Phenomenological-Ontological Prerequisites for an Existential Concept of Truth After Sartre

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Introductory Remarks

In this paper I would like to talk about prerequisites for a possible concept of truth to be derived from Sartre's system of phenomenological ontology. He himself does not provide us with a consistent concept of truth, but thoughts on truth appear throughout his work, so that it seems worth contemplating their weight. I am going to pursue this goal through three main argumentative steps. *Firstly:* truth cannot reside within a simple subject|object binary, as Heidegger has shown. *Secondly:* truth nevertheless needs to be placed within a relation that must, despite all the dangers that lie on this

way of thinking, 'include' a structure of otherness which, at the same time, must *not* be inclusive. *Thirdly:* this relation must in its very essence be a relation between subjects, where in order to understand this relation we need to re-establish the subject-object binary while simultaneously trying to find a way of thinking it that does not fall back behind Heidegger's achievements.

The Problem of the Subject|Object Relation

In order for something to be true or false, it must find itself in some kind of relation; otherwise it just is, but is neither true nor false. But what kind of relation, and what or who are the *relata*? One of the most traditional and, at Heidegger's time, still most common answers to this question, was that truth resides within the relation between thought and sensation, absolute reality and appearance, or, the most general, subject and object – the correspondence theory of truth. Truth would then be found wherever one side 'agrees' with the other.

But how, asks Heidegger in his 1930 lecture *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit*, as well as already in *Sein und Zeit*[1], can the subject ever agree with an object when both are defined by a total difference that makes them repel each other, even within a dialectical frame? How could the subject and the object be brought near to each other, let alone agree with each other, if they are defined by not having anything in common? Truth, as Heidegger says, has been confused with *Richtigkeit* (as correctness) and has thus been mistaken for a *sich-richten-nach* (as conforming to): in realism the subject was supposed to conform to the object, in idealism the object to the subject. But truth cannot be about one side of a dualism having to subordinate to the other; that would be, put bluntly, a mere act of power, or even violence, and does not reveal what *is*.

The Ontological Problem of the Subject|Object Binary

The problem of the question of truth within the subject|object binary can be traced back to the ontological problem of the binary opposition that constitutes the subject as a dynamic, meaningful structure. If its relation to an abstract outer world, or to a sphere of objects, is the main determining relation that the subject has – such that it is what the subject ontologically first encounters and what thus determines the subject as a subject – then it is very hard to understand how the subject could possibly recognize other subjects within that outer world or *behind particular* objects. What would enable the subject to decide behind which objects 'more' is to be found? The structure as such does not deliver any rule that would allow for the positing of another subjective structure beyond the objectivity that my own subjectivity faces.

The distinction between a 'mere' object and an object that is 'also' a subject seems to be impossible on this understanding. With the premise of the total difference between subject and outer world, we could only rescue other subjects by introducing a Kantian intelligible sphere in which transcendental subjects are somehow intertwined by virtue of a pre-spatiotemporal constitutional connection; however, that would still be an attempt to think other subjects in the manner of a *simple*, absolute difference. I will get back to what I mean by 'simple total difference.' Following Heidegger, we cannot begin from a binary that is based upon exclusion or a total difference because truth cannot reside within a relation whose relata are indifferent to each other and thus convertible. So we have to start with something else. The question is: with what?

Sartre's answer is that the basis for any possible relation between the subject and a thing, however that relation might be construed, is the subject's ontologically primary and ineluctable relation to other subjects. Any instance of truth that resides between

the subject and a thing can only reside there because there is another subject on the other end of that relation, 'beyond' the thing. If this were not the case, that thing would not be of any concern to the subject. I think it is obvious that Sartre picks up on Heidegger's concept of *Zuhandenheit* here, for *Zuhandenheit* also both mediates and is mediated by others. The crucial difference is, however, that for Sartre the ground of the structure is an actual *direct* and *primary* mutual dependency of subjects in the foundation of (all the modes of) their Being rather than a reference[2]: "The Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me".[3] Whatever resides between them or is *not* a subject only resides there as a *somewhat* meaningful entity because of the way this mutual dependency is structured. I will now briefly outline this structure.

The Subject-Subject-Relation

Sartre's main ontological argument about the intertwinement of subjects has two crucial aspects. It says that *firstly* we need a concrete structure of otherness – of something which is not always already somehow understood – in order to be able to understand the subject as a dynamic structure (and it cannot be understood otherwise), but that *secondly* this structure of otherness cannot be totally outside of the subject in the Cartesian sense, for then we would fall back behind Heidegger's achievements. The intricacy here obviously lies in the paradox of having to provide a structure of something that is, by virtue of this its very structure, outside of any structure 'I' could ever talk about. This seems – and probably is – an impossible task. The point is, however, that the impossibility of thinking it does not dispense us from the responsibility of attempting it anyhow; this task that other French authors, such as Lévinas and Blanchot, have taken much further and more radically is thus also already the basis of Sartre's thought. His solution is to make use of the traditional

subject|object binary, but to intertwine it in a *complex* difference instead of a simple one.

For Sartre, the object is, ontologically first and foremost, an aspect of the subject; however, and this is crucial, it cannot be grounded in the very subject of which it is an aspect, or at least not solely in it. There must be something to the object that lies outside of the subject, for the obvious reason that otherwise the object would collapse back into the subject. So far, Sartre is a Kantian. But for Sartre, on the other end of the object is neither a thing-in-itself nor 'the' (absolute) subject, instead it is *another* subject. Objectivity does not come into play when a sole subject faces or constructs an object (that kind of 'simple' dualism cannot serve as constitutive for the subject, as I have very briefly indicated already), but rather when the subject realizes that it is *being objectified*; put in Cartesian terms, that *it itself is* or belongs to an outer world – for another subject. It can only be objectified, however, if there is an *actual* other subject on the other end of the relation (an object can only be an object for a subject). As objects, subjects are part of *my* world; as subjects, in their subjectivity, they are not. The ontologically critical aspect of this argument is that other subjects cannot *first* occur as objects – in the sense of an 'absolute' subject facing a world of objects and *then* trying to distinguish 'mere' objects from objects that are 'also' subjects – since there is no way of explaining how the subject would be able to identify another subject *behind* a certain object. That is, unless it is already somehow ontologically connected to that subject *before* it is even able to see it as an object. There is no way that objective (empirical, sensual) data as such could lead to recognizing another subject; starting with objects as the subject's ontological counterpart, all that would be possible is to *assume* other subjects behind certain objects. However, that could never be more than a random act from which any number of subjects might well be

excluded. Truth, in its fullest sense, cannot reside in a random relation. Such a random relation is unable to constitute its relata and thus cannot take its own weight – neither phenomenologically nor ontologically.

The object is not the total outside ('outer world') of the subject for it can only exist *for* a subject, thus it must be a part of the subject somehow. But it cannot be a part of *one subject alone*; a single (absolute) subject would not have any inducement to place itself *towards* or *against* an object.

The *pour-soi* and the *en-soi*

Sartre makes use of the Hegelian terminology of *for-itself* (*pour-soi*) and *in-itself* (*en-soi*) to portray this complex interplay. The *pour-soi* holds the subjective moment of the structure, which is defined as precisely that which is "…what it is not and which is not what it is"[4]; if it were already what it is, it would not be a subjective structure for it would not have any inducement to aim anywhere.

The *en-soi* on the other hand is what Sartre defines as that which always already is what it is. In relation to the *pour-soi* as the subjective moment of the relation, the *en-soi* holds the objective moment that the *pour-soi* determines itself against. The *en-soi* has the function of a mediator between one *pour-soi* and another: as soon as an Other appears, I am put into the position to see myself as an object (as an *en-soi*), because that is how I realize the Other sees me. However, "this object which has appeared to the Other is not an empty image in the mind of another. Such an image in fact, would be imputable wholly to the Other and so could not 'touch' me."[5] We have already seen that the subject cannot found on its own being an object (in the Cartesian sense of it constructing an object), but neither can it in isolation found an Other to be an

object for it, or, the other way around, neither can its being-an-object be founded on another subject alone. If it could then once again subject and object would have nothing to do with each other and the subject's *being an object* for an Other would not even concern it. The object belongs to both subjects that are part of the relation. This is where Sartre's concept of shame comes into play, along with his concept of the glance: "Shame is by nature *recognition*. I recognize that I *am* as the Other sees me."[6] Not only shame but also the task of *accepting* the en-soi occurs between myself and the Other through recognition – that *en-soi* becoming a part of myself as a Being for the Other that I must make sense of.[7]

The task of having to make sense of how the Other sees me and to incorporate it into my self-understanding does not contradict what I have said and quoted before: that the *pour-soi* determines itself by refusing to be the *en-soi*. The *en-soi* is and remains a permanent and somewhat absurd task; the *pour-soi* can as such never fully merge into it, just as the subject can never fully 'agree' with the object, as we saw at the beginning. But Sartre draws another conclusion than Heidegger. For Sartre, the subject|object binary is *not* a problem of a too narrow cognition or logic (just as the Other is not a problem or question of cognition), such that it could be overcome by dissolving it into another kind of thought or by abandoning the kind of being-with-others that reveals this structure.

For him, this structure must perpetually be thought *even though* it might turn out to be impossible or absurd. Sartre thus draws the subject|object binary as a more complex interweaving than is traditional – portraying it as an ontologically detectable *fact* of intersubjectively founded existence that cannot be overcome, even though – as Heidegger also urged – it shall be overcome. This impossible 'shall' is, paradoxically,

what keeps the structure in motion and thus subjective.

Sartre in fact performs a minor Copernican revolution by turning the totalizing act upside down: my task is not to permanently objectify the Other and thereby constitute and affirm my own Being as an absolute subject. On the contrary, my task is to recognize that I am always *weaker* than the Other. And even that is, thinking Sartre a little further, too simple: it is possible that *both* subjects of a particular relation are weaker than the other *at the same time* – there is no arbitrator who could make that judgment other than the two subjects in question and they can only speak for themselves. Logical principles do not necessarily apply to existential matters. Sartre makes the two parts of a difference oscillate in such a way that they can no longer be 'simply' distinguished. They are equal and at the same time never equal, *both*, even though that seems to be a contradiction, because they are subjects. It is impossible for an observer to see or think them other than in an uncertainty relation.

Truth and Freedom

Having to make sense of how the Other sees me and to incorporate it into my self-understanding means that truth is something that I have to want and grasp: it is neither eternal (because no *en-soi* could ever exhaust the *pour-soi*) nor always already there ready to be uncovered – it is made. I do, however, have the choice to ignore it: "The condition of there being truth is the perpetual possibility of refusing it."[8]

Truth is, thus, a possibility and not a necessity – this notion once again turns the traditional narrative upside down. It is a possibility not in the sense that truth itself would be arbitrary, but rather in the sense that it can be grasped or not grasped: its condition must be freedom. However, it cannot be a merely negative freedom in the

sense of a choice between "two or several *external* possibles with one being in external indifference towards the other"[9]: this would be the kind of impossible freedom that a subject facing mere objects and nothing else would have. Instead, freedom must have some kind of a direction. Without something towards which it is aiming it is arbitrary, and it is this direction that for Sartre is provided by the Other since it is only through the Other that the *en-soi* occurs in the first place. The *en-soi* is what carries truth and what can be grasped or not grasped; but the *en-soi* can never be detached from the two subjects between which it occurs. To be more precise (and more vague at the same time), one has the *choice* for *or* against truth, but *freedom* has always already picked *truth*.

Concluding remarks

Many questions remain. Are there 'levels' of truth? Does its content increase the more subjects a particular truth 'belongs' to, which would be the common definition of objectivity – in other words: is something more 'true' the more 'objective' it is? Or rather the other way around? These questions do not belong to the range of issues Sartre explicitly deals with while contemplating truth. His thoughts on truth are fragmentary and appear unsystematically in *L'être et le néant* and in *Verité et existence*, a book that Sartre never finalized for publication.

However, there is one extremely important thought to be discerned here whose value far outweighs Sartre's lack of an elaborate and systematic position, a thought that seems to have been largely forgotten in philosophy and that Sartre can help us reinvent. This thought is that truth cannot be disconnected from, but must remain bound to the subject's ontological 'birth' (which cannot be accessed but only indicated through phenomenological inquiry). This is basically an old thought – what

constitutes the subject ontologically must be understood as its responsibility; however, with Sartre this is not construed in the metaphysical or theological sense of an extramundane Absolute that human being ought yet inevitably fails to accomplish. Rather, in Sartre it is responsibility in the sense of a mundane structure of otherness that cannot be resolved *as such*, because it is the structure of subjectivity (*pour-soi*) that precedes any objectification – be it my own or that of the Other. It can only be resolved in its objective realizations (*en-sois*) that always remain preliminary and temporary. They serve as the mediating and determining 'Between' of subjects – as this 'Between,' they are the instance that carries truth, but without absolute or eternal truth for no objectification (*en-soi*) can ever exhaust the subject (the *pour-soi*). At least a hint on one of the questions raised above can be given here: truth, in its widest and most primary weight, is not about being as 'objective' as possible, but about being as *honest* as possible; truth is thus rather about ethical values than epistemological ones. But what that means precisely will have to be discussed elsewhere.

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[1] Martin Heidegger, 'On the Essence of Truth' in *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930/1998). See also Id., *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1927/1996), §44.

[2] Heidegger himself actually characterizes *Dasein* as existentially bound to others, thus as *Mitsein* in a fundamental sense (cf. §26 of *Being and Time*). But Sartre criticizes that he only claims but does not actually show the structure (Jean-Paul Sartre: *Being and Nothingness*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1943/1984, p. 233 f.).

[3] Sartre: *Being and Nothingness*, p. 222.

[4] Sartre: *Being and Nothingness,* p. 268.

[5] Sartre: *Being and Nothingness*, p. 222.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] This does not mean that I have to accept whatever it is that others see in me. If they see something in me that does not affect me anyhow, then it has probably nothing to do with me, but then that also means that the Other is not even making me an object. The Other can only make me an object if I accept the objectification, otherwise the relation does not even occur, and if I accept the objectification, then that already means that it has something to do with me: shame comes into play.

[8] Jean-Paul Sartre: *Truth and Existence*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 27.

[9] Sartre: *Truth and Existence*, p. 28.