Publication Source:

Scott, Blake D. "From Perception to Action", *Sartre Studies International* 26, 2 (2020): 51-62, accessed Oct 11, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ssi.2020.260205>

From Perception to Action: Sartre's Practical Phenomenology

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Introduction

Over the course of his “holiday in Berlin” from the fall of 1933 to the summer of 1934, Jean-Paul Sartre encountered the writings of Edmund Husserl, which would prove to be a major point of reference for his thought in the coming decades.¹ Although this influence is well known, the details of Sartre’s appropriation of Husserl’s phenomenology are not always easy to spell out and often involve a good deal of reconstruction. Adding to this interpretive difficulty is the fact that Husserl’s influence on Sartre has often been overshadowed by that of Martin Heidegger. In recent years, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in Sartre’s relation to Husserl.² Of particular interest is an article by Lior Levy who correctly, in my view, locates the positive influence of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* on Sartre.³ Indeed, as Levy argues, Sartre’s criticisms of Husserl’s later transcendental phenomenology often depart from “a position of allegiance to the early [Husserl]”.⁴ While the extent to which Sartre’s own method may be characterized as a kind of transcendental phenomenology is a matter of ongoing debate,⁵ the fact that Sartre continues to employ Husserl’s phenomenological vocabulary in *Being and Nothingness* is beyond doubt.

Agreeing with the need to further excavate the Husserlian undercurrents in Sartre’s phenomenology, in this paper I nonetheless want to question the compatibility of some of Husserl’s notions with the larger aims of Sartre’s project. While Sartre often borrows Husserl’s language in his analyses and descriptions, basic questions of coherence arise if we fail to notice how Sartre is reworking many of the central notions in Husserl’s technical vocabulary. To bring this into focus, I will centre my discussion around the well-known problem of how it is possible to have an “intuition of absences” in Sartre’s famous example of failing to find Pierre in the café. As Sartre himself points out, this example faces a problem: for Husserl an intuition fulfilled by an absence is strictly speaking impossible.

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre (1999), *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phoney War, November 1939-March 1940*, pp. 77.

² See, for example, Stawarska (2013), “Sartre and Husserl’s *Ideen*: phenomenology and Imagination”; Levy (2016), “Intentionality, Consciousness, and the Ego: The Influence of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* on Sartre’s Early Work; Gusman (2018), “To the Nothingnesses Themselves: Husserl’s Influence on Sartre’s Notion of Nothingness”; Webber (2020), “Sartre’s critique of Husserl”.

³ Levy (2016), pp. 513.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 513.

⁵ Jonathan Webber defends this view in “Sartre’s Critique of Husserl” (2020).

While some commentators have offered compelling solutions to this problem by looking beyond Sartre,⁶ I will explore a different path. What I aim to show is not so much how we can resolve Sartre's apparent problem but rather how an interpretive shift in our reading can bring out the point at which he finds Husserl's phenomenology inadequate. Specifically, it seems to me that the intractability of this problem is best understood in terms of a deep-rooted tension in Sartre's phenomenology between (1) his reliance on Husserl's vocabulary, which tends to favour descriptions at the level of *theoretical* consciousness, and (2) his attempt in *Being and Nothingness* to steer phenomenology in the direction of *practical* consciousness. In other words, what I will argue is that the apparent problem of accounting for the intuition of absences is symptomatic of an excessively *theoretical* interpretation of Sartre's use of intentionality. The problem with this is that Sartre himself slowly sheds the language of theoretical intentionality as his analysis moves closer and closer to what is truly concrete, i.e. the "synthetic totality" of being-in-the-world.⁷ By reading Sartre in a more practical way, we can better understand what Sartre found lacking in Husserl, how Sartre may have understood his own work as a contribution to the phenomenological movement, and, perhaps, even help to free Sartre's distinctive phenomenological method from the shadow of his predecessors.

In the first part of the paper I review Husserl's notion of evidence and its role in the epistemological task of his phenomenology. Next, I introduce Sartre's Pierre example and highlight some difficulties with interpreting it as a problem of perception. By focusing on Sartre's notion of the project, I argue instead that the problem posed by the Pierre example is better understood at the level of action. In support of this interpretation, I conclude with a brief comparison to the early work of Paul Ricoeur. By borrowing some of Ricoeur's phenomenological vocabulary tailored to action, I reinterpret Sartre's example as a practical problem.

The Role of Evidence in Husserl's *Logical Investigations*

In the Foreword to the First Edition of the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl writes that the problems he had encountered while attempting to achieve a philosophical clarification of pure mathematics had brought him to the realization that the logic of his time was not up to the task of elucidating the sciences.⁸ In response to this crisis of foundations, Husserl understood his "breakthrough" work as an attempt to provide "*a new foundation of pure logic and epistemology*."⁹ Husserl's way of responding to this crisis begins with a careful investigation of "the relationship between the subjectivity of knowing and the objectivity of the content known."¹⁰ By thematizing the relationship between knowledge and the knower, Husserl wants to push science's concern with knowledge beyond the level of a coherent body of correct judgements. Indeed, on Husserl's view, for science to be genuinely concerned with knowledge, it must also understand how knowledge can be *evident* to some consciousness. For Husserl, evidence (*Evidenz*)¹¹ is a process of synthesis whereby a meaning-intention and a perception achieve some degree of "coincidence" [*Deckung*]

⁶ Clare Mac Cumhaill (2018), "Absential Locations and the Figureless Ground".

⁷ Sartre (2018), *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, pp. 34.

⁸ Edmund Husserl (2001a), *Logical Investigations: Vol. 1*, pp. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 2.

¹¹ Although Findlay translates "*Evidenz*" as "self-evidence", I prefer "evidence" to avoid any subjectivist or psychological connotations.

in consciousness.¹² Under ideal epistemic conditions, as a kind of limit-case, Husserl understands evidence as:

[the] *most perfect synthesis of fulfilment*, which gives to an intention...the absolute fulness of content, the fulness of the object itself. The object is not merely meant, but in the strictest sense *given*, and given as it is meant, and made one with our meaning-reference.¹³

For Husserl, it is through evidence that, in the last analysis, “things themselves” are *present* to consciousness and are thus able to serve as the criterion for distinguishing between arbitrary assertions and genuine knowledge worthy of the name of science. In other words, for science to be truly scientific, it must strive for knowledge that exhibits (1) systematic coherence and (2) is meaningfully understood *as* knowledge by its knowers *in evidence*. Without satisfying both of these requirements, Husserl argues, science can make no legitimate claim upon the “realm of truth”.¹⁴

The systematic importance of the notion of evidence in Husserl can thus not be overstated. The reason for this is that evidence on the part of the knower is what prevents Husserl’s own theory from violating the conditions of possibility of any theory whatsoever—a charge that Husserl raises against psychologism.¹⁵ Without satisfying this criterion, Husserl’s own phenomenology, or indeed any theory whatsoever, would be unable to account for how it can legitimately prefer “an inwardly evident judgment to a blind one”—the very purpose of epistemology.¹⁶ As we will see in what follows, it is this understanding of the boundaries between what can and cannot be given in evidence that Sartre’s example of Pierre’s absence seems to flout.

Where’s Pierre?

With this brief sketch of Husserl’s notion of evidence, we are now in a better position to reconsider Sartre’s famous example from *Being and Nothingness*:

I am meeting Pierre at four o’clock. I arrive a quarter of an hour late: Pierre is always punctual; will he have waited for me? I look at the room, the customers, and I say ‘He is not here.’ Is there an intuition of Pierre’s absence or does negation only intervene alongside judgment? At first sight it seems absurd to talk here of ‘intuition’, just because there can not be an intuition of *nothing*, and Pierre’s absence is this nothing. Yet popular consciousness bears witness to this intuition. Do we not say, for example, ‘I saw right away that he was not there’? In this case is the negation simply displaced?¹⁷

All clues point to Sartre giving this example in order to answer the guiding question of the first chapter concerning the “origin of negation”. Yet, in light of our discussion of Husserl, we will easily recognize with Sartre the apparent contradiction: How can there be any intuitive fulfilment

¹² Husserl (2001b), *Logical Investigations: Vol. 2*, pp. 262-263.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 263

¹⁴ Husserl (2001a), *Logical Investigations: Vol. 1*, pp. 18.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 75.

¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 75.

¹⁷ Sartre (2018), *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 41.

of Pierre's *absence*? Does evidence not demand intuitive fulfilment "in the presence of *the thing*",¹⁸ as Sartre himself is well aware?¹⁹

Sartre does not make things easy for himself. After presenting the example, he immediately concludes that it "suffices to show...that it is the negative judgment that is conditioned and supported by non-being" rather than the other way around.²⁰ Yet, as Sarah Richmond has argued, despite Sartre's confidence in his demonstration, upon closer inspection the example seems more of an "unnecessary detour" than a satisfactory justification of his account of nothingness, central as it is to both his argument and his ontology.²¹ Agreeing with Richmond on this point, I think that the example of Pierre can nonetheless be used as a helpful index of Sartre's relation to Husserl, even if it is not sufficient to warrant his conclusion.

One could be tempted here to think that Sartre is needlessly complicating a rather ordinary experience. For are there not already enough resources in Husserl to deal with such an example? Can we not account for this "intuition" of Pierre's absence in terms of "empty" or "frustrated" intentions without appealing to negativity at all? While this may be possible, two things are important to emphasize here. The first is that Sartre's Husserl is by no means our Husserl today.²² At best it would be anachronistic to criticize Sartre from the perspective of contemporary Husserl scholarship.²³ The second and more important thing to keep in mind is that the goal of *Being and Nothingness* is not to provide a phenomenology of perception but is first and foremost an attempt to respond to the modern philosophical fixation on epistemology by reinterpreting human existence in terms of its ontological engagement with the world. We should thus not be too surprised that Sartre does not offer us a theory of perception *à la* Merleau-Ponty.²⁴ Indeed, this absence may say more about our own horizon of interests than it does about Sartre's.

With these two points in mind, let us return to Pierre example. Reading further into the same chapter we find that Pierre's absence makes another appearance.²⁵ This time, however, we find Sartre at pains *not* to give an account in terms of a Husserlian perceptual analysis: "It would be futile", he writes, "to try and explain my apprehension of Pierre's absence...by invoking Husserl's well-known 'empty intentions' that are, in large part, constitutive of perception."²⁶ Sartre's reasoning here is straightforwardly Husserlian: "as the matter that is supposed to fulfil the empty intentions is, precisely, what *is not*, that matter cannot be what motivates them in their structure."²⁷ If this is the case, then why did Sartre bother to introduce the example in Husserlian language in the first place? It seems to me that Sartre is trying to show why the solution to this problem is not to be found at the level of perception, or, more precisely, not at the level of perception *alone*—as there is no perceptual matter to motivate the intention of Pierre's absence. The motivation for the experience of Pierre's absence must be located elsewhere.

¹⁸ Sartre (2004), *Transcendence of the Ego: A Sketch for a Phenomenological Description*, pp. 4.

¹⁹ In light of this difficulty, I disagree with Thomas R. Flynn's claim that Sartre straightforwardly "adopts Husserl's concept of evidence as the immediate presence of an intended object". (Thomas R. Flynn (1976), "Praxis and Vision: Elements of a Sartrean Epistemology, pp. 24.)

²⁰ Sartre (2018), *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 43.

²¹ Sarah Richmond (2013), "Nothingness and negation", pp. 103.

²² See Flynn (2014) on which of Husserl's works that Sartre is known to have read. (Flynn, 2014, *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography*, pp. 60.)

²³ See, for example, Iso Kern (2019), "Important aspects of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and phenomenological philosophy that could not be known through Husserl's own publications during his lifetime".

²⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012). *Phenomenology of Perception*.

²⁵ Sartre (2018), *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 63.

²⁶ Sartre (2018), *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 63.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 63.

While commentators such as Clare Mac Cumhaill have offered compelling solutions to this problem at the level of perceptual experience,²⁸ this approach does little to help us resolve the interpretive problem internal to Sartre. Regardless of what explanatory accounts we might offer—whether Husserlian or otherwise—I will argue that, as far as Sartre is concerned, the appearance of this problem is symptomatic of the interpretation that produces it. As Joseph Catalano and Matthew Eshleman have shown, a number of critical interpretive problems arise when we fail to understand the methodology of Sartre’s works.²⁹ Taking these insights into account, in what follows I will show how the problem of Pierre’s absence might be reinterpreted in light of where Sartre tries to go beyond Husserl’s phenomenology and its preoccupation with epistemology and perception.

The Project

Of particular relevance to this problem is Sartre’s posthumously published manuscript *Truth and Existence*, written in 1948 shortly after *Being and Nothingness*. Although this text was likely written as a response to Heidegger’s “On the Essence of Truth”,³⁰ it also offers some clues about Sartre’s relation to Husserl. Elaborating on the role of intuition in light of the For-itself’s anticipatory comportment, Sartre writes the following:

We see nothing that we have not first of all *foreseen*. But, precisely, this foresight and this anticipation cannot themselves be pure givens... Obviously we have to be our own hypothesis, that is, we have to exist as an anticipatory and revelatory behaviour (*comportement*) of the object that is being considered. This is what Husserl understood by “empty intentions” awaiting a missing intuition. But his theory of time did not allow him to see that these empty intentions straddled the present in order to be its future. We are replacing the empty intention by the project of discovery.³¹

Sartre’s notion of the “project” is of course already a central notion in *Being and Nothingness*. While not fleshed out until later in the text, the project will become a more concrete way of describing the future-oriented, synthetic unity of human existence than the more abstract Husserlian categories used in the beginning. To recall, a project is not something that the For-itself *has*, in the sense of having any kind of representation of its intentions. Rather, the For-itself *is* its project, meaning that part of what the For-itself *is* is what it is not, i.e. the end that it “pro-jects”, which may or may not be realized in action. In the above passage from *Truth and Existence* Sartre is clear that the “project” is to replace Husserl’s notion of an “empty intention”. For Sartre, there is something in experiences of negativity, like Pierre’s absence from the café, that an intentional analysis restricted to the level of perception cannot account for and which presupposes a more global, future-oriented synthetic structure. It is only in virtue of such a notion that sense can be made of the way in which more local forms of perceptual intentionality are organized.

²⁸ Mac Cumhaill (2018), “Absential Locations and the Figureless Ground”.

²⁹ Joseph Catalano (1986), *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre’s Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume 1, Theory of Practical Ensembles*, pp. 67; Matthew Eshleman (2002), “Two dogmas of Sartrean Existentialism”, pp. 68. For a masterful overview on the interpretive difficulties of *Being and Nothingness*, see Eshleman’s “On the Structure and Method of *Being and Nothingness*” (2020).

³⁰ See the note by Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre on the probable influence of Heidegger’s text on Sartre’s *Truth and Existence*. (Sartre (1992), *Truth and Existence*, note 6, pp. 84).

³¹ Sartre (1992), *Truth and Existence*, pp. 15.

We can now start to see more clearly where Sartre's phenomenology attempts to improve upon Husserl. As we know from *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre tries to show that the level of engaged human action is more primary than the epistemological level that concerns Husserl, particularly in the *Logical Investigations*. This emphasis on the practical character of the For-itself is reinforced further in *Truth and Existence* where, now engaging more explicitly with epistemology, Sartre tries to undermine the typically modern hierarchy established between acting and knowing: "All action is knowledge...and all knowledge, even intellectual knowledge, is action."³²

By redefining subjectivity in terms of action Sartre's phenomenology draws attention to an additional temporal stratum of the For-itself. When we talk about the For-itself's projected future at the level of action, rather than the level of perception, we are no longer beholden to what can be located in what is perceptually "given", or what is "present"—in both its spatial and temporal senses. Focusing on the level of action it is easier to see why Sartre insists on the language of negativity. Recognizing how the project is operative in experience prevents us from reducing human existence to what is present, or what already is; it enables us to talk about the way in which the projected end of action both is and is not.

On this point, Sartre's discussion of risk in *Truth and Existence* helps to clarify the ontological importance of negativity, now understood through the project as part of the For-itself's temporal existence:

I decide to act, that is, to *risk*. At this level, truth becomes risk, meaning that *there is a non-being of Being*... (there is a whole important dimension of its present being which *is not* given in intuition and yet which is present in its very character as absence).³³

Although he is here discussing the moment of risk in the becoming of truth, Sartre also implicitly clarifies his interpretation of the Pierre example in *Being and Nothingness*. Where he initially seemed to be saying that, we *can* have a fulfilled intuition of absence at the level of perception, here he seems to be saying that there is an important dimension of the present "which *is not* given in intuition". And yet, he insists, it is nonetheless somehow present "*in its very character as absence*".³⁴ What I take Sartre to be saying here is that in order to make sense of the kind of experience described in the Pierre example, phenomenology must go beyond perception and consider how, at the level of action, it is our project—that is, our engaged orientation toward the future—that conditions the appearance of absence against the otherwise indifferent plenum of being.

Here we need to draw attention to intuition as it relates to the different registers of perception and action. Where the former corresponds to questions of theoretical consciousness, the latter corresponds to questions of practical consciousness. Even though Sartre continues to use "intuition" on occasion, he more often opts for the more general language of vision.³⁵ To some extent, this language helps him avoid the more restrictive technical vocabulary of Husserl which, ideally suited to perception, strains when used for descriptions of practical situations. Because Sartre rarely dwells on the details of his phenomenological vocabulary, I suggest that his practical reorientation of phenomenology can be seen more clearly by borrowing from one of his contemporaries, Paul Ricoeur.

³² Ibid., pp. 14-15.

³³ Ibid., pp. 24.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 24, emphasis mine.

³⁵ See, for example, Sartre (1992), *Truth and Existence*, pp. 13, 15.

Practical Phenomenology: Sartre and Ricoeur

Originally published in 1950, Ricoeur's *thèse d'état*, *Freedom and Nature*, was completed in 1948, the same year that Sartre wrote *Truth and Existence*.³⁶ Unlike Sartre, Ricoeur is more careful in the way that he connects his project—a phenomenology of the will—with Husserl's. As Ricoeur points out, although the phenomenological descriptions found in *Ideas I* and *Ideas II* are “devoted primarily to perception and the constitution of knowledge”,³⁷ Husserl already recognizes that his analyses can be extended to action and the “sphere of willing”, among other things.³⁸ Ricoeur thus sets himself the task of trying “to identify the status an object might have as the correlate of consciousness in the context of practical functions.”³⁹

In spite of this commitment to extend Husserl's project, Ricoeur's efforts lead him to conclude shortly after—at a 1951 colloquium summarizing some of the results of his thesis—that the “practical life of consciousness presents *original problems* which in principle are not resolved by an interpretation of “representation”, a “logistic prejudice” he detects in Husserl.⁴⁰ Here Ricoeur articulates the same methodological insight operative in Sartre's phenomenology: both recognize the need to make a detour around epistemic consciousness in order to confront “practical life” directly. As Ricoeur further explains, “we need to take the practical life of consciousness as it is given and apply the method of intentional analysis directly to it without going through a prior phenomenology of perception and objectivating acts in general.”⁴¹ Unlike Sartre, however, this leads Ricoeur to develop a new vocabulary tailored to the specificities of action and the practical life of consciousness. For example, Ricoeur replaces the epistemic language of perceptual “fulfilment” with that of an action's “realization”.⁴² Where perceptions fulfil meaning-intentions, it is actions that realize projects. By borrowing such concepts, I suggest that the practical dimension of Sartre's phenomenology stands out more clearly.

There are, however, some important limits to this comparison that are worth mentioning. In a 1956 article entitled “Negativity and Primary Affirmation”, Ricoeur takes issue with Sartre's hypostatization of nothingness as *the* ontological characteristic of human beings, arguing instead that nihilation always presupposes an “originary” affirmation of being.⁴³ Consequently, Ricoeur objects to Sartre's view that the existential project can be conceived only in terms of negativity. Even in the extreme case of a “radical conversion”, Ricoeur argues, a better description would show that negation never truly effects a complete and self-founding rupture: I can only break with the power of one set of motives by adhering to other motives; I can only repudiate one part of myself by assuming another part, albeit one that may not have previously appeared as a possibility.⁴⁴ In other words, a radical conversion “nihilates a dead past only to discover and stir up behind it a living past” to which I now affirm my adherence.⁴⁵

³⁶ François Dosse (2001), *Paul Ricœur : Les sens d'une vie* (2001), pp. 212.

³⁷ Paul Ricoeur (2007a), *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, pp. 7.

³⁸ Husserl (2014), *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to Pure phenomenology*, §95, pp. 191.

³⁹ Ricoeur (2007a), *Freedom and Nature*, pp. 7.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur (2007b), *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, pp. 221-222, emphasis mine.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 214.

⁴² Ricoeur (2007a), *Freedom and Nature*, pp. 205-206.

⁴³ Ricoeur (2007c), *History and Truth*, pp. 314, translation modified.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 322-323.

Bearing in mind some of these deeper philosophical disagreements, Ricoeur's phenomenological vocabulary nonetheless allows us to bring out what is most original in Sartre's phenomenology—his descriptions of the practical life of consciousness.

Conclusion

Set against Husserl's overt epistemological intentions, Sartre's phenomenology cannot but appear as one of the many "heresies" issuing from Husserl's work. While we have only touched upon some of the differences between Sartre and Ricoeur's use of phenomenology, this short detour has nonetheless helped to shed light on the place where Sartre finds Husserl's epistemological orientation too restrictive.

Returning to the Pierre example, we are now in a better position to clarify things. According to the interpretation that I have been arguing for, we are no longer obliged to understand Pierre's absence as though it were only a problem of perception. The reason for this is that the intentional object in this case is not only a perceptual object; it would be better described as a *practical object*. When analyzed through the lens of practical intentionality, the intentional correlate in this example—what Ricoeur would call the "pragma" of action—would more accurately be described as "I am meeting with Pierre in the café".⁴⁶ In other words, Sartre's example should be understood as a project that failed to be *realized* rather than a meaning-intention that failed to find perceptual *fulfilment*; for the experience of absence in this example is not motivated solely by the perception of "things themselves" but from the project of the For-itself—not only from the cups, the saucers, and the empty chairs in the café but from the project's failure to be realized by going to the café to meet Pierre.

While the argument that I have offered here by no means resolves all of difficulties arising from this well-known example, it does show that any interpretation of it must bear in mind that Sartre is not trying to develop a phenomenology of perception but an engaged phenomenology of action. To this extent, we can learn to distinguish between genuine problems in Sartre's phenomenology and those that arise from his attempt to use the language of theoretical intentionality for descriptions of phenomena that are essentially practical.

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⁴⁶ Ricoeur (2007a), *Freedom and Nature*, pp. 210. For Ricoeur, the pragma of action can be detected by means of the heuristic question "what are you doing?"

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