

# Some Swings and Arrows in Western Philosophy

## Three Trends

(Paul Gregoris)

Of course Swings and Arrows must sound an odd combination. Nothing to do with the 'things and arrows' of <sup>outrageous</sup> fortune. By Swings I mean ~~chance~~ drifts of emphasis from one extreme to the other, so characteristic of western philosophy - e.g. from the subjective pole in Existentialism to the objective pole in Structuralism. This by no means implies that Swings <sup>have</sup> ~~do~~ not occurred in the history of Indian philosophy. In fact all creative philosophical endeavour has been characterized by such Swings - when Sankara overthrew completely the prescriptive element in Purva Mimamsa, or when Madhva overthrew Sankara's ~~Maya~~ sophisticated Maya doctrine by an unsophisticated affirmation of the reality of all reality, they were swinging.

By arrows I mean ~~to~~ not bars but just arrows in script - pointers to a direction, indicators of a trend. In this lecture I shall speak of one swing and two heads or arrows - the swing in

partialism to ~~some~~ <sup>concerns</sup>, and ~~various~~ <sup>directions of developments</sup> ~~suggestive~~ <sup>approaches</sup> in the philosophy of science and in the science of Interpretation or Hermeneutics. Of course, the treatment has to be summary and brief. The object is to whet the appetite where it ~~is~~ <sup>seems</sup> dull; not to satisfy philosophical curiosity. The latter would require several seminars.

Some of you know these issues better than I ~~do~~ <sup>do</sup>. I hope to benefit by your comments.

## I The French Swing

It is a peculiarly French kind of swing. It doesn't go simply from one pole to the other. There are three points of reference, and the swing goes between A, B and C. A is the <sup>pre-war and</sup> post-war subjectivistic Existentialism; B is the Marxism of the France left; and C is the <sup>cultural</sup> structuralism inherited from literary criticism, Anthropology and Systems Analysis.

The main lines of the Philosophy of Existence in France appeared in Gabriel Marcel's 1925 essay entitled Existence et Objectivité in the Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale. This <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> Sartre had

me on the scene. Then came Jaspers's systeme de Philosophie, immediately followed by Marcel's essays on the Ontological Mystery and his Journal metaphysique (1928-33). Both Marcel and Jaspers were Christian existentialists; with the coming of Heidegger and Sartre, existentialism became a secular philosophy in France, though they were ~~and~~ not uninfluenced by Christian ideas, either positively or negatively. But <sup>the Christian</sup> Marcel and Sartre agreed on one thing: ~~it is it is~~ <sup>is the one on which</sup> the question "what am I?" that philosophic reflection is called upon to centre. And it is here that the being is actually taking place <sup>today</sup>. Marcel had stated clearly that the medieval dictum <sup>that</sup> veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus was not applicable to the kind of truth for which one would sacrifice ~~oneself~~ <sup>oneself</sup>. Truth is more than a mere correspondence between reality and mind. Truth is in fact more than reality; and it has to do with more than judgments and propositions. It is the being of a subject-in-a-situation, open to aspects of reality, but under pressure to decide

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1. See G. Marcel, Mystery of Being Vol I. Gateway Edition, Chicago, 1960. p. 71-72. also see p. 103ff.

at truth as value. <sup>1 can't necessarily</sup> He rejects the Cartesian realism of subject and object, mind and will, feeling and thought, and centres everything in the inwardness of the subject passionately exercised about the reality that confronts him and under pressure to decide.

As Alisdair MacIntyre once said, "Sartre is a disappointed rationalist", and "his discovery that the expectations of metaphysical rationalism are necessarily disappointed, leaves him characterizing the world as lacking something."

MacIntyre gives us another insight into Sartre. Sartre is a philosopher of the situation of stress, of uprootedness and uncertainty, where "there is no God or nature to guarantee the rationality of the universe", no "background of socially established and recognized criteria" for moral choice, where the construction of <sup>a commonly</sup> acceptable philosophical system has become impossible due to social conditions. Only subjective determinations in freedom can give meaning, in the totally absurd post-war occupied France of the forties.

But then Sartre himself was more than existentialist. He was a Marxist humanist of some sort, and has lived under

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2. G. Marcel, The Philosophy of Existence, London, Harvill Press, 1954. p. 7

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on until Structuralism came on the French scene, and became more fashionable in the fifties and sixties with growing stability and affluence in French society. There is one permanent element of value in existentialism which is likely to endure, at least among the wise, as an insight. Truths in the books, objective truths, accumulated truths, <sup>(ala Popperian science)</sup> even if they existed would not really contribute truth for the human person. Truth is not a given, but something one has to become. But that does not mean either that subjective truth alone has value, or that external criteria for truth do not exist. It simply means that each person has to strive for his or her own truth. Truth cannot be handed to you on a platter.

It is precisely at this point that Structuralism is weak. For it regards truth as system, with relations and functions within a structure. The structure itself may be given or man-made. But it is the insistence that the structure is the truth that needs re-examination. Structuralism as a modern philosophical system is comparatively new. Its roots go back, as we have stated, into literary criticism, cultural anthropology, and the modern Cybernetics, or systems analysis.

Structuralism has its origin in Marxist literary circles, but is today advanced <sup>since</sup> as a substitute for Marxist theory, a subtle form of anti-Communism.

Its beginnings are in The Moscow Linguistic Circle in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Roman Jakobson (born 1896) was a leading figure in that Circle by the time he was ~~17~~<sup>20</sup> years of age. (The Moscow linguistic circle was formed in 1915, when Jakobson published his key works in literary criticism entitled Futurism)

In 1920 Jakobson went to Prague as Cultural attache' in the Russian embassy there. His seminal work on New Russian Poetry was published in 1921. His argument was rather simple. The component of poetry is words. All the words are in the dictionary; they are not created by the poet. What he creates is the way the words are related to each other - their structure. Structure is <sup>of form is</sup> meaning; structure is therefore reality. Structuralism is Poetry had some neo-idealist nuances.

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In Prague, Jakobson formed the Prague Circle <sup>in 1925</sup>, which is in fact the predecessor of the Vienna circle which gave birth to linguistic Analysis. Both Husserl the

ralyst have addressed the Prague  
circle in 1935, and Barnap probably  
persuaded his ~~Viennois~~ <sup>Austrian</sup> colleagues to form  
the Vienna circle.

In 1965, the jubilee of the founding  
of the Moscow Linguistic Circle was celebrated  
in France. The Paris journal Tel Quel  
published an article on Jakobson's thought,  
which ~~stimulated the birth of~~ fertilized the  
ovum of Structuralist thought in France.

Parallel to Jakobson in Moscow,  
<sup>long</sup> and Prague, in fact decades before ~~it~~ <sup>(1857-1913)</sup> him,  
Ferdinand de Saussure had started  
Structuralist analysis in linguistics, <sup>in general,</sup> which has  
been taken over and developed by the American  
Noam Chomsky (born 1928). This line in  
France <sup>has</sup> led to the creation of a discipline  
called Semiotics, the science of signs <sup>and their signification</sup>

In cultural anthropology as in linguistics  
it is recognized that words, myths, rituals  
are all symbol-systems that constitute a  
language for communication of meaning.

Roland Barthes published his  
Elements of Semiotics in 1967, making  
the distinction between 'sign' and 'signified'

words, labels, pictures, etc belong to the character of 'signs', while 'the signified' refers to meanings, ideas, thoughts etc.

It is through our system of signs that we create a structure for apprehending and expressing meanings. Structure in reality is thus a human creation; a constructionist understanding of meaning is <sup>thus</sup> inevitable. This is the point at which Marxism, Anglo-Saxon philosophy of science and Structuralism agree. All truth apprehended is constructionist. There is no such thing as ~~absolute certainty~~ pure objectivity independent of human subjectivity.

But meanings can be made clearer by making inter-relational structures more evident. This is what Levi-Strauss has done for us in The Savage Mind (1966) and in his earlier Structural Anthropology (1963). \*\*

What appears as accidental or contingent, random or passing, can be understood better, if we look into all the relations which produce each phenomenon. \* The Contingent and the accidental appear to be inexplicable because we have not traced their structural relationship with other realities. All things are structurally  
" 1. - 1 derive their meaning from that



Structures are of course, dynamic, moving and flowing in time. Man is capable of taking what is structured in a particular way, of deconstructing it, and of creating a new structure out of the elements so taken apart. This is what science and technology are all about. One has to know clearly how each part operates within a given structure, how it would operate in a different structure under different inter-relations, and then know how to take one structure apart and create another.

One can do the same to society. Society as it is presently structured, does not bring out the true meaning of man. It is necessary to destructure and re-structure society also, so that man's significance shines out more clearly.

We do the same in art and poetry, ~~or~~ in sculpture and music, in science and technology. We must know both identities and non-identities; for example, Ram, Shankar and Usha are all human beings. To that extent they have identity in belonging to a class called humanity. They may have further identity in that they are all Indians. Also perhaps in the fact that all three are born and brought up in U.P. All these  
In means