

## Sartre and Lacan: Considerations on the Concepts of the Subject and of Consciousness

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### *1. Introduction*

A thorough examination of the work of Lacan in the late 1940s and early 1950s reveals that Sartre calls Lacan's attention to a number of questions. Thus, for example, Lacan (1988) draws on Sartre's discussion of the gaze and love relations in his *Being and Nothingness* in Seminar I on *Freud's Papers on Technique*. His purpose is to provide an argument supporting a key issue explored in the seminar, namely intersubjectivity. Moreover, Lacan considers Sartre's book "essential reading" (p. 215) for every psychoanalyst, not only for its "talent and its verve" (p. 215), but also precisely for exploring the experience of intersubjectivity. However, Lacan offers a barely disguised criticism of Sartre in his work on the mirror stage (Lacan, 1977) and, in his Seminar I (Lacan, 1988), a reference to the phenomenological approach that conceives the ego as a function of *méconnaissance* (a notion which, as is well known, Sartre so emphatically upholds).

In spite of the above, the theoretical connection between these two thinkers is far from having been fully elucidated. For Foucault, Sartre and Lacan appear as alternate contemporaries (Roudinesco, 1997), in reference to the fact that they have confronted and opposed but have never truly encounter each other, from a theoretical and even a political point of view. This relationship, according to Foucault<sup>1</sup>, is essentially one of opposition. In our opinion, this opposition is partly based on the same historical and

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Roudinesco refers to two different sources: an unpublished conversation between Foucault and Didier Eribon on the occasion of Lacan's death in September 1981, and an interview that was published by the *Corriere della Sera* at around the same time and translated for *L'Âne*, 37 (January-March 1989).

philosophical context in which their work was developed – a context marked by a deep tension between the decline of phenomenology and the rise of structuralism.

Jorge Alemán has analyzed this issue in Argentina, where the introduction of Lacan's thought in the 1960s involved a complex dialogue with phenomenology and, in particular, with Sartre's philosophy. Alemán (2006, p. 11) arrives at a similar conclusion: "in the beginning [...] being Lacanian meant being anti-Sartrean for the simple reason that back then [...] Sartre was identified with freedom and consciousness [...] and Lacan's psychoanalysis with 'overdetermination'."<sup>2</sup> What was at stake in Lacan's theory was the importance of structure, the manner in which the subject was always caught up in and determined by structure. In Sartre's theory, on the other hand, the main focus was on freedom, and the search for excuses for one's life decisions was an act of bad faith. "Structuralism versus existentialism", adds Alemán (2006, p. 12): "this relationship of opposition can be said to be the way by which Lacan became an antidote to Sartre and even a departure from Sartre's theory."

The same relationship is emphasized by Elisabeth Roudinesco (1997), who claims that although Sartre never read Lacan – his reading of Freud being strictly "Sartrean"- , Lacan was a diligent reader of Sartre's work. So much so, that Lacan's theory of the subject and his doctrine of freedom could have been developed *in opposition to* Sartre's theses. For Roudinesco, however, this is the same relationship that Lacan had with philosophy in general: "his relationship with philosophy is like fighting to the death. Lacan draws on philosophy to refute it. He is always engaged in a sort of hand-to-hand combat with it" (Badiou & Roudinesco, 2012, p.81)<sup>3</sup>. In light of this, we should examine the validity of such relationship of opposition by locating aspects that can lead to a connection between the authors at issue here.

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<sup>2</sup> There is no English translation available for this article; therefore, this and the following translations from the Spanish edition are ours.

<sup>3</sup>At the time this paper was being written there was no English translation available for the article quoted; therefore, this and all the following translations from the Spanish edition are ours.

Out of the many links that can be established between Lacan and Sartre, there is one that is not evident after a first reading of their work, nor has it been made explicit by Lacan. As is well known, the overall project that Lacan undertook from the 1940s onwards, with special emphasis in the period between his first two seminars, was primarily aimed at rectifying a technical departure from a certain interpretation of Freud's work, particularly his second topography. In general terms, Lacan proposed redirecting a psychoanalysis from the register of the ego<sup>4</sup> and the dual relationship between analyst-analysand to a psychoanalysis of the register of the subject, where it is crucial to reveal the speech of the analysand to realize his truth. Significantly, the Lacanian concept of the subject seemed to be based on categories related to the notion of unreflective consciousness that Sartre developed in the 1930s, especially in his book *The Transcendence of the Ego*.

The two factors mentioned above, i.e. the little evidence supporting the connection between Lacan and Sartre, and Lacan's lack of explicit reference to it, have contributed in recent years to an increasing number of studies especially conducted to determine the validity of that connection. This paper draws on those studies to establish the theoretical conditions that can prove the actual conceptual resemblance between the Lacanian concept of the subject and the Sartrean concept of consciousness.

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<sup>4</sup> John Forrester, in his translation of Lacan Seminar I, uses the term “*ego*” in italics for the Latin “ego”, and the term “ego” in Roman face for the original French “moi”. We use “ego” for both original words, “ego” and “moi” since Lacan used them interchangeably (for example, see Lacan, 1988, p. 15). It is well known that, as early as the 1940s, Lacan sought to establish a conceptual separation between two words: “je” and “moi”. Some authors, like Roudinesco (1997), argue that Lacan's ideas about this bipartition were influenced by Kojève; others, like Dagfal (2012), suggest that they came to Lacan, at least partly, via Sartre. Finally, there are those, like Le Gaufey (1998), that consider Husserl to be the main influence here, in particular his two Parisian conferences given in 1929 and published in French two years later under the title *Cartesian Meditations*. When writing *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre was immersed both in the study of Husserl's works and in a deep discussion with him. In fact, the notion of ego that he presented there – an ego composed of two poles, a *je* and a *moi* – seemed to benefit from all the terminological distinctions that arose from the problematic translations of *Meditations* in France, where the German original words “Ich” and “Ego” became the French trio “je”, “moi” and “ego”. With respect to Lacan, the distinction between ego, *je* and *moi* seems to find, as well, at least some of its basis here. In Seminar I, the development of the distinction between *je* and *moi* did not seem to be among Lacan's main interests. In fact, the word *je* appears only a few times. Rather, he directs his efforts at criticizing the ‘ego psychology’. Thus, the Lacanian word *ego* also alludes to this psychoanalytic reference, apart from the references to the Strachey translations of the Freudian “Ich”.

To achieve such goal, we focus on Lacan's work from the late 1940s and early 1950s, especially his seminar on Freud's Papers on Technique (as we consider it the most significant and illustrative of his work in this period, at least in relation to the issues that are here at stake), and Sartre's *The Transcendence of the Ego*. The latter includes the initial formulation of the binary distinction that Sartre began developing in 1940 and is known as 'being-for-itself' (*pour-soi*) and 'being-in-itself' (*en-soi*). We have chosen to analyze the work of Lacan and Sartre in the periods mentioned because, as is well noted by Dagfal (2012), they show a convergence of themes shared by both authors. As a result of our work, we hope to shed some light on the complex relationship between Lacan and Sartre and, more specifically, on the traces left on the Lacan of the 1950s by his reading of the Sartre of the 1930s.

## 2. *Discussions about Subjectivity*

The discussions presented in this paper are related to whether it is valid to draw a connection between the Lacanian concept of the subject and the Sartrean concept of consciousness. They also focus on the Hegelian notion of *nothingness* as the epistemological basis of these concepts and on how that notion was assimilated by both authors.

Jacques-Alain Miller (1996, p. 27) draws on Lacan's first seminars to argue that "the Lacanian twist is to transfer the phenomenological view of consciousness to the concept of the subject, that is, the subject of the unconscious." Miller is referring, in particular, to the 'non-objectivist' status of consciousness in phenomenology, i.e. the fact – emphasized first by Husserl and later by his French pupils, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty – that consciousness *is not an object in the world* and that it cannot be described with objectivist or positive categories.

For Miller, what Lacan transfers to his concept of the subject would be strictly the Sartrean concept of consciousness, and more specifically, the concept of unreflective consciousness as developed by Sartre in *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Miller maintains that this consciousness is a *working nothingness* that "is

not something which is". It is a non-substantial, non-positive entity which does not exist once and for all. Rather, consciousness is something which forms and becomes, and it is opposed to being, which is what is. "It is Sartre's nothingness", Miller says, "[...] which paves the way for the Lacanian subject defined as a lack of being (*manque-à-être*)" (1996, p. 27).

By establishing the Hegelian origins of this notion of *nothingness*, Miller would have found an epistemological basis in Hegel that is shared by Sartre and Lacan. However, Miller is so eager to demonstrate the direct relationship between Sartre and Lacan that he fails to notice the Kojévian assimilation of Hegel by Lacan. Thus, Miller's approach suggests that Hegel's nothingness would have constituted the Lacanian subject only through Sartre. Still, it cannot be argued that Miller's failure is indicative of an adopted stance on his part, as a thorough analysis of his work would undoubtedly reveal.

Sara Vasallo (2006) considers that the claim of a conceptual similarity between the Lacanian concept of the subject and the Sartrean concept of consciousness cannot be sustained given the disparity of the authors' projects. "Sartre's project rules out Husserl's solipsism as obsolete to avoid being limited by the idealistic option (the transcendental ego<sup>5</sup> creates the world) or the realistic option (it is the world that creates the ego). This project has become useless for Lacan, for whom the category of the real pushes into the background the question of the presence or absence of the ego on a transcendental plane" (Vasallo, 2006, p. 40)<sup>6</sup>.

As we can see, Vasallo argues her point by referring to notions that Lacan formalizes at a later time than the time examined here. However, if we focus on the period under analysis in this paper, Vasallo's assertion that Lacan would have pushed "into the background the question of the presence or absence of the ego on a transcendental plane" loses validity. In fact, as we intend to demonstrate here, one of the key issues that Lacan addresses in the early 1950s is that of purifying the register of the subject of all

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<sup>5</sup> Sara Vasallo uses the Spanish "yo" to refer to the transcendental ego in Sartre (see footnote 4).

<sup>6</sup> The translations from the Spanish edition of this book are ours. There is no English edition at the moment.

egological structure. Lastly, Vasallo claims that if any similarity can be established between Sartre and Lacan, it should be limited to the ego, not to the subject.

In contrast to Miller, Vasallo argues that the concept of unreflective consciousness, which Sartre introduced in 1936 in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, is not based on Hegel's views; this being due to strictly chronological reasons<sup>7</sup>. She points out that, under Husserl's influence, Sartre begins to subject image to intentionality. In fact, Sartre considers that the image merely designates one of the many relations that consciousness can establish with objects (his assertion that "the image is consciousness of something" (Vasallo, 2006, p. 26) should be understood in this sense). Thus, two notions are ruled out: one is understanding knowledge in terms of a relationship between an interiority (consciousness) and an exteriority (the world); the other is the idea of consciousness as an inner and *inert* reservoir (hence the reformulation of consciousness as a creative *act* presented in *The Transcendence of the Ego*). For Vasallo, only at a later point in time, which can be located during the 1940s, will Sartre begin to introduce the notion of *nothingness* and thus connect Husserl and Hegel<sup>8</sup>. This connection provides a fundamental insight: the structure of consciousness in *Being and Nothingness*. Thus, from a chronological standpoint, imagination, in Sartre, precedes nihilation – a concept that would not be found in his 1930s work.

However, Miller and Vasallo agree on the notion that the structure of consciousness in *Being and Nothingness* (what Sartre calls "for-itself") is actually set up as a *nothingness* that finds its epistemological basis in Hegel's negativity. This is the same idea that Hyppolite<sup>9</sup> had already suggested. For Hyppolite, what Hegel's and Sartre's approaches would have in common is the loss of being, which in Hegel is related to the so-called "unhappy consciousness" and, in Sartre, to his idea of "for-itself".

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<sup>7</sup> Although published in 1936, *The transcendence of the Ego* was written by Sartre in 1934, partly during his stay in Berlin while studying Husserl's phenomenology.

<sup>8</sup> In 1940, Sartre writes a letter to Simone de Beauvoir from a prison camp in Alsace. In the letter he says: "After all, this theory of Nothingness has richer consequences and I believe it is true [...] Is it possible to conceive of desire in any other way as a lack? [...] If something can be argued to be lacking in consciousness in general, then the existential nature of consciousness should be that of a lack." (Vasallo, 2006, p. 28)

<sup>9</sup> See Hyppolite, J., *Figures de la pensée philosophique*, cited in Vasallo (2006).

Lastly, Vasallo points out that Lacan's reading of the Hegelian negativity is that of Kojève's. She argues that it is in Kojève where we should find the epistemological basis of the concept of the subject developed by Lacan in the early 1950s. As we will try to demonstrate here, we cannot but agree with Vasallo on this issue.

For Vasallo, the Kojévian-Lacanian and Sartrean interpretations of Hegel's nihilation would differ, even in an additional, basic way, in the fact – emphasized by Lacan himself (1958) – that Sartre's nihilation would take place in the context of a "living" or "immediate" subject; whereas, in Lacan's reading of Kojève – as we will see – the subject negates or mediates himself through language and, in so doing, separates himself from the immediate, given reality. Moreover, for Vasallo, the difference lies in that the loss of being in Sartre occurs on an ontological plane, while in Lacan, on the plane of the speaking subject, not of his being.

Borch-Jacobsen (1991) also argues that the Lacanian subject is based on Kojève's interpretation of Hegel. He even suggests that the same interpretation was adopted by Sartre when developing his notion of consciousness. Thus, for Borch-Jacobsen, the Lacanian subject and Sartrean consciousness would be similar in that they share a common epistemological basis<sup>10</sup>, as we will develop later.

For Borch-Jacobsen, what the Lacanian subject and the Sartrean consciousness would basically share is the impossibility of being fixed or, which is the same, the impossibility of *being*: "Like the ungraspable Sartrean 'for-itself'<sup>11</sup> [...] the Lacanian subject is not what he *is* (the 'signifier', or the statement that claims to fix him in his being 'in-himself'), and he is what he is *not* (a perpetual nihilation, a perpetual overtaking of the signifiers/statements that objectify him). In a word, he 'is' a permanent *self-negation*" (Borch-Jacobsen, 1991, p. 190).

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<sup>10</sup> It should be pointed out that Borch-Jacobsen draws on the Sartrean notion of "for-itself", which is based on important aspects of the concept of unreflective consciousness. For this reason, we have included it in our analysis.

<sup>11</sup> See previous footnote. A close reading of *The Transcendence of the Ego* reveals that the definition of the 'for-itself' as 'the being that is not' can easily be applied to the notion of unreflective consciousness.

It should be noted that even Borch-Jacobsen's argument seems to confuse both categories: "If the subject [the Lacanian subject of desire], in the signifier, cannot speak himself as he is, it is because he speaks himself in it as he is not –*in short, because (in accord with the Kojévian lesson reprised by Sartre) he is the radical negativity of a subject who can pose himself 'for-himself' only by ceaselessly negating himself as he is 'in-himself'*" (Borch-Jacobsen, 1991, pp. 190-1, our emphasis). Thus, for Borch-Jacobsen, the Lacanian category of the subject and the Sartrean category of consciousness (or strictly the "for-itself") are epistemologically equivalent ("the Lacanian subject [...] *like* the Sartrean 'for-itself'") on account of a shared Kojévian heritage.

In this way, the Lacanian subject will always be *other* than what he says: "He is pure Desire, *pure difference from himself* as the condition of relationship with himself, pure transcendence, through which he can rejoin himself only at infinity, since when he rejoins himself as he is 'in-himself', he is no longer 'for-himself' (he is a corpse, an inert thing)" (Borch-Jacobsen, 1991, p. 191, our emphasis). According to Borch-Jacobsen, "this subject is the subject of Kojévian 'error-truth' or Sartrean 'bad faith', a subject that cannot speak himself (as 'for-himself') except by negating himself (as 'in-himself), without ever being identical to himself" (Borch-Jacobsen, 1991, p. 191). "The subject 'ek-sists'<sup>12</sup> to language', Lacan says again and again, because he has no other essence than his ek-sistence, than his perpetual ek-stasis beyond what he is: *Lacanism is an existentialism*" (Borch-Jacobsen, 1991, p. 191, our emphasis).

### *3. The Lacanian Subject and the Sartrean Unreflective Consciousness: Arguments for a Conceptual Connection*

We cannot, in any way, overlook the differences in the theoretical and methodological frameworks of Sartre's notion of consciousness and Lacan's notion of the subject. However, in spite of the differences between phenomenology and structuralism, it is important to notice that there is some connection between

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<sup>12</sup> As Vasallo states, the term 'to exist', according to Latin etymology, means 'to stand forth, appear', from *ex-*, 'forth, out', and *sistere*, 'to make stand'.



the authors discussed here, at least in relation to some key points in the concepts they have developed. The connection between Sartre and Lacan may be more clearly evident at the point where both emphatically affirm the imaginary status of the ego; moreover, the same can be argued for the concepts of the subject and consciousness. Therefore, and without overlooking such fundamental differences between these authors, we will argue that there are principally four notions that allow us to establish a conceptual connection between Sartre's concept of unreflective consciousness and Lacan's concept of the subject. These notions are: the transcendental, the active, the constitutive and the impersonal/ trans-individual.

### 3a. The Transcendental or the 'Beyond' of the Ego

Lacan's developments of the early 1950s should be understood as an attempted critique of psychoanalytic technique, a critique aimed at decoupling psychoanalysis from the 'Ego Psychology' of the Anglophone world and redirecting it towards the truth of the Freudian experience. The ego, in fact, had come to play a central role in doctrine and clinical practice since the early 1920s, but especially after World War II and after some interpretation of Freud's work.

Otto Fenichel defined the ego as the function through which the subject learns the meaning of words and, in so doing, introduced the heart of the matter for Lacan, namely *does meaning correspond to or go beyond the ego?* Lacan was specific in this respect: "the ego is what the subject is caught up in, *beyond* the meaning of words" (Lacan, 1988, p. 17, our emphasis).

The question posed by the terms 'ego' and 'speech' was, for the Lacan of early 1950, an object of vital research. In fact, the whole seminar on Freud's Papers on Technique that Lacan taught from late 1953 to mid-1954 focused on the registers of the ego and speech. As previously stated, for Lacan, it was basically a question of decoupling psychoanalysis from 'Ego psychology', i.e. from the dual relationship between analyst-analysand and the *hic et nunc* of the session, and redirecting it to speech, as it is crucial to reveal the speech of the analysand *to realize* his truth.

This, in ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’, is what Lacan defined as the moment when full speech emerges. If this cannot be accomplished, the psychoanalytic experience would be reduced to an ‘attachment’ between the ego and the other where “speech is placed on the index of a search for the *lived experience*” (Lacan, 2001, p. 67, our emphasis). This would be the moment of resistance and empty speech. Thus, Lacan’s project should be understood as an attempt at rectifying the “interpsychology of ego and alter ego” to which we are reduced by “the very degradation of the process of speech” in order to aim at “who, *beyond* the ego, seeks recognition” (Lacan, 1988, 51, our emphasis).

For Lacan, the technique that promotes a search for the lived experience overlooks a key aspect of the psychoanalytic experience: the fact that “the subject goes *well beyond* what is experienced ‘subjectively’ by the individual, exactly as far as the truth he is able to attain” (2001, p. 41, our emphasis). Based on these considerations, it is necessary to identify two registers that are present in Lacan’s work at this point, namely a register that deals with the lived experience and the ego, and another register that is associated with a *beyond*, i.e. a transcendental plane where speech becomes central. This would actually be the register of the subject, which, according to Lacan, is forgotten by Freud’s interpreters or confused with the ego and what it experiences ‘subjectively’<sup>13</sup>.

This register coincides with what Miller calls ‘*transfactuality*’, which is associated with the setting in motion of a negative entity, a nothingness that introduces a decisive break on the plane of immanence (at the level of the lived experience, in Lacan’s words). “With regard to a vital, real immanence, the introduction of a negative entity opens up a transcendental field, a kind of beyond<sup>14</sup>. It concerns what in Lacan is to be viewed as the structure of ‘*beyond*,’ that is, there is a beyond to any given thing” (Miller, 2000).

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<sup>13</sup> Lacan (2001, p. 67), in *Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, says that it would just be a question of a subjectivity that is admitted only “within the parentheses of the illusion”.

<sup>14</sup> Jorge Jauregui translates “hereafter” for the French “*au-delà*”. We believe that the term “beyond” would be more appropriate; therefore, this will be the term we will exclusively use in this paper.

There is thus the need, stressed by Lacan, to deprive the ego of its absolute position in the subject: “The ego acquires the status of a mirage, as the residue, it is only one element in the objectal relations of the subject” (Lacan, 1988, p. 194). This statement quite accurately defines the intention underlying Sartre’s *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Thus, it would be reasonable to argue that Sartre’s *The Transcendence of the Ego* and Lacan’s work from the early 1950s share, at least, a common point of focus, namely the intention to purify a transcendental plane (the subject in Lacan and the unreflective consciousness in Sartre) from the ego—an objective and transcendent structure. This is the first connection we have noticed between the works mentioned: both Lacan’s subject and Sartre’s unreflective consciousness can only be defined on a transcendental plane (a *beyond*), as opposed to the ego and the transcendent experience.

However, even if we agree with this view, there is a *prima facie* objection (which Vasallo has already made), namely the radical differences between the projects and theories that include the concepts under analysis. To take a case in point, it is a well-known fact that Sartre rarely used the category of subject in his works. This can be explained by the fact that Husserl’s phenomenology rejects the notion of subject in favour of the notion of consciousness. Phenomenology is nothing but a philosophy of consciousness which captures the immediate and given experience; in other words, it is a philosophy concerning facts<sup>15</sup>, concerning how they appear to transparent consciousness. The emergence of structuralism implies likewise a deep rejection of the traditional concept of the subject, but also a questioning of phenomenology and its focus on the reflective ego and the sphere of intimacy.

In this context, Lacan adopted a particular stance: although deeply influenced by phenomenology (as noted by Miller (1996), who claims that Lacan, in his psychiatric practice, conceived of himself as a phenomenologist and was even a follower of Karl Jaspers’ psychopathology), he later turned towards structuralism and participated in the shift away from phenomenology proposed by it. However, at the same

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<sup>15</sup> As Sartre says: “phenomenology is a *de facto* science, and [...] the problems it raises are *de facto* problems” (Sartre, 2004, p. 2).

time, and unlike most structuralist authors, Lacan chose to retain the category of the subject<sup>16</sup> - in fact, not only did Lacan retain this category but he also made it central to the psychoanalytic experience - but with the sole purpose of radically transforming it<sup>17</sup>. What, then, is the subject that emerges from such radical transformation? According to Lacan, it is the speaking subject, i.e. the subject “that can lie. That is, he is distinct from what he says” (Lacan, 1988, p. 194). In other words, it is the subject of the unconscious, as he puts it.

This shows the distance that would come to separate psychoanalysis from phenomenology, in which the subject remains on the plane of consciousness to support the object world. Lacan himself suggested this several times. Thus, for example, in ‘The Mirror Stage’, after linking the subject to “existential negativity”, Lacan points out how this concept has been misapprehended by “the contemporary philosophy of being and nothingness”, which “grasps negativity only within the limits of a self-sufficiency of consciousness” (Lacan, 1977, p. 99/6)<sup>18</sup>.

In fact, some of the harshest criticism that Lacan directed at Sartre was that the latter understands Hegelian negativity as centred on the autonomy of consciousness or of the ego. Clearly, Sartrean consciousness is both an outcome of Hegelian negativity and an autonomous entity, as asserted by Sartre himself (2004). Lacan is very precise in this criticism of Sartre. As will be seen below, the Lacanian subject, on the contrary, is not autonomous due to his exposure and submission to the inevitable instance that Lacan calls “the Other”.

Another element of Lacan’s criticism is how Sartre understands negativity as taking place in the context of a “living” or “immediate” consciousness. According to Lacan, in traditional existential philosophy, “it is the human, living subject that introduces here an annihilation (*néantisation*)” (Lacan, 1958, p. 244).

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<sup>16</sup> Many authors still wonder why Lacan retained this category, even when it signifies something that is not traditionally understood by it. See Miller (2000); Borch-Jacobsen (1991).

<sup>17</sup> To explore some of these considerations see Roudinesco & Badiou (2012).

<sup>18</sup> The rest of the quotation (“This ‘flight of fancy’, though it borrows from psychoanalytic experience, culminates in the pretention of providing an existential psychoanalysis.”) clearly indicates that Lacan was talking to Sartre.

Sartre's consciousness constitutes, in fact, an immediate reality, as claimed by Sartre himself (2004). On the other hand, under the key influence of Kojève, the Lacanian subject negates or mediates himself through language and, in so doing, separates himself from the immediate, given reality.

However, if such view is adopted, we may overlook the strict difference that Sartre makes between two spheres: the nihilating consciousness of a living subject and the transcendent existent (or “the thing”, in Sartre’s words) presented to such consciousness. The last of these spheres would match that of the ego. In other words, we are speaking about the sphere of a transcendental consciousness which, despite its “living” nature, “is not”, and the sphere of a transcendent existent which “is”. Even Sartre (2004) expressed the need to address both spheres through different modalities: the transcendent sphere is accessible to psychology, in which the external method of observation and the introspective method can aid each other mutually, while the transcendental sphere is accessible to phenomenology alone.

### 3b. The active, the constitutive and the impersonal/transindividual

Sartre’s transcendental consciousness, as defined in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, constitutes a sphere of absolute existence, i.e. “of pure spontaneities, which are never objects and which determine themselves to exist” (Sartre, 2004, p. 26). Given its absolute nature, consciousness becomes constitutive inasmuch as nothing can act on it. Rather, consciousness is the cause of itself and of the world. “Transcendental consciousness”, Sartre says, “is an impersonal spontaneity. It determines itself to exist at every instant, without us being able to conceive of anything *before it*. Thus, every instant of our conscious life reveals to us a creation *ex nihilo* [...] a new existence” (Sartre, 2004, p. 27). Further on he adds: “The absolute, impersonal consciousness [...] is quite simply a precondition and an absolute source of existence” (Sartre, 2004, pp. 29-30).

All of Sartre’s references to transcendental consciousness also point to its active, spontaneous (“consciousness transcends itself”; “it unifies itself”; “it continually refers back to itself”; “the Cogito is

the result of a reflective act or operation”, etc.), and impersonal nature<sup>19</sup>. It should be stressed, firstly, that the concept of “act” has an important role in phenomenology after Husserl, where “it does not merely designate an action, activity or process, but also one’s own intentional relation. Acts are events of consciousness which are intentional in nature” (Szilasi, 2003, p. 35)<sup>20</sup>. And secondly, that for Husserl’s phenomenology, intentional acts are always constitutive acts. Thus, the active, absolute and constitutive qualities of intentional consciousness imply each other.

However, in contrast to the active and constitutive qualities of transcendental consciousness, Sartre highlights the passivity and inertia of transcendent objects - qualities that emerge from the basis of their existential relativity: “A relative existence can only be passive, since the least activity would free it from its relative status and would constitute it as absolute” (Sartre, 2004, p. 14). Thus in Sartre, consciousness designates pure activity that is both constitutive and impersonal, as opposed to the passivity and inertia of transcendent objects. In Lacan, as we argue here, the concept of the subject can only be defined on the basis of these three fundamental aspects that define Sartrean consciousness, namely its activity, its constitutive nature and its impossibility of being described with nominalist categories. We will try to demonstrate this below.

As stated earlier in this paper, the Lacanian subject is the subject that speaks, i.e. the subject of language and speech operations. He is the function that “cancels the existing thing [and] opens up the world of negativity” (Lacan, 1988, pp. 173-174). Or, in other words, the function that destroys the given reality and experience, and, in so doing, *creates* something new, introduces that *beyond* which is the symbolic system that governs all human life: “The symbolic system is not like a piece of clothing which sticks onto things, it is not lacking in its effect on them and on human life. You can call this upheaval what you will –

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<sup>19</sup> Sartre, at least in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, does not undertake the task of establishing a distinction between active consciousness and spontaneous consciousness, as he considers it “one of the most difficult problems in phenomenology” (Sartre, 2004, p. 15).

<sup>20</sup> There is no English translation for this text; therefore this translation from the Spanish is ours.

conquest, rape of nature, transformation of nature, hominisation of the planet” (Lacan, 1988, p. 265). What is actually constitutive is the “*act of speech*” (Lacan, 1988, p. 232, our emphasis), as stated by Lacan towards the end of his seminar on Freud’s Papers on Technique: “the function of the *action of speech*” (Lacan, 1988, p. 274, our emphasis) is what installs the dimension of being: “before speech nothing either is or isn’t” (Lacan, 1988, p. 228).

As we can see, in Lacan, language and speech lose their representative function and acquire a new one, namely of presenting or, which is the same, of producing or creating. This has already been pointed out by Borch-Jacobsen, who claims that the Saussurean *langue* enters into Lacanian doctrine at the expense of losing its representative function and acquiring the role previously imparted to speech: the role of “producing (presenting) *nothing* from *nothing*” (Borch-Jacobsen, 1991, p. 176).

In Lacan, language no longer represents anything; but, insofar as it is a power of negation, it presents or constitutes the nothingness that the subject of desire “is”. The linguistic model that Lacan formulates, based on Kojève, is auto-enunciative and self-referential, as noted by Borch-Jacobsen. It is a model that considers language as a system which, devoid of any realist reference, is central to the presentation (or constitution) of the subject: “This language is essentially speech that speaks itself, in the very precise sense of a subject’s intentionally *expressing* himself within it” (Borch-Jacobsen, 1991, p. 188). This also determines the direction of the cure: from empty speech (or language that represents something), in relation to what the subject does *hic et nunc* with his analyst, to full speech, i.e. “speech which performs”, after which “one of the subjects finds himself other than he was before” (Lacan, 1988, p. 107).

The Lacanian subject, the subject of language and speech operations, will thus be an active and creative instance, as well as a *trans-individual* instance, as claimed by Badiou (2012), because of his exposure and submission to language, a radical and common alterity. In this respect, Masotta (2008) stresses the paradoxical nature of the Lacanian subject: it is an active instance within the symbolic but is “passively”

linked to it. As in Sartre (2004) - for whom, as already seen, *impersonal* life should be placed on the plane of unreflective consciousness (and egotistic life on the plane of reflective consciousness) -, in Lacan the subject cannot be described with nominalist categories.

However, unlike Sartre's consciousness, Lacan's subject would not be autonomous (if we understand "autonomy" as defined by Sartre in terms of ontological and operative independence from any other entity or, which is the same, in terms of the ability of an entity to determine itself to exist), precisely because of this exposure and submission to the language that precedes him.

As a matter of fact, the Lacanian subject would not initially be a pre-existing entity but would be constituted by the Other, i.e. the language in which he is alienated. Comparing Lacan's and Sartre's notions of the Other is a task that we will not attempt here, but a few remarks on this will nevertheless be included. As rightly stated by Vasallo (2006), all the meanings of the Other<sup>21</sup> examined in Sartre's work share one feature – exteriority. As a matter of fact, in Sartre, the relationship between consciousness and the Other is conceived as one of exteriority; whereas in Lacan, the Other is a pre-eminent instance that constitutes and contains the subject.

There is, however, a characteristic that both notions share: their underlying connection with the Hegelian system. Lacan and Sartre even agree when they question the Hegelian system on the grounds that it is completed by closing in on itself. As is well known, self-consciousness in Hegel originates as a struggle for recognition. This is Sartre's starting point, as he claims that Hegel's brilliant intuition is to make me depend on the Other in my being. This idea, without the ontological categories that embrace it, is also present in the work of Lacan. However, what both Lacan and Sartre question is Hegel's concept of an

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<sup>21</sup> The Other, at least for the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*, does not belong to the order of perception. Its existence cannot be explained in terms of "objectivity" or "representation". This leads to a distinction between "the other", a notion that describes the object of perception or representation, as well as its "empirical variations", and "the Other", a notion that designates the entity which is not given in the empirical or in the representation. This "fundamental theme" of the Other, as Vasallo (2006, p. 183) puts it, is what is at stake here.



ideal reconciliation between self-consciousness and the Other. There is no possible synthesis between the consciousness and its Other. The Other, as Sartre claims, is irreducible.

In his attack on realism and idealism, Sartre conceptualizes a relationship with the Other "without intermediaries": the Other appears, he will say, to an immediate cogito. It is when trying to define this apprehension of the Other that Sartre will use his famous metaphor of the gaze, which Lacan discusses so extensively in his seminar on Freud's Papers on Technique. Sartre calls "the nothingness of exteriority" (*néant d'extériorité*) the space of the relationship between a cogito (i.e. a gaze that fully apprehends its object) and an Other that resists such apprehension. Thus, for Sartre, if the Other can be grasped in its alterity, it is because such alterity is "experienced" through an ungraspable nothingness that separates one consciousness from another. What the nothingness of exteriority asserts is that the Other exists as an inevitable remainder of the Hegelian synthesis.

For Lacan, the problem does not lie in refuting the Hegelian synthesis on the basis of the separation of consciousnesses, but in formulating the order of language which contains the subject. This alterity thus loses all ontological reference. As rightly stated by Vasallo, in Lacan, unlike in Sartre, the Other does not exist, whether ontologically, empirically, noematically or ideally. Lacan's assertion goes hand in hand with his critique of the connotation of the "living entity" that surrounds Sartrean consciousness.

Thus, Lacan's alterity is conceived as a linguistic system that precedes and constitutes the subject and, as Vasallo claims, "it implies forsaking the idea of an autonomous consciousness, which persists even in the separation postulated by Sartre" (Vasallo, 2006, p. 191). She argues, and we discuss below, that the fundamental difference between Lacan and Sartre lies in the fact that Lacan makes Hegelian negativity incarnate in language. "Making me 'depend on the Other in my being' - Hegel's brilliant intuition, in Sartre's words - changes its content. Lacan radicalizes Hegelian negativity by making it incarnate in language; he makes it the bearer of the death of the subject, who is unknowingly immersed in mortal

negativity. What emerges out of this is the subject of the unconscious, rather than a self-consciousness unable to achieve a synthesis with an exterior alterity (as in Sartre)” (Vasallo, 2006, p. 191).

#### *4. Negativity as the Epistemological Basis of Lacan’s Concept of the Subject and Sartre’s Concept of Consciousness*

As we have already noted, the conceptual resemblance that effectively exists between the Lacanian concept of the subject and the Sartrean concept of consciousness can only be explained by presenting a shared epistemological basis for both concepts. This basis is to be found in the negative function, the active nothingness, identified by Hegel.

When Lacan states in ‘Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’ that the goal of analysis is none other than the “psychoanalytic realization of the subject”, he is, as Miller (1996) suggests, referring to a subject based on the idea of an active nothing which, since it does not exist once and for all, should “realize” itself through the project that it actually is.

However, this active nothing that inhabits both Lacan’s subject and his symbolic register only enters into Lacanian doctrine in a mediated way. In fact, the Lacanian subject is based on Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel. Thus, the active and creative dimensions of this subject are explained by the influence that the Kojévian interpretation of Hegel exerts on Lacan’s linguistic model and, more specifically, on his concept of the symbolic. Vasallo has noted this, stating that “Lacan adopts Kojève’s point of view in his first years of teaching, making his own the concept of the link between negativity, unreality (symbolic death) and language—a link that becomes evident by reading not only Lacan’s “Rome Discourse” of 1953, but also the first three books of his *Seminar*” (Vasallo, 2006, p. 69). Combining the words “nihilation” and “symbol” into the expression “symbolic nihilation” would remove, Vasallo insists, any doubt about the Hegelian-Kojévian genesis of the idea of the symbolic in Lacan.

In Kojève's interpretation, the Hegelian category of negativity is linked to the human ability to abstract, i.e. the ability of a person to separate any object from the *hic et nunc* of its immediate reality through speech. Kojève himself repeatedly claims that this separation is the result of an "activity" or "work" which has, notably, a constitutive nature, since what results from such work are new concepts that transform the immediate, natural reality and give rise to "the technical or cultural, social or historical World" (Kojève, 2004, p. 44).

As negativity incarnate, man is defined by Kojève in terms of a "negative or creative Act". "The true being of Man", he adds more emphatically, "is his action" (Kojève, 2004, p. 66). Man is not a given or natural being; he mediates natural immediacy through creative, "negative Action": "Man [...] negates himself; it is he himself who creates and transforms himself; he is himself the mediation of a given-being through active, and therefore discursive or revelatory negation" (Kojève, 2004, p. 46). However, this does not imply that man ceases to have, in Kojève, "an empirical existence of his own" which is different from every purely natural empirical existence, namely his existence as a speaking being.

Perhaps herein lies the essential difference between Kojévian negativity as formulated within the framework of an empirical existence and - as we have seen - Lacanian negativity as formulated as a transcendental plane of existence. There is no *incarnation* by which the Lacanian subject is born because there is no materiality that has come to define it. We can expand Vasallo's thesis and claim that the Lacanian subject, the subject of language and speech operations, does not exist, whether ontologically, empirically or noematically. Apart from such materiality, what Kojève seeks to restore to the symbolic mediation that he describes is its autonomous nature. This constitutes another difference from the Lacanian subject who, exposed to and alienated in language, is not autonomous. It should be remembered that, as pointed out above, the autonomy of consciousness or of the ego was one of the aspects that Lacan criticized in Sartre's apprehension of negativity. In this respect, we agree with Masotta (2008) on the

paradoxical nature of the Lacanian subject as it is an active instance within the symbolic but is “passively” linked to it (and therefore is not autonomous).

What Kojève’s interpretation reveals is the active and creative nature of negativity, which nature is assigned to language itself. Thus, if in Lacan negativity is interpreted in terms of language operations, it is only possible because Lacan adopts the Kojévian reading of Hegel. The Lacanian subject is, in fact, the linguistic function that “cancels the existing thing [and] opens up the world of negativity”. The Lacanian subject is, as Borch-Jacobsen states, “negativity (separation from himself, separation from what ‘is’)” (Borch-Jacobsen, 1991, p. 191).

As for Sartre, we cannot agree with Vasallo’s assertion that Sartre formulates the concept of nothingness at some point during the 1940s. This is because in precisely those terms, as a nothing, Sartre defines unreflective consciousness in 1936, in *The Transcendence of the Ego*: “The transcendental field, purified of all egological structure, recovers its former limpidity. In one sense, it is a *nothing*, since all physical, psycho-physical and psychological objects, all truths, and all values are outside it, since the me (Moi) has, for its part, ceased to be part of it” (Sartre, 2004, p. 25). Moreover, earlier in the book, Sartre speaks of consciousness as “the absolute existent *by virtue of the fact that it did not exist*” (Sartre, 2004, p. 5).

We therefore argue that as early as 1934 Sartre began to shape an idea that he would not explore in depth until a later point in time during the 1940s. Even when it is still open to debate whether Sartre attended Kojève’s seminars on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, there seems to be no doubt as to the influence that the interpreter of Hegel had on Sartre. Thus, the same interpretation of Kojève would have influenced Lacan as well as Sartre in their development. Having established this fact, it is important to determine the aspects in the works of Lacan and Sartre on which Kojévian influence is more decisive. With regard to the question addressed in this paper, namely the subject and consciousness, an initial reading would suggest that, for the reasons outlined above, Kojève’s interpretation of Hegelian negativity would have had a more

decisive influence on Lacan's development of the concept of the subject than on Sartre's development of the concept of consciousness.

### 5. Conclusion

Both Sartre and Lacan apprehend Hegelian negativity as a creative, active, non-substantial and transcendental plane which cannot be described with nominalist categories. However, there would be an essential difference in the way Sartre and Lacan reformulate Hegel's idea of nothingness. In Sartre, the transcendental plane includes operations of consciousness that should be defined from the phenomenological, rather than psychological, point of view. In Lacan, on the contrary, the transcendental plane includes language operations, which should be addressed not in terms of the "interpsychology of ego and *alter ego*" that Lacan intends to rectify, but rather in strictly psychoanalytic terms.

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*Abstract*

In this paper we examine Jacques Lacan's work from the late 1940s and early 1950s and Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Transcendence of the Ego*, published in 1936, in order to establish a conceptual connection between two authors that are usually considered as having opposing viewpoints given their theoretical and methodological perspectives. The proposed connection is based on Sartre's concept of unreflective consciousness and Lacan's concept of the subject. There are four notions that allow us to establish this connection: the transcendental, the active, the constitutive and the impersonal/ transindividual. Finally, we present a shared epistemological basis for both concepts that is essential to support the considerations in this paper.

*Key words:* Lacan – Sartre – Subject – Consciousness

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