

# The Logic of Practice

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## The Imaginary Anthropology of Subjectivism

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Jean-Paul Sartre deserves credit for having given an ultra-consistent formulation of the philosophy of action that is accepted, usually implicitly, by those who describe practices as strategies explicitly oriented by reference to ends explicitly defined by a free project or even, with some interactionists, by reference to the anticipated reactions of other agents. Thus, refusing to recognize anything resembling durable dispositions or probable eventualities, Sartre makes each action a kind of antecedent-less confrontation between the subject and the world. This is seen clearly in the passages in *Being and Nothingness* where he confers on the awakening of revolutionary consciousness – a ‘conversion’ of consciousness produced by a sort of imaginary variation – the power to create the sense of the present by creating the revolutionary future that denies it:

‘It is necessary to reverse the common opinion and acknowledge that it is not the harshness of a situation or the sufferings it imposes that lead people to conceive of another state of affairs in which things would be better for everybody. It is on the day that we are able to conceive of another state of affairs, that a new light is cast on our trouble and our suffering and we *decide* that they are unbearable’ (1957: 434–5, my italics; cf. also 1953).

If the world of action is nothing other than this imaginary universe of interchangeable possibles, entirely dependent on the decrees of the consciousness that creates it, and therefore entirely devoid of objectivity, if it is moving because the subject chooses to be moved, revolting because he chooses to be revolted, then emotions, passions, and also actions, are merely games of bad faith:

‘It is no accident that materialism is serious; it is no accident that it is found at all times and places as the favourite doctrine of the revolutionary. This is because revolutionaries are serious. They come to know themselves first in terms of the world which oppresses them . . . The serious man is ‘of the world’ and has no resource in himself. He does not even imagine any longer the possibility of getting out of the world . . . he is in bad faith’ (1957: 580).

The same incapacity to encounter ‘seriousness’ other than in the disapproved form of the ‘spirit of seriousness’ can be seen in an analysis

of emotion which, significantly, is separated by *The Psychology of the Imagination* from the less radically subjectivist descriptions in *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*:

‘What will decide me to choose the magical aspect or the technical aspect of the world? It cannot be the world itself, for this in order to be manifested waits to be discovered. Therefore it is necessary that the for-itself in its project must choose to be the one by whom the world is revealed as magical or rational; that is, the for-itself must as a free project of itself give to itself rational or magical existence. It is responsible for either one, for the for-itself can *be* only if it has chosen itself. Therefore the for-itself appears as the free foundation of its emotions as of its volitions. My fear is free and manifests my freedom’ (1957: 445).

Like Descartes’s God, whose freedom is limited only by a free decision, such as the one which is the source of the continuity of creation, and in particular of the constancy of truths and values, the Sartrean subject, whether an individual or collective subject, can break out of the absolute discontinuity of choices without past or future only by the free resolution of a pledge and self-loyalty or by the free abdication of bad faith, the sole foundations of the only two conceivable forms, authentic and inauthentic, of *constantia sibi*.<sup>1</sup>

No doubt one could counterpose to this analysis of Sartre’s anthropology the numerous texts (especially in his earliest and last works) in which he recognizes, for example, the ‘passive syntheses’ of a universe of already constituted significations – such as the passage (1957: 465) in which he seeks to distinguish his position from the instantaneist philosophy of Descartes, or another (1960: 161) in which he announces the study of ‘actions without agents, productions without a totalizer, counter-finalities, infernal circularities’. The fact remains that Sartre rejects with visceral repugnance ‘those gelatinous realities, more or less vaguely haunted by a supra-individual consciousness, which a shame-faced organicism still seeks to retrieve, against all likelihood, in the harsh, complex, but clear-cut field of passive activity in which there are individual organisms and inorganic material realities’ (1960: 305); and that he leaves no room, either on the side of the things of the world or on that of the agents, for anything that might seem to blur the sharp line his rigorous dualism seeks to maintain between the pure transparency of the subject and the mineral opacity of the thing.

The social world, the site of the ‘hybrid’ compromises between thing and meaning that define ‘objective meaning’ as meaning-made-thing and dispositions as meaning-made-body, is a real challenge for someone who can breathe only in the pure universe of consciousness and ‘praxis’. And Sartre protests, not without reason, against the ‘objective’ (I would say objectivist) sociology which can only grasp a ‘sociality of inertia’. His active voluntarism, impatient of all transcendent necessities, leads him to refuse class defined as a class of conditions and conditionings, and therefore of durable dispositions and life-styles, which he sees as class reduced to a thing, ‘congealed’ in an essence, reduced to inertia and impotence, and to

which he contrasts 'the group totalizing in a praxis', arising from, but against, the class as a thing.<sup>2</sup> All 'objective' descriptions of this 'objective' class seem to him to be inspired by an insidiously demobilizing pessimism designed to contain, even push back, the working class into what it is and so distance it from what it has to be, the mobilized class, of which it might be said, as of the Sartrean subject, that it is what it makes itself.

Such a theory of individual and collective action naturally leads to the desperate project of a transcendental genesis of society and history (the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*), which Durkheim might almost have had in mind when he wrote in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1982a: 62): 'It is because this imagined world offers no resistance that the mind, feeling completely unchecked, gives rein to limitless ambitions, believing it possible to construct – or rather reconstruct – the world through its own power and according to its wishes.' And one might continue with Nietzsche (1966: 16): 'Philosophy is this tyrannical desire itself, the most spiritual will to power, to the "creation of the world", to the *causa prima*.' Seeing 'in the social organization combinations which are artificial and to some degree arbitrary', as Durkheim (1982a: 63) puts it, without a second thought he subordinates the transcendence of the social – reduced to 'the reciprocity of constraints and autonomies' – to the 'transcendence of the ego', as the early Sartre put it:

'In the course of this action, the individual discovers the dialectic as rational transparency inasmuch as he produces it, and as absolute necessity inasmuch as it escapes him, in other words, *quite simply*, inasmuch as others produce it; finally, precisely in so far as he recognizes himself in overcoming his needs, he recognizes the law that others impose on him in overcoming their own (he recognizes it: this does not mean that he submits to it), he recognizes his own autonomy (inasmuch as it can be used by another and daily is, in bluffs, manoeuvres, etc.) as a foreign power and the autonomy of others as the inexorable law that allows him to coerce them' (1960: 133).

The transcendence of the social can only be the effect of 'recurrence', that is to say, in the last analysis, of number (hence the importance given to the 'series') or of the 'materialization of recurrence' in cultural objects (1960: 234 and 281); alienation consists in the free abdication of freedom in favour of the demands of 'worked-upon matter':

'The nineteenth-century worker *makes himself what he is*, that is, he practically and rationally determines the order of his expenditure – hence he decides in his free praxis – and by his freedom he makes himself what he is, what he was, what he must be: a machine whose wages represent no more than its running costs . . . Class being as the practico-inert comes to men by men through the passive syntheses of worked-upon matter' (1960: 294).

The assertion of the 'logical' primacy of 'individual praxis', constituent Reason, over History, constituted Reason, leads Sartre to pose the problem of the genesis of society in the same terms as those used by the theoreticians of the social contract:

'History determines the content of human relationships in its totality and these relationships . . . relate back to everything. But it is not history that *causes* there to be human relationships in general. It is not the problems of the organization and division of labour that have caused relationships to be set up among those *initially separate* objects, men' (1960: 179, my italics).

Just as for Descartes, God is invested with the ever-renewed task of creating *ex nihilo*, by a free decree of his will, a world which does not contain within itself the power of subsisting, so Sartre's typically Cartesian refusal of the viscous opacity of 'objective potentialities' and of objective meaning leads him to entrust the endless task of tearing the social whole, or the class, from the inertia of the 'practico-inert', to the absolute initiative of individual or collective 'historical agents' such as 'the Party', the hypostasis of the Sartrean subject. At the end of his immense imaginary novel of the death and resurrection of freedom, with its twofold movement, the 'externalization of internality' – which leads from freedom to alienation, from consciousness to the materialization of consciousness, or, as the title puts it, 'from praxis to the practico-inert' – and the 'internalization of externality' – which, through the abrupt short-cuts of the awakening of consciousness and the 'fusion of consciousnesses', leads 'from the group to history' from the reified state of the alienated group to the authentic existence of the historical agent – consciousness and thing are as irremediably separate as at the beginning, without anything resembling an institution or a socially constituted agent (the very choice of examples bears witness to this) ever having been observed or constructed. The appearances of dialectical discourse cannot mask the endless oscillation between the in-itself and the for-itself, or in the new language, between materiality and praxis, between the inertia of the group reduced to its 'essence', that is, its superseded past and its necessity (abandoned to sociologists), and the continuous creation of the collective free project, seen as an endless series of acts of commitment that are indispensable for saving the group from annihilation in pure materiality.

It is difficult not to see the inertia of a *habitus* in the persistence with which the objective intention of the Sartrean philosophy asserts itself (whatever the change in language) against the subjective intentions of its author, that is, against a permanent project of 'conversion' that is never more manifest, and manifestly sincere, than in some of his anathemas, which would perhaps be less violent if they did not have an undertone of conscious or unconscious self-critique. For example, one has to bear in mind the famous analysis of the café waiter to appreciate fully a sentence such as this: 'To all those who take themselves for angels, their neighbour's activities seem absurd because these people presume to transcend the human enterprise by refusing to take part in it' (1960: 182–3). The example of Sartre, the intellectual *par excellence*, who was capable of undergoing, as he describes them, 'experiences' that were produced by and for analysis, that is, things that deserve to be lived through because they deserve to be told, shows that just as objectivism universalizes the theorist's relation to

the object of science, so subjectivism universalizes the experience that the subject of theoretical discourse has of himself as a subject. A professional exponent of consciousness committed to the illusion of 'consciousness without inertia', without a past and without an exterior, he endows all the subjects with whom he decides to identify – that is, almost exclusively the projective 'populace' (*le peuple*) born of this 'generous' identification – with his own experience as a pure, free-floating subject.

Analysis of Sartre's anthropology makes it clear that the principle and the point at stake in the struggle between objectivism and subjectivism is the idea that the science of man forms of man, who is the object and also the subject of this science (which we may assume to tend more towards subjectivism or objectivism depending on the subject's greater or lesser distance from the object of his science). It forces us to pose explicitly the anthropological questions which, out of a mixture of theoretical indifference and unawareness, economists (like anthropologists or linguists) answer without having posed them – that is, often incoherently – and which correspond very exactly to those that the philosophers raised, in the period of the rise of the bourgeoisie, in the sublimated form of the question of the relations between divine freedom and essences. The historical analogy helps us to see that the theory of action and, more precisely, of the relations between agents and objective conditions (or structures) that is implemented by economics constantly oscillates, from one text to another and sometimes from one page to another, between an objectivist vision that subjects freedoms and wills to an external, mechanical determinism or an internal, intellectual determinism and a subjectivist, finalist vision that substitutes the future ends of the project and of intentional action, or, to put it another way, the expectation of future profits, for the antecedents of causal explanation.

Thus the so-called 'rational actor' theory oscillates between the ultra-finalist subjectivism of a consciousness 'without inertia'<sup>3</sup> which creates the meaning of the world *de novo*, at every moment, and which can find continuity and constancy only in the faithfulness to oneself whereby it 'binds itself', like Ulysses sailing past the Sirens, and an intellectual determinism which, though it often defines itself in opposition to it, is separated only by a few differences in phrasing from a mechanistic determinism that reduces action to a mechanical reaction to mechanical determinations and reduces economic agents to indiscernible particles subjected to the laws of a mechanical equilibrium. For if choices are made to depend, on the one hand, on the structural constraints (technical, economic or legal) that delimit the range of possible actions and, on the other hand, on preferences presumed to be universal and conscious – or subject to universal principles – then the agents, constrained by the self-evidence of the reasons and the logical necessity of 'rational calculus', are left no other freedom than adherence to the truth – that is, to the objective chances – or the error of subjective thought, which is 'partial' in both senses.<sup>4</sup>

Sartre's ultra-subjectivist imagination has been outdone by the voluntarism

of the anthropological fictions to which the 'rational actor' theorists have to resort (when they actually raise the question, which they usually avoid) in order to make rational decision-making the sole basis of the rational conduct of the 'rational actor', and more especially of the constancy and coherence of his preferences over time. For example, when they invoke strategies that consist in 'binding oneself' – in a variant of the Sartrean pledge which is described as the 'privileged way of resolving the problem of weakness of will' (Elster 1979: 37) – they are able to give the appearance of accounting for rational conduct, of explaining it, with the aid of numerous theoretical models; but in fact, by refusing to recognize any other way of founding it in reason than by giving reason as its foundation, they simply introduce a being of reason, an ought-to-be, as a *vis dormativa*, in the form of an agent all of whose practices have reason as their principle.<sup>5</sup> This is because, by definition, by the simple fact of accepting the idea of an economic subject who is economically unconditioned – especially in his preferences – they exclude inquiry into the economic and social conditions of economic dispositions that the sanctions of a particular state of a particular economy designate as more or less reasonable (rather than rational) depending on their degree of adjustment to its objective demands. Formal models most completely reveal their perhaps most indisputable virtue, their power to reveal *a contrario* the complexity of the reality that they simplify, when they caricature the imaginary anthropology of liberal subjectivism. This they do by striving at all costs to dissolve the arbitrariness of instituted reality in an inaugural *fiat* and to establish the free decision of a conscious, rational subject as the principle of the – at least seemingly – least rational practices, such as customary beliefs or preferences in matters of taste.<sup>6</sup>

The truth of the formal constructions that abound in economics (I am thinking for example of the long debate generated by C. C. Weiszacker's article (1971) on endogenous changes of taste, which subsequent authors like to describe as 'seminal') is revealed in the poverty and unreality of the propositions to which they apply. Thus Weiszacker himself first assumes that current preferences depend only upon consumption in the immediately preceding period, rejecting the idea of a genesis of preferences co-extensive with the whole history of consumption as too complex and therefore too difficult to formalize; and then, for the same reason, he assumes that the consumer's income is to be allocated over two goods only. And what can be said about all the fictitious examples, so obviously invented for the purposes of demonstration that they cannot demonstrate anything, except that one can demonstrate anything with the aid of arbitrary quantifications and calculations applied to 'imaginary groups' such as 20 pilots, 5 promoted, 15 failing, or 20 students, 6 scoring 200, 8 scoring 100 and 6 scoring 0 (Boudon 1977: 39). But to spare ourselves a long enumeration of all the 'mathematical re-creations' that present themselves very seriously as anthropological analyses, such as the 'prisoner's dilemma' and other puzzles designed for circular circulation, it will suffice to cite one example which is the limiting case of all smokers who decide to stop smoking and fat people who decide to fast:

'Let us take a nineteenth-century Russian who, in several years, should inherit vast estates. Because he has socialist ideals, he intends, now, to give the land to

the peasants. But he knows that in time his ideals may fade. To guard against this possibility, he does two things. He first signs a legal document, which will automatically give away the land, and which can only be revoked with his wife's consent. He then says to his wife, "If I ever change my mind, and ask you to revoke the documents, promise me that you will not consent." He might add, "I regard my ideals as essential to me. If I lose these ideals, I want you to think that I cease to exist. I want you to regard your husband, then, not as me, the man who asks you for this promise, but only as his later self. Promise me that you will not do what he asks" (Parfit 1973, quoted by Elster [1979: 109]).

It scarcely needs to be pointed out that the production and acceptance of this kind of example and, more generally, of some 'absurdly reasonable' exercises, as Nietzsche (1954) puts it, of formal thought which, dealing with indifferent objects, makes it possible to speak of the social world as if one were not speaking of it, presuppose and encourage denial of the social world.

Thus Pascal's analysis of the most unusual and most unlikely, in a word the least sociological, of all rational decisions, the decision to believe, which is the logical outcome of the argument of the wager (and quite naturally attracts the interest of Jon Elster [1979: 47-54]), can be made to work as a heuristic model *a contrario*. Given, Pascal says, that a man who gambles on the existence of God is staking a finite investment to win infinite gains, belief presents itself without dispute as the only rational strategy; so long, of course, as one believes sufficiently in reason - Pascal points this out, but Jon Elster and all those who, like him, have grown used to living in the pure world of logic resolutely forget it - to be susceptible to these reasons. The fact remains that one cannot rationally pursue the project of founding belief on a rational decision without being led to ask reason to collaborate in its own annihilation in belief, a 'disavowal of reason' that is supremely 'in accordance with reason'. To move from the decision to believe, which reason can induce, to a durable belief that can withstand the intermittences of consciousness and will, one has to invoke other powers than those of reason. This is because reason, which we are supposed to believe capable of leading to the decision to believe, can in no way durably sustain belief:

'For we must make no mistake about ourselves: we are as much automaton as mind. As a result, demonstration is not the only instrument for convincing us. How few things can be demonstrated! Proofs only convince the mind; habit provides the strongest proofs and those that are most believed. It inclines the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it. Who ever proved that it will dawn tomorrow, and that we shall die? And what is more widely believed? It is, then, habit that convinces us and makes so many Christians. It is habit that makes Turks, heathen, trades, soldiers, etc. . . . In short, we must resort to habit once the mind has seen where the truth lies, in order to steep and stain ourselves in that belief which constantly eludes us, for it is too much trouble to have the proofs always present before us. We must acquire an easier belief, which is that of habit. With no violence, art or argument it makes us believe things, and so inclines all our faculties to this belief that our soul

falls naturally into it. When we believe only by the strength of our conviction and the automaton is inclined to believe the opposite, that is not enough. We must therefore make both parts of us believe: the mind by reasons, which need to be seen only once in a lifetime, and the automaton by habit, and not allowing it any inclination to the contrary' (1966: 274).

This extraordinary analysis of the foundations of belief, which might be meditated upon by all those who insist on seeing belief in terms of representations, did not prevent Pascal from falling into the usual error of professional exponents of logos and logic who always tend, as Marx put it, to take the things of logic for the logic of things. Starting out from the realistic concern to conceive the voluntary decision to believe along the lines of ordinary acquisition of ordinary beliefs, he ends up by presenting the voluntary decision of the subject of practice as the principle of the original practice which generates the durable inclination to practice:

'You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy; learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have . . . Follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile' (1966: 152).

By proceeding as if will and consciousness were the basis of the disposition which 'with no violence, art or argument makes us believe', Pascal leaves intact the mystery of the first beginning, carried away by the infinite regression of the decision to decide; by making belief the product of a free but self-destructive decision to free himself from freedom, he falls into the antinomy of voluntary arbitrary belief, which has naturally been seized on by connoisseurs of logical paradoxes. As Bernard Williams (1973, quoted by Elster [1979: 50-1]) points out, even if it is possible to decide to believe *p*, one cannot both believe *p* and believe that the belief that *p* stems from a decision to believe *p*; if the decision to believe *p* is to be carried out successfully, it must also obliterate itself from the memory of the believer.<sup>7</sup>

Needless to say, all these antinomies flow from the will to think practice in terms of the logic of decisions of the will. In fact, it is understandable that Anglo-American philosophers should be forced to admit that they can find no basis for the distinction between omission and commission that is so vital to a voluntarist theory. Acts of commission, that is, conscious, voluntary commitments, generally do no more than sanction the progressive slippages of omission, the innumerable, infinitesimal non-decisions that can be described with hindsight as 'destiny' or 'vocation' (and it is no accident that the examples of 'decision' most often given are almost always *breaks*). But, at a deeper level, how can one fail to see that decision, if decision there is, and the system of preferences which underlies it, depend not only on all the previous choices of the decider but also on the conditions in which his 'choices' have been made, which include all the choices of those who have chosen for him, in his place, pre-judging his

judgements and so shaping his judgement. The paradoxes encountered by the endeavour to conceive belief in terms of the logic of decision show that the real acquisition of belief is defined by the fact that it resolves these antinomies in practice. Genesis implies amnesia of genesis. The logic of the acquisition of belief, that of the continuous, unconscious conditioning that is exerted through conditions of existence as much as through explicit encouragements or warnings, implies the forgetting of acquisition, the illusion of innateness. There is therefore no need to invoke that last refuge of freedom and the dignity of the person, 'bad faith' in the sense of a decision to forget decision and a lie to oneself, in order to account for the fact that belief, or any other form of cultural acquirement, can be experienced simultaneously as logically necessary and sociologically unconditioned.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the anthropological constructs to which 'rational actor' theorists have to resort in order to deal with the consequences of the theoretical postulate that rational action can have no other principle than the intention of rationality and the free, informed calculation of a rational subject, constitute a refutation *per absurdum* of the postulate. The principle of practices has to be sought instead in the relationship between external constraints which leave a very variable margin for choice, and dispositions which are the product of economic and social processes that are more or less completely reducible to these constraints, as defined at a particular moment.<sup>9</sup> The 'rational actor' theory, which seeks the 'origin' of acts, strictly economic or not, in an 'intention' of 'consciousness', is often associated with a narrow conception of the 'rationality' of practices, an economism which regards as rational (or, which amounts to the same thing in this logic, as economic) those practices that are consciously oriented by the pursuit of maximum (economic) profit at minimum (economic) cost. Finalist economism explains practices by relating them directly and exclusively to economic interests, treated as consciously posited ends; mechanistic economism relates them no less directly and exclusively to economic interests, defined just as narrowly but treated as causes. Both are unaware that practices can have other principles than mechanical causes or conscious ends and can obey an economic logic without obeying narrowly economic interests. There is an economy of practices, a reason immanent in practices, whose 'origin' lies neither in the 'decisions' of reason understood as rational calculation nor in the determinations of mechanisms external to and superior to the agents. Being constitutive of the structure of rational practice, that is, the practice most appropriate to achieve the objectives inscribed in the logic of a particular field at the lowest cost, this economy can be defined in relation to all kinds of functions, one of which, among others, is the maximization of monetary profit, the only one recognized by economism.<sup>10</sup> In other words, if one fails to recognize any form of action other than rational action or mechanical reaction, it is impossible to understand the logic of all the actions that are reasonable without being the product of a reasoned design, still less of rational calculation; informed by a kind of objective finality without being consciously organized in relation to an explicitly constituted end; intelligible

and coherent without springing from an intention of coherence and a deliberate decision; adjusted to the future without being the product of a project or a plan. And, if one fails to see that the economy described by economic theory is a particular case of a whole universe of economies, that is, of fields of struggle differing both in the stakes and scarcities that are generated within them and in the forms of capital deployed in them, it is impossible to account for the specific forms, contents and leverage points thus imposed on the pursuit of maximum specific profits and on the very general optimizing strategies (of which economic strategies in the narrow sense are one form among others).<sup>11</sup>