
II. FURTHER INSPIRATIONS AND PROBINGS, NEW BEGINNINGS AND DEVELOPMENTS

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, A PROFOUND REVISION OF HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

Life taught me 'the force of circumstance'.

—J.-P. Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre is undoubtedly the one who, along with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas, contributed the most to the spread of phenomenology in France. While developing a phenomenology of existence or living experience, he carried out a profound revision of Husserlian thought. That revision involved three distinct dimensions, which presuppose one another and overlap, and at the same time constitute the principal stages of his philosophical evolution:

- the phenomenology of consciousness (1933–39)
- ontological phenomenology (1939–48)
- phenomenology of freedom based on moral and political commitment (1950–80)

Here I am going to try to provide a broad, general outline of them because it is impossible to go into detail here.

1. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born on June 21, 1905 in Paris, Sartre lost his father, a naval officer, very early, at the age of one, and was raised by his mother and his grandparents of the Schweitzer family. After passing his *baccalauréat* examination in 1922, he passed the entrance examination for admission to the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1924. There he frequented Paul Nizan, Raymond Aron, Daniel Lagache, Jean Hyppolite *et al.* In 1929, he met Simone de Beauvoir and prepared with her the oral part of the *agrégation* examination. They both received high scores in the competition. He came in first and she second, after

which he proposed a two year "lease" to her, which was to last a whole lifetime. In November of the same year, he began his eighteen month military service. In 1931, he was appointed to teach philosophy in secondary school in Le Havre, where he taught until 1933. In September 1933, Sartre left for a year in Berlin as a fellow of the French Institute. There he intensely studied the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, read Scheler and Jaspers. Upon returning to France, he received an appointment as a secondary school teacher in Le Havre (1934–36), then in Laon (1936–37) and finally in Paris (1937). The 1930s saw the publication of his first literary works (*La Nausée* 1937, *Le Mur* 1940) and his first philosophical works (*La Transcendance de l'Ego* 1934, *L'imagination* 1936, *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* 1939, *L'imaginaire* 1940). In September 1939, Sartre was mobilized in Nancy, then in Alsace and taken prisoner in Padoux. In 1941, he was freed and became a secondary school teacher at the Lycée Pasteur, then at the Lycée Condorcet, where he taught until 1944. It was while he was a soldier that Sartre began writing *L'Être et le néant*, which was published in 1943. The book went unnoticed in the beginning, and it was not until the autumn of 1945 that it attracted attention and became the most discussed book in France. This was the beginning of the great existentialist vogue (in October 1945 Sartre gave his famous lecture *Existentialism est un humanisme*) and at that same time, with the publication of the first issue of the review *Les Temps modernes*, which he founded with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, marked the turn towards committed or *engagée* literature and philosophy. This turn led to the existentialist revision of Marxism and a rather ambiguous leftist political commitment, accompanied by long controversies and the breaking off of relationships (with Camus, Merleau-Ponty, then the Communists). If in 1952 Sartre allied joined the Communist movement in opposing the cold war, he found himself obliged to leave it following the 1956 Hungarian uprising. All that left a mark on his philosophical and political writings—*Matérialisme et révolution* (1946), *Les Communistes et la Paix* (1952); *Le fantôme de Staline* (1957)—and culminated in the basic treatise *L'existentialisme et Marxisme* (1957), which was first published in a Polish review and later appeared with the title "Questions de méthode" in his second monumental work, *La Critique de la raison dialectique*, Vol. 1, 1960, the second volume of which was published only after his death (1985). Thus the theme of the last phase of Sartre's work (1950–80), which found expression in a great number of literary and theoretical works, several of them unfinished or not yet published (as, for example, his manuscripts on ethics), is the political

foundations of anthropology. This is what to large extent constitutes, as we will see, the exclusivity of Sartre's existential phenomenology and explains why he refused the Nobel prize in 1964.

2. TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

While Sartre's primary intention was to write, as he noted in his autobiography, *Les Mots* (*Words*), he was, nonetheless, far from becoming a "professional philosopher". In secondary school, and even during his time at *hypokhâgne* (preparatory school for entering the *Ecole Normale*), he found philosophy disgusting: "my teacher, by the name of Bernes, was inordinately difficult and I did not understand what he was talking about. It was in *khâgne* that I made up my mind, under a new teacher, Colonna d'Istria . . .".¹ It was by following the advice of the latter that he began to read *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* by Bergson. He found reading this book captivating. It made him think that philosophy "teaches the truth"² and that one must devote oneself to this. "I decided that I would study philosophy, considering it, at that point, to be simply a methodological description of man's inner states, of his psychological life, all of which would serve as a method and instrument for my literary works".³

This initial confusion, or identification, of philosophy with psychology, as well as Sartre's interest in inner life, in particular the reading of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Freud, led him to part with idealism, to renounce the conception of the world as a pure idea or pure "state of consciousness". In this context, he admitted in *Les Mots* to having had a tendency to confuse his literary experiences with reality ever since he had been a small child.⁴ Later on, his studies of academic philosophy—the idealistic rationalism of the Sorbonne—fettered him in the beginning, but he little by little managed to rid himself of it.⁵ The decisive break with this idealistic dogmatism, preaching the abstract unity of the world, came about when one of Brunschvicg's students threw herself in a stream and drowned there: "Mr. Brunschvicg recognized then that philosophy of mind had not provided for a comparable case of mental disintegration. He did not cease propounding his thought, but he less often believed what he said. The rest of us did not need this didactic suicide in order to flee this disastrous, cozy idealism that foolishly repeated, to excess, 'Thinking is measuring'".⁶

The questions of everyday life that concerned the young Sartre reinforced in him the desire for a philoso-

phical approach which accorded a place to reality as well as ideas. This is what he would discover completely unexpectedly in Husserlian phenomenology: "The messenger from heaven, for me, was Raymond Aron. Upon his return from Berlin,⁷ he spoke to me in a bar about the phenomenologists. 'Those hearty individuals,' he concluded smiling, 'find a way of philosophizing about everything. They would pass the night phenomenologically describing the essence of a lamppost.' I was overjoyed: nothing seemed more important to me than raising streetlights to the dignity of a philosophical object . . . A year later I was reading Husserl in Berlin. Everything had changed for all time".⁸ In this regard, he would remark in *La transcendance de l'Ego*: "For centuries . . . one had not experienced a movement in philosophy that realistic. They (the phenomenologists) plunged human beings back into the world. They gave them back the full measure of their anguish and their sufferings, their revolts also".⁹

This realism, which excited Sartre, consists more concretely in the fact that "consciousness and the world are given in a single blow: inherently external to consciousness, the world is, inherently, relative to it".¹⁰ He saw the foundations of this realism in intentionality or the principle according to which consciousness exists as "consciousness of" something. For him, this was the key conception of phenomenology, and this is why he devoted his two first essays *Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie de Husserl: L'intentionnalité* (1934/39) and *La transcendance de l'Ego* (1934/36) to it.

These essays first of all show the profound difference between the Sartrean idea of phenomenology and that of Husserl, who emphasized *pure* or *transcendental* phenomenology, which is not a science of fact, and is therefore not interested in the existential circumstances of things, but which carries out an eidetic description of immediately evident essences.¹¹ Husserl saw the principal new feature of his approach to be the phenomenological reduction, meaning the transition from mundane subjectivity to transcendental subjectivity, by criticizing the philosophy of life, anthropology (empirical or transcendental), psychology, etc.¹² In his earliest writings, Sartre tended to present the positions criticized by Husserl as the very principles of his doctrine. "Intuition, according to Husserl, puts us in the presence of the thing. It must thus be understood that phenomenology is a science of fact and that the problems that it poses are problems of fact, as for that matter may be understood by considering that Husserl calls it a *descriptive science*".¹³ Despite the fact that Sartre remarks in the notes that Husserl would not have used the expression "science of fact", but "science of

essences", he underscores that from his standpoint that would come down to the same thing.¹⁴

Sartre developed thereby a phenomenology of consciousness which, although it takes Husserlian thought as its point of departure, progressively distances itself from it. In contrast to Kant and Husserl, for whom the I is but a formal structure of the consciousness, Sartre was trying to show that the I, even abstractly conceived, is an infinite contraction of the "material" empirical Me. That is explained by the fact that the Ego has two components that meet—one subjective, ideal, active component that is the I, and an objective, "material", passive element that is the Me and implies the former. In other words, the Me is the concrete psycho-physical totality that constitutes me as a person and sees to it that I am situated in the world. Thus the Ego is not doubled "the Ego, of which the I and the Me are but two sides, constitutes the ideal (noematic), indirect unity of the infinite series of our reflected consciousnesses".¹⁵ That has several important consequences.

First, the transcendental field becomes impersonal, pre-personal, without an I, because the Husserlian thesis about the transcendental I as a personal field founding and unifying consciousness proves useless from the point of view of the phenomenological conception of consciousness—consciousness, which is always "consciousness of", is not united and individualized by the I, but by the intentionality that determines it as such. Second, the I only appears at the level of humanity and is only one side of the Me, the active, intentional side. Third, the I Think can accompany our representations because it appears on a foundation of unity that it has not contributed to creating and it is this prior unity that makes it possible; that means that it appears on the foundation of what he would call in *L'Être et le néant* the "pre-reflective cogito" and that in *La Transcendance de l'égo* he called first degree consciousness or unreflected consciousness. Thereby the question is finally raised as to whether the personality necessarily accompanies consciousness, meaning whether one can conceive of absolutely impersonal consciousnesses.

So, in this early work Sartre's distinctive place within the phenomenological movement, which most particularly consists in distinguishing between three degrees of consciousness, was already emerging:

- the first degree, the unreflected and non-positional consciousness of oneself that is the consciousness of a transcendent object.
- the second degree, the reflecting consciousness, non-positional with respect to itself, but positional with respect to the reflected consciousness.

- the third degree, the second degree thetic act by virtue of which the reflecting consciousness becomes positional with regard to itself.

The Sartrean contribution here consists in the development of the first degree as an autonomous field, the two others being thematized by the German tradition. Since each consciousness is consciousness of consciousness, or as he would explain later in *L'Être et le néant*—(of) consciousness (non-positional consciousness of oneself), this conception would enable him to pass beyond the primacy of the reflected consciousness of the classical theories and that of Husserl, as well as the psychoanalytic conception of the unconscious. In *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* (1939), he would show in this regard that emotion is neither an isolated fact, which comes to consciousness from outside, nor a non-conscious entity, but rather consciousness itself—a consciousness of the world, which is unreflected in the beginning.¹⁶

In the two treatises that follow, *L'imagination* (1936) and *L'imaginaire* (1940), which constitute a sort of transition towards *L'Être et le néant*, Sartre develops and deepens the phenomenology of consciousness by arguing that the theory of the image is only possible from the perspective of Husserlian phenomenology. In opposition to the great metaphysical systems of the 17th–18th centuries, in particular those of Descartes, Leibniz, and Hume, he shows that the identity between the nature of the perception and the image leads to the identification of the image with the thing by robbing it of its specific character: "Giving images a sensory content is making them into a thing obeying the laws of things and not those of consciousness. One thus deprives the mind of any possibility of distinguishing it from other things of the world".¹⁷ If, on the other hand, one starts from the theory of Husserl according to which consciousness is consciousness of something, the image proves to be different from transcendent objects. It is a physical reality and as such an intentional structure which refers back to a *hylé* (material content). Sartre's criticism of Husserl is that the *hylé* of the image differs from perceptions and that the image and the perception thus have different material contents.

This conception is studied in *L'imaginaire* where Sartre sets out the difference between image and perception in even more clear and distinct terms. He shows that since consciousness is intentional, the image is neither in consciousness, nor outside consciousness, but an intermediary: "The word image could therefore only designate the relationship of a consciousness to the object; in other words, its a certain way that the object has of appearing to the consciousness, or if one prefers, a certain

way that the consciousness has of giving itself an object".¹⁸ Sartre thereby addresses the distinction between perception, thought and image. Perception is a form of observation in which the object is given in profiles (*Abschattungen*). It is a serial grasping process leading to a synthetic unity of a multiplicity of appearances. Thought, on the other hand, is a single act of the consciousness that takes a central position without re-establishing appearances. In the image, the object is given in profiles, but it is immediate knowledge and without follow-up; it is not learned—it is already knowledge. That is why "my perception can deceive me, but not my image".¹⁹ Images are quasi-observations that posit their objects as non-existent, as absent, as existing elsewhere or in abeyance. In this sense, they conceal a certain sort of *nothingness* because "the imaginative act is at once constituting, isolating and annihilating".²⁰ The imaging consciousness is a going beyond and annihilation of what is existing towards a lack, towards a void, all the while constituting a relation between what is present and absent, respectively, by situating human beings in the world. "It is the appearing of the imaginary before consciousness that enables one to grasp the annihilation of the world as its essential condition and primary structure."²¹ Thus the phenomenology of the imaging consciousness takes a central place among the great problems of *L'Être et le néant* and constitutes the prelude to them.

3. ONTOLOGICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Despite the fact that certain positions stated by Sartre in his early works would later be revised, all his life he would remain convinced that subjectivity is not *in* consciousness, since it *is* consciousness.²² What he definitively rejects from Husserlian thought in *L'Être et le néant*, and which would bring him closer to Heidegger, is no longer so much the reduction of consciousness to the transcendental Ego, but the identification of the phenomenon and its appearing. Although right from the first sentence he underscores that phenomenology "has achieved considerable progress by reducing the existent to the series of appearances manifesting it",²³ assuring by that operation immediate access to the world through phenomena, Sartre suggests that this is also wherein lies the great error of Husserl, who identified appearing with the being of the phenomenon. For that "is simply a way of picking new words to clothe the old '*esse est percipi*' of Berkeley. And that was indeed what Husserl would do, when, after having performed the phenomenological reduction, he would treat the noema as unreal and would declare that its '*esse*' was a '*percipi*'".²⁴ In this regard,

Sartre reproaches Husserl that "the idealism concerned with reducing being to the knowledge that one attains of it should in some way assure the being of knowledge beforehand".²⁵ But, the sole reality that Husserl acknowledges is that of noesis. However, the transphenomenal being of the subject does not assure *being* as the transphenomenal foundation of phenomena. This is why Sartre accuses Husserl of phenomenism,²⁶ which actually misses the main point of phenomenology.²⁷

Thus, although he insists upon the autonomy of the unreflected consciousness and upon the need to start from the cogito, in *L'Être et le néant* Sartre gives up the conception of the impersonal, transcendental field, considering it as insufficient for going beyond solipsism and idealism. To attain this goal new solutions are needed, which he above all saw in clearly setting out the difference between the being of the phenomenon and the phenomenon of being, the ontological proof and the thematization of being-in-itself.

In so far as it is *phenomenological*, Sartre's ontology relies, on the one hand, on the Husserlian conception of phenomenology involving the theses on:

1. the immediate givenness of reality through phenomena;
2. the description of phenomenal realities as "the things themselves", meaning as fundamental objects of phenomenology;
3. the study of the cogito as "thought of... something";

and on the other hand, on the Heideggerian conception of phenomenology as questioning the being of being (*l'être de l'étant*) in light of phenomena, which always show themselves as what they are. Sartre believed, just as Heidegger did, that ontology can only exist as phenomenology and it is as *ontology* that the Sartrean conception accords a central role to the fundamental question (*die Fundamentalfrage*) of the meaning of being: "What is the meaning of being in so far as it includes within it these two radically distinct regions?"²⁸ This question also shows that it is a question of a reformulation of Heidegger's ontological difference between being (*être*, *Sein*) and being (*étant*, *Seiendes*) into a difference between being-in-itself and being-for-itself. But what Sartre most particularly tries to show is that the meaning of being (*l'être*) as a common basis of the two forms of being (*l'être*) is an absolute, ideal, non-existent totality that he would call *όλον*—a point of view rather different from that of *Sein und Zeit*.

The ongoing pursuit of realism explains the fact that of all the phenomenologies, Sartre's is ontologically the most radical with respect to the concept of ontic reality.

First of all, the ontic character of human reality is not simply, “of ontological *being (être)*” (Heidegger).²⁹ Next, if Husserl and Heidegger excluded metaphysical problems from philosophy, Sartre rather showed how the cogito as transcendence itself requires the analysis of that *towards which* it is transcending, *in what regard* it differs and *in relation to what* it constitutes itself as Itself or ipseity. It is for this reason that he rejects, on one hand, the Husserlian method of reduction which according to him leads to a speculative and fictive ontology identical to the formal structures of the transcendental I; and, on the other hand, the direct move of Heidegger to the question about the meaning of Being, disregarding the cogito and thereby arriving at a unreflected ontology. Thus, though phenomenological, Sartre’s approach in *L’Être et le néant* is neither Husserlian, nor Heideggerian—the transcendental reduction is rejected, description or hermeneutics is appreciably modified. It is no longer a matter of a simple description of the transcendental *Erlebnis*, but of a hermeneutics of Being, to which the *Erlebnis* refers, of a hermeneutics of the in-itself and of the for-itself. Unlike Heidegger’s fundamental ontology approach, Sartrean description is not a description of being in terms of *Da-Sein*, but an ontological differentiation in terms of the prior analysis of the phenomenon.

By distinguishing existence from essence and being from appearing, Sartre shows that being is not reducible to appearing since it is rather the condition of it. It is, therefore, being-to-unveil and not being-unveiled. That signifies that the being of the phenomenon is not reducible to the phenomenon of being either, that the latter is “ontological”, that it requires the transphenomenality of being. This transphenomenal necessity becomes apparent, according to Sartre, because the phenomenon as “known” refers us to the process of knowledge, which for its part refers us to knowing subjects in so far as they *are* and not in so far as they are known. The discovery of unreflected consciousness as the foundation of reflection, the primacy of the pre-reflective cogito respectively, shows that it is not essence that precedes existence and posits it as such, but that consciousness is prior to nothingness and “extricates itself from” being.³⁰ This first principle of the philosophy of existence, which would be later stated by Sartre in the well-known formula “existence precedes essence”,³¹ is grounded in his unique conception of subjectivity.

By the theory of the pre-reflexive cogito, as opposed to the transcendental I of Kant and Husserl, which prohibits the reduction of the consciousness to the hyletic layer, Sartre shows that subjectivity is consciousness of consciousness, meaning the psychophysical me, situated in the

world and transcending itself towards the world. It is this concept of subjectivity that makes it possible to carry out the ontological proof, which becomes necessary given that the transphenomenality of being cannot be drawn from the transphenomenality of the cogito. “Consciousness is consciousness of something: that means that transcendence is a constitutive structure of consciousness, meaning that consciousness is borne on a being that is not it. This is what we call the ontological proof.”³²

Subjectivity, which is *absolute* in so far as consciousness exists by itself, can only be constructed in front of something unveiled, something transcendent. This is why Sartre considers that the Heideggerian definition of *Dasein* had to be expanded to include the contrast between human reality (the for-itself) and the transphenomenal being of the phenomenon (the in-itself). Thereby, if for Heidegger *Dasein* is ontically characterized by the fact that for this being (*étant*) it is a *question* in its being (*être*) of this being (*être*),³³ for Sartre “consciousness is a being (*être*) for which in its being (*être*) it is a question of this being (*être*) in so far as this being (*être*) involves a being (*être*) other than it”.³⁴ In other words, consciousness involves in its being (*être*) an unconscious and transphenomenal being (*être*), which is found *facing it* in the revealing intuition. This head-on confrontation by the consciousness necessarily leads to the foundation of the ontology of intentionality—being-in-itself.

With the distinction between phenomenon and being (*être*) and the carrying out of the ontological proof, Sartre established the ontological difference and outlined the two regions of being—the in-itself and the for-itself—which now had to be described and defined as such. The famous formula that Sartre used to define the in-itself as opposed to the for-itself is conceived in these terms: “Being (*l’être*) is. Being (*l’être*) is in-itself. Being (*l’être*) is what it is”.³⁵ But what does that mean?

“Being is” signifies that being can neither be derived from something possible, nor from something necessary, that it is contingent and thereby “superfluous”. It cannot be derived from the possible because what is possible is a structure of the for-itself, but neither can it be reduced to necessity because that involves a connection between ideal propositions.

“Being is in-itself” signifies both that being is not created, because divine subjectivity cannot bring objectivity into existence and that it is not *causa sui*, since it is not activity. “Active” and “passive” are human concepts designating ways of being human, aiming for a given goal. This is why being in-itself is neither passive, nor active, but indeterminate—any determination comes to it through consciousness.

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