

Sartre and phenomenology

The full title of Sartre's masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, provides us with a convenient way into his thought. Let us examine the last word of the title first. 'Ontology' is a subdiscipline of philosophy. It is that branch of philosophy which deals with the ultimate constituents of reality, with what the universe consists of most fundamentally. For example, modern science holds that the universe consists of atoms and subatomic particles. At the most fundamental level, that is all there really is; everything else we see and encounter – rocks, trees, water, even people – is built up out of this basic matter. Since science holds that there is only one substance out of which everything is built, its ontology is 'monist'.

But the main title of Sartre's book signals that his ontology will be dualist: that is, it will hold that reality is composed of *two* irreducible elements. The world that science studies is (very roughly speaking, as we shall go on to see) the world of 'being'. But 'being' does not exhaust the entirety of reality. In order to grasp it fully, we must also grasp the place that nothingness occupies in it.

We can already glimpse the first puzzle that Sartre's work poses for us. How can *nothingness* be one of the components of reality? Ontology is concerned with everything

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that is, but nothingness *is not*. It cannot, therefore, be a component of the reality with which ontology is concerned. This supposed tendency to take nothingness for an entity has infuriated analytical philosophers. In fact, their attribution to Sartre of a simple mistake is based on a misunderstanding: Sartre is not committed to holding that nothingness *is*, but instead to the much more plausible thesis that our experience cannot be explained by reference to an ontology that has a place for only the positive features of being.

In what follows, then, I shall be concerned with correcting this misapprehension, by demonstrating the essential place that nothingness has in our actual experience of the world. I will also be concerned with avoiding another common misconception – the idea that Sartre’s dualistic ontology is merely an updated version of the dualism of René Descartes, perhaps the single philosopher who did more than any other to set philosophy on the path to modernity. Descartes argued that the universe consisted of thinking things and extended things – humans being both, a thinking mind inhabiting a body that is fundamentally different from it, and Sartre’s dualism certainly parallels this ontology. Nevertheless, Sartre’s ontology is no mere rehash of the Cartesian system. Instead, it represents a radical rethinking of the relationship between the self and the world.

Before I begin to elaborate this ontology, however, I want to explore further the subtitle of Sartre’s work. This ontology will, he announces, be *phenomenological*. What is phenomenology and in what ways is *Being and Nothingness* phenomenological?

It is rather difficult to answer these questions. Phenomenology does not refer to a single thesis, or even to a unified school. Instead, it names a number of overlapping and loosely related approaches to philosophy, all of which stem from the work of the influential German philosopher Edmund Husserl. I shall not enter into the difficult task of describing Husserl’s work and the transformations it underwent. Instead, I shall content myself with sketching the manners in which Sartre saw himself as continuing the phenomenological tradition.

Intentionality

One of the theories for which Husserl is best known is that of the intentionality of consciousness. To say that consciousness is intentional is to say that it always points to ('intends') something outside itself. One of Sartre's early essays is devoted to this thesis.⁵ It is worth pausing over, since for Sartre this thesis helped establish that the manner of being of things – of what he called the 'in-itself' – is fundamentally different to the manner of being of consciousness.

Sartre begins his discussion of Husserl's idea by contrasting it to a dominant position in the French epistemology (theory of knowledge) of his day. For many French philosophers, to know something was to draw it *into* consciousness, a process whereby the known thing was incorporated into the knowing subject, so that the two ended up of the same substance. 'O digestive philosophy,' Sartre comments sardonically. But, Sartre holds, this ignores the fundamental difference between things and consciousness. It ignores, that is, that things exist outside consciousness, in such a manner that whether, and how, they are does not and cannot depend on us and what we think of them. As Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness*,

A table is not in consciousness – not even in the capacity of a representation. A table is in space, beside the window, etc. The existence of the table in fact is a center of opacity for consciousness; it would require an infinite process to inventory the total contents of a thing ... The first procedure of a philosophy ought to be to expel things from consciousness and to reestablish its true connection to the world, to know that consciousness is a positional consciousness of the world. (BN, p. xxvii)

The thesis that consciousness is intentional restores to the world its transcendence, the sheer fact that it is essentially different from consciousness.

Moreover, Sartre holds, consciousness must be intentional because there can never be anything at all inside consciousness; consciousness is always and necessarily empty. Rather than the knowing subject incorporating the known object into itself, Sartre holds, almost exactly the opposite takes place: consciousness is

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outside of itself, with the object it intends. Thus, Sartre holds, Husserl returns the world to us, in all its transcendence and its fundamental indifference to our wishes and plans. At the same time, however, he shows us that nothing can inhabit consciousness – not even ourselves:

everything is finally outside, even ourselves. Outside, in the world, among others. It is not in some hiding-place that we will discover ourselves: it is on the road, in the town, in the midst of the crowd, a thing among things, a man among men.⁶

Because consciousness is intentional, nothing can enter into it. And a moment's reflection will show that consciousness must be intentional. To see this, we need only to imagine for a moment that consciousness was *not* intentional; that it really was able to incorporate what it knows into itself, as the French epistemologists had suggested. Gradually, as consciousness incorporated more and more known objects into itself, it would cease to be able to reflect what is outside itself properly. Think of a mirror. If a mirror were to bear the traces of all the objects that it has reflected in the past on its surface, it would quickly cease to be useful. It would be so cluttered with the images of past objects that it would be unable to reflect accurately whatever is before it now. In exactly the same way, if consciousness were permanently marked by what it knows, knowledge could not be trusted to reflect accurately what is known. (This is not to deny that the traces of what is known are permanently retained, in the memory. Instead, Sartre is asserting that consciousness and the memory must be held to be distinct if knowledge is to be possible.)

The priority of lived experience over the objective viewpoint

This, then, is one sense in which Sartre is a phenomenologist. Like Husserl, he is committed to the thesis that consciousness is intentional. There is, however, another sense in which Sartre can justifiably call himself a phenomenologist. The early Husserl had been concerned with establishing phenomenology as a science – in fact,

as the culmination of all Western science. The later Husserl, however, increasingly turned his attention away from science and towards the *Lebenswelt* ('life-world'), the world as it is experienced and lived. This lived world is now seen as more fundamental than the world of science. If Sartre is rightfully called a phenomenologist, it is principally because he follows Husserl in holding that we live in a world that is, at bottom, human.

Perhaps we can best appreciate the force of the claim that our world is *fundamentally* human by contrasting it to the view it opposes. This is a view that comes to us from modern science, but it has by now so thoroughly penetrated the consciousness of all of us that it is now also the view of common sense. On the scientific view, we ought to draw a precise distinction between the world as we experience it and the world as it *really* is. The world as we experience it, the subjective world, is the world of values – ethical and aesthetic – the world as hostile or hospitable. It is, advocates of this view insist, essentially an illusion.

The purveyors of the scientific viewpoint have persuasive evidence they can cite in favour of their cause. They can point to the undeniable success of the scientific worldview. It wasn't until science made the distinction they hold to be fundamental, between the objective and the subjective worlds, that it could begin to lay the foundations for its spectacular accomplishments. The scientific revolution became possible only when scientists interpreted the physical world as a system of interlocking causes and effects operating according to its own laws, without reference to our hopes and our values. In contrast, the attempt to view the world as meaningful only held back scientific progress. Think, in this regard, of the debate between Galileo and the Catholic Church over the Copernican system (the question whether the earth revolves around the sun, or vice versa). Galileo was able to produce evidence against the view that the sun revolves around the earth. But the church rejected this evidence *a priori*: the earth *must* be at the centre of the universe, its theologians reasoned, because the Bible (as they interpreted it) said so. We have here, defenders of the scientific viewpoint claim, a paradigm case of the clash between proponents of objective and subjective viewpoints, and a decisive

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vindication of the former. The church insisted upon seeing the universe as meaningful, and therefore was unable to distinguish what was *really* there from what was mere projection. The scientist, however, suspended his involvement in the world, in order to focus on it as an objective and independent reality. He was thereby enabled to understand it.

Now, whether or not this is an accurate depiction of the conflict between Galileo and the Catholic Church, there does seem to be more than a little validity to the claim here being made. It indeed seems to be the case that understanding the universe as a meaningless system of causal processes is the precondition of scientific progress. But Sartre is not committed to denying that this is the case. Instead, he wants to attack two related tendencies. First, he wants to point to the pernicious consequences of the over-extension of this kind of thinking, its application in areas in which it is not appropriate. Second, and more fundamentally, he wants to deny the claim that this scientific way of understanding the world is the more basic, the kind of understanding upon which all others are (or should be) parasitic. The truth, Sartre will claim, is exactly the reverse. The scientific mode of understanding the universe is in fact derived from the world as it is experienced in everyday life.

Let us continue to sketch the scientific view, in order to see how it is that it comes to be extended beyond the domain in which it is legitimate, and to be seen as the most fundamental way of apprehending the world. Once the success of the scientific worldview within science itself was apparent, philosophers began to interpret the world we experience in its terms. For example, John Locke, the seventeenth-century English empiricist (and himself a scientist as well as a philosopher) argued that we should distinguish between 'primary' and 'secondary' qualities. An entity's primary qualities are those features of the entity which are intrinsic to it. Such qualities as the object's shape and size, or its momentum, for example, are intrinsic to the object, which is to say that they exist whether or not the object is perceived by us. Its secondary qualities, on the other hand, are not intrinsic to the object, but are a product of its relation to us. For example, Locke claimed that an object is not *really* this colour or that. It simply reflects light at varying frequencies, and we

perceive this reflected light as colour. If we did not possess the sense organs we do, light would still be reflected by objects at different frequencies, but there would be no call to speak of colour.

Perhaps this seems a little too quick. Why should we think that there is no such thing as colour just because if we did not have eyes we would not see it? After all, we are not tempted to think that physical objects do not exist because if we lacked all senses we could not be aware of their existence. It is not the mere fact that we need specialized sense organs to be aware of colour (or of sound or odour) that makes philosophers like Locke suspicious of the very existence of these qualities. It is instead the fact that we can give a complete explanation of the features of objects which cause us to experience them as coloured without referring to colour at all. We can, that is, reduce colour to the (supposedly) more fundamental vocabulary of science. Think of a planet inhabited by aliens who lack all organs for perceiving light. Imagine that these aliens instead experience their world by sonar, as bats do. These aliens might have a highly developed vocabulary for describing the qualities of the sonar echoes they perceive, akin to our colour vocabulary. They might experience a spectrum of sounds, which they divide up into categories analogous to our colours. Though we can conceive of such a vocabulary, we do not feel tempted to think that these sound colours *really* exist. We have no trouble conceding that what the aliens perceive as qualities are really just vibrations in the air. Similarly, we ought to concede that what we perceive as colours are really just the effect of the surface reflectant properties of physical objects.

We are now well down the road to the objectivist viewpoint. Once one more element is in place, we will have it before us in all its power. It could hardly fail to escape the notice of philosophers that colours, sounds and odours were not the only qualities conspicuous by their absence from the best scientific accounts. Also absent were values, construed widely. We might *experience* the eruption of a volcano as terrifying, but that is simply a fact about our psychological states, not about the volcano. The beauty of a sunset, similarly, is in the eye of the beholder, not in the object perceived. And so on for all values. The world that is real is the world described by science,

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and it contains nothing corresponding to our values. These values must instead be seen as having their source in us, in our psychological states. They are, essentially, figments of our imagination. We project them upon the world, and then naïvely attribute to them an existence independent of us.

The picture that has emerged is of a universe that consists simply of physical entities obeying causal laws. It is a universe that is indifferent to our plans, our hopes, our desires, simply because at bottom these are no more than hallucinations. Science, in a memorable phrase of Max Weber's, disenchants the world. Its enchantments – the values and meanings that allowed us to take it for a spiritual realm – are shown to be no more than our projected fantasies. The final twist is given to this way of understanding the universe and our place within it when, in the wake of thinkers like Darwin, we begin to suspect that we ourselves are at root to be understood in exactly the same way as the inanimate world. We, too, are merely physical beings; we, too, obey the laws of causality and evolve in response to these laws. Even we, at bottom, are no more meaningful than are the waves and particles of the physicist.

This objectivist view of the universe has proven very powerful and very persuasive. The spectacular success of science, which seems to presuppose something very like this view, certainly accounts for a great deal of its appeal. Its defenders have been able to depict themselves as 'hard-nosed' realists, and accuse their opponents of mere sentimentality. So deeply has the view penetrated our culture that it has begun to take on the unassailability of common sense.

Sartre and objectivism

At first glance it might well seem that Sartre himself ought to be committed to objectivism. After all, the distinction that underlies objectivism, between the objective world as it really is and the merely human world of values, seems to parallel closely the distinction that Sartre insists upon, between being and nothingness, between what he will call the 'in-itself' – the world as it would be without human beings – and the 'for-itself', the being of consciousness. Moreover, as

we will see, Sartre, as much as the objectivist, insists that values have their source in our free choice. In some sense, then, he seems committed to the view of values as projected upon an objective world that is fundamentally indifferent to them.

In fact, as we shall see later, Sartre does not avoid the objectivist view entirely. The most important gaps and incoherencies in his thought can be traced to the residual power that view has for him. Yet despite this attraction, Sartre develops a powerful critique of the objectivist view. What problems it poses for him are the result of his not taking to heart the lessons of his own objections to it.

Perhaps Sartre is slow to absorb the full significance of his own best insights because he comes to them relatively late. Though Sartre had attempted to read Heidegger's work on several occasions previously, it was, by his own admission, only at the start of the Second World War that he really began to understand it. And it was Heidegger, above all, who showed Sartre the way beyond the objectivist view.

It was Heidegger's careful description of our 'being-in-the-world' which freed Sartre from the objectivist picture. If we reflect in the proper way on how we experience the world, Heidegger argued, we will see that this experience, and not the scientific picture, is the more fundamental. Imagine yourself engaged in any typically human activity. Heidegger's own famous example is of someone engaged in building something. When I am working with hammer and nails, for example, the hammer does not exist for me *first* as an object in the world, which I only subsequently utilize as an instrument. On the contrary, it exists for me first and foremost as the means whereby I engage in my project. When I am immersed in the ordinary activities of life, Heidegger claims, things are ordinarily revealed to me as *equipment*, as tools. The choice of the hammer as an example is thus no accident; for Heidegger its being is paradigmatic of the way in which the objects that surround me are normally revealed to me. Ordinarily I am barely aware of the hammer *as such*. It exists for me as one element in a broader totality. The hammer is not revealed to me as an independent thing, but as the means whereby I will drive *these* nails into *this* wood for *that* end. The meaning of my act of hammering is for me to find in this

future end, for the sake of which I now swing the tool. The hammer takes its place within this totality, and refers me to my end. It is the bookshelf to be built which confers meaning on my use of the tool.

Thus, when I am absorbed in my everyday activity, the objects that surround me do not appear to me as mere *things*. Their being, Heidegger will say, is that of the ready-to-hand. Everything changes, however, when something goes wrong. I strike the nail once more, and the head of the hammer flies off. I am left holding just its handle. I stare down at the piece of metal in my hands. Suddenly it seems to me that it is a mere physical thing, its being akin to those meaningless objects of which the advocate of the scientific view is so fond. Its being is now, Heidegger will say, that of the merely present-at-hand.

One way to make sense of what has happened is to say that while I was caught up in my everyday concerns, I was absorbed in a fantasy of my own making. It seemed to me that I inhabited a world that was meaningful, but only because I failed to see that I myself had created this world and projected meaning on to it. Of course, the universe is indifferent to whether or not my bookshelf exists. From its point of view – imagining for a moment that it could have one – it is all the same whether these pieces of wood are arranged in this manner, or that, or whether they simply rot on the ground. Now, though, I can no longer sustain the illusion. Harsh reality breaks in, and I see the objects for what they really are – mere meaningless things.

This is not how Heidegger interprets what has happened. He asks us to notice, first, the order in which the different kinds of being were revealed to us. My tools existed for me *first* as equipment, as ready-to-hand, and only *subsequently*, when they failed me, did they come to be revealed as present-at-hand. Though this is a long way away from being conclusive evidence, it is, at least, suggestive that the view of things as present-at-hand – that is, as mere meaningless things – is in fact parasitic upon that of them as belonging to a meaningful universe.

Heidegger is here attempting nothing less than a frontal assault on both poles that have dominated philosophy at least since Descartes. He is attempting simultaneously to undermine the view of things as essentially objects, and of human beings as essentially

subjects surveying them. These two notions are, as he realizes, correlative; they stand or fall together.⁷ Thus far, we have emphasized his attack upon the idea that things exist fundamentally as objects. But the same example can be utilized to show how he attempts to rethink the being of the subject. Traditionally, the subject has been thought of primarily as the subject of *knowledge*. By arguing that philosophy must begin by vanquishing radical doubt, Descartes ensured that philosophy would be centred around epistemology. Moreover, the Cartesian claim that we have indubitable access only to the content of our minds had had the effect of cutting us off from the world and from other people. We are, the Cartesian will say, essentially minds, spiritual substances that only contingently find themselves with physical bodies, and the sole real relationship we can have with the world and with others is the relation of knowing. This tendency to regard ourselves primarily as subjects of knowledge is correlative with the attitude that takes the present-at-hand being of objects as primordial: if objects are most authentically encountered as present-at-hand, then they are fundamentally things to be known, and not equipment with which to come to grips.

Heidegger will decisively undermine the primacy of epistemology. The Cartesian subject was essentially an observing subject, looking out upon a world to which it was foreign. Heidegger's subject, however, is essentially an acting subject. If we try to capture the activity of a carpenter, as she builds a bookshelf, within the Cartesian scheme, we will end up with a caricature of human being-in-the-world. Imagine how the Cartesian must depict the difference between the skilled carpenter and the beginner. Perhaps the beginner will be given a set of instructions, telling her how to hold the hammer, the best place to locate the nails, the order in which the planks ought to be affixed, and so on. She carries out these instructions slowly and clumsily. The skilled carpenter, on the other hand, builds the bookshelf with an ease and fluency altogether lacking in the beginner. The Cartesian will explain the difference by saying that by dint of practice the carpenter has internalized the instructions; she no longer need refer to them because they have become a part of her stock of knowledge.

But this is an implausible picture of the way in which we carry out those activities with which we are most familiar. When we think about just those actions in which we engage most often, we find that it is not the case that we know how to do them in the same way as our imagined apprentice learns how to do carpentry (only better). If that were the case, we should be able to reel off the set of instructions for how to perform these activities. But frequently we cannot do this. Instead, we very often find ourselves at a loss when someone asks us how we perform the tasks at which we are most skilled. If the skilled carpenter is asked how she holds the hammer, she will probably have to pick one up to find out. She will pay attention to what she does, rather than focusing on what she is doing. In other words, she will move from treating the hammer as ready-to-hand, a part of the instrumental complex with which she acts, to present-at-hand. Thus, Heidegger will want to insist, it cannot be the case that relating to objects as present-at-hand, and thus relating to them by knowing them, is primary. Instead, both attitudes are derived from a more fundamental manner of relating to the world. First and foremost, we are actors in the world, and our knowledge of it is derived from this more fundamental activity.

The phenomenologist does not deny that we must know – in some sense – what we are doing in order to be able to do it. The claim is, rather, that the picture of knowledge which Cartesianism has propagated is inappropriate for understanding the kind of knowledge our activity involves. We might usefully compare the claim here to Wittgenstein's remarks on language, in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Speaking a language is a paradigm of the kind of knowledge the phenomenologist has in mind. We speak our first language – and any others we know well – in much the same kind of way as the carpenter hammers. That is, we act without needing to think about how we act; we are concerned with what we want to say, and only peripherally with how we are to say it. We do not refer to the rules of grammar in order to formulate a sentence; we simply speak.

Someone in thrall to the Cartesian picture of knowledge might insist that nevertheless we must know the rules of grammar. If we did not know these rules, then we would make mistakes. Since we

do not make mistakes, we must be following the rules. We must have internalized them, to the point where we are no longer conscious of them. We follow them automatically; nevertheless, we still follow them.

Like the phenomenologists, Wittgenstein argues that this is a mistake. Moreover, his account of how the mistake comes about runs closely parallel to theirs. On both accounts, it comes from getting things the wrong way round. On the phenomenological account, the mistake arises when we come to think that the kind of attention we pay to the objects in the world when we step back from our involvement with them and simply regard them as things is primordial. As we have seen, this gives rise to a conception of ourselves as essentially knowing subjects. For Wittgenstein, our mistake with regard to language arises when we take the manner in which we acquire a second language as the model for the way in which we speak our first. Very often, we acquire a second language by learning rules: we are taught how to conjugate verbs, for example, or the way in which the cases modify nouns. Since this is how we acquire a second language, we make the mistake of thinking that we must have acquired our first in a similar way. We are well aware that no one ever actually sat us down when we were babies and taught us the rules of grammar (that kind of explicit teaching comes only much later, after we already are fluent speakers). But we think we must have acquired them nevertheless. Perhaps we gradually came to detect regularities in the sentences we heard, and we abstracted the grammatical rules from these regularities.

Wittgenstein and the phenomenologists reject this picture. It is profoundly misleading, in so far as it gives rise to the temptation to think that when we speak a language fluently we are following its rules, just as a beginner does (only much more quickly). It leads us, that is, to take language for one more present-at-hand entity, which must be analysed and dissected in order to be understood. Taking language apart is a perfectly legitimate activity, an activity that might allow us to acquire knowledge that is not to be had in any other way. The scientific viewpoint is valid and useful, its successes in allowing us to predict and control the world are great. But it is a great mistake to think that the way of knowing upon which it relies is or ought to

be the sole way of knowing. It is, in fact, derivative, from a more primordial manner of being in the world. We are first actors who are engaged in the world, before we are knowers who contemplate it.

A human world

Thus the phenomenologist, at least the phenomenologist of the post-Heideggerian variety, is committed to two fundamental, closely related theses, which concern the manner in which we exist in the world:

1. We are fundamentally engaged with the world; we act in it before we contemplate it.
2. The entities in the world are revealed to us primarily as equipment, in an extended sense. They have a place in our projects before they are mere extended matter.

The great prestige of the scientific viewpoint has obscured the truth of these theses from us; we misunderstand our own being in the world and take ourselves for disinterested spectators, because we believe that our engagements are at bottom no more than subjective projections. In fact, this is to get things exactly backwards. Objectivity is not the fundamental manner in which being is revealed to us; instead, it is a derived manner of being, which we reveal when we step back from our involvement in the world and its instrumental complexes.

What are the consequences of this phenomenological stance towards the world and ourselves? Most fundamentally, it implies that we live in a world that is *meaningful*. Meanings – values, the traces of human projects – are not imposed upon objects; instead, objects are revealed to us through their meanings. The world is not divided up into discrete entities, independent of our choice. Things do not naturally begin *here* and end *there*. Why, for example, do we assume that a tree is a fundamental unit, an entity complete unto itself? Why should the fundamental unit not be the leaf, on the one hand, or the forest, on the other? The phenomenological answer will be that it is our manner of being in the world, our projects and

plans, which articulates the world in this manner rather than that. The tree appears to me as a source of wood, for example; it takes a definite shape in my world. It stands out as an individuated object, against the forest that becomes background for it. In the same manner, Sartre notes, the crag is revealed to the climber as a separate object only in and through the project of climbing it: 'the rock is carved out on the ground of the world by the effect of the initial choice of my freedom' (BN, p. 488). In general, things are only revealed to me as being what they are, possessing the qualities they do, in terms of my projects.

But if it is the case that the world is articulated into discrete objects in terms of our projects and practical concerns, why is there so much agreement upon what objects there are? There are two reasons for this widespread agreement. First, if it is indeed true that the world is divided up into objects in terms of human projects, then we ought to expect a great deal of agreement. For, as Sartre himself insisted, though there is no shared human nature, 'there is nevertheless a human universality of *condition*' (EH, p. 362). We share a biology, which imposes certain tasks upon all of us. We must all solve the problems of how to find shelter and how to feed ourselves; we must all learn to make sense of the facts of birth and death. Given this fact, and given the fact that our projects only *reveal* the world and are powerless to *create* it, we ought to expect a great deal of cross-cultural similarity.

The second reason for this widespread agreement as to what are the basic components of the universe has to do with the fact that none of us is ever confronted with the task of articulating our surroundings from scratch. Instead, we are all born into ongoing cultural entities, which divide up existence for us. We are, Sartre says, born into a world that is already inhabited by meaning-conferring creatures. Thus, 'I find myself engaged in an *already meaningful* world which reflects to me meanings which I have not put into it' (BN, p. 510). These are meanings that objects have independently of me, and which I have no choice but simply to accept, the meanings of a particular society: 'I am thrown into a worker's world, a French world ... which offers me its meanings without my having done anything to disclose them' (BN, p. 514).

Let us revert to our earlier example in order to see how cultures might individuate the world. As we saw, the rock reveals itself as a separate entity, a rock 'to-be-climbed', in terms of someone's project of climbing it. We now see that we can go further than this. Our explanation of how it is that the world comes to be articulated in one way, and not another, does not have to come to an abrupt end as soon as we note that its divisions are the result of a project; we can attempt to explain the project itself. Mountain climbing is the kind of activity that arises only in certain kinds of societies. It might be explained by the fact that the society in question values risk-taking behaviour, for instance. Or it might be explained by some mystical or religious significance being conferred on high places: we can well imagine that standing on the peak of some mountain is held to give one privileged access to heavenly spirits. If you are born into a society in which either of these is the case, then it is far more likely that high peaks will stand out for you. If, on the other hand, you are born into a rather more prosaic society, in which activities are held to be valuable only in so far as they contribute to material well-being, and risk taking is seen as a selfish extravagance, then it is far more likely that the distant mountains will be nothing more than the background against which one lives and objects appear.

A proponent of the objectivist view need not deny any of this. She might well agree that different societies confer different significances upon the objects of the world. For some, mountains are highly significant objects, for others mere background. Some are interested in the natural world, and identify thousands of plants and insects, others have only broad categories into which to divide them. But, the objectivist might insist, this very fact demonstrates the profound importance of the objectivist position. The meaning conferred upon the entities of the world might vary according to our purposes and our culture; so much she might accept. But the basic structure of that world itself is not subject to variation. Since the meaning conferred upon it varies, we are justified in ignoring this level. It is, as the objectivist has always insisted, merely subjective. We ought to shift our focus away from these ephemeral meanings, and concentrate instead on the unchanging substratum that bears them. It is this substratum, the level of brute matter, which is

the support of all these meanings, and it is this which alone deserves to be called truly real. For it is this level alone which would continue to exist in the absence of all human purposes and projects.

Sartre does not deny that this is so; that is, he does not deny that there must be a substratum of matter which bears the human meanings with which he is concerned. The rock is revealed to me as an entity to be climbed, but it is beyond my power to vary its steepness; 'what my freedom can not determine is whether the rock "to be scaled" will or will not lend itself to scaling. This is part of the brute being of the rock' (BN, p. 488). What he does deny, however, is that we can claim sensibly to be concerned with the stuff of the universe as it is, independently of our purposes and projects. Things are always necessarily known from a perspective; the world is necessarily revealed to me from where I am. For me, the glass is to the left of the decanter and behind it, whereas for you it is on the right and in front. We cannot do as the objectivist would have us, and be concerned only with where it is in-itself, without reference to me or to you, because it is only anywhere *at all* in relation to us:

It is not even conceivable that a consciousness could survey the world in such a way that the glass could be *simultaneously* given to it at the right and at the left of the decanter, in front of it and behind it ... because this fusion of right and left, of before and behind, would result in the total disappearance of 'theses' at the heart of a primitive indistinction. (BN, p. 306)

If it somehow came about that the things of the world were to appear to us without distinction of here and there, near and far, and so on, we would no longer be able to distinguish anything from anything else. We could not speak of tree and forest, of foreground and background, because everything would be swept up into a vast confusion. We would perceive everything simultaneously, but, since we would be unable to distinguish anything, this would be equivalent to perceiving nothing at all. Thus perception is necessarily situated; we perceive the world as divided up in this way or that, or we fail to perceive it at all.

It follows from this, Sartre claims, that the objectivist project, of grasping the world as it really is without reference to the meanings

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that our purposes confer upon it, is incoherent:

The point of view of pure knowledge is contradictory; there is only the point of view of engaged knowledge. This amounts to saying that knowledge and action are only two abstract aspects of an original concrete relation. (BN, p. 308)

It is simply false to think that we inhabit the world that science reveals, the world of brute matter, alien and indifferent, upon which we subsequently project meanings. Instead, we inhabit an inherently meaningful world, a world of significance.

We can drive home the point using a piece of terminology that Sartre borrows from Kurt Lewin to describe the geography of our world. Our world is 'hodological'; its space is mapped in terms of human needs and interests. '[H]uman-reality is that by which something we can call place comes to things' (BN, p. 490). That is, the world is not *first* a meaningless space of exteriority, upon which a human significance comes to be imposed. It is, from the moment that we exist, a space of meaning and we map it accordingly. Once again, the objectivist who would assert the precedence of their perspective has got things the wrong way round: the objectivist perspective is a stance that we can take up only because we are able (temporarily) to step back from our involvement in the world and imagine what it might have been like if we had never existed.

This geographical – in an extended sense of the word – example is a particularly clear case of the primacy of a significant world over a purely objective one, in that it concerns so many of the concepts central to the manner in which we locate ourselves in space. Sartre's point here might be understood as the claim that such geographical terms ought to be understood on the model of indexical expressions; that is, words that alter their meaning according to the context in which they are used. In the geographical case, we often have recourse to such indexicals as 'here' and 'there'. Obviously, these terms have a reference that is relative to the context in which they are used. Something which is 'here' for me may well be 'there' for you. Similarly, words like 'close' and 'distant' get their reference from context.