The Sartrean Mind

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Sartre and the transcendental tradition

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Introduction

That Kant was the founding father of the transcendental tradition is difficult to contest. Perhaps equally difficult is to exaggerate Kant’s significance for Western philosophy starting with the eighteenth century. But how far does the transcendental tradition extend and does it also include Sartre’s philosophy? In what follows, I am going to argue that Sartre is a central representative of this tradition, that his early philosophy shares with the representatives of this tradition some significant aspects, particularly methodological in character, but that an attempt to attribute to him a position even closer to the transcendental tradition fails, although paradoxically it highlights a further feature that he shares with transcendentalism.

The founding act of the transcendental tradition

Kant’s reflection on the following assumptions of pre-philosophical common sense can be considered as the founding act of the transcendental tradition. One assumption is that there is a real world, a world which exists independently from us. A second assumption is that this world is knowable to us at least in part. Finally, pre-philosophical common sense assumes that knowledge takes place when already constituted objects of the world affect a subject’s cognitive functions.

Let us assume that an object, which is constituted independently from the knowing subject, would impress itself on the subject’s mind. In order for the result to be knowledge, we would have to assume that the impression left by the object would be an accurate representation of the object. In other words, we would have to assume that we are appropriately receptive to it. This presupposes an already existing link between the knowing subject and reality. If we explained knowledge not by how objects impinge on our cognitive capacities, but by the way in which the mind reaches out to the object and forms a representation of it, we would need again to assume that the mind can accurately locate the object and ‘read’ it. This would assume once again an already existing link between the knowing subject and reality. This leaves us with the task of explaining how we can have knowledge. Call this the Problem of Knowledge.

If we reject the assumption that the real world is at least in part knowable to us, we end up with skepticism. If we go further and reject the assumption that there is a real world, we obtain solipsism. In both cases, the Problem of Knowledge dissolves. Yet, if while reflecting on these
two assumptions, we do not reject them, then we are faced with the Problem of Knowledge. Kant does not find justificatory value in a “preformation system” (B167), that is, a guarantee (for instance, given by God) that we are properly receptive to reality or that what our mind locates and represents from reality is an accurate representation. Asserting such a guarantee presupposes knowledge of reality, that is, presupposes what we are trying to explain.

These particular assumptions of pre-philosophical common sense are at work in the accounts provided by both rationalists and empiricists. Rationalists assume that ideas already existing in our minds correspond to the features of reality (for instance, for Leibniz, there is a pre-established harmony between our ideas and the reality of the world). Empiricists take our representation of the world to be given by the sensory data produced by the world’s impinging on our senses, and the assumption is, again, that this representation is an accurate representation of reality. In both cases, we assume that which we are trying to explain. The point is not that it is false to assume the pre-existing link between reality and the knowing subject or the accuracy of our representation of reality; the point is that this is an assumption, for which we do not yet have a justification. Moreover, in order for us to provide such a justification, we would need to take a perspective beyond our representation or, in other words, beyond any particular perspective – and this is impossible for us.

Through his Copernican revolution, Kant acknowledges this problem and suggests a new approach. The assumption, which Kant thinks is not justified or even not justifiable, is that we know the real world (that is, a world constituted independently from us), because we can form accurate representations of the objects of this world. This assumption is similar to the Ptolemaic model of a static Earth from the perspective of which we perceive the movements of the other planets; what we perceive (for instance, the speed with which the Moon rotates) are properties those planets have independently from the way we experience them.

By contrast, according to Kant, what we know are objects of a world, which may well exist independently from us; yet, the knowledge we acquire of this world is not independent from the way we experience it. What we know are not objects constituted independently from us, but objects which we experience as having certain properties, which depend on the way we experience them. For instance, objects have certain temporal or spatial properties, and we can only sense objects in space and/or time; we may understand an object as a cause or effect, as substance or property, as related or independent, and this is how we necessarily understand the world. Hence, what we experience, the objects of our experience, depends on these structures of experience. This account is similar to the Copernican model in astronomy. What we perceive with regard to other planets are properties (for instance, the speed with which the Moon rotates), which depend on the Earth’s own movement around its axis.

We now have a sketch of the main philosophical moves introduced by the transcendental tradition; the next section will present a brief account of this tradition.

The transcendental tradition

Consider the following (very attractive) reading of the transcendental tradition. According to this reading, what is distinctive about the transcendental tradition is primarily methodological in character. In other words, philosophers who genuinely represent this tradition do not aim to produce knowledge about the world or to author a metaphysical theory (a theory about what really exists), but they adopt a common method or approach of reflecting critically on how knowledge and metaphysics are possible.

As inaugurated by Descartes and pursued by the British Empiricists, modern philosophy can be seen as working with the assumptions of the existence of a real world, independent from the
knowing subject, and knowable at least in part. It can also be seen as an effort to acquire such knowledge of the real world. This is in fact the continuation of the ancient philosophical attempt to formulate a metaphysics, that is, a theory about what there really is in the world. The formulation of a metaphysical theory is usually prefaced by an investigation on how such knowledge can be acquired, with a specific focus for modern philosophy on our cognitive capacities.

As we have seen, Descartes and the rationalists explain the possibility of knowledge through a connection between ideas and the properties of objects in the real world. Empiricists, such as Hume, rely on the narrative of a connection between these properties and the representation we form when affected by those objects. In both cases, we have the same assumption of a real world consisting of objects constituted independently of the knowing subject, and which the subject investigates either rationally or empirically.

By contrast, on the reading considered here, transcendental philosophers, such as Kant and Husserl, take the critical reflection on knowledge to be an end in itself. For them, genuine knowledge about the world can be found in sciences. Transcendental philosophy does not aim to challenge sciences and produce better or new knowledge; it aims to critically reflect on sciences, where ‘critical’ here (usually capitalised) should be understood as a project of understanding what knowledge is and what the limits of our knowledge are. That is, given the Copernican revolution in philosophy, the Kantian Problem of Knowledge becomes the question of the conditions which make knowledge possible, that is, the question about the structures of the knowing subject through which the objects to be known are constituted and their knowledge is made possible. In this sense, genuine representatives of the transcendental tradition do not aim to formulate an alternative metaphysical position to the traditional alternatives offered by realism and idealism.

One defining feature for the transcendental tradition is the concern for the objects of experience. The distinction between a reality independent from our experience (the reality of the objects in themselves or things in themselves, according to Kant) and the objects of experience as they appear or as they are intended (phenomena, in Kant’s terminology) shows a surprising continuity between Kant’s Critical philosophy and Husserl’s phenomenology. This need not be in tension with Husserl’s famous rejection of the Kantian things in themselves. What Husserl appears to deny is a notion of things in themselves, as presented by a ‘Two-World’ interpretation of Kant. What he seems to want to bracket (but without rejecting) is a reality corresponding to a notion of things in themselves implicit in a ‘Two-Aspect’ interpretation.

According to the Two-World interpretation, things in themselves are the reality behind each phenomenon; there is the phenomenal world of things which appear to us according to the conditions of our experience, and there is a noumenal world which gives reality to the phenomenal world through supposed links between phenomena and the corresponding noumena. According to the Two-Aspect interpretation, by contrast, there is one world of objects of our experience, which can be considered from two different perspectives. There is the perspective of the conditions of experience, which make objects possible for us (space, time, and various other structures of the mind/consciousness to which we refer through phenomenal predicates). In that case, we are dealing with phenomena. But there is also a different perspective: the objects of our experience considered independently from the conditions of experience, namely, the objects considered as they are in themselves independently from the phenomenal predicates we usually ascribe to them. In that case, we are dealing with noumena.

Let us assume it is right that Husserl’s criticism of Kant’s notion of things in themselves applies to this notion on a Two-World, rather than Two-Aspect, interpretation. If so, then there is available an interpretation of the Kantian notion of a thing in itself (namely, the Two-Aspect one), which is compatible with Husserl’s phenomenology. Thus, when Husserl brackets the
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existence of the objects of experience, he brackets in fact a particular way of being of those objects or perhaps, even more precisely, a particular way of considering these objects: what is bracketed is the naïve attitude of taking the objects of our experience (the objects as intended) to be objects constituted independently from the way we intend them – we take them to be the intended objects, not the objects as intended. By taking them to be independent from the way we intend them, we miss the manners of their givenness, that is, the phenomenal nature of the various predicates we use to refer to them.

Hence, on the reading of the transcendental tradition considered so far, the phenomenal predicates through which we acquire knowledge of the world do not belong to the thing in itself or the bracketed object. It follows that our critical reflection on knowledge must focus on phenomena. The purpose is not to deny phenomena, but to understand them. Moreover, this understanding of the phenomena is not meant to reduce the world to the conditions of its appearance. Such a reduction would turn the method presupposed by the transcendental tradition into a metaphysics. In the next section, I will focus on what I take to be a significant claim made by the transcendental tradition. I will then (Sections 5–7) focus on the extent to which Sartre endorses this claim in the context of three interpretations in the literature. An evaluation of those interpretations will enable us to determine more precisely Sartre’s place within the transcendental tradition.

A significant claim of the transcendental tradition

Consider the following aspect of the transcendental tradition, an aspect formulated in the previous section:

(TT) Phenomenal predicates are not applicable to things as they are in themselves, and, even if they were, this would not be something we could establish.7

We can take phenomenal predicates to be given by the structures of sensibility (the a priori intuitions of space and time) or by the structure of the understanding (the various categories, including causality and substance) or both or, even more generally, by the structures of subjectivity, consciousness or the experiencing agent. These structures of the experiencing agent are taken by the transcendental tradition to be conditions which make our experience possible, since our experience is of things (phenomena) which are in space or time and which often are in, say, causal or substance-property relations or of which we are simply aware as necessarily meeting certain conditions.8

According to the account of the transcendental tradition presented in the previous section, we take things in themselves to be things as they are independently from the way we experience them. Let us assume that we sense things spatially and temporally, and we understand them categorially. If things in themselves are independent from our way of sensing or understanding them, then they are independent from phenomenal predicates.9 (TT) can be seen as a very likely implication of the definitions of phenomena and things (or objects) in themselves.

If phenomenal predicates are not applicable to things in themselves, then we cannot have knowledge of things in themselves, since to know, for Kant, requires both the sensibility and the understanding. We can only think of things in themselves and we will usually think of them negatively by contrast with appearances or phenomena. For instance, we experience phenomena in space and time, and we think that noumena are not spatial or temporal. Hence, (TT) implies this very recognisably Kantian claim concerning the limits of our knowledge. At the same time, it applies to the recognisably Husserlian claim that the reality we naturally attribute to phenomena, a reality thought to be independent from their structures of givenness, is that of objects in themselves or objects which are intended, not objects as intended. Hence, phenomenal
predicates are not applicable to things as they are independently of the experiencing agent and even if they were, we could not establish it.

(TT) makes reference to the distinction between phenomena or appearances and things in themselves. There is, however, an analogous distinction with which it should not be confused. This is a distinction between objects of our experience which are mere appearances, on the one hand, and, on the other, objects of our experience which are real (that is, empirically real). One illustration of mere appearances is usually given by illusions. In the case of the illusion of an oasis in the desert, for instance, we can say that it appears to us to be out there, but that, once we try to get to it to quench our thirst, we discover it is not really there, but is a figment of our imagination.

We can also illustrate mere appearances by reference to a specific part of any empirically real experience: consider, for instance, the computer in front of me; if I make a claim about those visual sensations and perceptions which lead me to conclude that I have a computer in front of me, I focus on mere appearance; if I make claims about the computer itself, then I deal with a thing which empirically is in itself, and does not depend entirely (in the way an illusion does) on the mere appearance of the computer as provided by my visual perception. Hence, the second (empirical) distinction is between (a) the object of our experience, as presented by our sensations and perceptions (whether or not such an object is an illusion), and (b) the experienced object (an object admittedly given by our visual sensations and perceptions).

By contrast, the distinction between objects as they appear to us and objects as they are in themselves marks a more fundamental separation between things as perceived by us, say, in space and time, on the one hand, and, on the other, things as they are independently from the way they appear to us. Phenomenal properties are then structures of the world qua experienced, manners in which we experience the world or in which the world is given to us, rather than properties of objects in themselves.

This clarificatory note will be particularly important in Section 7. For the moment, however, let us turn to a reading of Sartre, which claims that Sartre’s connection with the transcendental tradition is weak.

Sartre’s Weak Transcendentalism

It would be difficult to deny that Sartre is significantly influenced by the transcendental tradition. There will, of course, always be views to the contrary, but a common position presented in the literature is that the early Sartre defends a version of transcendental philosophy. What seems to be uncertain is how close this version of transcendental philosophy is to the transcendental tradition. In the following three sections, I will examine three interpretations of the nature of Sartre’s phenomenological ontology, interpretations which have implications for the way in which we see the relation between Sartre’s existentialism and the transcendental tradition. We can call these views Weak, Mild and Strong Transcendentalisms depending on how strong they see Sartre’s connection with the transcendental tradition.

So, to begin with, consider a reading of Sartre which holds that it is plausible to see Sartre’s existentialism as putting forward a limited version of transcendental philosophy. Thus, we may be able to identify certain transcendental aspects in Sartre’s philosophy, but there is an important obstacle to a simple reading of Sartre as belonging to the transcendental tradition. The obstacle consists of some significant anti-idealist claims Sartre formulates in Being and Nothingness. These claims suggest he would reject one feature of the transcendental tradition. The rejected feature is the constitution of phenomena by the a priori structures of the world qua experienced (to which we usually refer through the phenomenal predicates introduced in Section 2, as given by the structures of the experiencing agent).
Thus, as we have seen, one important way in which the transcendental tradition parts way with traditional modern philosophy is through the view that knowledge is not the result of an attempt by the subject to grasp the features of already constituted objects; according to the transcendental tradition, the subject contributes to the constitution of the object of knowledge and knowledge is possible precisely because knowledge is given by instantiations of the general conditions which make possible the objects of knowledge. Thus, we can know the particular position of an object and its features at a particular moment in time, because we constitute the objects of knowledge as spatio-temporal entities with specific features, which are instantiations of the framework of the structures of the world qua experienced (for instance, the object may be a property or the holder of the property).

On the Weak Transcendentalist reading, Sartre disagrees with this aspect of the transcendental tradition. Consider, for instance, the following claim in *Being and Nothingness*:

> there is no point in replying that in fact subjectivity implies objectivity and that it constitutes itself in constituting the objective; we have seen that subjectivity is powerless to constitute the objective. (2003[1976]: 18/17) [Moreover], … consciousness could no ‘construct’ the transcendent by objectivising elements borrowed from its subjectivity. (2003[1976]: 194/133)

We can understand these claims as building a case against the view that phenomena are constituted by the structures of the experiencing agent. Because consciousness cannot construct phenomena on the basis of the structures of the subject, we cannot obtain objectivity (empirically real phenomena) from subjectivity (the elements of consciousness which make experience possible). This understanding of Sartre’s position places him in the camp of Weak Transcendentalists, who share some elements of the transcendental tradition, but reject a significant aspect of the transcendental tradition (namely, that phenomena are constituted by the structures of the world qua experienced).

If we refer back to the discussion of the Kantian Problem of Knowledge, in Section 2, we can see that Weak Transcendentalism is in tension with Kant’s solution to the Problem of Knowledge, and in particular with Kant’s Copernican revolution in philosophy. However, according to Weak Transcendentalism, Sartre does see a correlation between the intelligibly differentiated object-world and the structures of consciousness – he does share with non-realists the claim to a connection between phenomena and the experiencing agent. One way to account for this correlation, which would offer an alternative to Kant’s Copernican revolution is through the very constitution of the human subject and her world, in accordance with a Hegelian or Heideggerian model.

Thus, instead of assuming that the objects in the world are constituted by the human subject through the structures of the experiencing agent (the conditions which make possible their experience), on the Weak Transcendentalist reading, Sartre regards both human subject and world as already constituted by the imperative of a non-conscious and trans-phenomenal being, a being Sartre allegedly thinks is already there as part of the being of consciousness.

On this reading of Sartre’s phenomenological ontology, the structures of the human subject are conditions which make possible the subject’s knowledge of phenomena, but they are not conditions which make phenomena themselves possible. Phenomena themselves are already constituted, in accordance with the imperative of the trans-phenomenal being, at the moment when the human subject and her world emerge together. On this reading, Sartre can be seen as exposing the following (weak) version of transcendental philosophy, a version committed to a claim which qualifies (TT):

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Phenomenal predicates are not applicable to things in themselves (and even if they were, this would not be something we could establish), but not on account of their being constitutive of phenomena.

Consider a particular object, such as a package of tobacco (Sartre’s example). On the Weak Transcendentalist reading, we are able to experience this differentiated object, since there is a correlation between the way in which the world was structured into differentiated objects when it emerged regulated by the imperative of trans-phenomenal being, on the one hand, and, on the other, the way consciousness was structured when it emerged together with the world under the same imperative. It follows that, when we experience, say, a package of tobacco (we feel it in our pocket, for instance), we experience an object which has the same specific properties it had before our experience of it.

There is therefore a sense (temporal priority) in which this object is independent for its constitution from the way we experience it. Yet, recall that we can experience the object with the specific properties it already has, because we share a common structure with the world and, hence, also with any object in the world. Hence, there is another sense (normative co-dependence) in which the object’s constitution is linked with the structures of my consciousness, since they are both structured on the basis of the same normative requirements (of the aforementioned imperative). If so, then the question of how this object is, when considered independently from my consciousness and the consciousness-related properties which define the object will get the same answer as before: the object is a thing in itself. This is the sense in which phenomenal predicates do not apply to things in themselves, but the reason they do not apply is not that the structure of consciousness would directly constitute the object, as we have seen in the case of the transcendental tradition.

However, it is sufficient to examine in more detail Sartre’s position to see that the quotations above need a different interpretation than that offered by Weak Transcendentalism. First of all, on the Weak Transcendentalist reading, particularly through the Hegelian-Heideggerian answer to the Problem of Knowledge, the relation between consciousness and the world becomes a mystery – it simply assumes an “imperative” of trans-phenomenal being. By contrast, Sartre uses precisely this objection to argue against other accounts, for instance, Husserl’s (Sartre, 2003[1976]: 15/15). Following an argument, which relies on what looks like a version of Kant’s Problem of Knowledge, Sartre claims that Husserl’s account makes the relation between consciousness and the world an insoluble problem.

Secondly, Sartre’s descriptions of knowledge, in Section 3 (“Transcendence”) of Part II (“Being-for-itself”) of Being and Nothingness (2003[1976]: 194–241/133–64) show quite clearly that he regards the knowing relation between the for-itself and the in-itself as a way of being of the for-itself, which does not simply establish a ‘matching’ relationship between consciousness and the world as already similarly structured; consciousness constitutes phenomena through relations of internal negation, which reveal particular objects of knowledge, while at the same time constituting the experiencing agent through engagement of particular structures of consciousness, such as temporality, spatiality, quality and quantity, potentiality and instrumentality.

The alternative interpretation of the claims above, therefore, is simply that Sartre rejects the classical version of idealism, which reduces reality to ideas, and which attempts then to reconstruct reality and objectivity from those ideas and their subjectivity. Moreover, Sartre’s claim concerning the primitive upsurge of the regions of being is better understood as a claim concerning the emergence of the for-itself and the in-itself, in their fundamental distinction as consciousness and world, but without any additional differentiations. A completely undifferentiated being is the source of the upsurge of being-for-itself and being-in-itself through the negation which is presupposed by a non-thetic (self)-consciousness and which constitutes the for-itself or consciousness as a type of being which is not that of the in-itself or the world. Unlike
undifferentiated being, there is here only a basic relation of negation between the in-itself and
the for-itself, which, however, includes no further differentiation at that stage.

If this is correct, then Sartre’s place in the transcendental tradition could not be understood
along the lines of a Weak Transcendentalism. Is there an alternative?

Sartre’s Mild Transcendentalism

Consider a reading of Sartre’s phenomenological ontology, Mild Transcendentalism, which
regards it as a version of transcendental idealism that is closer to the transcendental tradition than
we would expect on the basis of the Weak Transcendentalist construal.17 Basically, on this read-
ing, what made Sartre’s early ontology a limited version of transcendental idealism, according to
Weak Transcendentalism (namely, the view that, in Sartre, the a priori structures of consciousness
are not constitutive of phenomena) no longer applies. Instead, on the Mild Transcendentalist
reading, the structures of human consciousness or of the experiencing agent (or, in general,
the structures of the mind), are constitutive of appearances. This gives us a richer aspect of the
transcendental tradition:

(MT) Phenomenal predicates are not applicable to things in themselves (and even if they
were, this would not be something we could establish), on account of the constitutive role
played by the structures of mind.

In the previous section, we have seen that Sartre can be interpreted as denying (MT). We
have also seen, however, that the alternative reconstruction of his position along the lines of
a Hegelian–Heideggerian response to the Kantian Problem of Knowledge goes against some
significant aspects of his phenomenological analysis in Being and Nothingness. I have argued that
those claims Sartre makes, which can be interpreted as in tension with (MT), could be under-
stood as formulated against a classical version of metaphysical idealism. Construed in this way,
Sartre’s position would be compatible with a commitment to (MT).

So far, I have simply taken for granted that Sartre’s phenomenological ontology represents a
version of transcendental idealism and I have started to examine how close to the transcendental
tradition his early existentialism is. But does Sartre hold a distinction between appearances or
phenomena, on the one hand, and, on the other, things in themselves or objects in themselves?
Moreover, does Sartre think there are structures of the experiencing agent, which are a priori
conditions of experience and constitutive of phenomena? Sartre’s apparent criticism of some
relevant Kantian terms seems to be again in tension with Mild Transcendentalism. The claim I
will defend here will be that, in a similar way to Husserl, Sartre relies on an inaccurate inter-
pretation of these Kantian claims and offers objections to a position Kant himself would reject.

We can begin with some fundamental claims of Sartre’s analysis of temporality: that tem-
porality arises with the for-itself, that (a Heideggerian tenet) the present has priority over the
past and future, that a principle of identity is needed by which momentary consciousnesses are
unified into one consciousness that endures through time.18 We can then move on to a discus-
sion of space and time as conditions of experience. First, we can conclude that, for Sartre, space
is not transcendentally real: space is not “a being” (2003[1976]: 207/141) and is “the ideality of
synthesis”. (2003[1976]: 207/141) Rather than being a property, which belongs to things inde-
pendently from our way of being conscious of them, space, for Sartre, would be a condition
which makes possible our perception of objects.

Secondly, space is transcendentally ideal. Space is “dependent” upon the for-itself, since it
depends on temporality, which is the structure of the for-itself. (Darnell 2006: 127) The same
applies to time: for Sartre, both space and time are conditions of experience and depend on
the for-itself; space and time exist only with the existence of human beings. In a similar way
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to Kant’s and Husserl’s accounts, for Sartre, time is a structure of the world qua experienced, whereas space is also part of this structure, but applies to entities which are distinct from the conscious being that perceives them.

We have yet to discuss whether there is, in Sartre, a Kantian distinction between appearances and things in themselves. Consider the following two ways of looking at the in-itself: “as ontologically independent being-in-itself and as objects given by consciousness.” (Darnell 2006: 131) As independent from the for-itself, being-in-itself exists as an undifferentiated being, a being which simply is and cannot be in a particular manner or other. Being in a particular manner presupposes a distinction between being in that way and being differently, a distinction which can only be introduced by the for-itself. There is here an assumption which it is worth noting, namely, that the for-itself can conceive of the in-itself concretely (or not abstractly) only by imposing some determination. As Hazel Barnes notes, the for-itself “introduces significance, differentiation, form, meaning and our own purposes” (Barnes 1992: 14, quoted in Darnell 2006: 132).

Hence, the second way of understanding the in-itself is as being molded into a general structure, when consciousness gets to know the in-itself. Once this structure is given, objects are distinguished from their ground. However, by giving structure to the in-itself, the for-itself does not create, or add anything to, being, but only modifies being. First, the for-itself is ontologically the same as the in-itself. The for-itself only introduces negation in the manner of being of the in-itself. As we have seen, independently from the for-itself, the in-itself simply is in an undifferentiated state. Secondly, however, for the for-itself, the in-itself can only exist differentiated into the objects of our world and temporally.

If we understand the first sense of the in-itself as referring to things in themselves, and the second sense, to appearances, to non-conscious phenomena, then we have a defense of the claim that Sartre, like Husserl, also has a Kantian distinction between appearances or phenomena and things in themselves. Let us now consider two objections to this interpretation that Sartre himself seems to formulate.

Both objections are terminological: ‘phenomenon’ should not be understood in the Kantian sense as referring to phenomena (2003[1943]: 4/7), and the in–itself should not be understood as a Kantian noumenon (2003[1943]: 4/7). To answer this, we can read Sartre as interpreting Kant along the lines of the Two-World construal of the distinction between phenomena and noumena, where the phenomenon corresponds to what we have called above mere appearance and the noumenon is a distinct entity connected in some way to the phenomenon – these are the notions of phenomenon and noumenon Sartre attributes to Kant and rejects. By contrast, we can defend the interpretation of a Kantian distinction between phenomena and things in themselves in Sartre along the lines of a Two-Aspect approach: the noumenon would refer to the in–itself as it would be independently from the for-itself, and the phenomenon, to the in–itself as it appears to the for-itself.

We have seen that Sartre does not adopt the Hegelian-Heideggerian answer to the Kantian Problem of Knowledge. Instead, he can be read as offering a solution that avoids Cartesian realism and Berkeleian idealism in the form of transcendental idealism. There are various issues that need to be explored in order to determine more precisely the kind of transcendental idealism Sartre puts forward. For instance, there is a dominant epistemological interpretation of transcendental idealism, but Sartre claims that Being and Nothingness is not strictly speaking a work of epistemology. There is also the issue of whether anything corresponding to Kant’s notion of the categories of the understanding could be found in Sartre (or Husserl). But the conclusion is that, although Sartre does not provide “a fully developed account of transcendental idealism,” “there is enough developed in Sartre that this theory is attributable to him” (Darnell 2006: 135).
The Mild Transcendentalist interpretation of Sartre places him at the center of the transcendental tradition. On this interpretation, not only does Sartre subscribe to (TT), but he also rejects (WT) and adopts (MT) — that is, a view of phenomenal categories as applicable to phenomena as a result of the constitution of phenomena by the a priori structures of the consciousness. In the next section, however, we will see that there is an interpretation that identifies further similarities between Sartre and Kant (and potentially the transcendental tradition).

Sartre’s Strong Transcendentalism

Let us now consider a view, which attributes to Sartre not only transcendental idealism, but also transcendental phenomenalism. Generally stated, phenomenalism is the view that the objects of a subject’s experience are the subject’s own representations (Jankowiak 2017: 205). We can understand in what sense this is a transcendental version of phenomenalism by reference to the earlier discussion, at the end of Section 4, of the two distinctions — empirical and transcendental — between appearances and things in themselves.

The reason why the form of phenomenalism attributed to Kant and Sartre is qualified as ‘transcendental’ is that the claim made by phenomenalism holds (allegedly) in Kant’s and Sartre’s philosophies, but only from a transcendental perspective. That is, from the perspective of how things are independently from the manner in which we are conscious of them or experience them, the objects of our experiences (phenomena) are reducible to our own representations. By contrast, from the perspective of our experience, we can certainly distinguish between the reality of some of the objects of our experience and the mere appearance of our impressions or illusions.

In the Introduction to Being and Nothingness, Sartre claims that a new manner, in modern thought, of reducing the existent to the series of appearances which manifest it promises to replace some objectionable dualisms (including a ‘Kantian’ dualism of phenomena and the things in themselves hidden behind phenomena) with a “monism of the phenomenon” (2003[1976]: 3/11). As we have seen in the previous section, Sartre regards the trans-phenomenal being of the phenomena as the being of the particular phenomena under consideration (“this table,” “this package of tobacco,” “this “lamp” – 2003[1976]: 24/29), rather than as a noumenal being hidden behind phenomena. However, he also talks about the being of phenomena as perceived.22 These may suggest an attempt to confer being to mere appearances and to then reduce phenomena to such appearances. In other words, he would regard the subjective impressions of, say, a package of tobacco as effectively the package of tobacco. By contrast, according to the transcendental phenomenalist reading, all Sartre says is that such subjective impressions can be regarded as mere appearances only from the transcendental perspective; from the empirical perspective of the object as perceived, subjective impressions are possibly appearances of real phenomena.

The transcendental phenomenalism that Sartre allegedly shares with Kant and potentially with the entire transcendental tradition represents the view that:

(ST): Phenomenal predicates are not applicable to things in themselves (and even if they were, this would not be something we could establish), on account of the constitutive role played by the structures of mind; in addition, appearances or phenomena can be seen, from one perspective, as empirically real existents and, from another perspective, as mere appearances of the phenomena under consideration.25

According to this reading, Sartre (as well as Kant and potentially the entire transcendental tradition) would see empirically real existents as mere appearances of these existents. This would not reduce the being of the empirically real objects to subjective impressions, since such a reduction would only be acceptable from the transcendental perspective of things as they are...
independently from the way the for-itself perceives them. To the contrary, there is an acknowledgment that empirical objects have reality beyond such impressions (that is, beyond the being of the empirically real objects qua perceived), insofar as these impressions can be regarded as possible appearances of the empirically real objects.

There is, however, a problem with attributing to Sartre (and the transcendental tradition) such a strong transcendentalism. The problem is that, if we accept Sartre’s commitment to transcendental phenomenalism, then we will need to abandon the Two-Aspect interpretation of the transcendental tradition, contrary to the claims, in the previous sections, of the need to rely on such a reading. Thus, according to transcendental phenomenalism, from the transcendental perspective of things as they are in themselves, an empirical object is reducible to the mere impressions of the for-itself or of the experiencing agent; by contrast, from an empirical perspective, the object is not reducible to these impressions, since it may have empirical reality, in the case when it is not an illusion.

For the Two-Aspect interpretation, the (transcendental) distinction between phenomena and things as they are in themselves refers to two aspects of the same objects. For instance, the same package of tobacco may have phenomenal properties from our perspective, but may not, when considered independently from the way we perceive it. Yet, the fact that it is most likely that such predicates would not apply to objects, as they are in themselves (as stated by (TT)), could not lead us to the conclusion that phenomena are reducible to their phenomenal predicates (and, hence, to the various representations we have of them). This is because, potentially, phenomena are the same entities as things in themselves; they are things in themselves qua experienced. On the Two-Aspect interpretation, Transcendental Phenomenalism, therefore, claims that things in themselves qua experienced are reducible to their phenomenal predicates. Yet, as we have seen, only mere appearances are reducible to their phenomenal predicates. What distinguishes mere appearances from phenomena is precisely the empirical reality of the latter.

(ST) includes another confusing feature: it claims that phenomena are reducible to phenomenal predicates from the transcendental perspective, that is, from the perspective of things as they are independently from the way we experience them. Yet, according to the Two-Aspect interpretation, if we consider phenomena as they are independently from the way we experience them, then we end up with things in themselves. Phenomena are the result of looking at the world from our perspective. It is puzzling then to talk about the ontological reducibility of phenomena from the perspective of things in themselves.

Transcendental Phenomenalism would make more sense from within the framework of the Two-World interpretation. There, we have a world of phenomena and a world of things in themselves, and phenomena are linked to corresponding objects in the world of things in themselves. Empirical objects or phenomena acquire their ontological status through this link. We can then unproblematically assert that, if we place ourselves in the world of things in themselves, then empirical objects or phenomena are reducible to mere representations or impressions of the experiencing subjects; if we place ourselves in the empirical world, then non-illusory appearances or phenomena would not be reducible to mere representations or impressions, precisely because they are not illusory.

Given the significance of the Two-Aspect interpretation for the transcendental tradition, we have therefore to reject Transcendental Phenomenalism as an aspect of this tradition.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the transcendental tradition, as presented in this chapter, refers to a number of original and significant thinkers, whose philosophies differ from each other in important
Sartre and the transcendental tradition

respects. Both Sartre and Husserl, for instance, differ starkly from Kant in their accounts of the constitution of phenomena (including their views of the a priori structures of the experiencing agent, the extent to which an exhaustive map of these structures can be drawn, the various types of structure), in their views of systematicity, as well as in many other respects in other areas of philosophy they investigated (for instance, practical philosophy [for a comparison between Kant and Sartre in this area, see Baiasu, 2011] or aesthetics). In this paper, however, my focus has been on the question of how close Sartre’s early philosophy is to the transcendental tradition.

The discussion was pursued by a presentation and evaluation of three hypotheses, which can be found in the literature. Weak Transcendentalism claims that, while Sartre is committed to some important claims, which are part of the transcendental tradition, there is one important aspect of his philosophy which marks a significant distance from this tradition, namely, that phenomena are not constituted by the a priori structures of consciousness. Weak Transcendentalism replaces this view of the constitution of phenomena with a Hegelian-Heideggerian alternative. Problems raised by this alternative interpretation, however, suggest that Mild Transcendentalism is a more adequate reading of Sartre’s position.

According to this reading, Sartre shares with the transcendental tradition various commitments, including a commitment to the constitution of phenomena by the a priori structures of the mind. This suggests that Sartre is committed to some significant distinctions for the transcendental tradition, such as the empirical and transcendental distinctions between phenomena and things in themselves. Moreover, we investigated seemingly critical comments formulated by Sartre in reply to the transcendental tradition. We have seen that a consideration of the distinction between the Two-World and Two-Aspect interpretations of Kant shows that Sartre argues in fact against an interpretation of transcendental philosophy (namely, the Two-World one), which Kant himself would have objected to. A discussion of Sartre’s account of temporality and spatiality also shows that he regards these as structures of consciousness, which are conditions which make possible experience and, hence, are constitutive of the experienced phenomena.

Mild Transcendentalism suggests that Sartre is quite close to the transcendental tradition. However, Strong Transcendentalism advances the hypothesis that he may in fact be even closer. According to Strong Transcendentalism, Kant and Sartre share transcendental phenomenalism – the view that, from a transcendental perspective, phenomena are reducible to mere representations. We have seen, however, that, while Strong Transcendentalism may seem to bring Sartre’s philosophy closer to the tradition, it commits both Sartre and other genuine representatives of the tradition to a view similar to the Two-World interpretation of the transcendental distinction between phenomena and things in themselves. Since the account of the transcendental tradition and some of its representatives sketched in this chapter relies on the Two-Aspect account, the conclusion was that Strong Transcendentalism can be rejected. While this may seem to suggest that Sartre’s philosophy cannot get closer to the transcendental tradition than Mild Transcendentalism allows for, given that the transcendental tradition more generally is incompatible with transcendental phenomenalism, the discussion of Strong Transcendentalism reveals, in fact, a further affinity Sartre has with the transcendental tradition.

Notes

1 Work on this paper began during a period of institutional research leave, when I was visiting at the Uehiro Centre for Practical Philosophy, University of Oxford, and at the Philosophy Department, Warwick University. I am grateful to these institutions for their support. I would like to thank the editors of this volume, particularly Matthew Eshleman, for their patience and support during the relatively lengthy process of bringing the chapter to this stage and especially for some excellent comments and feedback on the paper. Any remaining errors are my own.
Kant calls it “our common understanding” (Bxxii); in what follows, for Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, I will refer to both the English translation and the French original (respectively) from the editions mentioned in the bibliography. For Kant, pagination references are to the German edition of Kant’s works (1900-), apart from references to the *First Critique*, where the A (first edition), B (second edition) convention will be followed; translations used will be listed in the bibliography.

This is how it is usually discussed in the literature and the primary reference is to Kant’s 1772 (21 February) letter to Marcus Herz. (10: 129–35) For a more detailed discussion, see Gardner (1999: 27–29, 33–44).

See David Carr (1999), who offers this reading against Martin Heidegger’s reading (for instance, 1962). For a recent reading indebted to Heidegger, see Jürgen Habermas (1990).

From Kant, to Husserl, Heidegger himself, Wittgenstein, Sartre and Nagel. On Carr’s account, Hegel wrongly questions the metaphysics of transcendental philosophy almost along the same lines as Heidegger will do later (Carr 1999: 102–3); Carr also expresses reservations about including Fichte as a representative of the tradition (Carr 1999: cf. Sebastian Gardner 2010).

Husserl’s distinction in the * Logical Investigations* is between “the object as it is intended and simply the object which is intended” (1970: 578; see Carr 1999: 109).

Michelle Darnell (2006) offers a similar formulation with a focus on spatial predicates.

On some accounts, Kant’s restricted sense of intuition and aprioricity is the result of a focus on the common-sense notion of a thing which affects us sensibly; hence, Kant’s reflection on the naïve, pre-philosophical assumptions concerning our knowledge of the world is not as radical as Husserl’s (Gallagher 1972).

There are significant differences between the way Kant, Husserl and Sartre view the constitution of phenomena and what it means to know phenomena (see also n25 below). Nevertheless, on some accounts, Husserl’s notion of type is considered to be almost identical with Kant’s notion of schema. (Lohmar 2003) Moreover, sometimes, the dynamic of intention and fulfillment is traced back to Kant’s divide between sensibility and the understanding (Elliot 2005).

For this interpretation, see Gardner (2010).

For instance, on Gardner’s account, like Kant, Sartre rejects the metaphysical realist claim that the objects of our experience are things in themselves, as well as a Berkelean version of idealism. Metaphysical realism would regard the structures of the world *qua* experienced as properties of the world as existing independently from experience. Subjective idealism would reject the existence of anything like a world existing independently from experience. In both cases, TT would be false.

For an illustration of this reading, see Darnell (2006).

Darnell’s discussion starts with a characteristically Heideggerian claim by Sartre, namely, that time has priority over space. (Darnell 2006: 116) For a critique of Heidegger’s position, from a Kantian perspective, see Roxana Baiasu (2007). On similarities between Kant’s and Sartre’s views of temporality, see Daniel Herbert (2015).

For an illustration of this reading, see Darnell (2006).

Hence, on Darnell’s account, the in-itself, “as the sheer being which underlies the determination the for-itself imposes onto being-in-itself,” “can never be conceived (besides abstractly) by the for-itself” (Darnell 2006: 131).

Hence Darnell’s conclusion that “*Being and Nothingness* should be read as suggesting a version of transcendental idealism” (Darnell 2006:134).


“Let us note first that there is a being of the thing perceived – *as perceived*” (2003[1976]: 23/27).
23 The exception is given by illusions.

24 According to Aquila, Husserl too defends this type of phenomenalism. On Sartre and Husserl, see also Webber (2018).

25 This is compatible with differences in the ways Sartre and other representatives of the transcendental tradition account for the objective reality of empirical objects – see Aquila (2015: 241–2) for the comparison with Kant.

References


Kant, I. (1900) Kants gesammelte Schriften, ed. By the Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, subsequently Duetsche, now Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaften (originally under the editorship of Wilhelm Dilthey). Berlin: Georg Reimer, subsequently Walter de Gruyter.


