

Sartre and Adler - existential psychoanalysis and individual psychology

This is the text of a paper presented at the UK Sartre Society's annual conference in London 2010.

1. Sartre's understanding of psychology

The first question, which immediately comes up, is: Sartre a psychologist, psychoanalyst? It sounds like calling Stalin, an orthodox priest. Did Sartre not say: "There is philosophy, but there is no psychology"? As in the case of Stalin, this is more than just a mere play of words. Let's read an excerpt of an interview, which Sartre granted to Rybalka, Pucciani and Gruenheck in 1975:

"There is philosophy, but there is no psychology. Psychology does not exist; either it is idle talk or it is an effort to establish what man is, starting from philosophical notions. ... *L'Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* ... is still psychology... In *L'Imaginaire* I go beyond what is ordinarily called psychology. ... Psychology does not exist except in the sense of empirical psychology."

In Sartre's answer we can distinguish three different statements:

1. In his years before *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre was deeply involved in psychology: he even wrote psychological books.
2. Although Sartre denies it first, but there is psychology, at least as empirical psychology
3. Sartre's rejection of psychology refers to his claim that psychology, as an effort to establish what man is, has to start from philosophical notions.

2. Sartre and psychology

Sartre's target has always been to combine in his work psychoanalysis, sociology and Marxism. This was not just an idea he cultivated in the time of *Search for a Method* and in the *Critique*, but it was a concept, he mentioned the first time, when he reviewed a book written by Rougemont in - guess which year? - already in 1939.

Psychology always played a very important role in Sartre's life, and in his concept of philosophy.

Sartre's studies in psychology:

- 1923/24 essay about *La Conscience de Durer* (Bergson ; Khâgne)
- 1924 reads Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 1927 *The Interpretation of Dreams*
- 1924/25 attends George Dumas's courses at Sainte-Anne (with Nizan, Aron, Lagache; ENS)
- 1927 writes essay about *L'Image dans la vie psychologique: rôle et nature* with Delacroix (philosopher, psychologist)
- 1927 corrects translation of Jaspers's *General Psychopathology*
- 1928 passes exam in psychology (in writing)
- 1929 oral exam: presentation about *Psychologie et logique*
- 1930 studies Gestalt psychology
- 1935 experiments with mescaline (Lagache)
- 1936 Sartre visits psychiatric clinic in Rouen several times for study
- 1937/38 reads Stekel's *Frigidity in Women* (rejection of the unconscious)
- 1946 visits Dutch psychiatrist van Lennep

Sartre quite extensively studied psychology in his formative years at the khâgne and at the ENS, and he continued to do so in the following years. I just want to mention, the three most important events, highlighted in red.

In 1924/25 Sartre attended George Dumas's courses at the famous psychiatric hospital Sainte-Anne. He did that together with Nizan, Aron, and most notably Lagache. For those who are not familiar with Lagache: Lagache is the second most important person in French psychoanalysis after Lacan. Lagache was not a very close friend of Sartre's, but certainly a very good classmate of his.

In 1927, Sartre and Nizan corrected the translation of Jaspers's *General Psychopathology*. And we can be sure that Sartre and Nizan were not chosen because the publishers already knew that they both would become famous writers. They were chosen, because they were familiar with the latest lingo in French psychology at that time.

In 1929 Sartre had to pass the oral exam, the most important part of the exam, for the second time, after he had failed it a year before. The subject of the presentation Sartre had to give was "Psychology and Logic".

Sartre's theoretical work in psychology:

- 1935/36 *Imagination* (on request by Delacroix)
- 1935-40 *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*: planned by Wahl/Brunschvicg to be published as doctoral thesis to enable Sartre to teach at university
- 1937-39 *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*; part of *La Psyché*
- 1941-43 *Being and Nothingness*; 624 of 708 p.

Sartre's first theoretical works mostly were about psychology. *The Imaginary* bears as a subtitle even *A phenomenological psychology of the imagination*. Jean Wahl and Léon Brunschvicg planned to have it published as Sartre's doctoral thesis. If it had not been for the Second World War, Sartre most probably would have ended as professor for philosophy and psychology at the ENS or the Sorbonne, in the style of his early mentor Prof. Henri Delacroix. And when we have a closer look at *Being and Nothingness* we have to concede, that out of the original 708 p. 624 p. could well have formed a part of a book about psychology.

A good psychoanalyst must also have practical experience. Of course Sartre did not work as a medical doctor or analyst. His practical works were his biographies.

Sartre's practical work in psychology: his biographies

- 1939-40 : War Diaries : analysis of William II (German emperor)
- 1945/46 biography about Baudelaire
- 1947-52 biography about Mallarmé
- 1950-52 biography about Genet
- 1953-62 autobiography
- 1954-72 biography about Flaubert
- 1958-59 The Freud Scenario

He wrote only few of them, but he spent more time and he wrote more pages in connection with his biographies than with any other kind of writing, which he published, whether we take his novels and plays or his political essays or his theoretical oeuvre. Unfortunately, the biographies are frequently misunderstood and seen as factual biographies or as second-class writings about literature, ethics, or politics, whereas they constitute prime psychological analysis.

3. Sartre and Freud

When we associate Sartre with psychoanalysis, we normally think of Freud. But despite *The Freud Scenario*, there is, as we all know, a lot that divided Sartre from Freud. I just want to briefly mention the major differences, because it will help us to understand, how much closer Sartre is to Adler than to Freud.

- The most important difference is certainly, that Sartre rejected Freud's notion of the unconscious. In his rejection of the unconscious, Sartre always was very categorical. Even the introduction of *le vécu*, the past, in his *Flaubert* can hardly be interpreted as a kind of reversal of this position.
- But the question of the unconscious was not the only point of difference. Sartre didn't agree either with the importance Freud attached to the sexual drive. And of course, neither with Freud's later, more speculative concepts of Eros and Thanatos.
- And as a last, but very important point, Sartre did not attach the same importance to the first six years in a human's life, as Freud did. Freud meticulously differentiated between man's anal, oral, and phallic stages. For Sartre the formative later years in the age between 7 and 17, when man is able to reflect and consciously choose, are the decisive years in a human's life.

4. Sartre and Adler – what they have in common

These differences between Sartre and Freud are well known. But only few are aware of the fact, that Sartre has a lot in common with Adler.

When Freud's psychoanalysis and Adler's individual psychology have to be characterized, Freud's psychoanalysis is popularly referred to as psychoanalysis of the id and Adler's individual psychology as psychoanalysis of the ego. When we ask ourselves, in which category Sartre's existential psychoanalysis falls, the answer is clear: it falls into the same category as Adler's: it is a psychoanalysis of the ego and not one of the id.

- Adler and Sartre share the same teleological approach, when it comes to understanding human actions. In contrast to Freud, there is no mechanical model, in which the past determines my today's actions. It is also not the milieu or the genes which determine man, as many sociologists and biologists assume. Human actions are determined by their finality.
- Both, Sartre and Adler, assume that behind individual actions, there is a master plan, which guides the individual's actions and emotions. Adler calls it life style and life plan. Sartre talks about the fundamental choice, which man permanently has to make. With both, it is the human being that chooses himself. It is the criminal, who chooses to be a criminal. It is the homosexual, who chooses to be gay. This is what Sartre showed in *Saint Genet*. For both, Sartre and Adler, is valid: man is what he makes out of what he has been made to by society and nature.
- Life plan and fundamental choice are by their character something integral, embracing the whole personality. Neither with Adler nor with Sartre there is room for a conflict within a person, similar to the one which Freud saw between the id, the ego, and the super-ego.
- Adler and Sartre shared their views also, when it comes to the important point of sexuality. For both of them, a person's sexual behaviour is not the result of the sexual drive or its conflict with the super-ego, but it is essentially the expression of one's life-plan and choice.
- Both Adler and Sartre agreed that a life plan and a fundamental choice are not the result of rational thinking, in the sense of having been made after a lot of reflections. For both, life plan and choice are pre-reflexive. But life plan and fundamental choice can be understood by third persons, even on an inter-cultural level.
- Of course, man can pretend to be somebody, and to want something different, from what he has actually chosen. For Freud, this was the result of a conflict within the human being between the unconscious, the ego, and the super-ego. But according to Sartre and Adler, who both deny such inner conflicts, man knows the truth in his innermost. Sartre's technical term for such attitudes was bad faith, Adler called them life-lies.
- Adler and Sartre were atheists. For both of them, by being able to choose himself man competes with God. According to Adler, man wants to be akin to God. Sartre went even one step further: man wants to be God.
- Both, Adler and Sartre, shared their views also, when it comes to the relationship with the other. They saw man as somebody, who has to compete with his fellow human beings. According to Adler, man strives after superiority over his fellow human beings. For Sartre, as

expressed in his famous statement “Hell is other people”, the conflict with the other is a basic determinant of human life.

5. Were Sartre and Beauvoir aware of the closeness to Adler?

There cannot be any doubt about that. Beauvoir wrote a letter to Sartre, on the 14th March, 1940, in which she mentioned that the closeness was so big, that an Adlerian psychoanalyst could go through as an existential psychoanalyst in Sartre’s way.

Therefore it’s no surprise, that in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre tried hard to demarcate his existential psychoanalysis from Adler’s individual psychology. The same applies to Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, where Adler is mentioned several times.

Sartre and Beauvoir tried their best to prove that their theory was better than Adler’s. They criticized Adler particularly for his understanding of the inferiority complex. They alleged that according to Adler the inferiority complex is not a part of man’s fundamental choice. Beauvoir blamed Adler for explaining a human’s behaviour based on his past actions instead of their finality. But these are arguments, which are far from convincing and can be easily refuted. Their weakness hints at the limited knowledge Sartre and Beauvoir had of Adler’s psychology.

6. Did Adler influence Sartre?

Sartre and Beauvoir were definitely aware of their closeness to Adler’s theories. Therefore the question is: Did Adler influence Sartre? Did Sartre even derive his theory from Adler’s?

From *The Prime of Life* we know, that Sartre and Beauvoir read Adler’s *The Neurotic Character* in 1932 (if we can trust Beauvoir’s chronology). But in this very early book of Adler, which Adler wrote in 1912 and which followed his *Study on Organ Inferiority* of 1907, we cannot find the concept of the life-plan. In *The Neurotic Character* Adler talks about the guiding line, but this is a far cry of the concept of the life-plan, which he developed later and which is so close to Sartre’s fundamental choice. *The Neurotic Character* definitely can not have been the basis of Sartre’s existential psychoanalysis.

The *French Society of Adlerian Psychoanalysis* alleges that Sartre heard Adler already in 1926, when Adler held a conference at the Sorbonne, when he was on his way to the States. But this cannot be confirmed by other sources. And there is at least a certain doubt about the validity of SFPA’s statement.

Anyhow, it would be strange to assume that Sartre had been influenced by Adler in 1932 or even 1926, when the first indications of a potential influence of Adler on Sartre can be found not earlier than in the *War Diaries*. There, in his analysis of the German emperor William II, Sartre shows that he was familiar with Adlerian concepts of inferiority complex and compensation. Did Sartre read any of Adler’s other works just before the Phoney War or during it?

The particular book in question is Adler’s *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology*. Adler’s interest in theoretical work was quite limited. Articles of a more general character are confined to a very short period of less than two years. These were the years 1913 and 1914. Before and after that period, Adler published little, which contributed to a general theory of individual psychology comparable to Sartre’s theory. Most of the general articles Adler wrote in 1913/14 were republished in 1920 in German in a book with the title *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology*. This book was translated into French as *Pratique et théorie de la psychologie individuelle comparée* in 1930. So, basically Sartre could have read it.

But did he? I don’t think so. When Sartre talks about Adler’s psychology, he normally refers only to the inferiority complex. This is a concept that is very important in *The Neurotic Character*, but it is far less so in *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology*. On the other hand, if Sartre had read *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology*, he most probably would have mentioned Adler’s concept of the life-lie, when writing about bad faith. He never mentioned Adler in this context, which is a good indication, that indeed Sartre only read *The Neurotic Character*, where the concept of the life-lie is missing, and not *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology*, where it is prominent.

There is no evidence, for Adler having had a decisive influence on Sartre's existential psychoanalysis. In the case of the unconscious e.g., Sartre and Beauvoir openly referred to the psychoanalyst Stekel as an important source. But they never mentioned that Adler had a similar influence on them. If we are looking for somebody who inspired Sartre in his existential psychoanalysis, I'd rather point to André Malraux. For personal and political reasons, little is known about the relationship between Malraux on the one hand and Sartre and Beauvoir on the other. But we know that Sartre read Malraux extensively during the Phoney War, when he developed his existential psychoanalysis. And what's even more significant, there is a letter that Sartre wrote to Beauvoir in April 1940, in which he called Malraux his John the Baptist, seeing himself as Jesus. But of course, Malraux never developed his own psychology. Even if Sartre has been inspired by Malraux and his characters in his novels and although Sartre was familiar with Adler's concept of the inferiority complex, Sartre's existential psychoanalysis seems to have been a genuine parallel development, widely independent of Adler or Malraux or Freud.

7. Differences between Sartre and Adler

A comparison of Adler and Sartre would not be complete without an analysis of their differences. As mentioned before, Adler showed little interest in general theory. He was the medical doctor whose only interest finally was to cure the patient. In contrast to Adler, Sartre was a theoretician whose only practical works were the biographies he wrote. This had a serious implication for their theories. Adler was the practical pragmatist, Sartre the rigorous theoretician. Adler never distanced himself as much from Freud as Sartre did. He did not completely reject the unconscious or the importance of the first years of childhood. Adler always dithered, when it came to the question whether man has chosen his life-plan in the past once for ever, which would have brought him closer to Freud, or whether a life-plan can be changed. For Sartre, on the contrary, it was clear that there is no unconscious, that the important years in a man's life are between 7 and 17 and that one's fundamental choice has to be confirmed by each individual action.

A second difference between Sartre and Adler concerns the early concepts, which Adler developed: e.g. the inferiority complex, particularly in connection with the physical inferiority of organs, or the problem of the birth order or the difference between men and women, masculine and feminine, which was important to Adler. Sartre occasionally used the first two concepts. E.g. in *The Family Idiot* Flaubert's inferiority complex and his difficult relationship to his elder brother play important roles. But they were never corner-stones of Sartre's existential psychoanalysis as they were with Adler's individual psychology. And it is interesting to note, that Sartre never used Adler's concept of masculine protest. Sartre obviously did not share Adler's ideas, about the fundamental differences between men and women.

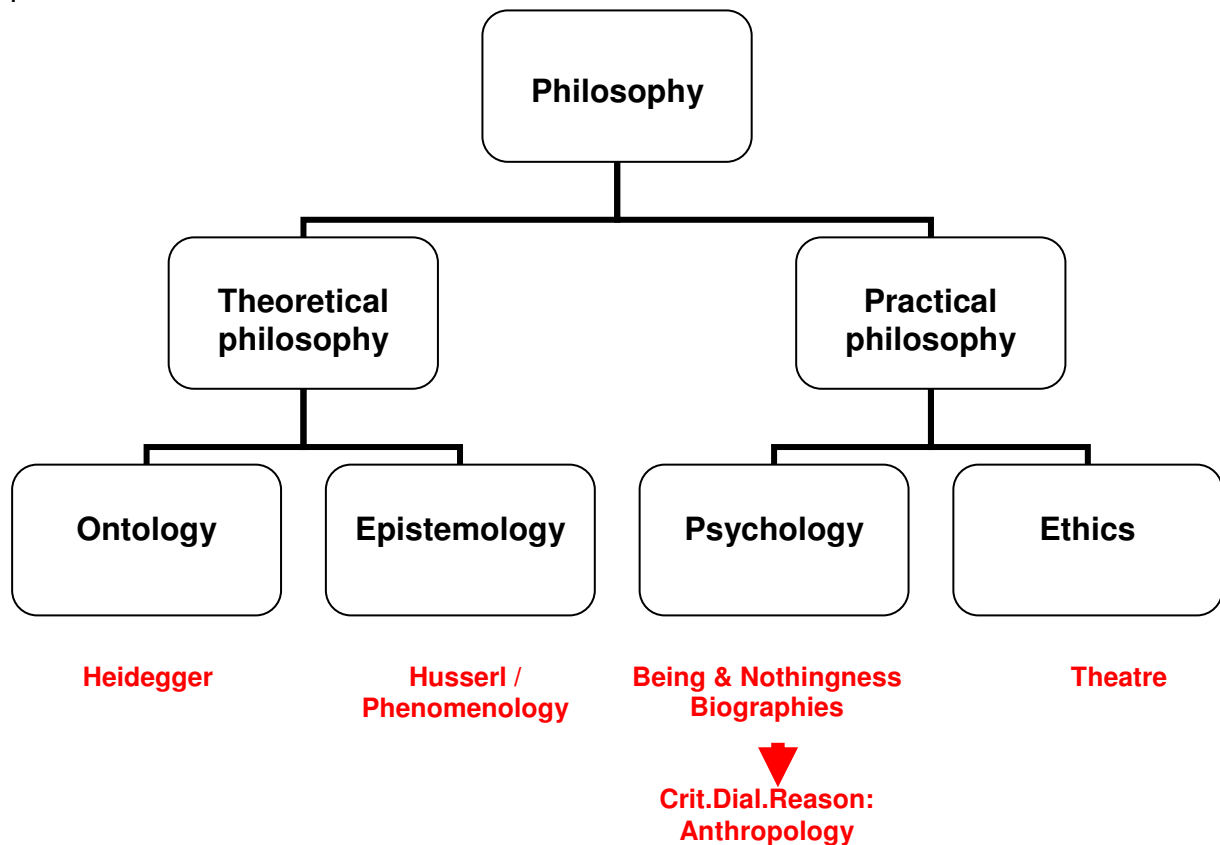
The only important antagonism, I can recognize between Sartre and Adler, refers to the concept of normality. Adler, a devout socialist, shared his party's concept of what has to be considered as normal. It is a concept, which can be found as well with other socialist psychoanalysts, such as Wilhelm Reich. For Adler normal was what was helpful to life. Perversion, delinquent behaviour, mental-health problems were not considered to be normal by Adler. This was an attitude common among the socialists of that time and which was the reason why countries governed by socialist parties introduced eugenics before the fascists. For Adler, the ideal form of life was in a community, united by its community feeling. This idealistic, socialist concept of normality was not shared by Sartre – definitely not by the Sartre before the *Critique* and *Hope Now*. In *Saint Genet*, Sartre rather showed that a criminal and homosexual can have an authentic, "healthy" choice of life. For Sartre, Genet's life-style is healthier, more authentic than the one of the bourgeois, which Sartre considered to be *des salauds*, scumbags. In contrast to Adler, for Sartre perversions, delinquency, and mental-health problems are as "normal" as any other choice. Sartre's defence of Genet and his support to the movement of anti-psychiatry were a logical consequence of this attitude. An attitude, which Adler would have vigorously opposed.

Today, Sartre is a philosopher, who is hardly mentioned in philosophy outside its history. If we want to revive Sartre, two things have to be done in my opinion: we have to get Sartre out of the trenches of the ideological wars, which ruled us between 1945 and 1989, and we have to rediscover him as psychologist and sociologist. I hope that this short presentation can contribute to that.

Annexes

A) Sartre's understanding of philosophy

Sartre's and Beauvoir's understanding of philosophy cannot be considered as very modern. As the discussion with the structuralists, the New Philosophers or the feminists showed, both insisted on an understanding of philosophy as it was characteristic in the time from Aristotle to the early 19th c.



There is no pragmatic and no linguistic turn. Both, Sartre and Beauvoir, believed in big philosophical systems as Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Kant or Hegel built them. The discussion between Margaret Simons and Beauvoir showed it clearly.

Sartre and Beauvoir were interested in theoretical philosophy, but their main concern was practical philosophy. When it came to epistemology and ontology, they mainly built on Husserl and Heidegger. But without copying them.

During all his life Sartre was a vigorous phenomenologist. His support to the Communist party in the 50s and the Maoists in the 70s cannot be fully understood without an understanding of his phenomenological approach. It was because he saw in the Communist party the only really existing party of the proletariat and because he saw in the Maoists of the GP the only active neo-communist party that he supported both of them. But finally Sartre was more a nominalist than a phenomenologist. That's why he did not follow Husserl in his more platonic endeavour of an eidetic reduction.

When it comes to ontology and Heidegger, the only expression that comes into my mind to describe the relationship between Sartre and Heidegger is the one of a fruitful misunderstanding. Sartre was not really interested in an existential ontology. Sartre talks about being and about nothingness, but finally there isn't anything comparable to Heidegger's Dasein, Mitsein and all the other technical terms which Heidegger created when he developed his existential ontology.

Sartre was more interested in existential psychoanalysis than in existential ontology. *Being and Nothingness* proves it. After having laid the philosophical basis, Sartre devoted most of his first major philosophical book to psychology. It is a psychology which he later, in the time of the *Critique of*

Dialectical Reason, developed further into anthropology. Beauvoir developed a special anthropology with regard to women in *The Third Sex*. Psychology and anthropology are the main part of Sartre's and Beauvoir's philosophical thinking. Their philosophy was mainly practical philosophy – which is completely in line with their general attitude of a combination of philosophy and (political) praxis.

Psychology (or: anthropology) was in the history of philosophy one of the two important areas of practical philosophy. The other are was ethics. It is not astonishing to see that Sartre (as well as Beauvoir) always showed a very big interest in this other important representative of practical philosophy and that they tried to develop their own ethics. Three times Sartre started with this endeavour. Three times he failed. Mainly because of the fact that when one starts from a nominalist point of view, it will never be possible to arrive at more than just a situational ethics. And to explore a situational ethics, philosophy is not the best way to do it. Drama is much more suited. Therefore it is not astonishing, that Sartre's important contributions to ethics are published in his plays, in *The Flies*, *Dirty Hands*, *The Devil and the Good Lord*, and *The Condemned of Altona*.

B) Psychology (and / or) anthropology?

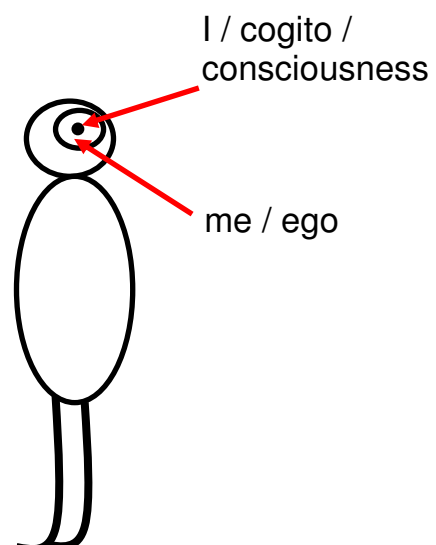
Frequently there is the idea that Sartre's anthropology in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* completely replaced his existential psychoanalysis in *Being and Nothingness*. In my opinion, Sartre's statements in this regard which he made in the early 60s had more to do with his political position and his trials to form an alliance with the Communists, who had vigorously opposed *Being and Nothingness* before, than with a change in his philosophical attitudes. The fact that he later accepted again to be called an existentialist philosopher, proves this.

But more than this a short analysis of his philosophical development shows that there is no opposition between his psychoanalysis in *Being and Nothingness* and his anthropology in the *Critique*. There was rather a continuous development of his philosophy from his early beginnings in *The Transcendence of the Ego* to his *Flaubert*. The major line of development was that, beginning from a Cartesian point of view and trying to define the *ego* in *cogito*, he continued to develop more and more his ideas about the philosophical structure of the outer world, Descartes' *res extensa*.

A graphical depiction of this development of his philosophy shows best that there is one common line behind it and not a complete change in the 50s as frequently is assumed.

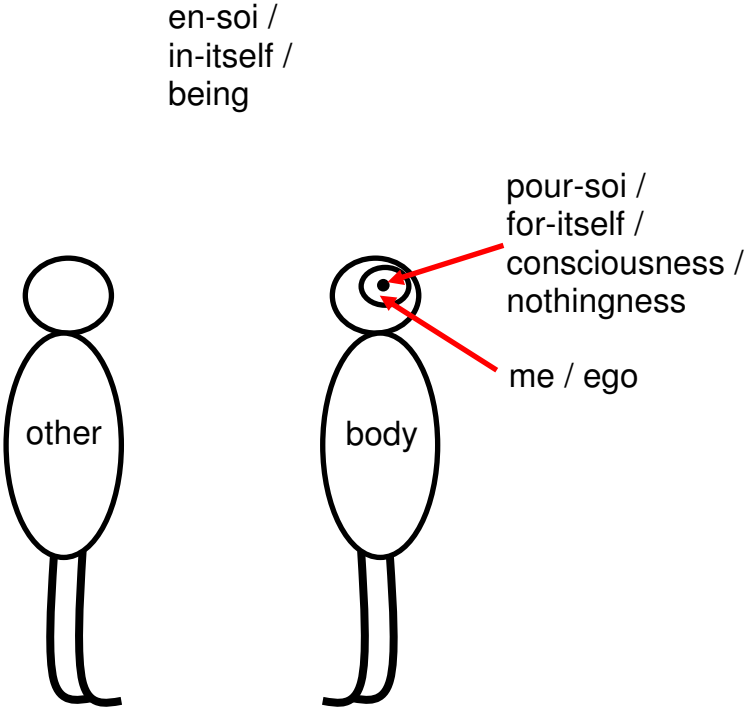
The first step to his later philosophy was the one in *The Transcendence of the Ego* where he differentiated between the I as a void, pre-reflexive subject and the ego as its object.

The Transcendence of the Ego

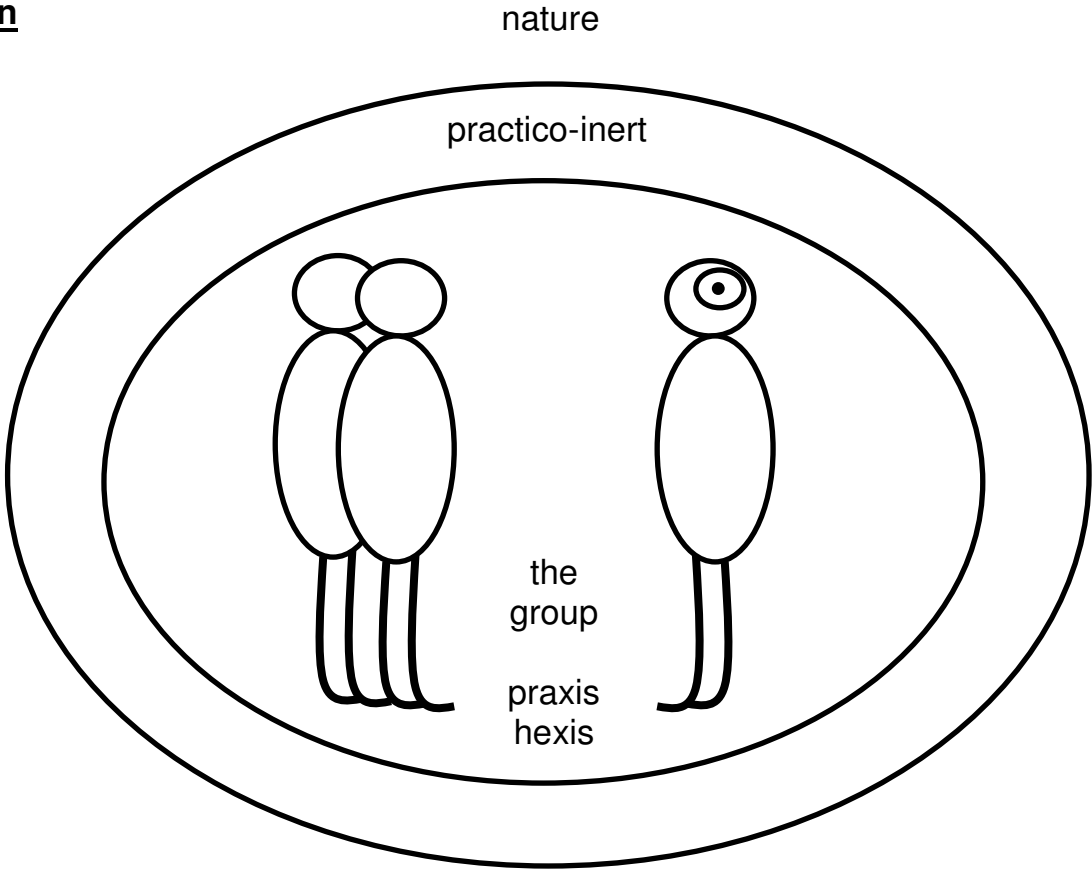


In the next step in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre introduced the outer world as the in-itself. Of particular importance are the other and the body. The other is a consciousness that opposes my own consciousness, and the body is the link between my consciousness and the outer world of the it-self.

Being and Nothingness



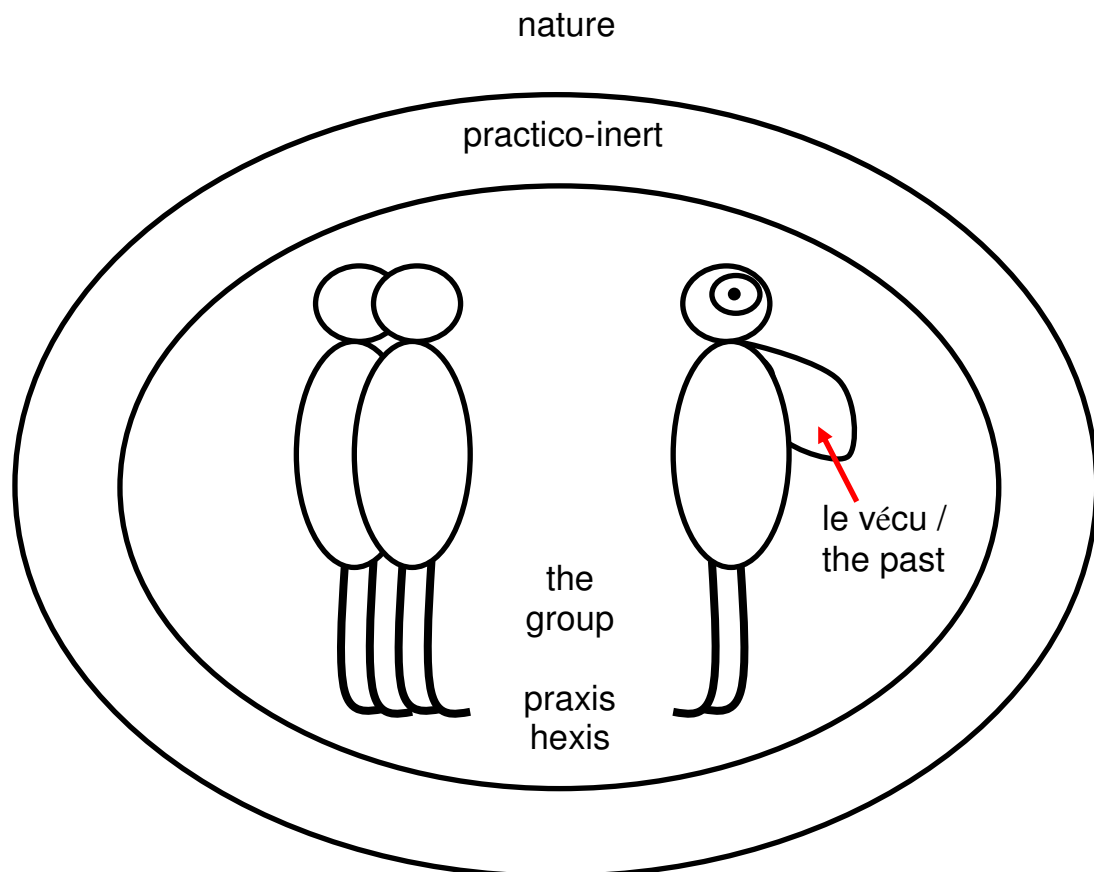
Critique of Dialectical Reason



In the *Critique* he further differentiated the outer world. The other was multiplied. Heavily influenced by Riesman's work Sartre saw modern man as somebody who lives in a group. In contrast to the other in *Being and Nothingness* the group is not merely seen as something negative. The human beings are connected to each other via their praxis. Depending on the degree of their interconnection we speak of seriality (the normal status of the masses), a group in fusion (the status of masses during revolutions) or a group. Among the groups we have to differentiate between those without an oath and those with an oath (of unlimited loyalty to the group). It is among these groups with oath (e.g. the communist parties or the Catholic church) that fraternity-terror is developed, which stands for the terror the Communists developed e.g. in their Stalinist times (or Castro on the Cuba shortly after Sartre's visit, as Sartre had predicted). Hexis, i.e. habits and social customs, is the basis of these interconnections. Based on this hexis the groups develop in their praxis rules and regulations which become institutions and bureaucracies, the larger the groups are. These institutions form a part of the practico-inert. The practico-inert is formed by the inert, materialized results of human praxis, e.g. the material products, institutions, and language. The practico-inert is the basis for alienation. Together with nature, the practico-inert builds what formerly was called the in-itself by Sartre.

The final development of Sartre's philosophical model was reached in the *Flaubert*, when he introduced the Past (*le vécu*).

Flaubert



Le vécu stands for what each individual carries with him around as his past.

Sartre's anthropology as he developed it in the end of the 50s and in the 60s is very close to modern sociology. Due to his philosophical basis it can serve as paradigm as well to modern sociology as to modern psychology – at least if we see *Being and Nothingness* and the *Critique* not as two opposing philosophies, but as the two sides (the psychological and the sociological side) of the same coin, of the same philosophy.

C) The question of the hyphen

If we want to revive Sartre, we have not only to rediscover him as psychologist and sociologist, but we have to get Sartre out of the trenches of the ideological wars, too, which ruled us between 1945 and 1989.

Sartre and the Sartrophiles and the Sartrophobes, they all agreed that Sartre was a radical socialist philosopher. Maybe even a Communist or a Maoist, as some called him. But was he that indeed? At least the real Communists and Maoists never saw in Sartre more than bourgeois philosopher who could help them as fellow traveller in their politics. He was never considered to be one of their own. Even not in 1954 or 1955 when Sartre publically (and on publically) renounced on most of his principles in favour of his alliance with the Communists.

And indeed, I think Sartre was more a radical-socialist (one with a hyphen) than radical socialist (without a hyphen). Sartre always stood up in favour of individual freedom, against discrimination (of Jews, Black, gays; in case of Beauvoir against the discrimination of women), for peace, against war, for decolonisation. These were themes of only marginal importance with the radical socialists or the communists (or Trotskyites at that time). But these were subjects which were long popular with the radical-socialists (with a hyphen), the left-wing liberal movement in France between 1880 and 1960. In France these political themes are strongly connected with names such as Schoelcher, Clemenceau, Daladier, Mendès France, all of them very famous radical-socialists.

And in contrast to his strong interest in these subjects, Sartre hardly showed any commitment to the hot topics of the socialist movement in his time: questions of trade unions, wages, social insurances, nationalisation. Read *Entretiens sur la politique* where Sartre discussed the politics of those years 1948/49 with Rousset and Rosenthal and you'll agree with me. Sartre simply had no common language with the socialists of his time. And Sartre showed in one point a very big reservation which finally would have made him a dissident in any Communist or Socialist regime: Sartre was a strong opponent of the state and its bureaucracy.

Even if it sounds blasphemous to call him a radical socialist having in mind his negative remarks about the radical-socialists in his own family (Schweitzer, his grand-father, and particularly Mancy, his step-father), Sartre was much more a radical-socialist with a hyphen than a radical socialist without hyphen.

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