

# EMOTION FUNCTION, ACCORDING TO J. P. SARTRE'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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## Abstract

*The aim of analysis is to demonstrate that phenomenological approach to nature can be useful for psychology, as it broadens the understanding of emotion. J. P. Sartre understanding of emotion nature was presented. Emotion functions according to Sartre were another focus of the research, as was comparing those functions to emotion functions specified in contemporary psychological literature.*

**Key words:** Sartre, emotion, emotional function, phenomenology.

## The Phenomenon of Emotions in Sartre's Psychology

The phenomenon of emotions was an unusual challenge for J.P. Sartre, from the very beginning of his philosophical and scientific activity. In his opinion, his contemporary psychology had serious problems with defining and specifying the nature of emotions. Moreover, the passing time and significant increase of empirical research on emotion also seemed unable to prognose that the nature of emotions will be finally unambiguously specified.

Therefore, J.P. Sartre, disappointed by up to date psychological and philosophical achievements, started research on emotion nature based phenomenological research method and published his works on emotion in his primary work "*Sketch for the Theory of the Emotions*" (1939) and a psychological treaty "*Being and Nothingness*" (1943)<sup>1</sup>. The treaty is the basis to present the views of J.P. Sartre as depicted in this article.

Even though many years have passed since Sartre published his works on emotion, we may, with all responsibility say, that the content, discoveries and achievements regarding emotions are still very interesting and that they can still inspire modern psychological research today. What seems most accurate in Sartre emotion theory is its holistic and alternative way to depict the nature of emotion.

The novelty of Sartre's analysis, mostly presented in his psychological treaty on emotion is based on a specific attitude to emotion examination, where emotion, according to phenomenological assumptions, set the direction for man's cognitive feelings.

As a supporter of phenomenology, Sartre showed a farfetched distrust to so called „sure data” being the basis and the research material of the empirical sciences. According to him, many issues concerning the nature of man and the nature of their emotion cannot be solved only on the grounds of empirical sciences, psychology included. What those sciences can offer us are only fractions, mechanically and schematically copied fragments of experimental fact compilations – whatever would those “facts” mean. Sartre wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre's dwellings on emotions also appear in his other works. However there, they are not the main focus.

„Are „facts”, however defined by a psychologist, really the first experience data in cognitive order? Maybe this first data is the sense, meaning, the gist, and not fact alone?” (Sartre, 1960, p. 45).

Naturally, as we can deduct, Sartre used the method support of phenomenology while trying to learn about the nature of man and their emotions. He proposes, first, a specific *epoche*<sup>2</sup> including up to date findings in emotion nature, secondly, he believes the question about psychology *eidos*<sup>3</sup> to be crucial.

Psychology, in general sense, is, for him, examination and description of human behaviour – in the world – and science, which investigates psychological processes<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, in line with his phenomenological research, Sartre treats behaviour not in categories of reaction (physiological or psychological, but in categories of signs (meaningful signifiers) referring to situations in the world, to individual relations and connections with the outside world. Emotions themselves are treated by Sartre as consciousness intentions guiding and directing man outside themselves.

In his opinion, searching for the nature of emotion is based on assumption of abandoning classical psychological science approach and the necessity to revalue psychology with phenomenology. Sartre frequently pointed out that:

„If psychologists race to collect newer and newer facts, no matter how numerous the sum of facts, it will not show *eidos* of emotion. It is rather the reverse, only essence of something makes it possible to gain insight into the nature of facts.” (Sartre, 1960, p. 23).

Sartre tries to revalue psychology with phenomenology and asks not just what emotion is, but how is emotion possible at all. He starts his research with the question about the structure of emotion, not emotion as a fact. A question formulated in this way takes on a new sense and directs a specific emotion research.

Phenomenology was Sartre's first and foremost self-conscious research field, which cannot see the allegedly certain transition between facts (or data) obtained from experiments and their structures. The transition is considered as obvious by the experimental sciences he criticises.

According to Sartre, abstraction and thinking play a crucial role in the fact observation process. In his opinion, each cognition is psychologically conditioned by psyche of the cognizer<sup>5</sup>. In a modern psychology handbook - *Introduction to psychology* (2005) F. Parot writes:

„Each empirical science starts everything naturally by observing reality, which appears to be a subject of examination. We will see in chapter 11<sup>th</sup> that observation is not at all free from theoretical presumptions, even when the observer believes themselves to be entirely neutral; (...) an observer with an ambition to describe and recreate reality as it is – or seems to be – in all its aspects and details would quickly realise mad character of this undertaking: they would not only quickly deplete their acting energy, but they would see, in the end, that they ended up back where they started. They would understand that to observe means to abstract, which is to bring out certain qualities and to ignore the others.” (Parot, 2005, p. 223).

We can not observe something not abstracting from something else, then. Sartre unsurprisingly claimed that the *eiedetic*<sup>6</sup> view postulated early by Husserl (1965), the experience of structure (made possible by the reduction theory) allows for proper and right understanding of an examined emotion.

Moreover, a very significant element in dwelling on the nature of emotion for Sartre was characteristic of emotion-world relation. Sartre claims that, like all living creatures, the man is

2 *Epoche* (Greek – doubt) – is suspending all judgement pertaining to existence of something.

3 *Eidos* (Greek for a being, form) – it is the essence of thing, its meaning.

4 Sartre understood psychology as positive science using positive research methods. This is nowadays more often referred to as empirical psychology.

5 Numerous arguments confirming this cognitive assumption are also presented in Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (1900-1901).

6 *Eiedetic* – Greek: relating to the nature of thing, its meaning

also dependent on his environment, on the world they live in. However, the world the man lives in, apart from temporal and spatial dimensions is also equipped in a number of social and cultural features. The world is made up of different people, of man-made objects, and is a field where specific social processes occur. The world is subject not just to the laws of nature, but is also organised by people, according to specific rules. A normal life cycle of every man also depends on the social features of the surrounding world.

There is a high degree of similarity between a social world understood in this way and emotional world that Sartre writes about. For Sartre, the social world is, first and foremost, the world of emotion.

Sartre emotional consciousness is, first of all, in-world consciousness. It not only exists in the world, but also acts in the world, in its own, specific way. The world to which the emotional consciousness refers is a world moved by the intention of consciousness, or, as Sartre calls it, an agitated world (*le monde agi*).

Emotional consciousness acting without the intervention of reflection, "projects" (*projeter*) itself all outside, towards the world. Sartre (1960) describes this world (*le monde agi*) not as a quality "in itself", but as a result of an intentional consciousness directing. Sartre speaks of it metaphorically, that it is a magic world, but the "magic" category (*le magique*) is a category, that rules relations between people in society<sup>7</sup>. Sartre writes:

„Indeed a world of emotions exists. All emotions have a common characteristic: they make one and the same world appear, cruel, horrible, dire, joyful, etc., in which, however, relation of things to consciousness is always and exclusively magical.” (Sartre, 1960, p. 44).

Sartre gives us another concrete phenomenological description of emotion as an event to confirm how emotional consciousness creates the magic of a given object and the world it refers to. I will quote the whole text, to better capture the point of "magical" influence of emotional consciousness on the world:

„I reach out my hand for a bunch of grapes. I cannot pick them, because they are outside my reach. I shrug my shoulders and I lower my arm mumbling: "They are still green" and I leave. All the gestures, words, the behaviour is not understandable in itself. The point is the comedy that I play in front of a bunch of grapes, so that I can give grapes the characteristics of "They are still green", which feature may substitute behaviour, which I may not realise. Prior to this, the grapes presented themselves as "requiring picking". But this urgent quality soon becomes unbearable, because potentiality cannot be realised. This tension, in turn, becomes a reason to give grapes a new quality "still green", which will solve the conflict and nullify the tension. The only issue is that I cannot nominate the grapes with this quality "chemically"; I cannot influence grapes choosing natural action methods. So I perceive the sourness of a green grape by my feeling of repulsion towards it. I magically nominate the grapes with a quality I desire. Here the comedy is only half honest. But let the situation become more urgent and the behaviour, as a spell, be filled with gravity: here is the emotion" (Sartre, 1960, p. 45).

It is possible to say that if we are talking about emotions in understanding of J. P. Sartre's phenomenological psychology we mean mostly the man in the world of emotions and their possibilities of magic influence over it. Emotion as an emotional consciousness is a passage, irreplaceable by other forms of consciousness, between the world agitated by intention (*le monde agi*) and the world consciousness that appears, for instance, in case of the grapes as hideous or irritating.

The second consciousness is a transformation of the first. It is a transformation of a basic my-being-in-the-world existential data. Sartre as a phenomenological psychologist, as opposed to a positive psychologist does not look for laws ruling emotion in the process of emotion itself, but in general structures of human consciousness and their relation with the outside and social world. Sartre wrote in relation to positive psychology:

<sup>7</sup> We will cover this category in more detail in further part of this work, in a separate chapter. This category has a crucial meaning in J. P. Sartre's emotion theory.

„In this way, a properly described and explained emotion will always only be a fact among other facts, closed in itself, which will never allow us to understand another thing but itself, nor will it let us grasp a valid human reality by the fact.” (Sartre, 1960, p. 12).

Sartre uses examples of individual emotions to develop more exactly his understanding of the specific relation emotion – consciousness – world.

When, for instance, within the limits of certain behaviour, some physiological phenomena occur in the body and a sense of danger occurs, fear or panic will encompass us only when consciousness-in-fear will discover (constitute) a fear-inspiring-world.

A symptom of fear is a sign of a meaningful consciousness. We cannot reduce behaviour symptoms to behaviours themselves (as behaviourism does), because, for instance, just in the fear emotion when the threat passes (somebody who pursues me disappears) and when I withdraw my intention understanding them as “something that threatens me”, shaking hands will not go away at once, blood pressure will not drop at once and the breath will not balance at once. We must take into consideration all elements of emotional experience and avoid omitting any of them in order to fully recognise the nature of emotion.

According to Sartre (1960), in case of emotion, it will be:

1. Consciousness directed to a world of fear and panic.
2. Physiological changes in the body.
3. Behaviour itself as a set of reactions.

Sartre negates the view that a single investigable element (without reference to the whole emotion) is enough to discuss the cause of an emotional state. If, for instance, I focus only on physiological changes in the body, I will skip the qualitative aspect of emotional life. In this way different emotions like joy, fear, anger, panic can cause occurrence of the same changes while at the same time being different in their nature.

If I consider only behaviour itself, I will also not see qualitative emotion aspect in it, and when I only stop running from the threat, I will not calm down immediately and I will not immediately stop feeling emotion.

So Sartre points out to a certain “discriminatory rule” of all emotions: fear emotion creates a world fragment in a different way (scary world) and joy emotion creates joyful world in a different way. Rejecting causal explanations for emotions, Sartre sees emotions as a carrier of meaning which always refers to the world with a way of intentional direction. In other words, man’s consciousness “uses” emotions attempting to cause changes in the world. From this viewpoint, it touches the world that surrounds us, called *Umwelt* by the Germans, the world of our wishes, needs, our actions, our natural world:

„It appears as if marked by narrow and stony roads, leading to this or other specific goal, that is to object appearance. (...) This world is difficult. The idea of difficulty is not a reflexive term which could include a relation to me. It is somewhere in the world, it is a quality of the world, manifesting itself to perception. It is a *noematic*<sup>8</sup> correlate of our action, action that we undertake or only begin.” (Sartre, 1960, p. 41).

It is also why Sartre quits causal explanations and tends towards finalist explanations. Thus, according to Sartre, emotions always have an adequately specified target. They aim at causing changes in the world.

Human world is not just the natural world with total rule of causal relationship. Full human world is just *Umwelt*, the world of objectives, wishes, values, which we want to introduce to the world, which we choose in our actions. In this world there is still place for intentional – objective relation. This relation will have an even more important role to play in that world.

8 *Noemat* – Greek: the ability to understand; broader intuitive data, content of a task.

But, as stated earlier, the limits of human emotional consciousness influence on this world are specifically defined. The man can change the surrounding world; transform it, but only by affecting themselves – their own way of thinking and their own body. Only in this way, which we could call own consciousness activity, the man may create new and new possibilities and situations for themselves. The man changes and develops during their cognitive activity. Sartre wrote:

„Emotion is world transformation. When set roads become too difficult, or when we cannot see the road, we cannot stay in a world so hurrying and hard. All the roads are blocked and in the meantime we must go on acting. So we try to change the world, which means to experience it as if the relation of things to their potentiality was not set by deterministic processes, but by magic.” (Sartre, 1960, p. 44).

So it seems that Sartre's strong attempts to investigate emotion structure, providing many phenomenological descriptions of individual emotion examples and their phenomenological analysis are aimed at proving a basic dependence of emotion on consciousness and its meaningful character to the world it occurs in.

Emotion, in Sartre's opinion, is a whole system in emotion-consciousness-world, which is tending towards making some changes in the surrounding world. The man as a subject of the system authentically believes that the determined world, in which they inarguably live, can also show them its possible aspect. But, as we wrote, in case of unbearable tension on the consciousness-world line, the consciousness changes itself or changes its body, so as to change its object. It is its only way and the only possibility to influence the world.

This article presents the most important frameworks of emotion theory in J. P. Sartre's phenomenological psychology. The presentation touched on both general statements being ontological and epistemological emotion concept basis by Sartre and more detailed claims, relating directly to examples of phenomenological descriptions for specific emotions.

As a result of reconstruction and analysis of Sartre's emotion concept, we may say that in spite of emotion phenomenon great complexity, their common nature can be found. Consequent use of phenomenological cognition method may lead to perceiving of what is their most significant part.

Emotion as grasped by J. P. Sartre's phenomenological psychology (1960) is, above all:

1. A meaningful act of non-reflexive consciousness.
2. A specific emotional relation between the human and the transcendent world (for Sartre the relation is a basic function of consciousness).
3. A phenomenon of emotional belief experienced physically (bodily).
4. A phenomenon of emotional world constitution in a certain qualitative *modi*, which Sartre metaphorically calls the world of magic.

To put it differently, emotion as a conscious belief phenomenon is its own way for being-in-the-world.

## **Emotion Functions in Psychological Concepts According to Sartre**

The difficulty in setting Sartre's emotion and their function concept with the psychological concepts is that the Sartre's emotion concept is a part of his whole concept. In spite of the fact that, in a way, we may write about “Sartre's phenomenological psychology”, we must keep in mind that he was a philosopher. He sees human being as a being-for-itself, which is also what it isn't – it is a potentiality (to differentiate from a being-in-itself, which is an existence mode of objects, which only exists in act, not being a potentiality) (Gadacz, 2009). A human is a possible being, which chooses himself and creates himself, because he is free. Transcendence is a feature of consciousness – transcending what was truly given towards what is possible (Gadacz, 2009). “Man is a creator of himself and first he is, before he starts to precise his being.” (Gadacz, 2009, p.478). Psychological concepts frequently do not articulate implicitly philosophical anthropology assumptions that underline them, in spite of the fact that some authors postulate this as the right way (i.e. Gałdowa, 1995).

The aim of an analysis is to show how useful emotion and their function concept by the French philosopher could be for psychologists. The main assumption was to focus on a narrow aspect of his approach, which seems important from the viewpoint of psychology, keeping in mind that we cannot exhaust here the full depth of Sartre's emotion concept.

Sartre draws our attention to the fact that emotional awareness works without the use of reflection.

First function enumerated by Sartre could be called cognitive function. Sartre writes about discovering the world as having a quality (i.e. we perceive the world as terrifying). Here we may see some similarities with emotion functions as seen by today's psychologists. But according to Sartre, emotion function is also magical world transformation. The fragment on inaccessible grapes which are ascribed the quality of "still green and sour" by emotion of repulsion, in order to make their inaccessibility less painful, is an example, an illustration of a "magical" transformation. Of course, it needs to be stressed, that the objective world (world "in-itself") is not subject to transformation. The transformed world is the world of a given human: a world full of wishes, values and aims. The boundaries of emotion world changes are limited, but man can change or shape himself/herself, may develop.

Different emotion functions are enumerated in psychological literature. Different emotions perform different functions, but there are also functions common for all emotions (Clark & Watson, 1994). Averill (1994) draws attention to the fact that functional explanations are rather a statement on researcher's ingenuity, because we may find justification of almost any consequence of any behaviour. She divides emotion functions into three groups (see Averill, 1994):

1. Functions, which used to be adaptative, from the viewpoint of species preservation. Clark and Watson (1994) stress that emotions create physiological states favourable to behaviours that were adaptative for a given situation type in evolutionary species' past.
2. Adaptative functions from the viewpoint of the society. Some emotions act as a social relation regulator (i.e. shame and guilt). Actions motivated by those emotions are directed towards respect for other people and norms (Frijda, 1994).
3. Adaptative functions for an individual.

Of course, functions, which are mostly adaptative, in some specific cases may prove disadaptative. It depends, among other factors, on individual conditions of a given person, on what their aims are and if a given way of emotional reaction to situations, coping with those emotions and acting on them are harmonised with their aims.

Sartre also writes about emotion functions in relation to an individual. As mentioned earlier, cognitive emotion function can be separated in Sartre's approach. Psychologists also pay attention to cognitive emotion functions, although the functions are understood differently in different individual concepts. According to Levenson (1994), emotions enable us to "shortcut" information processing. According to Clore (1994), emotions are a source of information; they are a basis for judgement. Thanks to expression, they supply other people with information and thanks to thoughts and feelings – they supply the information for the individual himself. But the fact if emotions deliver adequate information or not, depends on whether its source was identified adequately (see Clore, 1994). Also, according to Clore & Robinson (2000), emotions are valid due to the meaning they carry/ transmit/ communicate and not due to their hedonic value. Clark and Watson (1994) believe that emotions decide where most attention is to be engaged. Emotion function is also resource mobilisation. According to Clore, Schwarz and Conway (1994) positive and negative emotions activate different ways of information processing. Positive affect engages heuristic information processing: "thinking shortcuts", usage of scripts, stereotypes.

Negative affect results in more analytic information processing. Emotions are bilaterally connected with information processing: they are a result of data processing and they influence the process at the same time (Clore, 1994).

Clore (1994) believes that emotions influence our motivation and aims. Oatley and Jenkins (1992) also believe that emotion function is a priority change in goal hierarchy of an individual. The authors refer to emotion influence on a given coefficient: goals of an individual human. Frijda (1994) believes that emotion signal that something valid from the viewpoint of the individual's

well-being is happening, or something valid for their tasks, their interest. Positive emotions have the character of a reinforcement (you are on the right way); negative emotions signal the necessity to take actions to change the situation. Emotions are a factor motivating towards actions oriented to coping with the events that cause them. According to Frijda (1994) and Levenson (1994) an emotion causes an increase in readiness for some limited number of specific actions – a set of inborn tendencies. Clark and Watson (1994) believe that resource mobilisation is also one of emotion functions; so emotions are connected with motivation. A similar function can be seen in Sartre's approach, but in this approach emotions change a given person's world, together with wishes, motives and goals. Sartre stresses more the change of the perceived world, the world in which a human being lives (in their subjective perception). Psychologists differentiate individual factors influenced by emotions. Psychological concepts do not usually focus on the fact that since people react to the world differently, perceive the world differently (in categories of their world experience) and as a result they live, in a way, in "different worlds". That is if we assume that a world for a given person is how that person experiences world. The clue is explored in Mudyń research (2007), in which he explores what is real for whom (what is reality).

### **Sartre Emotion Function Application Value**

The question if setting the Sartre concept together with psychological concepts is legitimate is left open. From a practical viewpoint – helping specific people – each of those concepts may have its use.

Practice in psychotherapy and managing emotional competencies trainings shows that many people treat how reality appears to them under the influence of specific emotions as an "objective truth". They believe that their emotions show them "how things are", frequently without realising that their emotions may change this "subjective world" and that, in fact, it may not reflect "objective reality" or not even "intersubjective" one. Awareness that emotion may perform a function of a "magical" change of an individual's world (among others by ascribing some attributes to objects) may make it easier for them to have distance to their perception of reality "forced" by emotions. Realising this emotion function people will be able to verify if and how far the image of the world "painted by their emotions" is reflecting reality. On the other hand, the knowledge that their emotions may change "their world" may prompt to reflection, which ways of feeling emotion "shape their own reality" the way they want to live in. For example, showing people how their lives are influenced by the feeling of grief and harm kept too long by constant remembering the harm they suffered. People could also be taught to direct attention to the fact if their way of acting corresponding to an appearing emotion is favourable to their goals or not.

### **Conclusions**

The aim of analysis is to demonstrate that phenomenological approach to nature can be useful for psychology, as it broadens the understanding of emotion. Emotion according to J. P. Sartre is something more than: mental state, a natural fact, psychological feature or a mental idea. It is, first and foremost, a meaningful act of consciousness.

Emotional awareness constitutes the world in qualitative *modi*, enforces other quality on the worldly things, refers to it, but imposes meanings or points on it. It is then a way of world comprehension.

Phenomenological approach to emotion nature by Sartre may be useful for psychology, because it broadens both the understanding of emotion nature and it sheds more light on functions performed by emotions. This approach may also have application value. It may be used in therapy and in trainings developing emotional competences.

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