

## SARTRE'S HYPERBOLIC ONTOLOGY: *BEING AND NOTHINGNESS* REVISITED

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*Late in his career, Sartre told us that "subjectivity (in Being and Nothingness) is not what it is for me now," but I do not think that this should be understood as simple rejection. Rather, I think that his notion of the "spiral" best expresses his meaning. The development of his thought progressed through levels of integrating new experience with the past and, in the process, refigured the past. Sartre was, all along, a philosopher protective of subjectivity and freedom, but these notions underwent transformation over time, preserved and modified in their surpassing. Sartre's philosophical itinerary follows the model of the spiral, and in that way, he is his own best commentator.*

Thirty years after his death, Jean-Paul Sartre continues to be thought of, both popularly and by many professional philosophers, as the paradigmatic philosopher of subjectivity. Despite his protestations, he remains for them congealed in the terms set by *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>1</sup> (Even his friend and nemesis, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, thought of him this way.) When confronted with this assessment, Sartre protested that "they all stop too soon. I think that a study of my philosophical thought should follow its evolution. But no, they don't do it. It's odd."<sup>2</sup> Throughout *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre makes it easy to tag him as a philosopher of subjectivity by making dramatic claims such as, "In anguish I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself" (BN, 40), and "Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all." (BN, 441) Yet, in later works, he speaks much more soberly and modestly about subjectivity, expressing reservation about what he had held in *Being and Nothingness*: "Thus, in *L'Être et Le Néant*,

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (tr.) H. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BN.

<sup>2</sup> "Interview with Sartre," in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, (ed.) P. Schillpp (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Press, 1981), 8.

what you could call ‘subjectivity’ is not what it would be for me now, the small margin in an operation whereby an interiorization re-externalizes itself in an act. But ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’ seem to me entirely useless notions today, anyway.”<sup>3</sup> Remarks such as these raise the question of how far Sartre’s thinking on subjectivity evolved, and, specifically, whether his later views took him beyond the ontological categories of *Being and Nothingness* for which he is so well known.

Subjectivity, ontologised in *Being and Nothingness* as being-for-itself, has its roots in Sartre’s early studies, most importantly, *The Transcendence of the Ego*,<sup>4</sup> where he set out to define the essence of consciousness. He appropriated Husserl’s intentionality as he reconfigured it. For both thinkers, consciousness, in a variety of acts, intends (for Sartre “posits”) objects, which appear as intended or “meant” in the context their acts. In the actual lived experience of intending, the intending object is focussed upon the object intended and not on itself. But, Sartre insists, the intending consciousness is not unaware of itself. This self-awareness, which appears in an act of intending on the pre-reflective, as well as the reflective level, is not objective or positional; rather, it is “non-positional” or tacit. This bending back of consciousness upon itself is creative of the self. To exist as a self is to comprehend that one is differentiated from the other, from what is not oneself. This is the origin of the epistemological difference between subject and object and of the ontological difference between self and other, which are so characteristic of Sartre’s philosophy. This non-positional self-consciousness pulls back from fusion with both itself and its objects. Sartre’s ontology of consciousness, in the mode of being-for-itself, is based upon his understanding of difference as *neant*. “Thus freedom is not a being; it is the *being* of man, i.e., his nothingness of being. If we start by conceiving of man as a plenum, it is absurd to try to find in him afterwards moments or psychic regions in which he would be free.” (BN, 441) Being-for-itself is a “break” in the continuity of being, which Sartre understands to be wholly positive, a plenum, in which events are causally connected. “The coincidence of identity is the veritable plenitude of being exactly because in

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<sup>3</sup> “The Itinerary of a Thought,” [interview with Sartre] in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, (tr.) J. Mathew (New York: Morrow, 1974). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as IT.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, (tr.) F. Williams and R. Kirkpatrick (New York: Noonday Press, 1957).

this coincidence there is left no place for any negativity.” (BN, 77) Sartre offers a phenomenology of acts such as imagining, questioning, doubting and experiencing absence that reveal this break in the plenum of being, locating it in the presence of consciousness to itself in non-positional self-consciousness. “Presence to self...implies that an impalpable fissure has slipped into being. If being is present to self, it is because it is not wholly itself.” (BN, 77) The consequence of this fissure is the creation of subjectivity as absolutely free: “Man is free because he is not himself but presence to himself. The being which is what it is can not be free. Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is *made-to-be* at the heart of man and which forces human-reality *to make itself* instead of *to be*.” (BN, 440)

Throughout *Being and Nothingness*, the *néant* appears in descriptive terms such as “rupture,” “wrenching away” and “escape,” which are used to depict the relationship of subjectivity to any factual situation. In Sartre’s discussion of temporality, these terms are used to portray the relation of subjectivity, in its present moment, to its past. While admitting that temporality is a “synthesis,” Sartre’s treatment emphasises its “heterogeneity” in a “diaspora” of the modes of past, present and future. He acknowledges synthesis in the claim that “I am my past,” while asserting heterogeneity in the claim that “I am not my past.” I am my past in the mode of “was,” and in my present, I surpass that positive, given state, which he likens to being-in-itself:

It is in the past that I am what I am. But on the other hand, that heavy plenitude is behind me; there is an absolute distance [*distance absolue*] which cuts it from me and [it] fall[s] out of my reach, without contact, without connections [*sans contact, sans adhérences*].... Between past and present there is an absolute heterogeneity; and if I cannot enter the past, it is because the past is. The only way by which I could be it is for me myself to become in-itself in order to lose myself in it in the form of identification. (BN, 118–19)

The insistence on conceiving of *néant* as a radical break in the identity of being, and therefore as a radical freedom, is consistently present throughout *Being and Nothingness*, in all discussions of the relationship between transcendence (subjectivity) and facticity (situatedness): “No

factual state whatever it may be (the political and economic structure of society, the psychological 'state,' etc.) is capable itself of motivating any act whatsoever.... No factual state can determine consciousness...[can] define it and circumscribe it.... Consciousness is a pure and simple negation of the given, and it exists as the disengagement from a certain existing given." (BN, 435–36, 478) In taking up particular examples of facticity, such as social structures, institutions such as language, nationality and race, Sartre boldly asserts the "total independence" of subjectivity from them: "Each for-itself, in fact, is a for-itself only by choosing itself beyond nationality and race just as it speaks only by choosing the designation beyond the syntax and morphemes. This 'beyond' is enough to assure its total independence in relation to the structures which it surpasses...." (BN, 520) It is not surprising that claims such as the "total independence" of subjectivity from its facticity, and the present's existence "without contact, without connections" to the past, leave Sartre open to being read, on the basis of *Being and Nothingness*, as a philosopher of an exaggerated subjectivity.

For a number of reasons, including his experience of World War II and his growing awareness of economic alienation and class, Sartre's subsequent philosophy shifted its attention to situatedness as a strongly structured historical reality. One of the most important results of this shift, I am convinced, is his recognition of the significance of childhood and of the entire notion of the development of subjectivity. In *Being and Nothingness*, being-for-itself as ontological subjectivity arrives on the scene as already adult and, in anxiety, aware of its freedom. But this is not the case, for example, in Sartre's work on Jean Genet.<sup>5</sup> In his study of Genet, Sartre comes to recognise the vulnerability of children to the authority of cultural institutions and he speaks, not at all in the letter or spirit of *Being and Nothingness*, of "the making of Genet." Little Genet does not easily fit into *Being and Nothingness*, not only because being-for-itself is adult, but also because Genet is neither in bad faith nor in authenticity. He cannot be said to be running away from the anxious awareness of his freedom, for he does not consider himself to be free. He thinks of himself in the terms given him by adults. It is only gradually that Genet comes to sense his freedom through his writing. In his work

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, (tr.) B. Frechtman (New York: Pantheon, 1963).

on Flaubert,<sup>6</sup> Sartre spends considerable time treating the “constitution” of young Flaubert, how Flaubert internalises and lives the impact of the social structures of his era through family life, the family being “a social unit that expresses in its manner and through its singular history the institutions of society that produced it.” (FI 1, 50) Both Genet and Flaubert were indelibly marked by childhood events, to the point of facing certain “permanent impossibilities” (FI 1, 44) in their later lives.

Absent here is the depiction, as given in *Being and Nothingness*, of the relation of past to present as “absolute distance” and “without connections.” Instead, Sartre uses (in *Search for A Method*)<sup>7</sup> terms such as “inscriptions” and “traces” to describe the past in the present, here stressing the continuity of temporal phases and firming up his sense of “I am my past,” which he had earlier marginalised in favour of “I am not my past.” Absent as well in his later work is the sharp way he delineated the relation of subjectivity to social structures in general as one of “total independence.” Attention comes to be centred on “the objective structures of the field of possibles,” which condition, “circumscribe” and constrain one’s projects: “Social possibles are lived as schematic determinations of the individual future. And the most individual possible is only the internalization of a social possible.” (SM, 95) In the midst of this weighting of situatedness, Sartre insists that he is not rejecting the subject, but it is clear that he has mitigated his former language:

We affirm the specificity of the human act, which cuts across the social milieu while holding on to its determinations, and which transforms the world on the basis of given conditions. For us man is characterized above all by his going beyond a situation, and by what he succeeds in making of what has been made of him.... (SM, 91)

This revised way of characterising subjectivity and its relation to its situatedness differs from that found in *Being and Nothingness*, for here we find the expressions “while holding on to its determinations,” “on the ba-

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot*, 3 vols., (tr.) C. Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 1987, 1989). Hereafter, volume 1 is referred to parenthetically in the text as FI 1.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, (tr.) H. Barnes (New York: Random House, 1958). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as SM.

sis of given conditions” and “what has been made of him.” Indeed, when he conceptually ties this notion of situatedness to *Being and Nothingness* by invoking the *neant*, the break in the identity of being, we can see how he tweaks its earlier presentation: “In relation to the given, the *praxis* is negativity...and opens onto the ‘non-existent,’ to what *has not yet* been. A flight and a leap ahead, at once a refusal and a realization, the project retains and unveils the surpassed reality....” (SM, 92) What is added to the “pure and simple negation” of *Being and Nothingness*, expressed as “without connections” and “total independence,” is the notion of retention, of being marked by surpassing and retaining that mark.

The existential expression “transforms the world,” echoes *Being and Nothingness*, as does the reference to self-making, but this existential component is expressed here in terms of a “spiral” development: “A life develops in spirals; it passes again and again by the same points but at different levels of integration and complexity.” (SM, 106) Self-making is a “long work” whereby one reshapes oneself on the basis of what, in one’s present self (understood as a level of integration of past experience), lends itself to reshaping, and the reshaping carries on, in a newly integrated way, one’s previous integration: “Preserved, surpassed, scored with new and complex meanings, [the original] sense cannot help being modified. But its modification *must be inclusive*, indeed it involves reproducing a new whole out of the internal contradictions of the previous totality and the project that was born of them.” (FI 1, 44) We noted Sartre’s declaration of freedom as absolute in *Being and Nothingness*: “Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all.” (BN, 441) In an interview twenty-five years after that bold declaration, Sartre spoke of freedom in different terms: “This is the limit I would today accord to freedom: the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him.” (IT, 35)

And so, inevitably, the question arises: Did Sartre break conceptually with his views in *Being and Nothingness*, specifically the ontology of subjectivity and freedom? I think not, although the threads that tie together the early and the late work are slender. My view is that, in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre hyperbolically broke the balance between transcendence and facticity, marginalising the latter, but that there are conceptual resources in the often passing remarks he makes about facticity that open a path to the later work.

To make any meaningful judgement about *Being and Nothingness*, it is necessary to appreciate its limited scope. Sartre called his phenomenological ontology his “eidetic of bad faith,” the conditions making it possible, its types, and a potential overcoming of it. The possibility and nature of an authentic life, he promised, would come later in a study of ethics. In his opening chapter, he employs a phenomenology of negative experiences, followed by their ontological conditions of possibility in the break with the positive identity of being, to establish freedom as the being of human reality. This freedom can be recognised in anguish and then either accepted or fled. Reserving the former option for “special study,” he focuses on the latter in the rest of the book. It is in this sense that the childhoods of Genet and Flaubert do not fit. Again, bad faith presumes the anguished apprehension of one’s radical freedom: “[A]nguish, the intentional aim of anguish, and a flight from anguish toward reassuring myths must all be given in the unity of the same consciousness. In a word, I flee in order not to know, but I can not avoid knowing that I am fleeing; and the flight from anguish is only a mode of becoming conscious of anguish.” (BN, 43) The young Genet and Flaubert are untouched by that sort of anguish.

In *Being and Nothingness*, birth is mentioned in passing as the ultimate facticity: “Actually it seems shocking that consciousness ‘appears’ at a certain moment, that it comes to ‘inhabit’ the embryo, in short that there is a moment when the living being in formation is without consciousness and a moment when a consciousness without a past is suddenly imprisoned in it.” (BN, 138) While being-for-itself is recognised as an embryo inhabited by consciousness, its childhood development is passed over and we are thrust directly into the adult world of the café, gamblers and flirting couples. It is not so much the case that a study of developmental aspects of being-for-itself would contradict the ontological analysis, but rather that there is something missing, an important part of the full picture of what it is to be a human subject. And, indeed, when Sartre takes up the issue, particularly in his studies on Genet and Flaubert, he is compelled to tell a more complex story. An intimation of this fuller story, a thread connecting the earlier to the later work, can, perhaps, be found in the offhand remark, which appears late in *Being and Nothingness*, that “I am indeed an existent who *learns* his freedom through his acts” (BN, 439), an acknowledgement of a condition not dealt with there,

namely, the processes of becoming reflectively aware of one's radical freedom and the fact that one, such as Flaubert, may fail to do so.

And yet one hesitates to say that inserting what Sartre says later about childhood into *Being and Nothingness* produces no conceptual problems, no conceptual strain. Let us recall the terms in which Sartre expressed the break (heterogeneity) between past and present: "absolute distance," "without connections." If we take these characterisations literally, I believe that they would create serious contradictions between the early and the late work. After all, Sartre came to describe childhood as "unsurpassable." Speaking of Flaubert, he said that "everything took place *in childhood*; that is, in a condition radically distinct from the adult condition. It is childhood which sets up unsurpassable prejudices...." (SM, 60) Whereas the presentation of temporality in *Being and Nothingness* stresses heterogeneity ("I am not my past"), temporality in the later work stresses continuity ("I am my past"). However, I do not take Sartre's vocabulary of "absolute distance" and "without connections" literally; I take them hyperbolically. My reason for doing so is based on Sartre's admission of what he means by ontological freedom: "The technical and philosophical concept of freedom, the only one which we are considering here, means only autonomy of choice.... A choice is said to be free if it is such that it could have been other than what it is." (BN, 483, 453) Thus, Sartre frequently refers to his opponents, the determinists and behaviourists. Whether he is using the examples of fatigue, headache or disability, he limits his definition of freedom to the ability to choose an attitude toward them, to "live" them in various ways. The past is not determinative: "Under no circumstances can the past in any way by itself produce an act." (BN, 436) Continuity understood as a strict causality is what he contests in his discussion of the past, and it is in this context that we must understand his hyperbole.

A connecting thread to the later work, which saves him from serious inconsistency, can be found in a passing remark that Sartre makes in the chapter on temporality. In the midst of repeated assertions of distastiation, Sartre notes that "this weight [of the past is] surpassed and preserved in the very surpassing—[and] this is *Facticity*." (BN, 118) The denial of the continuity between past and present implied in his understanding of the causal relation does not mean that there is no continuity at all, for the past would then not be "preserved" and one would lose one's sense of identity. But Sartre is so intent on protecting the "auton-



omy” of choice that he, save for that scarce reference to the continuity of preservation, represses the need to explore that side of temporality, something he cannot do when discussing childhood in the later works. Yet the mere mention of preservation serves as a thread that connects his early to his late understanding of freedom.

In the same context, one must understand the hyperbolic use of “total independence” to describe the relation of free subjectivity to social structures. The expression is meant to convey that “no factual state can determine consciousness.” (BN, 435–36) In other words, no matter what one’s situation, there are always options. He uses the example of a Jewish person in Nazi-occupied France, subject to a host of restrictions, and to severe, even deadly, penalties for disobeying them. Despite these apparent limits, Sartre argues, the Jew is free; the situation is not determinative. One can obey the prohibitions, believing that the Nazis will eventually be forced to withdraw, or one can refuse to obey, believing thinking that life under the Nazis is such an assault on dignity that it is not worthwhile. Compare this example to the one of the woman who works in the Dop Shampoo factory, given in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*<sup>8</sup>: “A working woman who earns 25,000 francs a month and contracts chronic eczema by handling Dop Shampoo eight hours a day is wholly reduced to her work, her fatigue, her wages and the material impossibilities that these wages assign to her: the impossibility of eating properly, of buying shoes, of sending her child to the country, and of satisfying her most modest wishes.” (CDR 1, 232) Her life situation “is a strictly limited field of possibilities.” (Recall, here, the claim, made in *Search for a Method*, that “the most individual possible is only the internalization and enrichment of a social possible.”) (SM, 95) Looking over his shoulder toward *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre asserts that “existential principles are unaffected,” meaning that the woman is nonetheless ontologically free and, even in her desperate situation, has options; she is a “transcendence,” but, in this case, he adds, she is a transcendence-transcended. “When the woman in the Dop Shampoo factory has an abortion in order to avoid having a child she would be unable to feed, she makes a free decision in order to escape a destiny that is made for her; but this decision

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, (tr.) A. Sheridan-Smith (London: Humanities Press, 1976). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CDR 1.

is itself completely manipulated by the objective situation....” (CDR 1, 235) In his later work, Sartre considered the ontological freedom established in his earlier work to be true, but “abstract,” and in order to be made “concrete,” the objective possibilities of the situation must be taken into account. If that is the case, and as his political commitments attest, people such as the woman in the shampoo factory must be “liberated” by changing the material/social conditions of their situation so that their needs can adequately be met. Here, then, is another thread that connects the early to the late work—ontological freedom, albeit reconfigured. With regard to situatedness, Sartre had insisted, in *Being and Nothingness*, that free subjectivity is always situated and that freedom is not gratuitous, but his analysis of situatedness was de-emphasised by his preoccupation with establishing autonomy and overcoming determinism. His later work would rectify this neglect, offering a more complete understanding of free subjectivity.

Late in his career, Sartre told us that “subjectivity (in *Being and Nothingness*) is not what it is for me now,” but I do not think that this should be understood as simple rejection. Rather, I think that his notion of the “spiral” best expresses his meaning. The development of his thought progressed through levels of integrating new experience with the past and, in the process, refigured the past. Sartre was, all along, a philosopher protective of subjectivity and freedom, but these notions underwent transformation over time, preserved and modified in their surpassing. Sartre’s philosophical itinerary follows the model of the spiral, and in that way, he is his own best commentator.

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