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Robert C. Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts: Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 241 pp. Notes, selected bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-19-518157-3.

Review by William E. Duvall, Willamette University.

Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre do indeed reflect about their personal experiences, the meaning of those experiences, and the relationship between experience and reflection. For this reason, Robert C. Solomon sees them as phenomenologists, explorers of experience and consciousness in extreme situations, namely their historical context. They are also, for Solomon, both “existentialists” despite Camus’ insistent rejection of that label. Having been eclipsed by postmodernism, they are now both “back,” speaking meaningfully to today’s “alienated, uprooted, and disoriented world” as moralists (p. 6).

Solomon considered this the third volume in “an informal trilogy on continental philosophy” (p. 10), the first of which, *In the Spirit of Hegel*, is a massive work centering on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*; the second, *Living with Nietzsche*, explores Nietzsche’s ethical thought.[1] The loose threads which tie this trilogy together are the phenomenological experience/reflection nexus, Solomon’s long-standing interest in human passions and emotions, the existential human predicament of being thrown into the world in particular circumstances and being responsible for living and acting, making and creating, in the face of the givens of life, and Solomon’s own moral passion.

In *Dark Feelings* he does not seek to offer an overall assessment of either Camus or Sartre; nor does he analyze their relationship and conflict as Ronald Aronson and David Sprintzen have recently done.[2] He looks at individual works with an eye to the themes mentioned above. When he takes up their works of fiction, it is not as literary critic but as philosopher interested in phenomenology. This is a casual book, a reflective conversation with two significant twentieth-century thinkers. The casual quality, however, necessitates a couple of critical comments—there are casual errors of chronology (for example, Camus’ birth year is 1913 not 1920 and the publication year of *The Rebel* is 1951 not 1955) and casual judgments unnecessarily tossed out to the reader (*The Rebel* is “a book that had better never been published at all” (p. 8)). The refusal to consider that particular essay weakens Solomon’s analysis of Camus as we will see.

The first chapter centers on Camus’ *The Stranger*, for Solomon a book of negative phenomenology as Meursault lives his limited experiences without reflection. Only in part two of the novel, as he is deprived of pleasures while in prison and during his own trial as he realizes that he is being judged by others, does Meursault begin to reflect. The irony of part one is, Solomon suggests, that Meursault is the narrator, and thus a doubling of himself. The narrating Meursault is conscious of the experiences of Meursault the character; he is an impossible character because, Solomon concludes, “he is both the reflective transcendental narrator and the unreflective bearer of experience” (p. 18). Solomon contests Camus’ suggestion that his character is a hero of honesty and truthfulness, arguing that for a character who does not reflect, those two notions simply don’t pertain. He also contests the interpretation of Meursault as a man faithful to his feelings. Solomon’s theory of emotions and feelings suggests that they are grounded in judgment—judgments of significance make feelings possible, and since Meursault

does not judge, he has no feelings, only sensations and urges. Solomon even doubts his agency, given that he does not judge, interpret, reflect or feel.

Once Meursault begins, he reflects not merely on his life and death, but on life and death in general. He becomes a philosopher linked to the worldly spirituality Solomon sees in Hegel and Nietzsche, grounded for Meursault in the brotherly bond he feels with the “benign indifference of the universe.”[3] Solomon’s is an insightful reading of the text and character. He does not make Meursault an illustration of phenomenological theory but rather reads him closely with regard to experience, emotion, consciousness, judgment and their relationships. Like several pieces in this book, this essay was previously published, but it has aged well.[4]

Solomon then moves to Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* concerned to find a phenomenology productive of an absurd sensitivity.[5] If he is critical of Camus’ logical arguments, he senses that Camus is after something else—namely, to provoke “a sense of profound disorientation, disillusionment and dissatisfaction” rooted in an appeal “to our ordinary experiences of absurdity in everyday phenomenology” (p. 46). Camus calls us to self-conscious reflection for it is there that the absurd emerges, not in experience itself. Through all of this, Solomon offers a thoughtful discussion of life’s meaning, of meaninglessness, and of their relation to the absurd. Sisyphus is Camus’ chosen emblem because of his meaningless repetition, the basis of “everyman’s” discovery of the absurd. Solomon completes his meditation of four Rs by suggesting that Camus’ reflection on repetition, which is at the heart of ritual, leads to resentment. If Meursault was emptied of hope, Sisyphus has no hope for escape or consolation, and the result is scorn and resentment. This, for Solomon, makes Camus’ “heroic stance less admirable” (p. 53), and his Camus is an incomplete atheist trapped in a meaningless world and fraught with guilt without God. The chapter fulfills the book’s title, as Camus’ project in Solomon’s hands becomes misleadingly grim and dark. He does not acknowledge Camus’ insistence that the absurd is always only a beginning point, a place to move from, and he does not consider Camus’ affirmative views on art as a response to the absurd.

Chapter three, original for this book, analyzes Sartre’s early novel, *Nausea*. The focus is a phenomenology of perception in a peculiar consciousness, that of Antoine Roquentin, a fact which prompts Solomon to question the extent to which it is valid to universalize Roquentin’s experience as Sartre desires to do. Unlike Meursault, Roquentin seems constantly to reflect, and his nausea, his sense of absence beneath appearances, and his sense of being overwhelmed by sheer existence seem to be the result of reflection on experience of the world. All this apparent reflection gets in the way of experience, thus no adventures, no perfect moments as lived. Yet Solomon argues that really Roquentin only observes and comments. True reflection is the managing of one’s states and feelings, and Roquentin makes no effort to take such charge. His confrontation with raw existence at the foot of the chestnut tree becomes a source of shame, though he remains “shameless” since he is alone and has no relation to others (except the projected desire to write a novel to make others ashamed of their existence). Meaningless existence stripped bare becomes active, aggressively so, as it confronts one with radical freedom – and deep anxiety meant to overwhelm. Solomon reads Sartre’s ideas as grim and dark, but he also uses them as a prompt for his own philosophizing, much more so than he did with Camus. Also unlike his treatment of Camus, he gives some sense of how Sartre will evolve in his thinking, even as he misses the wonderful irony of the scorned self-taught man’s revelations that as a prisoner of war he discovered human solidarity and now is a humanist and socialist, quite similar to comments Sartre will make about himself in the immediate post war years.

He then takes up Sartre’s 1939 “sketch” on human emotions,[6] a topic to which Solomon has devoted a good bit of work. For Sartre, the emotions are acts of consciousness, “organized strateg[ies] for dealing with the world,” intentional acts, something we do and not simply endure (pp. 96, 101). This leads to what Solomon considers Sartre’s singularly bold thesis: that emotions are “magical transformations of the world” (p. 102). That is, emotions transform our view of the world, our being in the world, not the

world itself. Solomon then pushes toward *Being and Nothingness* and what he sees as the Sartrean view that locates emotions as central to the fundamental project of giving meaning to our lives. Our emotions, Solomon argues using Sartre (and he does frequently use the second person plural), are foremost among our choices as we orient and position ourselves in an unsatisfactory world and as we act to change that world. Once again, Solomon has used this early work to point toward a later Sartre, which he did not do with Camus. Because he neglects *The Rebel*, he does not take account of Camus' evolution from the absurd toward revolt and the desire to act in the world to change it. This is particularly interesting since the next chapter considers Camus' *The Plague*; for me this is the least satisfactory chapter in the book. Solomon sees this as an existential social novel about choices in the face of great peril, but he tends to treat the characters rather casually while frequently leveling them with pretentious judgments. Much of the discussion gives the impression that Solomon does not like the characters or the novel, which makes his early and concluding comments somewhat surprising. His opening paragraph states that it is "the best and most moving presentation of Camus' social philosophy" (p. 114), and his positive and rather touching conclusion suggests that *The Plague* is "so effective" (p. 128) in portraying a social struggle, a struggle for human solidarity in the face of our common fate, death.

We arrive at what I take to be the central chapter of the book, a lengthy and helpful discussion of the knotty issue in Sartre's thought, "bad faith." The context for "bad faith" is Sartre's insistence on radical human freedom and responsibility. Solomon begins by identifying bad faith as the denial either of one's facticity--the factual situation in which one finds oneself or of one's transcendence--the ability to see possibilities and move beyond one's factual situation. He suggests, however, that this either/or is too stark, for humans tend not simply to accept life as it is given to them while at the same time they "cannot be and do all that [they] might desire and imagine" (p. 139). He thus contests the absoluteness of Sartre's insistence that humans are free and responsible to choose their situatedness. Solomon then questions whether freedom and responsibility are not mutually contradictory and whether the whole idea of bad faith undermines Sartre's defense of radical freedom. Also complicating the issue is Sartre's paradoxical consideration of bad faith as pre-reflective while defining it as self-deception and lying to oneself. Further he argues that Sartre's illustrations and examples of bad faith are problematic and not fully convincing in large part because they are drawn from the experiences of others. And then there is the question of whether bad faith is constituted in the mind of an observer of the person in bad faith or in that person's own mind. As he explores these twists and tangles, Solomon engages in reflective, critical and active dialogue with Sartre, and he is more sympathetic and less judgmental than he had been of Camus and Sartre's early works. Accepting "for the most part" (p. 131) Sartre's ideas of freedom, responsibility and bad faith, Solomon assists Sartre in sorting out the contradictions and paradoxes, and in ameliorating the absoluteness, of his thinking. He softens the definition of bad faith, suggesting that it is "the refusal to take responsibility for our engagements in the world by way of the dubious strategy of refusing to spell them out as such" (p. 155). And against Sartre's tendencies to see bad faith as inescapable, just because humans are what they are, and to set bad faith in absolute contradiction to authenticity, Solomon argues that both moral concepts need to be rethought in terms of degree. Solomon's thinking here, ironically, is very Camusian, that is, very similar to Camus' Mediterranean thought in *The Rebel* which emphasizes the "approximative," moderation, and limits which avoid absolutes.[7]

From here Solomon takes up Sartre's play, *No Exit* which he argues centers on another concept that complicates Sartre's "bad faith," namely "being-for-others" or "being recognized, characterized and identified by other people" (p. 180). Humans are inextricably tied to each other, are stuck with each other, are in it together (echoing the conclusion to the chapter on *The Plague*), and here Solomon the moral teacher most clearly shines through and joins hands with Sartre the moralist. He returns to the idea of taking responsibility for our engagements in the world, arguing that Sartre's play emphasizes the fact that "we are not what others make of us...nor are we ever free from what others makes of us" (p.

180) and that because we are situated among others and gain knowledge of ourselves through others, we “are nothing but networks of relationships. These alone should matter to us” (p. 195).

The final substantive chapter is a consideration of Camus’ *The Fall* and its narrator, Clamence.[8] Solomon becomes philosopher-psychologist as he takes up the “pathologies of pride” (p. 196), specifically resentful pride, in a novel he regards as quasi-religious. Solomon grasps the Nietzschean overtones of this narration as Clamence describes his earlier noble and superior life in Paris, a life lived at great heights, and then his fall. Having taken up his role of judge-penitent in an Amsterdam bar, he reveals the scorn and resentment that mark his post-fall. For Clamence as for Meursault, lived experience and reflection are antithetical and interfere with each other. Solomon’s Clamence is a character of extremes, and Solomon mistakenly identifies Camus with Clamence. His refusal to take *The Rebel* seriously now takes its toll. He ignores Camus’ political and ethical ideas and his philosophy of limits, not to mention his views on art as rebellion. He also does not read *The Fall* in the context of the bitter Sartre-Camus rupture over *The Rebel* (it is as though he simply accepted Sartre’s judgment of Camus’ philosophical essay) and thus overlooks the self-criticism and criticism of Sartre that Camus embedded in the character of Clamence. And in identifying Camus with Clamence, he misses the way Camus self-consciously distanced himself from his character whom he sees as having fallen to servitude. A final comment: I am intrigued by the absence of any comment on Sartre’s autobiography, *The Words*. It would not only be an interesting text to explore in terms of the experience/reflection relationship, but its narrative strategies and tone significantly parallel *The Fall*.

The concluding pages reiterate Solomon’s main thesis about the dichotomous relationship between experience and reflection and the “dark vision of human nature” (p. 213) in the work of Sartre and Camus. Yet he regards them as beacons prompting a call to a phenomenology that works to grasp the relationships between experience, self-consciousness and agency and a call to humans as free, responsible agents. This intelligent and very readable book stimulates and demands conversation with its author, and Solomon’s ethical focus on living and acting in the world—without absolute values but with values drawn from experience, reflection and being with others—is powerful and relevant in our world.

## NOTES

[1] Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) and *Living with Nietzsche: What the Great “Immoralist” Has to Teach Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[2] Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of their Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and David A. Sprintzen and Adrian van den Hoven, eds. and trans., *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2004).

[3] Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans., Stuart Gilbert (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1946), p. 154. (Solomon prefers this translation.)

[4] Robert C. Solomon, “L’Etranger and the Truth,” *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 2: no. 2 (Fall 1978): 141-159 and *From Hegel to Existentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[5] This essay previously appeared in Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976, reissued 1993).

[6] This essay previously appeared in Paul Schilpp, ed., *Sartre* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1981) and *From Hegel to Existentialism*.

[7] See Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans., Anthony Bower (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1956), pp. 253-306.

[8] This essay previously appeared as "Pathologies of Pride in Camus' *The Fall*," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 28: no. 1 (April 2004): 41-59.

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