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Travelling philosophy : from literature to film

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Part III. Solaris

I. Self and Alien Other: The Existential Philosophy of *Solaris*

Bringing together strands of Hegelian phenomenology, Machiavellian political philosophy, and Augustinian theology, the projection and alienation elements of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's existential thought best suits my critical probe into the particular philosophy of the *Solaris* texts.

   Generally speaking, existentialists see a fundamental problem in Western philosophical traditions, which is the rather Pelagian belief that humans are generally good, self-sacrificing creatures. Although some may disguise it better than others, the Machiavellian, Augustinian belief in natural human egocentrism links a Hegelian dependence on the sensual world with Sartre's existential view of a resistant world that compels the self to make choices.[182] However, human selfishness problematizes socialization in a world of conflicting desires. In *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (1957), Sartre wrote that: "all human existence is passion, the famous self-interest being only one way freely chosen among others to realize this passion" (92). Sartre's acknowledgement of egocentrism rests on the human predisposition to want more, even when it is more of less. In his work *Existentialism* (1962), American professor Robert G. Olson wrote that the existentialists generally:

> ...mock the notion of a complete and fully satisfying life. The life of every man, whether he explicitly recognizes it or not, is marked by irreparable losses. Man cannot help aspiring toward the serene detachment from the things of this world which the traditional philosopher sought; but it is not within his power to achieve either of these ambitions, or having achieved them, to find therein the satisfaction he had anticipated (14).

With perfection an impossibility, existentialists commonly assert that our struggle with the world challenges us to improve through the choices we make. Sartre wrote:

> Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence. Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism (1957: 15).

In other words, we first exist and then spend the rest of our lives defining ourselves through the choices we make – existence precedes essence. In Sartre's view, existentialism is fundamentally about living, as we are defined through the act of living.

   Similar to German philosopher Martin Heidegger's "being-in-the-world," Sartre sees the self as a free "being-for-self," or a self-making agent, and it is through its projects – or its mental projections of consciousness in order to establish new relations with external entities – that the world is revealed and made meaningful.[183] To put it another way, because my projects are who I am in the mode of engaged agency, the world

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[182] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1957), 23. Sartre places a great responsibility on the self's ability to choose: "That is the idea I shall try to convey when I say the man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."

[183] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library Inc., 1956), 3, 629: "The concrete is man within the world in that specific union of man with the world which Heidegger, for example, calls "being-in-the-world." "Being-for-itself is the nihilation of Being-in-itself; consciousness conceived as a lack of Being, a desire for Being, a relation to Being."

reflexively reveals to me who I am. However, although the world is made meaningful through my projects, the world itself is not brought into being through them. Consequently, the world (and those within it) retains its otherness and thus can be perceived as utterly alien.[184] In *Being and Nothingness* (1956), Sartre develops his notion of alienation through his analysis of the "look":

> In the first place, he is the being toward whom I do not turn my attention. He is the one who looks at me and at whom I am not yet looking, the one who delivers me to myself as unrevealed but without revealing himself, the one who is present to me as directing at me but never as the object of my direction; he is the concrete pole (though out of reach) of my flight, of the alienation of my possibles, and of the flow of the world toward another world which is the same world and yet lack all communication with it. But he cannot be distinct from this same alienation and flow; he is the meaning and the direction of them (269).

Sartre argues that as long as we are engaged unreflectively in a certain practice, we are nothing but a first-person perspective. We are absorbed in the world and do not experience ourselves as having an "outside," that is we do not understand our actions through a kind of third-person description. However, when we become aware of "being-seen-by-another," we become conscious of having a nature of being.[185] In this way, we see ourselves as voyeurs who could not originally experience ourselves as such, but it is the other who gives rise to this mode of being, a mode that we acknowledges as ours and not merely the belief of another. The existence of others allows us to gain a third-person perspective of ourselves, although this also reveals the extent to which we are alienated from a dimension of our being. Hence, while the self is more deeply revealed through the look of the other, our alienation stems from the fact that we can never know what the other truly believes.

It is Sartre's notion of alienation that is of particular interest to the philosophy of both *Solaris* texts. At the outset of the fabula, the "being-for-itself" protagonist (Kelvin) is engaged unreflectively in the world and, in a sense, does not experience himself as having an outside. However, it is paradoxically through his inside that he is aware of being observed when his subjectivity is invaded by the subjectivity of Rheya, or the physical manifestation of the memories of his dead wife. Kelvin, through the reflected look of Rheya (a kind of Hegelian other self-consciousness) is a voyeur into himself and, thus, Kelvin is ultimately provided with a kind of didactic third person perspective. In spite of the fact that his own subjectivity is more deeply established through her, Rheya is also the source of Kelvin's alienation. Since Rheya is an extension of Kelvin's mind (a project), his alienation – once recognized – offers the potential to choose a more unified, Hegelian understanding self-consciousness. On the other hand, alienation can also result in a kind of existential anxiety when we choose not to understand or are simply unable to see ourselves through the other. In this case, the self feels isolated and threatened because anxiety draws the self out of its projects and there is a collapse of a practical

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[184] F.H. Heinemann, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 173: "There is a limit to our understanding of other persons. In their inner life they all remain, to a certain degree, foreign to us. (...) From this it follows that alienation cannot be completely eliminated, it can only be reduced to reasonable terms. All we can do is to remove it from the foreground to the background and deprive it of its central position and of its emotional power, but we have to acquiesce in the fact that alienation somehow belongs to our heritage."

[185] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1956), 256-257: "It is in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject. For just as the Other is a probable object for me-as-subject, so I can discover myself in the process of becoming a probable object for only a certain subject. (...) This is the relation which I call 'being-seen-by-another'..."

immersion into the world.[186] As a result, there is a loss of the basic self-identity that is provided by our projects. Robbed of self-identification, anxiety teaches the self that it does not coincide with any concrete indication that it factually is (Crowell 2005).

In *The Self* (1955), Niebuhr suggests a potential source for anxiety, which is a kind of empty dialogue seen when: "The self faces the other self as a mystery which can never be fully penetrated" (30). As a result of this impenetrability, the self lacks an authentic self-consciousness because – alienated and unaware of its own outside – it is never exposed to a meaningful third-person description. Thus, Kelvin, attempting to cope with the resulting anxiety, anthropomorphizes the impenetrable other. Expounding this notion, Niebuhr argues that the self can merely: "surmise about the internal life of the other self by way of analogy with its own internal dialogue" (30). Niebuhr points out a problem with this kind of anthropomorphic tendency: "The self makes many errors by relying too much on analogy" (30). Merely anthropomorphically projecting one's self onto an impenetrable other only reflects back what you already know. This happens when Sartorius, speaking to this idea, tells the literary Kelvin:

> We don't want to conquer the cosmos, we simply want to extend the boundaries of Earth to the frontiers of the cosmos. For us, such and such a planet is an arid as the Sahara, another as frozen as the North Pole, yet another as lush as the Amazon basin. (...) We think of ourselves as the Knights of the Holy Contact. This is another lie. We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors (72).[187]

The self can only transcend to an understanding consciousness through the other, not by merely bouncing its own reflection off of it. In the novel, this notion of anthropomorphically projecting one's self onto the alien other keeps Kelvin in a fixed cycle of existence, or a perpetual state of alienation and anxiety because he fails to understand himself through Rheya. In other words, his existence is fixed because he does not choose to improve his existence through the other. This idea is evidenced in the last page of the novel when Kelvin wonders if we must be:

> ...resigned to being a clock that measures the passage of time, now out of order, now repaired, and whose mechanism generates despair and love as soon as its maker sets it going? Are we to grow used to the idea the every man relives ancient torments, which are all the more profound because they grow comic with repetition? That human existence should repeat itself, well and good, but that it should repeat itself like a hackneyed tune, or a record a drunkard keeps paying as he feeds coins into the jukebox... (204).[188]

Although, shortly thereafter, Kelvin's remarks imply that he does cling to the hope of a future transcendence, he ultimately remains in a static state of despair as he meditates on the vanity of a cyclical, fixed existence. Kelvin sees himself as subject to external

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[186] Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (1957), 23. Sartre argues that we try to avoid anxiety by denying our freedom and responsibility, but this only amounts to ignoring reality and we only betray ourselves. Sartre condemns this self-deception and argues that we must accept responsibility for our behavior. If we are to live authentically, then we must become aware of the human situation and accept it.

[187] Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris* (New York: Walker and Company, 1970), 204. Subsequent citations are from this edition and I will cite them parenthetically.

[188] Lem, *Solaris* (1970), 197. In the novel, Dr. Snow further develops our anthropomorphic nature. He notes that we see God's attributes as "amplified human ones" (197). See also Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (1957), 92. Similarly, Sartre wrote that: "Man makes himself in order to be God, and selfness considered from this point of view can appear to be an egoism..."

forces and does not believe that his essence can be positively modified by his choices – at least not yet.

While we may never completely evade the type of innate anthropomorphic tendencies that lead to Kelvin's condition, these propensities issue a warning against the practice of moral anthropocentrism. I define moral anthropocentrism as the belief that morality only applies to those objects we deem as human. In the following passage, Kelvin begins to recognize the duality of his own anthropomorphic tendencies:

> Any attempt to understand the motivations of these occurrences (Rheya) is blocked by our own anthropomorphism. Before we can proceed with our research, either our own thoughts or their materialized forms must be destroyed. It is not within our power to destroy our thoughts. As for destroying their material forms, that could be like committing murder (134).

Kelvin realizes how his own anthropomorphism can block his understanding of Rheya and thereby himself. On the other hand, projecting humanity onto Rheya may allow him to see Rheya's death as a situation that is not "beyond morality," as Dr. Gordon claims (152). In other words, although such anthropomorphic tendencies may obstruct Kelvin's deeper understanding of himself, they also allow Kelvin to see Rheya as something more than an impenetrable other, but rather as a moral agent. However, the literary Kelvin fails to truly see himself through the manifestation of his own memories (Rheya) and ultimately resigns himself to seeing life as a series of empty gestures (196). Unlike the metaphysical transcendence the filmic Kelvin exhibits, the literary protagonist's resignation implies a failure to transform his essence through existential choice. With these concepts in mind, I examine the literary and filmic texts to gain a deeper understanding of the existential question: Who am I?