

## 1. Hegel, Kierkegaard and Sartre. *by Roger C. Poole*

The problems involved in human communication in the complex and complexifying modern world, stretching as they do from the cybernetical sciences of 'communication theory' on the one hand across to the re-iteration of the modern cinema, theatre and novel that communication is well-nigh impossible on the other, are so complicated and so apparently insoluble, that one might be inclined either to pretend that they do not exist, or to deny their importance, or even to make derogatory reference to the 'fashionableness' of the theme of non-communication. To do all of these three things, but especially the last, is to ignore the human moral duty to comprehend and to extend our communicational relations. In considering the subject of indirect communication in these articles, those forms of communication that is to say which are fundamental to any adequate understanding of human intercourse, we have not to pretend that immense problems do not exist, nor simply to decry the popularity of the modern stress upon non-communication, but bravely to make a few inroads. The problems we sketch here are like those mirrors to which Kierkegaard compared his own works; if an ape looks in, no saint can be seen looking out.

### *Communication as indirect*

In the present articles I want to consider indirect communication from five different points of view. They come from thinkers as different from each other as it is possible to imagine. We shall consider communication in the philosophies of Hegel, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Claude Lévi-Strauss. It will at once be noticed that we have to deal with an idealist, two 'existentialists', a phenomenologist and a 'structural' anthropologist. It follows from this that all the theories we are to consider are in some way or other theories of 'indirect' communication.

It seems to be a peculiarity of modern method in the social sciences, and with it therefore, of modern philosophical method, that the approach to a subject of enquiry is necessarily carried out to some extent indirectly, the presence of the observer being a determining factor which influences both the process of the experiment and the meaning of the results. This interdependence of 'subject' and 'object' in anthropological observation was formulated by Marcel Mauss, who decided to use his own subconscious as a

*tertium datur*, as an instrument of comprehension in considering a 'total social fact'. We wonder today whether any truly 'impartial', 'detached' or 'objective' method is possible in the social sciences. Do not our own characters, our own experience, our learning, our conditioning, and above all our 'intentionality' towards an object constitute it *already* entirely in our own terms? May we say that we understand anything as it is in itself actually and forever?

The modern quest for meaning in life, and with this the quest for coherence in communicational relationships, must conduct its search largely in the realm of *appearances*, those appearances precisely which have a personal truth or validity. What seems to me to be true, that is to say, may be as near as I shall ever get to the Truth, to encase our proposition for a moment in the bad old dichotomy. This *necessarily personal* grasp of truth, instead of being recognised as a limitation (in the style of Pilate's question) must now be accepted as a genuine state of knowledge, if not the only possible genuine state of knowledge. Merleau-Ponty himself said (*Signes*, p. 20) 'Look back into the past, ask what philosophy can be today: one will see that the philosophy of transcendent systems (*philosophie de survol*) was an episode and that this episode has finished. Today as before, philosophy begins with the question: What is it to think? and starts its work there. But today we have no instruments, no aids. It is a pure: it appears to me that . . .'

Once accept that this 'pure: it appears to me that . . . ' is a valid cognitive instrument, and we are already some distance towards formulating some theories of indirect communication, theories that is to say of the total impression made upon me by others, and the total impression made by me upon others. This total impression is the 'pure: it appears to me that . . . ' which constitutes the truth, and *a fortiori* the satisfactoriness, of my communicational relationships with others, and the success or failure of those relationships.

This sense, *the total impression made upon a sensibility*, we refer to in this study as a 'phenomenological' sense. The use of the word is not strict, and refers above all to those elements in phenomenology which are primarily visual, and which concern themselves, in philosophical terms, with the meaning and interpretation of what is seen, not only of what is thought abstractly as the condition of possible experience.

The 'phenomenological' sense then of visual impression, as a total impression upon the sensibility of an individual in a society, and the total impression upon the sensibility of a society created by an individual, is our theme here. The various possible uses of the word, and of the visual method implied in the word, will appear more clearly in what we say of Merleau-Ponty in particular, but we begin with an attenuated form of the conception since it will usefully orient our enquiries. The visual sense, the total sense of the other in space and time, my society acting upon me, and myself

constantly casting out impressions upon my society, both in a process of modifying the experience and sensibility of the other, is our Ariadne's thread in the labyrinth which follows.

### Hegel

Beginning unexpectedly and perhaps a little perversely with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, completed in 1807 the night before Napoleon opened his cannon-fire upon the walls of Jena, we stumble across a treasury of almost incredible richness. Hegel's first major work, written at the age of 37, the *Phenomenology of Mind* describes the extensive inward movements of consciousness in every individual, movements made as it were up through aeons of past time as well as through the few formative years of any individual intellectual development. Each individual has to move (in the period from birth up to the optimum state of his intellectual development) from the mentality of primitive or Stone Age man, up to a state of comprehension which can account for and include modern science and citizenship in a modern state. This individual has thus to clear tribalism, totemism, Scepticism, Stoicism and all the many forms of consciousness which precede the adequate, dialectically-qualified, World-View held by the philosopher. What a task! Hegel himself points out in the *Preface*, that if the World-Spirit (Weltgeist) has taken so long, so many ages, to arrive at an adequate understanding of itself, then the individual can hardly do less than to spend a lifetime of patient and loving work in the understanding of that evolution and of his own place in it.

Hegel's method in the *Phenomenology of Mind* is the now famous one of dialectic. Dialectic as Hegel describes it, is simply movement from one stage of comprehension up into another stage which is a little more adequate, and contains, so to speak, slightly fewer logical holes. There is no magic in the word or in the method of dialectic. Indeed the works of Jean Hyppolite, Alexander Kojève, and recently Walter Kaufmann have shown us how perfectly 'descriptive' the Hegelian dialectic is. Far from imposing an arbitrary form of analysis upon a mass of disparate materials, as he has commonly been accused of doing, Hegel simply describes the immense inner movements of Spirit (Geist) as it struggles to understand itself through the individual, through history and through all forms of society. Hegel's dialectic is 'descriptive', not 'prescriptive' as it has a tendency to be in the work of Fichte and Schelling. Hegel merely observes the struggle to understand itself which consciousness has had since the beginnings of human thought in the Stone Ages, and points out that this titanic struggle towards the light moves from an inner *principle of development* which is largely hidden from us, and which it is the job of the philosopher to study. Later theorists have started from a similar intuition. One can think of analogies between Hegel's view and Jung's 'collective unconscious', similarities with

Teilhard de Chardin's theory of 'the confluent ascent of consciousness' through matter and spirit toward the Omega Point, similarities with Lévi-Strauss' sea of myth which surrounds and impregnates our contemporary conscious thought.

Hegel's first task then, in the *Phenomenology of Mind* is that of describing the movement of consciousness as such up to a satisfactory level, using individuals in its work as the Egyptian Pharaohs used men to build pyramids. But there is another level to Hegel's work, and it is that level which interests us now.

Hegel describes the movement of the mind in terms of what he calls 'Gestalten': forms. The various stages of adequate (or rather inadequate) consciousness are represented as being Gestalten, forms, incomplete forms naturally, but recognisable entities all the same. These Gestalten (Master and Slave, Stoic, Sceptic, Unhappy Consciousness, Academic Pundit, World Reformer, etc., etc.) are incomplete forms of *understanding*, precisely. Each of these Gestalten, acting more or less unhappily across the sensibility of his time and society, creates ruin or havoc around him because he incompletely understands himself, and therefore misinterprets his relationship to the society in which he lives and of which he forms a part. Hegel's descriptions of Don Quixote, of Karl Moor in Schiller's *The Robbers*, of the Manon of Lescaut or of the Marianne of Marivaux, not to mention the most famous description of all, that of the Unhappy Consciousness torn between doubt and belief, between his outer projected world and his inner world of necessities, all these descriptions add up to a charge of incomplete understanding of the rôle an individual must play as part of his society. He has simply got things wrong, this Gestalt, insofar as he confuses himself with the outer world or as he detaches himself too violently from it. In doing either, he causes himself and others unnecessary pain.

The communication theory as such which one can see intermittently in the course of the Hegelian analysis, is one of immense power, and needs to be developed elsewhere at length. In brief, what happens when an incompletely self-comprehending Gestalt acts out of accord with the demands and exigencies of his society, is that he projects a 'picture' of himself in his action which alienates him from his society, and hence, by extension, from himself. One could refer here to Alexander Kojève's analysis of this phenomenon (*Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, pp. 505–512) where the dialectical and 'rhythmic' interchange of an individual with his society is analysed with reference to the word 'erscheint' (apparaît). To take up our 'phenomenological' criterion again for a moment, what we see is the following: incomplete understanding of the self, and of the self in relation to an environing society, leads to wrong or misconceived action, which, received as a visual impression by a given society, alienates that society from the individual and so drives the individual

into further self-torture, thence again to commit other and even more disproportionate acts.

The word here which may cause difficulty to a reader is the word 'visual'. Why should the misunderstanding caused by the egoistic or ill-applied Gestalt in his action happen above all at a visual level? Why is the resulting alienation a visual affair first and foremost?

For the following reason. Suppose we enter a room where there is a cocktail party going on. Before I have even spoken a word, before a word has been spoken to me, everyone in the room has communicated with me, and everyone in the room also has an impression of me (more or less fortunate). In speaking or acting I merely act *over against* their newly-formed 'intentionality' towards me, or slowly win them away from it by my own work. This kind of communication, in other words, is largely if not primarily visual, and only afterwards do my words and actions begin to get taken into account by the others in the room. Before a word is spoken then, communication of an indirect nature has taken place.

The truth and importance of this basic assumption is illustrated by the amusing and instructive story told by Wolfgang Köhler in Chapter 7 of his *Gestalt Psychology* about the two Russians in conversation.<sup>1</sup> Although Köhler understood no Russian, he could follow every phase of their argument, and could 'read off' as it were the meaning and significance of their words and gestures visually. These words and gestures gave immediate access to internal situations and emotional *parti pris*. It was not that Köhler understood what was said, rather that he understood what was meant, by each speaker.

We may then try to derive a similar 'phenomenological sense' from our Hegelian materials. Taking the language of the World-Reformer, the Unhappy Consciousness or of the exponent of the Law of the Heart as being quite incomprehensible to me, then we may say that a failure of communication has taken place. I have pre-eminently failed to understand my man, or I have made a disastrous impression upon him. Can we any longer speak the same language? Do we even want to? There is the nub. The failure of the *will* to communicate is the first fruit of incomprehension. That is the damage done by the ill-considered action of the Gestalt. His misunderstanding of himself has engendered misunderstanding in me, and now neither of us is willing to go on trying. With the fragmenta-

<sup>1</sup>After my use of the word 'Gestalt' and my references to 'total visual impression', this use of Köhler, one of the great fathers of 'Gestalt psychology' might lead a reader to suppose that the whole of the present essay could be seen as a latter-day vision and presentation of that movement. If that were the case, why would it have been necessary to start with Hegel, and why necessary to push through as far as 'structural' anthropology? No, 'Gestalt psychology' as such is as incomplete as its old opponent 'Behaviourism'. Merleau-Ponty shows the deficiencies of both in *The Structure of Behaviour*, and goes on, in *Phenomenology of Perception* to present the philosophic *locus* we need: a 'functional' body-image in an *individualised* consciousness (perception), a multiplicity of conscious viewpoints centered in a personalised space. Only a philosophy of psychology such as his can do justice to each view, and yet still try for the synthesis.

tion and the complexification of languages in our world, we stand always more and more in danger of ceasing to want to make the effort to communicate. We throw up our hands, we say: It's hopeless, we don't even speak the same language.

Hegel's analysis pushes deep into this problem. His theory is at root, like all his theories, extremely simple, that the failure to understand the self engenders the failure of understanding in others. Incomplete comprehension leads to misleading impression, and that misleading impression leads to an impasse in communication. The Platonic theory of virtue is here not far from his point: the worse we understand, the worse we act. It is a hard theory, but it is proven every day a thousand times. Applied to the relationships of two human beings in a communication situation, one might say (transforming one set of words into another), the less I communicate with myself the less I communicate with the other. In the breakdown of comprehension there is automatically the breakdown of communication. And this breakdown may be read off, visually, 'phenomenologically', every time I act, in everything I am, even when I am silent. We are all ceaselessly communicating in the act of living.

### *Kierkegaard*

Kierkegaard, as is well known, spent his life in opposing the Hegelian philosophy, but it must be admitted that he had a very insecure grasp of what Hegel was saying, and his reactions are therefore very largely tangential to European philosophy as a whole at that time, and especially to Hegel's. In nothing more than in his theory of communication did Kierkegaard so richly, profoundly and doggedly oppose the German master. Developing a theory of 'indirect communication' which has as its dual axes the total isolation of the individual from his society, and the total obligation to communicate a religious message, Kierkegaard barricades himself off from his society more and more, becoming ever more an example of an incomplete Gestalt as his life progresses. Finally, he comes to define the job of 'the witness to the truth' as dying – a death which shall be an indirect communication raised to its highest power. I have developed this Kierkegaardian *Imitatio Christi* at length elsewhere in all its detail.<sup>2</sup> What is important to notice here is the disjunction from the Hegelian philosophy, but at the same time the bizarre fact that Kierkegaard himself developed the visual aspects of the Hegelian philosophy to a quite astonishing degree, without however being conscious of what he was doing.

Starting from the ironic M.A. dissertation on the irony of Socrates as an indirect communication method, Kierkegaard develops in his works of the early 1840's (the so-called 'aesthetic' authorship) a theory of doubled signification which has its efficacy almost exclusively

<sup>2</sup>*The Indirect Communication of Soren Kierkegaard*, Ph. D. thesis, Cambridge, 1965, unpublished.

in the disjunction of what is said and what is meant. This purely verbal disjunction develops, after the attack upon him by the satirical journal *The Corsair* in 1846, into a belief that the life of a thinker must necessarily 'reduplicate' the written works, must stand over against them in such a way that both the works and the *vie vécue* contribute to a total indirect statement of meaning, an indirect communication of immense power largely because it operates at a level which transcends an exclusively verbal level. It draws on the total sensibility of what Kierkegaard called in full seriousness 'his age', and it is largely the 'martyrdom' which 'attracts attention' to the written communications, in such a way that the ensemble adds up to more than the parts viewed or experienced separately.

The visual aspect of this dual communication is what constitutes, in my submission, the true originality of the Kierkegaardian indirection. In the late 1840's, in delivering his religious discourses in the cathedral at Copenhagen under the newly-installed Christus of Thorvaldsen, and surrounded by the twelve eloquent disciples from the same sculptor, disciples who were nearly all 'witnesses to the truth' and who hold meditatively their instruments of martyrdom under the imposing presence of the Christus with outstretched arms and the subscription: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, I will give you rest', Kierkegaard develops to its highest power the theory that the martyr is an indirect communication of the truth. This communication is cast in a form adequate to the immense subjectivity, the immense need, of men who seek the truth everywhere and at all times. Kierkegaard, doubling his already doubled disjunction between what is said and what is signified, brings into sharpest possible relief the indirect communication of the visual image, of the effect of the man who 'reduplicates' his belief, who 'steps out in his own character'.

The effect of the doubled or 'reduplicated' indirection upon Kierkegaard's Copenhagen public needs a separate study to itself, and a fascinating one it would be. We may say however that his message might be seen as a communicational failure in the short term, but as a success in the long term. We should today examine the indirect method of Kierkegaard with the same attention we bring to the Socratic method of dialogue. But on his own age, there seems to be no doubt, Kierkegaard had the effect of an incomplete Gestalt. By understanding himself too narrowly, he alienated himself from the very people with whom he attempted to communicate. A more fitting indirect judgment on his own method could scarcely be imagined. Between Hegel and Kierkegaard it is our job today to decide. They are the two sides of an unresolved tension in the philosophy of communication, and should only be considered in conjunction with each other.

We now come to the first of our three French thinkers, who, different as they are, have yet been associated both personally and

intellectually for a long time. The interrelations of their thought need to be carefully observed, though there is no place here for a study of these interrelations.

### Sartre

There are two Sartres, if not three. There is the early Sartre of the late 30's and middle 40's, the phenomenologist, the student of Husserl, Heidegger and Scheler, the author of *Being and Nothingness* (1943). The early Sartre will not have any communication. *Being and Nothingness* is raised as a memorial to the failure of all attempts to communicate between one person and another. The operations of 'bad faith' and the 'objectification' of the limitlessly free 'subjectivity' of the Other by 'the look', sadism, masochism, etc., imprisons every one in his own consciousness like a fish in its glass bowl. *La Nausée* and *Le Mur* testify again at a fictional level to the utter isolation of the individual in consciousness and in political situation. *Les Mouches* and *Huis-Clos* testify in dramatic form to the utter hopelessness of communication at the level of ethical commitment or at that of personal gentleness and forgiveness.

At the end of the War, the era of the great 'existentialist' vogue, the 'Caves', Juliette Greco, Simone de Beauvoir and the new emergence of woman as a philosophical subject, we have the grimmest Sartre, unremitting in his insistence that man is a useless passion as well as being very likely a meaningless one. In such an atmosphere, it is not likely that a theory of communication could be developed, but it is indeed striking that Sartre should have taken such pains in his early work in all genres to deny the very possibility of there being one.

The second Sartre is the Sartre of *Les Temps Modernes* (from 1945), the friendship with Merleau-Ponty, the period which leads up to and includes the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in 1960.

In spite of the extreme pessimism of *Les Sequestrés d'Altona* of the same year, in which deep concern is expressed, it seems for the first time, about the hopelessness of communication when there is a situation of madness or imperfect self-comprehension, one may not be deceived in feeling a certain rise in the temperature, a certain optimism even, and above all a belief (expressed very markedly in the *Critique*) that a possible communication exists. But this communication can only take place within what one might call 'optimum conditions', that is to say a Marxist millennium, which may not be confused with any presently existing Communist state.

Sartre does indeed develop a kind of communication theory in his 1960 *Critique*, a communication which could exist between members of a 'group', a group held together by common aims, common work, freedom, and – and this is the paradox – an 'oath', (freely given but once given enforced by the 'group' whatever the

later decisions of the individual), an 'oath' of loyalty to the 'group', which must and may legitimately be enforced by 'terror'.

Raymond Aron in his lectures at the Sorbonne, as well as Claude Lévi-Strauss in the closing chapter of *La Pensée Sauvage* have both criticised the contradictoriness and wilful arbitrariness of the *Critique*, Aron for practical sociological reasons, Lévi-Strauss for practical anthropological reasons; but the basic unacceptability of this new theory must appear to any reader of this long and intricate work which yet manages to turn in a constant self-involved circle. In it, one sees nothing but force, will, and an insistence that men *shall* communicate, even if force, the 'oath' and 'terror' have to be brought to bear on him to improve their willingness to do so. The *Critique* makes painful reading. As Raymond Aron has pointed out, it ends in a kind of 'humanism of violence', in which communication is laid upon the individual with a force which governs his will and his entire spiritual life. Once the 'oath' has been given (and the giving of it is free, a hopeless premiss if one presupposes any kind of Communist state) then the individual has no right to withdraw it (*Critique* pages 450–455). It is a free act, but it is his last one. From then on communication (at the applied level of common hopes and aims, common desires and emotions) is the order of the day, and *Vae Victis!*

But there is another Sartre, the third Sartre we suggested before, who is himself a Gestalt in the Hegelian-Kierkegaardian sense, acting out or 'reduplicating' his beliefs. This is the Sartre who was the friend of Camus, until they turned against each other, the Sartre who was the friend of Merleau-Ponty, until that friendship dissolved, the Sartre who always regrets in long essays the failure of his own communicational enterprises. Sartre it seems has the curse of Roquentin upon him. Time and time again he insists, with his immense *will* which derives from an incomplete self-understanding and an excessive belief in the transcendence and opacity of the freedom of the individual consciousness, upon homogeneity of belief as the proper basis of friendship. Time and time again his friends drop away from him, or he drops away from them, time and time again it is failure. In his *Reply to Albert Camus (Les Temps Modernes* for August 1952) he writes 'Our friendship was not easy but I will miss it. If you end it today, that doubtless means that it had to end. Many things drew us together, few divided us. But those few were still too many. Friendship too, tends to become totalitarian. It insists upon either total agreement or total discord'.

To read this *Reply*, followed by the fine obituary after Camus's death, or to read the long and moving account in *Situations 4* of the disintegration, as from 1950, of the friendship with Merleau-Ponty, is to undergo the painful experience of seeing the failure of communication through what we might call an inadequate personal reading-off of the Gestalt. Sartre is unable to communicate for the

reasons that Hegel sketched out in his passages upon 'Das geistige Tierreich und der Betrug, oder die Sache selbst' in the *Phenomenology of Mind*, a Gestalt whose title is expressively translated by Josiah Royce as 'The Intellectual Animals and their Humbug; or the Service of the Cause'.

Sartre is not alone amongst French intellectuals in believing that unity of belief is the only proper base for friendship. The pain suffered both by Merleau-Ponty and by Sartre as from 1950 must have been great, as one can deduce from the essay mentioned above. The harsh analysis of the confusions in Sartre's political beliefs which appeared from Merleau-Ponty in his *Adventures of Dialectic* in a chapter called *Sartre et l'ultra-bolchévisme* met a harsh rejoinder in Simone de Beauvoir's article in *Les Temps Modernes* for June-July 1955, *Merleau-Ponty et le pseudo-Sartrisme*. After this any rapprochement became, apparently, impossible. The friendship was written off, exclusively for intellectual reasons.

Even at that time, be it 1950, 1952 or 1955, it seems to have been accepted by the members of the Sartrian circle that 'friendship tends to become totalitarian. It insists either upon total agreement or total discord'. There seem to be present in Sartre's conception of friendship those elements which we find justified as a proper 'communication' in the 1960 *Critique*: an agreement of independent minds, an agreement however sanctioned by an 'oath' and enforced by a rule of 'terror', such that at the first stirrings of other opinions in the 'group' all communication is cut, and the 'lynching' may legitimately begin.

This failure of communication is a failure of the 'total sense', the 'phenomenological' sense. It is the simple insistence upon the liberty of the individual consciousness as absolute, coupled with a gross misreading of the nature of human relationships which makes Sartre's Gestalt as painful a sight as Kierkegaard's. The works on Baudelaire and Genet testify to this isolation of consciousness which sprouts and flourishes in dark silent corners away from the contact of human beings. According to Sartre, both Baudelaire and Genet were unable to accept their world, but chose to play, in a kind of evil game, a rôle selected for them in advance by society. This is the 'geistige Tierreich', the belief in *things*, the belief in ideas, which ossifies and kills all desire to communicate. It is what Kierkegaard called 'Angst', the 'demonic', 'shut-up-ness'. Where there is incomplete understanding of the Gestalt which one is, there will be found loneliness, will and a desert in which no streams flow.