

The Existential Unconscious: Sartre and the Dialectic of Freedom

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Abstract

In conceptualising and arguing for the ‘existential unconscious’ in the works of Sartre, this article contends that all empirical acts of the self relate to the self’s being-in-the-world as an original and a-volitional project of being. The inclusion of the unconscious makes for a dialectical approach to freedom as authenticity.

Key Words

Sartre, existentialism, unconscious, psychoanalysis, self, subjectivity, dialectic, freedom.

Introduction

It may appear strange or obtuse to speak of an ‘existential unconscious’ at all, given that it is oft-supposed and asserted that Sartre’s existential phenomenology rejects the concept of the unconscious wholesale¹. Existentialism, after all, is a philosophy of the individual as a self metaphysically free and responsible for their own being. As Sartre’s famed credo goes: *existence precedes and defines essence*. That is, the self first exists and then defines itself. The essence of Sartre’s credo and the apparent volitional agency it is associated with it, forms the basis of numerous critiques and undermines the basis of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, broadly defined, as interpretative psychologies concerned with the hidden a-volitional ‘depths’ of the self. My view, however, is that Sartre’s existentialism is a far more humane philosophy than those it seems akin to, and is closer to depth psychology than initially thought. More specifically, I maintain that there is an ontological unconscious in Sartre’s metaphysics which forms the basis of what he himself labels ‘existential psychoanalysis,’ and which accounts for a-volitional or a-subjective agentic structures of the self.

The critiques of Sartrean existentialism can be broadly grouped into two related camps: the metaphysical and socio-political. The metaphysical issue at stake here, accordingly, is the question of human being. In positing consciousness as the constitutive site of subjectivity, Sartre is said to overlook the impersonal and pre-individual basis of the transcendental, and by extension, the genetic and contingent nature of the self. In terms more related to psychotherapy, this means that to employ Sartre’s metaphysics as a basis for understanding the subject is to bar one from its full disclosure. Such a

reading is prominent amongst those who privilege Sartre's earlier 'rationalist' works, at the expense of his later 'dialectical' turn²; and is responsible for the claim that Sartre is an avowed Cartesian. The second critique is closely related to the first, in that the genesis of the interior self and its contingent nature concerns and relates to socio-political exteriority. To employ the image of a transparent rational subject is to commit to a sovereign-centred juridico-political model of liberalism and social contract theory; or rather, to reject ontology as conflated with 'metaphysical rationalism'³. Thus why Sartre was subjected to a series of Communitarian and Marxist critiques.⁴

Nowhere in these critiques is there a recognition of Sartre's dialectic of the self and freedom, which encapsulates the unconscious and its relation to the exterior. In the rare instances the unconscious in Sartre is 'recognised,'⁵ there is a failure to expound how it, 'deals a death blow to all ideas of autonomy of consciousness', as Collier (1977, p 43) puts it. In any case, the supposed conceptual estrangement between the existential self as it is posited by Sartre, and the unconscious as it is known to psychoanalysis broadly understood, is merely a double-move of blind supposition and blind assertion. Sartre opens us up to what I call the 'existential unconscious', in which we come to view all empirical acts of the self, or every empirical tendency, as existing within the original project of being, a fundamental attitude residing in a pre-reflective and pre-personal transcendental field.

Akin to Freudian psychoanalysis, this is to maintain that there exists a division of the psychical into what is conscious and what is unconscious; and that, furthermore, unconscious material and the conflicts or complexes that reside therein are obscured, or rather remain inaccessible to the self's memory and thus immediate conscious reflection in linguistic form. But where Freud focuses on infantile sexual trauma as the origin of the unconscious neurotic complex, Sartre posits the existential project of being as complex. This article traces the development of this unconscious in Sartre's work and relates it back to existential freedom and the related ethic of authenticity. Concerning authenticity, the inclusion of the unconscious makes for a dialectical approach that contextualises choice of self within the a-volitional contingencies of the self.

The pre-reflective and lived experience

The notion of an impersonal and pre-individual transcendental field – as an ontological unconscious – is central to existential phenomenology. In Sartre's early *Transcendence of the Ego* – the first crucial text of French existentialism – we find an avowed repudiation of Husserl's Kantian categories in the form of the 'pure Ego' and *hyle*, by which he sets up an alternative *impersonal* transcendental field as one with neither the form of a synthetic consciousness nor that of a subjective identity. Sartre argues that the retention of the pure Ego runs up against the fundamental requisite of phenomenology

(‘back to things themselves,’ or back to the phenomena at the expense of the noumena), for consciousness’s direct access is here *mediated* by representational machinery. If the phenomenological *epoché* is supposed to exclude any transcendent noumenic being, then we cannot have an Ego of the sort to which Husserl refers, particularly in his *Ideas*. Indeed, how can consciousness be intentional if it is loaded down or driven by something else (Sartre, 2004: p 42)? But what then provides the self with unity? Sartre gives transcendental unity to the object, wherein the flux of consciousness itself participates in this unity by play of ‘transversal’ intentionalities which are concrete and real retentions of past consciousnesses.

This rather obscure sounding point is best understood by breaking it down into three sub-points. Firstly, it simply means that consciousness is an activity as opposed to a substance; an activity in the sense that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something (an object of the exterior world). Secondly, it is consciousness’s reflection on this activity, and thus the object – which is to say that the activity is a pre-reflective immersive activity with no immediate representation of itself to itself – that furnishes a sense of self or transcendental unity. The ego, in this case, is artificial though *practical*. The functional structure of the transcendental deduction is maintained, even though the entities performing these functions are replaced. Thirdly, it follows that the pre-reflective is not an empty container. It is full of one’s virtual past to which reflection can refer and thereby anchor itself; virtual, for it is real without being actual in time as extended in space.

I wish to dwell on the last sub-point, for it is here we find the origin of the unconscious in the Sartrean system. The past is the referential axis of memory by which one may retain unity in duration and speak of the sum that makes up one’s personality; albeit, a personality in flux, in accordance with the negative structure of consciousness. The latter structure concerns the manner in which consciousnesses transverse themselves through the durational experience of time. In its failed attempt to be totally present to itself in an instant, consciousness nihilates itself from its factitious past, only to flee the present toward a forever unrealisable future. That is, the for-itself arises as diasporic, dispersing itself in the three dimensions of time by virtue of nihilation or the negation of the in-itself. Yet the pre-reflective past as memory is accorded ontological priority, in that, as Sartre (2008a: p 164) puts it, it is the ‘origin and springboard of all my actions’, and my ‘contingent and gratuitous bond with the world and with myself’. In being pre-reflective, this type of memory must be distinguished from active memory, wherein one forcibly recalls an event – though it is the prelude to recalling. The past is not present as a representation in thethetic (positional) mode of consciousness, but is nevertheless constantly there, surrounding it, essentially as a facticity continually and pre-reflectively orientating consciousness’s for-itself to the world.

Questions of Sartre's interpretation of Bergson aside, it soon becomes evident that this take on duration as the basis of the for-itself still has critical elements that meet the general criteria of a virtual or intensive multiplicity as described by the early Bergson (2001, p 128; pp 162-4), and in part by Deleuze (2006a, p 112). It speaks to a structure of time, or a mental synthesis in which the three dimensions of time and their corresponding psychic states interpenetrate and melt into one another to establish a forever fluxual synthetic whole (a totalisation), which is set off from an extensive Outside to which consciousness continually intends in a condemned effort to achieve self-coincidence. That means to say, it is a reality, and a condition of our experience of reality, initially beyond though related to the corresponding symbolic representations of such intensities juxtaposed in an ideal extended space. Explicitly employing Bergson's terminology from *Time and Free Will*, Sartre goes on to add that the ego is an abstract, infinite contraction of the material self, a 'virtual locus of unity' (Sartre, 2004: p 34) – or, more specifically, it is, in relation to the past as facticity, an 'interpenetrative multiplicity', and in relation to the future, a 'bare potentiality', which is actualised and fixed when it comes into contact with events (p 38). Here, the ego, 'is apprehended but also *constituted* by reflective knowledge' (Sartre, 2004: p 34). The appearance of the ego, in this case 'is not so much theoretical as practical' (p 48). When confronted with this ego, 'we are dealing with a mere appearance' (p 33) – that is to say, with a semblance.⁶

How exactly does the pre-reflective past act as a condition, or a springboard? In the first instance, it is what gives the given by way of the body's flesh (see Sartre, 2008a: pp 412-421; and Gilliam, 2016). That is to say, the body is the surface (third term) or interface between, through which the virtual content of the Idea can be actualised in time as extended in space, as its final mechanical movement or contraction. Further, it is by virtue of the body's extensivity and mechanical movement, or rather the way it is *in* and *of* the world, that we can have an intellectual and intuitive experience of reality as extended, namely in the form of memories as continual recordings of these experience, and a past as a springboard for my actions and corresponding thoughts and the ability to think reflectively or thetically under the form of extensive homogeneity. The body as surface reabsorbs the finished act into the interpenetrative multiplicity (see Sartre, 2004: p 38), and as such furnishes and informs the direction of consciousness in the form of the pre-reflective past. In the second instance, though related to the first in that the body is still the third mediatory term, the pre-reflective shapes the self's ethical actions, and thus actions that portray an ethical orientation, i.e. a personality.

To understand the second instance, we must turn to the way Sartre relates the pre-reflective virtual past to his alternative *existential* psychoanalysis – as appears at the end of *Being and Nothingness*. The essential task of existential psychoanalysis is 'hermeneutic', that is, 'a deciphering, a determination, and

a conceptualization' (Sartre, 2008a: 590), deciphering the meaning of acts in relation to a synthetic totality underpinned by an *original project* of being, as expressed by an *original* or *fundamental choice*. The original project simply refers to a totalising mode of being in the world, that underpins a person's inclinations and empirical acts. That is, how one has appropriated and approached their existence in its totality, which is expressed in the multiplicity of their thoughts, actions, behaviors, attitudes, relations to Others, idealisations and so forth. The project turns into choice, since the expression of the project of being is a choice of myself as a totality in a particular circumstance (see Sartre, 2008a: p 585). Choice here does not refer to a volitional act on part of the self on the self in full transparency, and one therefore that can be pinpointed by a specific place and time. Choice is pre-reflective and ontogenetic (onto = being, genetic/genesis = origins of, i.e. origins and history of ones being). It refers to the first way the world has made *sense* to us, namely by early experiences, and by which it continues to underpin our subjective experiences, perceptions and actions in their immediacy.

There is a two-fold structure to 'choice': the 'event' that underpins its pre-reflectiveness (of infancy, of love, of death) and the psychic crystallisation of it. The crystallisation is what takes shape in the movement from the pre-reflective to reflective consciousness such that every act – its resultant meaning and the meaning that provoked it – is a manifestation of the totality of the existent, the untimely, and in which reflection is only ever *quasi-knowing*, unable to isolate the choice symbolised. This is, as Sartre notes, to pay homage to a method that 'has been furnished for us by the psychoanalysis of Freud and his disciples' (Sartre, 2008a: p 585), in that it considers all objectively discernible manifestations of 'psychic life' as maintaining symbolic relations to the fundamental, total structures that make up the individual person. Choice, as in a crystalised project of being identifiable in symbols, is the springboard of all my actions, of all my negations, and of all my perceptions. Indeed, in expanding the concept of the pre-reflective via *lived experience (le vécu)* in his later works, Sartre (2008b: p 42) *explicitly* recognises a 'dialectical process of psychic life', where the exterior world of social facticity is interiorised by the organism, the subject, and retained in its lived virtual self, and re-exteriorised in being, in the carrying out of an activity or expression.

The dialectic of freedom

What I have said thus far may imply a determining psychic factor that would most certainly negate existentialism as a philosophy of ontological freedom, insofar as I have seemingly portrayed the self as under the influence of non-conscious and exterior forces. However, in Sartre's system, psychic life is dialectical in a second sense: that in every act of consciousness, in every expression and projection of the self, there lies

an inherent negativity, a negation of the situation and of the past self in a temporal becoming propelled into the future by intentionality (diasporic). Due to this negativity, the totalising process by which one interiorises and exteriorises and re-interiorises and re-exteriorises, as Sartre explains in both the *Search for Method* and *Critique of Pure Reason*, is always-already de-totalised. That is, nothing is subordinate to an *a priori*, either of the interior negativity of consciousness or the facticity of the exterior situation; the plurality of a multiplicity cannot refer back to a stable unity for negation resides within the process of totalisation (which is a constant projection of a project into the future via intentionality). And this process as project itself is put into opposition with new projects (counter-finalities) that it detotalises and that detotalise it, i.e. negate it. Complete totalisation or synthesis is ‘never achieved’ (Sartre, 1963: p 78). This is not to undermine the univocal nature of the elements being brought together.⁷ Their disparate nature is only viewed from the vantage point of praxis, or a retroactive identification as a moment of incarnation, wherein a practical reality envelops in its own singularity, the ensemble of totalisations in progress – incarnation is totalisation as individuated (Sartre, 1976b: p 28), i.e. the practical ego. The totality of the self as an interior-exterior being is relative, a mere ‘appearance’ of a never-ending process that must be upheld for it to appear, but no less real on that account. For this reason, Sartre defines the totality as a ‘totalising project’ (p 113).

Whether in terms of an original project of being and choice or a totalising project, when the self projects itself it is immediately brought into question. The self may have a modicum of permanence via its virtual self and as supported by the practical structure of the reflective ‘I’ in praxis, but it is in a perpetual mode of flight from itself, *diasporic*. What this means, fundamentally, is that ‘choice’ or phantasy is in flux in accordance with the negative/creative nature of consciousness and experience itself. For no-thing is static, not the self as that which continually injects nothingness into the world, nor the world to which the self relates and by which it is constantly negated. In the latter case, experiences as counter-finalities continually provoke a re-adjustment or re-arrangement of self, per the requirement of the situation and the meaning that is given to it. A partner breaks off her relationship with me. I am now thrown into a situation not of my making but requiring action on my part: ‘what shall I do now?’ – how shall one speak and make meaning of the event? Here, the original choice shall have to adapt itself to new circumstances, to a new interpretative endeavour, to a new positioning, or rather to a new method of realisation of the choice-position in and towards being. But sometimes the *event* can rupture the meaning/ the original choice itself, out of which is born a new *retroactive* one. That is, not only does the method of realisation change, but so too does the choice-position underpinning it.

That I refer to this moment as ‘retroactive’ is imperative, for it is to say that an actual event that comes later in one’s life, beyond infancy, can be so gloriously earth shattering as to completely change the meaning of all that has come before it (though still in a relation to it by virtue of virtual retention – and identification by exteriorised Others – by which a modicum of subjective temporal unity is maintained), and in this sense, take on the virtual character of something a-linear and primordial. It is the wonderstruck and conjunctive moment of reflection via the practical ego: ‘So *that’s* what I wanted!’ This new sense of self can be fictitiously applied to linear time through narrative (i.e. ‘so that’s *why* I did x, y, z during my 20s’), yet despite this fictitiousness, it takes on and provides subjective Truth, a new position, (dis)orientation, sense to and of the world. The Event is thus untimely, though real.

So, we are given an unconscious and a consciousness as an act of negation; facticity and freedom as a dialectical interplay. Despite the ‘existential freedom’ of the subject, then, he/she is still subject to certain situated predispositions – external influences of fundamental choice – that operate in a *habitual way*, easily recalled into action, *lived* rather than *known*, but simultaneously negatable. Freedom is dialectical. It exists in and through facticity, which includes one’s situation as one’s lived experience. Hence Sartre’s (2008a, p 74) contention that bad faith, as an original project, is ‘very precarious, and though it belongs to the kind of psychic structures which we might call ‘metastable’, it presents nonetheless an autonomous and durable form’. Negation takes place through, out and against the facticity of one’s durable-virtual-lived-unconscious. The latter navigates the direction of the negatite – as in the choice of thing-to-be-negated – even onto and against itself. Yes, the very lived experience through and out of which the negation sprung, is negated. I act, and then I distance myself from my act in the next act (in accordance with a counter-finality) and in proffering the experience through reflective narratives seeking a durable form of self, e.g. ‘I apologise for how I behaved yesterday’. It comes full circle. And yet, the negation is premised on something lived: ‘man can always make something out of what is made of him’ (Sartre, 2008b: p 35). There is, then, never quite a pure negation; only a partial negation since the stuff out of which a subject is made, its virtual self, can never be fully annihilated, as with the exteriority of the self.

Existential ethics

It follows from the above that in-order to understand one’s-*self* and another in authenticity, we must bring the lived component as the pre-requisite to negation, as fundamental unconscious *choice* underpinning the exercise of ‘active’ choice (action), to light. But what now do we mean by authenticity? What does such a dialectical approach do to our understanding of Sartrean ethics? In repudiating Husserl’s idealism, the early Sartre (2004: p 51) claims he has ‘immersed man back in the world’, and as such restored to

man's 'anguish and his sufferings, and to his rebellions too, their full weight'. With this, he declares: 'Nothing further is needed to enable us to establish philosophically an absolute positive ethics and politics' (p 52). This ethics is one of authenticity, typically construed as accepting the enduring responsibility of one's 'radical choice'. That is to say, our ontological condition (nihilation) leaves us utterly responsible for choosing the self we become (essence) and the evaluations that emanate from that self. Is authenticity, then, the mere acceptance of this responsibility, conjoined to the idea that the unhappy consciousness, being the axiomatic condition of nihilation, is unsurpassable? Is this not the prominent vision of existentialism as an ethical position? And if indeed that is the case, how can this be squared with the unconscious as an element of the self hidden from the self?

My understanding is that Sartre's valuative ideal of authenticity speaks to the way in which we can attempt to *recognise* and *utilise* the *conditions* and *factitious limits* that have given form to this reflective semblance of the ego as practical function. It is precisely with the dialectical relation in mind that Sartre says the self chooses itself in *situation*, that 'the exercise of this freedom may be considered as *authentic* or *inauthentic* according to the choices made in the situation' (Sartre, 1976a: p 9). Hence the central Sartrean claim: 'man can always make something out of what is made of him' (Sartre, 2008b: p 35). That is also to say that the self is 'totally conditioned by his social existence and yet sufficiently capable of decision to reassume all this conditioning and to become responsible for it' (Sartre, 2008b: p 34). Sartre asserts that this 'is the limit I would today accord to freedom: the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him' (p 35).

Subsequently, man 'cannot be distinguished from his situation, for it forms him and decides his possibilities; but, inversely, it is he who gives it meaning by making his choices within it and by it', which is to say that to be in a situation is '*to choose oneself* in a situation' (Sartre, 1976a: p 60). Strictly in this sense, it is said that to choose is to invent (Sartre, 2007: p 43). Choice, understood here in the active/thetic sense, is a moment of creation and invention precisely because *existence is prior to essence*. In choosing oneself there is no pre-defined eternal image or identity to which one could refer. Any such image would therefore have to be created anew, but *only* out of the stuff out of which one has been made (hence why 'Jewish authenticity consists in choosing oneself *as Jew* – that is, in realizing one's Jewish condition' [Sartre, 1976a: p 136]). For that reason, 'of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative', and we 'will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image' (Sartre 2007: 32).

Above all, the ethic of authenticity should be viewed as an attitude and practice not only insofar as any static identity (i.e. a proclamation of ‘authenticity’ as identified) would fall back into bad faith, but also insofar as the limit of freedom as guaranteed by the unconscious, ensures that we are never quite completely rid of all social conditioning, that we never quite reach a ‘pure’ existential state, or a pure negation. One must always seek to take advantage of the small *movements* – a constant attempt to gain lucid and attentive consciousness of one’s situation and take as much responsibility for it as is possible within these parameters – that is, of the limits that define the self. Thus, authenticity does not refer to the radical dissolution of all that makes up the self, a return to some archaic *tabula rasa* wherein one can create something entirely new and distinct from its past. Authenticity is the moment of creative affirmation, but within the confines of a context. Any therapeutic endeavour would fail and err on an inhumane moral condemnation for the self’s actions, and would struggle to access the hidden depth of the self, if it did not consider this dialectic.

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Notes

¹ E.g. Cohn (1997: 77); Deleuze (2004b: 114n. 6); Frie (2012); Grimsley (1955), and Holzhey-Kunz and Fazekas (2012).

² See for instance Barrett (1990: 245), Craib (1976: 93) Deleuze (2004b: p 114n6) Fox (2003: 149) and also Warnock (1970: 128).

³ See for instance Aronson (1978: 226), Cumming (1979: 193), Flynn (1997: 50), Gillan (1997: 193), and Martinot (1993: 45).

⁴ I.e., On the side of the communitarians, Taylor’s (1976: p 293); on the side of the Marxists, Adorno (1973: 50) Marcuse (1948: 311), and Lukács (1973).

⁵ E.g. Binswanger’s (1958); Fromm (1973: 306); Hatzimoysis (2011: 56); Laing (1990: 57).

⁶ Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick’s earlier translation of the text indeed renders the French ‘appearance’ as ‘semblance’, which seems more appropriate given its use in the context of Sartre discussing the ego’s ‘pseudo-spontaneity’. See Sartre (1957: 79).

⁷ I am employing Univocity in the Deleuzian sense, i.e. that there are no constitutive or primary breaks or ruptures at the level of Being. Infinite substance (Being) and finite modes (beings) are said to be in immanence, as opposed to modes being immanent to substance, so that it is not akin to a predicate that belongs

to a subject. Thus, there is no difference of category, of substance and of form, between the senses of the word 'Being', e.g. for-itself and in-itself.

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