

SARTRE'S POSTCARTESIAN ONTOLOGY: ON
NEGATION AND EXISTENCE

ABSTRACT

This article maintains that Jean-Paul Sartre's early masterwork, *Being and Nothingness*, is primarily concerned with developing an original approach to the being of consciousness. Sartre's ontology resituates the Cartesian *cogito* in a complete system that provides a new understanding of negation and a dynamic interpretation of human existence. The article examines the role of consciousness, temporality and the relationship between self and others in the light of Sartre's arguments against "classical" rationalism. The conclusion suggests that Sartre's departure from modern foundationalism has "postmodern" implications that emerge in the areas of ontology, existential analytics and the ethics of human freedom.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (*L'être et le néant*, 1943) responds in decisive ways to the Cartesian legacy in developing an original ontology that underlies the philosopher's commitment to existentialism. In arguing that Sartre is in dialogue with the rationalist tradition, we shall maintain that he is a "postcartesian," not primarily in the minimal sense of coming after René Descartes, but rather in the stronger sense of responding to the philosophical challenge of his "classical" predecessor. This stronger claim also means that Sartre sometimes adopts an adversarial relationship to Cartesian ontology. Our approach to Sartre's attempt to address the question of being will allow us to examine four integral concerns, namely, (i) the structure of consciousness as conscious being, (ii) the nature of temporality, (iii) the role of the *cogito* in clarifying the existence of other persons and (iv) the significance of freedom to "postmodern" accounts of the modern condition. These four concerns will be interrelated in a way that argues in favor of Sartre's distinctive contribution to existential phenomenology.

I

While early commentators on Sartre's work did not hesitate to discuss the influence of Descartes on *Being and Nothingness*, we might begin by reconsidering this influence from two different standpoints. First, Sartre's early philosophy

is often described as a philosophy of consciousness because of the role that it assigns to conscious reflection in mental life. To the degree that this interpretation can be sustained, Sartre's work in phenomenology would seem to be Cartesian in the classical sense. Is it not the case that Sartre dismisses the Freudian notion of an unconscious as inherently self-contradictory? Moreover, Sartre's early rejection of determinism would presumably prevent him from easily accepting the economic orientation of a philosophy like Marxism. An emphasis on consciousness in philosophy would seem to go along with methodological individualism, which would preclude the construction of synthetic concepts like class and social interest that perform a special role in Marxist analyses. Finally, and in a different vein, Sartre's rationalist tendencies might elevate conscious thought in a manner that would foreclose any serious dialogue with religious traditions. The principle that all beliefs must be grounded in evidence in order to be valid, which is implicit if not explicit in Cartesian philosophy, seems to disallow a respect for the unknown that makes religious life possible.

However, these apparent limitations would only become binding if Sartre had adopted Cartesian rationalism as a complete system of knowledge. In truth, while Sartre is concerned with the epistemological status of knowledge claims, the approach to the world that he adopts begins with an analysis of consciousness, rather than with the question of validation through evidence. As a phenomenologist, Sartre contends that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, which means that it exhibits intentions in its engagement with the world. Moreover, consciousness is irreducible to objective knowledge insofar as it always presupposes a pre-reflective awareness of its own activity. What this means is that my consciousness of a given entity necessarily carries along with it the awareness that I am conscious of the object intended. To say this much is to propose that consciousness exhibits a tripartite structure, instead of upholding a more restrictive epistemological dualism. Knowledge would occur in a manner that sustained a narrow opposition between knower and known if it did not involve an implicit awareness of what I know. However, Sartre prevents us from accepting an *impersonal* theory of consciousness in specifying how consciousness embraces self-consciousness. I am present to myself in being conscious of the object intended. Nonetheless, presence to self should not be confused with self-knowledge: what separates these two concepts not only helps us distinguish Sartrean phenomenology from Cartesian rationalism but it also points to a crucial *non-objective* aspect of consciousness itself.

Sartre clarifies this non-objective component in his analysis of how consciousness differs from being as such. In discussing how objectifying intentions are empty ones, Sartre maintains that consciousness produces itself "as

a revelation of a being which it is not and which gives itself as already existing when consciousness reveals it."¹ However, the division that occurs within consciousness cannot be understood in terms of a simple relation between subject and object. This division presupposes the attempt to lay claim to being that occurs in every objective experience. In criticizing a foundational concept of reason, Sartre argues that pre-reflective awareness is what provides relative security to conscious thought. Cartesian rationalism falls short of its goals when it confuses knowledge with ontology. In taking up this criticism, however, Sartre does not identify his own position with relativism, since consciousness is an experience that cannot be limited in this way. His quarrel with Descartes does not involve the affirmation of a lesser knowledge: "The ontological error of Cartesian rationalism is not to have seen that if the absolute is defined by the primacy of existence over essence, it cannot be conceived as a substance."²

Sartre's divergence from Descartes is nowhere clearer than in the role that negation performs in the phenomenon of consciousness as considered in its everyday modalities. The difference between two entities can be grasped in terms of an external negation. Hence the subject, observing that the chair is not an inkwell, judges two objects to be mutually distinct. However, Sartre contends that the subject who reflects on a given entity is present to a self that remains impossible to identify in substantial terms: "The *self* therefore represents an ideal distance within the immanence of the subject in relation to himself, a way of *not being his own coincidence*," which means that negation can be grasped as an internal procedure that occurs within the phenomenon of consciousness.³ Hence, when Sartre contends that the *cogito* is his point of departure, he is really contending that a movement beyond the confines of Cartesian rationalism is necessary before the "structure" of consciousness can be appraised. It does no good to try to eliminate presence to self as a mere intrusion or as the inessential aspect of a cognitive process for the simple reason that consciousness cannot be identified with itself in a meaningful way. Consciousness is never (mere) consciousness; we cannot claim that consciousness simply maps onto objective reality when a prereflective dimension complicates its interface with the world. This prereflective dimension refers back to a subject, but it cannot be identified as either subject or predicate. Thus, Sartre's notion of the self brings into play the shifting "space" within which internal negation is carried out in every act of consciousness.

Sartre's phenomenological analysis of internal negation casts light on his unique conception of nothingness, which should not be confused with rival conceptions developed by G. W. F. Hegel and Martin Heidegger. Hegel's dialectical logic attempts to subordinate nothingness to an ongoing movement from abstract to concrete, thus testifying to the power of the negative as what

generates change itself. However, in opposing being and nothingness as the most abstract moments in a purely logical process, Hegel displaces the *cogito* as the origin of generation and also obscures the role of nothingness in psychic life. Sartre responds to this instance of logical reductionism when he calls attention to “those little pools of non-being which we encounter each instant in the depth of being.”⁴ But this metaphorical description should not be restricted to the domain of empirical psychology. Sartre’s deeper argument against Hegel can be related to the way that the *cogito* is evoked as what produces nothingness, which assumes the significance of anguish whenever the self confronts its own ontological instability. In this regard, Sartre mentions that Søren Kierkegaard was the first philosopher to emphasize how anguish, rather than fear, combines a sense of object-loss with a protective concern for the self in a single upsurge of emotion. And yet, what Sartre contributes to this tradition is a strong insistence on the importance of freedom to the “meaning” of nothingness as it emerges on the margins of the *cogito*, which had been repositioned as the site of anguish itself.

We are now in a much better position to compare Sartre and Descartes as ontologists who, in different ways, confront the relationship between knowledge and being. Sartre takes up the example of Descartes in discussing how the *cogito* assumes a reflective role in early modern rationalism. In standard accounts of Descartes, the being who doubts is hard to separate from the idea of perfection. Sartre notes that, in the Third Meditation, Descartes uncovers a cleavage or lack of being “that is more revealing than the scholastic terminology that he employs in reissuing earlier versions of the ontological argument.”⁵ What this means for Sartre is that, when indicating this basic discrepancy, Descartes at least suggests that the being who doubts cannot be its own foundation. Sartre presents this interpretation of Descartes only after he has pointed out that a purely methodological conception of doubt is ontologically problematic. For this reason, the opening of this discrepancy does not reinforce dualism but helps us understand the instability of the *cogito* from a new standpoint. By placing the *cogito* in this broader context, we help demonstrate that Sartre’s own thought could never be assimilated in an unambiguous manner to a dualistic philosophy of consciousness.

It remains to be explained more exhaustively why Sartre’s philosophy is only inadequately described as dualistic. Certainly Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s later criticisms of Sartre, which are based on the role that the “for-itself” (*pour-soi*) and “in-itself” (*en-soi*) perform in his philosophy, rest on the assumption that an oppositional framework runs through his early work and ultimately prevents him from performing a synthesis of the social.⁶ While Sartre’s early position strongly depends on a phenomenology of consciousness, we have seen that his departure from Cartesian rationalism allows him to identify

the prereflective with self-consciousness, and that self-consciousness involves presence to self, rather than self-grounding in the foundational sense. Hence consciousness involves a "structure" in which presence to self testifies to an ontological awareness that accompanies any encounter with the world. When examined from a somewhat different standpoint, Sartre also contends that the non-conscious in-itself in attempting to found itself can only introduce reflectivity into its being and therefore ceases to be self-identical at the exact moment that it undergoes nihilation: "The for-itself corresponds then to an expanding de-structuring of the in-itself, and the in-itself is nihilated and absorbed in its attempt to found itself."⁷ What Sartre calls "facticity" is a remnant of being that can only remind the for-itself that it lacks ontological justification. It would seem, therefore, that the for-itself and the in-itself are not mutually exclusive terms but related notions and operate in a way that should caution us against interpreting them as two detachable sides of a binary opposition.

In truth, Sartre's complete rejection of the metaphysical idea that the subject can be detached from the world is what distances him from traditional dualism and qualifies his relationship to most philosophies of consciousness. His early work, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (*La transcendance de l'ego*, 1936–37), is based on the radical gesture of placing the ego in the world as one object among others. Hence, in this early essay, Sartre already turns away from the "classical" phenomenological notion of a Transcendental Ego as the seat of consciousness. This does not mean, however, that Sartre conceives of the subject as merely indifferent to an ego over which it presides as a kind of reflective agent. Consciousness is present to a self that is distinct from an ego, just as the movement of consciousness is what allows existence to acquire personal meaning. In Sartre's phenomenology, the self does not substitute for the subject as a new inhabitant of vacant space; on the contrary, "it is an ideal, a limit" that offers consciousness a reason or motive, without supplying it with an ultimate standpoint on being-in-the-world.⁸

What might seem to be of minor importance becomes crucial when Sartre develops his own concept of "world" as complementary to selfness. Heidegger's phenomenological concept of world was presented in *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*) as an advance over Descartes, whose subject cannot constitute a totality that remains external to it.⁹ Sartre, however, shows how a new understanding of the *cogito* can assist in the task of clarifying the nature of a world that is either remembered or always in the process of being constituted. In attempting to satisfy any present desire, I move toward the world as it is retained in some particular instance that haunts self-consciousness. To the degree that it is my own, therefore, I can say that "the world is a fugitive structure, always present, a structure which I live."¹⁰ The evanescent relationship

between self and world indicates the role of time in presenting the for-itself with distinct possibilities for being.

II

Sartre's view of the self as situated in time also argues that *Being and Nothingness* must be read in terms of the on-going development of phenomenology, which involves a re-examination of how time itself has been interpreted philosophically. The importance of temporality to Heidegger's philosophical project can be traced back to his work with Husserl and might be specified as an attempt to radicalize what was already implicit in early phenomenology. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger makes some headway toward developing the thesis that the question of time requires a critical overview of modern philosophy before it can be freed from the legacies of metaphysics. In this regard, both Descartes and Kant serve as key figures in an analysis of how different conceptions of eternity ultimately came to replace a more fundamental sense of time that permeates *Dasein* in its being-in-the-world. Heidegger's "destruction" of metaphysical time, which emerges in his incomplete survey of modern philosophy, can be read as a prelude to Sartre's confrontation with temporality in a different context. Heidegger contends that temporality provides *Dasein* with some of its most crucial features, such as finitude, an awareness of death and the need for resolve that is assumed to be the proper response to a sudden moment of vision. Does time perform an equally crucial role in Sartre's own phenomenology of consciousness?

In considering this question, we might recall how Sartre argues against Cartesian rationalism by exploring the meaning of internal negation as a phenomenon that clarifies the structure of everyday consciousness. We have seen how self-consciousness arises in terms of the prereflective, which can be theorized as the site where an internal negation is accomplished within the domain of consciousness. The broader implications of this insight help demonstrate how the for-itself constantly negates the present as it recedes into the past. Sartre contends that this event is continually disruptive so that the process of becoming cannot be conceived as separation from being. The appropriate way of grasping the phenomenon of becoming is through the vehicle of consciousness: "The bond between being and non-being can be only internal."¹¹ In opposing both Descartes and Bergson, Sartre argues that the past is neither a sequence of time that is discontinuous with the present or a plenitude that subsists without interruption. On the contrary, the past is not isolated either in being unrelated to the present or as flowing beneath the domain of conscious thought. The internal bond that brings the past closer to conscious being also complicates the way that consciousness moves from one moment to the next.

Our peculiar relation to the past can be disclosed in terms of how the for-itself and the in-itself equally engage in attempting to achieve foundational status. The for-itself seems to become its own foundation when the in-itself fails to secure being through conscious activity, but consciousness once again discovers its dependency on the in-itself when it confronts its relationship to the world. The play between these two tendencies does not allow me to imagine a form of consciousness that can simply "leap" into the future.

Hence, when applied to matters of temporal concern, the notion of internal negation either demonstrates how conscious being is immersed in being or points to a movement "beyond being" itself. First of all, internal negation cannot simply free consciousness from the past; on the contrary, it demonstrates how the past lives on, haunting the present as the re-entry of displaced contingency: "The contingency of the for-itself, this weight expressed and preserved in the very surpassing – this is *Facticity*."¹² By identifying the past with facticity, Sartre indicates how conscious being is intrinsically temporal on the level of lived experience. In a similar way, the present can be grasped as "an internal relation between the being which is present and the beings to which it is present."¹³ At the same time, this internal relation involves negation insofar as the for-itself bears witness to *not* being what it experiences in being present to being. For Sartre, this means that the so-called present is more accurately described as a mode of presence in a continual state of dissolution. Finally, the future is not an ideal state that consciousness posits as it attempts to realize itself. The future cannot be understood in the mode of a representation. It is true that the future is the "not-yet" through which the for-itself unfolds as a series of concrete possibilities. Nonetheless, the for-itself is "beyond being" because it implies an enabling distance within which consciousness can approximate presence to self.¹⁴

Sartre's argument against "classical" conceptions of the *cogito* also underlies his analysis of static temporality. Here Sartre examines how temporal succession requires an original approach to the connection between before and after. Descartes and Immanuel Kant tried to solve the problem of temporal succession by evoking a privileged standpoint on related moments. Descartes refers to the perception of God as witness to a continuous creation, whereas Kant employs the notion of synthetic unity as the basis for understanding the passage of time. Sartre contends, however, that any attempt to establish the unity of time from a non-temporal standpoint is basically in error, since "the problem is not so much to account for the total unity of its upsurge as for the intratemporal connections of before and after."¹⁵ He concurs with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz that this external viewpoint has allowed Descartes to forget the continuity of time, but he also argues against Leibniz that the relationship between before and after cannot be grasped unless both terms can be thought

as separate. Moreover, Sartre's criticism of Leibniz allows him to argue against Henri Bergson as well, who also fails to recognize that multiplicity can only be organized through a unifying act. Nonetheless, consciousness cannot provide us with the key to temporal succession when it is temporal in its being, that is to say, when consciousness is "a being outside itself."¹⁶

In examining how consciousness is necessarily outside itself in its temporal constitution, Sartre takes us on a remarkable excursion to demonstrate how the past continually haunts the mind as a vestige of what cannot be either left behind or easily accepted. The movement of temporal succession is perhaps inscribed in the nature of consciousness itself, rather than something that occurs as an external passage. The past is a necessary aspect of the for-itself because the act of surpassing implies that something has been surpassed. Sartre does not only contend that the for-itself exists as its past, but that it brings the past with it as it enters the world. The sudden appearance of consciousness is said to be "shocking" in the same way that our need to inhabit the embryo prior to birth is difficult to reconcile with embodied consciousness. Sartre refers to how the original relation between the for-itself and the in-itself can only be thought as an "absolute event" that allows the Past to be constituted in terms of consciousness.¹⁷ On the basis of this event, we are able to use the word *before* in expressing the "profound solidarity" that indicates how the for-itself and the in-itself are somehow intertwined. Sartre describes this moment in phenomenological terms: "Through birth a Past appears in the world."¹⁸ It would seem, therefore, that the *cogito* cannot separate itself from the past in a manner that would allow it to simply eliminate the past as it moves into the future.

On the other hand, Sartre also discusses the ontology of temporality as a dynamic process that demonstrates how the present includes the past in its flight from what it was. Sartre insists that the philosophical problem of change cannot be understood according to the classical model that assumes the permanent existence of entities in time. On the contrary, we should instead try to conceive of the present as a single upsurge that separates what was from what will be. The for-itself that lies at the heart of this upsurge is what allows a new present to transform the present that was into a recent past. Sartre describes this temporal phenomenon as a "global modification" because it does not merely concern the past as such but demonstrates how the present bears the past as it moves into the future.¹⁹ However, if this is in fact the case, how can we *explain* change as a dynamic occurrence? Sartre responds to this question by claiming that, once the for-itself is conceived as spontaneity, we must confront the temporality of consciousness as an irreducible aspect of its constitution. Moreover,

the act of consciousness, as it both posits and refuses its being, has ontological priority over change itself, which "is simply the relation of the material contents of the series."²⁰

Phenomenology performs a crucial role in Sartre's subsequent discussion of original as opposed to psychic temporality, just as it prepares us for the discourse of the other that constitutes one of his most important early achievements. Sartre begins this phase of his analysis by criticizing the rationalist tendency to restrict the meaning of consciousness to acts of immediate immanence. He then observes that, while reflection only bears witness on the basis of appearances, whatever is reflected-on is *altered* when it becomes the object of self-consciousness. Sartre provides a brilliant metaphor to illuminate this internal object of reflection: "It may be compared – to use one example – to a man who is writing, bent over a table, and who while writing knows that he is observed by somebody who stands behind him."²¹ Reflection, therefore, opens the possibility of an outside that informs its activity with a "meaning" that throws it off-center.²² Of course, Sartre remains committed to phenomenology: reflection is still a unified activity; however, its "historicity" can be discovered in a mode of dissociation in which both presence to self and the world reflected-on are united in consciousness.²³

Hence the ontological status of reflection provides an opening onto the relationship between the for-itself and a world that exceeds it but also suggests the possibility of a new sort of ground. Sartre considers reflection to be a failure in the ontological sense because it seeks a foundation in the mode of existence for-others. However, reflection involves negation in a manner that prevents a movement between the pure for-itself and existence for-others from being accomplished. This means that reflection cannot dispense with the reflected-on as an intermediary that establishes the basis for recognition, rather than for knowledge. Sartre returns to the example of Descartes in reminding us that methodological doubt cannot supply an ontological ground for the *cogito*: "Doubt appears on the foundation of a pre-ontological comprehension of knowing and of requirements concerning truth."²⁴ Pure reflection allows pre-ontological comprehension to emerge on the horizon of knowledge, whereas impure reflection occurs as a series of psychic states that are differently constituted. Hence pure reflection is irreducible to matters of psychology. Sartre's analysis of temporality indicates that the for-itself seeks to found itself as being-for-others, and also that this move is basically mistaken. Is it possible, nonetheless, that the relationship between consciousness and other human beings is in some sense basic to the meaning of consciousness? In order to answer this question, we must now turn to Sartre's discussion of whether or not the existence of the Other is crucial to the way that consciousness functions in the world.

III

We have arrived at the moment in our discussion when we must inquire into the role of phenomenology in allowing Sartre to confront the problem of other minds. Does the sense of self that accompanies the for-itself necessarily presume the existence of others? This very question evokes an old problem that was frequently examined by realists and idealist alike during the modern period. In his original discussion of this problem, Sartre considers how the existence of the external world was only rarely considered in terms of the relationship between Self and Other. While previous philosophers tried to frame exterior existence in regrounding knowledge in either a deeper affirmation of the subject or the object-world, Sartre argues that the Other is *encountered* but not *constituted*.²⁵ This does not allow us to either prove that the external world exists or disprove its reality. However, before making this bold claim, Sartre discusses how earlier philosophers have not persuasively argued that the Other is necessary to the existence of the Self. In dismantling various arguments that posit the Other without assigning it definite importance, Sartre prepares us for a phenomenological description of how an encounter between Self and Other can be philosophically contextualized.

It might seem that Kant would be a useful ally in this campaign to the degree that transcendental philosophy, properly conceived, entails an ethical agenda that postulates the mutual accord of autonomous subjects. However, Sartre clearly objects to the critical distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, which informs Kantian ethics and epistemology. Kant's concept of causality cannot be employed in good faith to "unify my time with that of the Other."²⁶ The failure of the Other to constitute any experience explains why, in Kant's teleology, the Other is placed among regulative concepts. Sartre, in contrast, cannot risk what Kantian teleology implies, namely, that the Other can be thrust among the concepts that are used to describe nature. The way that the Other confronts me *as* Other does not permit the Other to be assimilated to an inhuman background. Idealists are generally opposed to pure solipsism, which would abolish the Other in affirming ontological solitude. However, Kant and his followers succumb to a variety of "metaphysical realism" when they tacitly reintegrate the Other in a world of substance that does not allow for genuine communication between members.²⁷

After arguing that Kant has brought us to a philosophical impasse, Sartre turns to more recent attempts to present the ontological status of the Other as somehow basic to our understanding of the Self. Sartre contents that Edmund Husserl's admirable effort to show that "the Other is always there as a layer of constitutive meanings" not only relates to the perception of subjects but suggests as well that the self is experienced in relational terms.²⁸ Husserl

has performed an indispensable service in showing us that the question of the Other's existence cannot be relegated to secondary considerations with regard to existence in general. However, Sartre contends that Husserl shares with Kant a bias toward knowledge as the basic factor underlying my relation to the Other, and that the being of the Other does not for this reason emerge in his thought. Sartre returns to Hegel rather briefly only to criticize tendencies toward totalization that offset any gains that might have been derived from a dialectical approach to consciousness. While Hegel makes considerable progress in positing both Self and Other as mutually related, he fails to describe the precise nature of ontological opposition: Self and Other are not the same when existing separately as they are to one another. The true ground for recognition is not knowledge but being: "Here as elsewhere we ought to oppose to Hegel Kierkegaard, who represents the claims of the individual as such."²⁹ And yet, we cannot by implication take up Heidegger's ontological approach to reality as a corrective to Hegel's logicism. What Hegel's system lacks but allows us to envision is a position that does justice to the claims of both realism and idealism. While each person can appear as an object to someone else, self-consciousness nonetheless allows for radical interiority. Hegel is not wrong to emphasize the possibility of knowledge but in failing to concede the importance of subjectivity: "In a word the whole point of departure is the interiority of the *cogito*."³⁰

It is as a phenomenologist that Sartre provides us with the master metaphor that allows him to reclaim the truth of the *cogito* while also insisting on the role of the Other in the realization of personal objectivity. In a mental projection of what might be a concrete situation, Sartre invites us to imagine him in a public park. A man passes, appearing only briefly where there are benches. The moment is fraught with ambiguity. On the one hand, the man is not easy to distinguish from the trees and other objects that occupy the observer's line of vision. What allows us to say that the briefly appearing passerby is a man and not a physical object? Sartre describes both the potential disintegration of the observer's world as a self-contained totality as well as the partial reconstitution of another world that is no longer the same. Between these two worlds, the observer notices how the man who looks at him does not turn toward him as he might respond to a physical object. On the contrary, his response indicates a veritable refusal to be seen as a mere thing: "A radical conversion of the Other is necessary if he is to escape objectivity."³¹ When this same moment of interaction is considered with regard to the observer, we can better understand why objectivity cannot derive from the world since the observer cannot be an object for himself.

Sartre might be accused of *overdramatizing* the significance of this moment in this imaginative version of what is occasionally experienced in everyday life.

A similar sort of encounter is even presented in another description as dangerous, even life-threatening. Hence the sharp distinction between the observer and the person observed can result in an almost pathological account of the crucial encounter: "He is that object in the world which determines an internal flow of the universe, an internal hemorrhage."³² The purpose of this description, however, is not to suggest that the encounter with the Other results in a fatality but to show how *my* objectivity requires the collapse of one world and the experience of another before it can be internalized.³³ This does not mean, of course, that objectivity in every case presupposes an overt encounter between unlike persons. But it does mean, quite simply, that I cannot speak of *my* world until the Other invites me to experience the burden of self-consciousness. Moreover, the sense that this revelation of "mineness" can be dislocating is clearly suggested in Sartre's peculiar use of language.

In a similar way, we learn about how this encounter can be appraised ontologically through the metaphor of an observer discovering that he is being watched, which prompts him to seek cover in a deeper certainty of being that ultimately evades him: "Here I am bent over the keyhole; suddenly I hear a footstep. I shudder as a wave of shame sweeps over me."³⁴ What this means is not that my relations with others are shameful but that the center of my being has shifted from my own "inner" world to the sphere of the Other through this encounter. This sudden shift in perspective, which deprives me of whatever security my solitude made possible, can be understood in two different ways. On the subjective level, my response to being observed calls attention to the being of consciousness that cannot be identified with knowledge. I do not need to turn inward to realize that, in confronting the gaze of the Other, my being bears a negative relation to objective knowing. On the other hand, I cannot escape the gaze of the Other by returning to my solitude in a spirit of forgetfulness: "My original fall is the existence of the Other."³⁵ Hence the gaze of the Other is what precipitates the heightening of subjective awareness that accompanies my attempt to *twist free* from what holds me captive.

The Other is originally the being through whom I become conscious of being an object, rather than simply the token of my subjectivity. This experience seems to confirm Hegel's conception of the relationship between Self and Other on an elementary level. However, consciousness *of* the Other cannot be known or represented; it lies "behind" my consciousness of being an object, which points elsewhere. In truth, Husserl has already shown us that "the ontological structure of 'my' world demands that it be also a *world for others*."³⁶ As a phenomenologist, Sartre intervenes at this point primarily to insist that objectivity, whether mine or that of the Other, is the other side of an internal negation that coincides with an original upsurge, that is to say, with being-for-others. If my world escapes from me, I simply confirm the presence of the

Other in the mode of objective being. I suffer an absolute loss when both self and world suddenly escape me, bringing about the dissolution of my knowledge and the confirmation of a freedom that is not my own. Hence objectivity is less a shared perception than a fragile achievement that can easily dissolve, since it does not solely depend on my consciousness.

At the same time, even while conscious of myself as an object, I possess a sense of the Other as other than me and as a kind of "shadow" that relates to my being in the mode of not being me. Sartre does not propose through this description that the Other constitutes a metaphysical unknown that lies "behind" consciousness as a "truer" world. However, the Other is in some respects "behind the scenes" as I act on the stage of life, complicating my attempt to present myself in concrete settings. The shadow that sometimes appears in my midst is not the sign of my own absence but compares to a projection upon insubstantial material that cannot be assigned objective meaning. Nonetheless, the Other bears a relation to my being instead of functioning as an image of my presence. Sartre invites us to envision the Other as the writing of freedom: "We are dealing with my being as it is written in and by the Other's freedom."³⁷

How are we to interpret Sartre's metaphorical attempt to clarify both the being of consciousness and the freedom of the Other? To be sure, Sartre uses this metaphor to emphasize how the nothingness that seems to separate me from my being announces the freedom of the Other, which I hope to enlist in the process of being recognized. The recognition that might be anticipated in this encounter would not be based on any prior knowledge but on a sense of being that has no foundation. In "classical" modern philosophy from Descartes through Hegel, the human subject is said to ground thought and, in different ways, provide the foundation for all that we know. Sartre's understanding of freedom can be related to a non-foundational understanding of being that places us in a peculiar relation to this modern tradition. Thus, in approaching the question of human freedom, we hope to learn more about how Sartre understands being-in-the-world and also to interpret his philosophy as a unique adventure that unfolds in the vicinity of a basic modern concern.

IV

Our inquiry into Sartre's unique approach to ontology allowed us to return to one of his basic philosophical insights, which maintains that non-being resides in the heart of being itself. My relationship to the Other encourages me to anticipate a type of recognition that would allow the non-being that separates us to form the being of a future recognition. However, this ontological hope does not possess a definite foundation, so once again we are confronted with

Sartre's reluctance to use the word "being" as a means for securing a practical resolution to my sense of homelessness. To the degree that the opposition of "being" and "doing" allows us to grasp how "doing" better describes human activity as inherently unstable, Sartre contends that the ethics of Kant is a modern achievement that prefigures his own position.³⁸ In truth, the whole notion that being can be interpreted as a foundation undergoes extensive criticism in Sartre's phenomenology of consciousness. In confronting various positions that are central to the modern philosophical canon, Sartre demonstrates how the question of being is only improperly reduced to a matter of unchanging presence. Even consciousness cannot be posited as an entity that has the formal meaning that is assumed in statements of abstract identity.

Hence, in examining Sartre's arguments from a historical perspective, we might also consider the possibility that a "classical" conception of being bears a "postmodern" significance that could be further explored in multiple contexts. Louis Dupré has argued that the postmodern turn in recent philosophy can be assessed as a response to a basic inconsistency in the modern *épistémé*, which posits a sovereign subject on the one hand and static, unchanging reality on the other.³⁹ Thus, from one standpoint, the human subject is conceived as wholly distinct and invested with powers that elevate it over the rest of creation. This tradition arguably culminates in the Absolute Idealism of Hegel, who dispenses with the idea of the external world altogether. However, from another standpoint, the external world is sometimes predicated as identical and finite. Its invariant qualities are handed over to science, conceived as a body of knowledge that more or less excludes the possibility of human intervention. This tradition leads to the positivism of Auguste Comte and his followers who ultimately consider the laws of physics to be those of society. It is obvious that Sartre's work cannot be placed in either of these two camps, which, taken together, provide us with a useful, if contradictory, image of modernity itself. We now would like to discuss how Sartre, as a precursor to the postmodern, attempts to overcome this philosophical division in three ways.

First, Sartre helps us understand that the relationship between the for-itself and the in-itself is basically an ontological one, rather than a matter of pulling together two distinct entities. In the conclusion to his major early work, Sartre raises the question of the ultimate relationship between the two basic terms of his system. He acknowledges that being is not an abstraction but perpetually engaged in the project of founding itself as self-cause (*ens causa sui*). However, this project can only be glimpsed in terms of an ideal synthesis that cannot be achieved in a manner that would constitute a practical totalization: "Everything happens as if the in-itself and the for-itself were presented in a state of disintegration in relation to an ideal synthesis."⁴⁰ If being is in a constant state of destabilization, the best that we can do is simply to acknowledge

the ideal aspect of our human aspirations while remaining aware that ultimate totalization cannot be achieved. Dupré has argued that modern thought initiated a new stage of reflection when it indicated a disparity in the very nature of the real that Sartre has brought to our attention.⁴¹ Hence the irreducible difference between the in-itself and the for-itself, as well as the irresolvable nature of their antagonism, foster a new ethical imperative: we must accept the practical significance of our longing for an ideal synthesis that remains forever out of reach.

Such an imperative would be *creative* because it inscribes the role of freedom in the life that I assume as my own. This brings us to the second aspect of Sartre's position that distinguishes his thought from the rationalism of his modern predecessors. "Lightness of being" does not allow me to evade my situation in good faith, but it reminds me that my basic life-project does not rest on an external mandate that predates me: "This is because freedom is a choice of being but not the foundation of its being."⁴² The past invariably figures in any attempt to "construct" a life that allows my actions to be interpreted in relation to a future meaning. Sartre takes issue with Sigmund Freud's psychic determinism, but he values the method of psychoanalysis, which he adopts in suggesting how my actions can "turn back" from the future in order to comprehend the present.⁴³ In a similar way, he also argues against all forms of economic determinism, which deprive history of the crucial role that singular individuals perform when "men reassume the past by making it a memorial."⁴⁴ It would seem, therefore, that even the past can assume creative importance when its "repetition" allows us to separate ourselves from what would otherwise unfold as an impersonal process devoid of all subjective meaning.

The possibility of assigning the past a new meaning and thus transforming the present in relation to future goals brings us to the third and final indication of Sartre's disagreement with modern rationalism. Sartre's appreciation for Kant's ethical system should not distract us from the significance of his departure from the long tradition that interprets freedom in terms of law, if not as equivalent to law. Hence, in Kant's moral philosophy, freedom is defined as clearly dependent on a concept of causality that derives from the natural sciences. Dupré has remarked that, only recently, a small number of thinkers, including Maurice Blondel, Paul Ricoeur and Karl Jaspers, have "begun to rethink the relation between freedom and causality in noncausal terms."⁴⁵ Perhaps in anticipating this recent effort to renew the question of transcendence, Sartre no longer defines freedom as a mode of conduct that follows a causal principle but invites us to imagine how it begins in a situation that does not define it in advance: "Freedom is total and infinite, which does not mean that it has no limits but that it *never encounters them*."⁴⁶ In other words, the limits to freedom are those that it imposes on itself and that derive solely from

facticity, the surrounding world and the techniques through which we communicate with others. By redefining freedom in this way, Sartre extends the phenomenological critique of the “natural attitude” into the wellsprings of human action.

American University in Cairo

NOTES

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 24.

² *Ibid.*, p. 17. The notion of the absolute is important to the phenomenological tradition as a whole. Edmund Husserl ultimately defines the absolute as an experience of consciousness in *Ideas I*. While Sartre’s conception of existence aligns him more closely to Heidegger, we wish to emphasize in this context how phenomenology as a “science of consciousness” is also concerned with consciousness as an experience. By relating consciousness to experience, Sartre establishes an implicit basis for distinguishing his own ontology from that of Descartes and also moves beyond the formalism that besets Kant’s position.

³ Sartre, *op. cit.*, pp. 123–24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers sympathetic but stringent criticisms of Sartre’s philosophy in “Interruption and Dialectic,” *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 50–104. His argument is based on the guiding assumption that Sartre’s commitment to the opposition between “in-itself” and “for-itself” distinguishes his position from that of traditional dialectics but also falls short of the “perceptual faith” that provides phenomenology with a more convincing starting-point. While many of Merleau-Ponty’s late criticisms have merit, we believe that the imputation of radical dualism cannot appreciate that *no one term* in Sartre’s set of opposites can be privileged over the other. Moreover, this criticism does not indicate how Sartre’s ontology can contain an active side that is irreducible to a dualistic opposition.

⁷ Sartre’s concept of “de-structuring” might remind contemporary readers of Derrida’s “déconstruction,” which is also concerned with showing how the stability of consciousness cannot be sustained as a philosophical thesis. Like Derrida’s déconstruction, Sartre’s concept of de-structuring demonstrates how the idea of structure has metaphysical features that reduce the role of temporality in the way that it functions. An important essay and accompanying conversation that clarifies the status of the subject in the poststructuralist camp can be found in Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), pp. 247–72.

⁸ Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

⁹ Heidegger’s phenomenological concept of world is developed in contrast to what emerges in Descartes as “present-to-hand” and signifies the ascendancy of theory over practice in early modern philosophy. For details, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Publishers, 1962), pp. 122–34.

¹⁰ Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 183–85.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 195.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 205.

²⁰ Ibid., 210.

²¹ Ibid., 214.

²² The notion of “de-centering” is vitally important to recent poststructuralism. Clearly, Sartre remains committed to the phenomenology of consciousness in a way that would prevent him from interpreting mental activity from some other standpoint. However, Sartrean phenomenology presupposes the continual “decentering” of consciousness and therefore demonstrates a kinship with recent poststructuralism. It is appropriate to mention in this context that Derrida warns us against the dangers that necessarily accompany decentering as a philosophical strategy: “I do not destroy the subject; I resituate it.” Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

²³ Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 219.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 336.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 308.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 311.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 316.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 324.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 329.

³¹ Ibid., p. 345.

³² Ibid., p. 345.

³³ We might contrast Sartre’s somewhat “pathological” account of the encounter between Self and Other with Emmanuel Lévinas’s “celebratory” affirmation of the Other as the inaugural site of ethics. However, we might also note that Lévinasian ethics assumes that this initial encounter would have to be *traumatic* in order to offset the mundane preoccupation with being that allows us to remain ensconced in limited totalities. Both the affirmative and disruptive aspects of this encounter inform the argument in Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

³⁴ Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 369.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 352.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 363.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 351. Sartre’s metaphor of writing as a way of communicating the freedom of the Other compares in some respects to what can be found in the work of Derrida, who suggests that the tendency toward “logocentrism” is what suppresses the emergence of the Other as a counter to more centered modes of consciousness. The theory of “logocentrism” is a general one that can be related to *déconstruction* in its many guises. For a readable account of how writing involves “de-centering” and also opens up a non-totalizable conception of language, see Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context” in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 307–30.

³⁸ Sartre, *op. cit.*, pp. 557–58.

³⁹ Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 6, 162.

⁴⁰ Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 792.

⁴¹ Dupré, p. 252.

- ⁴² Sartre, op. cit., p. 616.
⁴³ Ibid., p. 591.
⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 642.
⁴⁵ Dupré, p. 163.
⁴⁶ Sartre, op. cit., p. 680.

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