Reflexivity, Agency and Normativity:
A Reconstruction of Sartre's Theory
of (Self-)Consciousness[1]

ABSTRACT – This paper reconstructs Sartre's account of the "circuit of ipseity" as an integral theory of the experiential, agentive and normative aspects of self-consciousness. At the core of this theory is a conception of human (self-) consciousness as lacking, and the correlation between lacking and ideal. In Section 1, I show how this theory manages to satisfy the apparently incompatible requirements generated by the idea of a pre-reflective cogito. Section 2 discusses practical self-consciousness, in particular the agent's consciousness of herself as self-determined in the projection and pursuit of ends, and how this is accounted for in Sartre's theory by the correlation of lack and ideal. Section 3 first clarifies the Sartrean conception of the ideal by comparing it with Korsgaard's, and then reconstructs Sartre's account of practical normativity by showing how it can be read as emerging from a critical engagement with Heidegger.

KEYWORDS: agency, ipseity, normativity, phenomenal consciousness, self-consciousness

Self-consciousness is a multifaceted phenomenon. Reflecting on this distinctive feature of our experience, one may be struck by the fact that there is something *it is like* to be conscious (i.e., to consciously perceive, imagine or feel pain), a state the enjoyment of which is supposed to distinguish us from, say, artificial intelligence. This *experiential* aspect of our self-consciousness is arguably what a shepherd has in common with his grazing sheep, which are also immediately aware of their own grazing activity. It does not seem to be what is uniquely *human* about our self-consciousness. For *us as humans*, to be self-conscious is not just about being aware of one's experience, but to be knowingly involved in one's behavior as *an actor or agent*. Moreover, it seems that this *agential* aspect of human self-consciousness is closely linked to our *normative* sense of self: being self-conscious, I know what I am saying and doing, not from observation or inference, but from my sense of what is reasonable for me to say and to do in a given circumstance. If one's focus is on

the distinctively human, then self-consciousness is likely to seem more about agency and normativity than about experiential self-acquaintance. Nevertheless, there is reason to think that the self-consciousness we share with the grazing sheep and the self-consciousness that distinguishes us from it are not two unrelated phenomena. For us, at least, it seems no accident that self-consciousness is at once *experiential, agential and normative*. Philosophically, we want to understand how this is so.

I believe that Sartre's theory of self-consciousness has a contribution to make in this regard. I am thinking in particular about his account of "the circuit of ipseity" in *Being and Nothingness*, which is precisely an attempt to show how the experiential, agential, and normative aspects of self-consciousness are interrelated. It does so by providing an ontology of self-consciousness, the central idea of which is the correlation between "lack" and "ideal." Schematically, human self-consciousness *is* lack and therefore in the grip of its ideal. Alternatively, human self-consciousness "makes a couple" with its ideal and experiences itself as lacking.

As far as I can tell, this theory, with its potential contribution to an integrative account of self-consciousness, has not received the attention it deserves in the recent wave of commentary spurned by contemporary interest in the topic of self-consciousness. There is by now a substantial literature on Sartre's theory of the experiential aspect of self-consciousness,[2] but contributors to this discussion tend to isolate what Sartre says about experiential self-consciousness from its context in his account of "the circuit of ipseity." Presumably, some of them have done so out of an intention to rescue what is clear and compelling in Sartre from what is perceived as confused and mystifying. Indeed, Sartre is often less than clear when he comes to speak of consciousness as nothingness and lack. Nevertheless, I believe that one can make good sense of this discourse by focusing on the correlation between lack and ideal (rather than, say, getting lost in the metaphorical connotations of the discourse of nothingness). I see this correlation as the core of Sartre's theory of "the circuit of ipseity," which provides an integrative account of the experiential, agential, and normative aspects of self-consciousness. The aim of this paper is to offer a reconstruction of this account.

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[2] See the papers collected in Miguens, Preyer and Morando (2016), especially the contributions by Manfred Frank, Kenneth Williford, Mark Rowlands and Joseph Levine. See Zahavi (1999, 138-142) for an earlier but still important discussion and Henrich (2007 [1971]) for a pioneering contribution.

1. Reflexivity

Recent studies of Sartre's theory of self-consciousness have tended to focus narrowly on its experiential or phenomenal aspect. This is not surprising, since Sartre's fame in this area is largely due to his introduction of the term (if not the concept) of the "pre-reflective cogito," and the first use of this term – in the "Introduction" of *Being and Nothingness* – occurs in the context of a discussion of phenomenal self-consciousness. However, this initial account is not (and not intended to be) sufficient in itself; it merely raises a problem without answering it.

Sartre introduces the notion of the "pre-reflective cogito" as a consequence of his insight that conceiving of self-consciousness in terms of reflection is a nonstarter. Since his argument against what is now called the "reflection model" is well studied,[3] I will not dwell on it here. The conclusion he draws from this argument is this: self-consciousness "must be an immediate and non-cognitive relationship of self to self" (Sartre 1943, 19/11[4]). Sartre characterizes this immediate and non-cognitive self-relation as "the only possible mode of existence of any consciousness of something," but he says almost nothing about the internal constitution of this relation in the "Introduction."

This relation is puzzling, however, because it must simultaneously satisfy two requirements that seem difficult to reconcile. On the one hand, being immediate and non-cognitive, it cannot be a two-place intentional relation where consciousness unequivocally distinguishes itself from its object. On the other hand, it must relate to itself *as the subject of this self-relating*. This implies that there must be some kind of internal distance in pre-reflective self-consciousness that makes room for sufficient structural complexity. In other words, pre-reflective consciousness cannot collapse into a non-relational field of self-coincidence. Sartre summarizes the two requirements by saying that self-consciousness involves "an ideal distance, within the subject's immanence, in relation to himself, a way of not being his own coincidence" (Sartre 1943, 119/126).

The second requirement is sometimes referred to in contemporary literature as the "*de se* constraint" (Frank 2012, 373-374). It refers to the internal reflexivity required for self-consciousness as opposed to external

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[3] See the studies cited in note 1.

[4] The first page number refers to the original French edition, the second to the English translation by Richmond. The translation has been modified when needed.

reflexivity (Castañeda 1989). Reflexivity alone does not suffice for self-consciousness; one must refer to oneself as the one who refers to oneself, as if from within. However, any intuitively compelling example of this internal reflexivity is likely to involve some form of *reflective* – rather than pre-reflective – "aha" experience. In the example made famous by Perry (1979), for instance, a shopper following a trail of sugar on the supermarket floor suddenly realized that he *himself* was the one making a mess. Prior to this realization, he had a *de-re* belief about himself: there is an x such that x is identical with Perry and x is believed by Perry to be making a mess. But with the realization comes something new, a *de-se* belief and self-consciousness proper: Perry believes that he *himself* is making a mess. Here, the self-consciousness is obviously *reflective* – and conceptually articulated. So, when pre-reflective theorists talk about the *de se* constraint or the internal reflexivity of *pre-reflective* self-consciousness, they are making an *analogical extension* from cases of *reflective* self-identification. In other words, they claim that something *analogous to* the distinction between internal and external reflexivity (or the irreducibility of *de-se* belief to *de-re* belief) must also play a role at the pre-reflective level.[5] This fact sets up a constraint on viable theories of pre-reflective self-consciousness: pre-reflective self-consciousness should *not* be understood as completely non-relational and anonymous, so as not to break the analogical link with reflective *de se* belief.

But how is it possible to conceive of a self-consciousness as a self-relation *analogous to* reflective *de se* thought without falling prey to the reflection model? Sartre's model of consciousness as lack suggests an answer (~~see~~ Huang 2021). According to this model, the experiential self-manifestation of consciousness is an abstract, non-independent moment of full pre-reflective self-consciousness. In particular, this phenomenal self-consciousness is, Sartre writes, "not original [*primitive*], and can derive its meaning only from an earlier relation," which is "a relation, given as constantly absent, of the for-itself to itself, in the mode of identity" (Sartre 1943, 132/144). This latter, Sartre tells us later, is the *ideal* of the for-itself, which he describes as "the absolute being of the self" (*l'être absolu du soi*, 137/147). This ideal is transcendent

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[5] This claim plays an indispensable role in Frank's argument against competing theories of self-consciousness, such as the Higher Order Monitoring Theory or Self-Representationalism (Frank 2012, 269-397).

vis-à-vis the immediate self-manifestation of consciousness, and consciousness relates to this ideal as to a totality that is missed or lacked (*manqué*). Insofar as this internal relation to a missed totality *haunts* consciousness in its innermost self-awareness, (self-)consciousness exists in the form of lack, or more precisely, it exists *as its own lack* (130/140).

This series of quotations is, admittedly, dense and daunting. Much of this paper will be devoted to unpacking them. Let me start with the easier part. In describing (self-)consciousness as a lack, one thing Sartre is saying is that phenomenal self-consciousness cannot be understood by itself: it lacks something for its intelligibility. Rather, phenomenal self-consciousness depends on an internal relation to its ideal. Existing as its own lack, consciousness, even in its intimate self-manifestation, is not intelligible (to itself and to us as philosophers) in abstraction from the relation to its own ideal. And this means, in particular, that the internal reflexivity of self-consciousness is only possible because of this relation to the ideal.[6]

To see how this works, let us recall where the difficulty lies in the first place. Pre-reflective self-consciousness, on the one hand, cannot be any two-place intentional relation, for fear of infinite regress. On the other hand, it must have the kind of internal complexity analogous to reflective *de-se* belief in order to allow for a distinction between internal and external reflexivity. But how is it possible to have an internal reflexivity, which is a special version of the "as-structure," without an intentional relation? Presumably, every instance of "seeing-as" is an instance of intentionality? We seem to be faced with a dilemma.

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[6] As noted in the main text, I will need the whole article to unravel Sartre's cryptic remarks about lack and the ideal that I quoted in the previous paragraph. What I say in this paragraph is only a beginning. Much remains to be added, especially the connection with action, which I will discuss in section 2. Readers familiar with Sartre's text, however, may find my approach unnecessarily indirect. Has not Sartre himself written: "The existence of desire as a human fact suffices to prove that human-reality is a lack" (Sartre 1943, 130/139)? That desire *calls for* its satisfaction and *motivates* us to act is only intelligible if desire is understood as lack. This may be true of desire, but there is no obvious way to generalize this for consciousness in general. It will be retorted that Sartre understands consciousness in general as desire. This is true, but that is precisely the point to be established. Borrowing a bit of Heideggerian terminology, we can distinguish between ontic desire and ontological desire (see Bernet 2002, 8). Sartre's thesis is that, ontologically, consciousness has a desire-like structure. Pointing to the existence of ontic desire cannot establish this point. According to the reading developed here, Sartre establishes this thesis by considering the inner structure of self-consciousness.

The Sartrean proposal offers a way out by "parceling out" the two requirements to two *loci* or moments of self-consciousness and by construing their unity in a way that avoids making use of any two-place intentional relation. The self-manifestation of consciousness is indeed immediate and non-intentional, in such a way that, left to itself, it would be an anonymous field devoid of internal reflexivity. However, just as the crescent moon cannot be understood as such without reference to the full moon, so the self-manifestation of consciousness is never so self-contained, but always exists in the haunting presence of its own ideal.[7] Consciousness feels itself *as* lacking in the presence of its ideal; it exists for itself *as* lacking in relation to that ideal.

Thus, the presence of the ideal introduces an "as-structure" into the self-manifestation of consciousness, which without it would be totally non-relational and anonymous.[8] However, and this is the crucial point of the Sartrean proposal, it avoids reintroducing a full-fledged intentional or object-directed relation because of the special mode of

[7] Of course, this comparison, like any metaphor for self-consciousness, has its limits. The crescent moon does not relate *itself* to the full moon; *we* see it as lacking in relation to the latter. On the contrary, consciousness relates *itself* to its own ideal and determines *itself* as lacking.

[8] Raoul Moati speaks in this connection of the "self-augmentation" (*l'augmentation de soi*) of the for-itself, by which consciousness establishes itself as a lack in the face of an impossible ideal (Moati 2019, 112-118, 160). Moati's reading stands out among recent interpretations of *Being and Nothingness* for its unabashed emphasis on the metaphysical aspect of Sartre's early philosophy. As a consequence of this orientation, he devotes considerable space (Chapter 2) to Sartre's theory of the circuit of ipseity. Despite this shared insistence on the importance of this part of Sartre's system, our readings differ in both motivation and content. Moati seems to have a tendency to place metaphysics at the foundation of Sartre's phenomenological ontology. ~~Chapter II, for example,~~ begins with an exposition of the metaphysical drama of how consciousness emerges from being in-itself, and then derives the circuit of ipseity from metaphysical premises. These premises include the "hypothesis" that "the for-itself draws its origin from an in-itself," which introduces the arch-event of nihilation "in order to remove the contingency of its being" (108). A further premise is that the for-itself somehow inherits this aspiration: it "integrates into its very core the primary aspiration of the in-itself to become the cause of itself" (109). This aspiration, proper to the for-itself, to become *causa sui*, then leads to its "self-augmentation" and the formation of the circuit of ipseity (111-112).

Admittedly, one can piece together evidence for this interpretation from Sartre's text, but it does not seem to me to be the most promising way to read his theory of the circuit of ipseity. Metaphysics, for Sartre, is a realm of hypothesis, which should be guided by the findings of ontology to avoid ~~becoming arbitrary~~ (Sartre 1943, 713-714/800-802). Therefore, when interpreting his ontology, it seems preferable to steer clear from metaphysical presuppositions as much as possible – which is the methodological principle I have followed in my reading.

givenness of the ideal. The ideal, according to Sartre, has a *"haunting"* presence, and what haunts you is something you do not and cannot have before you in the form of an object.[9] It is everywhere and nowhere, it surrounds you and eludes your grasp, like the *horizon*. Consciousness is present to itself in the presence of a haunting horizon,[10] and it is this horizontal presence of the ideal that brings an "as-structure" into what would otherwise be non-relational self-manifestation without falling back into the "reflection model."

Is this "as-structure" what we need for pre-reflective self-consciousness, i.e., a quasi-*de se* structure? There is, *prima facie*, a gap here, for the as-structure made possible by the ideal-horizon – i.e., "as lacking" – seems to be different from the internal reflexivity of pre-reflective self-consciousness. One might object that the introduction of ideal-relatedness is irrelevant here, since understanding oneself as lacking in relation to an ideal already presupposes the pre-reflective self-consciousness we are trying to account for. One must be able to relate to oneself as oneself in order to find oneself lacking.

This objection would be justified if the ideal in question were a specific personal identity, like the ideal of a dutiful teacher or a loving father. To have such an ideal as one's practical identity undoubtedly presupposes pre-reflective self-consciousness. But we are talking about ideal-relatedness at a more fundamental level. It is something like "the form of all concrete ideals" that according to Sartre haunts consciousness

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[9] "This being (i.e., the ideal) is not posited by consciousness, and in front of it: there is no consciousness of this being, since it haunts our non-thetic consciousness (of) self" (Sartre 1943, 134/143).

[10] The notion of "horizon" is of course a term of art in Husserlian phenomenology. For Husserl, a perceptual intentionality does not simply aim at an isolated object; it is always correlative to a field of perception in which more or less determinate objects appear in a certain context or horizon (see, e.g., Husserl 1970, 158-163). Object-intentionality and horizon-intentionality are thus different but essentially connected moments of a perceptual act. On a larger scale, the world, for Husserl, is the universal horizon or the horizon of horizons, and world-consciousness and thing-consciousness are also different moments of an inseparable unity (see 142-3). As far as I know, Sartre does not explicitly characterize the ideal as a horizon or ideal-consciousness as horizon-consciousness. The closest he comes is perhaps his characterization of the ideal as "cet être-valeur qui nous constitue en tant que valeur de nos horizons" (Sartre 1983, 137). Nevertheless, it is clear that the ideal-consciousness is distinct from, and at the same time inseparable from, object-consciousness; Sartre himself often describes this non-objectifying relation between consciousness and its ideal as "being haunted by." Here I use the Husserlian concept of "horizon" to clarify the mode of givenness of the ideal.

in its minimal self-presence.[11] Obviously, this ideal can only be specified on a rather high level of formality, for example as "the absolute being of the self." As to what exactly is meant by the attribute of absoluteness, we shall come to later; for the moment, we can safely understand it in a properly formal sense as referring to a certain totality or completion in relation to which consciousness feels itself as lacking. The crucial point is that the ideal-relatedness in question does not specify any particular "essence," any concrete motivational structure inherent to one's will or personality. It lies, as it were, at the "basis" of the latter. It is the moment of self-consciousness that makes possible the self-relatedness of all possible ideals, by being the moment of ideal-relatedness that makes possible the internal reflexivity of self-consciousness. Living through its experiences in light of this ideal, consciousness experiences itself *as* falling short *of itself, as* lacking *in relation to itself.*

In this way, the as-structure made possible by the formal ideal does provide what we need, i.e., the internal reflexivity of pre-reflective self-consciousness. According to Sartre, consciousness is not merely or blankly aware of itself as itself. Rather, its self-consciousness is inseparable from a sense of lack.

As noted above, this doctrine is absent from the Introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, from which many commentators take their cue when speaking of Sartre's theory of pre-reflective self-consciousness. In my view, the theory of self-consciousness in the "Introduction" should be seen as preparatory and abstract, in comparison to the theory presented in Part Two, on which the above interpretation is based. It is preparatory because its account of the internal reflexivity of self-consciousness is incomplete, leaving out an essential moment (i.e., ideal-relatedness). It is abstract in that it describes an allegedly pure consciousness without taking into account what might be called its "personal" constitution. According to the theory of Part Two, however, consciousness "makes itself personal […] from the moment it arises" (Sartre 1943, 148/160). I will argue in the next section that these two deficiencies are related: the "personal" constitution of consciousness can be accounted for by further elaborating upon the "lacking" character of self-consciousness or its ideal-relatedness.

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[11] Sartre says that this formal ideal "make[s] a couple" with the very upsurge of consciousness; it is "cosubstantial" with the latter, and not something to be set up or endorsed in a particular act (134/144, 138/148).

2. Agency

As is well known, there are important differences between the theory of the for-itself in Part Two of *Being and Nothingness* and the theory of pure consciousness in *The Transcendence of the Ego*.[12] Sartre has apparently changed his mind on several important issues – de Coorebyter mentions contingence, liberty, temporality and the subject – from 1934 to 1943. The core of this change concerns none other than the theory of self-consciousness. In this respect, the "Introduction" to *Being and Nothingness*, with its preparatory and abstract character, comes closer – if read in isolation – to the earlier work, in its provision of a thin conception of self-consciousness, as the mere self-manifestation of a pure consciousness. Why did Sartre become dissatisfied with this account?

In a revealing passage from *War Diaries*, written in the very midst of the theoretical shift we are discussing, Sartre looks back on his theory in *The Transcendence of the Ego* and describes the supposedly pure consciousness of that book as a "consciousness-as-refuge." This pure consciousness, he writes, can be compared to the top of a tower to which one can always retreat for refuge "when its base is under attack" and from which one can look down "without blenching, albeit with eyes somewhat widened by fear" (Sartre 1983, 392/324). As Sartre goes on to note in this retrospective diagnosis, the problem lies not in the distinction between *consciousness* and *the ego* – a doctrine he continues to maintain in *Being and Nothingness* – but in the failure to distinguish between *the ego* and *the person* (Sartre 1983, 394/325). Because of this failure, pure consciousness is purified of all personal structure when it is dissociated from all contamination by the ego. This is problematic, because any notion of personal commitment then loses its grip, and with it loses any sense of personal responsibility.[13] We are left with a totally unstructured, "monstrous spontaneity" (2004, 47), which it does not even make sense to call *human* freedom.[14] By human freedom we usually

[12] See, e.g., de Coorebyter (2000, 172) and Mouillie (2000, 61-68), Gardner (2009, 13-19, 90-96).

[13] With regard to the irresponsibility made possible by the doctrine of pure consciousness, Sartre writes: "the existence of a consciousness-as-refuge allowed me to decide at will on how much seriousness to attribute my situation" (1983, 393/324).

[14] In fact, Sartre repeatedly refers to pathological forms of consciousness in *The Transcendence of the Ego* to illustrate his idea of impersonal spontaneity, which is thus indifferent to *our* conception of *human* freedom (2004, 61-62, 80-81, 83). In *War Diaries*, he then speaks of "the passage from absolute freedom to disarmed and human freedom"

understand a *controlled* spontaneity that is able to own up to its action, commit itself to a project, and thereby develop a conception of itself as a person with a more or less stable volitional structure. Only such a (self-)consciousness could be held accountable, in its own eyes and in those of the other, because only such a (self-)consciousness – but not a pure consciousness – *has* something for which it could be held accountable, i.e., actions, projects, character traits or anything else with which it *identifies* itself.

Thus, Sartre's main reason for dissatisfaction with his early conception of pure consciousness concerns its inability to accommodate an adequate conception of *practical agency*.[15] He continues to uphold the thesis ~~in~~ *The Transcendence of the Ego* that we do not need to postulate an ~~inhabiting~~ ego to account for the unity of consciousness; for this purpose ~~alone~~, the mechanisms of self-unification intrinsic to consciousness as such are sufficient (2004, 6-7). The new insight is that these mechanisms must be such as to make possible the self-consciousness constitutive of practical agency. And for this to be possible, consciousness cannot be so pure as to be empty of any personal structure. The task of the new theory of consciousness, then, is to describe the mechanisms of self-unification that constitute *agential* self-consciousness. In view of the connection between the notions of agency, practical identity and (personal) ideal, it is no surprise that this task will involve an elaboration of the ideal-relatedness of self-consciousness.

Before proceeding with this elaboration, it is worth pausing for a moment to highlight the distinctiveness of the Sartrean approach to agential self-consciousness by contrasting it with a contemporary approach that seems similar in many respects. I have in mind the "minimal self" theory proposed by Dan Zahavi and Shaun Gallagher. At least in the case of Zahavi, this proposal is directly influenced by his "thin" reading of Sartre's conception of pre-reflective self-consciousness. The minimal self

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(1983, 393/324), which corresponds to the shift from pure consciousness to consciousness with a personal structure.

[15] Sartre is not unaware of this problem in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, but he is content to note the problem and leave it at that. In the very short section on "the constitution of actions," he writes: "I shall not be attempting to establish a distinction between active consciousness and simply spontaneous consciousness. Furthermore, it seems to me that this is one of the most difficult problems in phenomenology" (2004, 26). One of the motivations for his change from 1934 to 1943 is the realization that this problem admits of no satisfactory solution within his early framework.

theory claims that this thin version of self-consciousness, in the sense of phenomenal consciousness, suffices for a "basic sense of egocentricity" (Zahavi 1999, 144, 110). In other words, phenomenal consciousness is not just givenness *for itself* but also and at the same time givenness *to me*: "rather than speaking simply of phenomenal what-it-is-likeness, it is more accurate to speak of what-it-is-like-for-me-ness" (Zahavi 2014, 88)[16].

However, as the minimal-self theorists are quick to acknowledge, phenomenal consciousness by itself cannot account for the agential (and normative) character of practical consciousness. In fact, Zahavi and Gallagher turn this inability into the very definition of the minimal self. That is, the minimal self is circumscribed in terms of a base-level self-awareness that excludes any sense of agency. This base-level self-awareness is specified in terms of the sense of ownership (SO), as distinguished from the sense of agency (SA) (Gallagher 2000). SO can be defined as "the sense that I am the one who is undergoing an experience" (Gallagher 2000), or as "the sense that it is I who am experiencing the movement or thought" (Gallagher 2005, 173). SA, on the other hand, is "the sense that I am the one who is the initiator or source of the action" (Gallagher 2000). While these modalities of experience are normally intertwined, Gallagher argues that they come apart in a number of situations, such as involuntary movements, unbidden thoughts, and schizophrenic thought insertion. These particular experiences in which SA falls away but SO remains in some form allow us to identify SO, as opposed to SA, as "the invariable dimension of first-personal givenness" of experiential phenomena, that is, as the minimal or core self (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 204). Zahavi proposes on this basis a "multi-dimensional account" of the self that combines SO as the fundamental experiential dimension with various higher dimensions involving SA, such as the normative and narrative dimensions (Zahavi 2014, 88-94).

The minimal-self theory thus adopts a different strategy than the Sartrean approach (in my interpretation) to agential self-consciousness. For Sartre, the inability of his early theory to accommodate this feature of our experience is the decisive reason for a major modification of his theory, while for the minimal-self theorists the same inability is turned into an asset, as it circumscribes the scope of the minimal self. The modified Sartrean theory includes experiential self-manifestation as a non-independent moment of agential self-consciousness, while the

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[16] See also 48-50.

minimal-self theory locates the experiential self and the agential self in different dimensions in an envisioned "multi-dimensional" account. In my view, the Sartrean approach has the advantage of promising a more integrative conception of self-consciousness. In the alternative proposal, on the other hand, the relation between different "dimensions" of the self, e.g., between SO and SA, is rather obscure. It is acknowledged that in normal experience, SO and SA "coincide" (Zahavi 2005, 6). What does this coincidence mean? Is it simply the simultaneous presence of two senses of self on different dimensions? This does not seem right. It seems that we have, in normal conscious life, only one first-person perspective, not an experiential perspective and a normative perspective that happen to coincide. In contrast to the minimal-self theories, the Sartrean approach takes the normal integrity of our first-person perspective as its primary data.[17]

Sartre's theory of practical agency is laid out in his discussion of freedom in Chapter One, Part Four of *Being and Nothingness*. As he clearly states, this discussion is not so much a contribution to the metaphysical problem of determinism and free will as an essay in the philosophy of action.[18] His goal is to "make explicit the structures contained in the idea of action" (1943, 508/567), a term he uses only to refer to free action, that is, full-fledged action that expresses the actor's intention and embodies her sense of agency. Sartre's theory begins with a variation on the traditional analysis of the causal antecedents of an action in terms of reasons and passions. Following the tradition, he distinguishes between the "*motif*" and "*mobile*" of an action, which Richmond translates as "motive"

[17] Admittedly, it also has its drawbacks compared to the minimal self approach. In fact, its advantage and its drawback come from the same source. If its advantage is that it better accounts for the integrity of our normal first-person perspective, its drawback is that it becomes more difficult to account for its dissociation in abnormal and pathological cases. After all, the distinction between SO and SA has at least the appearance of providing a neat solution to the puzzles posed by these phenomena. However, the correct phenomenological interpretation of these phenomena seems to be a topic that is still up for grabs. Ratcliffe, for example, offers a different interpretation, claiming that the phenomenon of thought-insertion involves "experiencing thought contents as alien, rather than thinking" and that the person suffering from thought insertion "is not mistaken about whether she is the owner and/or agent of her thinking" (Ratcliffe 2017, 50). De Haan and de Bruin (2010) offer yet another, according to which the schizophrenic patients lack not only SA but also SO.

[18] In his eyes, the traditional debate of free will is framed in inadequate terms and based on misguided assumptions. It is better to set it aside than to continue it (Sartre 1943, 508/567, 511/573, 530/594).

and "reason," respectively. "*Motif*" is Sartre's term for "the reason for an act, i.e., the set of rational considerations that justify it" (522/585). Sartre's conception of what constitutes the reason for an action, however, is narrower than most contemporary views of the matter. For him, reason is of an intellectual nature; it is basically the representation of an objective state of affairs, or, in his words, "the contemporary state of things, as it is disclosed to consciousness" (524/587). In other words, it corresponds to the "belief" component of the belief-desire analysis of action.

Sartre, however, does not have a single term that corresponds to the "desire" component. Nevertheless, he shares one of the considerations that leads contemporary philosophers to see belief and "desire" as jointly constituting the reason for action: a belief never causes and justifies a behavior by itself; it does so only in conjunction with some fact about the motivational condition of the actor. Sartre expresses this insight by saying that reason, far from determining an action by itself, "only appears in and through the project of an action" (Sartre 1943, 524/588). A consciousness grasps certain objective facts and relations as reasons for its action only in light of the ends it gives itself. Now the end of an action is not identical with what Sartre calls its motive (*mobile*), although the two are essentially related. The end or goal of an action is often, though not always, a representation of a future state of the world. A motive, on the other hand, is not a representation, but the affective manner in which consciousness "hangs on to" its ends and projects (525/588). It is the lived non-thetic consciousness that correlates with the projection of an end, which in turn reveals an objective state of affairs as a reason for action. Thus, in Sartre's example of Clovis' conversion to Christianity, the king's ambition is the subjective motive correlative to the project/end of the conquest of Gaul, in light of which the state of the Roman Church (its power over the people of Gaul, etc.) is revealed as a reason for his conversion (523-525/585-589).

The analysis in terms of reason-end-motive constitutes the beginning of a theory of free action. For a behavior to count as a free action, i.e., for it to express intention and embody agency, it must be done for reasons for the sake of some ends, which in turn are correlated with lived motives. However, Sartre is not satisfied with such an answer, because the connection between freedom or agency, on the one hand, and reason-end-motive, on the other, is still to be established. Thus, "the essential question" "lies beyond" this complex organization; "we ought to ask how a reason (or a motive) can be constituted as such" (Sartre 1943,

512/574). Now, for Sartre, reasons are constituted as such, i.e., as that which *justifies* my behavior and makes it an action expressive of my intention, only in relation to *my* ends and motives.[19] The essential question, then, is really one of the constitution of the motivated projection of ends *as mine*. Sartre's general approach to this question is clearly inherited from the Kantian tradition (see Baiasu 2011, 105-118). The motivated projection of ends is constituted as mine – and thus as the determinant component of free action – by virtue of "autonomy" or "self-determination" (Sartre 1943, 556/623, 563/631). For behavior to qualify as free action, it is not enough to act for reasons informed by ends; one must also be self-determining in the projection of ends.[20]

The challenge, however, is to flesh out the relevant sense of autonomy or self-determination.[21] Obviously, the self-determination in question cannot be another free action consisting in the free projection of ends, for fear of infinite regress. Moreover, since self-determination is an enabling condition of free action, it cannot consist in adding something more to a free action. A passage from *War Diaries* expresses this insight with all the clarity one could wish for:

> [A] voluntary act – just like consciousness, which must be consciousness of itself – should itself be willed. … So will, like consciousness, referred back upon itself. And, as with consciousness, unless we are to fall into

[19] To this extent, Sartre holds an "internalist" view of (practical) reasons – to speak in terms of the contemporary terminology due to Bernard Williams (1981, 101-113).

[20] In contemporary philosophy of action, there is a strand of thinking – initiated by Harry Frankfurt – that makes basically the same point. These philosophers claim that the standard belief-desire model of action is insufficient, for it fails to single out and to account for the full-blooded human action that is expressive of free agency (Frankfurt 1989, 69-79, 47-57; Velleman 2015, 11-23, 100-107). The more Kantian-minded among them then appeals to (some version of) autonomy as the constitutive element of free action overlooked by the standard model (e.g., Velleman 2005, 179-186).

[21] Poellner (2015) distinguishes between two versions of Sartre's conception of self-determination. He considers the weaker version to be "extremely insightful and important," while the stronger version is judged as "deeply problematic" (249). What I have presented in the preceding paragraphs corresponds to Poellner's weaker version (250-251). The stronger version adds the further thesis that consciousness, being self-determining, cannot experience itself "as determined by any of its intentional objects" (250), which implies that the apparently receptive dimension of our experience is itself "fully determined by a deeper, pure spontaneity" (252). I agree that the stronger version, as thus specified, is overly voluntaristic and deeply problematic. But I think Poellner's distinction misses a nuance: Sartre's actual view goes further than the weak version without endorsing the strong version. For Sartre, self-determination is ontologically accounted for by the original ideal-relatedness that is intrinsic to self-consciousness. This original ideal is indeed not external (it is not an intentional object), but neither is it arbitrarily posited.

a whole reflexive series of wiling and willed wills, we must grant that this reference back upon itself corresponds to the infrastructure of will. (Sartre 1983, 48-49/33-34)

Sartre points out the parallel between the self-determination of practical consciousness and the self-manifestation of experiential consciousness: both are characterized by internal reflexivity. This is not to deny that practical self-determination contains something more than experiential self-manifestation, which he indeed affirms in the continuation of the quoted passage. It is to be expected, then, that his account of self-determination consists in a further elaboration of the scheme introduced in section 1.

In section 1, we have seen how the internal reflexivity of experiential self-manifestation can be accounted for in terms of the ideal-relatedness of consciousness. What is at issue there is the horizon of givenness of the ideal, as that in the presence of which consciousness feels itself to be lacking *of itself*. Only this formal feature is specified; the content of the ideal is left indeterminate, as is the relationship between consciousness and its ideal.

Now, in action, consciousness is not just aware of itself – passively – as lacking in relation to its ideal; rather, it is actively engaged in projecting ends in light of that ideal. Indeed, it is only in action that the ideal-relatedness of consciousness comes to its own, and we realize that our previous discussion has been operating at an abstract level. For an ideal manifests itself not primarily in its capacity to reflect its image back to consciousness, but in its power to engage consciousness in the active projection and pursuit of ends. Now, and this is the central idea in Sartre's philosophy of free action, it is precisely by being projected in the light of my ideal that particular ends are constituted as mine. Thus, to determine oneself to project such and such an end is to project the end in light of one's ideal.[22] The ideal-relatedness of practical consciousness

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[22] According to Sartre's theory of action, as we have seen, ends are always projected in certain affective states, which provide motives for the projection and the subsequent pursuit of ends. On this view, it is not essential for an end to be explicitly formulated as a *representation* of a future state of the world (though the possibility of such a formulation may be essential). As the intentional correlate of a lived affective state, the end can be had in a more or less inchoate way. Consequently, projecting an end in light of one's ideal does not necessarily involve entertaining a thought about the objective relation between the end and one's ideal, nor, for that matter, an explicit representation of the ideal as such. In particular, it does not necessarily involve an objectifying assessment of how one falls short and what one must do to close the gap. Both the ideal and the "in-light-of" relation can be lived without being represented.

thus clarifies the puzzling feature of self-determination that is the decisive component of free action.

However, it might be objected that the same question can be asked of the ideal as was asked of ends and motives. If it is their relation to the ideal that constitutes ends and motives as the ends and motives of my free actions, then it might be asked how the ideal as such is constituted. What makes it the case that an ideal is really mine and has the right kind of motivating force for free actions that count as mine? Sartre's theory has an answer to this question that avoids a potential infinite regress because of the intimate relationship between self-consciousness and its ideal. The relation to its ideal comes to self-consciousness not as something external, but as the necessary moment that makes its internal reflexivity possible. Thus, a concrete ideal is constituted as mine and with the right kind of motivating force when it expresses the essential ideal-relatedness of (practical) self-consciousness.

As we have seen, this essential ideal is described as "the absolute being of the self" (Sartre 1943, 137/147). What does the attribute of absoluteness amount to? We raised this question in the last section, and now we can venture an answer. "The absolute being of the self" is the ideal in light of which the projection of ends is constituted as self-determining. We aspire to self-determination because we are contingent, vulnerable creatures formed by and exposed to the causal forces of the world. It is not up to me where in the world and what kind of family and society I am born into. I am not the ground (either in the sense of reason or in the sense of cause) of my own existence, nor the ground of the physiological makeup of my body and the drives, inclinations, and affective states of my mind. We aspire to self-determination out of a deep sense of our own contingency. Of course, self-determination cannot deliver us from contingency, but we aspire to it nonetheless, as if it were the closest we could come to the ideal of an existent that is beyond the reach of contingency because it is the ground of itself. Sartre's proposal, then, is that ends are constituted as self-determined by being projected (and then pursued) in light of the ideal of self-grounding. "The absolute being of the self" is the self as the ground of itself.

3. Normativity

This Sartrean account of self-determination bears some *prima facie* resemblance to Christine Korsgaard's position in *The Sources of Normativity*. A brief comparison will help to highlight the distinctiveness of

the Sartrean view. In both theories, an action is autonomous and expressive of free agency when it is chosen in light of ideal(s) that are inseparable from the actor's self-consciousness. For Korsgaard, the ideals are embedded in the actor's self-conception, or the description "under which you value yourself" (Korsgaard 1996, 101). It is our self-conception or personal ideals[23] that "determine which of our impulses will count as reasons" (and obligations) and thereby provide us with "a principle or way of choosing" (129, 100). Only by having such a principle do we find a successful answer to the existential question posed by our reflective nature. In other words, the reflective nature of human consciousness gives us the task of being a free agent, and we can only live up to this task by committing ourselves to personal ideals.

There are also important differences between Korsgaard's position and my interpretation of Sartre. Arguably the most important and fundamental of these is how they think about the relation between reflection and pre-reflective life. For Sartre, as we have seen, the relation to the ideal of self-grounding is a necessary moment of *pre-reflective* consciousness, which is thereby both present to itself and self-determining. For Korsgaard, on the other hand, personal ideals are our answer to the question posed by *reflection*; autonomy, acting for reason, and free agency all begin with reflection.

This difference has implications for the nature of the ideal-relatedness that each philosopher holds to be responsible for autonomy. For Korsgaard, self-conceptions and personal ideals function in a reflective situation, as the perspective for our reflective valuation and endorsement. They provide us with the principle of choosing and thus with reasons for action, because they give us something like a volitional nature, i.e., personal boundaries that cannot be violated for fear of losing integrity and identity.[24] Thus, they derive their authority from our tendency to promote our ideal and our fear of losing our identity. In the Sartrean account, by contrast, the ideal need not be an object of reflective endorsement

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[23] Korsgaard does not explicitly emphasize the ideal nature of self-conception or practical identity. However, any self-conception will yield implications about what it is for us to excel from this perspective and thus entail a personal ideal. And when Korsgaard describes self-conceptions as descriptions under which we value ourselves, she makes it clear that they do function as ideals to which we aspire. This does not imply that they are not true descriptions of us. When it comes to practical identity, it is not self-contradictory to aspire to what one in some sense already is.

[24] "For to violate them is to lose your integrity and so your identity, and to no longer be who you are […]. It is to be for all practical purposes dead or worse than dead." (Korsgaard 1996, 102).

and valuation in order to play its role. As Sartre puts it, "it arises at the same time as consciousness, in its heart"; consciousness and its ideal "make a couple" (Sartre 1943, 134/144). It functions as an un-thematized horizon of our pre-reflective experience, and it manifests itself in a sense of lack that propels consciousness forward in the self-determining projection of ends. It does not derive its authority from our reflective attitudes; rather, it owes its power to our ontological finitude, which Sartre understands in terms of the character of lack inherent in self-consciousness.

While this comparison highlights the distinctive features of Sartre's view of self-determination, it also shows how far this view is from our everyday understanding of the ideal and its place in practical life. For in its ordinary sense, the ideal is indeed something we identify with and emulate when we reflect on our lives, and it involves the desire (and the corresponding attempt) to reflectively shape ourselves accordingly. To speak, as we have done so far, of the ideal and our relation to it in pre-reflective life is necessarily to do some violence to our normal way of speaking and thinking. It is more a matter of theoretical construction than phenomenological description. This much we must admit. But the idea of the pre-reflective is itself a conceptual innovation, and arguably, theorizations of the pre-reflective self-consciousness cannot avoid constructions of one kind or another. The question, then, is whether this particular construction is internally coherent and theoretically enlightening.

There is some reason to think that an account of practical agency and normativity must operate at a level deeper than reflection. For an exclusively reflective theory such as Korsgaard's seems to have the problematic consequence that pre-reflective life is seen as governed by instinct alone and therefore devoid of normativity and agency. It leads, in other words, to a sharp divide between reflection and the pre-reflective, and everything characteristically human is attributed to the former. This picture seems phenomenologically implausible: it seems to introduce agency and normativity one step too late. If this is the case, then we need a theory that accounts for agency and normativity at the pre-reflective level.

Sartre, of course, is not the only philosopher to have offered such an account. Before him, Heidegger is also credited with providing a similar one (Crowell 2007). A comparison with Heidegger will again help to advance our analysis, for, as I will show, Sartre's position can be read as emerging from a critical engagement with Heidegger.

A promising place to look in Heidegger for an account of normativity at the pre-reflective level is his rich account of our immersion in the

everyday world which appears to be permeated by norms. Thus, our relation to the tools of our environment (*Umwelt*) is guided by the pragmatic significance of these tools, their role in the totality of involvements (*Bewandtnisganzheit*). An as-structure is inherent in the way tools show themselves. This as-structure is not a product of judgment, but is already present in our pre-predicative engagement in *the space of significance* that he calls the world. Moreover, my understanding of the pragmatic significance of tools is inseparable from my sense of the "point" of my dealing with such tools (i.e., the *Worumwillen*), which in turn is inseparable from my *self*-understanding or practical identity.

From the perspective of normativity, however, there seems to be something missing from this colorful account of our pre-predicative engagement with the world from Division One of *Being and Time*. As Tugendhat (1970) has famously objected, the normative distinction between truth and falsity does not seems to have a grip here. Dasein's primordial disclosedness, in which the pragmatic "as" is rooted, does not seem to stand in any normative relation to falsity.

In response to this challenge, Crowell mobilizes the existential themes from Division Two of *Being and Time* to develop an interpretation that highlights the normative constitution of Dasein. In the experience of the call of conscience, the pragmatic as-structure of everyday Dasein is suspended, our practical identity breaks down, and the web of significance withdraws. Nevertheless, it is precisely in this withdrawal that a structural modification of Dasein occurs. There is a splitting of the ego, an emergence of a genuine first person over against the breakdown of socially mediated practical identities (Crowell 2001, 2008). In the silence of the call, I understand my original guiltiness, which has nothing to do with the transgression of given laws. Such guiltiness is spontaneously given, and then actively assumed, as "the predicate of the 'I am'" (Heidegger 2010, 270). This guiltiness means nothing other than the fundamental situation of having to assume responsibility and to account for myself. Thus, by making possible the genuine first person, conscience is also "Dasein's opening to the normative as such" (Crowell 2008, 266).

This interpretation masterfully locates practical agency and normativity in *Being and Time*, but it seems to have the unfortunate consequence that the experience of the inauthentic Dasein is not really first-personal (see Crowell 2001, 437). That is, her behavior is merely *in accordance with* norms but not *in light of* norms, and in this respect almost indistinguishable from the purposive behavior of animals (Crowell 2007, 57).

This is problematic, because it seems to contradict something else we want to say about inauthenticity. Inauthenticity, we want to say, as a choice that Dasein makes of herself, must be as inescapably first-person as authentic existence (see Golob 2020).

From a Sartrean perspective, this problem arises from Heidegger's decision in *Being and Time* to eliminate the first-person perspective in Division One, in order then to reestablish it in Division Two. It is precisely this methodological decision that Sartre takes aim at when he writes that "one cannot first eliminate the dimension of consciousness, even if one then later restores it" (Sartre 1943, 128/136). A Heideggerian might respond that Division Two merely *makes explicit* the first-person perspective of everyday Dasein without first bringing it about. From a Sartrean perspective, this is true, but not enough. What is still needed is an account of *how* the first-person perspective that is made explicit in the breakdown of all practical identity, in the form of the "guilty" singularity, is nevertheless implicit in the experience of everyday Dasein, immersed in her pragmatic world and secure in her identity.

I suggest that Sartre's ontological construction of (self-)consciousness as lack is intended to accomplish precisely this task. In Sartre's appropriation of the existential themes, the revelation of one's singular first-person perspective in anxiety is "freedom's *reflective* self-apprehension" (Sartre 1943, 77/79). It is reflective insofar as "it is mediation," "arising from the negation of the calls made upon me by the world" (77/79). Similarly, to predicate guiltiness of the "I am" is to *reflectively* grasp the groundless thrownness of my existence and to *reflectively* assume the responsibility of "elevat[ing] factic grounds into the possibilized space of justifying reasons" (Crowell 2008, 268). To be sure, what is thus *reflectively* revealed in limit-situations cannot be present in precisely this form in *pre-reflective* experience. But neither is pre-reflective experience simply mindless immersion in the world. For Sartre, it is a fundamental insight of Heidegger's philosophy to have taken such experiences as *Angst* and the call of conscience as a guiding thread in his exploration of our first-person perspective.[25] His own task is to construct a theory of pre-reflective self-consciousness with this guiding thread in hand.

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[25] Indeed, the whole discussion of the phenomena of nothingness in Part One of *Being and Nothingness* is meant as a "guiding thread" (Sartre 1943, 115/121) for the ontological determination of (self-)consciousness as lack in Part Two of the book.

At the pre-reflective level, I do not grasp myself thematically *as* being guilty, or *as* the bare possibility of taking over being a ground. Nonetheless, I am aware of myself *as myself*. As we have seen, Sartre accounts for this internal reflexivity by construing pre-reflective self-consciousness as lack. Now, this move is made possible precisely by his taking the Heideggerian call of conscience as a guiding thread. To take it as a guiding thread is to see guiltiness as the reflective thematization of a certain pre-reflective awareness of oneself *as oneself*. At the pre-reflective level, this as-structure is not explicated as guiltiness, but lived in a sense of groundlessness, of lacking-ground.

One is tempted to use the adverbial form and say that it is lived "*ground-lackingly*." But adverbialism pure and simple is not enough for our purpose. From a Sartrean perspective, to live oneself "lackingly" in the self-transcending pursuit of one's possibility (the project of writing a book, for instance) is fundamentally different from the bodily malaise that is "painingly" suffered in the background while one is engaged in writing. The former pertains to transcendence, the latter to facticity. Sartre may be happy to endorse an adverbial interpretation of the second (see Sartre 1943, 396/444), but if the difference between the two is to be maintained, as it must be for Sartre, then something more needs be said about the first case. We already know how Sartre construes this "something more": the "oneself-as-lacking-ground" is lived in the haunting horizon of the ideal of oneself as self-grounded, "the absolute being of the self." I am pre-reflectively aware of myself as lacking ground insofar as I live my conscious life in light of an ideal of myself as self-grounded.

As with the Heideggerian call of conscience, this (formal) ideal inherent in self-consciousness is not meant to be the ground of any specific norm, but to account for the for-itself's "opening to the normative as such," to borrow Crowell's (2008, 266) apt phrase. Thus, concrete norms, as far as their contentfulness is concerned, are by no means created by consciousness, neither by its reflective, deliberate choice nor by its pre-reflective, fundamental choice. As Poellner convincingly shows, a voluntaristic theory of norms and choice "is not forced upon us by the Sartrean texts" (Poellner 2012, 226). Rather, Sartre accepts a limited form of the Schelerian phenomenology of value.[26] Like Scheler, he

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[26] Sartre writes in *War Diaries*: "Reading Scheler made me understand that there existed values" (Sartre 1984, 88). On the relation between Sartre and Scheler on value, see Poellner (2012), esp. 227-230.

thinks that contentful norms and values are experientially given in our emotional encounter with the world (Sartre 2002, 56[27]). However, Sartre thinks (and here he parts way with Scheler) that the *normative force* of such quasi-perceived norms is something that needs to be accounted for in a way that goes beyond an analysis of emotion as the quasi-perception of value. This, in turn, is a consequence of his taking anxiety as a guiding thread of his analysis. For in anxiety, the normative force of mundane objects is suspended while their contentfulness remains. Sartre takes this to mean that the *claim* that worldly objects make on us cannot be normatively effective without our committing ourselves and thereby binding ourselves through our commitment. And it is the structure of this *self-binding* that Sartre seeks to explicate with his theory of the ideal-relatedness of pre-reflective self-consciousness.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have argued that what Sartre calls pre-reflective self-consciousness cannot be limited to experiential self-manifestation, but includes agential and normative aspects as well, which are non-independent moments of an integral phenomenon. In other words, the agential self and the normative self are not layers over and above the experiential self. In Sartre's model, they are all accounted for by the model of (self-)consciousness as lack, in correlation with its ideal of self-grounding.

This result, which originates as a theory of self-consciousness, has important ethical consequences. Indeed, with this ontology that regards (self-)consciousness as intrinsically ideal-oriented, "we are already within the domain of morality" (Sartre 1943, 721/810). It can, therefore, legitimately be called a moral ontology. And it immediately opens up to ethical questions. Does the ideal of self-grounding necessarily (or spontaneously, or naturally) translate into an object of desire that is doomed to remain forever unsatisfied? When translated into an object of impossible desire, how does it relate to (or interfere with or distort) our desires for and pursuit of concrete and realizable ends, which are autonomously projected only in the light of this ideal? How does this self-seeking desire affect our dealings with other people? Does it lead to a kind of moral narcissism? What are the chances of freeing ourselves of this desire, and

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[27] See Poellner 2020, 544.

how? I consider it a strength of Sartre's theory of self-consciousness that it opens up these "moral perspectives," but further exploration of the topic must be reserved for another occasion.

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