Hendley argues that examining why precisely Rorty's pragmatism leads him to reject realism will in turn help to show how Sartre's conception of contingency does not provide an adequate conceptual mesh with his realism. Since Sartre has been inconsistent in formulating his view of contingency, Hendley sketches out what must be done so as to reconstruct a Sartrean form of realism that can serve as a viable alternative to Rorty's anti-realism. Hendley's analysis also helps to pinpoint an important inconsistency which has persistently plagued the literature on Sartre's ontology.

Sartre's attitude towards women has certainly come under considerable scrutiny. In the forth chapter there are two articles which, in addition to

dealing with the ontology of his behavior, also present new material on Sartre's sometimes convoluted and tortuous relationships with the opposite sex. First, Benedict O'Donohoe's article is able to pinpoint how many of Sartre's unresolved conflicts with women, maternal and otherwise - conflicts for the most part lived out prereflectively - are precisely reflected in his own literary work. In addition to many salient examples that demonstrate the extent of Sartre's problematic relationship to his mother, O'Donohoe also shows how Sartre's material provides clear evidence of his "intense interest in, and profound puzzlement with, the nature of maternity." Jean-Pierre's Boulé's contribution focuses on the important role that was played in Sartre's life by his Russian guide and companion Lena Zonina. Boulé shows how Zonina introduced a different and more mature element into Sartre's relationships with women. However, this connection consequently had profound ramifications for the Sartre-Beauvoir tie and so for the way in which Beauvoir reacted to Zonina, someone who came to be an authentically loved Other in Sartre's life.

In the chapter dealing with "Aesthetics and Literature" the article of Sophie Astier explains in detail the ways in which Sartre developed a philosophical analysis to deal with the works of Tintoretto. Noémie Parant's analysis demonstrates that in terms of style Sartre's philosophical and literary works are inextricably linked, and that bodily experience allows for a hybridization of style that is one of the defining characteristic of his work. Dennis Gilbert's article provides an illuminating insight into Sartre's theatrical practice and its theoretical links with research being done elsewhere in Europe. Once again it is shown how Sartre's work is grounded in a profound European tradition. Adrian van den Hoven's study of *Bariona* illustrates how through a subtle admixture of Jewish history and then-contemporary events and situations (France's invasion by the Nazis, the Vichy collaborationist government and the plight of the French POW's incarcerated in Germany), Sartre was able surreptitiously to transmit a philo-semitic message of hope and resistance. Finally, as already alluded to, Heiner Wittman's article explains how, through the reaction between artist and reader or viewer, a refined view of freedom can be found in examining Sartre's work on the aesthetics.

When it comes to the topic of Sartre and value, we have chosen to deal with this in terms of two articles that are concerned with the issue of Sartre's relation to Marxism and his subsequently moving beyond it. In the first of these, Ronald Aronson gives a detailed analysis of Sartre's intellectual development as he became increasingly involved with Marxism. He then addresses what factors there may have been that

ultimately led Sartre to become at least partially disillusioned with this Marxist world, and hence his turn in *Hope Now*. Menachem Brinker shows how Sartre's early thought continued to play an important role even during his Marxist period. Brinker also explains how, while generally maintaining an independent stance relative to orthodox Marxist thought, there was a period when Sartre did in fact become doctrinaire and uncritical.

Up to this point what has been discussed is Sartre understood primarily from a philosophical and psychological point of view. But what about the Sartre that needs to be understood historically and culturally? As already indicated, especially when it comes to the English-speaking world, new insight can be gained if Sartre can be understood in context; not just historically but also, more specifically, in terms of his being French. There are therefore two chapters of the book that deal with this issue. In the first of these, 'Sartre and the French Connection' Bruce Baugh discusses the roots of French existentialism by comparing the work of Sartre to that of philosopher and poet Benjamin Fondane - profoundly influenced by Kierkegaard - who resided in Paris during the 1930s and 40s. Not too long before he was betrayed and deported to a concentration camp, Fondane had read *Being and Nothingness*. Baugh explains how Fondane rejected what he saw as Sartre's unacceptable move to combine irrational, subjective truth with rational abstraction, i.e. Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety with the Hegel's view of negativity. Concomitantly, Fondane was disturbed by Sartre's formulation about humans necessarily being "condemned to be free." Baugh explains how, from Fondane's point of view, this formulation imports an element of logical necessity into human freedom whereas true freedom in fact comes to liberate us from this type of illusion, including that of Hegel. Moving to a later period, Thomas Busch, in a second article for this chapter, asks how close Sartre's thought moved toward that of Merleau-Ponty after *Being and Nothingness*. He answers this question by seeing how each thinker responded to structuralism. Busch explains how there are profound similarities when it comes to their respective views on lived experience, language and an emphasis on the dialogical life of communication. However, he finds that Sartre remains insistent that structural systems are a function of human existence, as opposed to Merleau-Ponty who, in his most developed thought, takes such systems and incorporates them into his understanding of Being. In a third article, Hannes Opelz notes a type of intimacy-by-contrast in comparing Sartre and Blanchot when it comes to a common concern for the relation of literature to the political. For Sartre, literature's relation to the political exists in order to establish a distinct logical continuity between writing and world, between language and reality. By

contrast, Blanchot describes this relation in analogical terms, insisting on the revolutionary force of literary language so that established ideas of subjectivity, being, world and time are threatened. That is, for Blanchot literary experience entails a discontinuity between the work of art and activity in the world. Thus, unlike Sartre, the writer faces two types of responsibility that remain irreconcilable, literary and political. Opelz then discusses a type of double bind that emerges for writing when analysed from the point of view of the two thinkers.

The next chapter deals with Sartre and history. In the first of three articles, James Brydon compares *Men without Shadows* (1946) and *The Condemned of Altona* (1960) to show how Sartre's representation of World War II changes regarding the role of the French Resistance and the ideas of commitment and freedom. Having reacted to strong criticism of the first play, and reflecting the transition from *Being and Nothingness* to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, *The Condemned of Altona* emphasizes how by 1960 Sartre had come to view the possible scope of freedom and committed action as being profoundly limited by material circumstances. As opposed to the earlier, idealised view of the Resistance, Sartre's final original play is understood as part of an ongoing process of demythologizing the war. In a second essay for this section, Manuel Bragança notes that Sartre in his trilogy *The Roads to Freedom* (1945-1949) is one of the few French writers who focused on the pre-war period. Bragança discusses Sartre's depiction of French perceptions of the Germans just prior to the outbreak of the conflict. By interweaving material from the trilogy and *The War Diaries* it is shown how because of then-recent conflicts between France and Germany, and also due to the fact that France was a nation torn between political extremes, the perception of the Germans was problematic for the French of the 1930s. Bragança discusses Sartre's portrayal of Prussians, Austrians, Germans and Alsations, the latter especially being of interest since their ambiguous identity – being caught between France and Germany – illustrates how war encourages suspicion and highlights the arbitrary nature of one's being born into a particular nationality. In the final article of this chapter, William McBride deals with the issue of the meaning of history for Sartre by showing how he rejects the view of Hegel and a number of Marxist variants on this topic. Sartre's own insights as expressed in various texts are, by contrast, shown to be highly perspicacious and McBride applies these to a number of current situations, concluding that absorbing Sartre's views entails a degree of skepticism on his – McBride's – part when it comes to the idea of there being genuine historical progress.

The last chapter deals with Sartre and psychology. Both *Imagination* and *The Psychology of Imagination* – especially the latter tome, full of scrupulous academic references to by now long-gone figures such as Lagache, Dwelchavres and Leroy – make it amply apparent that Sartre's concern with this discipline was far from a passing fancy. In fact he reacted against traditional psychological theories by turning to the work of the Gestaltists, and in this volume the articles of Morris and Mirvish deal with the use of experimental Gestalt material to help explain Sartre's views of consciousness. On a clinical level, in an article already alluded to, Betty Cannon shows how the existential psychoanalysis of Sartre shares many important common principles with Gestalt therapy. She also explains how important clinical details from the latter can dovetail and help to fill out and support the more general and abstract claims that have been made by Sartre. At the same time, principles of existential psychoanalysis can aid in providing a theoretical underpinning for what is the oftentimes the more philosophically naïve, Gestalt therapy.

In concluding this introduction, we can ask what there is about Sartre that makes him so appealing to the reader. What is there about his work that attracts the attention of critics in so many disciplines? Rather than attempting to answer this question in detail, we would merely note that in *The Words*, during the process of explaining how he has come to slough off his old neuroses and illusions, Sartre writes that "... I came to think systematically against myself, to the extent of measuring the obvious truth of an idea by the displeasure it caused me."¹ One is therefore dealing with a type of intellectual honesty or frankness that is most appealing. And having become an intellectual leader, Sartre was someone nearly always willing to try new approaches, someone not at all afraid to criticize his previous work. In addition, in *Notebooks for an Ethics* we are told that "... to love is ... to love in spite of oneself, to allow oneself to be overcome by one's love".² Here Sartre is talking about authentic love of a friend, but in fact this surely also characterizes his own attitude towards his work. And, indeed, this is a pattern that scarcely ended or ebbed with old age but rather continued so that, three weeks before his death, Sartre in *Hope Now* could promulgate views about a new relation between his thought and Judaism that – again characteristically – confounded and shocked the intellectual establishment. So it is not just intellectual dedication but also a passion towards ideas that helps to characterize the stamp of Sartrean authenticity. In this sense, as philosopher and writer, Sartre is indeed a passionate iconoclast and so, in fact, an appealing revolutionary.

Notes

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (George Braziller: New York, 1964), 158.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 477.

CHAPTER ONE

SARTRE AND CHILDREN

THE FUTURE IN THE CHILD

KENNETH L. ANDERSON

Near the beginning of *Notebooks for an Ethics* Sartre talks cryptically about “Childhood as the creation of unsolvable situations.”¹ The ambiguity of this statement is representative of the conceptual difficulties raised by childhood in Sartre’s thought. It might be assumed that the statement was meant to say that childhood creates unsolvable situations *for the child* which adults could help to resolve or alleviate. However, the statement could alternatively be read as claiming that childhood creates unsolvable situations *for the adult* who must deal with the child. In either case the difficulty arises from the peculiar ontological status the child occupies within a philosophy of freedom. From a Sartrean point of view the child is not fully an Other to herself or to others since this would require recognition of her own and of others’ freedom, even if this recognition were undermined by bad faith. In addition, the child is almost entirely undefined with respect to her future, possessing a kind of freedom often undirected by her own knowledge, whether actual or presumed. Consequently, the child cannot be conceived of as enjoying the possibility of the same sort of relationship to an adult as would adults to one another.² Indeed, for Sartre, due to the disparities involving knowledge and awareness of the future, the relationship between adult and child is essentially one of unavoidable violence.

Although we will see that violence plays a constant role in adult-child relations, Sartre’s views change over the course of his writings. This paper will examine his attempts to resolve this systemic violence by looking at three separate analyses of childhood given in *NE*, the “Rome Lectures,” and *The Family Idiot*. Sartre’s conception of adult-child relations and the ethical status of the child broadens from *NE*, with its snapshot moment of childhood and its narrow view of an individual future, to the “Rome Lectures,” where it is implied that the child has a role to play in the common future of an integral humanity. Finally, in *The Family Idiot* a positive analysis of love is developed, one that leads back to the very first moments of infancy.

These developments notwithstanding, the problem of adult-child violence in Sartre’s writings remains. However, by appealing to Levinas’

concept of “election” it becomes possible to restructure some of Sartre’s thoughts on the issue in question, which in turn will allow us to gain some important insights regarding responsibility and the role of the child when it comes to the possibility of the future of an integral humanity.

Notebooks for an Ethics

In this work, violence is seen to form an endemic part of education. In an extended example Sartre writes about how a father, in order to keep his child from going “into the basement while sweated up and without a jacket,” transmits an imperative prohibiting such behavior. (NE 189) This imperative can be transmitted through either *influence* or *force*. In influence, Sartre says, “the father’s freedom tries to penetrate into the child’s and to make it recognize from within by itself that it is a lesser freedom.” (NE 190) Here the child is made to recognize the inferiority of his own freedom in the face of his father as the embodiment of the prohibition. The child’s own ends are reduced “to just being instincts, that is, false ends, pseudo-ends which in reality are determined” (NE 190). The adult uses *influence* to convince the child to be complicit in the alienation of his own freedom by endorsing demands that he has not chosen and *could not* himself have chosen due to his primitive state. Actual *force*, Sartre goes on to say, accomplishes the same end but more directly. Here again the superiority of the father is acknowledged and the child obeys an end which was not posited by himself. In either case, “this Good is the man he will be.” (NE 191) In other words, the end which is acted upon is the supposed good of a future self, not the child as he currently exists. This is why Sartre notes that “[i]n the case of the child one sacrifices him every day to the man he will be.” (NE 192)

The father therefore treats the child as a lesser freedom, a freedom which cannot choose its own good because it cannot know that good. One cannot appeal to the child with reason, because the child cannot comprehend the whole of the truth which determines the good. Thus a profound inequality enters the relationship, which is why Sartre goes on to say that “when a reason is not the *whole* reason, it becomes violence.” (NE 193) This father, “a Hegelian without knowing it, represents the cunning of reason in his own eyes.” (NE 192)³ The father represents the truth toward which he directs the child by manipulating this young person’s freedom, leading the child toward the end which he, the adult, would have chosen and which is the end the child was destined to want anyway.⁴ That is, the Hegelian father sacrifices the child’s present freedom so that the

authority's freedom can be realized, an imperative which, had the child known what the father knows, he too would have chosen.

Since the adult is in a much better position to know or at least have a fairly good idea of what might result from the child's choices, the mere presence of the former can promote the alienation of the latter's freedom, if and when the child is made to recognize his own ignorance. "[T]he violent situation is created by our existence, not by his [the child's]." (NE 193) So instead of the child's choice or freedom being valued for itself, its value comes to consist essentially of what it may one day eventuate in. The child, by means of the adult, becomes of value in terms of the future he may one day realize. Thus the child represents a type of pseudo-Other whose true otherness lies in the future.

Sartre does propose a way to alleviate violence when he notes that "[t]he means of limiting violence in the education of the child is clearly to consider the age of adulthood as a regulative principle and concrete, everyday emancipation as the real end." (NE 194) That is, we need not only value the future adult at the expense of the present child, but also see the future as "*the future of this present*, giving each present along with the future it foreshadows an absolute value." (NE 194) This idea does indeed moderate violence; since the present itself is meant to have value, the child is *not simply* a means of achieving a future into which he must be transformed. Indeed, the specific or concrete child of the present takes on an absolute value insofar as "the situation of the child is the means of his concrete and real emancipation." (NE 194) On this analysis, therefore, the future is present in the child here and now, not just as a potentiality to be actualized, but real in the sense that what the child *does* now determines the future of *this freedom*.

Note however that the violence has only been mitigated. First, what the child is ultimately permitted to do is *still in the hands of the adult*—"one lets him have [his experiments] only disallowing that they have nasty consequences." (NE 195) Second, the *real test* of value, if not its source, still lies in a future beyond the concrete child and this future is visible only to the parent. The value of the child, even granting that his present constitutes the locus of the creation of freedom, still can be recognized only from an external vantage point.

Two basic problems remain on this analysis of the parent-child relationship. First, there is no sense of there being a history to the relationship.⁵ The child's choice in the present situation must indeed be addressed relative to the adult she will become. But we are not provided with any sense of how she may have reacted to the demands and suggestions of the adult in the past. Has she, for instance, been

consistently resistant to prior suggestions about catching cold? The scenario also lacks any sense of the time the father may have spent with the helpless infant who could make *no* choices at all. A second important problem involves violence and the so-called “natural attitude.” Sartre writes that “[t]he very fact that *Being and Nothingness* is an ontology before conversion takes for granted that a conversion is necessary and that, as a consequence, there is a natural attitude.”⁶ (NE 6) When it comes to adult-adult relationships violence may be overcome through conversion, according to *NE*. However, this strategy would *not* succeed in adult-child relations since, as has been discussed, here one is dealing with a fundamental and insurmountable inequality when it comes to knowledge and freedom. In terms of Sartre’s analysis thus far, the original adult-child situation involving violence must persist even if the attempt is made to moderate it, with conversion not being a viable option.⁷

Although *NE* talks about the possibility of authentic love for the child predicated on valuing her specific future, this possibility is undermined by the young person’s unalterable ignorance of the future. Contrary to the argument of Adrian Mirvish that posits a love based upon the child’s reliance upon the adult as “a vital intermediary in dealing with contingency,” I find that this reliance results from the acceptance of an adult Other whose true and full ontological status remains unrecognized.⁸ After all, the parent possesses vital knowledge which the child lacks and cannot attain until some time in the future. In addition, since the child’s choices are made in ignorance of such future consequences they come from a lesser freedom, and hence the influence of the adult’s superior freedom and insight, as noted above. Thus the violence in question can only be overcome with the maturing of the child into an adult who can foresee consequences and in this respect make a free choice. From the perspective of *NE* violence in childhood is inevitable and natural—which is to say, unalterable through conversion.

The Rome Lectures

The second approach to the problem of the child is found in the “Rome Lectures.” Specifically, Sartre uses an example of infanticide to illustrate that moral norms, even although they are experienced as unconditional obligations, are rooted in praxis rather than in the *pratico-inert*. Norms, in other words, with their unconditional demand upon human action, result from human freedom rather than the external social and material system.

Sartre cites a group of mothers in the Belgian town of Liège who committed infanticide on their severely deformed thalidomide babies.

These infanticides, as Stone and Bowman express it, were seen by Sartre “as resolving a conflict of values by creating new ones.”⁹ This act of infanticide created new values and resolved itself into a vision of integral humanity, the pure future of humanity. The mothers creatively resolved their conflict by “taking the birth products not as natural but as *artificially* brought about by the faulty drugs, such that it was permissible *artificially* to end the resulting drug-impaired life.” (RL 198) The normative character of this act was *not* a universal, Kantian maxim which should be able to be repeated in similar situations, but was instead *historical and particular*. It was *normative* in the sense that the murders aimed at “struggling for a future in which all neonates are promised the wholeness of life,” or to put it more broadly, the particular is experienced normatively here “in order to bring about that future time in which truly human life...will become possible.” (RL 201) These singular acts of murder are meant to make way for the universal possibility of humanity.

Sartre in fact employs the term “subhuman” as a contrast to the projected unconditioned future of humanity, and the mothers recognize in their oppression the impossibility of achieving human fulfillment. Their acts move toward the ideal of an integral humanity, an ethical ideal unstructured by hierarchy, where an “unpredictable, pure future [is] based not on construction of a new system...but on destruction of all systems” (RL 199). The mothers experience their babies as “monstrous products of the society which produced them.” (RL 202) They recognize their “birth products”—and by extension themselves too—as falling short of being human, i.e., as being subhuman.

This analysis of this creation of norms can usefully be compared to Levinas’ conception of “election.” Election is a loving relation to a child that *invests* the child with the responsibility of the parent and also presumes a capacity for acting it out.¹⁰ In election, the parent receives another future by way of the child, who has unique possibilities for choice, and the child receives a past which can be resumed, though not with seamless continuity. In fact, Levinas talks here about a “permanent revolution” due to the child’s uniqueness and the fact that she has to undertake the parent’s project on her own terms.¹¹ The child, says Levinas, “is me a stranger to myself.”¹² This peculiar relation with the future, which Levinas terms “fecundity,” is made possible by way of what the child makes possible or brings to the adult in their relationship. This “I” which is not-I, the child who is both “a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other,” is said to be “my adventure still, and consequently my future in a very new sense, despite the discontinuity.”¹³ Fecundity represents an “adventure” of the parent with an alterity through whom the future comes.

Indeed, “the relation with the child,” says Levinas, “establishes relationship with the absolute future, or infinite time.”¹⁴ Fecundity brings the parent into history by becoming a part of the absolute future through the child insofar as this allows for a future regeneration or renewal of the project. It is important to stress here that, as an observant Jew, Levinas himself would have stood adamantly against the killing of one’s own child.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Sartre’s explanation of the Liège infanticides can be usefully clarified in light of Levinas’ ideas.

From the perspective of the mothers the infants might appear as representative of their own subhumanity, while the choices made by the former might be seen as a kind of election of the infants, an investing of them with the project of advancing toward the future of humanity, the time of unconditional freedom for all humanity. Although infanticide obviously halts the possibility of literal regeneration, the goal of the future of humanity, this “unconditioned future” for all, even if not genetically or biologically attained, is still inherent in these acts.

Subhumanity must be rejected, and in this case rejection amounts to the murder of the subhuman. Sartre says that rejecting one’s subhumanity “means that death must be accepted as one’s singular, historic possibility as sub-human in order for there to be one day an unconditioned possibility for all people to live as human beings—instead of as monstrous products of the society which produced them.” (RL 202) What becomes clear is that not only are the deformed infants such monstrous products, but the mothers too. Again invoking the idea of election we can say that these children were invested with the responsibility of the mother’s project to destroy the system which denies the possibility of a human future. At one and the same time the mothers may reject *their own* subhumanity by murdering their infants only if they see themselves in their infants, as if viscerally present in their deformity, so that they destroy their own subhuman future by destroying the particular subhuman futures of these children.

On this interpretation it is important to emphasize that the children sacrificed must be killed *not* out of protest but out of a kind of *self-sacrifice*, or else the act would itself become one of subhumanity, i.e., an unmitigated act of violence. In sum, on this reading, the child is invested with the task of being both the future of the mother’s subhumanity and ultimately the future of integral humanity.

So whereas in *NE* the child is made to submit to me by force and accept the future I posit for her, in the “Rome Lectures” the child *becomes me*, a person with the same subhuman future that I have, and thus the sacrifice is in a sense the sacrifice of *myself* in an Other who is me. This

interpretation of the “Rome Lectures” also allows us to see that the child cannot herself choose to accept death for the sake of a human future. Rather, if not in full consciousness, acceptance of death must at the least be made with a groping consciousness of the future—like the Liège mothers—and thus must be the product of an *adult* consciousness. The child, one may thus say, is still in an unsolvable situation.

The Family Idiot

In this text Sartre develops an idea of “maternal love” which deals with the mother-child bond in a positive light. This form of devotion and warmth aims at the valorization of the infant so that, in its true and best manifestation, maternal love is said to provide the child with “a mandate to live.”¹⁶

Here Sartre widens the scope of his vision of the parent-child relationship from that in *NE*, which as we saw was a relationship without a history. He also deepens his focus from that given in the “Rome Lectures,” which dealt with the future of the relationship question only insofar as there was reference to the ideal future of an integral humanity. By contrast, in *FI* Sartre provides a prototype for the history of an actual mother-child relationship explaining its formative effect upon the latter’s future freedom in light of the former’s treatment from birth on. The infant experiences love somatically as a passive internalization of the mother’s attitude. He discovers himself “through the repeated handling of [his] body by forces which are alien, purposive, serving [his] needs.” (FI 129, n.2) These external attentions are profound and formative for the attitude the child will develop toward himself. “If the mother loves him...he gradually discovers his self-object as his love object. A subjective object for himself through an increasingly manifest other, he becomes a value in his own eyes as the absolute end of habitual processes.” (FI 192, n. 2) That is, the child becomes a valued object to himself by means of having experienced loving objectification by his mother.

The valorized child experiences himself as the end or purpose of the world. He can make demands upon the Other because he is the end and the purpose of the Other’s activities. Indeed, through valorization the infant develops his “aggressiveness” and “stubbornness” since his needs are felt as “sovereign demands.” “A need,” says Sartre, “pushed to its limit becomes aggressive, creates its own right”; it becomes “imperious.” (FI 130-1) The infant who receives this maternal love is made to feel *deserving* of the other’s attentions. So, for instance, the Other’s touch is