

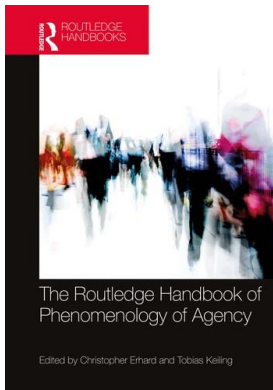
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11

DETERMINED TO ACT

On the structural place of *acting* in Sartre's ontology of subjectivity

Simone Neuber

Preliminary remarks

John Atwell observes that the eclectic and disparate nature of Sartre's thinking is nowhere exposed more extremely than in Sartre's considerations on *acting*. As Atwell remarks:

Very frequently, I find, Sartre begins a discussion with relatively familiar, i.e., "analytic," considerations only to turn abruptly to thoughts of a quite different sort, sometimes idealistic and sometimes phenomenological. Often, I think, he makes a rather sudden turn in order to carry out an analysis which his starting point will not accommodate. Nowhere is this more evident than in his treatment of the nature and explanation of action, for there he begins with (1) considerations much like those urged by many current analytic philosophers, goes on to (2) views normally called idealistic, and finally depends on (3) theories propounded by phenomenologists.

(Atwell 1972: 143)

I am not convinced that this exposition is helpful. Talking about a *digression* from a *systematically oriented* starting point to *idealistic* and *phenomenological theories* obfuscates Sartre's theoretical setup and thereby the place Sartre ascribes to his considerations on agency. Sartre does not start from a *systematic* reflection on *acting* in order to "digress" into "idealistic" and "phenomenological" theories. Sartre works on a *unified theory of subjectivity* – i.e. an *ontology of subjectivity*; and it is within that framework that actions find their place and that acting (in French: *faire*) is specified as the *definiens* of consciousness: "A first glance at human reality informs us that for it being is reduced to doing" (Sartre 1992: 612/521)¹; "human reality is act" (Sartre 1992: 615/523).

Atwell recognizes these concerns and is eager to correct this merely *first* impression to stress that the three strands are interrelated. Despite this, he nonetheless abstracts from Sartre's cumbersome ontology as if Sartre's notion of action could *obviously* be exposed without it. But this is far from obvious.

What *is* obvious, however, is that this abstraction from Sartre's ontology is quite common when Sartre is brought into a dialogue with "analytically" oriented philosophers. This move is understandable since it tames Sartre; but it does not reflect that Sartre – in our case

of action – reflects on the issue *from within the standpoint of his ontology* and that he even stresses that his reflection on action is the ultimate task of his ontology: “Ontology must be able to inform us about [the problem of *Acting*]; this is by the way one of ontology’s essential tasks if the for-itself is the being which defines itself by *action*” (Sartre 1992: 558 *modified*/475).

The following exposition refrains from this abstraction in order to expose the systematic place of *acting* in Sartre’s overall theory and to reflect that Sartre’s take on acting is shaped by the question of why subjects are agents *essentially* (i.e. why they *define themselves by action*). Thus, I will not proceed from a glimpse at current issues in the theory of agency to ask how Sartre would relate to them. Rather, I will start with an extensive outline of Sartre’s ontology to then sketch the resulting take on acting.

The ontological framework: Sartre’s dualism and his notion of consciousness as *néant*

According to Sartre’s dualism there are two irreducible *regions of being*: non-conscious being-in-itself (*être en-soi*) and the being of consciousness, i.e. being-for-itself (*être pour-soi*). Both appear in the title of his *Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique* as *l’être* and *le néant*.

If one defines *substance* in terms of independence and as that *which does not depend on anything else for its existence*,² then Sartre is no substance dualist. Only one of the two regions of being is independent: *l’être en-soi*. *L’être pour-soi* is sketched as a relational being presupposing an ontologically independent *relatum* in its being. Sartre hopes to ground this essential implication by outlining consciousness as a *néant*. Since this move is controversial and essential for Sartre’s theoretical reflections on acting, and since it serves quite a number of systematic expectations (SE), a brief reflection on this ontological determination may be useful.

Translating *néant* as “nothingness” fails to recognize the fact that *néant* sounds like the present participle of *néer* (cf. Gadamer 1988: 47). Now, there is no such verb in French; but that does not matter here, since there is no proper German verb *nichten* either, and still, it is this *Nichten* Heidegger has exposed as the ontological mark of “das Nichts” (*the nothing*) in his *What is Metaphysics?* (cf. Heidegger 1976). According to Heidegger, it is wrong to say of *das Nichts* that it *is*; but admitting this does not imply that it has no *mode of being*; and according to Heidegger its mode of being is its *Nichten* (*its nothinging*). Heidegger forces us to note that “[d]as Nichts *nichtet*” (“the Nothing *nothings*”), and this is something we should hear sounding it Sartre’s *néant*. For Sartre, a *néant* exists as mere power to negate, i.e. *pouvoir néantisant*, which has its being in *acting out this power*.

This ontological specification may be difficult to accept, but Sartre expects much of it. One can identify five SE that *néant*-structure is invested in, some of which will be important later on.

(SE1) Sartre accepts Heidegger’s claim that any “negativistic” comportment, be it “the pain of failure” (Heidegger 1976: 117), “the bitterness of dispense” (Heidegger 1976: 117), or negative judgments, presupposes some basic understanding of *nothingness*, i.e. some pre-conceptual acquaintance. Sartre is happy with this idea – and this will be important for his considerations against determinism (see below) –, but unhappy with its theoretical articulation with Heidegger’s claim who grounds this acquaintance in a *transcendence into* “nothingness.” For Sartre, *transcendence* already is a negative comportment. Thus, if Heidegger’s initial claim is correct, there must be an even more basic source of this acquaintance which Heidegger misses in Sartre’s eyes. For Sartre, this more basic acquaintance is rooted in nothing but the – essential! – self-acquaintance of consciousness in so far as it exists as *néant*.

(SE2) Sartre relates this structure to what he gathered from his eclectic readings of Hegel. There he found a specification of what it means *for something to exist for consciousness* (in Sartre's language: to be an intentional object) linked to a *self-differentiating of consciousness from that which it intends and thereby determines as an object*. As Hegel writes: "Consciousness simultaneously *distinguishes* itself from something, and at the same time *relates* itself to it" (Hegel 1977: 76).

Given that Sartre accepts the Brentanian claim that *intentionality is the mark of consciousness*, and given that Sartre adopts this Hegelian (and also Reinholdian) notion of *being-for-consciousness*, intentionality is explicated as a complex structure containing (i) a determining of the thing as "*not being consciousness*" (Sartre 1992: 242/210), i.e. as *non-moi* ("non-ego"), and (ii) a determining of consciousness "*as not being the thing*." But in Sartre's eyes, this self-differentiating imposes restrictions on what *can* possibly manifest such a structure; and for Sartre, such a structure can only be manifested by a *pouvoir néantisant*, i.e. a *néant*.

(SE3) Sartre aims at a theory of consciousness leaning toward realism and intrinsically immune to the constitutive idealism he finds in the transcendental Husserl. Here is how this negativism is meant to support this aim: consciousness is seen as a *néant*, i.e. a *power to negate*. But according to Sartre, any operation of *negation* is conceptually and ontically secondary in so far as it *presupposes* some positive given on which it can operate. Thus, consciousness as *néant* seems by necessity "*born supported by a being which is not itself*" (Sartre 1992: 23/28). Given that what a *néant* can contribute to being is only negative and "ideal" (Sartre 1992: 264/228), it is full of a *determining power* but devoid of any ontically relevant productivity. Whatever contribution it makes to being, for Sartre, this contribution must be *causally ineffective* and *ontically conservative*. Thus, in so far as it is a *néant*, Sartre's consciousness is sketched as something like a parasite *living on and fed by* robust being and beings. But still, and this is the fourth and related point.

(SE4) Sartre takes this parasitical structure to be *structurally and ontologically robust* in so far as he regards *negativity* as *underivable* from *being* (cf. Sartre 1992: 57/57). With this notion of *ontological underivability* Sartre joins Husserl in assuming that consciousness is an *absolute being*. But whereas Husserl (1980: § 49) ties this *absoluteness* to the *ontological priority* of consciousness, Sartre reserves³ it to its *ontological irreducibility* which – concerning the *ground* of the *néant* – hints at consciousness's spontaneous and self-determining structure: "in so far as it makes itself [*se fait lui-même*] it is an absolute" (Sartre 1992: 787/667).

(SE5) Linked to this last point is a fifth: Sartre hopes to expose consciousness as beyond any causal determination. Assuming that negativity as well as negative compartments cannot be *logically derived from* or *physically caused by* being (or any positive given) and assuming that the theoretically intentional as well as the practical life hinges on negative compartments (such as positing something as *non-ego*, positing something as *not yet the case* or *discovering that milk is lacking in the fridge*), Sartre concludes that the intentional and practical life has to be logically and causally undetermined. It cannot but emerge *spontaneously* from that *néant*. In its *radical spontaneity* and in its *transcending any psycho-physical causation* Sartre regards a *néant* to manifest the structure of *freedom*: "there is no difference between [this mode of being] and being-free" (1992: 60/60).

As controversial as these points may be, one (Megarian⁴) point is clear for Sartre: *doing* is vital for such a consciousness; as a mere *power to nihilate/negate*, its being ("existence") lies in some kind of doing, i.e. in acting out its power.

But so far, this doing is highly abstract and "philosophical," and it is unclear how all this is meant to relate to (observable) bodily movements leading to alterations within the world's arrangement, i.e. compartments like raising one's arm or drinking a cup of coffee. But if

we are interested in a philosophical account of *actions*, we are interested in an account of the category into which those examples belong rather than in operations of consciousness even if they may be a vital dimension in Sartre's claim that the being of consciousness is some kind of *faire*.

Sartre has more to say about this category, but what he has to say is not independent from his ontological sketch of consciousness. First, especially (SE1) and (SE5) will be especially important. Further, Sartre expects a philosophical elucidation of *acting* to illuminate why subjects are agents *essentially*. For this, however, reflecting on the nature of action in isolation will not suffice. Rather, reflection has to start from a consideration of consciousness to expose why there cannot be a purely *contemplative* consciousness. However, since nothing can *cause* consciousness to do anything (SE5), the task is to expose *why consciousness spontaneously determines itself as an engaged consciousness*. This is how Sartre hopes to expose this *self-determination as an agent* thereby exploiting (SE2) and (SE4).

Toward essential agency: *l'en-soi*, *le pour-soi*, and the emergence of the value

As Sartre grounds negativity in consciousness and takes the *en-soi* to be conceptually and ontically prior to consciousness, the ontological sketch of *l'en-soi* may not presuppose any negativity, hence a rather Parmenidean picture results (see also Gadamer 1988: 45). For Sartre, *l'en-soi* is, amongst other things, (i) uncreated, (ii) non-relational, (iii) full positivity (being), and (iv.) a limit case⁵ of self-identity.

As *néant d'être*, consciousness is meant to determine itself as *not all this*. It results a self-determination as (1) *existence pour-soi* (*existence through itself*) or *causa sui* (Sartre 1992: 27/31), (2) essentially relational, (3) pure negativity, and (4) an *existence* which is not identical to itself. But for Sartre, consciousness does not only determine itself as *not all this*; it also determines itself as *lacking these features*; more concretely (and above all with respect to features 2–4), it determines itself as *ontologically imperfect*. As Sartre holds: “In its coming into existence human reality grasps itself [*se saisit*] as an incomplete being” (Sartre 1992: 139/125).

For Sartre, this self-apprehension of consciousness as lacking ontological perfection is tantamount to its (pre-reflective) *self-determination as engaged*. This self-determination consists of three *essentially interrelated* moments: (M1) consciousness in so far as it apprehends itself as ontologically imperfect; (M2) *the value* as the background against which consciousness forms this apprehension; and (M3) properties of objects calling for and demanding operations in the world, i.e. *motivational qualities* (see Morris 2010: 147). Here is how they are interrelated from Sartre's vantage point.

The interrelation of M1 and M2 follows from the fact that, for Sartre, apprehending oneself as lacking an ontological perfection is never an *immediate* apprehension. *Lacking something* does not mean positively having a property (i.e. a *lack* or an *imperfection*) which could be intuited in isolation and self-ascribed. It means not to have a property *in relation to* something having it. Thus, the self-determination/self-apprehension is *mediated*; more precisely, it is mediated by something thereby taken as an ontological *norm*. This norm and the respective self-apprehension “form a dyad” (Sartre 1992: 141/127). Sartre calls the mediator of the respective self-apprehension in so far as it presents some norm *the value* (*le valeur*); given that it is the background for the self-determination of consciousness as being ontologically imperfect, the value is nothing less than what Sartre calls *the perfect being* (*l'être parfait*).

The claim that apprehending oneself as an imperfect being presupposes the apprehension of a perfect being is, of course, familiar from Descartes' third meditation, and Sartre is eager

to stress this.⁶ But Sartre's indebtedness to Descartes is limited. Sartre only endorses one aspect of Descartes' attempt to counter an objection to his *argument from ideas*, i.e. the objection that the idea of an infinite being (which Descartes' first proof of the existence of God presupposes) might not be a *true idea* (*vera idea*, AT VII: 45; cf. Descartes 2007: 31) perceived directly, but only indirectly arrived at by negating a finite (*per negationem finiti*, AT VII: 45; cf. Descartes 2007: 31) of which one has a true idea only. To this, Descartes replies that it is *evident* (*manifeste intelligo*, AT VII: 45) that an infinite substance surpasses a finite substance in its reality and that *therefore* the perception of the infinite is prior to that of the finite; and at this point, Descartes alludes to the apparently obvious fact that I could not possibly account for any self-apprehension in terms of *imperfections* if not granting that such self-apprehensions take place before a background of a presupposed *perfect being*:

For how could I understand that I doubt or desire – that is, lack something – and that I am not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?

(AT VII: 46; Descartes 2007: 31, modified)

Descartes regards this line of reasoning not only as a piece of Scholastic metaphysics but as *evident*; and he has Sartre on his side – at least with respect to the claim in the last quote. But Sartre refuses to go further: he only grants *epistemological priority* to the perfect being given this factive self-apprehension; he does not grant it any *ontological priority*.

The strategy of ridding himself of the ontological priority is vital for Sartre's action theoretical turn. Sartre takes it by criticizing Descartes for regarding the thinker's self-apprehension as imperfect as *revelatory of a real relation to a perfect being which I (qua thinking creature) essentially have*. For Sartre, this goes too far. All that is revealed in my self-apprehension as imperfect is *that I now happen to understand myself in terms of something which I accept as a norm*. Thus, it is my prior and implicit *acceptance of the norm* which must be acknowledged and theoretically accounted for. But this, for Sartre, does not imply that there is an *object* which I thereby accept or relate to and whose existence I implicitly endorse.

But what functions as the required norm which I do accept in apprehending myself as imperfect? Although Sartre stresses that consciousness determines itself as *imperfect* with regard to *l'être en-soi*, *l'être en-soi* is not Sartre's *être parfait*. The reason is that, notwithstanding that consciousness lacks its properties in not being an *omnitudo realitatis*, *l'en-soi* has deficits with regard to consciousness as well: it is not conscious and not spontaneous. But the perfect being is *beyond* both deficits. It does not lack robust being as consciousness does but enjoys the ontological privileges of *l'en-soi* (i.e. independence and full being). Further, it does not lack consciousness as *l'en-soi* does, but it is self-conscious and spontaneous. Thus, the implied perfect being is an *omnitudo realitatis* which is also a *self-conscious causa sui*; and this is why Sartre chooses to call this perfect being "God."

As stated previously, Sartre takes *l'être parfait* to be *epistemologically* prior to this self-apprehension. However, he regards any such being as *conceptually* and *metaphysically* impossible (cf. Sartre 1992: 140/126). Consciousness cannot but come as a *néant*; and a *néant* cannot be an *omnitudo realitatis*. Thus, Sartre goes beyond saying that the relevant norm is not necessarily identical to some pristine object. For Sartre, it cannot be identical to any such object since *l'être parfait* cannot have what Descartes has called *formal reality*. Thus *l'être parfait* cannot be *ontologically* prior. Consequently, we may not say that *l'être parfait* is *presupposed* by consciousness if this is taken to entail that it is *implicitly posited* by consciousness. This is due to the fact that *l'être parfait* is nothing which one *could* ever be posited in Sartre's framework.

If this is the case, however, two tasks emerge: (i) the mode of givenness of *l'être parfait* must be determined given that it still somehow is *for* consciousness, albeit not as what Sartre would regard as an intentional object in an unqualified sense, and (ii) the kind of intentional relation that pertains to *l'être parfait* must be elucidated, given that it is not posited by consciousness but still mediates the self-apprehension of consciousness.

In response to this double task, Sartre introduces three technical terms deserving further elucidation in the next section: the notion of *haunting*, that of a *project*, and that of *engagement*. With respect to the first task, Sartre claims that the value is given to consciousness in so far as it *haunts* pre-reflective consciousness (see Sartre 1992: 141/127). With respect to the second, Sartre claims that *l'être parfait* is *projected* by consciousness and that any such projection is tantamount to *an engagement into realizing it*. Thus, it is this very engagement which also gives an answer to the question of what it means to accept *l'être parfait* as the ultimate ontological norm.

On *haunting*, projections, and *engagement*

The technical term *haunting* requires and the earlier “*grasps itself* as imperfect being” (*se saisit*) invites clarification. As for the latter, Sartre does not claim that each of us has *conceptual knowledge* of being ontologically imperfect (such that the imperfection would be *posited*). In fact, Sartre assumes we will not reach knowledge of this ontological deficiency even in ordinary reflection; such knowledge is only reached by *pure reflection*. The *purity* of *pure reflection* is due to its mere *explicatory* status of whatever is non-positionally but pre-reflectively understood (cf. Sartre 1992: 217ff/190ff). Thus, *se saisir* alludes to this implicit non-positional and pre-reflective understanding of the ontological imperfection. Sartre speaks of a “*lived*” (*vécu*) *ontological imperfection*, a notion echoing (i) a phenomenal coloredness of this self-determination, (ii) that this ontological imperfection is existentially carried out, and (iii) that it is not reflexively given. Minimally, *living* something indicates that *what is lived matters to the intentional life of consciousness* without this *mattering* consisting in the fact that consciousness poses its imperfection as an object.

The elusive notion *haunt* is Sartre’s technical term for a mode of givenness of that which is no object for consciousness but only has some “inapprehensible presence” (Sartre 1992: 364/312) so that it can affect the intentional life. Since for Sartre, *being an object for consciousness* is the correlate of *positional consciousness* or *intentionality* as implicit in (SE2), the being-toward that which haunts consciousness cannot be an intending in *this* sense.

For Sartre, it is obvious that *each mode of givenness* of – loosely speaking – “something” (if *the given* is an object or not) has a structurally correlative *being-toward of consciousness*. As we have seen in the last section, Sartre regards *l'être parfait* as conceptually and metaphysically impossible; it is no possible *object* for consciousness; and it is nothing which could possibly be *posited* by consciousness. But what, then, does consciousness *do* when being *toward* or *for l'être parfait*? Sartre’s answer is: it does not *posit l'être parfait*; it *projects l'être parfait*. Thus, to say that *l'être parfait haunts* pre-reflective consciousness is just the flipside of saying that consciousness *projects l'être parfait*.

To say that the relevant being-toward is a *projecting* echoes two aspects: (i) first, it echoes an *ontological dependence* of the value on consciousness. As seen, the value is not equivalent to *l'en soi* which is presupposed by consciousness and ontologically independent, but a (confused) projection of a synthetic unity of the two poles of the intentional “relation” (*en-soi* and *pour-soi*). Its presence is as robust as that of cinematic screen images; if you switch off the projector, they vanish. (ii) A second claim resounds in Sartre’s notion of *projection*: the claim

that I would not apprehend myself as imperfect if I did not accept *l'être parfait* as a *norm*. But qua *norm*, *l'être parfait* is apprehended as *worthy of being attained* (that's why Sartre calls it a *value*); and for Sartre, this very apprehension is nothing over and above the attempt to live up to that norm. That is: apprehending *l'être parfait* as worthy of being attained simply is striving toward living up to it. Thus, projecting the value is tantamount to *engaging into the realization of value*.⁷ And here we see why value matters for Sartre's self-determination of the agent: for Sartre, being toward value simply is being practically engaged.

With respect to this last point, Sartre's notion of a *project* translates Heidegger's notion of an *Entwurf* (i.e. a *project* in a practical sense) and circumscribes the ultimate "Worumwillen" or *telos* of consciousness, i.e. that *for the sake of which* consciousness ultimately lives and exists.

As the *telos* of a striving, the value is projected as a *possibility for consciousness*, i.e. what Sartre calls the ultimate *existential possibility*. Obviously, Sartre does not thereby presuppose that *existential possibilities* are *conceptually* or *metaphysically possible*. They are just what consciousness projects and engages into.

Engagement, intentionality, and motivational properties

Engagement is non-positional with respect to value. If one defines *intentionality* by the positional aspect along the lines of (SE2), then one may not call engagement *intentionality*. But *semantically*, we are not forced to do so but can also say that any *being-toward* defines intending. Doing so, we can say that engagement is a kind of intending: not *positional intending* (intending_{POS}) but a non-positional *projective intending* (intending_{PRO}).

Intending_{POS} is meant to be a mark of consciousness. It is not the only mark, however. For Sartre, consciousness is by definition intention_{POS} and a non-positional and pre-reflective self-apprehension: "every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself" (Sartre 1992: 13/19). Given the earlier point, we can add a third vital aspect and say: each consciousness is non-positionally directed toward a value, thereby living its ontological imperfection; or: consciousness essentially exhibits intentionality_{PRO}.

In fact, however, the third aspect comes down to the second. Intentionality_{PRO} is a kind of self-awareness: it is how subjects non-positionally live their ontological imperfection while being non-positionally toward the value. Thus, it is a mediated non-positional self-awareness or, as one could say, one which is *stretched out* toward an ultimate existential possibility. This, as a matter of fact, is not only *some* kind of self-awareness; for Sartre, this *is* self-awareness properly understood. Not only is Sartrean *selfhood* defined by projecting. Furthermore, Sartre also cashes out any "state-consciousness" in terms of intentionality_{PRO}. For Sartre, a self-ascribable "mental state" cannot but be a *haunter* and a *project of engagement* for pre-reflective consciousness. In that respect, "mental states" are also *values* (see Sartre 1992: 122/111, 138/124; for more on this see Neuber 2017).

According to Sartre, positional consciousness and pre-reflective self-awareness exhibit a two-way entailment. Thus, intrinsically two-dimensional intentionality_{PRO} (two-dimensional with reference to the *imperfection* and the *value*) has its own positionality, the positionality of structures that seem to *allow for a realization of the ultimate existential possibility*. Thanks to intentionality_{PRO}, situations are apprehended as *calling for certain modifications*; they confront us with *tasks* (Sartre 1992: 274/236); they raise "pure demands which rise as 'voids to be filled' in the middle of [the world]" (Sartre 1992: 274/236), claiming "a right of the real" (Sartre 1992: 150/136). And this is where the above-mentioned last moment (M3) enters, i.e. the idea that there are motivational qualities, i.e. properties of objects calling for and demanding actions in the world.

Sartre tries to shed light on the constitution of those structures by giving examples that require a cautionary remark and a clarification. As for the former: the following may sound as if some previously intended world of objects suddenly gained a new, additional structure. This is not intended. Rather, the respective constitution of demands is primordial. As for the latter: the examples introduce a situational concretion⁸ of the abstract notions *lived ontological imperfection* and *value*. The former comes, e.g. as a *lived thirst* (elsewhere Sartre introduces a *lived hunger* or a *lived tiredness*), the latter as the concrete existential possibility against which⁹ the concrete “imperfection” has its specific nature (e.g. being saturated, being quenched, resting). This situational concretion follows from the assumption that the former rather abstract structure cannot but appear as situationally defined. It is the concrete situation I find myself in as an embodied being which allows for quite specific ways to engage into the value and to live my imperfection. Still, these examples *maintain* the two-dimensional non-positionality of intending_{PRO}. Sartre assumes that intending_{PRO} is related to a specific kind of intending_{POS} in the following manner:

The possible which is *my* possible [i.e. the existential possibility/value into which I engage] is a possible for-itself [i.e. a future state of consciousness in which the value is realized and in which it apprehends itself as the value] and as such a presence to the in-itself as consciousness of the in-itself [i.e. as such it intends some object]. What I seek [is this existential possibility, i.e. this consciousness]. But this possible which is non-thetically absent-present to present consciousness is not present as an object of a positional consciousness [. . .] The satisfied thirst which haunts my actual thirst [. . .] is athetic consciousness of the glass [. . .] and a non-positional self-consciousness. It then makes itself transcend to the glass of which it is conscious; and as a correlate of this possible non-thetic consciousness, the glass-drunk (from) haunts the full glass as its possible and constitutes it as a glass to be drunk from.

(Sartre 1992: 157/141, modified)

What Sartre indicated in this rather complicated passage is that what I *engage into* is a (sought and thus a future) state of consciousness; abstractly speaking, it is one in which consciousness can apprehend itself as *omnitudo realitatis*. More concretely, it is some state in which a current thirst “grasps and incorporates repletion into itself” (Sartre 1992: 138/154) to thereby “pass[] on to the plenitude of being.” But if the engaged-into is a future state of consciousness, the engagement necessarily is engagement into a *positing*, in this example, into a positing of a glass of water in so far as it is empty (or drunk from). This is crucial for the rather eccentric *haunting of the value*. What Sartre observes is that when the value (here: the future state of consciousness) haunts *actual consciousness*, then a haunting *on the positional level takes place*; more precisely, Sartre observes some *superimposition* of the intentional object of that future consciousness onto the intentional object of the current consciousness. The not-yet intended object into whose positional consciousness actual consciousness engages comes to *infect* the actual object of consciousness. It is due to that infection that the actual object gains a property, namely the property of *being-to-be-emptied*.¹⁰ It thus *demand*s being drunk from.

According to Sartre, those emergent structures are apprehended as *intrinsically motivational*: “their character [. . .] is manifested to the unreflective consciousness by a direct and personal urgency which is *lived* as such without being referred to *somebody* or thematized” (Sartre 1992: 274/236). Thus, being responsive does not mean *noticing*, but *being practically responsive*. *Sartre’s subject unreflectively or pre-reflectively feels addressed and feels torn toward a practical response and, thus, simply follows the call of the objects to give them their right to be real. Responding to value in a concrete situation, reflection is completely bypassed.*

Since, according to Sartre, intentionality_{PRO} and intentionality_{POS} are interrelated (with respect to demands) and since *apprehending demands* is just *being practically responsive* to them, intentionality_{PRO} comes as *praxis*:

Our description of freedom [i.e. consciousness] [. . .] compels us to abandon at once the difference between the intention and the act. The intention can no more be separated from the act than thought can be separated from the language which expresses it; and as it happens that our speech informs us of our thought, so our acts will inform us of our intentions – that is, it will enable us to disengage our intentions, to schematize them, and to make objects of them instead of limiting us to live them – i.e. to assume a non-thetic consciousness of them.

(Sartre 1992: 622/529)

This motivates a reflection reflecting on possible dangers for a theory of action. Sartre at one point observes:

As soon as we formulate the problem of action, we risk falling into a confusion with great consequences. When I take this pen and plunge it into the inkwell I am acting. But if I look at Pierre who at the same instant is drawing up a chair to the table, I establish also that he is acting. Thus there is here a very distinct risk [. . .] of interpreting *my* action as it *is-for-me*, in terms of the Other's action. This is because the only action which I can *know* at the same time it is taking place is the action of Pierre [or some Other]. I see his gesture and at the same time I determine his goal: he is drawing a chair up to the table *in order to* be able to sit down near the table and to write a letter which he told me he wished to write.

(Sartre 1992: 422/359f.)

Sartre's approach to acting as a pre-reflective practical response to demands – Sartre speaks of *lived intentionality* – is a direct reaction to the danger articulated in the just quoted passage. Sketching acting as being practically responsive to a world of demands is thus Sartre's attempted first-person approach. Sartre hereby formulates an approach where acting is nothing but a *practical reading*¹¹ of a motivational structure – which is itself a reflection of existential possibilities. This practical reading bypasses reflection and any self-related positing, be it that of a project (or *my* project) or that of an objectively given desire. All objects which exist for consciousness are the objects out in the world calling for modifications within the world. For Sartre, it is only a secondary objectification from a third-person perspective that turns the *lived lack* into a “desire” and the lived value into an “intention” the subject “has formed.” And although sketching the details of this process of objectification is beyond the task of this chapter, Sartre is eager to stress that accounts explaining actions in terms of causally efficient beliefs-cum-desires simply fall into such a “confusion with great consequences” by ignoring a more fundamental layer of analysis.

The “structures contained within the very idea of acting” – Sartre's “translations”

The account developed earlier is the foundation for Sartre's attempt “to make explicit the structures contained with the very idea of acting” (Sartre 1992: 559/477). The relevant chapter in Sartre's *magnum opus* has three aims: (i) translating the earlier scheme into a more

“action theoretical” vocabulary in order to expose *action* as a manifestation of an *internal tripartite structure*, (ii) exposing how this structure can reconcile intuitions of both “*determinists*” and proponents of a *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae*, and (iii) providing the basis for a hermeneutics of agency which gives way to Sartre’s existential psychoanalysis at the end of *Being and Nothingness*.

With respect to (i), Sartre starts by identifying three concepts he seems to take as generally accepted core notions of action theory: (1) *le motif*,¹² (2) *le mobile*, and (3) *la fin* (the purpose). Sartre assumes that the former two notions are regarded as either unrelated or even as belonging to “two radically distinct layers” (Sartre 1992: 577/491), and his task is to show that this is wrong. Thus, Sartre’s opponent is someone quite distinct: it is someone assuming that *le motif* is that which *justifies* the act (cf. Sartre 1992: 575/490); that *le mobile* is the non-rational “ensemble of desires, emotions, and passions, which urge me to accomplish a certain act” (Sartre 1992: 576/491), and that an ideally *rational* act is one exclusively determined by *un motif*. Thus, the opponent is someone assuming that there can be acts which are only determined by *le motif*.

For Sartre this is a poor abstraction which is blind to the constitution of *motifs*. To expose this, Sartre hopes to show that the three notions can be neatly mapped onto the earlier three moments M1, M2, and M3. The *purpose* takes the place of M2, i.e. of the *value* or of that into whose realization we engage. *Le mobile* takes the place of M1 and replaces *lived urgency/lived ontological imperfection*. Now the crucial point for Sartre is that *le motif* is in fact only a variant of M3, i.e. of objectively given motivational structures. But if the structure of *le motif* mirrors the constitutive structure of demands or objectively given motivational properties, then there is no tradeoff between *le mobile* and *le motif*; both are but moments of an interrelated complex structure of being toward a project.

Given this interpretation of *le motif* along the lines of M3 and along the constitution of objectively given motivational structures, it is clear for Sartre that there are only actions *performed in light of* “*reasons*” (*motifs*). But there are never actions which we opt for by balancing “neutral” reasons. Instead, engaging into a project *is* finding a reason for that project – and there is no other access to practical reasons apart from that: “far from determining the action, [the motive] appears only in and through the project of an action” (Sartre 1992: 578/492). In a way, *le motif* is itself an “‘irrational’ fact” (Sartre 1992: 578/493).

This view has consequences for Sartre’s take on *deliberation*, which for him is just *a way to be engaged into the project*. Putting theoretical weight on deliberation or assuming that there is something pristine to being determined by *one’s best reasons* appears as a mistake about the ontology of *motifs*, i.e. the mistaken assumption that *motifs* can be apprehended neutrally in order to weigh them against one another. For Sartre, however, what we will find in weighing pros and cons for a project does not inform us about the *value of the project* (since there is no such independent value) but about *whether we have already started to engage into the project*. “When I deliberate, the chips are down” (Sartre 1992: 581/495). Acting is thus not only trivially acting for a reason but also acting for the subjectively best reason, i.e. the reason on which we would have acted on had we deliberated. In that respect, mindless and blind acting and reflected acting only differ in the *form* of engagement.¹³

The limits of self-knowledge, freedom, and determinism

Obviously, a Sartrean framework has no place for *akrasia*, weakness of will or an *invitus facere*. But of course, it has place for being mistaken about one’s intentions. My reflective self-ascriptions may be guided by a self-image I wish to be true to, so that I self-ascribe the more

appreciated wish. When doing something that does not reflect a wish that I aspire to have, I might come to claim that I somehow acted against my *real* intentions. For Sartre, such claims do not reveal hidden intentions. They only reveal that I can reflect *impurely*.

That we can be radically mistaken about our intentions, plans, and projects would not be surprising for Sartre. Nevertheless, there cannot be psychological motives or forces that prevent us from doing what we pre-reflectively intend to do (naturally, we can fail if someone or something hinders us). All we can be wrong about is our intentionality_{PRO}; and we are prone for mistakes once we start reflecting on it to ascribe intentionality_{PRO} in terms of concrete “intentions.” As Sartre suggested before: what ultimately reveals my intentions is not an act of reflection but what I have ended up doing.

Although each project is “irrationally” chosen, what I end up doing it is not arbitrary. Rather, all my actions cohere in virtue of what Sartre calls an *initial project* (Sartre 1992: 588/501) or *profound intention* (Sartre 1992: 582/496) functioning as an all-encompassing frame of coherence. It is the ultimate “project of myself” (Sartre 1992: 594/505) and projected in a “fundamental act of freedom” (Sartre 1992: 594/506).

This initial project is usually not discovered in ordinary reflection and needs a hermeneutics of concrete subjectivity which Sartre’s existential psychoanalysis wants to provide. But apart from its function to expose action as *ontologically meaningful* it is meant to help reconcile the correct but one-sided assumptions of “determinists and the proponents of a liberty of indifference [*liberum arbitrium indifferentiae*]” (Sartre 1992: 563/480, modified). Whereas the former assume that my acting can be entirely explained in terms of psycho-physical causal laws and forces, the latter assume that we can imagine a situation in which two agents end up doing different things although their respective psycho-physical determinants are identical. In order to explain this, they allude to an unconditioned power of the will.

Sartre agrees with the libertarian that (i) psycho-physical forces cannot *cause* my actions. This follows from the fact that intentionality_{PRO} is a being-toward something which still *lacks* and thus a comportment implying *negativity* (see Sartre 1992: 560/478). According to (SE3), however, this is only possible for a *néant* which according to (SE5) exposes the structure of radical spontaneity and causal unreachability. Sartre furthermore agrees with the libertarian that (ii) there are projects that are not chosen *in virtue of one’s reasons*. But this does not mean that they are not made *in the light of one’s reason*. As soon as I engage into a possibility, there *is* a network of sufficient reasons; as a consequence, the apparent situation cited by the libertarian is not possible.

Given that my projects cohere in light of my initial project, others may be quite reliable in predicting my behavior. This is what Sartre grants to the determinist. Perfect prediction is nevertheless impossible for both epistemic and structural reasons. According to Sartre, the initial project is free in so far as *I could have chosen otherwise*. The initial project thus gives coherence to all my projects and in some way *determines* my projects. This allows for some predictability. But there are two factors that limit this determination: first, this *determination* by the initial project is just *self-determination* and thus nothing which could be played off against Sartrean freedom. Second, although nobody can act *against* her initial choice, everyone can, in principle, alter her initial choice to inaugurate a radical transformation of selfhood. Thus, at each time, I could have acted otherwise because I could have just now altered my initial project. But this, according to Sartre, comes at quite an existential expense, and thus it is rare.

Conclusion: Sartre’s primary interest

Sartre has a theoretical interest in acting insofar as he takes actions to be aspirations to achieve the value. In that respect, there cannot be *acting* for Sartre if there is no intentionality_{PRO}.

This is why Sartre assumes that acting is “on principle *intentional*,” and why he regards the “adequacy of the result to the intention” (Sartre 1992: 560/477, my translation) as a criterion for action: “The careless smoker who has through negligence caused the explosion of a powder magazine has not *acted*” (Sartre 1992: 560/477).

When Sartre assumes that the *criterion* for speaking of an *action* is nothing but the coincidence of *project* and *result*, he is talking from the perspective of a hermeneutics of subjectivity interested only in those “results” that are indeed a revelatory manifestation of an intention_{PRO}. But even from that rather restricted stance, this approach is tricky. Since Sartre’s agent does not have to know her intention but may often learn it from what she does, Sartre assumes that my actions in the world ultimately teach me what I really intended_{PRO}. However, I can only make a difference between actions of mine and slips of my body by checking whether the latter correspond to intention_{PRO} of mine.

This is only one of many problems¹⁴ that arise even on a sympathetic reading. On a less sympathetic reading, one may regard Sartre’s ontology as far too speculative or simply absurd. But the aim here was not to offer a defense or a critique but an exposition of what take on action results from Sartre’s ontological framework. That this perspective does not even touch upon many issues currently discussed stresses the impact of this framework. What Sartre is after is not a *theory of action* but an (ontological) account of the non-reflective life of a consciousness which is determined to act and which determines itself to act.

Notes

- 1 I usually follow Hazel Barnes’ translation unless marked by “modified”; the page numbers refer to Sartre (1992). The page numbers of the French version are included after a slash. They follow Sartre (2010).
- 2 As Descartes (1983) suggests in his *Principia Philosophiae*, First Part, § 51: “Per substantia, nihil aliud intelligere possumus quam rem quae ita existit, ut nulla alia re indigeat ad existendum.” “/By ‘substance’, we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way that it needs no other thing in order to exist.”
- 3 Sartre’s notion of the absolute is also linked to the transparency of consciousness: “it is because of this identity of appearance and existence within it that it can be considered as the absolute” (Sartre 1992: 17/23).
- 4 See Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* IX: 3, 1046b29–1047b3.
- 5 See Sartre (1992: 28/32) on the merely *regional* status of the principle of identity.
- 6 Sartre habitually but wrongly refers to “the second Cartesian proof” of the existence of God (see e.g. Sartre 1992: 139/126). What Sartre hereby refers to, however, is only a moment within the dialectics of weighing arguments against Descartes’ argument from ideas; and the argument from ideas is Descartes’ *first* proof of the existence of God, not his second one.
- 7 Cf. Sartre (1992: 140/127): “Nothing can hold out against this self-evident truth: consciousness can exist only as *engaged* in this being [of the value].”
- 8 For Sartre, desire “bears witness to the existence of lack in human reality” (Sartre 1992: 137/124).
- 9 Without being haunted by its existential possibility of being quenched, “thirst” would be no more than an *affective tenor* (cf. Sartre 1992: 562/479).
- 10 For a fine delineation of the background of Gestalt–psychology, see Morris (2010: esp. 147).
- 11 Cf. Sartre (1992: 275/237): “[T]he order of instruments [and demands] in the world is the image of my possibilities projected in the in-itself, *i.e.* the image of what I am. But I can never decipher this worldly image. I adapt myself to it in and through action.”
- 12 Barnes translates Sartre’s *motif* as “cause” and *mobile* as “motive” which leads to confusions when thinking bilingually. The terms are thus left untranslated.
- 13 The mode varies with the profound intention. See Sartre (1992: 581f/495f).
- 14 A further crucial problem is linked to Sartre’s ambivalent sketch of the *value*. On the one hand, the engagement into value is what bears the entire framework of an engaged subjectivity which Sartre is so keen on. On the other hand, Sartre regards this engagement as a source of an essential

alienation and takes it to be nothing but a source of bad faith and a manifestation of unhappy consciousness: “The being of human reality is suffering because it rises in being as perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, precisely because it could not attain the in-itself without losing itself as for-itself. Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state” (Sartre 1992: 140/126f). See also Sartre’s concluding reflections: “Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the *ens causa sui*, which religions call God. Thus the passion of man is the revers of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion” (Sartre 1992: 784/662). However, here – after his discovery of an existential psychoanalysis – Sartre is at least open to the possibility of “put[ting] an end to the reign of this value” (Sartre 1992: 798/675). However, it is revealing that one of the last questions that Sartre raises in his book is the question: “And can one live this new aspect of being?” (Sartre 1992: 798/767) – i.e. that which is not under the reign of the value.

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Further reading

J.E. Atwell, “Sartre and Action Theory,” in H. Silverman and F. Elliston (eds.), *Jean Paul Sartre* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1980, pp. 63–81), outlines the interrelation of intention and action in Sartre and draws many lines to (then) contemporary discussions. K. J. Morris, “Sartre,” in T. O’Connor and C. Sandis (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action* (Malden, MA et al.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 570–577), discusses Sartre as a proponent for the claim that reasons for actions cannot be causes for actions which is not challenged by standard refutations.