

## The Philosopher and his Novel<sup>1</sup>

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**1.1** Sartre enters the systematic study of philosophy with an array of views which will affect the choice of themes to explore, and will delineate some of the core theses that he will later develop. Prominent among those views is that existence is irreducible to thought: the world is not the creation of a web of ideas, and depends for its existence on no design, human or divine. As such, all entities are 'contingent,' since they form part of a reality which exists without necessity or reason, and 'gratuitous,' as they lack justification, and serve no purpose: they simply are.

Often stated in an aphoristic manner, the above views are hardly self-evident. Yet their significance for appreciating Sartre's worldview is hard to overstate. They were first encountered on the pages of a novel whose flowing narration of human experience imprints on the reader the material presence of things.<sup>2</sup> Set as a personal diary, the novel gives us an intimate picture of events in the life of an individual whose thoughts and feelings are transformed, as the objects start presenting themselves to his senses.

The book is a rich source of ideas which, by Sartre's own standards, lacked at that stage the solidity required for a

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<sup>1</sup> *Philosophical Inquiry* 25, December 2003: 124-35.

<sup>2</sup> *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938). Work on the themes of novel dates back to 1928, and most of the views expressed in the text actually precede the writings on Intentionality and Imagination that will appear several years later in the 1930s; cf. M. Contact and M. Rybalka, *Les Ecrits de Sartre. Chronologie, bibliographie commentée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

philosophical treatise.<sup>3</sup> This however has not deterred several philosophers from offering an interpretation of the text along the following lines. The novel is an ideal textbook summarising the main points of Sartre's quite technical argumentation in his academic writings; it illustrates his theoretical views on the nature of time, while it presents a philosophical justification of art through the adventures of the novel's hero, who is none other than the author in disguise.<sup>4</sup>

I wish to show that, despite its popularity among Sartrean scholars, this interpretation is incorrect. I will provide an alternative reading of the novel that would identify its core themes, in a way that illuminates the reflective distance between the fictional agent and the philosophical narrator.

**1.2** Perception and understanding are often connected through the act of seeing: the hero of the novel, Antoine Rocquentin, resolves to keep a diary "in order to see clearly".<sup>5</sup> Seeing is a sense which operates at a distance from its objects. The space between the perceiver and the item perceived accounts in part for a subject's awareness of being different from the object. That

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<sup>4</sup> This interpretation has been proposed by, among others, Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: romantic rationalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953); Hazel Barnes *Humanistic Existentialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958); D. Fletcher, "The Use of Colour in 'La Nausée'" *Modern Language Review* 63 (1968); R. Goldthorpe "The presentation of consciousness in Sartre's *La Nausée* and its theoretical basis: 1. Reflection and facticity" *French Studies* 22 (1968); Michael Edwards, "La Nausée - A symbolist novel" *Adam* (1971); James Wood "Introduction" in *Nausea* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> OR 6. ". . . pour y voir clair." -- note that the 1963 Penguin translation reads: "in order to understand", in *Nausea*, translated by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin Classics, repr. 2000), henceforth cited as *N*, p. 9.

difference is an aspect of the subject's own sense of individuality, and is accompanied by awareness of the distinctness of each of the objects on which his sight may focus. Distance, therefore, is crucial for the independence, individuality, and distinctness involved in the phenomenon of human vision.

The sense of distance, however, also allows for the rising of questions about the correctness of the beliefs we form in the light of the information our sight provides. Such questions will enter Rocquentin's mind through an ordinary incident: on a stroll to the beach, while children were playing ducks and drakes, Rocquentin picks up a pebble to throw to the sea, suddenly stops, drops the pebble and walks away, as the children start laughing at his bewildered face. What happened inside him involved apparently the fusion of two sense modalities, sight and touch: "There was something which I saw and which disgusted me, but I no longer know whether I was looking at the sea or at the pebble. It was a flat pebble, completely dry on one side, wet and muddy on the other. I held it by the edges, with my fingers apart to avoid getting them dirty."<sup>6</sup>

Touch is the sense in which the distance between oneself and the objects is cancelled. It is often the most reassuring of our senses, as we use it to feel the texture, or trace the contours of an object, defining clearly the limits of its body. That sense of security, however, disappears if we feel that an ordinary object extends beyond its familiar territory, shedding off the ways it used to be handled. For Rocquentin, ordinary objects lose their domestic character, gaining, for the first time, their presence. As he is on the point of coming into his room, he stops short because he feels in his hand a cold object attracting his attention "by means of a sort of personality. I opened my hand and looked: I was simply holding the doorknob."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> N 10/OR 6.

<sup>7</sup> N 13/OR 8.

**1.3** If touch creates such uneasiness, the return to sight should restore the distance between oneself and the world, providing the means for identifying each separate thing and its qualities, for what they are. Distinctness, as we noted, is an important characteristic of perceived objects, and its loss often implies a defect in our sight, or in the ability to focus visually or conceptually. Our use of words for identifying properties aspires to convey such a distinctness, guarding against vagueness in the description of the object. Vagueness generates problems for a discourse that employs terms for which there are no sharp boundaries of correct application. A pragmatic way of dealing with this problem is to err on the generous side in our use of predicates; this allows communication to continue by predicating of an object characteristics which are to a certain extent different from the properties the object appears to have.

Such an approach assumes that vagueness reflects a limitation in the ways human beings map the world in language and thought. Yet a lack of sharp distinctions might be more than an accident of how we think and talk: vagueness infuses the object itself -- or so it is experienced by Rocquentin as he looks from his table at the bartender in a blue shirt with mauve braces. The braces can hardly be seen against the shirt; they are obliterated, buried in the blue, "but that is false modesty; in point of fact they won't allow themselves to be forgotten, they annoy me with their sheep-like stubbornness, as if, setting out to become purple, they had stopped somewhere on the way without giving up their pretensions. You feel like telling them: 'Go on, *become* purple and let's hear no more about it.'" The blue shirt stands out against a wall in the colour of chocolate; and that also brings nausea. Only by this time, he feels that he is the one inside the nausea, which is over there, on the wall.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> N 34/OR 26.

**1.4** Rocquentin is in the middle of a crisis, but he is unable to understand its cause. He considers that some change in his thoughts has affected the way he sees the world. This explanation however rings false to his experience. We may have thoughts about our seeing and touching, but they are part of our reflection on how we see or touch, and we would hardly confuse them with seeing, or touching itself. We hear, smell, taste, see and touch objects, which exist "over there," independently of us. It is this direct feel of the external world that makes it hard for Rocquentin to dismiss what the senses present him as a mere projection of his mind.

The alternative explanation seems at first no less problematic. Is it possible for objects themselves to suddenly change in ways we would find upsetting? To answer this question we should consider what is involved in the conception of an object. A physical object is something connected to other things in space and time, on the one hand, and to previous instances of that thing's own history, on the other. These connections are causal, and the idea of causality is related to, if not exhausted by, our sense of regularity. Our understanding of the causal activities of an object are, thus, closely related to our experience of how the object behaves regularly. Whatever grounds causal relations in the world, however, it cannot be our sense of how things regularly behave. Physical objects transcend our ways of thinking, talking, or making predictions about them, and they can certainly betray our expectation about how they ought to function.

Still, it is not clear why such change in the objects could create anything more than a practical inconvenience. What can be so upsetting about the behaviour of objects? The answer is that the way objects present themselves to his senses, make Rocquentin understand what it means to exist.

**1.5** Existence is the most discrete of our concepts: thinking or stating of every single thing that surrounds us that it exists is not a practice in which we normally engage. However, it is not possible to refer to anything in the world, without existence being somehow involved in our sentence. When we do talk about existence, it is often by way of placing things under various categories, say that a page is or belongs to the category of white objects, or that white is a quality of this page; but even when, as we read, we touch and look at the page, we are far from forming the thought that it exists. If we were asked what existence was, we could well reply that it was nothing extraordinary, just a notion which added itself to external objects, without changing anything in what they are. The nausea felt by Rocquentin has changed all these. Existence lost its docile appearance and revealed itself as the very stuff of reality.

In our ordinary dealings with objects, existence hides itself. Accordingly, the realisation of existence undermines the sense of identity and difference that makes up the plurality of things perceived. The diversity of objects is but a thin covering of the overwhelming presence of existence. Sitting on a park-bench, Rocquentin tries to calculate distances, count trees, compare their heights, that is, he tries to give to things back their individuality. The attempt, though, backfires, as the only thing he can ascertain is how superfluous it all is: "We were a heap of existents inconvenienced, embarrassed by ourselves, we hadn't the slightest reason for being there . . ." <sup>9</sup>

What makes everything superfluous is the lack of a justification for existing. An existent cannot be justified by another existent, for several reasons. First, because the other existent would itself need to be justified by another existent, hence leading our attempt for justification to an infinite regress. Secondly, justification is a normative notion, concerning not the fact that

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<sup>9</sup> N 184/OR 152.

something is the case but the reason why that is; trying to justify an existent by reference to other existents would simply increase the list of what exists and could not on its own generate a reason for why it does.

We might perhaps wish to account for the existence of an object, say a newspaper page, by presenting it as a set of properties, of white colour, rectangular shape, of 30cm width and 60cm length, etc.. However, none of our ideas, concepts or words belong to the world of existents, and the attempt to reduce the latter to the former is doomed to failure. Colour, shape, width or length on their own do not exist, only an actual object, the rough page of the newspaper, smelling of ink, smudging my fingers, does. Rocquentin brings these thoughts together in a paragraph that will resonate through the rest of Sartrean work: "The essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence is not necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*; what exists appears, lets itself be *encountered*, but you can never deduce it."<sup>10</sup>

**1.6** The belief in the contingency of existence is formed through an intuition that is locked in the present. The perception of motion, and, along with it, the awareness of time, seem to vanish. If it is hard to see how motion could disappear from view, it suffices to think that what we see is not an object called 'motion,' but things that change in space through time. Movement implies a point of transition, an intermediary between the before and the after, a gap in the plenitude of being. But no such gap is visible. The stirring of the leaves on a branch does

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<sup>10</sup> N 188/OR 154.

not mark a passage from what was to be (the potential) to what is (the actual); it is the constant renewal of existents.<sup>11</sup>

Time reigns unique in the diary of Antoine Rocquentin. The very form of a personal journal reflects how lived experience is framed by intervals, discontinuous events, and unfilled pauses. This fragmentary picture, however, is undermined from within by the very act of writing about it. To recount one's life is to attempt to find order in place of contingency. In telling a story, one takes a point in time and turns it into a beginning, that is, something pregnant with possibilities towards the story's end. Narration is always more than a keeping of records. We live our life forward but we narrate it backwards, in the sense that our understanding of things past is guided by their conduciveness to things present.<sup>12</sup>

In Rocquentin's case the interrelations of the past to the present, and the projection of the latter to the future, have been sort-circuited. Continuity in time has to be regained through a number of devices, none of which sounds appealing. On the one hand, there is the public past of the commemoration days, religious holidays, bronze statues, and condescending looks of the bourgeois portraits, all nicely hanged in the Municipal Gallery. On the other hand, there is the private past explored in his projected treatise on Monsieur de Rollebon, a notorious

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<sup>11</sup> N 190/OR 157. The differences between *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness* on the nature of time is a central point of tension between the two works, and seriously undermines the practice of using the later treatise as an explication manual for the early novel. According to *Being and Nothingness*, the instantaneous present is a theoretical abstraction, that gives rise to a number of paradoxes precisely because it contravenes the phenomenology of human experience. For Sartre, the question is not how we could transcend the present, but why certain philosophers have been wont of denying the essentially temporal character of conscious processes; *L'être et le néant: essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), pp. 142-164.

<sup>12</sup> N 60-63/OR 48-50.

Marquis of the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whose adventurous life was full of political intrigues and tantalising anecdotes. Having spent years on collecting data, Rocquentin will eventually abandon that project when he realises that what attracted him to Marquis' life was its adventures; and the problem with adventures is that they do not exist -- or, rather, that they can exist only as narrated.<sup>13</sup>

A moment in life could be an instant of adventure within a plot that weaves that moment to its (fascinating) future. However, when one is turning into a dark alley, or walking into the noisy pub, the future is not there. If there is such a thing as a 'feeling of adventure,' it is not the sense of anything experienced, but the wish for having in the future a past worth talking about.

**1.7** The attempted separation of living from talking or reminiscing about living, is another aspect of the sharp distinction between the present and past. Is it possible to resist such divisions in one's experience? Rocquentin will propose an answer that implies a particular understanding of artistic creation. His proposed solution is to introduce a different time from that of lived experience through the writing of a novel. The fictional hero will thus become the author of a fictional text, opening the door for modernist readings of the novel as a closed system whose end (the commitment of creating a novel) is realised by the novel itself.

For Rocquentin, a novel, like a melody, is characterised by an internal necessity that composes its different parts into a harmonious whole. Listening to a jazz-song Rocquentin feels ashamed of his being, as he is absorbed by the force by which each note should follow the others. The song is beyond the contingency and arbitrariness of his life, but ". . . if I were to get up, if I were to snatch that record from the turn-table which is

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<sup>13</sup> N 61, 138-140/OR 49, 113-114.

holding it and if I were to break it in two, I wouldn't reach *it*. It is beyond -- . . . I can't even hear it, I hear sounds, vibrations in the air which unveil it." The jazz-song does not exist "since it has nothing superfluous: it is all the rest which is superfluous in relation to it. It *is*."<sup>14</sup>

Rocquentin now claims that all he ever wanted was *to be*. Exploring the jargon that separates existence from being, Rocquentin aspires to wash his life from the unbearable "sin of existing"<sup>15</sup> by being the creator of something that is beyond this time, abstract, necessary, and indestructible. Rocquentin's life is thus "saved," and along with it his understanding of time, by annulling the lived present for the sake of an aestheticised eternity.

**1.8** We might think that the above approach to art represents Sartre's own understanding of his activity as an author. Such an interpretation would draw considerably on the assumption that the Rocquentin who is planning a novel is the *alter ego* of his author. As Sartre brought Rocquentin into existence, so the latter explicates on Sartre's behalf the meaning of his text. *Nausea* is thus read as concluding with the unambiguous moral that an artistic object, be it a melody or a novel, is a fortress against the tide of superfluity that characterises human existence. Is it correct, though, to identify Rocquentin with Sartre on these matters? There are at least two reasons for answering this question in the negative.

The first reason is rather general. It concerns Sartre's own view on the activity in which Rocquentin appears to devote so much of his time, and which becomes the privileged medium for the creation of his artistic desires: keeping a diary. Reflecting on his work of that period, Sartre notes: "I was not interested in myself

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<sup>14</sup> N 248/OR 206.

<sup>15</sup> N 251/OR 209.

at all . . . I had a horror of personal diaries, and I was thinking that human beings are not made for seeing themselves, but for fixing their look always in front of them" in the world.<sup>16</sup>

The second, and most important, reason for dissociating Sartre from Rocquentin is internal to the novel itself. The immense fascination with the jazz-song is expressed from early on in the vocabulary of escape: Rocquentin is absorbed in a melody which lives in "another time" as the notes fill the cafe from "so far away."<sup>17</sup> While the citizens of the provincial town look for an excuse of their existence in the ritualised past, Rocquentin aspires through art to transcend time altogether. Not unlike all the petit-bourgeois criticised in the novel, Rocquentin is seeking a justification in something outside "this time in which the world has fallen."<sup>18</sup>

The novel Rocquentin desires to write would shine slim and hard "as steel," with events succeeding one other through a "rigorous necessity" that pushes forth a well-rounded, continuous, whole.<sup>19</sup> Whatever such novel might be, it does not sound anything like a text of internally frustrated plot and discontinuous structure, that master drawing of contingency, that Sartre created with *Nausea*.

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<sup>16</sup> *Carnets de la drôle guerre. Septembre 1939-Mars 1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 175.

<sup>17</sup> N 37-38/OR 28-29.

<sup>18</sup> N 37/OR 28.

<sup>19</sup> N 252/OR 210.



Endnotes