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Sartre’s legacy

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Shaping and contesting Sartre’s legacy

The shaping of Sartre’s legacy began while he was still alive. In part, this was due to a concerted effort from Sartre himself, and from Simone de Beauvoir along with others in his inner circle, to pre-empt posthumous evaluations, both positive and negative. In an extended interview with Pierre Vicary and de Beauvoir that was broadcast in early 1975 on ABC radio in Australia, Sartre was asked by Vicary: “How do you want to be remembered? What would you like your epitaph to be? How do you want people to remember the name Jean-Paul Sartre?” Sartre responded in the following terms:

I would like them to remember [my novel] Nausea, [my plays] No Exit and The Devil and the Good Lord, and then my two philosophical works, more particularly the second one, Critique of Dialectical Reason. Then my essay on Genet, Saint Genet, which I wrote quite a long time ago. If these are remembered, that would be quite an achievement, and I don’t ask for more. As a man, if a certain Jean-Paul Sartre is remembered, I would like people to remember the milieu or historical situation in which I lived, how I lived in it, in terms of all the aspirations which I tried to gather up within myself. This is how I would like to be remembered.

(Charlesworth 1975: 154)

One may take issue with Sartre’s selection of the literary and philosophical works that he chose in this case to define his legacy; while few
Sartre scholars would dispute the quality of the works cited here by Sartre, some might wonder why he chose these works as definitive of his career and not others.

Yet it is the second part of Sartre’s answer that is far more telling. Sartre explicitly asked that if he was to be remembered, he should first be situated within a particular historical, social and political context, and be understood as having pursued the possibilities open to him, through concrete action in situ. This suggests that Sartre regarded his philosophical legacy as consisting primarily in a philosophy of existence driven by his conceptions of human freedom and of self-creation, and grounded in a concrete situation, to be understood and interpreted at the level of lived experience. Arguably, these themes persisted in one form or another throughout Sartre’s philosophical trajectory, although, of course, one may nevertheless distinguish between these ideas as they appear in Sartre’s earlier existentialist works, and his later politically driven (and sometimes explicitly Marxist) works.

Given that Sartre gave this interview late in life, we may further infer from his request to be situated in a particular historico-political context, that Sartre hoped his legacy would be understood in explicitly dialectical terms; after all, it was just such a dialectical methodology (combined with insights from psychoanalysis and sociology) that came to define his later thought. Just as Sartre had sought to enmesh his biographical portraits of great French writers (for example, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire and Jean Genet) in the broad sweep of history, so too may Sartre be understood here as requesting that the study of his legacy be historically enmeshed in this way.

As for the specific aspirations Sartre tried to “gather up within himself”, to use his phrase, we may infer that Sartre hoped his legacy would be defined in terms of his aspirations for a world free of hierarchies and class distinctions, his aspirations for a world unencumbered by self-deception or “bad faith”, and so on.

Of course, Sartre understood that in order to concretely situate his philosophical, political and literary legacy, he would have to project a certain personal image for posterity, as well. Sartre wanted those who encountered him to take away the message that he was serene, but nevertheless active, in the face of declining health and the looming spectre of death; he was almost totally blind by the time he turned seventy in 1975, after suffering haemorrhages behind his left eye, having been blind in his right eye since three years of age. This meant Sartre could no longer read or write as he had previously, such that he was effectively forced to rest from these activities, a state of mind that went entirely against his ferocious work ethic; he also had considerable difficulty
walking, even over short distances, and suffered from high blood pressure and heart problems, as well as from the debilitating effects of several strokes. These health woes in later years were primarily caused by Sartre's decades of heavy smoking and drinking, a diet high in saturated fat, and his extreme overuse of Corydrane tablets; these tablets were a once legally available mixture of aspirin and amphetamine (banned as toxic in 1971), which Sartre used both to ward off drowsiness, and to increase the speed of his writing rhythm. The impression that Sartre wanted to give, though, was that the loss of his occupation as a writer, and of his health more generally, did not trouble him too much. In an interview to mark his seventieth birthday in 1975, Sartre had this to say: “I should feel very defeated, but for some unknown reason I feel quite good: I am never sad, nor do I have any moments of melancholy in thinking of what I have lost” (Sartre 1977a).

Certainly, this image of contentedness that was presented to the public by Sartre and his inner circle had some truth to it; Sartre continued to work industriously on various projects right up until his final hospitalization in March of 1980, particularly on a planned book entitled *Power and Freedom*, which he had been formulating for some years. Sartre hoped this book would arise out of taped dialogues between himself and his young secretary, a former Maoist militant turned Talmud scholar by the name of Benny Lévy (also known as Pierre Victor), since he could no longer write such a book on his own. Sartre had far-reaching ambitions for this ultimately never-completed work, describing it as the potential *summa* of all of his prior attempts at an ethics, and at a theory of political engagement. Sartre also continued to participate directly in political affairs until the end of his life, appearing at various rallies with other prominent French intellectuals, including Michel Foucault; Sartre also readily gave his support (both moral and financial) to various groups and causes, with one of his final political interventions being to support a boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games, set to take place over July and August of 1980. Aside from his philosophical and political work, Sartre continued to enjoy the company of others and he took holidays to picturesque locations. All of this suggests that for a good deal of this time, at least, life remained tolerable, and even pleasant, for Sartre. In short, one is left with the impression of a man seeking to make the best of a deteriorating situation, seeking to maximize his possibilities as they began to diminish in ways that were simply beyond his control; arguably, this is the very definition of an existentialist response to the "force of circumstance".

Despite the veracity of much of Sartre's stoic self-image in his final years, however, there was also a good deal of concealment, and even
outright deception involved in sustaining this image. Simone de Beauvoir recounts in her memoir of her final decade with Sartre, entitled The Farewell Ceremony (alternatively titled Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre), that Sartre would frequently lapse into depression, agitation, and even anger at the thought of the loss of his health and his occupation as a writer (de Beauvoir 1988). This picture of Sartre appears at odds with his statements in interviews such as those we have just now considered. In fact, de Beauvoir writes that Sartre would often refer to himself as a “living corpse” (ibid.: 74), and that when he moved to a large new apartment with a view of the Eiffel Tower in the mid-1970s, he referred to it as “this dead man’s house” (ibid.: 73). Adding to Sartre’s distress in his final days was the reaction to the release in March 1980 of excerpts of his taped dialogues with Benny Lévy, under the title Hope Now. Although Sartre himself was pleased with the excerpts as they were published, those in Sartre’s inner circle (and de Beauvoir in particular) were not at all impressed. In Hope Now, the views Lévy attributes to Sartre often appear at odds with views that he held throughout his career. For instance, Lévy has Sartre agreeing with the view that Sartre’s conceptualization of existential despair was simply a “fashionable” view that he followed because others around him were interested in similar themes, especially readers of Kierkegaard (Sartre 1996: 55). Towards the conclusion of these excerpts, Lévy attributes to Sartre a complete re-orientation in his philosophical perspective, guided by a newfound appreciation for messianic notions. At one point in the dialogue, Lévy exclaims “you are beginning all over again at the age of seventy-five” (ibid.: 108). In The Farewell Ceremony, de Beauvoir was scathing of Lévy’s involvement with Sartre, accusing him of having effectively “abducted” the Sartre she had known and loved, and more generally of having harassed Sartre, forcing him to accept Lévy’s ideas as his own (de Beauvoir 1988: 119). For Lévy’s part, he continued to insist throughout his remaining years (he died in late 2003) that he never bullied Sartre into accepting a particular position, and that any new developments in Sartre’s thought expressed in Hope Now were entirely his own. Just as Sartre had shifted from his early existentialism to concrete political engagement, so too, Lévy argued, Sartre had shifted late in life to yet another way of thinking (Cohen-Solal 1987: 519).

However, de Beauvoir simply never accepted Lévy’s version of events. So strongly did she object to the views attributed to Sartre by Lévy that, according to Sartre’s adopted daughter Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre, de Beauvoir broke down screaming and crying at Sartre in his apartment over his collaboration with Lévy, even throwing the manuscript of the dialogues across the room (ibid.: 514). Elkaïm-Sartre recalls that Sartre...
was visibly shaken by this incident, declaring that he did not understand de Beauvoir; he is also said to have remarked to Elkaïm-Sartre that de Beauvoir – along with other Sartreans – were treating him “like a dead man who has the gall to appear in public” (ibid.: 516). For the first time in their lives, Sartre and de Beauvoir were in an apparently severe rupture. So stressful was this episode for Sartre that he spoke with increasing urgency of his next planned vacation over Easter of 1980 to Belle-Île, a French island off the coast of Brittany; presumably, Sartre hoped that the conflict would ultimately “blow over”, so to speak. Of course, Sartre never made it to Belle-Île, and the controversy he was engulfed in followed him to the intensive care unit at Broussais Hospital, where he would ultimately die in April 1980. He repeatedly asked his visitors in hospital for news of the reception of Hope Now, seeking positive feedback on the text in contrast to the views of de Beauvoir and others (ibid.: 519).

In fairness to de Beauvoir, it is not hard to see why Sartre’s collaboration with Lévy may have caused her such distress. By undertaking the taping of these dialogues with Lévy, Sartre was wilfully operating outside of the “truth” about his life and works that he and de Beauvoir (along with others) had worked hard over many decades to create. If these divergent views now being attributed to Sartre by Lévy were to gain widespread notoriety, or even acceptance, then the perspective on Sartre and his thought put forward by de Beauvoir in her memoirs, her biographies and so on would no doubt be placed under pressure. As well as the “professional” motives de Beauvoir may have had in seeking to protect her investment in helping to shape Sartre’s image (as well as her own), there is the personal aspect of this conflict to be considered. Previously, when Sartre had sought to put forward his views on his life and works for posterity, he had typically involved de Beauvoir in one way or another. For example, in 1974, Sartre had taped a long series of interviews with her, excerpts from which de Beauvoir pointedly included as an addendum to The Farewell Ceremony, as if to say that these interviews, and not those recorded by Lévy, reflected Sartre’s “real” voice, his true convictions and intentions. Sartre’s choice of Lévy as his final interlocutor, though, effectively left de Beauvoir shut out of this final phase in Sartre’s life. Moreover, since Sartre and de Beauvoir had always pledged total transparency to one another regarding their relations with others, it must have come as a considerable shock to de Beauvoir to find views so utterly foreign to the enduring image of Sartre she had in mind attributed to him in his dialogues with Lévy. Of course, de Beauvoir records in The Farewell Ceremony that Sartre expressed love and affection towards her on his deathbed in hospital,
and there seems no reason to doubt her version of events in this regard (de Beauvoir 1988: 123). Yet it is not clear that Sartre and de Beauvoir ever truly reconciled over their opposing views regarding Sartre’s relationship with Lévy; certainly, de Beauvoir never spoke to Lévy again.

In any case, the distinction at issue between Sartre’s “public” image as presented in interviews and through other media, and the “private” image of him as presented through the accounts of those closest to him, demonstrates that Sartre’s efforts (and those of his inner-circle) to position him in a particular light both professionally and personally, were never a matter of seamless consensus-building; rather, there was a constant tension between the “public” and “private” images of Sartre, and in the case of the Lévy affair, these tensions were exposed and strained in ways that threatened the very sense of identity of all those involved. Sartre’s legacy, then, was not merely collaboratively shaped, but actively contested by both Sartre himself and those closest to him. Indeed, Sartre’s legacy is still being contested in various ways; he has been variously described as the moral conscience of his age, a supporter of murder and tyranny under Communist regimes, a womanizer, a fighter, a coward, and countless other things besides. For this reason, it is crucial that Sartre’s legacy not be regarded as an evaluation of his life and deeds set in stone for all time, but rather as a “live” proposition, that continues to develop in new, and often unexpected directions.

The reaction against Sartre’s legacy

The contest over Sartre’s legacy, however, meant little (if anything) to the generation of philosophers that succeeded Sartre as the defining “voices” of French philosophy. Rather, the primary concern for Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and others, in relation to Sartre, was to demonstrate conclusively that they were not like Sartre.

Foucault, for example, gave eloquent (if devastating) expression to a negative view of Sartre and his intellectual legacy, the basic contention of which was no doubt held in common with many intellectuals of Foucault’s generation, and indeed those of subsequent generations. Foucault characterized the Critique of Dialectical Reason (1960b, 1960c), the work that Sartre treasured the most of all his philosophical treatises, in the following terms: “The Critique of Dialectical Reason is the magnificent and pathetic attempt of a man of the nineteenth century to think the twentieth century” (Foucault 2001: 541–2).

By attacking the Hegelian-Marxist project underpinning Sartre’s Critique of Dialectical Reason, Foucault was not simply criticizing a
particular work of Sartre’s, considered in isolation. Rather, Foucault
was attacking the Critique as representative of a particular type of
philosophical work, written by a particular type of intellectual – a type
which Foucault wanted to confine forever to the nineteenth century.
The “type” that Foucault had in mind was that of the “universal intel­
lectual”: that is, an intellectual who critiques society and human affairs
with recourse to transcendent or otherwise ahistorical principles, such
as “freedom”, “justice”, “authenticity”, and so on. For Foucault, any
philosophical enterprise underpinned by such transcendental or other­
wise ahistorical concepts was fatally undermined by a lack of analysis
of the localized forces (relations of power, knowledge, etc.) involved
in constituting concepts like “freedom”, “justice” and “authenticity”
as they appear in a particular historical context. In short, Sartre rep­
resented an outmoded conception of the intellectual on Foucault’s
account, who, like a builder trying to create modern housing using
old-fashioned tools and materials, could never hope to create a frame­
work capable of addressing the present epoch, let alone the intellectual’s
place within it.

Derrida, meanwhile, mentioned Sartre only sparingly, particularly in
his earlier writings, with “The Ends of Man” (Derrida 1969) and Glas
(Derrida 1986, first published in 1974) serving as notable examples.
Despite the relative scarcity of direct references to Sartre, the negativity
of Derrida’s polemic against Sartre was no less apparent. In “The
Ends of Man”, for instance, Derrida criticized Sartre’s claim that nothing
human is strange to him, because all subjectivities are expressions of
freedom; Derrida argued that Sartre had simply substituted one pre­
supposed universal (namely “humanity”) for another (namely “free
subjectivities”) (Derrida 1969: 34–5).

Another criticism of Sartre’s methodology that is certainly evoked
by Derrida’s claim regarding the presupposition of universals, is that by
positioning human subjectivity as central to his philosophy, Sartre had
constructed the very object of his inquiry, by undertaking to investigate
it; every account of the subject already constitutes its construction,
on this view, meaning that the only productive way to proceed is to
rigorously deconstruct subjectivity, along with all other such universal
presuppositions. In Glas, Derrida’s intertwined study of Hegel and
Genet, Derrida dismissed Sartre’s phenomenology as a “misontology”,
a perspective that allowed Sartre only superficial access to Genet’s writ­
ing; Derrida instead championed his deconstructionist perspective as
allowing for a genuine immersion in Genet’s texts (Derrida 1986: 28b).

Derrida also discussed Sartre’s influence on him in several interviews.
In an extended interview in 1983 with Catherine David, for example,
Derrida acknowledged that Sartre had “played a major role” for him in his early philosophical development; however, he then immediately followed this acknowledgement with the assertion that he had since judged Sartre to have been a “nefarious and catastrophic” influence (Derrida 1995: 122). Pressed by David to elaborate, Derrida posed the following question:

What must a society such as ours be if a man [that is Sartre], who in his own way, rejected or misunderstood so many theoretical and literary events of his time – let’s say, to go quickly, psychoanalysis, Marxism, structuralism, Joyce, Artaud, Bataille, Blanchot – who accumulated and disseminated incredible misreadings of Heidegger and sometimes of Husserl, could come to dominate the cultural scene to the point of becoming a great popular figure? (Ibid.)

Derrida’s contention was that Sartre, a man who had made so many mistakes, in his view, had attained the status of a cultural phenomenon in France – a status that could not be explained in terms of genuine philosophical or literary ability (notwithstanding that Derrida does praise Nausea, in passing, in a footnote in “Ends of Man”: Derrida 1969: 35).

In other words, a deconstruction of Sartre’s enduring cultural popularity in spite of his intellectual mediocrity (from Derrida’s perspective) was of far more interest to Derrida than Sartre’s works themselves. These were strong words indeed from Derrida, such that David felt moved to ask him: “So you see in Sartre the perfect example of what an intellectual should not be ...?” (Derrida 1995: 123). At this point, Derrida resisted going down Foucault’s path of explicitly characterizing Sartre as a negative model of all that was wrong with a certain generation or “type” of public intellectual; “I didn’t say that”, he replied (ibid.).

Nevertheless, it seems clear from his earlier remarks that Derrida viewed Sartre as a vexing, indeed, bemusing example of popularity (or perhaps more accurately, notoriety) without substance, and therefore as a negative reflection on a tendency in French cultural life to embrace such superficiality. Derrida’s own early investment in Sartre is detailed at length in Edward Baring’s (2011) The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, and Christina Howells also argues that Derrida’s mature work also retains some surprising proximities with dimensions of Sartre’s thought (Howells 1991), perhaps suggesting something like an anxiety of influence on Derrida’s behalf.
Whereas Foucault had dismissed Sartre as outmoded, and Derrida had regarded him as symptomatic of a culture of rewarding intellectual superficiality, Lyotard turned to irony in critiquing Sartre. In “A Success of Sartre’s”, Lyotard largely devoted himself to what he regarded as having been Sartre’s failures (Lyotard 1986). The titular “success” at issue for Lyotard was Sartre’s belated acknowledgement of the role of language in his multi-volume biography of Flaubert, *The Family Idiot* (1971–2). According to Lyotard, Sartre realized in the course of formulating this work, that human subjects (or “transcendences”, in Sartre’s earlier existentialist terminology) do not simply originate meaning and then communicate it transparently with others. Rather, on this view, language has the power to constitute meanings, and to condition subjects in various ways (Lyotard 1986: xx). Although Sartre had by no means explicitly endorsed a structuralist, or indeed, post-structuralist perspective according to Lyotard, he had in fact arrived at a position closely related to these perspectives. On Lyotard’s account, Sartre had recognized the “thickness” of words in an ontological sense, and therefore, their power over the subject (*ibid.*: xxii). In other words, Sartre’s one real success, in Lyotard’s view, was realizing that his existentialist perspective had been wrong.

So then, it may seem that Sartre’s only significance for subsequent generations of French philosophers was to act as a kind of springboard, as it were, propelling them in new directions. Yet, this view ignores a very important aspect of many post-Sartrean philosophers’ intellectual development, alluded to by Derrida in the interview with Catherine David; that is, the fact that many of these philosophers who would later seek to consign Sartre to irrelevance had, at one time or another, been card-carrying Sartreans themselves.

Another prominent example of this journey from Sartrean to Sartre-critic, is Gilles Deleuze. In the 1964 essay “He Was My Master”, published in the wake of Sartre’s refusal of the Nobel Prize for literature, Deleuze declares that Sartre was his “master” up until Sartre’s turn toward a Kantian-inspired humanism in the 1940s (Deleuze 2004: 77). Deleuze writes approvingly of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, particularly with regard to the emphasis on conflict and violence in human relations that pervades this work. Deleuze also praises Sartre’s earlier work *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936–7, 1957a), asserting that Sartre’s critique of Husserl’s conception of the ego as transcendent yields a “pure immanence” of the transcendental field (Deleuze 2004: 102). Deleuze began to move away from Sartre, though, when Sartre attempted to reconcile his existentialist perspective with a humanist ethics of respect for the Other’s freedom, a respect which Sartre had
previously denounced in *Being and Nothingness*, as an empty platitude. In sum, Deleuze regarded Sartre’s earlier existentialism as tough and uncompromising, while regarding Sartre’s humanistic existentialism as an insipid attempt to compromise with those who decried Sartre as an “immoralist”. Deleuze regarded Sartre as having needlessly re-animated the Kantian “Kingdom of Ends”, to the detriment of his renowned radicalism.

Given that Deleuze was by no means alone in his trajectory in relation to Sartre, it would seem reasonable to reassess claims that Sartre’s influence on subsequent generations was purely negative; the ways in which subsequent generations of philosophers have been positively influenced by Sartre’s philosophy, ought to be taken more fully into account.

**Returning to Sartre**

In considering Sartre’s positive influence on philosophy today, we might begin by acknowledging that central elements of Sartre’s existential phenomenology in *Being and Nothingness*, *The Transcendence of the Ego* and elsewhere have been an important indirect influence on various interdisciplinary fields concerned with embodied agency and the perception of others. That is because Sartre’s early work on the emotions and his chapter on the body in *Being and Nothingness* were a profound influence upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s own philosophy of the body, which, for a variety of reasons, has become increasingly embraced in regard to debates concerning, for example, embodied and enactive cognition (see Varela *et al.* 1991), as well as J. J. Gibson’s work on affordances (Gibson 1977); a negative evaluation of the prospects for projects in artificial intelligence realizing their aims and ambitions on an information-processing or computational model of the mind (see Dreyfus 1997); the extent to which our access to the minds of others (and to particular mental states, like anger) is predominantly inferential or perceptual in nature (Gallagher 2006; Overgaard 2012). In these regards (which are far from exhausting the contemporary interest) it is Merleau-Ponty who has been the phenomenological philosopher whose thought has received the most attention. But not only were many of Merleau-Ponty’s insights developed contemporaneously with Sartre in relations of reciprocal influence, but Sartre also offers new resources for all of these debates that have not yet been as influential as they might soon become. While for a long time phenomenological work on embodied agency that affirmed the direct perception of others
without intermediary appeared to many Anglo-American philosophers as an outmoded continental reinvention of Rylean-style behaviourism, the kind of anti-representational view proffered differently by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty is now back on the agenda in philosophical psychology and philosophy of mind, as well as associated sciences. Indebted to aspects of Gestalt psychology, their phenomenological accounts of hodological space, embodied motility and agency, the priority of the pre-reflective cogito, the primacy of perception, and so on, have played a significant role in transforming many of the intellectualist, empiricist and Cartesian biases that were dominant for a long time in these fields. Without being able to detail all of the contributions that Sartre’s philosophy has already made to such fields, in what follows, the focus will be on the contribution that his theories of intersubjectivity are poised to make, given that developmental psychology and some of the cognitive sciences are under some internal pressure to find and develop new theoretical models.

Of course, it is true that Sartre’s work on intersubjectivity is often the subject of premature dismissal. The hyperbolic dimension of his writings on the look of the Other and the pessimism of his later chapter on concrete relations with others, which is essentially a restatement of the “master-slave” stage of Hegel’s struggle for recognition without the possibility of its sublation, are frequently treated as if they were nothing but the product of a certain sort of mind – a kind of adolescent paranoia or hysteria about the Other. To some extent this was apparent even in the earliest assessments of *Being and Nothingness*, including a review published by Herbert Marcuse (1948) and in Merleau-Ponty’s chapter on other minds in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1962). What this has meant, however, is that the significance of Sartre’s work on intersubjectivity, both within phenomenological circles and more broadly in regard to philosophy of mind and social cognition, has tended to be downplayed. Not only has Sartre’s work been important within the phenomenological tradition, especially in highlighting issues with Husserl and Heidegger’s treatments of intersubjectivity (Heidegger himself agreed with Sartre’s criticisms of his treatment of *Mitsein* – see Zahavi 2001, fn 7), but even today it promises to make some important contributions in regard to contemporary interdisciplinary work on intersubjectivity. Building on the insights of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, Sartre proposes a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for any theory of the other, which are far from trivial. If correct, they would appear to be not only an obstacle dissipating solution to the epistemic problem of other minds, rather than an obstacle overcoming solution (see Cassam 2007: 2; Overgaard 2012), but also
offer some important new insights for contemporary approaches to issues concerning social cognition.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre suggests that various philosophical positions have been shipwrecked, often unawares, on the "reef of solipsism". His own obstacle dissipating solution to the problem of other minds consists, first and foremost, in his evocative descriptions of being subject to the look of another and the manner in which in such an experience we become a "transcendence transcended". On his famous description, we are asked to imagine that we are peeping through a keyhole, pre-reflectively immersed and absorbed in the captivating scene on the other side of the door. Maybe we would be nervous engaging in such activities for a little, given the socio-cultural associations of being a "Peeping Tom", but after a period of time we would be given over to the scene with self-reflection and self-awareness limited to merely the minimal (tacit or non-thetic) understanding that we are not what we are perceiving. Suddenly, though, we hear footsteps, and we have an involuntary apprehension of ourselves as an object in the eyes of another; a "pre-moral" experience of shame; a shudder of recognition that we are the object that the other sees, without room for any sort of inferential theorizing or cognizing. This ontological shift, Sartre says, has another person as its condition, notwithstanding whether or not one is in error on a particular occasion of such an experience (for example, the floor creaks, but there is no-one actually literally present). Our identity is hence experienced as transcending our own self-knowledge, or, to put it differently, one form of self-knowledge depends in a quasi-Hegelian manner on the recognition of the other. While many other phenomenological accounts emphasize empathy or direct perception of mental states (for example, Scheler and Merleau-Ponty), Sartre thus adds something significant to these accounts that seem to focus on our experience of the other person as an object (albeit of a special kind) rather than as a subject. Dan Zahavi suggests that Sartre’s approach is distinctive in that:

The other is exactly the being for whom I can appear as an object. Thus, rather than focussing upon the other as a specific object of empathy, Sartre argues that foreign subjectivity is revealed to me through my awareness of myself qua being-an-object for another. It is when I experience my own objectivity (for and before a foreign subject), that I have experiential evidence for the presence of an other-as-subject. (Zahavi 2001: 158)

In common with other phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty and Scheler, Sartre also maintains that it is a mistake to view our relations
with the other as one characterized by a radical separation that we can bridge with inferential reasoning. Any argument by analogy, either to establish the existence of others in general, or particular mental states, is problematic, begging the question and having insufficient warrant (could Mother Teresa, say, argue by analogy to the mental states of Adolf Hitler?). Does this suggest, then, that Sartre must be a quite radical sceptic about our relations with others? Can we merely deduce the structure of being-for-other from the first-personal experience of shame with little else to go on in our interactions with others? Does Sartre’s philosophy leave us haunted by the unknowable other, leaving us with a kind of agnosticism about the other, as Merleau-Ponty says in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968: 79), reprising themes from *Phenomenology of Perception*.

This, however, is not an entirely fair reading of Sartre’s philosophy. Notwithstanding the sense in which for Sartre we are perennially “transcended” by the other who eludes our cognitive grasp in important respects, Sartre is actually not a sceptic about our knowledge of other’s mental states *tout court*. We can, in fact, viscerally perceive bad faith, on his account. It is nothing other than its expression. This should not surprise us unduly, given that Sartre maintains that the body is a synthetic totality of life and action (BN1: 346; BN2: 370). While bad faith is admittedly a complex form of behaviour, there are other simpler situations in which direct embodied perception is also argued by him to be sufficient for understanding the emotions of others. Indeed, he adds a comment of clear resonance to Merleau-Ponty’s own work and that of other phenomenologists who emphasize bodily expressivity and direct perception of others:

Of course there is a psychic cryptography; certain phenomena are “hidden”. But this certainly does not mean that the meanings refer to something “beyond the body” … These frowns, this redness, this stammering, this slight trembling of the hands, these downcast looks which seem at once timid and threatening – these do not express anger; they are the anger. But this point must be clearly understood. In itself a clenched fist is nothing and means nothing. But we also never perceive a clenched fist. We perceive a man who in a certain situation clenches his fist. This meaningful act considered in connection with the past and with possibles and understood in terms of the synthetic totality “body in situation” is the anger. It refers to nothing other than to actions in the world (to strike, to insult, etc.).

(225)
Basically, Sartre maintains there is direct perceptual access to others in emotions like anger, albeit of a different nature to our access to our own anger. Inferential models of our knowledge of others obscure this apparent descriptive fact (it seems that we don’t infer, theorize, simulate, etc., when we see the raised and tense fist of an opposing supporter at a football game) and they also make various epistemic assumptions if they purport to show what a justification for our knowledge of others ought to consist in. After all, they tend to assume without argument that all mental states are necessarily hidden and inaccessible, and thus buy into a Cartesian perspective that both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty differently challenge. Moreover, any such inferential and theoretical considerations can only give us the other as a probability or a hypothesis as Sartre suggests, and thus seem peculiarly unable to deal with the apparent epistemic certainty we have in witnessing a given form of anger in context.

Now, it might be thought that any such direct perception view fits uneasily with other aspects of Sartre’s work. After all, it is Sartre for whom the perspective of the other eludes and frustrates us in our concrete relations with them, whether that be in regard to love, desire, or anything else. But perhaps there is no incompatibility here. For Sartre, our relations with other people are not conflictual because we are stuck with hypothesizing about others, inferring what it is they are up to in an intellectualist’s horror scenario that appears closely related to the actual experience of autism. While the other is given to us directly in their embodiment, for Sartre, their constitutive freedom also means that when we seize on this, or attempt to pin it down as a basis for our own self-knowledge, it is inevitably the other as they were rather than currently are that we grasp. We may even frame some of Sartre’s insights in this respect in a more positive way; there is dynamic interaction, a structural coupling, in which self and other solicit each other in a free and unfolding expression that cannot be anticipated or predicted. What we are, and what the other is, is not what we (or they) will be. As he puts it, “The body-for-others is the magic object par excellence. Thus the Other’s body is always a ‘body more than body’ because the Other is given to me totally and without intermediary in the perpetual surpassing of its facticity” (BN1: 351; BN2: 374). Whether this sort of position about the body-for-others should attract the sort of negative valence that Sartre gives it, admittedly quite often, is a question worth asking, but it is arguable that Sartre’s necessary and sufficient conditions for a theory of intersubjectivity do not directly entail such a view (indeed, his abandoned Notebooks for an Ethics were one notable attempt to show this; Sartre 1983b, 1992).
While phenomenology alone may not be sufficient for a theory of inter-subjectivity as Sartre seemed to maintain, since other resources of a more empirical nature demand to be considered (for example, findings of developmental psychology, cognitive science, etc.), one of the reasons why Sartre’s view promises to help contribute to contemporary debates is precisely because his work strongly challenges many of the basic presuppositions of the philosophical and psychological literature regarding social understanding that has dominated since the 1980s. Without summarizing the various psychological results concerning false-belief tests here, it suffices to say that the two dominant approaches in this field and within analytic philosophy – theory theory and simulation theory – remain mentalistic approaches to social cognition that emphasize the importance of mind-reading, as opposed to what we might call body-reading, notwithstanding the behaviourist connotations of such a term. Shaun Gallagher suggests that theory theory and simulation theory, and hybrid versions of them, have four basic assumptions:

1. Hidden minds
   ... Since we cannot directly perceive the other’s beliefs, desires, feelings, or intentions, we need some extra-perceptual cognitive process (inference or simulation) to understand their mental states.

2. Mindreading as default
   These mindreading processes constitute our primary, pervasive, or default way of understanding others.

3. Observational stance
   Our normal everyday stance towards the other person is a third personal, observational stance. We observe their behaviours in order to explain and predict their actions.

4. Methodological individualism
   Our understanding of others depends primarily on cognitive capabilities or mechanisms located in an individual subject.

   (Gallagher 2012: 194)

As would be apparent, Sartre’s necessary and sufficient criteria for an adequate theory of intersubjectivity contest all of these views. Moreover, pressure has also come on these commitments from within the relevant sciences themselves, perhaps especially in developmental psychology, given the capacity of early neonates to interact and understand intentions, emotions and so on prior to the acquisition of language and the passing of the false-belief test at the age of four or five.

Nonetheless, the standard approach has been to create hybrid versions of these two dominant perspectives, thus remaining largely guided
by the above four basic assumptions. Much more needs to be said about this, but we hope to have done enough in this short discussion to suggest that there are important resources within the phenomenological tradition, and in Sartre’s work in particular, for motivating more radical revisions within contemporary work on social cognition, helping to induce something like a paradigm shift in which the theoretical contributions of existential phenomenology has an important role to play.

Of course, the jury is still out in regard to just how fertile such a theoretical pairing might be. It would depend on the dialectical relationship between the given philosophical theory and what is revealed by new empirical investigations that have been shorn of some (arguably) faulty assumptions with which they have laboured. Yet there is at least some evidence that, in regard to embodiment and intersubjectivity, Sartre’s early work may well be proved to have been right at the wrong time (which is what Sartre said of Cornelius Castoriadis on certain political questions). Perhaps now, however, it is also the right time for a return to Sartre on these and other issues.

Further reading