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Situational Man:

Notes on Emphases in the Analysis of Action

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One of the primary foci of sociology is the attempt to account for the differential orientations and acts and patterns of acts and role assumptions of actors, rather than the differential features of social systems.

It is possible, one supposes to raise the question of whether such an attempt is a legitimate sociological enterprise. It could be argued that sociology is properly the task of accounting for variations in social systems only. If, however, we define sociology as what people called sociologists do, then the actor focus is undeniably and overwhelmingly a central endeavor of the field.

Given the facts of practice within sociology, we are thus constrained to concern ourselves with the logic of this kind of endeavor.

(And I should confess, also, a greater interest in accounting for patterns of actors' activities than in accounting for patterns of social systems, at least large-scale social systems as distinct from situated activity systems.)

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The attempts of sociologists to account for differential actions of actors may be seen as having grown up against the background of what are called psychodynamic or, simply, psychological explanations. Indeed, they have not merely grown up, but fought their way up, as alternatives of, and competitors to, psychological explanations.

Of late, however, the sociological--psychological debate has lost some of its intensity. Various kinds of treaties have been negotiated. One such treaty expounds the doctrine that sociological explanations are properly used for some types

of cases while psychological explanations are more appropriate in other types of cases. Another treaty introduces the doctrine of mutual complementarity which assents the indispensability of both approaches for complete explanation.

I call attention to this classic matter in order to provide a familiar point of departure for my next remarks. I should like to suggest that while a dispute has existed and certainly continues to exist, the psychological-sociological distinction obscures rather than pin-points what are in fact some underlying issues, or at least differences in emphasis. The generic questions of note do not pit sociologists against psychodynamicists or psychologists, but rather, pit various members of these respective denominational affiliations against each other, in a criss-crossing of disciplinary or trade-label lines.

I shall undertake, therefore, to explicate what appear to be some of these underlying or logical matters, focusing in particular on the relation of organizational or structural analysis to this chronic controversy. Following this explication, I will shift the purview to a sociology of knowledge perspective, attempting to suggest how this more technical matter is an aspect or manifestation of broader social and cultural changes.

Special Predisposition and Situational Determination

For purposes of explication, we may label and oppose two doctrines of how one best accounts for differentials in human action. We have, on the one hand, the special predisposition doctrine, and on the other the situational determination doctrine.

The Special Predispositionalists seem, most generally, in search of those stable features of actors which will differentiate such actors from the general population and which are, therefore, correlates or determinants of orientation or action outcomes. As noted, the predispositional doctrine is best known in its explicitly psychologistic form. Of more interest is its sociologistic form which shows a logical isomorphism to psychologism. Only the content of the variables is changed.

The Situational Determinists begin by positing a population of similar predispositions -- a society of rather similarly inclined actors whose differential orientations and actions must, therefore, be accounted for on the basis of on-going, more or less current, circumstances. Differentiated or specialized predispositions are minimized as a relevant element. Put another way, starting with people who are assumed or asserted to have dispositions pretty much like everyone else, the situational determinists must then ask: how do we structurally account for variations?

I will by-pass discussion of the obvious reconciliation of these opposing stances -- that achieved by asserting that each complements the other as different phases of a single explanatory account. While such an assertion may be true enough at a logical or conceptual level, we want to distinguish the logic of the matter from the operational emphasis actually found in accomplished research.

In so distinguishing conceptual or logical complementarity from operational emphasis, we can begin to dis-

cern more specifically some practices in the collection and analysis of data that reveal, I think, a strong tendency for sociologists to adopt the specialized predisposition model of analysis and, therefore, of man. Much of what is called sociology is, in this sense, logically identical to the kind of work that is conventionally identified as psychology.

Let me sketch here three operational characteristics of many sociological studies which suggest the assumption of the specialized predispositional model, and contrast each of these practices with its corresponding situational determinist alternative. I will refer to first, the structure of causal models employed; second, the conceptualization, or lack thereof, of the actor's view of himself and of his situation; and, third, the remote or proximate character of adduced independent variables.

These are, of course, three aspects of a whole, singled out artificially for purposes of examination.

First, it is useful to distinguish, following Howard S. Becker,¹ between static and processual models of causation. By static models of causation is meant the practice of taking phenomenon X and successively examining factors a, b, c, etc., to assess their effect upon X; or, in more sophisticated versions, to assess the effects on X of a, etc., in various combinations. This procedure, intentionally or not, assumes that all causes operate simultaneously or that temporal occurrence of factor a, etc., is irrelevant in the determination of X. Assemblages of such

static factors conduce an image of stable, fixed, special predispositions.

Although seekers for specialized predispositions would be happy to discover one factor that accounted for all variance in X, they, of course, do not. They console themselves, rather, with attempts to build portraits of the essential characteristics related to X, which is to say, account for X. They present static profiles, (including the "profile fallacy") of what, for example, Republicans are like, juvenile delinquents are like, murderers are like. It is assumed, of course, that Republicans, juvenile delinquents, murderers or whatever, are not merely "like" the features assigned to them. Rather, they are these things. By compiling a set of characteristics on persons who commit murder, vote Republican or act delinquent; it is assumed that the specialized predispositions of murderers, Republicans and delinquents have been uncovered. Casual inquiry need proceed no further; murder is explained by the fact that it is committed by people who are disposed to commit murder.

Although the methodology is as yet underdeveloped, the Situational Determinists move in a different direction: toward a processual, temporally-oriented or sequential imagery of causation. The focus is upon successions of dependencies through time; upon the ways in which prior conditions may or may not develop into succeeding conditions of X and may or may not cumulate and eventuate in X. Attention is directed to ways in which alternatives may or may

not be present, to the ways in which and the degree to which action may be constrained, as for example in Becker's well known study of marihuana use or in Cressey's study of embezzlement.²

Attention to process focuses particularly upon the cumulation of factors--each factor being a condition of X, but not sufficient for X; each factor making X merely more possible or more probable but not yet determined. This imagery, sometimes referred to as the logic of value-added, one finds somewhat applied at the social system level in Smelser's account of the British cotton industry and thoroughly applied in his theory of collective behavior.³

Second, the search for specialized predispositions in sociology seems to lead to a minimization of the importance of the actor's own account of himself, of his perspective and of his verbalized reasons for acting the way he does or did. The actor's phenomenology tends to be viewed as epi-phenomenal, as masking the "real" or "in fact" or "actual" reasons for conduct. Even survey researchers whose technology allows them to tap some spate of "attitudes" are in something of a hurry to get "beyond" attitudes to the "real reasons" which are typically demographic attributes.

And, of course, demographic sociology, with its perennial use of census data, is often in the happy position of being unencumbered by phenomenological materials. The demographic habit, indeed, has become a standard format of Specialized Predisposition sociology. As is known, the pro-

fessional literature abounds in cross-classifications of some item, such as an actor or type of actor, with characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, race, occupational standing and stability, size of community of origin or residence, education, religion, marital status, geographic and social mobility and the like. Accompanying these correlational presentations, there is a rather standardized apology for the lack of intervening phenomenological substance.

Researchers who bear the label psychologist, have shown more willingness to stand close to their subjects. But here, too, the phenomenology of the actor has generally been underplayed; the search has been, rather, for indicators of "deeper things"--character or personality--the actors' specialized predispositions.

Situational Determinists, on the other hand, counsel taking the actor at least somewhat more seriously and considering the possibility that part of the reason for his action has to do with what he says it has to do with. They do not, however, suggest subjective idealism. They suggest, rather, that to fail to consider the actor's construction is, in fact,

to risk the worst kind of subjectivism...the... observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it.⁴

One of the special attractions of the materials grouped under the rubric of organizational analysis, as distinct from certain other clusters of materials, has been exactly this willingness to look over the actor's shoulder,

as it were, and to take seriously, what is seen from that vantage point. Whatever else one might say about March and Simon's Organizations, Blau and Scott's Formal Organizations, or Katz and Kahn's Social Psychology of Organizations as analyses of organizations, they do display this willingness, which is, in my mind, no small achievement in view of what commonly goes on in sociology.

Third, the use of static models and a distrust of the actor's phenomenology goes hand in glove with the Specialized Predispositionists' focus on spatio-temporally and conceptually remote independent variables. I refer here to the practice of linking some dependent variable with explanatory units that are far removed in geography, time and level of explanation and being reasonably satisfied with the results. Thus, for example, to explain the killing of a man by a friend in a barroom, by primary reference to a tradition (or "culture") of violence in America is to call upon forces widely diffused in space and time and to jump many levels of analytic abstraction from that neighborhood bar. To explain the same event by primary reference to socio-economic conditions in that city, occupational opportunities, relations among ethnic groups, etc., is to call upon independent variables spatially and conceptually distant from the act. Similarly, to seek to locate long past events in the biographies of the participants and then to conceptualize these events as operative forces in the homicide is to focus explanation upon temporally remote variables.

In general, the use of remote variables may be seen as an attempt to evoke fixed or long-past characteristics of the actors or looming and massive features of their settings (i.e. a city, an entire culture) as elements of the specialized predispositions of actors that are responsible for their acts.

Situational Determinists experience a certain disquietude because of the failure of such attempts to focus on the immediate situation confronted by the actor, on his enmeshment in it and on the viable alternatives afforded by that enmeshment. In philosophical terms, one might say the situation of homicide is a condition of confrontation par excellence. In methodological terms one would point to the need for deciphering the channeling effect of on-going face to face interaction systems in spatio-temporally bounded situations.

Immediate situations have a compelling reality of their own and generate their own imperatives for action. As Kurt Lewin put the matter many years ago:

It is a simple fact, but still not sufficiently recognized in psychology and sociology, that the behavior of a person depends above all upon his momentary position. Often the world looks very different before and after an event which changes the region in which a person is located.⁵

The Specialized Predispositionalists among sociologists have labored mightily to depict, in particular, the remote causes of acts, but, according to the Situational Determinists, they have fallen short of their objective because they have

sought explanations where none are to be found. At best, remote variables can only roughly depict a range of actors who might be more likely to find themselves in conducive circumstances. Whether or not a person with "appropriate" remote features will engage in an act, etc., remains highly indeterminant; the eventual outcome, they claim has less to do with specialized predispositions than with the contingencies faced in immediate situations.

At this point, too, the organizational analysis of action has built a body of empirical materials. Without fanfare and for some years now, researchers in that field have been fashioning situational accounts of action emphasizing not only process models and phenomenology of actors, but also the role of proximate factors in action.

To provide one example among many, we find Balu and Scott distinguishing the "sociopsychological approach" from the "structural approach" (or, in terms here, specialized predispositions as distinguished from situational determinants). Thus they recount Almond and Laswell's study of aggressive behavior of relief clients toward government officials.

The focus of this study is clearly on personality characteristics of individuals rather than on social structure. It explains the observed conflicts by reference to the internal and psychological processes that motivated them. The approach is sociopsychological, that is the psychological differences are traced back to the past social experiences that produced them. For example, the authors do not assume that aggressiveness is an inherent trait that accounts for

both the tendency to violate laws and the tendency to have conflicts with officials, but suggest that the social experience of having been arrested engenders negative attitudes toward government officials. The sociopsychological approach asks: what are the past experiences and characteristics of participants that foster conflict? But one can also ask, and this is the structural approach: what are the conditions in the social situation that promote conflict? Both approaches deal with the influence of social conditions on patterns of conduct, but the former examines the influence of past social conditions on personality characteristics and hence on conduct, whereas the latter is concerned with the influence of present social conditions on conduct.⁶

Blau and Scott then elucidate the distinction with one of the first and perhaps the most famous of situational studies in an organizational context: Whyte's analysis of crying waitresses.

Whyte in his study of social relations in restaurants observed that waitresses sometimes broke down and cried. After careful observation of the situations in which such behavior occurred, he concluded that it was the result of cross-pressures on the waitress. The nature of these pressures can be clarified by analyzing the "flow of demand" in the organization, that is, by studying who makes demands on whom. Demands that flow contrary to status lines--from lower to higher status--create conflicts. Thus, male cooks and counter-men did not expect to be ordered around by females, yet the waitresses often had occasion to tell them what food to prepare or serve. Whyte found that this discrepancy produced conflicts, which could be reduced if some sort of impersonal barrier was erected at the point of encounter. For example, a spindle on which waitresses placed their food orders reduced tensions and conflicts by changing the flow of demand, since it enabled the counterman to fill the orders at his discretion instead of at the command of the waitress and then tell her that the food was ready.

Orders from superiors made demands on the waitress, as did the "orders" of the customers, and even the requests for help from her co-workers. A waitress was often caught in the cross currents of these demands, as when an impatient customer

insisted on services that upset her routine. The tensions produced by these conflicting pressures sometimes built up to a point where they exploded, that is, made the waitress break down and cry.

Whyte's analysis illustrates a structural as distinguished from a sociopsychological focus. He does not discuss the psychological traits of customers or waitresses. He deals neither with the typical personality of the waitress nor with the past experience and psychological characteristics that distinguish those that cry often from those that rarely do. He explains an observed pattern of conduct not in terms of personality traits, even socially acquired ones, but in terms of existing social conditions. The social element in the approach is not the significance of past social experiences for present personality characteristics but the significance of the present structure of social relations for patterns of conduct. The question that Whyte attempts to answer, then, is: how does the social structure give rise to conflict.⁷

And, of course, Blau's work on structural effects is squarely in the same line of thought.⁸

The model of the situationalist, then, might be summarized as follows: given almost anyone in a given situation or series of situations, what is likely to be the typical outcome that is attributable to the features of situated activity systems rather than to specialized predispositions?

Methodological Concomitants

Before going on to bracket all of this within a sociology of knowledge perspective, let me comment briefly on some methodological concomitants of these two emphases.

The Situationalists' emphasis upon the on-going present implies data collection devices that garner materials on situated activity systems.

Concretely, such data can be collected by asking

people about their experiences in such systems (interviewing), by reading documents which describe situations (such as mental hospital ward notes), or by directly observing such systems. Each practice involves a serious set of limitations and each practice, assiduously prosecuted, requires the researchers' involvement in systems for rather long periods of time--much longer periods than they typically devote to social life for scientific purposes. From the perspective of the occupant of the researcher role, his presence within a system for long periods of time raises a wide range of problems having to do with the maintenance of social relations between himself and the participants of the system. If one considers, as I do, that ideal sociological data is nothing short of complete sound and motion picture film records on a system, then the social problems involved in maintaining relations while securing such data get to be formidable indeed. Since people tend to be ambivalent about the presence of even a single, unobtrusive observer, it seems unlikely that they would respond to the constant presence of such machines with greater enthusiasm.

The difficulties involved in the methodological direction that the situationalists would take us does, however, suggest one kind of reason for the widespread utilization of the special predisposition model in sociology. The popularity of this model may have less to do with the predispositions of predispositionally oriented researchers than with the situational difficulties inherent in collecting

closeup, detailed records of human behavior in day-to-day situations.

Census data and survey interviews make minimal demands upon "respondents." They require at most, and only rarely, a few hours of the respondent's time; more generally only a few minutes are involved. Such a constriction of access forces the researcher, if he is to secure any data at all, to focus upon those kinds of items that the respondent can reasonably be expected to know with some minimal degree of accuracy. As it happens, dispositional kinds of materials can be reported with more assumed accuracy and detail than can accounts of situations and their structure.

So it is that our social scientific knowledge of persons is highly skewed--an inescapable consequence of the kind of access to members of society available to occupants of the social researcher role.

Social Organization, Conceptions of Person-Objects and Personal Action

Although there may be some measure of truth in the lament that knowledge tends to fragment into insulated, disciplinary compartments, it seems also the case that specialists in various disciplines participate in a general culture, drawing a part of their orientation from it and feeding their materials back into the pool of popular and common conceptions.

I should like, tentatively, to suggest that the pre-

dispositional-situational contrast within sociology is merely one version of a broader contrast in the conceptualization of person-objects; that Western-technological society is in the advanced early stages of shifting from a specialized pre-disposition ideology of person-objects to a situationalist ideology (which shift is increasingly evident in sociological studies); and, that this shift in ideology is both in response to, and a cause of, a change in the empirical facts of conduct. That is, an increasing proportion of the population are coming to view their behavior as a function of situational demands and the bases upon which they predicate their conduct reflects the ideological shift.

Let me make clear that these statements and the expansion of them which follows are necessarily in the nature of speculation; no one can really tell anything very much at this point in time. My statements are additionally speculative in view of my previous avowal of greater interest in situated activity systems than in large-scale social structures which are the present focus.

It is a common and oft repeated (if still inadequately conceptualized) observation that an industrial, verging on technological society is characterized by, among other things, a relatively high degree of geographical and social mobility. For the participants in such a society, this means that they must share their biographies with a changing set of others and must be responsive to changing situational roles and rules.

Although the proportion involved is still probably a minority of the population, even in the United States, those who take part in the technological culture develop, in response to the special features of such a social order, what Katz and Kahn so aptly caption "role readiness."⁹ They develop a kind of social suppleness, an ability to deal with a succession of strangers and a succession of segmentally known people in a succession of instrumentally defined situations within which local demands change and across which demands differ.

It can be posited that under such circumstances people will tend to view themselves and others as reciprocals of situated demands. Folk-theories of action will tend to evolve which emphasize the changing, fluid, malleable character of persons as types of objects. The current activities of actors will tend to be seen as manifestations of their organizational enmeshments.

Let us consider some scattered materials which suggest a movement in this direction, referring first to the popularity of those literary and social science analyses which attempt to depict responses to these structural features. Note, for example, the responsiveness to Riesman's famous distinction between inner and other directed analyzed in The Lonely Crowd. (This is, in this context, a contrast between specialized predispositions and situational determinants.) Note also the widespread attention to Whyte's Organization Man who is, in present terms, Situational Man. And we must consider the growing popularity of sociology itself, now on the verge of a popular preoccupation.

So too, ethical types have begun to muse over the problems of "situational ethics."

At the more abstract philosophical levels, the advent of, and popular following around, existentialist philosophy may be conceived as the development of a situationalist rhetoric. Existentialism as a rhetoric implies a contrast with something that is not existentialist, and that something, in the mind of J.P. Sartre, anyway, seems to be essentialism. Leaving aside some of the dimensions of, and deductions from, this distinction, it primarily involves the character of the assumptions that persons have about others and themselves as objects.

As imputed by Sartre, the essentialist posture assumes that human activity is a manifestation of an identifiable and fundamental or underlying human nature or character. In its universalistic versions, found sometimes in Christian doctrines, human activity, especially sinful activity, is related to a universal feature in the nature of human beings, most commonly to some version of a transmitted original sin. All men are, basically and fundamentally sinners, and all are in need of redemption. In less universalistic versions, human activity is a concrete manifestation of some underlying specialized nature of the actor. The actor's "nature", it is assumed, permeates his acts and makes possible, therefore, his identification by others as some particular kind of human.

The existentialists, most predominantly, Sartre, begin with the assertion that the prime consideration is not

man's universal or special nature or essentiality but rather the "condition of man", by which is meant:

all the limitations which a priori define man's fundamental situation in the universe. His historical situations are variable; man may be born a slave in a pagan society, or may be a feudal baron or a proletarian. But what never vary are the necessities of being in the world, of having to labor and die there.¹⁰

In "having to labor and die there" without benefit of essence or essentiality to guide them, actors are free to define themselves and others and continually to re-define one another. The burden of self-other definition is placed entirely on each individual man.

The existentialist argues that actors are nothing other than that which they define themselves to be through their actions. As such, the conception of some kind of essential character or fundamental human nature is an illusion, however convenient and necessary it may be in making actors more predictable to themselves and to others, and, therefore, in insuring that social relations are orderly affairs.

Within existentialism itself this conception of man leads to the moral doctrine that each man is responsible for his acts and for what he is. It leads to an emphasis upon the actor's freedom to define himself through his choice of acts. Whatever he, in some sense, is, the is is a product of his own acts. Or, as Sartre has put it in response to his critics:

A coward is defined by the deed that he has done.

What people feel obscurely and with horror is that the coward [as presented in existentialist fiction] is guilty of being a coward. What people would prefer would be to be born either a coward or a hero. One of the charges . . . is something like this --- "But, after all, these people being so base, how can you make them into heroes?" That objection is really comic, for it implies that people are born heroes; and that is, at bottom, what such people would like to think. If you are born cowards, you can be quite content. You can do nothing about it and you will be cowards all your lives whatever you do; and if you are born heroes you can again be quite content; you will be heroes all your lives, eating and drinking heroically. Whereas the existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero.¹¹

Whatever else existentialism may be, it is without doubt an alternative to conceptualizing persons as stable objects. Almost anything is possible for existential man and existentialist fiction undertakes to portray some of the possibilities.

Within social science, those works which are, in some unarticulated sense, responsive to this shift seem most quickly and widely diffused, cited and rewarded. As is known, the criteria of what is important and significant in sociology are rather vague. The public criteria touted in theory and methods texts having to do with theoretical significance and methodological adequacy hardly provide a basis for predicting what practicing sociologists will consider important contributions.

Among the most widely known works of an experimental sort, we must refer immediately to the Asch experiments, the

McGill experiments and the Milgram experiments. Each of these speaks to the theme of the surprising responses that can be elicited from almost anybody, given their enmeshment in certain kinds of situated activity systems.

Among works of a more general variety, the awards accruing to and the peculiar popularity of Goffman's Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (winner of the MacIver award), and Matza's Delinquency and Drift (winner of the C. W. Mills award), suggest responsiveness along situational lines.

At the moment we are witnessing the rapid diffusion of the behavioral therapy point of view, the situational alternative to the psychodynamic conception of persons, a conception which is built upon the specialized predisposition model. The conditioning approach, as a type of situational determinancy, may well be the wave of the future. While Freud articulated a model of person-objects appropriate to the social order of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries (entrepreneurial capitalism), Skinner and Hull have perhaps propounded a view more congruent with the social organization of the technological societies of the immediate and more distant future.

I have spoken primarily of the relation between ideology of person-objects and type of social order and made only oblique reference to the relation between social organization and the empirical facts of conduct. These two aspects are, of course, intertwined; each feeding on the

other. Let me conclude with a brief observation on what may be the secular trend in the kind of bases upon which people act.

Theories, both folk and scientific, emphasizing specialized predispositions appear most congruent with a social order characterized by heterogeneous socialization climates. Participants in the wider society are drawn from diverse local and parochial areas and receive their socialization in a spectrum of family types and idiosyncratic family constellations. Peer group patterns and educational apparatus vary.

As we proceed into an era of increasing homogenization of family training and educational experience and toward the complete dissolution of distinct territorial and ethnic enclaves (such as the end of urban ghettos), sources of special predispositions are correspondingly diminished.

Federal standards for educational institutions, wars on poverty, military training, penetration of welfare organizations into non-conforming families at all class levels, programs of technical training, and other efforts, conspire to reduce variations in experience, which is to say, reduce variations in special predispositions.

The announced aim of establishment institutions is the absorption of the total population into a cosmopolitan, technological culture. To the degree that their massive efforts are successful and to the degree that almost all of us live our lives in changing though formalized and rationalized

settings, to that degree Situational Man will be an appropriate image for our age.

NOTES

1. Howard S. Becker, Outsiders (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), Chap. 2.
2. Ibid., Chap. 3; Donald R. Cressey, Other People's Money, (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1953).
3. Neil J. Smelser, Social Change in the Industrial Revolution, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959); Theory of Collective Behavior, (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).
4. Herbert Blumer, "Society as Symbolic Interaction," in Arnold Rose, ed., Human Behavior and Social Process, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), p. 188
5. Kurt Lewin, Field Theory in Social Science, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 137.
6. Peter Blau and Richard Scott, Formal Organizations, (San Francisco: Chandler, 1962), p. 82.
7. Ibid., pp. 82-83.
8. Peter Blau, "Structural Effects," American Sociological Review, 25 (1960), 178-193.
9. Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn, The Social Psychology of Organizations, (New York: John Wiley, 1966), esp. pp. 463-464.
10. Jean Paul Sartre, "Existentialism as a Humanism" in Walter Kaufmann, ed., Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1956), p. 303.
11. Ibid., pp. 301-302.