Turned into a world-wide known cultural trend, often labeled as “atheistic existentialism”, scattered through very different domains (psychology, aesthetics, literary criticism, ontology, politics, ethics, psychoanalysis), employing a wide range of literary forms (philosophical essays, novels, dramas, journal articles), Jean-Paul Sartre’s contribution to philosophy is both rich and extremely variegated. But what is the place of phenomenology within such a complex picture?

55.1. Diving into phenomenology: a first but decisive step

Sartre’s first step into phenomenology appears as a radicalization of Husserl’s discovery of intentionality.

Husserl’s fundamental statement, according to which “consciousness is always consciousness of something”, requires that every conscious lived experience is necessarily related, in one way or another, to some transcendent object (be it a number, a fictional character, a melody, a perceptual thing, etc.). To such preliminary account Sartre adds a further clause: if consciousness is intentionality, then the very fact of being conscious of something implies the rejection of all forms of immanence (be they psychological, epistemological, metaphysical, etc.). It is precisely by adding such clause that Sartre’s relationship to phenomenology, literally, begins—both from Husserl and against Husserl.

It is worth noticing, however, that accepting Husserl’s concept of intentionality while rejecting, at the same time, all form of immanence strikes as a quite drastic move. For the notion of “immanence” also lies right at the heart of Husserl’s own phenomenological project. Already in the Logical Investigations, Husserl had in fact included within the actual stream of conscious experiences not only the “real” (reell) presence of intentional acts (directed towards something transcendent), but also the equally “real” purely immanent presence of non-intentional sensible contents (5th Logical Investigation, Ch. I.). Moreover, Ideas I’s introduction of the noema also strongly suggests the idea of a somehow intentionally “immanent” object, whose status appears to be quite controversial. But Sartre does not shy away from criticizing Husserl’s phenomenology in the very same moment in which he acknowledges its philosophical and critical potential, as if he could sharply separate the invention of intentionality from any possible use of the vocabulary of “immanence”.

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The reasons for this twofold radical move (appropriation of intentionality *qua* transcendence/critique of *any* form of immanence) are better clarified if we keep in mind the historical context within which Sartre developed his own variety of phenomenology. And more generally, they become ever more apparent if one reminds oneself of Sartre’s relation with history.

Sartre has always shown little or no interest in the history of philosophy. And in the rare cases in which he refers to the philosophical tradition, he hardly goes further than Descartes’s Modernity. By contrast, what has always been crucial for Sartre is the engagement with the philosophy of *his* time. Though almost ignoring his predecessors, Sartre constantly struggles with his contemporaries, facing the way in which the world is pictured *in the present*, and challenging the living effects of the philosophical shortcomings of his generation.

This apparently biographical detail turns out to be of the utmost importance in order to understand Sartre’s philosophical relation to phenomenology. In fact, the main interlocutors of his first philosophical essays are not drawn from the catalogue of the *philosophia perennis*, but precisely from the living discussions of French, German and Anglo-American epistemology between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Thus the very concept of “immanence” Sartre is fiercely opposed to—and further applied to Husserl himself—is first and foremost the backbone of the mainstream epistemological projects of his time, be they neo-Kantians, psychologists, empirio-criticists or intellectualists of all sorts (Brunschvicg, Lachelier, Mach, Brochard, Lalande, Meyerson, etc.).

Now, how is it possible to lump together so many different approaches under a common heading? *To begin with, thanks to a literary device*: the image of what Sartre calls “digestive philosophy”.

According to Sartre, if one draws from the concept of “immanence” in any of its varieties, knowledge literally turns into something monstrous, i.e. *the absorption of the world within a conscious subject that, stripped out from the world itself, turns out to be something external to it*. An absorption that could fittingly be captured by the powerful comparison between the cognitive process of bringing the transcendence of the world into the immanence of consciousness and the physiological process of digestion. Appearing or cognitive objects seem to “sink” into the “empty stomach” of a starving consciousness, eager to assimilate the world, instead of preserving its irreducible exteriority.

This literary image has a philosophical background though. In the *Logical Investigations* Husserl had criticized Brentano’s *Psychology* for having described consciousness as having mental objects as its contents, immanent copies of transcendent objects, in-existing in the mind as within each and every spiritual act of representation. Moreover, in the short paper *A fundamental idea of Husserl’s phenomenology: intentionality*, published in 1939, the attentive reader finds Sartre explicitly echoing Husserl’s own critique of Wilhelm Schuppe’s “Immanent-Philosophy” and his rejection of Richard Avenarius’ empirio-criticism in §56 of the *Krisis* (1935–1936). Thus Sartre wholly endorses this Husserlian critique of “immanence” and amplifies it to the point that consciousness itself turns out to be ultimately equated to the act of positing a transcendent being as such. Nothing more, but also nothing less.

The literary metaphor of “digestive philosophy” and the fully fledged philosophical concept of “philosophy of immanence” ultimately join forces to *unify and challenge* an otherwise scattered contemporary philosophical landscape.

By doing this, by drastically identifying consciousness, intentionality and transcendence, Sartre has thus a twofold aim. He not only rejects all forms of representationalism or psychologism (as Husserl); he also maintains—and this is the crucial point—that the intentionality of consciousness is precisely what grants the irreducibility of Being to consciousness, vouchsafing the transcendence of the World. Differently put, it is not that consciousness *has* intentionality, i.e. includes intentional lived expe-
riences. One should rather say that consciousness is intentionality. Accordingly, knowledge (as a conscious state, i.e. as an intentional conscious state) is not aptly pictured by the metaphor of “absorption”, but rather by the fleeting image of an “explosion” (Sartre 1939a); something that is comparable not to the process of bringing inside what is outside, but rather to the eccentric movement of the turning inside-out.

Thus Sartre’s battle has two fronts: theoretical-conceptual (philosophy of immanence vs. philosophy of transcendence) and literary-metaphorical (philosophy of digestion vs. philosophy of explosion). As a result, Husserl’s phenomenology finds itself dislocated in two different fields: as a residuum of immanentism it is still somehow similar to neo-Kantianism and intellectualism; as a force of transcendence it finds itself carelessly merged with Heidegger’s “being-in-the-world”.

One might have the impression, however, that, in his virulent plea against the “philosophies of immanence”, Sartre seems to follow a quite idiosyncratic idea of Philosophy: merging arguments and attacks, catchy metaphors and text interpretations—all weapons seem to be allowed to defeat the “enemy”. After all, in Sartre’s good friend Paul Nizan’s Les chiens de garde (1932), one finds exactly the same targets (Bergson, Bourtroux, Brunschvicg, Lalande, etc.) and somehow the same literary device.

Yet what makes Sartre’s enquiry so sharp, if compared with Nizan’s polemic pamphlet, is precisely the twofold fact we have stressed so far. On the one hand, as already suggested, Sartre turns into literary images a wide array of very structured philosophical claims borrowed from phenomenology; on the other, he is not only motivated by the idea of rejecting the philosophies of immanence, but also by the urge to pursue phenomenology with other means.

Differently put, inspired by Husserl’s conception of intentionality, Sartre’s main aim is to question the ultimate legitimacy of phenomenology itself. What lies behind the critical transformation of the phenomenological concept of intentionality into a weapon against the philosophy of immanence, and activates its metaphorical resources, is precisely the very question of the status of transcendental phenomenology.

As a result, when it comes to the relation between Sartre and phenomenology, one should sharply distinguish and, at the same time, clearly articulate two quite different and yet connected standpoints. On the one hand, we have “phenomenology” as the vector of Sartre’s motivation, what Sartre tries to do, and, on the other, there are “Sartre’s views on Phenomenology”, i.e. how Sartre tries to understand phenomenology and its inner possibilities.

### 55.2. Recasting the ego: a vagrant story

From his first significant publication, The Transcendence of the Ego (1936), to his magnum opus Being and Nothingness (1943), Sartre insists in providing a series of variations on the very same theme: the phenomenological privilege of “exteriority” or “transcendent being” (to which consciousness is essentially related).

In an unusually academic style and mode of argumentation, The Transcendence of the Ego focuses on what seems to be a quite technical issue, i.e. the status of psychic life and the relation between consciousness and ego. By “ego” Sartre understands what we usually refer to by means of linguistic items, such as “I” (active form) or “me” (passive form), expressing the identical pole of “our” personal psychic life (Sartre 1936, 13–26/31–60). The ego is the first victim of Sartre’s turning-inside-out-strategy.

In a handful of very dense pages, Sartre now argues that the ego is nothing but a transcendent object that appears through reflection to a prior consciousness. The core of the argument
is quite straightforward: if consciousness is intentionality and intentionality is nothing but the
position of a transcendence; since the ego only shows itself through reflection and reflection is
a form of intentionality, then the ego is a posited transcendence.

Consider the ordinary experience of reading a book: as I am reading Conan Doyle’s A Study
in Scarlet, “my” consciousness is experiencing the reading and refers to the investigations of a
famous fictional private detective. “I” am entirely conscious of Sherlock Holmes’ adventures, not
of “myself”. It is only thanks to a new kind of consciousness, which does not posit the (fictional)
occupant of 221B Baker Street, but “myself”, sitting on this couch (in the world) and actually
having a novel in my hands, that something like an “ego”—“my” ego—could be posited.

Once recast in strict phenomenological terms, such ordinary description shows that the
“ego” cannot be fittingly described as something like the inhabitant of consciousness—showing
itself without the world, within the depths of one’s mental life—but rather as being simply an
object; an object that is transcendent as any other object, and appearing as any actual or possible
appearing transcendent object, i.e. through a specific intentional position of the world.

Rejecting what he assumes to be Kant’s account of the transcendental ego, Sartre’s essay
also provides a thorough examination of the constitution of the ego thanks to a meticulous
description of all kinds of synthesis (such as the emanation of qualities or the procession
of states). Yet the use of philosophical technicalities to criticize Kant is not a central movement in
Sartre’s strategy. What is relevant, instead, is the phenomenological idea that actions, qualities and
states constitute the ego as “the ideal (noematic) and indirect unity of the infinite series of our
reflexive conscious acts” (Sartre 1936, 43/60). It is not that the ego refers to the transcendent
world by means of conscious intentional acts of all sorts. One should rather say that the ego
is constituted as a transcendent worldly-object by means of conscious intentional acts of all sorts.
Again, Husserl’s inmanence is, quite literally, turned inside-out.

After having “exteriorized” the ego in the Transcendence of the Ego, Sartre now exteriorizes
emotions, as it were, in another short essay called Sketch of a Theory of Emotions (1939b).

No longer conceived as internal psychological processes—revealing only the hidden secrets
of one’s inner life, but silent about the actuality of the world “out there”—emotions are now
recast within an intentional-phenomenological framework. The new question is thus the fol-
lowing: what does “to be conscious of the world” mean when I am conscious of the world in the
mode (that I experience every day) of being-emotionally-conscious-of something?

By stating that emotions are intentional conducts directed towards the world and thanks to
which—as we will see shortly—one is able to, literally, “escape the inescapable”, Sartre reaffirms
the primal relation of the consciousness to transcendence (rejecting, again, all forms of interior-
ity). What is new, however, with respect to his previous attempt in the Transcendence of the Ego, is
the idea of engaging the essential ability of consciousness to modify the world.

If one is stuck in front of a rabid dog and no way out is available, one is likely to be very scared.
But, according to Sartre, being afraid, scared, terrorized, screaming and fainting are all ways to
modify emotionally a situation that could not be modified practically. Emotions are forms of conscious-
ness, and therefore ways to posit something transcendent. Perception and knowledge posit out
in the world the existence of a rabid dog next to me; emotions posit—always out in the world—
the existence of a frightening rabid dog. They are, as Husserl would have put it, value-constitutive
intentional experiences (Sartre 1039b, 69–117/56–91).

Sartre’s phenomenological description of emotions as intentional conducts is thus meant
to account for the fundamental affective being of human existence. Accordingly, it ultimately
frees affectivity from any commitment to the interiority of the ego that “I” am. As in Rimbaud’s
famous “Lettre du Voyant” (May 15, 1871) addressed to Paul Demeny: “I is someone else” (“Je
est un autre”, quoted in: 1936, 63/97). And Sartre tries precisely to explain who this “I” is, i.e. the result and necessary correlative pole of all our objective negotiations with the world. A pole that is constituted, little by little, whenever we deal with the world, in all intentional ways possible. “The object is transcendent to the consciousness which grasp it, and it is in the object that the unity of the consciousness is found (l’objet est transcendant aux consciences qui le saisissent et c’est en lui que se trouvent leur unité)” (1936, 22/38; on the topic see Masselot 2012).

Thus, if the ego truly is a unifying pole—as Husserl claimed—then, since the unification is founded on an unreflective and prior consciousness always and necessarily directed towards the world, one should draw the conclusion that such unification is always delayed. An indefinitely moving and ungraspable object, the ego is not less infinitely constituted than any other transcendent object. For as a constant in-between, setting apart myself from the world but out of the world, this “ego” is constantly modified along with all kinds of (prior) experiences of the world—and this includes emotions.

55.3. From images to imagination: on the way to nothingness

The analysis of the ego has uncovered what Sartre calls a “structure of backward reference” (structure de renvoi) that “is limited to reflecting an ideal unity, whereas the real and concrete unity has long been effected” (à refléter une unité idéale, alors que l’unité concrète et réelle est opérée depuis longtemps) (1939, 81/100). Now, once this inescapable condition of consciousness is assumed, one is left with the task of uncovering the necessary condition of the being in the world of such consciousness. Being intentionally directed towards the world from within the world, consciousness is not the world.

Drawing again from Husserl the idea that intuitions of transcendent objects can be either perceptive or imaginative, The Imaginary (1940) focuses on another relevant way for a consciousness to be conscious-of an object, i.e. image consciousness. One could already expect to see Sartre repeating the same phenomenological move shown in his previous works. After having “turned inside-out” the ego and the whole of emotional life, it is now time to destroy the concept of “mental image” and exteriorize the imaginary through the intentional description (both eidetic and psychological) of the act of “aiming at an object in image” (viser un objet en image). But something new happens in this novel confrontation between Sartre and phenomenology.

Thanks to their intentional structure, perception and emotions still posit something real in the world (the rabid dog is actually frightening); imagination doesn’t. Imagination is still transcendence and yet it is a transcendence that is not real, that does not posit its objects as in the world—although it cannot posit them without the world.

I can say I am imagining Sherlock Holmes or a rabid dog in front of me only if their appearance is negated by what I actually perceive here and now: my room, my couch, the books that are around me, etc. Thus imagination certainly posits something transcendent as unreal, but it does so only from within and along with the position of the transcendent reality it negates.

This brings Sartre to an extremely important conclusion. If the intentionality of imagination allows us to posit an absent object despite its unreality, then a consciousness that is able to imagine is also a consciousness that is certainly in the world but not stuck in it. Imagination is thus reinterpreted not as a mere psychological accident of mental life, but as decisive phenomenological experience and an essential feature of consciousness; a consciousness that is able not only to comply with the world (as still happens with the intentionality of emotions) but rather to radically transgress it.

On this point, Sartre’s reading of the famous Müller-Lyer illusion (in which two identical segments seem to be of a different size) appears to be quite instructive. Image conscious-
Jean-Paul Sartre says, breaks the solidarity between perception and knowledge. In the Müller-Lyer illusion one confers “on the object a new quality, and this quality we have perceived. The object thus constituted can serve as a sign (...) but never as an image, at least not as such” (1940, 72/33). Now, the eye movements through which the transformation is carried out (so that segments having the same size are imagined to have different sizes) do not objectify such new quality as real (for nothing has really changed, the segments have still the same size) but in image. Thus, what happens in the case of perceptual imagination is a transformation of the perceptive objectification or, as Sartre puts it, a new change of “focus” (mise au point). Of course, this can only be the case if the object is already “there before the focusing” (être là avant la mise au point) (1940, 84/39).

Sartre’s conclusion is the following: image consciousness hinges on spontaneity. It is a sui generis form of consciousness, rooted in perception and relying on a “certain thickness of reality” (certaine épaisseur de reel), (1940, 132/66 modified); at the same time, it transgresses the rules of perceptual reality as such and refers to something that is not there. It is intuitive (as perception), relies on perception, but refers to something absent (as knowledge). In this sense, neither perception (reality) nor pure knowledge (ideality), and yet, relying on both perception (un-realization) and knowledge (debasement of ideality), imagination is therefore an intermediary and unsteady form of consciousness. It is a form of transcendence that somehow breaks the negotiations with the world.

To put it in slightly different terms, one could also say that imagination shows the possibility of constituting objectivity into image. Again, it should not be described as the “creation” of something that is not (or is “inside us”), but as the consciousness of something that is “given as not-being there in person” (1940, 205/113). The word “image” is therefore the name of a mode of consciousness (deeply rooted into the position of transcendence), not of a particular kind of entity (having the property of being similar to some other entity). Or, to put it in Sartre’s words, “the image is not a thing but a consciousness”.

At this point, Sartre’s descriptions widen to the point of drawing an entire map of the whole “family of the images” (1940, 40/17): portraits, mirrors or reflections, pantomimes, mental images, dreams, and all sorts of “unreal objects” (1940, 240/125). In all these cases transcendence is still bound but not limited to the reality of the world.

One last point needs now to be recalled. Since imagination is an essential “ability” of consciousness, and since we, as human beings, are beings having such ability, then imagination also tells us something about us—i.e. about the mode of existence of that being that is essentially able to imagine. Deeply rooted in the world and, at the same time, distanced from the world, consciousness “exists the world” in positing being in that very way that Sartre calls “Nihilation”. In other words, a consciousness that is free to imagine, is essentially free.

As a result, from the analysis of the Ego in the mid-1930s to The Imaginary, Sartre refines his phenomenological understanding of exteriority and seizes more accurately the different and irreducible patterns of transcendence; the transcendence of mundane objects, of the Ego, of emotionally charged reality, and, finally, of the “images”—which ultimately shows our own overall transcendence as being both relative to the world and free to nihilate it.

From now, Sartre’s phenomenology will focus precisely on this fundamental transcendent pole of consciousness and its distinctive mode of existence. And he will do so mostly in two different directions: first, by considering the transcendence of consciousness as the ontological position of an external Being; second, by focusing on consciousness itself, which realizes itself by irrealizing Being (and thus allowing us to understand how “knowledge of ourselves” is ultimately possible). Such a double process hinges on Nihilation.

Both paths will finally lead to the phenomenological ontology of Being and Nothingness.
55.4. A new variety of phenomenology: the project of a phenomenological ontology

In order to interpret imagination as an act of freedom with respect to the world and yet from within the world, Sartre needs a deeper analysis of the concept of “Nihilation”.

Such analysis, however, as suggested by the complete title of Being and Nothingness—“Essay on Phenomenological Ontology”—can only be carried out if one switches from a phenomenological account of consciousness to an ontological one. Differently put, consciousness is now studied not with respect to its different modes to transcend itself, but in its mode of being—a mode that is essentially different from the mode of being of that towards which consciousness transcends itself.

From a more general standpoint Sartre’s project is to bring together phenomenology and ontology, Husserl’s (phenomenological) method and Heidegger’s (ontological) purpose; the two most noticeable varieties of “philosophy of transcendence” discussed in his previous works. However, in Being and Nothingness, merging “intentionality of consciousness” and “being-in-the-world of the Dasein” is no longer enough. And treating these two concepts simply as two different ways to praise the transcendence of human conscious beings appears to be utterly insufficient.

The new, refined, form of encounter between Husserl and Heidegger is now summarized in Being and Nothingness’s inaugural statement, according to which

consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself (la conscience est un être pour lequel il est dans son être question de son être en tant que cet être implique un être autre que lui).

(Sartre 1943, 29/24)

At first sight, one might have the impression that such uncanny sentence merely rephrases the very general key tenets of Sartre’s illustrious predecessors: Husserl’s intentionality, to begin with, but more than anything else Heidegger’s ontological depiction of the Dasein as being in quest of his or her own Being. However, though somehow justified, this impression would be quite misleading. For if this were the case, Sartre would be simply turning Heidegger’s ontology into a quasi-anthropology and Husserl’s phenomenology into a naïve ontology.

But this is far from being the case and Sartre strongly insists on this point. Moreover, the accuracy of Sartre’s reading of Being and Time is also attested by a private letter that Heidegger sent to the young author of Being and Nothingness:

For the first time—Heidegger writes—I finally meet an independent thinker having experienced all the way the domain from which I am thinking. Your book shows an immediate understanding of my philosophy, something I haven’t met so far (Pour la première fois, écrivait Heidegger, je rencontre un penseur indépendant qui a fait à fond l’expérience du domaine à partir duquel je pense. Votre livre fait montre d’une compréhension immédiate de ma philosophie telle que je ne l’ai pas encore rencontrée).

(de Towarnicki 1993, 84)

Thus Heidegger himself was well aware of the fact that Sartre was neither simply merging his fundamental ontology with some Husserlian insights, nor misunderstanding it as a form of existential anthropology. Sartre is not unwillingly conflating Husserl’s (phenomenological account of) consciousness and Heidegger’s (ontological account of) Dasein. He is deliberately providing
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a shift. He is shifting to an entirely new project of a “phenomenological-ontology”. Though still employing the language of his sources of inspiration, Sartre redefines his own terms.

*Phenomenological-ontology* only begins with discussing “consciousness” or “Dasein”. But this happens in order to accede to a new concept of the subject: the “for-itself” (*pour-soi*). Correlatively, “phenomenological-ontology” does not deal with Husserl-like “phenomena”, but with an entirely new ontological sense of the phenomenon, i.e. what Sartre calls the “transphenomenal-being”.

The outcome of such “shift” is noteworthy and grounds the one and only true “ontological difference” that Sartre is willing to recognize. Not Heidegger’s “invisible” difference between Being and Entity, but the “hyper-visible” and inescapable difference between Being-in-itself and Being-for-itself.

While there is little is to say about the latter (one could say that “Being is”, that “it is what it is”, that “it is in itself”, etc.) an ontological description of the former under the guidance of phenomenological intuition turns out to be an extremely rich enterprise; an enterprise to which, in some sense, the whole of *Being and Nothingness* is somehow entirely devoted. And among the richness of this ontological description, Sartre immediately singles out one distinctive feature: the for-itself is the only conscious being that is inhabited by a Non-Being (“the spur of Nothingness”), kept at distance from Being (in it-self). Differently put, the for-itself is characterized by an “internal breach”; a “breach” thanks to which, to use Sartre’s convoluted formula, the for-itself posits a Being in a way such that he/she is always aware of the fact that he/she is not and cannot be the Being that is posited.

Sartre expresses such a condition by famously defining consciousness as a “For-itself”, namely as “a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is” (*un être est ce qu’il n’est pas et n’est pas ce qu’il est*) (Sartre 1943, 94/100).

Next to and beyond the for-itself, there is always and necessarily the posited Being in-itself. But how could one get a phenomenological intuition of the Being in-itself as such?—Sartre asks. The only intuition one could get of Being is, as we have seen, the (transphenomenal-)Being as it appears to a For-itself. Differently put, what only shows itself is a portion of Being (namely a being-in-itself) appearing to a “given portion” of Nothingness (namely a being-for-itself). Such phenomenological description is to be considered as somehow complete and ultimate. Hence, in some sense, when Sartre quite surprisingly claims that “everything about the being in itself has been said” in the introductory remarks, this stunning allegation is indeed correct. And in this regard, one could truly argue that Sartre tries to provide a genuine ontological analytic of the phenomenon (as transphenomenal-being) whose starting point is neither the appearance of *Being* (realistic position) nor the appearing of consciousness (idealistic position), but the ultimate analysis of a given portion of transphenomenal-being under the scope of a given consciousness. There is nothing even remotely comparable in the whole phenomenological tradition.

This point needs to be emphasized, for it is oftentimes a source of confusion, especially when one has to assess the originality of Sartre’s project. Despite the fact that Sartre frequently borrows terms and themes from Husserl and Heidegger, his “phenomenological ontology” is more suitably characterized as the constant attempt to develop its own conceptual tools somehow “from within”. And probably one of Sartre’s most relevant conceptual innovations is precisely this new correlation established between “Transphenomenal-Being” and “Human-Reality”.

The concept of “transphenomenal-being” is in fact introduced to define not a particular kind of phenomenon, but the (identical) *Being of all (singular) phenomena*, i.e. the Being “of what is for consciousness” (de ce qui est pour la conscience) and “is itself in-itself” (est lui-même en-soi) (Sartre 1943, 29/24). As for the correlative concept of “human reality” (*la réalité-humaine*), it is defined accordingly as
being in so far as within its being and for its being it is the unique foundation of nothingness at the heart of being (l’être en tant qu’il est dans son être et pour son être fondement unique du néant au sein de l’être).

(Sartre 1943, 115/126)

At this point, Sartre is finally able to describe with extreme precision a wide array of new and irreducible ontological structures that are nevertheless always and constantly in relation to and accordance with the “transphenomenal-being” they rest upon: the “Being for-itself” (Being and Nothingness, second part); the “Being for-other” (third part). Finally, once the core structures of “Human-Reality” are definitively fleshed out, Sartre can approach the three cardinal categories: “To Have, to Do, to Be” (fourth and last part). Only at this point the meaning of our essential freedom in every fundamental “situation” of the Being could finally be affirmed. Only now, at the end of this phenomenological path, the concept of freedom—discovered at the end of the Imaginary—receives a strong ontological rooting.

Probably the best-known example of such ontological rooting is Sartre’s famous account of “Bad faith”.

This concept, often hastily read as superficially “existential”, has rather a deep phenomenological meaning. More specifically, it has to be understood from an irreducibly twofold point of view: on the one hand, as a fact (say in a psychological-sociological point of view), on the other as a phenomenological-ontological component of our being. Thanks to three very explicit and evocative literary examples—thus continuing his strategy to complement conceptual and metaphorical tools—Sartre now shows the impossibility for the For-itself to “fill” his/her lack of being and turn into an In-itself.

“Bad faith” is therefore the concept to describe the dual ontological transgression by which, at the same time, one is tempted to turn the For-itself into something that is (while only the Being in-itself is), tries to extinguate a sample of Being in-itself and turn it into a component of the For-itself. Thus the arch-famous examples of the waiter who is “playing the game” of being-a-waiter, or the young lady who is-not-there, letting the womanizer bachelor touch her hand as a mere-being, or the gay person who is sincerely aware of the essential impossibility to bridge the gap between what “he is” and what he is “expected to be”—all these examples are not meant to illustrate psychological characters or social conducts. They are rather varieties of one absolute ontological structure. They all reveal that “Being” is always kept at a distance and, at the same time, it is always and necessarily more or less contracted in the form of not being in-itself.

As Sartre writes—strikingly anticipating the non-existing and yet firm character of Agilulf in Italo Calvino’s novel The Nonexistent Knight (1959)—such impossibility-to-be (not only “to-be-something”, but also, and more importantly “to-be-myself”) is “the very stuff of consciousness” (l’étuffe même de la conscience) (Sartre 1943, 97/62). The for-itself ontologically clothed in “bad faith” seems to be like Calvino’s non-existent knight, whose otherwise solid armor appears as the rather thin membrane setting apart two regions of Being, one of which is empty.

Given Sartre’s tendency to complement concepts and metaphors, one might feel entitled to suggest that Calvino’s character could have been a suitable literary counterpart of Sartre’s non-psychological description of bad faith as an ontological-phenomenological structure of the For-itself. In fact, an ontological gap clearly separates the non-existent Agilulf from both his armor (the transcendence that closely surrounds him) and the world (the transcendence of himself, ipseity and facticity). Sartre’s for-itself provides a strongly conceptual account of such gap. Yet, instead of relying on a self-evident literary device as the walking empty armor of Calvino’s novel, Sartre depicts waiters, seduced women, gay people, etc. And by doing this he also ambiguously suggests a “psychological-empirical” understanding of “bad faith”; an understanding that, for instance, has
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not fooled an attentive reader like Deleuze who has fittingly labeled such descriptions as “short novels” (courts romans).

Be that as it may, what is ultimately relevant is the idea that existence hinges on a double degree of nihilation according to which one is neither the Being that he/she nihilates (first degree: I am neither this table nor this chair, i.e. the nihilation of transcendence) nor the Being that he/she “is” (second degree: I am neither what I pretend to be—the transcendence of my “own” ipseity—nor what I have been so far—the facticity of the past).

But what has this to do with phenomenology?

The answer could be found in Sartre’s assessment of the final aspiration of Being and Nothingness. In his “phenomenological ontology” Sartre is trying to push to its limits one of the most fundamental claims of Husserl, i.e. the claim that phenomenology should account for the ultimate concreteness of the factual life in its innermost features, i.e. to reveal in essence what only stands as a fact in Psychology.

Of course, far from equating this phenomenology ambition with Husserl’s eidetic project, Sartre’s own understanding of this “essentiality” is that of a twofold ontology of human reality and of the trans-phenomenal-being. But this brings us to what appears to be a major problem. Is Sartre’s joint venture between conceptual and metaphorical strategies, between theoretical and metaphorical devices, truly “descriptive”? Or, differently put, are Sartre’s putative ontological-phenomenological descriptions actually “true” to the facts and, as one often says, to the “things themselves”?

The problem, however, is easily solved if we recall another distinctive feature of Husserl’s phenomenology.

Phenomenological descriptions are never brute reports of facts. And, quite certainly, this cannot be the case when the description aims at the ontological relation between the pure nothingness of the Human-Reality and the pure identical trans-phenomenal-Being. On the one hand, literary fictions are precisely—as suggested by Husserl—the necessary devices to turn an empirical fact into something carrying the phenomenological weight of a self-showing essence. On the other, as we have seen, Sartre often insists that we constantly experience a given phenomenon that is not the whole (identical) Being but a given way through which the Being appears to me as being so and so. This latter point is of the utmost importance to understand another aspect of Sartre’s appropriation of Husserl’s phenomenology.

In this manner and despite all possible comparison with Calvino’s novel, where at least in some sense the knight is “someone” who tries to be something, Sartre considers the For-itself not an “empty-being” (something one could see and report about) but as a “non-being” whose very “mode of being” tends to be achieved in the unachievable form of Existence. As the For-itself is free to nihilate the Being in-itself, he/she exists precisely insofar as he/she is not an identical Being. As it is meant to depict a “metastable” (metastable) form of realization (Sartre 1943, 104/68), Sartre’s phenomenological ontology leads not to a descriptive classification of facts/essences, but rather to an existentia psychoanalysis (which develops the ontological features of the being for-itself) and to a crit of the principles of the Dialectical reason (which presents the epistemological conclusions of the ontological principles of the Being in-itself) as it appears via adumbrations to a given consciousness, which in turn appears to itself in a given situation of Being.

Thus, Sartre’s “phenomenological ontology” is not a systematic work guided by merely theoretical concerns. It is rather meant to account for and start from every dimension of our life and our world as interwoven; dimensions that are captured by a suitably combined strategy of conceptualization and metaphorization. Accordingly, Sartre’s essays written after Being and Nothingness—and often labeled as “non-phenomenological”—now appear under a new light.
Neither following the dogmatic principles of a realistic philosophy, nor indulging in any idealistic form of “immanentism”, Sartre’s later work could now fittingly be considered as an attempt to further stretch the limits of phenomenology.

From now on, Sartre will not simply apply phenomenology to ontology but to all areas of human life whose principles are ontological and founded on phenomenological method.

55.5. Beyond ontology, still phenomenology?
Questions of (phenomenological) method

In his impressive book *The Family Idiot* (1971–72), Sartre directly inscribes the concrete case of Flaubert within the scope of his previous book *Search for a Method* (1957).

But what is the method he is talking about?

Sartre’s writings now focus on the life of one single individual or a group. And such life is questioned with respect to its “truth”, whose understanding is related to the dialectical movement of being and knowing. Despite the apparent differences, the conceptuality spelled out in *Being and Nothingness* is clearly active even in these later texts.

Neither the for-itself nor the Human-Reality are able to reach pure identity—that is to be realized, achieved, completed. Accordingly, “truth” (be it of an individual or a group) has to be realized through a historical process, either a single existence or the whole history of Human-Reality. As Sartre stresses in the Preface of the essay *Search for a Method*, later included in the first tome of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), “if such a thing as Truth can exist in anthropology, it must be Truth that has become, and so it must make itself a totalization” (Sartre 1957, 10/xxxiv).

Acknowledging the fact that in this sense, reason has been understood as dialectic only since Hegel and Marx, Sartre does not have the ambition to rediscover or revisit Dialectics in a new fashion. He rather aims at providing a “critique” of it, a critique of dialectical reason recalling that of the “analytic reason at the end of the 18th Century when its legitimacy was threatened” (Sartre 1957, 15/2).

The importance of Kant’s *Critique* of (pure) reason and its analytic (and eventually empirical) function is not only related to the development of post-Kantian Idealism and Romanticism. Its greater relevance rather lies in the fact that, since then, it is widely accepted that we have the right to study a man, a group of men, or a human being in the synthetic totality of his significance and his reference point in the process of totalization (droit d’étudier un homme, un groupe d’hommes ou un objet humain dans la totalité synthétique de ses significations et de ses références à la totalisation en cours).

(Sartre 1957, 15/2)

Thus, Sartre’s initial claim is not that reason has to be dialectic, but rather that one has to acknowledge the fact that reason has become dialectic. One still needs, however, to provide an ontological ground for this fact. And Sartre finds it in the fact that Human-Reality is essentially unable to be what it is, but has only to become what it is. In other words, what Sartre is doing here is to provide a strong phenomenological-ontological basis to Dialectical reason.

In doing so Sartre doesn’t merely assume that a given change happened in the History of Philosophy at a certain time in a certain place (18th-century Germany). By remaining faithful to his “idea of Intentionality” as the position of the irreducible Transcendence (now also called “Otherness”), which consciousness or Human-Reality are always and necessarily related to,
Sartre makes explicit the phenomenological framework within which his critique of dialectical reason has to be developed.

Thus, it is safe to say that the late Sartre did not turn into a Hegelian or a Marxist, but always remained a Phenomenologist. In fact, Sartre’s critique of Hegel, developed in *Being and Nothingness*, is still valid: “the totalization is never achieved and the totality exists at best only in the form of a detotalized totality” ([la totalisation n’est jamais achevée et que la totalité n’existe au mieux qu’à titre de totalité détotalisée]) (Sartre 1957, 67/78; 1983, 68/88).

Leaning on Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel, Sartre stresses that it is only thanks to Human Beings that Dialectics is introduced within nature. For nature is, in itself, essentially non-dialectical and governed by the pure principle of identity of the Being-in-itself. In other words, if identity is not dialectical, dialectics can only exist as related to negativity. Accordingly, reality is dialectical only because the natural world (of the In-itself) is inserted within a human world (of the For-itself). However, since the In-itself necessarily resists Dialectics, the latter cannot complete its process of totalization.

Thus, echoing the Kantian distinction between phenomenon (sphere of knowledge) and Metaphysics of pure reason, Sartre expands from the Critique of Analytic Reason to the Critique of Dialectical Reason and tries to ground ontologically the fact that no process of totalization could ever be achieved. However, such impossibility is not grounded on the legitimate principles of Knowledge (as in Kant) but on the structural principles of Being. And since Sartre’s ontology aims at legitimating the irreducibility of the identic Being in-itself to the For-itself, it implies at the same time that the In-itself is irreducible to an achieved historical process. Again, the concepts of phenomenology supersede both the language of Kant and that of Hegel.

But, if this is correct, what kind of “unexpected” phenomenologist is the late Sartre?

One could say that, against Husserl, Sartre has now developed an ontology that is still based on his early idea of phenomenology and intentionality. So, at least from this specific standpoint, nothing new could be found in Sartre’s late position with respect to Husserlian phenomenology. Against Heidegger, however, Sartre has now developed an ontology which strongly requires an anthropology; an anthropology that is not ontology itself, but is based on ontological-phenomenological principles. And, more specifically, an anthropology whose core is represented by a critique (i.e. an epistemology) of Dialectical reason that is consistent with the ontological principles it is based on. Now if one follows the pattern going through a (phenomenological) Ontology to a (phenomenological) Anthropology and ultimately to a (phenomenological) Epistemology, one has clearly mapped the borders of Sartre’s way to phenomenology.

Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* was supposed to end by addressing the problems of morality. The task of addressing morality from the standpoint of a phenomenological ontology remained unfulfilled for more than fifteen years. In this sense, the examination of dialectical reason could be seen precisely as the achievement of such task. It is thanks to the concept of “detotalized totalities” that a critique of Reason appears to be finally able to deal with the moral dimension of human reality as the ongoing history of an unachievable synthesis.

### 55.6. Idios and idioi

The last step brings us from a phenomenological account of the history of humanity to the history of one human being. It is, again, the dialectic quest for a constantly “detotalized totality” that ultimately leads Sartre to consider the work of Flaubert. And, as already anticipated, he does so within the framework of what he calls “existential psychoanalysis”.

Who is Flaubert, the man?—Sartre asks (Sartre 1971–72).
Whereas one could begin by imagining a sharp difference between objective facts (as Flaubert’s birth certificate stating that he was born in Rouen in 1821) and reports of feelings and thoughts (such as Flaubert’s intimate confessions, written down over one of the thirteen volumes of his published Correspondence), Sartre maintains that both documents are equally relevant to answer the question about Flaubert, the man. What will bring these elements together is again the narrative device of a hybrid biographical novel as the literary counterpart of the philosophical project of an existential psychoanalysis. The task is daunting: capturing “one” life in its ultimate singularity and inner becoming. The ultimate phenomenological description, as it were.

As a result, Sartre’s Flaubert appears to be a living demonstration of the fact that knowledge demands a dynamic dialectical consideration in which we must assume that any given individual has to be “called a singular universal being”. Carrying over the manifold levels of understanding of his analysis, Sartre shows in quite rigorous terms how an individual singular life is precisely a non-totalized and non-totalizable totality.

Thus, for Sartre, calling Flaubert the “Family Idiot” is not indulging in a disrespectful remark. Echoing the Ancient Greek word “idios” (meaning “particular”), Sartre now tries to account for the passive-active individuation of Flaubert in which he distinguishes his “constitution” and “personalization” from any other member of his family, and ultimately from any other existed, or existing, presently or in the future, human being.

Who is Flaubert, the man, then? If, as Sartre puts it, “a man is nothing more than an individual”, it cannot be but an “idiot”. The existential psychoanalysis is thus ultimately geared to the idea of a phenomenology of idiocy, i.e. of the untotaled totality that each of us is; a project whose first realization can be found already in the provocative opening sentence of his early essay Baudelaire where is said that, despite the appearances, Charles Baudelaire “lived just the life he deserved” (Sartre 1947, 17ff./15 ff.).

Conclusion

Navigating through Sartre’s works, from his early essays written in the 1930s to his last essays on which Sartre had been working until his death, it seems we have never lost the thread of Phenomenology. Intentionality could certainly be considered the essence of Sartre’s “Idea of Phenomenology”, and the latter represents a constant leitmotive of his work. Yet such leitmotive varies in numerous ways. From the psychological (eidetic and empirical) descriptions of the ego, emotions or imagination; through the project of an overall ontology of the For-Itself and the In-Itself; to the progressive discovery of epistemic and normative principles anchored in our most concrete structures of human life; taking the form of a critical-historical study where a phenomenological-ontology of relation (a discourse from and upon the absolute-relative Being of the transphenomenal being) turns into a critique of dialectics; throughout the vicissitudes and adjustments required by each specific stage of Sartre’s enquiry—one can certainly find a pattern of unity in Sartre’s thinking that could soundly be called “phenomenology”.

This pattern ultimately leads to the irreducible yet not self-existing “Relative” (be it a “transcendence”, a “relative being”, “alterity”, the “In-itself”, “Nature”, etc.) to which Human beings, collectively and individually, are deeply and essentially rooted. And this is what should be unambiguously acknowledged as Sartre’s major contribution to phenomenology.
Jean-Paul Sartre

References