

*Philosophy in the Wild:
Advice Columns, Sartre and Masochism*

The Guardian runs a regular advice column called ‘Dear Mariella’. This is not unfamiliar: plenty of newspapers run advice columns often covering intimate concerns of their readers. Why would one send a letter to Mariella? An obvious answer would be: to get advice. But there is something disconcerting about the project of advice columns. A reader shares a personal problem in sometimes less than 200 words. On these grounds, Mariella is offering her recommendations. Not only that, the problem is shared with all other readers. Such a characterisation of the matter leads one to ask: is an (often generic) advice by a newspaper columnist worth the exposure of deeply personal problems to thousands of people and their judgements?

Perhaps, there is something about being human that makes such columns flourish. Sartre’s account of freedom in *Being and Nothingness (BN)* gives a glimpse into what motivates the belief in all resorts of advice like columns and astrology. Overwhelmed with the fact that we alone will have to decide, we resort to ‘bad faith’ and unsuccessfully use the possibility of encountering (anonymous) Others to lose ourselves in them, to deny our freedom and subjectivity. This act of striving towards being an object for Others is characteristic of masochism – advice columns become a masochistic way to deny responsibility.

For Sartre, everyone is an intrinsically free being. This freedom consists in choosing ends and in consciously pursuing the project we set out according to them. There is nothing that could choose those ends for us – everyone is condemned to be free. Sometimes, we are prompted to realise that indeed, all the world comes down to is the decision we make for it. Such moments can be terrifying because they reveal that there is nothing in the world to lean on or to take the weight of decisions off us – Sartre calls such moments ‘anguish’ (BN: 63).

Now consider a recent dilemma outlined to Mariella (Frostrup 2018): a widow has found a new partner but her son refuses to accept that. Finding herself in such a dilemma, drawn between the love for a partner and balancing the new situation with children is draining. In such despair, when no one seems able to offer guidance, one might realise that it is ultimately a balancing act only oneself can do – that nothing else will resolve the situation.

Anguish is a painful experience and one, Sartre stresses, that often leads to bad faith (BN: 71) – i.e. resorting to actions that deny our ultimate freedom, playing a game pretending it is not us at the foundation of the world for us. Mariella’s advice column is an outlet for exactly such a game. We tell our stories to Others in the hope that they offer counsel and choose our ends for us. However, here, bad faith warrants special attention when analysed through Sartre’s eyes because it is bad faith achieved through the encounter with Others. How exactly does someone else lift our subjectivity from us? What is the process like when I decide to deny that I am free?

It is at this point that Sartre’s proposals become especially relevant. He (BN: 282) argues that the encounter of another is fundamentally the experience of ‘the look’: the experience of someone taking me as an object in the world, fixing and judging my existence. When I apprehend this view of the Other on me, e.g. when I feel ashamed of what I did when they looked at me, I accept their view of me – I resume it. But there are two aspects about this

encounter that sit uneasily. Firstly, by letting the Other fix my existence, I am no longer as free as I used to be. The Other is not just a table I can push aside, he or she is an unpredictable freedom in itself. I am an object for something I cannot surpass – thus, I am alienated from my free choice of what to do. Secondly, the Other actively judges me. I am victim to whatever the Other decides I am – I am in his servitude (BN: 287-291).

When a reader opens up to Mariella, they experience the ‘look’. She takes them as a fixed existence at this point, they are reduced to what Mariella and readers judge them to be. The writer cannot influence what is made of them. However, it seems they actively seek to be in this situation of alienation and servitude. Why would anyone choose to do that? What can make this servitude seem *desirable*?

When seeking advice, the reader chooses to become an object for both Mariella and the anonymous readership. Becoming an object entails denying that one is condemned to be free since objects are not free. By accepting the judgement of the Other, the writer of the letter hopes to get rid of their own subjectivity, of their own burden of having to choose and decide. However, giving oneself up to the superiority of Others is alike to masochist attitudes. It is in this sense that advice columns are masochistic: they allow us to lose ourselves in the judgement of countless Others and thereby we accomplish to actively enjoy the pain of being exposed to Others in all our vulnerability (BN: 386, 399-400).

Frustratingly, as Sartre observes, such masochism is destined to fail (BN: 400). Mariella is not the one that returns home and separates from her partner because of her children. It is the writer of the letter that has to do it, who despite all the advice nevertheless has to choose her ends and values. Mariella cannot take this burden from them – they are all, necessarily, thrown back into their subjectivity. This illuminates advice columns’ futility: they achieve nothing but offer an outlet for deceiving oneself, at least shortly, of being an object – of not being obliged to decide on the path of life every moment anew. Interestingly, the same analysis of self-deception seems to apply to other popular reads like horoscopes or, perhaps, even the weather forecast?

Words: 999

Bibliography:

- Sartre, J.P. (2003) *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. Barnes, H. E. London: Routledge.
- Frostrup, M. (2018) *Dear Mariella: My husband died and my son is angry I’m in a new relationship*. [online] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/feb/18/my-husband-died-and-my-son-is-angry-i-am-in-a-new-relationship-mariella-frostrup> (Accessed 14 March 2018).