

# On being a person: Sartre's contribution to psychotherapy

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## **Abstract**

The principal focus of this paper revolves around the existential pre-occupation with what it means to be a person. I argue that the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, in particular through the way he placed consciousness centre-stage in his analysis, allows conceptions of the 'self' that help us, as psychotherapists, in understanding the manifestations of existential anxiety and the possibility of choice in the face of that anxiety. In particular, I consider his analysis of 'Bad Faith' and the subject/object dichotomy in human relations manifest in his analysis of the 'Look'. A major contribution of his work is the idea that from the maelstrom of consciousness emerges our constant striving for knowledge of who we are and therefore who we might become.

**Key Words:** Sartre, Consciousness, Self, Freedom, Choice, Anxiety

## **Introduction: why the focus on the idea of the 'self'?**

*'.....Man must create his own essence: it is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines himself.....'* (Sartre, 1944: quoted in Cohen-Solal, 1987: 221)

This paper reflects a consideration of the fundamental attributes of anxiety that lie at the root of presenting issues. These attributes can be interpreted as concerns that pivot around the notion of what it means to be a person, an individual.

As a psychotherapist I build, or attempt to build, a relationship with another human being. My intention is that through that relationship I, as the therapist, will facilitate change, in the way that the client interacts with their 'self' and with their world. We meet in that relationship the client and I, and it is the relationship between us that is the vehicle for change; but it is an 'I' (therapist), that meets another 'I' (client) in that real and metaphorical space between us. But what is this 'I' (client) that I (therapist) meet? Turning this around, when I (now client) meet my own therapist, am I meeting there with my therapist in order that I might grow to be more comfortable with 'my' being-in-the-world, and with 'my' self?

In sum, who or what is the 'I' that meets and possibly changes? Already we have two possibilities: there is 'I' as subject and 'my'-self as object. It is reasonable to assume that what changes (or doesn't in the case of therapeutic failure) is 'my' sense of who 'I' am. How this sense can be described is a complex issue, but this description is central to therapeutic change and to what happens in therapy since, in my view, it is this sense of who and how we are, that is its focus. But it is not only in the therapy room that this sense is central, because that place is merely a locational construct that attempts to reflect all of a life. We live life with a sense of ourselves: as individuals this sense, I believe, is the *reference point* of existence. Of course, there are widely differing approaches to how this sense of self can be perceived; but Sartre, I believe, made a very important contribution to our understanding of this subject.

Below, I present the outlines of what I understand to be a *Sartrean* approach to the idea of 'self'. This grows from his critique of Husserl's transcendent ego, through his almost anatomical unravelling of consciousness, to the study of the impossible human pre-occupation with a unified sense of who we are. I feel this is at the very heart of Sartre's philosophy, and provides the springboard for his discussion of the

individual's encounter with the 'other', and of the human being as, above all, an always unrequited, but relational being.

Sartre suggested, both directly and indirectly, a view of the self-concept that encompassed more than one categorisation or idea of the self. He also indicated that to arrive at a complete knowledge of the self would be to see the self as an object, and this would be something we are unable to do. But he also suggested that we nevertheless strive to do this, and do so in a variety of ways, ways that make it possible to speak of more than one 'self'. He is not talking of multiple personalities or manifestations of self (persona), but of several conceptions of the self, namely the self as agent; as object; and as value.

## **Subject and Object**

Sartre's views on the self are first enunciated in the *Transcendence of the Ego*, a short essay that was essentially a critique of Husserl's phenomenology. According to Husserl, all our moments of consciousness are structured and contained by an essence he describes as an ego, or self. Sartre argued that the idea that there exists a subject that 'stands behind' consciousness, that somehow orchestrated consciousness, contradicts Husserl's own phenomenology or the intentionality of consciousness (Sartre, 2004a:18). There is no essence which precedes existence: first of all, we exist, then we become; we are 'thrust' forward into existence without a 'plan'. So, if there is no Aristotelian acorn to represent the subject, where is the self? Contra Husserl, Sartre argues that the self as subject does not exist.

At the same time, I am perceived by others as an object, just as I perceive others as objects. We call this object our facticity. The latter includes my containment, the world I am born in, my social and cultural roots and the economic forces that shape me. But if we were only our facticity we would be determinate beings, and a central tenet of Sartre's work is that we are free, non-determined beings. This does not imply that there are not constraints on our freedom, these are part of our facticity, but as Sartre elaborates in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, we have a freedom of response to our facticity (the 'practico inert') that also (and dialectically) determines our determinants (Barnes, 1968; Jameson, 2004). Freedom is expressed through our praxis, or from the perspective of the individual, our consciousness.

That freedom comes from the 'fact' of our consciousness. But what is consciousness? Effectively Sartre states that we do not know; that we cannot know. All we can say is that consciousness is. It is neither subject nor object. It is intentionality in the sense that it is always consciousness *of* something; it is a 'revealing intuition' of things, of objects. But it is not an object, we cannot know it, neither is it a subject that can 'orchestrate' objects. It is a no-thing or 'non-being'<sup>1</sup> (Sartre, 2004a: 24).

But if there is no ego 'standing behind' consciousness to conduct the orchestra, where is the 'I' that perceives or intends? For Sartre we are embodied consciousness, but that does not imply there is a 'subject' in the sense inferred (a conductor)<sup>2</sup>. We are conscious beings, we experience objects, but we do not unify those experiences into a coherent whole; these experiences are moments which are not 'taken together' or unified, because we lack a subjective ego. But if I have no subject, and do not, or cannot, perceive myself as an object; what is the 'I' of whom we speak?

## **The centrality of consciousness**

Sartre's work is often impressionistic and allegorical (even metaphorical) and therefore open to different interpretations. In one sense his notion of the self is straightforward: as conscious beings we are 'being' and 'non-being' combined; and given the complete interdependence of these two facets of our being, we are never really subject nor object. But this doesn't leave us with any operational concepts when it comes to the therapeutic process. For this we need more identifiable notions of the entities we encounter in the

therapy room; and Sartre does provide these. In fact, there are a number of different conceptions of the 'self' that provide us with working concepts.

Central to these conceptions is consciousness, which for Sartre represents 'openness towards being', a bringing into awareness of existence. As such it creates a gap between the mind-body and the objects that consciousness encounters: we are not the objects encountered, we become aware of our encounter with them and of our separateness from them. In this encounter, Sartre distinguishes between pre-reflective and reflective consciousness. Pre-reflective consciousness describes a 'felt sense' of what is experienced, before the possibility of reflection; an immediate and always translucent awareness of being. In addition, he distinguishes two forms of reflective consciousness: pure and impure. Impure reflection is that which is turned upon this felt sense, to classify and contextualise, but with the perspective of affect engendered by a myriad of past experiences. Pure reflection involves a standing apart from affect, a reflection of a different order that seeks a dispassionate knowledge of phenomena uncluttered by the 'magical' world of the emotions.<sup>3</sup>

But in taking these encounters with the world and reflecting upon them: the past actions, emotions and full range of experiences, consciousness is not only directed towards the world, but is also directed inward towards what might be termed the 'self'<sup>4</sup>.

Sartre does not interpret consciousness as an entity, nor does he view it as separate from either the world or the body. We are not conscious of the world as an entity since we cannot stand outside of the world; there is no subject-object dichotomy and neither, it follows, can there be subject-object unity. Sartre is at pains to emphasise the impossibility of this outcome; that we could never achieve what we strive to achieve, which is a union of the 'for-itself' (loosely consciousness) and 'in-itself' (loosely facticity). We can never concretise the 'self' in this way, thus we can never truly be a 'self'. At the same time, we constantly strive to be just such a 'self'; and herein lies the ultimate human paradox (Sartre, 1956: Part Two, Ch 1): we seek to construct a self, but always fail.

## **Conceptualising the 'self'**

The first notion of the self arises from pre-reflective consciousness. But this 'self' has no form or substance; it cannot be objectified and discussed: it is a simple awareness of being-in-the-world. This awareness simply exists; it is not cognisant of the entity that is in the world, but it lies at the 'heart of human reality' (Cannon, 1991: 139). This 'self' is full of possibility (rather than potential), but it is at the same time not aware of itself. Cannon describes it as 'the taste of self which goes along with each of my acts of world formation' (Cannon, 1991: 141). I think of it as our 'way of being-in-the-world', an intuitive 'sense of self'.

The second notion of self arises when consciousness reflects upon its experiences: a bringing together of all the images and impressions that are experienced, in an attempt to form them into a coherent whole. But the consequent 'self' or 'ego' is not a subjective entity: it is 'neither formally nor materially in consciousness, it is outside, in the world. It is a being of the world, like the ego of another' (Sartre, 2004a: 31; Barnes, 1992). Sartre describes this ego as a 'transcendent unity of states and actions'.

It is significant, I believe, that Sartre regarded this 'self' as in every way a manufactured object that was not a 'real' self. It is a reflection: a way of representing ourselves to ourselves in order to know, to have knowledge of, ourselves. To do this, we somehow have to create a unity from a myriad of impressions and experiences of ourselves in the world. So, there is a process through which we try to make sense of our being-in-the-world, a reflection that leads to a sense of self that has a substantive essence. And this happens continually. Furthermore, the very process of creating a unity places the ego outside of

consciousness: in becoming an object of consciousness it can never be *of* consciousness and never, therefore, a 'real' self.

This does not mean that this ego is not important to the individual, Sartre argues that this search for a sense of self is an imperative, and that an absence of this sense leads to the formation of an ego based on other people's constructs<sup>5</sup>. We need and seek some idea of who we are. The point remains, though, that this reflection can only (at best) be an approximation, and one that will be constantly subject to change. There is a fluidity in consciousness that can never be captured as an ego.

The third notion of self is about possibilities, and about values. It concerns the realisation of our 'project'. It is the projection of a future self, one that is desired (Cannon, 1991: 145-148; Cannon, 2003).

These three notions of self: the intuitive; the reflected, and the projected, should not be regarded, though, as separate entities: they can better be seen as parts of one process. One consciously experiences, but that experience is, in part at least, influenced by past experiences that have also been reflected upon. Similarly, with the projected self: the act of projection is based on an intuitive notion of self, as gathered from pre-reflective awareness, and also on a notion of the reflected ego. This unfolding process is essentially a dialectic, a concept that Sartre used more in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre, 2004b), which replicates his thinking at the social rather than individual level.

But we do not *know* the intuitive self in the way that we attempt to objectify the reflected or projected self. So while the pivotal and fundamental significance of the intuitive self must always be kept in mind, it is the latter two that are central to linking these theoretical constructs to the therapeutic process.

### **'Bad Faith'; the 'Look' and 'Being-for-Others'**

The distinctions Sartre makes between pre-reflective and reflective consciousness are critical to understanding other Sartrean concepts that appear in many guises in the therapy room, such as 'bad faith' and 'the look'<sup>6</sup>.

We are in 'bad faith' when we are in that space between impure and pure reflective consciousness; when our way of being in the world is governed by perceptions arising from the 'magical' world of affect. 'Good faith', therefore, arises through perception of our 'self' gained through pure (dispassionate) reflection. But the latter is never be a static or constant state, rather Sartre views consciousness as a dialectical process (Heldt, 2009: 58), constantly recreating a sense of 'self'; so we can never completely avoid being in 'bad faith'. The more poorly developed or closed our sense of 'self', however, the more we take what is 'known' about ourselves from our affective state and from others, and the more we are in 'bad faith'.

It is in his chapters on 'The Look' where Sartre elucidates his perspective of 'being-for-others'. Through the 'look' we reduce the 'other' to an object, a part of our facticity. By this Sartre means that as we bring another into our awareness, we perceive this person as part of our field of consciousness, as something in thrall to our own being-in-the-world. This object-like status of the other, however, is only part of the story. We become aware also that we are, in turn, an object for the other, that we are reduced by the other to part of the other's facticity, an 'in-itself'. The look of the other involves three adaptations for the one observed or brought into the awareness of another, for the self-as-object (Martinot, 2005: 47). There is the discovery of our own objectivity; there is a loss of project; and a loss of autonomy as one becomes a part of the other's project. But, at the same time, Sartre insists that the 'other' is 'what Consciousness is'; and a 'being-for-itself', that is replete with possibility and that is herself a conjuncture made possible by 'excluding the other' (Sartre, 1956: 284).

Consequently, not only do we seek to arrogate the other's objectivity, we also desire to appropriate their subjectivity. In our impossible endeavour to unify our 'in-itself' with our 'for-itself', we seek to see ourselves as the other sees us, but to accomplish this we first need to appropriate the other as subject: an impossible task.

We seek to have an identity and retain our freedom at the same time. In wishing to appropriate the other's subjectivity we are seeking recognition, affirmation that we are who we believe ourselves to be. At the same time, as we seek this recognition through the other's consciousness, it must arise from the other's freedom. But we also wish to challenge the other's freedom, to control it so that the consciousness of the other may affirm our being-in-the-world through their recognition. The possibility that this recognition might be withheld is perceived as a threat.

This dichotomy is developed by Sartre as the paradox of inter-subjective relationships (Sartre, 1956: 363-364): we want the other to be a free consciousness in order to take an objective view of ourselves, but at the same time we want them not to be free, to be under our control and to rule their freedom and dissolve their autonomy. This contradiction leads to two polarised ways of being-for-others, both attempts to overcome this paradox: we wish the other freely to deny their own freedom; or we seek to force them to do so.

The importance of this concept here is that it is through 'the look', through the process of being brought into the awareness of others, that we have an awareness of ourselves. We are aware of ourselves as an object for others. It is important that 'the look' also brings with it a sense of shame; that in being observed, rendered an object by another's consciousness, we feel shame. This shame need not necessarily be understood in the moralistic sense, although this is certainly implied by the famous 'keyhole' illustration that Sartre provides (Sartre, 1956: 259-260). It is more importantly comprehended in the existential sense (Martinot, 2005: 47), that associated with being known. The idea of being 'known' is an idea that is encapsulated completely in the 'look'. It is not an empirical notion, it is about becoming the object of another's consciousness, even if the intention of that consciousness is benevolent and altruistic<sup>7</sup>. This has, I believe, definitive implications for our self-concept.

It is through our relations with others that we find it difficult to recognise and act in a way that reflects acceptance of who we are. We do not use our freedom responsibly. For Sartre, *who* we are can be defined as *how* we seek to be, how we view ourselves and project ourselves forward, but there is always a danger that we falsify our own perceptions of our potential or actuality in order to be more comfortable with the other. We are always free within the constraints of our facticity, but we do not always act as though we are, or take cognisance of the consequences of our freedom (Sartre, 1956: 55-70).

What this approach brings, more than anything else is paradox; the paradox of both seeking and holding a 'sense' of identity that can never be fully known. Yet we strive for this sense of identity, and seek to resolve the paradox. In this view, the purpose of therapy is to reveal the paradox and allow it to be held as just that: an irony and a contradiction. More explicitly, this is about openness to possibility, and the willingness to hold the paradox of awareness.

## **Conclusion: the freedom to choose ourselves**

I have attempted to explore Sartre's concept of the self. Although unravelling this concept leads to the idea that the self as such is non-existent<sup>8</sup>, it also leads to an acceptance that we constantly seek a *sense* of our 'selves' that we find consistent with our experiences. We need to have a vision of ourselves, of who we are now, in order to project ourselves into the future. I have not had space to discuss the temporal nature of

the self here, but it is worth noting that Sartre saw the future as the primary focus of our reflective consciousness. This ties in with his notion of the 'fundamental project', and the need at times to re-discover or re-invent this (Jopling, 1992: 111).

The idea of the fundamental project is also an important construct. This describes 'the series of actions that a person chooses in response to, and as a result of, his fundamental choice of himself' (Cox, 2008: 89). We could view the fundamental choice as the choice of a 'self' that was made in early childhood. But this idea of choice is controversial: if we have no essence, as Sartre insists, on what basis is this choice made? It can be argued that it is made on the basis of our early experiences, that we choose (at some point) how to be, and our sense of self, from these experiences. But this still seems quite essential: as though fixed in stone. The word fundamental carries this connotation. Probably what Sartre meant is that we make choices continually in our lives about our project(s), and that our actions that constitute this are derived from a sense of self. It follows from the discussion of consciousness above, that there is, in the space between perceptions based on pure and impure reflection, the possibility of freedom: the possibility of re-orientating our sense of self. In this sense fundamental might be interpreted as 'original' (a nomenclature Sartre also used), and that our project will change over time, as does our sense of who we are. Is this not what we work with in therapy, perhaps always?

But an underlying issue here is that of choice; and this *is* fundamental for Sartre. By our actions we choose ourselves: we make decisions (choices) and by so doing we define ourselves. If those decisions are consistent, and made in a state of awareness, of openness, then our choices are in accord with our project. And our project is a projection of our 'selves' into the future. We are free to choose who we become<sup>9</sup>.

The idea of a reflected sense of self, the objectification of the ego, may not be exclusively Sartrean, but the impermanence and approximate (at best) nature of this ego, this sense of identity, is more so. We seek an impossible and unachievable target, yet the pursuit of this unachievable goal is a necessary part of our conscious endeavour. This is, I believe, because in reflecting a sense of 'self' we give ourselves the opportunity to construct a future, to project our possible selves into the future. So our reflected sense of identity, manufactured on the basis of the past, provides a basis from which to imagine the future. It is this, perhaps, that is the central endeavour of reflective consciousness and the source of our freedom to choose who we might be.

These Sartrean concepts also demonstrate the underlying centrality of the anxiety surrounding the sense of self. Without a coherent sense of identity, one that feels comfortable in the context within which we are situated, we experience existential anxiety that becomes manifest in other, surface anxieties. It is this, I suggest, that underpins Sartre's contribution to psychotherapy. This view is based on the premise that we intuitively seek a coherent and integrated sense of self (identity) from which to project a future, that our fundamental anxieties are ontological in nature, and that our bridge to these is through the ontic considerations of the 'self'.

Finally, I would like to view Sartre's contribution as part of a continuum of thought. But within that particular continuum of which he is a part, I feel he brought the insights of a passionate, self-critical and enquiring mind. His is no longer a fashionable work, neither in the world of existential psychotherapy nor within the annals of continental philosophy. But perhaps it is a neglected work, and one that can provide the framework at least for a greater understanding of our clients<sup>10</sup>. There have been, and there continues to be, some outstanding contributions to the Sartrean tradition in Psychotherapy (e.g. Cannon, B. 1992), not least through the pages of this Journal and those of *Sartre Studies International*, but overall this tradition remains sadly neglected.

Sartre once described his objective in writing the massive pseudo-biography of Flaubert as the desire to further his insights into what it is to be a human being (Barnes, 1981: 8). These insights, I believe, are very useful to me as a therapist. In particular, the way he provided a bridge between the ontology of being, and the ontic expression of that ontology. Paramount in this is his placing of consciousness at the centre of human existence, as a way of understanding the dialectical, unknowable process that is the human self. And, perhaps most importantly, the idea that in that process we choose who we are, and that we are free to choose.

### **Addendum: working with John, or an existential approach to 'being a person'**

John came to therapy talking of suicide and of loss of the desire to go on living. He could have been 'pathologised' as severely depressed and at risk: he had problems sleeping; was increasingly withdrawn and 'unhappy'; and cried easily and often. He was living with his partner, who seemed quite devoted to him; he was successful in his work; and outwardly had every advantage. For John, the 'depressed' state revolved around periods where he expressed an obsessive desire to be alone, to devote himself to religion and forego human contact. These moods contrasted with those where he felt 'light' and 'out of control'. This behaviour led to continual and unhappy confrontations with his partner, and he felt 'stuck' and unable to move.

We spent some time in the early stages of therapy considering what he considered to be his alternatives, and why he felt unable to choose between what he described as a 'worldly' life and a life of seclusion. He lived in a state of acute anxiety, but could only describe the associated feelings in terms of an uncontrollable oscillation between despair and joy. We also spent some time exploring his early relationships, the confrontations with a domineering father; the sense of not being loved enough; and his experimentation with psychedelic drugs, in order to fully explore what he described as his 'depression'. But as we uncovered the associated anxieties: a fear of failure; of social rejection; and of a concomitant pursuit of perfection; these 'symptoms' gradually receded to reveal a deeper concern with who he was, with how he could 'be' in the world: a world of possibles and potential. It was at this time that a moment of 'clarity' occurred.

This pivotal moment occurred when he described a feeling of desperation he experienced when at an exhibition with his partner. He saw their reflection together in a mirror and noticed that whereas he could see her and know that what he saw *was* her as far as he, and others, were concerned, he felt that he could never see himself as others did, that he could never really know himself in the way that others knew him. This experience was a revelation; slowly he began to face the uncertainties of his life, and the possibility that choices could be made in the absence of certainty. The experience, and ultimate acceptance, of himself as 'real but unknowable' was, by his own admission, the critical factor. His extremes of mood receded and he felt himself to be a 'more balanced' individual. He chose his partner (or the world) rather than seclusion, and our meetings ended with his rather uncertain acceptance of the uncertainty governing the outcomes of his choice.

Working with John was a demonstration for me of how, when clients present with manifestations of anxiety, they are often struggling with a sense of identity, of who they might be. This struggle, or exploration of the 'self', I believe, is essentially an existential one. We form a myriad of impressions of self in response to our experiences, and struggle to form a sense of coherence and integration in order to meet the relentless unfolding of time, the bringer of mortality. Without a *sense* of who we are or might become, we cannot impart meaning to existence, and without certainty of meaning in the face of mortality there can

be a sense of futility and despair. It is through the acceptance of uncertainty surrounding that paradox that a sense of self is accessed that allows both choice as well as the imperative of process.

To have treated John's 'depression' as a 'pathological disorder' would have meant that he might have missed the revelation of the paradox. It might not have led to the gradual acceptance of transience that occurred during his therapy, through which he was able to sit more comfortably with a sense of an impermanent and ultimately unknowable 'self'. His case, I believe, demonstrates the central position of an individual's concern over identity, over a sense of being and becoming: the search for a knowable self and the anxiety this creates.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> An alternative translation of 'Being and Nothingness' could be 'Being and Non-being' (Cox, 2008:23)

<sup>2</sup> Although Sartre refers extensively to the concept of embodiment, some commentators (Wider, 2007; Laycock, 2001) suggest that, while this principle is key to his argument, his analysis is incomplete in this respect and in need of refinement.

<sup>3</sup> Sartre uses the distinction between pre-reflective and reflective consciousness in his critique of Freud, especially of the notion of the unconscious. See Cannon, (1991: Chapter 2); and Sartre, (1956: Part 4, Chapter 2-1). Sartre also distinguishes at length between pure and impure reflection. For an interesting discussion of these distinctions and some implications see Zheng (2001); Webber (2002) and Heldt (2009).

<sup>4</sup> For Sartre, all consciousness is self-consciousness. Wider (1997) argues that this argument is integral to his thesis, and then goes on to show that without a more densely reasoned concept of embodiment, this argument is unsustainable.

<sup>5</sup> As he argues in the *Family Idiot* was the case for Flaubert (Cannon, 1991: 144). See also Barnes, (1992).

<sup>6</sup> The idea of 'bad faith' is, in my view, conceptually distinct from Heideggerian notions of authenticity, and from either Winnicottian or Rogerian ideas of 'false self'. In fact I regard all of these latter concepts as unhelpful in the therapeutic context. I believe, furthermore, that it is possible to understand and clarify the conceptual basis of cognitive behavioural therapy through Sartre's analysis of bad faith.

<sup>7</sup> Martinot goes on to develop a view of mutuality and reciprocity, based on the premise of the look, but a view of the potential of this concept that was not immediately apparent in *Being and Nothingness*, although these ideas were developed more by Sartre in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

<sup>8</sup> And some of the complications of this and its radical departure from psychoanalysis are explored in Howells, (1992).

<sup>9</sup> Sartre modified, but never rejected his fundamental belief in human freedom in this sense, although he increasingly recognised the psychological constraints placed on our ability to make choices. The dialectic



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involving the capacity to make choices on the one hand, and our physical and psychological facticity on the other, perhaps became most apparent in his later work (see Charmé, 1984: 60-62).

<sup>10</sup> No-one has done more to maintain the Sartrean tradition in psychotherapy than Betty Cannon (particularly Cannon, 1992, and also see Cannon, 2009). Others look towards Sartre as a potential bridge between continental and analytical philosophy (Wider, 1997). Perhaps the most unread and unappreciated of his work is the massive pseudo-biography of Flaubert (Sartre, 1981).

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