**Beyond the Minimal Self**

**Sartre on the Imaginary Dimension of Selfhood**

Abstract: This paper reconstructs Sartre’s theory of selfhood against the background of the contemporary debate between minimal-self theories and narrative-self theories. I argue that Sartre’s theory incorporates both an emphasis on the singular first-person perspective, which is characteristic of minimal-self theories, and an emphasis on the practical intelligibility of experience, which is characteristic of narrative-self theories. The distinctiveness of the Sartrean combination of these motifs consists in its idea of the necessary ideal-relatedness of consciousness. According to Sartre, the logical structure of the pre-reflective cogito requires the haunting presence of an ideal of self-coincidence, which determines for consciousness the meaning of its lived experiences. Consciousness exists as a question to itself due to this ideal-relatedness, and it answers this question by projecting its possibilities as creative and symbolic realizations of this ideal. Establishing the connection between Sartre’s theory of imagination and his theory of selfhood, I suggest that both the ideal and the possibility of consciousness are lived in the manner of the imaginary.

Key words: Sartre, selfhood, self-consciousness, minimal self, ideal, imagination

In this paper, I will provide an interpretation of Sartre’s theory of selfhood or ipseity against the background of the contemporary debate between theories of minimal self and theories of narrative self. In contrast to the ego which for Sartre is a transcendent entity in the world, selfhood or ipseity designates the very structure of consciousness through which it possesses a singular and meaningful first-person perspective. Thus, in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre rejects his earlier position, in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, of consciousness as an impersonal field of appearance and develops a complicated theory of “the circuit of ipseity” (Sartre 2018: 159), with its three-fold structure of self-presence, value (or ideal) and possibility. This theory not only does justice to the fundamental singularity of conscious, as does the contemporary theories of minimal self. It also goes beyond the minimal-self theory by spelling out what I shall call the imaginary dimension of selfhood, which has the function of making intelligible our lived experiences in the horizon of a nexus of totality. In the contemporary theoretical landscape, this emphasis on meaning and intelligibility is above all characteristic of the narrative theories of the self. By thus combining the strengths of the minimal-self theory and the narrative theory, the Sartrean theory of selfhood proves to possess hitherto underappreciated theoretical resources for contemporary reflections on the self – or so I will argue.[[1]](#endnote-1)

To be sure, thicker notions of self are not a rarity. The strength of the Sartrean conception of selfhood lies not just in its “concreteness,” but in its ability to go beyond minimal self by starting from the minimal self. Sartre takes this step by arguing for the necessary ideal-relatedness of the pre-reflective cogito. The ideal of the pre-reflective cogito, or its value, enjoys an imaginary mode of being and givenness. Since this imaginary dimension is intrinsic to and constitutive of pre-reflective lived experience, it behooves us to call it – following Sartre’s own suggestion in *The Imaginary*, the transcendental function of imagination. This novel account of the transcendental imagination as the dimension of value is a distinctive feature of Sartre’s theory of selfhood.[[2]](#endnote-2)

This paper is divided into four sections. Section 1 briefly reviews the contemporary debate between theories of minimal self and theories of narrative self. Section 2 reconstructs Sartre’s argument that the pre-reflective cogito is its own lack and hence contains an implicit reference to an ideal of self-coincidence. Section 3 presents Sartre’s phenomenological description of the ideal-relatedness of consciousness, which the previous section establishes in a more argumentative manner, and justifies my characterization of its mode of givenness as imaginary. Finally, Section 4 shows how the ideal-relatedness of consciousness requires its self-transcendence towards the horizon of the possible and explains the symbolic/imaginary character of the meaning of possibility.

# 1. The minimal self and the narrative self

The theories of minimal self, as developed by Galen Strawson and Dan Zahavi, claim that being a subject of experience in the sense of possessing a singular first-person perspective is not only necessary but also sufficient for being a self. This is, of course, a minimal self, the formal core of our ordinary human self-experience. As Strawson (2009: 23) notes, the theory of minimal self is not meant to contradict “the profoundly environmentally embedded, embodied, ‘enactive,’ ‘ecological,’ or (for short) EEE aspects of our experiential predicament,” but to give due emphasis to a formal experiential dimension that makes such embeddedness possible. It is, after all, *my* experience that is thus profoundly embedded, this mine-ness or for-me-ness being the indispensable foil against which its embeddedness can be distinguished from the way a screw is “embedded” in a machine. Indeed, it is precisely because I can and often do figure myself as distinct from my body and my environment that my bodily and environmentally embeddedness can be a revelation both perplexing and profound.

As opposed to the admitted formality of the minimal self, the narrative theorists emphasize the concrete meaningfulness or intelligibility of our self-experience. They conceive the self as fundamentally a quest for meaning and the narrative as the form such a quest must take due to the temporal character of human experience. Our life is a journey, we make sense of ourselves by knowing where we are heading for, where we are and where we have been. This we achieve by giving our life a narrative structure (Taylor 1989: 41-52; MacIntyre 2007: 204-225). A difficult problem for the narrative theorists is how to clarify the idea of an untold narrative, for living out one's life as a narrative obviously does not require the actual composition of an autobiography. Concerning this problem, Ricoeur speaks of the pre-narrative structure of experience and Rudd goes as far as to distinguish four levels of narrative. With the notion of the pre-narrative structure of experience, Ricoeur asks us to see episodes of our life as “(as yet) untold stories,” in the sense that “it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms,” as well as by "temporal structures that call for narration" (1984: 74, 57-59). In a similar vein, the first two of Rudd’s four levels of narrative – the (proto-)narrative structure of my life and the implicit narrative sense I have of my life – precede the explicit articulation of my story on the third level (Rudd 2012: 181).

It is not without reason that critics have found the notion of pre-narrative structure or implicit narrative frustrating (see Strawson 2017: 106--09; Zahavi 2014: 58; Hutto 2014). Unclarity reigns especially regarding the relation between the implicit narrative and the experiential self-presence on which the notion of minimal self is based (Schechtman 2011: 410). Let us take Rudd's theory as an example. He concedes that narrative presupposes selfhood but denies that this presupposed selfhood is a minimal self constituted in non-narrative terms (Rudd 2012: 185; cf. MacIntyre 2007: 218). The combination of these two claims becomes all the more difficult to understand, when Rudd identifies his notion of the implicit narrative with the tripartite structure of temporal experience as described in Husserl's analysis of time-consciousness (Rudd 2012: 199). After all, Husserl’s analysis is directed at the purely formal framework of temporal experience, and it is difficult to see how this can be identified with the generation of narrative meaning, as Rudd seems to hold.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Thus we are left with the problem of relating the implicit narrative of our experience to its pre-reflective self-presence. Since the notion of implicit narrative is meant to account for the meaningfulness or intelligibility of my lived experience (both to myself and to my interlocutor), and since the notion of pre-reflective self-presence designates the singular first-person perspective I enjoy, the question concerns the relation between the self-presence of my lived experience and its meaningfulness. It is to this question that the following reconstruction of Sartre's theory of selfhood will provide an answer.[[4]](#endnote-4)

# 2. The ideal-relatedness of the pre-reflective cogito

Though, as we will see, Sartre’s theory of selfhood surpasses the formality of the minimal theory by including the dimensions of ideality and possibility, he is nonetheless emphatic that the philosophical understanding of consciousness must start from the immanence of experiential self-presence. This is because – and in this point Sartre is in total agreement with Zahavi – experiential self-presence is the very medium through which the for-me-ness of experience is constituted, and this for-me-ness is not an optional decoration added to a given episode of experience but the very first-person perspective inseparable from consciousness as such. If our goal is to understand conscious experience, it is necessary to start from experiential self-presence – though it is equally necessary not to remain with it.[[5]](#endnote-5) In this section, I will show how Sartre surpasses experiential self-presence – or better, how experiential self-presence surpasses itself – by following its internal logic.

What is, then, experiential self-presence? In the Introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre calls it the pre-reflective cogito and distinguishes it from reflection and self-knowledge. Whereas reflection is a concrete intentional act which consciousness at a given moment may or may not perform, pre-reflective cogito is the very of mode of existence of consciousness (Sartre 2018: 13). Consciousness need not await a subsequent act of reflection to become aware of itself; in fact, its self-awareness cannot come about in this way. Self-awareness cannot come about by way of reflection, because unless the reflecting agent is already aware of the reflected as itself, the relation established by this reflection would not be *self*-awareness. But in case the reflecting is already aware of the reflected as itself, it is already in possession of self-awareness, and reflection becomes useless.[[6]](#endnote-6)

One strategy to avoid the reflection-model is to conceive consciousness as intrinsically self-representational. According to this position, which calls itself self-representationalism, the reflexivity of an act of consciousness is not due to an external act of reflection. Rather, every act of consciousness is at once representation of its object and representation of itself. This latter moment of self-representation is responsible for the fact that I am conscious of an episode of experience as mine. In Kriegel's words: “whatever else a conscious state represents, it always also represents itself, and it is in virtue of representing itself that it is a conscious state” (2009: 13-14).

By definition, self-representationalism avoids the danger of segregating consciousness and its self-awareness into two temporally and numerically distinct acts. One and the same act, e.g. hearing the clock ticking, has two intentional contents: the ticking of the clock and the my auditory experience of the clock ticking. The question, however, is how the postulation of a secondary intentional content can constitute the self-manifestation of the lived experience in question. To genuinely avoid the pitfall of the reflection-model, it seems not enough simply to crush the object-directed act and the reflective act in one, unless it is explained *how* the intending of the secondary content is intrinsically different from the intending of the primal content. If we say that the mode of givenness of the primary content (the ticking sound) is *objectifying*, insofar as it presents an object as distinct from consciousness, then the mode of givenness of the secondary content deserves to be called *non-objectifying*, precisely because it reveals consciousness to itself. Self-representationalism attempts to do justice to this difference by appealing to the distinction between focal awareness and peripheral awareness; the claim is that the secondary content is given in a peripheral awareness (Kriegel 2009: 47).

However, peripheral awareness is still an objectifying consciousness, since both the focus and the periphery are part of our objective environment. Critics have pointed out that by conceiving self-consciousness as peripheral consciousness, self-representationalism is holding fast to “a univocal notion of intentionality,” which fails to do justice to the veritable subjectivity of consciousness (Drummond 2006: 208). The critical point here is not that the focal-periphery distinction does not apply to inner awareness, but that this distinction leaves the underlying notion of objectifying intentionality untouched. It is, therefore, incapable of explicating the *subjective* character of consciousness (see Zahavi 1999: 61, Zahavi 2004: 80; Drummond 2006: 209). An objectifying intentionality – be it peripheral or focal – directed at itself can only establish a factual coinciding of the representing and represented. But, as Manfred Frank has argued, this does not constitute self-consciousness, because it is possible to relate to something that is factually identical to oneself without recognizing it as oneself (Frank 2016: 38; cf. Zahavi 1999: 9-10). Hence, self-consciousness requires that “the identity of representing and represented must not only exist *de facto* (or, aptly, *de re*), but it must also exist for itself (*de se*) — without thereby engendering a new relation which threatens to split the identity into two” (Frank 2016: 37).[[7]](#endnote-7)

Thus, the “pre-” in the pre-reflective cogito signifies more than temporal precedence. It refers to a radical difference of structure. Reflection is an objectifying intentionality, but self-awareness is not. The task is to clarify the internal structure of this non-objectifying intentionality. One way to do so is to adopt an adverbial interpretation (Rowlands 2013). By going adverbial, the distinctiveness of the pre-reflective cogito is firmly placed on the side of the intending instead of the intended. It is no longer the peripheral character of a special object that accounts for the subjectivity or for-me-ness of an intentional experience, but the specific way of intending the intentional object. As Rowlands puts it: “when I have experiences, I have them minely,” and it is such “adverbial modification” of positional acts that constitutes their non-positional self-awareness (2013: 535).

Insofar as the adverbial theory embodies the insight that the peculiarity of the pre-reflective cogito must be sought in its peculiar manner of experiencing, it moves in the right direction. However, the question is whether the adverbial modification in question admits of further analyses; in other words, whether the specific adverbial modification responsible for the subjectivity of experience can be further clarified (than merely saying “minely”). Such a clarification is required, insofar as experiencing something “minely” is fundamentally different from experiencing something “redly.” The two are radically different, since “mine-ness” is “subjective” in a radical sense which excludes objectivity, while redness does not. Without such clarification, the adverbial theory would amount to the postulation of “an unstructured, inexplicable, sui generis property, a sort of intrinsic glow,” which, as Kriegel (2009, 101--02) remarks (rightly in my opinion), is a hopeless gesture of giving up the game.

The more promising account, it seems to me, is to be sought in between self-representationalism and the simplified adverbial account. Together with the former, it insists on the internal complexity of self-consciousness; together with the latter, it emphasizes its non-objectifying character (compare, e.g, Frank 2016: 40-41). This is no doubt a thorny path, but the difficulty of the theory only reflects the complexity of the phenomenon.

Sartre’s theory treads precisely such a middle path, emphasizing both the non-objectifying character of self-consciousness and its internal complexity.[[8]](#endnote-8) As we have seen, Sartre characterizes, in the “Introduction” to *Being and Nothingness*, pre-reflective cogito as the mode of existence of our intentional consciousness of something. This formulation easily lends itself to an adverbial interpretation. However, this is only the first step of the full Sartrean theory. This mode of existence is further clarified, in Part Two of the book, as “an ideal distance, within the subject’s immanence, in relation to himself, a way of not being his own coincidence” (Sartre 2018: 126), and as a “fissure” or “pure negativity” (Sartre 2018: 128) – descriptions that point to the internal complexity of pre-reflective self-awareness. The remainder of this paper is an attempt to clarify these admittedly dense and metaphorical concepts and statements, for I believe that the distinctive Sartrean contribution to a theory of selfhood can be appreciated only if we take them seriously.

That self-consciousness requires taking a certain distance from oneself is not particularly controversial. Anyone who is not satisfied with the idea of an intrinsic glow seems to be obliged to accept some version of this claim. For instance, Zahavi's Husserlian account makes longitudinal retention (*retentionale Längsintentionalität*) responsible for self-consciousness, and this involves an emerging temporal distance (Zahavi 1999: 72-75). What is challenging is the next step: to say how this internal distance is, metaphorically speaking, “less” than the distance that separates consciousness from its object. In less metaphorical terms, we need a notion of non-objectifying intentionality, which opens a distance that separates consciousness from itself while maintaining the intimate identity between what is thus separated. (As we have seen, self-representationalism has difficulty a time with this task, because of its commitment to a uniform notion of representation.) From this perspective, Sartre’s characterization of selfhood as “in a constantly unstable equilibrium between identity as a state of absolute cohesion without any trance of diversity, and unity as a synthesis of a multiplicity” is well understandable (2018: 126). It remains for us to render its internal structure more precise.

Recall the reason why an objectifying intentionality inevitably misses the peculiarity of self-consciousness. A *de facto* self-reference – i.e., a *de facto* identity between the intending and the intended – does not constitute self-consciousness. Neither is it enough to add an external act of recognition that knows their identity – this would be an instance of reflection. Pre-reflective cogito requires that what is internally differentiated be simultaneously recognized as the same by the very agent of self-differentiation. But isn't this a formal contradiction? One may attempt to avoid contradiction by saying that the intending and the intended are identical in one aspect and different in another. This does not seem to work, because the relata of this internal differentiation seem to be totally absorbed in their relation, and there is no independent point d'appui to distinguish different aspects. We must conceive of identity and difference together and conceive of the one as conditioning the other, without taking refuge in the usual method of distinguishing aspects. (At this point one may go on to draw a link with contemporary dialetheism and argue that self-consciousness is a “dialetheian” structure, i.e., a structure that contains real contradiction. Graham Priest (2006: 213-220) has argued that time and movement are dialetheian phenomena, and self-consciousness may well be added to his list. Indeed, the famous Sartrean refrain that human reality is a being “which is what it is not and which is not what it is” seems to support this alliance.)

As we will see in a moment, the Sartrean model of self-consciousness does involve a dialetheian element, but in a more complicated and interesting manner than suggested above. Dialetheia figures in self-consciousness in the shape of an haunting ideal. It is a figure that consciousness cannot but aspire to without the possibility of ever realizing it. This conception of the ideal-relatedness of consciousness will enable us to think about identity and difference as conditioning each other, insofar as self-identity is conceived as an ideal that is constitutive of the living process of self-differentiation.

In order to explain what this means, let me begin with Sartre’s claim that consciousness is “its own lack” (2018: 139). Lack is an internal relation with three relata: the existing (A), the lacking (B) and the totality comprising both, which Sartre calls the lacked (C). A lacks B for (i.e., in order to become) C. For example, a crescent moon (A) can be described as a lack insofar as we take the full moon (C) as the totality it is supposed to be. In this case, the corresponding gibbous moon would be the lacking (B). The point is that something is determined as a lack only in reference to a totality considered as that which it *should* be.

To say that consciousness is a lack is to claim that consciousness contains within itself an implicit reference to a totality that it should be. To say that consciousness is *its own* lack is to claim that this implicit reference cannot be established from a third-person perspective. Consciousness cannot be determined as a lack in reference to external standards. Instead, it determines itself as a lack. As we have seen, self-consciousness requires an internal distance to itself that is the correlate of a non-objectifying intentionality, “a way of not being his own coincidence” (Sartre 2018: 126). Now the tiny but all-important further step is to say that consciousness is a *lack* of its coincidence (Sartre 2018: 139--40). Its self-coincidence is the totality that it *should* be for itself but it is not. Self-coincidence is the ideal for consciousness, or, as Sartre also says, its value or norm (Sartre 2018: 144--49).

Thus, Sartre's model for thinking identity and difference together is to think about self-identity as an ideal that is constitutive of (self-)consciousness, which is, as pre-reflective cogito, always at a distance from itself. This model allows us to think identity and difference together in such a way that the one is conceived as the condition of the other. On the one hand, the internal distance is not a given quantity; it exists only as a lack deriving its sense from the constitutive ideal of self-coincidence (hence no difference without identity). Unlike the crescent moon, which has an identifiable shape independent of its relation to the full moon, the internal distance of self-consciousness has no independent existence apart from its falling short of the ideal of self-coincidence. The internal complexity of self-consciousness is held in the state of emerging duality by the haunting presence of the constitutive ideal; it never becomes a full duality of subject and object. In this way, the non-objectifying character of the self-consciousness is given its due. On the other hand, the identity in question, insofar as it is a constitutive ideal, is neither a numerical nor a qualitative identity; it is the self-coincidence of what inexorably exists at a distance from itself (hence no identity without difference). This logical figure, which Sartre calls in-itself-for-itself, is a contradiction in terms, or a dialetheia. Thus, self-consciousness involves dialetheia, but only in the form of an constitutive ideal, which is forever the unrealizable haunting horizon of consciousness. Thus, Sartre’s model of consciousness as a lack haunted by the ideal of its self-coincidence enables us to think identity and difference as conditioning each other in the manner required by the logic of pre-reflective self-consciousness.

This argument for the ideal-relatedness of consciousness is the first step beyond the minimal self – a step that consists in following to the end the internal logic of self-consciousness. This result will be corroborated and developed in the next section by more concrete phenomenological descriptions.

# 3. The imaginary character of the ideal of self-coincidence

The determination of consciousness as its own lack is for Sartre not only a conceptual innovation designed to solve the problem of self-consciousness. It is also – perhaps primarily – a phenomenological discovery. The lacking character of consciousness is not only responsible for the general character of pre-reflective awareness. Each lived experience is also its own lack in a concrete and individual manner that is a function of its unique situation. As we have seen, consciousness is determined for itself as a lack in reference to a totality. Now since this totality is determined concretely for each consciousness in its concrete situation, the sense of each consciousness is not only determined as a lack in general, but the lack of such-and-such a concrete ideal. Thus, by demonstrating the ideal-relatedness of self-consciousness, we have already made the first step toward the concretization of the minimal self that is required by the meaningfulness of our self-experience. Our self-experience is meaningful because it contains an implicit reference to its concrete ideal which determines what it should be but falls short of being.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre illustrates this point with a phenomenological description of suffering. He frames his discussion by a contrast between suffering as it is lived through and suffering as it is depicted and observed (e.g., in a sculpture).[[9]](#endnote-9) Suffering as it is lived through is aware of itself. Precisely because of its self-awareness, there is always an internal distance between suffering and itself so that suffering is always not suffering “enough.” This does not mean that the one who suffers wants more pain to be inflicted upon himself, but that its self-awareness is simultaneously the awareness of its falling short of an ideal suffering. This ideal would be suffering purely and simply, a silent suffering that forgets itself and forgets its forgetting. Suffering as seen on the face of another person, or better, suffering as carved in marble (think about the statue Laocoön and His Sons), would be an approximation to this ideal suffering. My real suffering is constantly experienced in the haunting presence of such an unrealizable ideal:

I wring my hands, or I shout, in order that beings in themselves – sounds and gestures – may race throughout the world, ridden (chevauchés) by the in itself suffering which I am unable to be. Every groan, every facial expression of the suffering person aims to sculpt an in itself statue out of suffering. But this statue can exist only through others, and only for others. (Sartre 2018: 145)

This example shows how the lived experience of suffering is haunted by an ideal or norm that clarifies its meaning. Because of its pre-reflective self-awareness, our lived experience is troubled by an internal fissure that renders it in some sense indeterminate and ambiguous. Consciousness is, from this perspective, a process of self-determination and self-precision through an implicit reference to its concrete ideal. The concrete ideal of a lived experience is nothing but this same lived experience rid of its ambiguity, finally recast in identity with self. Consciousness aspires to its ideal as to its meaning that defines what it is.

The reference to an absent “statue-in-itself of suffering” in the above example suggests the imaginary nature of the implicated ideal of concrete self-coincidence. The givenness of the ideal of self-coincidence may be characterized as imaginary, for it is *present* in the form of *absence*. Since this ideal is an inherent moment of the pre-reflective self-awareness, it is inseparable from consciousness and in this sense constantly *present*. Its presence, however, does not take the form of a thematically posited intentional object. Instead, the unrealizable ideal remains, despite its intimate presence, a haunting horizon, and in this sense, it is forever *absent*.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The imaginary nature of the meaning-clarifying ideal of consciousness is not explicitly affirmed in *Being and Nothingness*. Nevertheless, indirect evidence can be gathered for this characterization if we consider the theory of selfhood in *Being and Nothingness* in relation to the transcendental function of imagination in the “Conclusion” of *The Imaginary*. This text is devoted to the following question: Is the function of imagining a constitutive structure of consciousness (Sartre 2004a: 179)? Sartre's answer follows a transcendental strategy, that is, he proceeds by determining the condition of possibility of imagining. Imagining involves positing an object as unreal, i.e., beyond the causal nexus of the real, and this presupposes that consciousness can grasp the real as a whole and hold it at a distance. More precisely, the totalizing apprehension of the real as a world and the act of holding the world at a distance “are one and same act,” and this totalization-cum-negation is the transcendental condition of imagining (Sartre 2004a: 184). Since consciousness always finds itself embedded in concrete situations, its totalization-cum-negation is always performed from a certain point of view. And this situated totalization-cum-negation motivates the creation of the imaginary object beyond the nexus of the real. For example, my totalizing grasp of my concrete environment as a world where my friend Pierre is absent motivates my imagination of him. Thus, imagination is the totalization-cum-negation of the real from a certain point of view, and since this coincides with the condition of the cartesian cogito, Sartre claims that “imagination is not an empirical power added to consciousness, but is the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom” (Sartre 2004a: 186). Imagination thus conceived may be called transcendental[[11]](#endnote-11) in order to be distinguished from imagination as “a psychological and empirical function” (ibid.).

By attributing to imagination a transcendental function, Sartre is claiming that “every concrete and real situation of consciousness in the world is pregnant with the imaginary,” even when no imaginary object is explicitly posited (Sartre 2004a: 186). The idea is that consciousness transcends the real in and through its situated apprehension of the real, and this transcendence of the real is *eo ipso* a transcendence towards nothingness, which implies the implicit positing of the imaginary. He goes so far as saying that the imaginary represents “the implicit sense of the real” (Sartre 2004a: 188). This promising conception, which would have allowed Sartre to respond to a common objection to his view of imagination, is unfortunately not further developed in *The Imaginary*.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Nonetheless, the theory of the ideal (or value) in *Being and Nothingness* can properly be regarded as the successor to this undeveloped theory of transcendental imagination. The (transcendental) image that was earlier posited beyond the world is now absorbed into the structure of selfhood as the imaginary dimension of the ideal. More importantly, just as the imaginary is claimed to represent the implicit sense of the real situation of consciousness in *The Imaginary*, so the ideal determines the concrete meaning of the situated self-experience of consciousness in *Being and Nothingness*.[[13]](#endnote-13)

# 4. The imaginary character of the meaning of possibility

Introducing the dimension of the ideal is only the first step toward the concretization of the minimal self. The ideal is the concrete totality that determines the sense of our conscious (self-)experience. The concrete ideal specifies what each particular lived experience *should* be. The meaning of this “should” requires further clarification, for, paradoxically, this “I should” excludes “I can.” Indeed, given the terms in which self-consciousness and its ideal are defined, consciousness would have to aim at its own destruction (i.e., the suppression of its internal distance) if it were to realize its ideal. The ideal is thus not meant to be realized in its own terms. It is, instead, destined to remain an ideal – comparable to the Kantian “*focus imaginarius*” – that determines the sense (as meaning and direction) of consciousness. But if the ideal is to determine the direction of the development of consciousness, if, in other words, the ideal is not to remain ineffective in its haunting presence, consciousness must pursue its movement of self-transcendence in a dimension other than its beholdenness to the ideal. Now, if the ideal of self-coincidence is what is strictly impossible for consciousness to realize, this other dimension is then the possible. The ideal determines the meaning (and direction) of the moment-to-moment lived experience of consciousness by determining the meaning of its concrete possibility. Recalling the tripartite structure of lack, Sartre correlates the dimension of possibility with the moment of the lacking. Hence the complete tripartite structure of selfhood as lack: self-presence, ideal (or value) and possibility.

The dimension of the possible is at once creative and symbolic. It is *creative*, because the possible as the lacking of consciousness is not pre-determined by the existing and the lacked, in the way the exact shape of the gibbous moon is determined by the full moon and the shape of a specific crescent moon. Rather, what is given or determined in the case of the lacking of consciousness is only a problem or a task, while its specific manner of solution is left to the creativity of consciousness. Since the problem in question – an “I should” that excludes the “I can” – does not admit of a direct solution, the self-projected possibility is destined to remain a *symbolic* response to an impossible task. Consciousness exists as a question to itself, and its projection of possibility is its creative and symbolic response to this question.

Let us examine this idea in more detail. To project one’s own possibility is, in the context of practical life, the entertaining of an intention, or the choice/projection of an end.[[14]](#endnote-14) Now my concrete choice of ends is certainly restricted and qualified by my factual situation. Being always situated – bodily, historical, socially, environmentally, etc. – the creativity of consciousness is always a situated creativity. When I am thirsty, I project the act of drinking as an end. The relation between thirst as a disturbance of fluid balance in my body and water as that which restores this balance is a physiological fact; there is nothing particularly creative about it. Nonetheless, even in this least creative performance of a bodily function, room for creativity appears if we consider the *meaning* that this act of drinking has for me.

This meaning is, in fact, many-layered. On the most general level, it has the meaning of something to be done. In other words, it has normative force for me, and correspondingly, my thirst becomes a motive (*mobile*) for the intended act of drinking. But the possible act of drinking does not merely have the meaning of something to be done (i.e., a task), this meaning always comes with a specific qualification, and it is here that creativity becomes more manifest. Oftentimes, when we are absorbed in our work, the act of drinking has for us the meaning of getting rid of an uncomfortable and distracting bodily sensation so that we can continue with our work. But it is also possible to immerse ourselves fully in the feeling of thirst. Then it could be our primitive craving that the desire should remain a desire - and indeed, become fully desire - even while being fulfilled, so that the desire can be enjoyed without being suppressed. The projected end is still an act of drinking, but now this act has for me the meaning of perpetuating my thirst in and through its satisfaction (Sartre 2018: 156--58). The meaning of an act as simple as drinking is something that I must decide for myself. It represents my poetic response to a question that I am to myself – in this case a minor question indeed, but a question nonetheless.

However, in our life the minor questions are not isolated from the bigger ones. In the meaning that I (pre-reflectively) decide for an act of drinking, for example, my general attitude toward my bodily desire is involved and reflected, and this is in turn part of my even more general attitude toward the facticity of my existence. Thus, a human being is a whole, and the meaning of a specific projection of possibility or choice of end is not restricted to itself. Each specific choice is a symbolic response to the question posed by the haunting presence of the unrealizable ideal, but it is such a response only insofar as it is a symbolic expression of a more fundamental choice, until we arrive at the most fundamental choice which is this person’s concrete answer to the question that he is to himself. Let me illustrate this order of symbolic expression again with Sartre’s example of different ways of coping with fatigue.

During a hike in the mountains, I feel exhausted after several hours of walking. The bodily feeling of fatigue becomes unbearable and motivates the decision to give in. Now this decision has a significance beyond itself. Another person, with the same training and the same bodily strength (insofar as this can be objectively determined), may persevere. The perseverance of the one and the giving-in of the other both have a meaning that points beyond this specific choice to a larger choice, to different attitudes towards one’s own body and towards nature. The perseverance in the face of burning fatigue might have the signification of a “trusting abandon to nature” and one’s own body, of “try[ing] to be absorbed into one’s own body,” and of appropriating the mountain by overcoming it (Sartre 2018: 597). The decision to give in might, on the contrary, be interpreted as a distrust of one’s body (Sartre 2018: 598). These different attitudes towards nature and one's own body again refer beyond themselves to still larger choices. And this regress ends only when we reach the fundamental choice whose fundamentality will be self-evident.

The regress is a regress in search of intelligibility. It is not a search for causal explanation, which would require that the concrete and individual be subsumed under the abstract and general, whether or not one assumes, in addition, strict psychological laws.[[15]](#endnote-15) Our search for the meaning of an action (or desire, or emotion) of a person attains its end when we see why *he or she* does it, i.e., not when we can explain why it happens. We feel satisfied in our quest for meaning when we reach the concrete totality of the person, because we grasp the total meaning of a specific action by seeing it as the symbolic expression of the concrete personality as a whole. In other words, the relation between a particular choice and its meaning that points beyond itself is a part-whole relation. A particular choice is non-independent, insofar as it is not intelligible by itself and insofar as its adequate understanding relies, ultimately, on the independent totality which is the fundamental choice.

We have encountered two totalities in our investigation. The first is the ideal of self-coincidence, the totality that is implied in each lived experience due to its self-awareness. The second is the fundamental choice of a person, the totality symbolically expressed by particular projections of possibility. These two totalities are related as a question is related to its answer. Consciousness is, before any explicit act of questioning, always a question to itself insofar as it is its own lack, haunted by the unrealizable ideal of being-in-itself-for-itself. This question it answers by its fundamental choice, its project of being, which is none other than its concrete manner of symbolically realizing this ideal. It lives out this answer through each and every of its actions, without and prior to any explicit self-clarification. Consciousness exists as a constant question to itself and a perpetual effort to answer it.

As we have seen in Section 3, the mode of givenness of the first totality can be characterized as imaginary. The same thing can be said of the second totality, the fundamental choice. The fundamental choice is symbolically expressed in every concrete choice as its ultimate meaning. This amounts to saying that the fundamental choice is implied in each concrete choice in the manner of the imaginary. Like the concrete ideal of self-coincidence, the fundamental projection is both everywhere and nowhere. It is present in each concrete projection of possibility, but only as its ultimate horizon of intelligibility. As we have noted, Sartre entertained in *The Imaginary* the idea of a transcendental imagination which represents the implicit sense of the real situation of consciousness. Now if an ideal or value determines the meaning of each lived experience by projecting a purified image of this very experience, a concrete choice points to its meaning beyond itself, insofar as it is a partial adumbration of a totality of meaningful choices. Thus, the two totalities which constitute the imaginary dimension of selfhood have precisely the function attributed to the transcendental imagination in *The Imaginary*. Each lived experience is “pregnant” with an imaginary dimension of totality which represents its implicit meaning.

# Conclusion

Consciousness is a play of presence and distance, and it becomes intelligible to itself in this play. There is no self-presence without the intimation of a nascent distance. The minimal self transcends itself, because the proximity of self-presence, already troubled by an internal distance, is haunted by an ideal of self-coincidence, and because this ideal, being in principle impossible to realize, requires its self-projection towards the possible. Through its imaginary self-transcendence in the dimension of the ideal and the possible, consciousness in its moment-to-moment self-presence becomes meaningful for itself. As in the theories of narrative self, the meaningfulness of our experience implies an internal (imaginary) relation to the totality of our existence. However, this relation has not taken an explicitly narrative form in Sartre’s theory. Given the difficulty of making a clear sense of the notion of pre-narrative structure or implicit narrative, this feature may well be a merit. In any case, it offers an interesting alternative that shares the narrative theory’s concern with meaningfulness while doing full justice to the experiential dimension of consciousness, as emphasized by the minimal-self theories.

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1. Zahavi (1999: 52-54, 127--42; 2005: 11-29) has made substantial use of Sartre in his own theory of minimal self. Strawson (2004), for his part, has enlisted Sartre’s help in his fight against narrativity. The narrative theorists, on the other hand, are generally critical of Sartre, who represents for them the extreme exaggeration of self-shaping or the extreme separation of the self from its (social) roles (see, e.g., Rudd 2012: 31-34, 71-73; MacIntyre 2007: 21-22, 32, 204--05). It is generally not seen that there are also resources in Sartre that might help integrate the two approaches. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a brilliant discussion of Sartre’s theory of subjectivity with specific attention to his theory of value, see Seel (1971). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Indeed, Husserl (2001: 170) acknowledged that the purely formal framework is by itself “meaningless for the ego.” Compare Zahavi’s (2014: 61) objection to Rudd’s use of Husserl. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Let me note that the purpose of this paper is *not* to integrate the minimal-self theories and narrative-self theories as developed in recent literature. The ambition is the much more limited one of demonstrating that Sartre’s theory has potential resources for such an endeavor. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sartre insists on this point against Heidegger, who leaves behind the traditional problem of self-consciousness and talks directly about “Seinsverständnis” (Sartre 2018: 122, 136). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This argument against the reflection-model of self-consciousness, which Sartre more presupposes than explicitly elaborates, is first systematically formulated as such by Dieter Henrich (1966), in his interpretation of Fichte. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Speaking about self-acquaintance might seem a promising step beyond self-representationalism insofar as the notion of acquaintance suggests a sense of immediacy and intimacy that is absent in the notion of representation. It is for this reason that Williford’s (2016) interpretation of Sartre appeals to this notion, though he has defended self-representationalism before (Williford 2006). However, since knowledge by acquaintance applies first and foremost to objective qualities and states of affairs, this notion by itself does not help to elucidate the non-objectifying character of mine-ness. The difficulty remains, now in the form of the problem of accounting for the distinction between self-acquaintance and acquaintance. Williford (2016: 83) tackles this problem in terms of the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual content. This does not seem convincing, for this distinction obtains within the realm of objectifying intentionality as well. In the absence of a convincing clarification of the non-objectifying structure of self-acquaintance, Williford's interpretation seems to fall back to self-representationalism. This seems to be confirmed by his conception of reflection as a mere “shift of emphasis” (Williford 2016: 85). Reflection is an objectifying consciousness. To say that reflection requires no more than a shift of emphasis is to presume that pre-reflective self-awareness is already objectifying, though only peripherally so. For Sartre himself, reflection is never a mere shift of emphasis, but a “radical modification” that is genuinely productive, i.e., production of the ego (Sartre 2004b: 11). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Zahavi also steers such a middle course. *Pace* Kriegel, Zahavi’s account is not a simplified theory of the intrinsic glow. With his Husserlian resources (the tripartite structure of time-consciousness, its transverse and longitudinal intentionality, its dynamics of fulfillment, etc.), Zahavi has much to say about the internal structure of self-manifestation (Zahavi 1999: 63-90). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Suffering is a better example of the lacking character of consciousness than desire or thirst, which Sartre also uses, if only because it is less obvious. Of course, a man in thirst lacks water, but this is not at all what Sartre means when he claims that consciousness is its own lack. It is helpful to distinguish between “horizontal” and “vertical” desire or lack, as Bernet (2002: 8) does. The horizontal lack refers to the empirical lack of something other than oneself (e.g., water), while vertical lack refers to the ontological constitution of consciousness as its own lack. A phenomenological description of vertical lack should avoid being confused with horizontal lack, and using the example of suffering helps in this regard. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Compare Sartre’s description of “perfect moments” in his novel *La Nauseé*. Perfect moments are like works of art. They are something we should realize using our lived experiences as material. Sartre describes how Anny for a long time orients her whole life toward the realization of these perfect moments, only finally to realize the futility of this project. This is how Anny describes her illusion: « je pensais que ça existait, 'La Haine', que ça venait se poser sur les gens et les élever au-dessus d'eux-mêmes … comme les langues de feu du Vendredi saint » (Sartre 1938: 212). To say, as Anny later does, that “the Hatred” does not exist means, in the language of *Being and Nothingness*, that the Hatred *is* only in the form of an ideal, as a perpetual absence that haunts consciousness. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Sartre does not speak explicitly of transcendental imagination, but he speaks of consciousness as “transcendentally free” (2004a: 186) and we have quoted him identifying imagination with “the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom”. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The objection goes that Sartre severs the imaginary from the real so sharply that he cannot show how they relate (see, e.g., Casey 1981: 156--57; Kearney 1991: 77-78). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. What we have presented (here and in the next section) is, of course, no more than the beginning of an account of the imaginary dimension in Sartre’s ontology of consciousness. For the continuation of this story, especially in the realm of intersubjectivity, see, e.g., Butler (1987) and Bonneman (2007). Though only a beginning, the steps we have retraced – the arguments for the ideal-relatedness of the pre-reflective cogito and the imaginary character of this ideal – are crucial for the understanding of Sartre’s ontology and, I believe, insufficiently attended to in the literature. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Under these titles, Sartre carries forth, in Part Four of *Being and Nothingness*, the ontology of consciousness as set out in Part Two. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The narrative theorists also emphasize the distinction between understanding and causal explanation. See, e.g., MacIntyre (2007: 209) and Rudd (2012: 177--78).

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Zahavi, Dan. 2014. *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)