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Sartre's Radicalization of Husserlian Phenomenology

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to *Being and Nothingness*, Jean Paul Sartre sets up a critique of phenomenology, especially that of Edmund Husserl. Sartre discusses the successes and failures of Husserl's phenomenology, and proposes his own "phenomenological ontology" as an alternative. In Sartre's critique, I find two major points of contention with Husserl. Sartre is unsatisfied with Husserl's view of the subjective *hyle* as contents of consciousness, and with Husserl's attributing consciousness to a transcendental ego (10–23).[1] Sartre believes that both are problems because they attribute to consciousness an actual content or substance. Sartre remedies the former problem by insisting that consciousness is a nothing and has no contents. Sartre's solution to the latter problem is to make the ego a referent constituted by way of a totality of reflected instances of consciousness, rather than the subject of one reflective consciousness.

The focus of this paper will be to look at how Sartre attempts to overcome these difficulties that he finds in Husserl's phenomenology. In turn, I will examine the notions of *hyle* and the transcendental ego in Husserl's own work, and Sartre's attempts to overcome these notions. I will then propose that Sartre's system be understood in light of the

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[1]A more complete critique of the transcendental ego and *hyle* is offered in Sartre's *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Although in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre prefers to talk about Husserl's notion of the "cogito," his critique remains centered on Husserl's notion of consciousness as an entity.

phenomenological principles set forth in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness*. Through an examination of Sartre's critique of these concepts and his proposed solutions, I want to show what is involved in Sartre's radicalization of Husserl's original phenomenological principles, and that perhaps Sartre's system is really not as different from Husserl's as it may seem.

Before looking at the elements of Husserl that Sartre did not like, it is important to note two key ideas of Husserl's which Sartre uses as jumping off points. Sartre points out one of these in the very first sentence of *Being and Nothingness*: Modern thought has realized considerable progress by reducing the existent to the series of appearances which manifest it (3).[2] Sartre speaks here of a key contribution of Husserl's phenomenology, the elimination of a hidden metaphysical realm that "would drain to itself all the *being* of the existent" (4). Husserl's model removes the dualism of appearance and reality because appearances refer only to the total series of appearances, and not to a hidden reality. Things reveal themselves through appearances as what they are and do not refer to another ontological realm (4).[3]

The second contribution that Sartre attributes to Husserl is his idea of the intentionality of consciousness. Husserl presents the notion of the intentionality of consciousness in his *Ideas*, Book I. Intentionality is an essential peculiarity of the sphere of mental processes taken universally in so far as all mental processes in some manner or other share in it (199). For Sartre, this idea, that "all consciousness is consciousness *of* something" (11) is key. As we shall later see, it is pivotal in his conception of consciousness as empty of all contents.

According to Sartre, this step of removing the contents of consciousness is not taken by Husserl. He attributes the idea to Husserl that the *hyle* is some sort of real thing, a stratum or content of consciousness (20). He bases his critique on this reading, which I consider unfair to what Husserl meant by *hyle* or *hyletic* data. Husserl characterizes the *hyle* as "sensuous mental processes" (*Ideas* 203–07) and suggests that the

[2]Henceforth, citations from Sartre will be from *Being and Nothingness* unless otherwise noted.

[3]This is not to say that there is no being in itself. Without it, there could be no phenomenal world for Sartre.

hyle is "animated" by the intentional noetic act.[4] These "sensuous mental processes" are in a way taken up by the intentional act and bestowed with meaning. The *hyletic data* can be construed as simply the raw perceptual data of phenomena which must be interpreted by the intentional act. This sensuous content "*has in itself nothing pertaining to intentionality*" (*Ideas* 203). But Sartre interprets Husserl to hold that intentionality is necessary to consciousness and critiques Husserl's notion of hyle as unfaithful to this principle. Surely the *hyle* cannot be the contents of intentionality and yet have nothing pertaining to intentionality. Yet this is just what Sartre's critique would entail. Thus it seems that Sartre's critique is unfair to Husserl. For Husserl the *hyle* is not the contents of consciousness, but merely data which is taken up by consciousness in its intentional perception of what is presented to it. The *hyle* is the material *through which* consciousness bestows meaning on the object of its intentionality.

Though it is possible that Sartre is unfair to Husserl on this issue, the *hyle* as contents of consciousness remains the jumping off point for Sartre's discussion of consciousness as nothing. This assertion is one of the main points of *Being and Nothingness* and is also a major target of criticism. Husserl's notion of the transcendental ego was also a pivotal motivation for Sartre's making of consciousness a nothing. Sartre is clearly more justified in his critique here, though I will later question the extent to which his model is an improvement over Husserl's notion of the ego. In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl sets up the pure ego as that which survives the phenomenological reduction or ἐποχή (21). The ego with its consciousness is that which the reduction reveals:

> If I put myself above all this life and refrain from doing any believing that takes "the" world straightforwardly as existing—if I direct my regard exclusively to this life itself, as consciousness *of* "the" world—I thereby acquire myself as the pure ego, with the pure stream of my *cogitationes*. (21)

[4]By "intentional noetic act," I simply mean the intentional act which both Husserl and Sartre take to be constitutive of consciousness. Sartre will later designate this act as the for-itself.

The second important point regarding Husserl's notion of the ego is that it is not of the world and is not dependent on the world for its being:

> If I keep purely what comes into view—for me, the one who is meditating—by virtue of my free epoché with respect to the being of the experienced world, the momentous fact is that I, with my life, remain untouched in my existential status, regardless of whether or not the world exists and regardless of what my eventual decision concerning its being or non-being might be. This Ego, with his Ego-life, who necessarily remains for me, by virtue of such epoché, is not a piece of the world. (25)

Thus, Husserl's ego is not dependent on the world for its being. It is a "transcendental ego" even in its ontological status.

Sartre's main problem with the Husserlian ego is that it is an entity from which consciousness emanates. Sartre argues in *The Transcendence of the Ego* that such a conception is incorrect. Once again, however, I think that Sartre's critique may be based on an unfair reading of Husserl. Elsewhere in the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl says that the ego *lives* in my "flowing conscious life" (31; my emphasis). If the ego lives in consciousness or the stream of consciousness, it seems that it cannot also be a concrete entity from which this consciousness emanates. I will later propose the view that Sartre and Husserl may actually have very similar conceptions of the ego. Such an argument cannot be made, however, without an explication of Sartre's model of consciousness. Arriving at an understanding of Sartre's model will be our next task.

The keys to understanding Sartre's "phenomenological ontology" are set up in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness*. Unfortunately, the introduction is one of the most difficult parts of the book and often seems unrelated to the rest of the work. It is difficult to see why Sartre began his book with this particular material. I propose a reading of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* based on the phenomenological precepts set up in the introduction. I feel that such a reading will provide particular insight into Sartre's conception of consciousness as a nothing, while still providing a standpoint from which the remainder of the book is understandable.

As previously stated, Sartre takes up Husserl's phenomenological model by "reducing the existent to the series of appearances which

manifest it." The key derivation that Sartre makes from this principal is that a thing is the totality or sum of its "effects" (3).[5] Sartre continues this theme throughout the first two sections of the introduction. He discusses it in connection with his conception of essence:

> We can equally well reject the *dualism*[6] of appearance and essence. The appearance does not hide the essence, it reveals it; it *is* the essence. The essence of an existent is no longer a property sunk in the cavity of this existent; it is the manifest law which presides over the succession of its appearances, it is the principle of the series. (5; my emphasis)

Thus, for Sartre, the appearance reveals itself and the essence of the revealed thing, which is the total series of appearances. It is important to note that Sartre does not limit these appearances to perceptual phenomena. It is essential to my reading of Sartre that he indicates that any *effect* which occurs in the world is reducible to some sort of appearance or series of appearances. Thus, for Sartre, even force, that of an electric current for example, is simply the sum of its effects or appearances (3–4). The importance of this point will become clear later when I argue that even consciousness, which is a nothing, is in a special way an appearance or effect.

Thus for Sartre, a thing or existent is the sum of its appearances or effects. Its essence is the principle of the series. In addition, the essence itself is an appearance:

> Essence, as the principle of the series, is definitely only the concatenation of appearances; that is, itself an appearance. This

[5]Henceforth, when talking about a thing, I will use "effect," "appearance," and "phenomenon" interchangeably. I consider appearances and phenomena as examples of effects, and I will later consider the effects of consciousness.

[6]The dualism to which Sartre refers is any conception in which the phenomenal world is opposed to another ontological realm. Reality or being-in-itself is then limited to this ontological world and the phenomenal world is viewed as mere appearance. Sartre's point is that a phenomenological conception removes the ontological distinction between these two realms. In Sartre's words,

> explains how it is possible to have an intuition of essences. . . . The phenomenal being manifests itself; it manifests its essence as well as its existence, and it is nothing but the well connected series of its manifestations. (5)

For Sartre, that a thing presents itself, that is, that an appearance is made, also implies that there is something else to which it appears. Thus he refers to a phenomenon as a "relative-absolute." It is absolute because it has its own being and relative because the thing is dependent upon consciousness in order to reveal itself as a phenomenon "being in-itself *gives* itself and raises itself in relief *on the ground of* this nothing" (248).[7] This something to which phenomena are revealed is consciousness, which Sartre refers to as being for- itself, or simply the for-itself. This dependence of phenomena on a consciousness is the source of Sartre's conception of the infinite:

> The existent in fact can not be reduced to a *finite* series of manifestations since each one of them is a relation to a subject constantly changing. Although an *object*[8] may disclose itself only through a single *Abschattung*,[9] the sole fact of there being a subject implies the possibility of multiplying the points of view *on* that

"the appearance becomes full positivity; its essence is an 'appearing' which is no longer opposed to being but on the contrary is the measure of it. For the being of an existent is exactly what it *appears*. Thus we arrive at the idea of the *phenomenon* such as we can find, for example, in the 'phenomenology' of Husserl or of Heidegger" (4).

[7]The nothing to which Sartre refers here is the for-itself, consciousness. We shall soon see what is meant by calling consciousness a nothing.

[8]Here I take Sartre to mean anything capable of being an object, including things which are also subjects.

[9]According to Hazel E. Barnes, the translator of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre means by *Abschattung* an appearance of an object taken as a profile (799). Such a profile would be an abstraction since the successive appearances of an object occur in continual flux. Sartre feels quite comfortable, however, in talking about appearances as finite, and it will be necessary for our purposes to follow his lead. The possibility that there is really nothing finite and therefore no distinction is a subject best left for another time.

> *Abschattung*. This suffices to multiply to infinity the *Abschattung* under consideration. Furthermore if the series of appearances were finite, that would mean that the first appearances do not have the possibility of *reappearing*, which is absurd, or that they can be all given at once, which is still more absurd.[10] (5)

Thus, when a phenomenon is perceived, it is only a finite manifestation of the infinite essence of the existing thing.

There is another sense in which the distinction between infinite and finite is made. If considered temporally, the set of past appearances and interpretations of those appearances make up a finite totality. In this sense, at any given moment, the essence of the thing can be considered finite. However, the essence includes all of the future appearances and interpretations of appearances as well. In fact, the essence *must* be understood as infinite because these future appearances of the thing consist in an infinite set of possibilities.

We have seen the role of consciousness in this "phenomenological ontology"; it has the role of that to which things present themselves.[11] Having set up the general system in which consciousness serves this purpose, I may now discuss Sartre's insistence that consciousness is a nothing. Intuitively, it seems difficult to accept this insistence as anything sensible. However, I want to argue that, if read within the broad context of Sartre's phenomenological principle, it is more plausible than it might seem. I will distinguish three ways in which consciousness can be understood as a nothing. However, these three ways are separated only for the sake of clarification and are really abstractions from a holistic consideration of consciousness as a nothing. The first two distinctions I will make are set out clearly in the text. The third should be seen to follow from the phenomenological system already discussed.

[10]This is not *necessarily* a contradiction with Sartre's earlier statement that the essence of a thing (which is infinite) is an appearance. In that case, I think he means that the essence is intuited from the appearances and is not an appearance in the usual sense, that is, apprehended all at once.

[11]Sartre prefers to speak of consciousness as being "present" to the world, rather than the world being "present" to consciousness.

The first way in which consciousness is a nothing is discussed in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness* and in the *Transcendence of the Ego*. Consciousness for Sartre is always pre-reflectively self-conscious. It is conscious of itself as a consciousness, yet it does not take itself as an object. Sartre's says:

> Every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself. (*Nothingness* 13)

> The existence of consciousness is an absolute because consciousness is consciousness of itself. This is to say that the type of existence of consciousness is to be consciousness of itself. And consciousness is aware of itself *in so far as it is consciousness of a transcendent object.* We should add that this consciousness...is not *positional*, which is to say that consciousness is not for itself its own object. Its object is by nature outside of it, and that is why consciousness *posits* and *grasps* the object in the same act. (*Transcendence* 40–41)

Sartre has two things in mind here. First, consciousness is only pre-reflectively self-conscious in relation to its object. I take this to mean that its self-consciousness is derivative from its recognition of an object as transcendent. Consciousness recognizes its objects as "not itself" and through nothing other than this very recognition is consciousness of itself. Secondly, consciousness is not an added existent. This point is more closely related to our concerns. Consider the human being: It is a thing. Thus for Sartre, it is nothing but the sum of its appearances or effects. Consciousness is a nothing in that it adds no new being-in-itself to the appearances of the existing human being.[12] The appearances of the human being are somehow pre-reflectively conscious of themselves. Thus there simply is an appearance, but it has something added. For Sartre, that something is consciousness, which is really a nothing.

[12]The philosophical concept of substance might be helpful in understanding this concept. Consciousness adds no new substance to the world, such as the Cartesian consciousness would. There is no mental substance added by

The second sense in which consciousness is a nothing is related to Sartre's conception of consciousness as a transcendence of facticity. Consciousness is a pure action. Thus it is a nothing in the sense that it is not an existent thing but an occurrence, a movement. In addition, consciousness as an action is always a projection toward the future; it is a transcendence of facticity. I take facticity to consist in the finite series of past appearances and past interpretations of appearances of the human being. As discussed above, essences of things are infinite, but the series of their past appearances and the past interpretations of these appearances can be seen in a way as finite. Consciousness is a transcendence of this facticity because it is always a moving beyond this finite series toward the further constitution of the infinite essence. In this sense, each new appearance is a sort of transcendence of the past. Since, as we have seen, consciousness is nothing but the pre-reflective consciousness of self which an appearance of a human being has, consciousness participates in this level of transcendence. Consciousness is also a transcendence in the sense that *it is not the appearance*, but the appearance's consciousness of itself.

The third way in which consciousness is a nothing is closely related to the first two, but is not as obvious from the text. It follows from the phenomenological precepts that Sartre sets up in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness*. To understand what Sartre means by consciousness as a nothing, we must ask what he considers a thing. As we saw in our previous examinations, a thing for Sartre is the sum of its effects. Consciousness is not a sum of effects in the usual sense, but a pre-reflective consciousness which an effect of a human being has of itself. Thus, neither the appearance (effect) nor consciousness is a thing. The appearances make up the human being as a thing, and consciousness is the self-consciousness of these appearances. In a sense, consciousness is appearance (17). I shall examine this idea shortly in my discussion of reflection.

consciousness. Note that my uses of "the existing human being" are meant to show that a human being is a thing in the world, which, like other things, reveals itself through appearances. Consider the phenomenal world "objectively." The appearances of the human being have effects both in the world for that human being and in the world for others. I consider consciousness to be merely the self-consciousness of these appearances or effects.

It can now be seen how it is that Sartre considers consciousness a nothing. Admittedly, separating these three aspects is an abstraction, as is shown by the degree of overlap among them. If these three explanations are considered as a totality, the full meaning of Sartre's conception can be seen. All of the aspects of consciousness as a nothing can be viewed if they are considered in light of his phenomenological principles. I will now consider reflection and how it is that consciousness is a type of appearance. Here I hope to bring back Husserl's notion of the ego and propose that it is really not very different from Sartre's ego.

Sartre uses two French terms which are rendered as "reflection" in English. This is important to note because there is a key distinction between the two (see note below). For Sartre, the for-itself exists as a "reflection-reflecting" (213–14). In being consciousness of an object, the for-itself is both a reflection and a reflecting (240–41).[13] Here I understand Sartre to mean that 1) the object is reflected through the consciousness of it, and 2) the consciousness is reflected in the phenomenal world through its being consciousness of an object in that world. Thus, through this reflection,[14] consciousness too can be seen as being an effect or an "appearance" in the phenomenal world, and thereby a possible object of consciousness. It is here that the second use of reflection emerges (214). By taking the *noematic* reflection of a consciousness as an object, consciousness can in a way "reflect" on itself. Consciousness "reflects" on its particular "appearances" in the phenomenal world, the "reflections" (*reflet*) of consciousness in the world. In addition, consciousness can reflect on the past of appearances of the human being to which it belongs, its facticity. The fact that each of these appearances was pre-reflectively conscious of itself shows how it is that consciousness is also reflecting on consciousness in a way. It is

[13]"Reflection" here, according to Barnes, is a rendering of the French term *reflet*. It is to be distinguished from *reflexion*, which refers to "the attempt of consciousness to become its own object"(*Nothingness* 806). The first term corresponds well to the English use of "reflection" as in reflection in a mirror. The second term is closer to the usual philosophical use of "reflection."

[14]Henceforth I shall refer to consciousness' reflection in the phenomenal world as the *noematic* reflection of consciousness. The *noema* is the object side of intentionality in Husserl's phenomenology.

important to note that consciousness can thus gain access to the "essence" of the human being. However, this "essence" will only be the facticity of which consciousness is a transcendence, since it is only a finite number of past consciousnesses which can become an object in this way. Thus it can be seen how consciousness can recognize that it is not its facticity. It is not this finite series of which it has become conscious, it is always a moving beyond this series toward the future, with its infinite possibilities.

It must be noted that there is another aspect of facticity: the part of facticity which is made up of the past *noematic* reflections of consciousnesses, the "effects" of these consciousnesses. But what is this part of facticity? It seems to me that this is exactly what Sartre calls the ego. Thus, it can be seen how the ego is a constituted, transcendent object for consciousness, which was Sartre's intended conclusion in *The Transcendence of the Ego*:

> We are going to try to show that this ego . . . constitutes the ideal and indirect (noematic) unity of the infinite[15] series of our reflected consciousnesses. (60)

Thus the ego is a constituted object for Sartre. He intends this to be in strict opposition to Husserl. However, I believe that Husserl may have had a similar structure in mind for his ego. In the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl says that:

> The ego is himself *existent for himself* in continuous evidence; thus, in himself, he is *continuously constituting himself as existing*. The ego grasps himself not only as a flowing life but also as *I*, who live through this and that cogito, *as the same I*. Now we encounter . . . a *second kind of synthesis*, which embraces all the particular multiplicities of

[15]It is *constituted* as an infinite unity because future noematic reflections of consciousness will be included in this unity. The object from which this infinite essence is intuited is the finite series, the facticity. Similar instances occur throughout Sartre's early works. It must be kept in mind that appearances are always presented and finite; essences are always intuited and infinite. The key distinction I want to make here is between a finite set of appearances, which is the facticity, and the infinite set, which is the essence.

> *cogitationes* collectively and in its own manner, namely as belonging to the identical Ego, who, *as the active and affected subject of consciousness*, lives in all processes of consciousness and is related, through them, to all object-poles.

But it is to be noted that this centering Ego is not an

> *empty pole of identity*, any more than any object is such. Rather, according to a law of "transcendental generation," with every act emanating from him and having a new objective sense, he acquires a *new abiding property*. Since, by his *own active generating*, the Ego constitutes himself as *identical substrate of Ego- properties*, he constitutes himself also as a "fixed and abiding" *personal Ego*.(66–67)

I think that it can be seen in this passage that Husserl clearly has in mind some sort of ego constitution. There are clearly two different uses of the term ego here (note that even the translator makes a distinction between ego and Ego). The first use of the term seems as if it could be substituted for by Sartre's for-itself.[16] This ego constitutes himself through a *synthesis* as an identical Ego. However, at the beginning of chapter 32, acts emanate from this Ego, and later, this Ego "constitutes himself." This part of the passage suggests that the Ego, which seemed to be constituted by an instance of consciousness, is actually a thing from which acts of consciousness emanate, and constitutes himself. This shift clearly damages my position on what Husserl had in mind. I want to say that the first problem can be resolved by understanding Husserl's Ego as similar to Sartre's. That is, as a finite set of past "appearances" of consciousness. With such an interpretation, Husserl's assertion that "with every act emanating from him and having a new objective sense, he acquires a new abiding property" could be seen as quite similar to the way in which each instance of consciousness, as an effect, adds concretely to the facticity of future reflecting consciousnesses. As to the latter problem, I am inclined to say that Husserl

[16]Sartre says, "there is not one of my consciousnesses which I do not apprehend as provided with an I" (*Transcendence* 44). Thus had Sartre read Husserl in this way, he might have been more sympathetic to Husserl's system.

inclined to say that Husserl meant that the "ego" does the constituting, rather than the "Ego."[17] This is of course conjecture, and it is quite a stretch to attempt to attribute Sartre's system to Husserl. However, I think that Husserl was thinking similarly to Sartre, at least as a possibility. In addition, it seems to me that Husserl was sufficiently ambiguous on this subject to warrant a question as to the fairness of Sartre's critique.

In any event, the idea that Sartre's "phenomenological ontology" in *Being and Nothingness* radicalizes Husserl's phenomenology by including consciousness in the world of appearance is not dependent on any foreshadowing in Husserl of Sartre's view of consciousness. This idea, I hope, has been made sufficiently clear. We have seen that a close reading of the introduction to *Being and Nothingness* reveals a radicalization of Husserl's phenomenology which provides a reasonable standpoint from which to read the remainder of the book. The reading of Sartre which I have proposed explains why Sartre included this particular material in an introduction. The subtitle of the book: *A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* indicates that Sartre intends a system deeply rooted in phenomenology, and his liberal citation of Husserl shows his deep indebtedness to his predecessor. In addition to these factors, I believe that the more Husserlian reading which I have proposed makes many of the highly controversial views in *Being and Nothingness* more plausible. The book maintains its radical nature, but most of its claims seem more sensible if viewed from this perspective. Many of Sartre's views in *Being and Nothingness* have in the past been easy targets for criticism, and many have seemed completely absurd to some readers. I believe that the reading I have proposed will not only make the book easier to understand, but will also enable more of the book's claims to be taken seriously.

[17]Husserl's return to the distinction between "ego" and "Ego" in subsequent sections is the motivation for this hypothesis.

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