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## NATURE AND LIVED EXPERIENCE IN LATE SARTRE

### *ABSTRACT*

The paper deals with the Sartrean concept of lived experience which constitutes a bridge between phenomenology and Marxism, psychology and ontology, individual and society, as well as between philosophy and literary criticism. The notion of lived experience is rooted in psychology, at the same time being embedded in literary criticism and phenomenology. It is interlinked with the notions of facticity, contingency, singularity, intersubjectivity, and body in the Being and Nothingness, and became the theoretical base of Sartre's essays on Baudelaire, Genet, and especially of that on Flaubert. This lived experience is closely related to the Sartrean phenomenological concept of nature which consists in the non-reflexive conscience of our own presence-at-the-world, including corporeality.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, hermeneutics, ontology, psychology, Marxism, subjectivity, corporeality, contingency, facticity, nature.

In this paper I focus on the philosophical layer of *The Family Idiot*, a biography of Gustave Flaubert by Jean-Paul Sartre, which can put into perspective some issues and problems concerning the thinking of Sartre. The importance of lived experience (*vécu*) is indicative of his connection to both Wilhelm Dilthey and Edmund Husserl, for whom the notion of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) was absolutely central in their theories of psychology and phenomenology, respectively. Moreover, this concept bridges between the pre-reflexive, bodily consciousness and nature. Thus, those interpretations, showing the influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that miss the philosophy of nature in Sartre's alleged Cartesian, dualist and rationalist thinking, simply prove to be false.

The Sartrean concept of lived experience constitutes a bridge between phenomenology and Marxism, psychology and ontology, individual and society, as well as between philosophy and literary criticism. Sartre had been deeply concerned about the basic structure of subjectivity from the very beginning (see the

non-egological notion of the non-reflective consciousness in *The Transcendence of the Ego*) and it had remained absolutely crucial for him. It is interlinked with the notions of facticity, contingency, singularity, intersubjectivity, and body in the *Being and Nothingness*, and became the theoretical base of his Marxism (sketched out in his *Question of Method*). Therefore, his existential psychoanalysis developed best in *The Family Idiot* may give a clue to his basically phenomenological philosophy, misinterpreted by Merleau-Ponty<sup>1</sup> and others. It is worth to notice here that it was Jan Patočka, Husserl's Czech disciple who saw first the body's importance in the phenomenology of Sartre.<sup>2</sup>

### THE *ERLEBNIS* IN DILTHEY AND HUSSERL

The core of Dilthey's hermeneutical conception is the historical understanding of the expressions of lived experiences in the person's life context. Thus, lived experience (*Erlebnis*) represents a "direct contact with life which we may call immediate lived experience," a realm prior to reflexive thought as Robert E. Palmer stresses.<sup>3</sup> The uniqueness of someone's life and the subjective character of his lived experiences as meaningful unities escape rational theorizing. "Concrete, historical, lived experience must be the starting and ending point for the *Geisteswissenschaften*."<sup>4</sup> Beside cognitive acts, lived experience also implies emotional, affective experiences, and that is why it means a broader theoretical background to Sartre's existential psychoanalysis willing to understand the everyday, mundane aspects of life, much more than the Husserlian phenomenology which concentrated to the epistemological and logical questions of conceptual cognition (*Erkenntnis*) before thematizing the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) in the 1930's.

Lived experience is also crucial for Husserl; in his fifth investigation of *Logical Investigations* he defined consciousness as the stream of intentional lived experiences.<sup>5</sup> However, his phenomenology's scope was somehow reduced by the fact that he focused on the problems of truth and validity concerning cognition in a reflexive way. In *The Idea of Phenomenology* (in the third lecture) he

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bene, A. 2010. "Merleau-Ponty et Sartre: un débat? (Facticité, corporéalité, intersubjectivité)." In: *Az újlatin filológia aktuális kérdései a XXI. Században*. Oszetzky, É., B. Krisztián (Eds.). Pécs: MTA Pécsi Területi Bizottsága Romanisztikai Munkacsoport – PTE Francia Tanszék, 61–70 Online: [https://www.academia.edu/6173626/MerleauPonty\\_et\\_Sartre\\_un\\_debat\\_Facticite\\_corporealite\\_intersubjectivite](https://www.academia.edu/6173626/MerleauPonty_et_Sartre_un_debat_Facticite_corporealite_intersubjectivite)

<sup>2</sup> Patočka, J. 1988. "Qu'est-ce que l'existence." In: idem. 1988. *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l'existence humaine*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 259.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, R. E. 1969. *Hermeneutics; Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 108.

<sup>4</sup> Palmer, R. E. 1969, op. cit., 99.

<sup>5</sup> *Husserliana* XIX/1. (Ursula Panzer, ed. 1984. *Logische Untersuchungen. Zweiter Band*, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff), 356.

also rejects the natural attitude proposing a phenomenological reduction to grasp the essence of the lived experience.<sup>6</sup> The other main difference consists in the way Husserl considers the lived experience impersonal in his phenomenological method of *Wesensschau*<sup>7</sup>. (From the *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, published in 1913, he assumed a transcendental egologic structure, being problematic as well.) This separation of the consciousness as lived experience from the natural world of life including such phenomena as body, intersubjectivity and nature was insufficient for Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Moreover, the functioning of consciousness is primarily discursive for Husserl,<sup>8</sup> while Sartre as well as Merleau-Ponty investigated the pre-reflexive, bodily experience, overstepping the transcendental method. In spite of those Cartesian reminiscences of *Being and Nothingness*, it was Sartre who first drew attention to the bodily aspect of the facticity of the Heideggerian *Dasein*.

The late Husserl tried to revise his transcendental theory setting in it the intersubjectivity and the life-world. However, the influence of this period on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* was based on a manuscript of the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* written in fact by Eugen Fink, absolutely ignored by Merleau-Ponty. Nevertheless, Husserl through the notion of life (though in a transcendental context of consciousness)<sup>9</sup> sought a way out from the dead-end of his monadic conception to an intersubjective life-world in *Cartesian Meditations* and in *The Crisis of European Sciences*. The common life-world as nature that encompasses our bodies is the ground (*Erdboden*) of every transcendental subjectivity,<sup>10</sup> analysed in a historical way by the genetic phenomenology. The notions of *hyle* and nature remained unelaborated by Husserl, but some texts of his *Nachlass* show the way to the phenomenology of affectivity<sup>11</sup> that regards affects as phenomena connecting body, self, and world.

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<sup>6</sup> *Husserliana II*. (Walter Biemel, ed. 1973. *Die Idee der Phänomenologie*, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhof).

<sup>7</sup> See his review on a study of Theodor Elsenhals in 1903 in *Husserliana XXII*, (Bernhard Rang, ed. 1979. *Aufsätze und Rezensionen 1890–1910*, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff), 203–208, 207. (Cited by Péter A. Varga. 2009. “A Logikai vizsgálódások filozófiai álláspontja és annak átalakulása a mű első kiadását követően”. In: Péter A. Varga, and Zuh Deodáth, eds. 2009. *Husserl és a Logikai vizsgálódások*. 226–274. Budapest: L'Harmattan – Magyar Daseinanalitikai Egyesület, 240.)

<sup>8</sup> See the first logical investigation in: *Husserliana XIX/1*, 30–110, Especially, 10–13.

<sup>9</sup> Toronyai interprets this as an effort to elaborate a scientific philosophy of life. See Toronyai, G. 2001. “A késő husserli transzcendentális fenomenológia mint tudományos életfilozófia.” *Magyar Filozófiai Szemle* VL/1–2, 113–140.

<sup>10</sup> *Husserliana XV*. (Kern, I. (Ed.) 1976. *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlass, Dritter teil, 1929–1935*, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff), 546.

<sup>11</sup> Toronyai, G. 2002. *Tudományos életfilozófia. Tanulmány Edmund Husserl késői gondolkodásáról*. Budapest: Osiris, 155.

This conception is far more compatible with the totality of life and lived experience taken as a basis by Dilthey. “Lived experience” that has various meanings<sup>12</sup> is seen here as the notion that is able to emphasize the immediacy of the relation between the life-world as nature and the bodily being that lives in and through it.

### LIVED EXPERIENCE IN SARTRE

The problem of subjectivity in lived experience had been crucial for Sartre from the beginning of his career. The notion is closely connected to contingency and facticity, in his novel *Nausea* as well as in *Being and Nothingness*. In *The Transcendence of the Ego* Sartre points out that there is not a transcendental “I” prior to experience. There is non-reflexive consciousness without “I,” for example “When I run after a streetcar [...] there is no I. There is consciousness of the streetcar-having-to-be-overtaken.”<sup>13</sup> In the *Nausea* Antoine Roquentin’s illness comes from the fact that his world and his life, even his face and body are incoherent, meaningless, and absurd: “A pale reflection of myself wavers in my consciousness. Antoine Roquentin ... and suddenly the ‘I’ pales, pales, and fades out.”<sup>14</sup> He reveals contingency through the facticity of embodied being-in-the-world: his sickness coming from the pebble is “a sort of nausea in the hands”: a lived experience instead of a reflexive act. In *Being and Nothingness* the ontological notion of being-in-itself (as an aspect of human existence beside being-for-itself) involves the fact of being in a body as a pure presence in the world, a sort of immediacy that reveals itself by our irreflexive consciousness. Thus, he followed the route of both Husserl and Heidegger via rehabilitation of the natural world, as Patočka stressed.<sup>15</sup> The “nature-for-me” of my body analysed in the *Being and Nothingness* underlies the investigation of lived experience in *The Family Idiot*. This conception implies all the three aspects of the nature in phenomenology that serves as a correlate of the primal layer of experience (as Husserl puts it in *The Crisis of European Sciences*); implies the modes of being without consciousness; as well as it means a sort of ontological determination of human being.<sup>16</sup> In terms of perception, the lived experience of the being-in-the-world is also thematised in a similar way by such phenomenolo-

<sup>12</sup> See Bene, A. 2013. “Le vécu chez Sartre.” *Analele Universitatii Din Craiova Seria Filosofie* (2) 32, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1962. *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Williams, F., R. Kirkpatrick (Trans.). New York: Noonday Press, 48–49.

<sup>14</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1964. *Nausea*, Lloyd, A. (Trans.). New York: New Directions, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Patočka, J. 1988. “Le monde naturel et la phénoménologie.” In: idem. *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l'existence humaine*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 19.

<sup>16</sup> See Husson, L. 2005. “La nature, entre métaphysique et existence: Sartre et la question de la nature”. *Le Portique* (online) 16. Accessed in August 16, 2014 : <http://leportique.revues.org/733>.

gists as Erwin Straus, Renaud Barbaras and Henri Maldiney, inspired by Merleau-Ponty and Patočka in their analysis of dance and rhythm.<sup>17</sup>

### THE NOTION OF NATURE IN SARTRE'S THOUGHT

The ambiguous notion of nature appertains to the field of phenomenological ontology in Sartre's thought. Accepting that self-determination and contingency are basic principles of Sartrean existentialism, it is evident that his conception of nature has nothing to do with any essentialism assuming a pre-established, universal human nature. His anti-humanism is a form of ontological anti-naturalism to the effect that it denies the absolute determination.

It is the human being's presence in the world as facticity that interconnects man and nature through the body. In his *Materialism and Revolution* he argues for the axiom of dialectic materialism concerning the Engels' dialectic of nature. In his argumentation he places an equal sign between nature and matter, whose principal characteristic is inertia, i.e. the incapability to create of itself.<sup>18</sup> 14 years later, this notion of inertia would be the key-concept of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Here, Sartre studies the *praxis* as a reciprocal relation between human activity as permanent totalization and matter as passivity. Inertia is also linked with the social state of alienation and atomization, contrary to the collective agency and spontaneity, based on solidarity. Thus, Sartre sketched out an action theory which is the theoretical core of his phenomenological social ontology. Nature has the same theoretical function here as alienation in the process of serialization; both are obstacles for group-formation and common action.

### FROM PURE CONSCIOUSNESS TO THE SOCIALLY AND HISTORICALLY CONCRETE SUBJECTIVITY

It is well known that after World War II Sartre became a prophet of commitment. He gave the popular version of his phenomenological existentialism in his *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. After writing such allegoric plays as *The Flies* and *The Dirty Hands*, in *Les Temps Modernes* he propagated the commitment concerning arts and literature, underpinned theoretically in his *What Is Literature?* From 1949 to 1956 he was known as the most influential public

<sup>17</sup> See Raphaël Gély. 2010. "Entre immobilité, pesanteur et mouvement: la danse originaire du corps: Straus, Maldiney, Merleau-Ponty". Talk, October 26, 2010, Cercle des étudiants en philosophie, Université catholique de Louvain. See online: Accessed in August 16, 2014. [https://www.academia.edu/7977631/Entre\\_immobilite\\_pesanteur\\_et\\_mouvement\\_la\\_danse\\_originaire\\_du\\_corps\\_Straus\\_Maldiney\\_Merleau-Ponty](https://www.academia.edu/7977631/Entre_immobilite_pesanteur_et_mouvement_la_danse_originaire_du_corps_Straus_Maldiney_Merleau-Ponty).

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. 1949. "Matérialisme et révolution." In: Jean-Paul Sartre. 1949 (reedited in 1976). *Situations III*. Paris: Gallimard, 145.

intellectual who supported the Marxism as a “joint-fellow,” criticising capitalism as well as colonialism. After the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary he turned away from the Communist Party, but remained a Marxist. In the 1960’s he supported the Maoists and anarchism.

In his critical essays he tried to tackle the source of singular subjectivity by taking social determination into consideration. His books on Baudelaire, Genet and Flaubert can be seen as a special way to study the philosophical problems of subjectivity, determination, nature and lived experience. Sartre called it a basically Marxist existential psychoanalysis in the *Search for a Method*. The aim is to reveal the dialectic of human existence in his concreteness. This investigation of everyday social and family life requires a psychological and sociological method in spite of analysing the lived experience that connect the individual to his life-world both enclosing nature as a source of material inertia, either in the form of our surroundings or in our own body’s facticity.

### THE FAMILY IDIOT

Flaubert based the genetic analysis of the individual called Gustave on a Diltheyan reconstruction of the lived experiences as well as on their psychological as well phenomenological evaluation. For instance, Flaubert’s words that reveal his desire to be a woman who can watch herself in a mirror, are interpreted in a way that reminds the theory of intersubjectivity developed in the *Being and Nothingness*: “since his being is in the hands of others, he tries to recuperate it by turning himself, through complaisant submission, into a fascinating object for his executioners and simultaneously for himself.”<sup>19</sup> Then Sartre focuses on the lived experience of being-in-body, and on the endeavour to resist being objectified by the look of others:

“We understand, of course, that he is trying to rejoin his *being of flesh* and to be dissolved in it to the extent that his palpitating inertia itself sums up and manifests his *presence-in-the-world*, his pathetic, painful, and fragile nakedness, beaten, explored, violated by overly expert hands, by an excessively penetrating look, which is none other than his constitution, an opaque core that is endlessly surpassed but always preserved by his projects. Yet this merging with the *carnal body* cannot be realized, he is convinced, except in woman.”<sup>20</sup>

In this context of body, desires, and sexuality, passivity is crucial, since Flaubert did not want to be anything but pure inertia, a matter formed by others.

<sup>19</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1987b. *The Family Idiot. Gustave Flaubert 1821–1852*, vol. 2, Cosman, C. (Trans.). Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 32.

<sup>20</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1987, op. cit., 33.

That was his “original choice,” interiorizing his permanent humiliation in his family as a cadet and an almost-idiot. The quasi-vegetative characteristic of his existence manifests itself in the *ennui de vivre* as well as in the constituted passivity:

“the child *sexualizes* passivity by demanding to submit to it as a *permanent passivization* in lovemaking; it will become *inflamed* if the chosen lovers transform it into burning flesh by their caresses, which are addressed to the entire body, *reducing it to helplessness*, and thus produce a retotalization of the masculine body as feminine flesh.”<sup>21</sup>

This constituted passivity is the lived experience of the being-in-itself, of the exigency of flesh.<sup>22</sup> The “repeated and vague time of lived experience”<sup>23</sup> is stagnant or flowing slowly, and it has not a visible direction. This pure subjective quality of feeling lacks reflexive mediation, it is the experience of life without meanings: the pure succession of organic impressions. The calm little child “lets himself be absorbed by the surroundings, the plants, the pebbles in the small garden [...] he seeks to merge with unnamable nature, fleeing the weight of nomination in the unnamed texture of things.”<sup>24</sup> Djalioh, the ape-man of an Flaubert’s early writing expresses perfectly this attitude towards nature:

“The symbol is precise: the ape-man, monstrous product of nature and man, must be both the pure object of man and natural subject par excellence. His most intimate relations are with nature and not with men—nature is within him, it is his pure existence; outside him, it is his own potential. His only potential; he can surpass himself only in the direction of nature, making himself so much more nature—that is, spontaneity without a subject—that he loses himself in the unnamed, uncultivated virgin vastness of the ocean or forest. Nature is the meaning and end of his basic project elaborated in a thousand particular appetites; he comes back to himself from the horizons, he is a being from the natural distances.”<sup>25</sup>

Speaking is also “an immediate and spontaneously lived experience”<sup>26</sup> but Gustave, a little boy, is frustrated, has not the faith in language, he stammers, does not manage to learn reading for a long time. For him “the role of the word

<sup>21</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1987, op. cit., 34.

<sup>22</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1987b, op. cit., 188.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>24</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1987a. *The Family Idiot. Gustave Flaubert 1821–1852*, vol. 1, Cosman, C. (Trans.). Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1987a, op. cit., 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 28.

is not to translate the silence of nature into an articulated language,”<sup>27</sup> he cannot express his feelings, his lived experience because “the words inside him belong to others and cannot designate his own experience.”<sup>28</sup> The pure phenomenological description of these difficulties in speaking and reading concludes that:

“from early childhood Gustave can neither surface comfortably in the medium of human praxis nor let himself sink completely into the unconsciousness of the inanimate world. His domain is *pathos*, the emotions insofar as they are suffered without being assumed, and which ravage him, then vanish, having neither denied or affirmed anything, lacking the power to assert themselves.”<sup>29</sup>

This affective inertia that became his second nature, this “passivity is constituted on that deep level where what is experienced, the signifier, and the signified are indistinguishable.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Sartre interprets Flaubert’s apathy as a social phenomenon—a product of his internal relationship with the family.<sup>31</sup> In this context, the constitution of self through material activity, through the violence or gentleness of the hands as a body interiorize it in his flesh.<sup>32</sup> Thus, through psychology of development and the criticism of the Marxist ideology Sartre broadens the scope of his conception of body towards the genetic phenomenology of the sedimentations in the life-world. Concerning body, in the *Being and Nothingness* he focused on coenesthesia that is “the immediate awareness of the affective quality of our body”<sup>33</sup> and on the body-for-others in a state of instantaneity. In *The Family Idiot* Sartre studied the historicity of this body and the self, bending subjectivity to social phenomena.

## CONCLUSION

The bodily conception of nature and lived experience can be seen as a trial to transcend the former dualism of the Sartrean ontology which sets consciousness as a being-for-itself against nature, as a material being-in-itself,<sup>34</sup> subjectivity against objectivity. On this point Sartre found very fruitful Kurt Lewin’s notion of hodological space; in the *Being and Nothingness* where it is “the real space of

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 47–48.

<sup>33</sup> Catalano, J. S. 1980. *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness*. Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 174.

<sup>34</sup> *Nota bene*, in fact, being-in-itself and material nature are not identical, just share the characteristic of passivity.



the world.”<sup>35</sup> The world reveals itself as an instrumentality, possible futures for the actions of our body:

“the body is given concretely and fully as the very arrangement of things in so far as the For-itself surpasses it towards a new arrangement. In this case the body is present in every action although invisible, for the act reveals the hammer and the nails, the brake and the change of speed, not the foot which brakes or the hand which hammers. The body is lived and not known.”<sup>36</sup>

In *The Family Idiot* Sartre also stresses that Flaubert’s anatomy, his bodily dimensions determine his hodological space: “the aptitude and limitations of our anatomy, internalized-and reexternalized by our actions—reveal to us our immediate hold on the world.”<sup>37</sup> This direct connection to the world is a basic constituent of Flaubert’s personality, because of his aversion of rationalist discursive thinking.

“On the contrary, what characterizes his thought is depth, in other words, syncretism. This mode of predialectic knowledge—through the vague perception of totalities, encompassing contradictions, circularities—is closer to comprehension than to the act of judging; it is valuable to the extent that its object is itself syncretistic, that is, has bearing on lived experience.”<sup>38</sup>

Over against the Cartesian stress on reflexive thinking, Sartre proposes here a notion of knowledge that is close to the theories of affordance, or to the embodied cognition. This conception presupposes the insights of the late Husserl and Heidegger concerning the sedimentation of knowledge in a life-world and the openness of *Gelassenheit*. As for the lived experience it seems to me that the characteristics of singularity and directness come from the hermeneutic conception of Dilthey. This notion of lived experience serves as a key notion of *The Family Idiot*—as a philosophical analysis of the relation between affectivity and cognition, body and consciousness, subjectivity of human existence and his life world. Thus, the late Sartre’s philosophy can be placed in the phenomenological context of the Merleau-Ponty, Patočka and Lévinas considerations which analyse the relation between humanity and nature in a dialogic way.

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<sup>35</sup> Sartre, J-S. 1971. *Being and Nothingness*, Barnes, H. E. (Trans.). New York: Washington Square Press–Pocket Books, 308.

<sup>36</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1971, op. cit., 324.

<sup>37</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1989. *The Family Idiot. Gustave Flaubert 1821–1852*, vol. 3, Cosman, C. (Trans.). Chicago–London: University of Chicago Press, 120.

<sup>38</sup> Sartre, J-P. 1989, op. cit., 24.

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