

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SARTRE'S REALISTIC METAPHYSICS

Mary Edwards, Cardiff University

ABSTRACT:

This paper traces the development of Sartre's metaphysics with three interrelated aims in mind. The first is to situate Sartre's metaphysical views in relation to those of his predecessors, his contemporaries, and ours. The second is to show that Sartre's project to turn his phenomenology towards reality informs some of the key changes he makes to his existentialism during his career. The third is to bring Sartre *the metaphysician* into dialogue with key thinkers in the current realism/anti-realism debate in continental philosophy by showing that the defense of materialism he offers in his later work preserves many hard-won insights of phenomenology and has significant advantages over many contemporary articulations of realism.

KEYWORDS: Sartre, existentialism, phenomenology, speculative realism, hermeneutic realism, materialism.

*[A]ll existence in the universe is material;
everything in the world of man is human.¹*

This paper traces the development of Sartre's metaphysics from *The Imaginary* (*L'Imaginaire*, 1940) through to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (*Critique de la raison dialectique*, 1960-85, *Critique* hereafter). It has three interrelated aims. The first is to constellate Sartre's metaphysical commitments and situate them in relation to those of

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Vol. 1, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. Jonathan Rée (London: NLB, 1976), 180-1.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

his predecessors, his contemporaries, and ours. The second is highlight how Sartre's project to turn his phenomenology away from idealism, toward reality influences the development of his existentialism. The third is to bring Sartre *the metaphysician* into dialogue with key thinkers in the current realism/anti-realism debate in continental philosophy by showing that the materialism he defends in his later work, which has been largely overlooked by scholars,² not only affirms the existence of a mind-independent reality but does so in a way that makes it significantly less vulnerable to charges of hubris than many contemporary articulations of realism.

The first section argues that Sartre's initial form of existentialism³ is assiduously anti-idealist, despite ostensibly being purely "ontological" and metaphysically non-committal. The second section shows how Sartre employs rationalist argumentation to derive ontological conclusions, with important metaphysical implications, from his phenomenological analyses. The third section shows how Sartre calls upon his phenomenological ontology to provide support for materialism in his mature work. The fourth section then contrasts Sartre's materialism with an influential variety of

² The only scholarly analysis of the metaphysical merits of Sartre's realistic materialism that I am aware of is Hazel E. Barnes's essay, "Sartre as Materialist," in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1981), 661-84. Barnes affirms that Sartre's realistic materialism qualifies as a form of "dialectical materialism," although it cannot be considered a "metaphysics of nature" nor, therefore, a full-fledged realism because Sartre's theorization of the connection between consciousness and "the body which it both is and is not remains abstract and obscure" in his mature work. *Ibid.*, 683. However, in Section III below, I demonstrate that Sartre lends crucial clarification to his conception of this connection in the second volume of the *Critique*, first published in 1985. Interestingly, Roy Wood Sellars anticipates the potential of Sartre's initial form of existentialism to be made compatible with his "non-reductive, evolutionary, materialism" in "Existentialism, Realistic Empiricism, and Materialism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 25, no. 3 (1965): 315-332. This is quite remarkable given that Sellars does not engage with Sartre's explicit defense of his realistic materialism in the *Critique*, but only with the ontology of *Being and Nothingness* and Sartre's 1946 essay, "Materialism and Revolution," which, as Barnes notes, later became a "source of embarrassment" for Sartre on account of its seeming wholesale rejection of materialism, see "Sartre as Materialist," 669.

³ I follow Jonathan Webber in *Rethinking Existentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 113-30, by distinguishing between Sartre's "initial" and "mature" forms of existentialism. I take the former to find its fullest articulation in *Being and Nothingness* and the latter in the *Critique*.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

speculative realism in current continental philosophy. Finally, the fifth section explains why Sartre's metaphysics deserves more attention than it has received hitherto, especially from contemporary metaphysicians who want to get realism off the ground of mere speculation.

In what follows, *reality* refers to the whole set of objects that exist independently of consciousness and *real* is used to pick out objects or qualities that exist in reality. Together, these terms allow us to discuss the possibility of an order distinct from and independent of consciousness. The term *realism* denotes any metaphysical doctrine that offers an account of reality and affirms that everyday objects of perception are real. That is, it refers to what used to be pejoratively called "naïve realism": the position that there is a reality beyond appearances, whose structure, entities, and properties really are as they appear to be, at least in the context of veridical perception.

I

Sartre's existentialism may be broadly conceived as a response to intellectualism, which – at least until the latter half of the twentieth century – provided the epistemological and ontological framework for many of the influential defenses of realism in Western philosophy.⁴ Intellectualism may be characterized as the view that predicates have an objective meaning in virtue of standing for observable qualities of objects, which rational beings are capable of apprehending and making true (and false) statements about. In other words, intellectualism endorses a correspondence theory of truth; it holds that humans can make true statements about the world, so long as the content of such

⁴ See Frederick A. Olafson, *Principles and Persons: An Ethical Interpretation of Existentialism*. (London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970) for a classic presentation of Sartre's (and Heidegger's) existentialism as a response to intellectualism.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

statements “corresponds” to the way things are in reality. Realists have traditionally been attracted to intellectualism because it can support the view that we can construct propositions that are true because they accurately represent reality and, hence, gain knowledge of reality by possessing such propositions.

Although it is possible to trace intellectualism back to Socrates-Plato, Sartre’s existentialism appears to primarily target ‘Aristotelian’ articulations of it.⁵ To see why, let us briefly consider some central features of this intellectualist doctrine. Aristotle affirms that every being partakes in the primary substance by virtue of which it *is*, although it is *what* it is by virtue of its “secondary substance”.⁶ Aristotelian⁷ intellectualists read this to imply that every existent possesses essential qualities that make it a particular instantiation of a natural category. This Aristotelian brand of intellectualism may be considered realist, since it holds that objects exist independently of consciousness. But it may also be considered deterministic insofar as the view that the form of all possible existents is a function of natural categories, presupposes the prior existence of these categories in an ideal form (presumably, in the mind of God), so that the *essence* of all particular existents *precedes* their *existence*. This means that ideal categories have implications not only for the validity of our conceptual systems but also for the nature of

⁵ Frederick A. Olafson identifies the intellectualist doctrine that has its basis in Aristotle’s philosophy as that which “principally stimulated – by reaction – the developments in ethical theory that eventually led to existentialism” in *Principles and Persons*, 5-6. Katherine J. Morris has also highlighted how Sartre’s interpretation of the existentialist doctrine principally targets the ontological concept of essence that was popular among the medieval scholastic philosophers who sought to “integrate the teachings of the Bible with those of the great Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle” in *Sartre* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008), 30.

⁶ Aristotle, “Selection from *Categories*,” in *Metaphysics: A Guide and Anthology*, eds. Tim Crane and Katalin Farkas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 152.

⁷ The view that Aristotelian intellectualism is rooted in a faithful interpretation of Aristotle’s thought is contested. Notably, Heidegger argues that it is based on a misreading of Aristotle. See Martin Heidegger, *Logic: The Question of Truth*, trans. Thomas Sheehan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 107-36.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

existence itself, since all existents are taken to have category-specific characteristics which dispose them toward different “proper” ends. If we take the view that the proper ends of existents are pre-determined by their essence, so that the existents can never choose their proper ends for themselves but only correctly or incorrectly apprehended them to be a form of determinism,⁸ then determinism is a foregone conclusion for Aristotelian intellectualism and this is, unsurprisingly, an unacceptable conclusion for the existentialist philosopher.

The existentialist doctrine, *existence precedes essence*, turns Aristotelian-intellectualist ontology on its head and allows Sartre to eschew the determinism associated with it. It also allows him to identify existentialism with humanism during “the existentialist offensive” of 1945, in which he and Simone de Beauvoir strove to emphasize existentialism as an ethical theory.⁹ It is perhaps a testament to the success of this offensive that the ethical and libertarian implications of Sartre’s initial existentialism have received much more attention than its metaphysical implications beyond the acknowledgement that, as an “anthropological” development of Heidegger’s ontology, it clearly *has* metaphysical implications.¹⁰ To redress this oversight, it is important to

⁸ Granted, this is a peculiar, if not idiosyncratic, concept of determinism; yet it is the kind of determinism that Sartre’s critique of Christian intellectualism targets. For instance, he notes that existentialists “find it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven”; existentialists must therefore recognize that they are “without excuse” and unable explain their behavior in terms of a predetermined “human nature.” See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen & Co, 1973), 33-4.

⁹ See Webber’s analysis of how Sartre’s commitment to existentialism as an ethical theory is a key motivation for his identification of existentialism with humanism (*Rethinking Existentialism*, 2-14). The term “existentialist offensive” is from Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968), 46.

¹⁰ See Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” trans. HaperColins Publishers Inc., in *Heidegger: Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), 213-66, for a classic account of why Sartre’s initial form of existentialism is metaphysically committed; Tom Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Philosophy: Humanism, Antihumanism and Being*. (London: Routledge, 1995), for a critical reading of Sartre’s humanism is premised upon an anthropological misunderstanding of Heidegger’s ontology; and Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 30,

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

establish the metaphysical¹¹ implications of Sartre's initial interpretation of the existentialist doctrine. For simplicity, let us approach this task by considering his understanding of each of the terms that comprise it.

Existence. Sartre's conception of existence denotes the internal relation between thought and being.¹² In this respect, it is less like the ordinary concept of existence that applies to "any actual object" and more like Heidegger's concept of "ex-istence," which refers to the specifically human kind of existence: the awareness that makes (human) being stand out to itself.¹³ Although Sartre's conception of "ex-istence" is unfaithful the Heideggerian original in significant respects, I shall preserve the Heideggerian hyphenation when referring to it from this point on, so as to distinguish it from the ordinary conception of existence that metaphysicians are chiefly concerned with. This will allow us to assess whether Sartre's phenomenological-ontological analysis of existence does any metaphysical work by telling us something about existence too.

no. 1, (1969): 31-57, for an argument for the view that both Sartre's and Heidegger's ontologies are metaphysically committed.

¹¹ I follow Sartre in interpreting "metaphysics" to be concerned with objective knowledge of what exists from a perspective that is outside of the relation between thought and being. He explains that he does not consider his ontology a metaphysical enterprise because he views the relation of metaphysics to ontology as analogous to that between "history" and "sociology" in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Sarah Richmond (London: Routledge, 2018), 801. By this he means that metaphysics, like history, aims to discover why things are thus and so by analyzing its objects from an "external" perspective; whereas ontology, like sociology, examines the relations that structure both the objects under investigation and the investigator from a perspective that is "internal" to the relationship between them. Although Sartre regards the project to acquire metaphysical knowledge by assuming a God's eye perspective on being as a hopeless one, he affirms that ontology can provide robust support for metaphysical hypotheses, since their ability to unify the findings of ontology can serve as an indication of their validity. See *Being and Nothingness*, 803.

¹² "Internal" relations obtain between mutually dependent entities, whereas "external" relations obtain between separate, mutually independent entities. For an illuminating analysis of the prejudice in favor of external relations in Western scholarship, see Morris, *Sartre*, especially 43-6.

¹³ Thomas Baldwin, "Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series* 20 (1986): 287-307, 291 here.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

The primary form ex-istence for Sartre is pre-reflective thought: the direct apprehension of an object, which serves as the basis for all other relations between consciousness and its objects, including knowledge. Understanding ex-istence this way enables Sartre to renounce “the primacy of knowledge”: the assumption that consciousness relates to its objects primarily through its knowledge of them.¹⁴ He believes that the primacy of knowledge effectively limits philosophy to epistemology because it means that questions concerned with the validity of our claims to knowledge of various objects are continually posed instead of more fundamental questions about our ex-istence. What is more, epistemological philosophies that take knowledge to be the primary form of our relation to the world are incapable of affirming that humans are the agents of their own lives in Sartre’s view, for they are either idealist or intellectualist-realist. And idealism renders human freedom trivial by depriving it of the opposition that can only be found in objects that transcend thought, while intellectualist iterations of realism are deterministic in the sense outlined above. Thus, Sartre presents his conception of ex-istence as the starting point for a philosophy that can accommodate the full extent of human freedom by revolutionizing our understanding of the relation of thought to being.

Essence. We can distinguish between metaphysical and phenomenological uses of “essence” in philosophy. Metaphysical uses take it to refer to a real structure, hidden behind appearance of a thing, which makes that thing what it is. H₂O may be offered as a candidate for the metaphysical essence of water since anything with this molecular structure is “water,” even if its appearance varies in different environmental conditions. Phenomenological uses take “essence” to denote a law of possible appearances by virtue

¹⁴ Sartre *Being and Nothingness*, 10-16.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

of which a thing appears to be what it is. For Husserl, an essence is something that can be shared by many objects that appear to us: a quality of a “special shape *in general*, of melody *as such*, of a social happening *as such* and so forth, or of the shape, melody, etc. of the relevant special type”.¹⁵ On his account, essences make objects the *kind* of objects they are for consciousness. So, the essence of any object is to be discovered in the singular quality without which it would appear to be another kind of object. Accordingly, Husserl’s conception of essences as what particularizes the objects that populate the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) resembles Aristotelian intellectualism in that it holds the intelligibility of objects to be a function of the ideal kinds that they instantiate.

Sartre follows Husserl in interpreting “essence” phenomenologically, but this is where the similarity between these two thinkers’ concepts of essence ends. Essences are not qualities possessed by particular objects that instantiate the same kind for Sartre. Rather, they are the means through which objects reveal the peculiar nature of their existence. Although, like Husserl, Sartre insists that the essence of any object is given to consciousness through “the series of its appearances”¹⁶ and accepts that the essences of ideal objects, such as concepts and categories, hold implications for our experience of concrete objects, he affirms that the essences of the latter can only be revealed through their appearance to consciousness as individual beings.¹⁷ Hence, the essences of concrete objects individuate them, rather than making them a particular instance of a kind. While

¹⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (London: Routledge, 2012), 14.

¹⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 4.

¹⁷ The term “individual” is used here because while a “particular” can be subsumed under a general category – that is, as a particular instantiation of a kind – an individual cannot. Hence, Sartre’s conception of essence is akin to what Husserl – who is more concerned with essences of higher stages of generality – describes as the “individual essence” or “lowest concretum (*Konkretion*) of the individually determined thing” in *Ideas*, 312-13.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

the essence of the category “rhombus” may set the criteria for any sketch to qualify as a sketch of a rhombus, if I were to compare my sketch of a rhombus to yours – that is, two concrete objects – I will discover aspects that distinguish it from yours, and it is the totality of these individuating aspects that constitutes its Sartrean essence. This notion of essence underlines the key distinction Sartre sees between the ideal categories that we use to organize beings and the beings themselves: the essences of the former are determined by consciousness, while the essences of the latter can only be disclosed to consciousness through observation.¹⁸

Precedes. What kind of relation between ex-istence and essence is signaled by the transitive verb “precedes” in Sartre’s interpretation of the existentialist doctrine? The simplest answer to this question is that it means that beings ex-ist (appear) before any (divine or human) ideas do. This allows us to understand Sartre’s curious affirmation in his 1945 lecture, “L’Existentialisme est une humanism,” that the existentialist principle that “every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity” should appeal to humanists:¹⁹ it is because he believes that only the abandonment of the primacy of knowledge can restore to individual human beings their power to determine their own essence through their chosen actions.

This brief analysis of each of the terms that comprise the doctrine of Sartrean existentialism shows that even though Sartre describes his initial existentialism as being

¹⁸ Sartre’s insistence that freedom is the definition of human being does not contradict this view; the concept of freedom cannot constrain the essence of any individual consciousness because consciousness is not “produced as a particular exemplar of an abstract possibility” but, rather, arises “in the heart of being” and “it creates and maintains its essence,” like all other concrete beings. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 14. What is more, neither Sartre’s acceptance of the notion that existents have essences, nor his conviction that the intuition of essences is possible can be taken as evidence that he fails to fully renounce the primacy of knowledge, as his conception of essence rejects the intellectualist notion that the categories that allow us to bestow a logical structure onto ex-istence also play a role in determining its nature.

¹⁹ Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 24.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

“beyond [epistemological] realism and [epistemological] idealism,”²⁰ it is not beyond metaphysics. To the contrary, it is in dialogue with metaphysics and anti-idealist since its refutation of the primacy of knowledge aims to reject all forms of idealism (as well as all intellectualist forms of realism).²¹ At first glance, this seems to make Sartre’s initial existentialism compatible with non-intellectualist forms of realism. However, the whole point of highlighting the primacy of ex-istence over knowledge for Sartre is to show that there are direct, non-epistemic, pre-reflective consciousness-object relations that precede and found all epistemic ones. Precisely because these relations are non-epistemic and partly constituted by consciousness, they cannot supply consciousness with direct knowledge of mind-independent existence. Hence, Sartre presents his initial existentialism as metaphysically minimal, and only incidentally so, because he interprets metaphysics to make claims to knowledge of an existence independent of consciousness but holds that consciousness is an inextricable element of ex-istence, which his phenomenology analyses.

II

Let us examine how Sartre’s rationalist treatment of his phenomenological findings enables him to make some progress toward realism in his early work. Now, as “rationalist” is often used to describe philosophical approaches that attempt to gain fundamental knowledge of the world through reason alone, and which also privilege “reason over

²⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 25.

²¹ Because it denies that we can gain knowledge of reality beyond its appearance, Sartre’s initial existentialism is nevertheless compatible with Kantian transcendental idealism, which holds consciousness responsible for objective “reality” through its organization of the manifold of experience. See Gregory McCulloch, “Sartre: Between realism and idealism?” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 1, no. 2 (1993): 286-301.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

sense experience,”²² considering Sartre a rationalist may seem at odds with considering him as a phenomenologist who demands intuitive, or experiential evidence. However, what I am proposing here is that Sartre employs a rationalist style of argumentation to deduce ontological claims, with metaphysical implications, from the evidence won through phenomenological reflection upon what is given to pre-reflective thought.

An early example of Sartre’s rationalism is to be found in *The Imaginary*, where he seeks to show that consciousness can distinguish perceptual experiences of objects that are ‘real’ insofar as they are given to consciousness from hallucinatory experiences of “irreal” (*irréel*)²³ objects that are wholly constituted by consciousness. Sartre’s key claim is that even though the phenomenal character of hallucinations is often perception-like, the structure of a consciousness hallucinating its object is distinct from that of one perceiving its object. His argument proceeds as follows. First, it states that hallucinations occur either when consciousness has intended the presence of an irreal object or when a “partial and absurd psychic system” suddenly appears to it.²⁴ In the former case, there is no concern about the irreal object of consciousness being truly mistaken for a “real” one because consciousness is (non-positionally) conscious of its own role in the constitution of the object, even if it refuses to acknowledge it.²⁵ Only the latter case constitutes a genuine hallucination for Sartre. Although he accepts that an unhealthy consciousness

²² Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 308.

²³ “Irreal” is the term Sartre uses to describe any object produced by an act of imagination, whose presence is always “out of reach,” unlike that of real (that is, perceived) objects. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2004), 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁵ Sartre describes this as “the syndrome of influence” and it is what he believes makes schizophrenic hallucination phenomenally distinct from genuine hallucination. Unlike genuine hallucinators, he argues that schizophrenics are aware that they themselves “are producing” their hallucinatory thoughts, although he stresses that these thoughts “are not willed.” *Ibid.*, 156.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

may experience irreal objects *as if* they are given to it, he insists that it is still possible to distinguish them from “real” ones because all the aspects of irreal objects are given to them by consciousness, which means that they always lack the rich, transphenomenal character of “real” objects.²⁶ The “essential poverty”²⁷ of irreal objects relative to “real” ones therefore supplies consciousness with certainty that their source lies in it, not in the world, and this, for Sartre, means that a healthy consciousness has no difficulty in reflectively discerning “real” objects from irreal ones. Already, we can see how Sartre’s rationalism is congenial to a realist position. It allows him to overcome the important argument from hallucination against the reliability of perception by moving from the certainty that consciousness exists – *qua* consciousness *of* something – to the certainty that it can tell the difference between being conscious of concrete objects that are “outside” it and being conscious of irreal objects constituted by it.

Now, let us turn to consider how Sartre’s rationalism enables him to begin to turn his phenomenology toward reality in *Being and Nothingness*. Without denying that there are tendencies towards idealism in this work,²⁸ I want to highlight two rationalist arguments in it that allow Sartre to sketch in outline the phenomenological ontology he will later develop in more detail to lend support to materialism: the ontological proof that being-in-itself is outside consciousness²⁹ and the argument from the birth of consciousness to the chronological primacy of the world.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9, 133, and throughout.

²⁸ Despite *Being and Nothingness*’s avowed anti-idealism, commentators have continually called attention to its idealist tinge. See, for example, Barnes, “Sartre as Materialist”; Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 180; Sebastian Gardner, “The Transcendental Dimension of Sartre’s Philosophy,” in *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2011), 48-72, 57; and McCulloch, “Sartre: Between realism and idealism?”.

²⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 20-23.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

Sartre's ontological "proof" that being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*), or non-conscious being, is distinct from consciousness commences from his notion of intentionality. From the premise that consciousness is always *consciousness of x*, where x denotes an object that is other than consciousness, it follows that consciousness always "*implies a being other than itself*".³⁰ Hence, the existence of consciousness is itself proof of being "outside" of consciousness, because consciousness depends on it for its own being. Crucially, this conclusion is "derived not from the reflective *cogito*, but from the *prereflective* being of the *percipiens*,"³¹ which means that it takes consciousness in the mode of being positionally conscious of an object – and only non-positionally conscious of itself – as its starting point. To illustrate with a Sartrean example: when I am writing, I am positionally "*of the words as they come to birth under my pen*"³² and my awareness of myself is non-positional and tacit, as is my awareness of other objects in the room – the chair, the desk, and so on. As soon as I become positionally conscious *of myself*, however, my attention is drawn away from the words emerging under my pen, toward an image of myself. For Sartre, this change requires essential modifications in the structure of consciousness: a switch from the pre-reflective to the reflective "ekstasis" or mode of existence. I will find it difficult to continue writing without switching back into the pre-reflective mode because reflection pulls consciousness out of its direct relation to the world, to facilitate what we ordinarily call "thought": attending to *representations* of objects, including the concept of self.

³⁰ Ibid., 23, emphasis original.

³¹ Ibid., 21.

³² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, 2nd ed., trans. Philip Mairet (London: Routledge, 2002) 34.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

As an unmediated relation to the world that is prior to representations, pre-reflective consciousness emerges as the condition for the “I think” of Cartesian *cogito*, and Sartre affirms that it is the proper starting point for all phenomenological investigations. The ontological proof in *Being and Nothingness* provides what is perhaps the most powerful demonstration of how Sartre believes the assumption of primacy of knowledge has led so many philosophers, including Descartes and Husserl, to overlook vital evidence concerning the structure of ex-istence that can be apprehended by reflecting on our pre-reflective experience of it. It allows us to see why – contra Husserl’s view that only somebody “who misunderstands the deepest sense of the intentional method, or that of the transcendental reduction, or perhaps both, can attempt to separate phenomenology from transcendental idealism”³³ – Sartre believes that only someone who misunderstands the primary structure of consciousness would consider a phenomenological reduction to a “pure” transcendental consciousness possible, for there can be no consciousness without an object.³⁴

Nonetheless, Sartre’s ontological proof is limited as an anti-idealist strategy. It shows that objects that appear to consciousness transcend it, but it does not say anything about what they are really like, beyond their appearance, because consciousness “requires simply that the being of that which *appears* does not exist *only* in so far as it appears.”³⁵ Thus, while it rejects ontological idealism – idealism that denies the existence of anything beyond appearances – it cannot reject transcendental idealism, which may

³³ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), 86.

³⁴ For a detailed analysis of how Sartre’s interpretation of intentionality allows him to turn his initial existentialism outwards, toward human-reality, see John Duncan, “Sartre and Realism-All-the-Way-Down,” *Sartre Studies International* 11, nos. 1 & 2 (2005): 91-113.

³⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 23.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

accept the idea of a reality beyond appearances but deny that we have epistemic access to it.

Another rationalist argument in *Being and Nothingness* is worthy of note: the argument from the certainty that consciousness was born to the claim that being-in-itself is *chronologically* prior to consciousness. Sartre writes that “the body as facticity is the past in so far as it originally refers back to a *birth* . . . My birth, the past, contingency, the necessity of a point of view, the *de facto* condition of any possible action on the world: such is the *body*, as it is *for me*.”³⁶ An arrangement of being-in-itself – a body – therefore precedes consciousness, chronologically. Moreover, being a body, in a situation, is what enables consciousness to ex-ist as a perspectival relation to the world. Hence, the body turns out to be the “contingent actualization” of the necessary condition for the world in the context of Sartre’s existentialism.³⁷

The implications of this chronological primacy of the body have received little attention in the secondary literature, and for good reason. Chronological primacy is not ontological primacy, and consciousness, as the “relative-absolute,”³⁸ is clearly granted ontological primacy over being-in-itself, including the body, in *Being and Nothingness*. This point is reaffirmed in Sartre’s metaphysical observations in the Conclusion, where we are told that without consciousness there would be “an absolute nothing.”³⁹ So, even if the body is apprehended by consciousness as the condition for its ex-istence, consciousness remains the condition for the ex-istence of the body – that is, there being a

³⁶ Ibid., 439.

³⁷ Ibid., 440.

³⁸ Ibid., 2.

³⁹ Ibid., 803.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

body (for consciousness) – and, accordingly, for the reflection that reveals the chronological primacy of the body. Nonetheless, the argument for the chronological primacy of the body is important for our concerns here since it prefigures the argument Sartre will later offer for the view that there is existence beyond our ex-istence, which we also have epistemic access to.

To see how Sartre’s argument for the chronological primacy of the body can be pushed toward a more substantive metaphysical conclusion, consider how the embodiment of consciousness also means that its being is shot through with contingency. Although, in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre upholds that we can never grasp this contingency, since “in so far as our body is *for us* and because we are choice and, for us, to be is to choose ourselves,”⁴⁰ the inescapable fact of having to be a body puts us in a special relation with the contingent, unchosen aspect of being that is both other and older than us. Our body intimately acquaints us with the transphenomenal dimension of being because certain “objective” aspects of it elude us even as we constitute human-reality through “living” it. For example, the mere fact of our embodiment grants us no epistemic access to what bacteria inhabit our gut, the integrity of our artery walls, and so on, and such things are also outside of our choice. But if we can apprehend aspects of the lived body as being beyond our knowledge and control, and as preceding us chronologically, even as we live it, do we not also apprehend something that will persist into a time when we cease to ex-ist? Sartre does not pursue this question in *Being and Nothingness*, where he characterizes death from the perspective of a consciousness that forgets its body and which, therefore, posits its potential to be reduced to its “objective” aspects in death as

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 440.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

outside its own possibilities.⁴¹ This overlooks our embodied awareness of our own mortality and of the permanent possibility that we may be reduced to *just* a body: a corpse. However, we shall see that Sartre's mature form of existentialism redresses this oversight and more fully exploits the range epistemic possibilities afforded by consciousness's intimate relation to its body.

III

The starting point for Sartre's mature existentialism remains pre-reflective "*consciousness* as apodictic certainty (of) itself and as consciousness *of* such and such an object."⁴² Existence, however, is no longer described as an internal relation between being-for-itself and being-in-itself, but as one between *praxis* and the *practico-inert*. "Praxis" roughly corresponds to being-for-itself. It denotes any purposeful action, but Sartre no longer upholds that any intentional act constitutes action as he did in *Being and Nothingness*, where he writes that the being of consciousness "is acting" and that, for it, "to cease to act is to cease to be."⁴³ Instead, he theorizes action as material change that refers to a project. Unlike being-for-itself, praxis cannot be used interchangeably with "consciousness" because it involves "a passage from objective to objective through internalization" and must therefore have an objective manifestation.⁴⁴ "Practico-inert" corresponds to being-

⁴¹ Sartre affirms that consciousness's embodied apprehension of its own finitude cannot properly be said "belong to the for-itself's ontological structure" (*Being and Nothingness*, 707). Also, see Christina Howells, *Mortal subjects: Passions of the Soul in Late Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 35-40, for an illuminating discussion of how Sartre's conception of death as something external that does not concern the subject in his early work impoverishes his analysis in *Being and Nothingness*.

⁴² Sartre, *Critique*, Vol. 1, 51.

⁴³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 623.

⁴⁴ Sartre, *Critique*, Vol. 1, 71.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

in-itself in that it designates the world within which praxis obtains – or human-reality. It is the entire world of worked-on matter, in which past praxis sets the conditions for present praxis. Accordingly, it incorporates far more than the material facts of the environment. It also refers to the social meanings that the environment is infused with, language, social-hierarchical structures, institutions, and so on. So, while it may initially seem as though the change in the way that Sartre describes the dyadic relation that constitutes ex-istence is merely terminological, he is not simply re-packaging his initial existentialism in the *Critique*, and this is perhaps most apparent in this work's metaphysical commitments, which are not only anti-idealist but materialist, and may even qualify as realist.

What is it about Sartre's mature existentialism that allows him to claim that "all existence in the universe is material,"⁴⁵ when his initial existentialism could only support the claim that objects of consciousness transcend it? To begin with, the dualism of praxis and practico-inert exhibits a circularity and an interdependence that was lacking in the previous formulation. This is evinced in the description of man as "a material organism with material needs" and of "worked matter, as an exteriorization of interiority," which "produces man, who produces or uses this worked matter in so far as he is forced to re-interiorize the exteriority of his product in the totalizing movement of the multiplicity which totalizes it."⁴⁶ The interdependence described here does not, however, imply an ontological parity between the two parties in the relation – which *Being and Nothingness* argues is consistent with idealism⁴⁷ – since the practico-inert, understood as "worked

⁴⁵ Ibid., 180-1.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 414.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

matter,” is clearly ontologically secondary to the praxis that has “worked” it, and so it cannot be interpreted as inert matter, unlike being-in-itself. Although Sartre continues to accept that pure inertia – matter untouched by praxis – may precede consciousness chronologically, he excludes it from the dialectical praxis-process that constitutes human-reality.

Sartre also takes pains to differentiate his phenomenological treatment of the “situated dialectic” between praxis and the practico-inert from “any form of idealism” in the *Critique*, although he acknowledges that the task of envisaging the “*real-being*” of the praxis-process “risks appearing as a phenomenological idealism” unless the situatedness of the praxis-process is fully understood.⁴⁸ He goes on to explain that agents of praxis are inescapably situated within human-reality in virtue of being partly constitutive of it. Then, he describes two ways that agents of praxis can deceive themselves into thinking that they can analyze objects “objectively” without their analytical praxis altering the “reality” of those objects. The first is by identifying with “Nature” and regarding history as an effect of natural processes, which “leads to the dialectical dogmatism of the *outside*.”⁴⁹ The second is through the denial of “the situation as a reciprocity”: acknowledging the relation of the analyst to the object analyzed, without also acknowledging how the analyst and her analytical discipline are implicated in the constitution of the sense of that same object.⁵⁰ Both of these strategies aim to “de-situate” the analyst by treating the practico-inert *as if* it were an absolute reality independent of praxis. Both de-situated analytical perspectives

⁴⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Vol. 2, trans. Quintin Hoare, ed. Arlette Elkaim-Sartre (London: Verso, 1991), 301.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁵⁰ This second approach describes the “objectivity” that empirical investigations tend to assume, which Sartre believes leads to “dogmatic and positivist idealism.” *Ibid.*

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

are therefore “unrealistic” in Sartre’s estimation because they overlook the analyst’s situation within, and continual contribution to, human-reality.

Even though Sartre’s mature existentialism concentrates on the human-reality interior to ex-istence he insists that it is materialist. He writes:

What becomes of *matter*, that is to say, Being totally without meaning? The answer is simple: it does not appear anywhere in human experience . . . Does this lead us back to [substance] dualism? Not at all . . . If we were not wholly matter, how could we act on matter, and how could it act on us?⁵¹

This position does not qualify as a form of materialism by virtue of affirming that only “mind-independent” matter is real and reducing thought to an effect of electro-chemical events in the brain. Rather, it qualifies as a form of materialism because it affirms that everything can be explained by the material conditions *except* for what, within those conditions, represents “the negation of *natural* universality”: the praxis that materializes thought through undetermined action.⁵² Sartre’s mature existentialism thereby construes human-reality as a pocket of material events that result from choice within a deterministic universe, an “interiority” that distinguishes itself from “exteriority ... by the improbability of the concatenations that it in turn produces.”⁵³

A consequence of this view is that a tree falling in the woods that nobody sees or hears is an event in exteriority, outside human-reality, and therefore not “real.” It can be incorporated into our “reality” as a likely past event, though, if someone should pass by

⁵¹ Sartre, *Critique*, Vol. 1, 180.

⁵² Sartre, *Critique*, Vol. 2, 318.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

the tree later and observe it decaying on the forest floor. Sartre is willing to accept this consequence, as he holds that this position “which *starts from the human world* and *situates* man in Nature is the monism of materiality . . . the only monism which is realist, and which removes the *purely theoretical* temptation to contemplate Nature ‘without alien addition’”.⁵⁴ This “realistic materialism”⁵⁵ is, for Sartre, the only position that neither reduces human being to a predetermined bundle of molecular reactions, nor casts it into an ideal realm where it cannot act. It situates human being at the heart of an existence bound by the limits of human experience. This means that the only “reality” we can experience is that which is partly constituted by us.⁵⁶ But this does not mean that this “reality” is the only reality we can know of.

To the contrary, Sartre’s mature existentialism affirms that *there is* an exterior reality that envelops human-reality *and* that we can know of it on account of the evidence that is available to us. Indeed, the very fact that the *Critique* introduces the term *exteriority* to denote all that is exterior to ex-istence shows that Sartre’s phenomenological concentration upon human-reality no longer restricts him to a Kantian “metaphysical modesty of noumena.”⁵⁷ This decrease in Sartre’s metaphysical modesty after *Being and Nothingness* is principally due to his contention that exteriority occasionally manifests

⁵⁴ Sartre, *Critique*, Vol. 1, 180-1.

⁵⁵ In “Sartre as Materialist,” Barnes translates “le matérialisme réaliste” in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique : précédé de questions de méthode*, Vol. I, ed. Arlette Elkāim-Sartre (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 148, as “realistic materialism” rather than “realist materialism.” I follow Barnes’s translation here because, as we shall see, the form of materialism that Sartre aligns his mature existentialism with does not qualify as “realist” in the sense in which the term is used in this paper.

⁵⁶ Just as the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* endorses a humanly restricted metaphysical scope so that his view of absolute freedom could withstand skeptical doubt – see Gardner 2011, “The Transcendental Dimension of Sartre’s Philosophy,” 64-5 – the Sartre of the *Critique* affirms that there is nothing more to “reality” than the world that appears to us in order to bolster his materialist view.

⁵⁷ I borrow this term from Lee Braver, “A Brief History of Continental Realism,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 45, no. 2 (2012): 261-289, 263.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

itself in our “reality” as the “drift” that practico-inert “constantly engenders in praxis itself.”⁵⁸ This “drift” offers us a glimpse at the shadow side of ex-istence in exteriority,⁵⁹ which also reveals the exteriority as the real source of contingency, as well as all that is wholly “other” in our experience.

The *Critique* proposes that we can become acquainted with the “drift” of the practico-inert in exteriority from our situation in interiority in moments when we apprehend our own death as a possibility. Sartre’s mature existentialism can now treat death as a possibility for us because it develops the account of embodiment offered in *Being and Nothingness* by emphasizing *need* as a force that constrains praxis and compels us to recognize the materiality of the body. The concept of need enables Sartre to interpret fear of death as the direct intuition of our need for the specific material conditions that will sustain the body in its capacity to support our ex-istence. The thought of our own death “terrifies,” he writes, “because it is that of Nothingness-in-itself as a window on to Being-in-itself.”⁶⁰ (“Being-in-itself,” with a capital B, denotes exteriority here.) In fearing my death, then, I do not merely grasp the possibility of no longer ex-isting but also my body’s potential – *qua* material object – to exist in a time when I no longer ex-ist. I enter a mode of being that we might call *mortality consciousness*: a form of pre-reflective consciousness that corresponds to fight, flight, or freeze reactions to a perceived threat, which is partly constituted by a bodily apprehension of the indifferent, inhuman reality exterior to “reality.”

⁵⁸ Sartre, *Critique*, Vol. 2, 315.

⁵⁹ Sartre sometimes uses the term “process-praxis” to denote the shadow side of existence, which he takes to be the unseen side of the praxis-process: that which “ensures that there is something in the Universe like the reverse side of cards.” *Ibid.*, 331.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 314.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

In short, Sartre's analysis of the fear of death in the *Critique* offers a rationalist argument from a specific *cogitatio* – mortality consciousness – to the existence of a reality beyond appearances, an exteriority enveloping ex-istence. However, this argument is limited in a similar way to the ontological proof in *Being and Nothingness* insofar as it signals the independent being of exteriority, without revealing anything more about it beyond the fact that *it is, out there*. Sartre writes:

Through the pitiless necessity of his death-agony, a traveler lost in the desert experiences the non-humanity of the Universe, and thereby the transcendent limit of the human adventure manifests itself to him in its full horror, as his impossibility of living and as the impossibility of being a man.⁶¹

Exteriority has no essence for Sartre because it does not ex-ist; there is nothing “of” or “about” it for us to know. Mortality consciousness is thus a “terrifying apparition of the human adventure as conditioned in exteriority,”⁶² and that is all.

IV

Considering the recent resurgence of arguments for realism in the continental tradition, collectively referred to as the *speculative realism* movement, the question of how Sartre's realistic materialism fares in comparison to contemporary defenses of realism presents itself. But responding to this question is complicated by the fact that the motley range of positions collected under the umbrella of speculative realism seem to have little in common apart from their rejection of the position that we only have access to “the

⁶¹ Ibid., 313-14.

⁶² Ibid., 314.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

correlation” – that is, the internal relation – between thought and being, but never to being in isolation from thought and vice versa. At first glance, then, it may seem misguided to attempt to bring Sartre, a phenomenologist, into dialogue with speculative realists, especially since one of the few other points of general agreement among the latter is that phenomenology is a form of *strong correlationism* and, thereby, committed to the view that being, beyond its appearance to us, is not only unknowable but also unthinkable.⁶³ The aims of phenomenology – the discipline that analyzes appearances – are often taken to be antithetical to the realist enterprise by speculative realists, who pursue knowledge of “reality itself,” beyond appearances.⁶⁴ Moreover, as the orthodox view among phenomenologists is that the phenomenological reduction allows Husserl and his followers to circumvent the realism/idealism dispute,⁶⁵ this seems to lend further support to the idea that phenomenology is incompatible with metaphysics.⁶⁶

⁶³ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 38.

⁶⁴ Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re. press, 2011), 3.

⁶⁵ In contemporary phenomenology, it is widely accepted that Husserl’s transcendental idealism is “beyond” both metaphysical realism and idealism. Although this claim may be interpreted in various different ways: as meaning that it is “concerned with quite different matters altogether” and so “lacks metaphysical impact”; as beyond “the traditional alternative between realism and idealism insofar as it actually seeks to combine elements from both positions”; or in the sense that it “makes us realize that both metaphysical realism and subjective idealism (together with a lot of traditional metaphysical heritage) are strictly speaking nonsensical.” See Dan Zahavi, “Metaphysical Neutrality in Logical Investigations,” in *One Hundred Years of Phenomenology: Husserl’s Logical Investigations Revisited*, eds. Dan Zahavi and Frederik Stjernfelt (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 105 fn.

⁶⁶ Not all phenomenologists consider their theoretical framework to prohibit a realist metaphysic, though. Notably, in reply to Tom Sparrow’s insistence that the phenomenological reduction functions to drive “a correlationist wedge between the world as it is represented in consciousness and the world as it stands outside consciousness” in *The End of Phenomenology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 36), Dan Zahavi points out that, “by developing a sophisticated non-representationalist theory of intentionality, Husserl sought to rule out the possibility of a gap between the world that we investigate and the real world,” to allow “global scepticism no purchase,” in “The End of What? Phenomenology vs. Speculative Realism,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24, no. 3 (2016): 289-309, 301. This explains Husserl’s insistence that phenomenology “does not exclude metaphysics as such.” See Husserl, *Cartesian Mediations*, 156. Further, it has even been argued that Husserl can be read as a direct realist of sorts, see Julia Jansen, “Taking a Transcendental Stance:

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

That said, not all speculative realists view their goals as necessarily opposed to those of phenomenology. Sartre's realistic materialism can be usefully be contrasted with Quentin Meillassoux's "speculative materialism" – widely acknowledged as spearheading the speculative realism movement⁶⁷ – since, rather than forego an analysis of the correlation, Meillassoux's formulation of speculative realism pushes what can be discovered within it to the limit, to open thought up to what he calls "the great outdoors": "that outside that is not relative to us,"⁶⁸ which seems equivalent to Sartre's exteriority. By commencing from the contingency of the correlate or what, in phenomenological terms, is called facticity – which phenomenology also reveals to us – Meillassoux argues that there is solid ground for speculation about what lies beyond the correlation from within it by deriving the conclusion that facticity is itself an absolute fact, not merely another contingent fact, from the fact of its appearance. Counting against the idea that phenomenology must be committed to transcendental idealism, Meillassoux's speculative realism illustrates how phenomenology could, potentially, provide a foundation for realism by presenting facticity as a real condition for appearances.⁶⁹ The degree to which Meillassoux's realist project is successful does not concern us here, what is important for our concerns is that his approach to regaining access to reality resembles Sartre's in two important respects. One, it commences from within the correlation (or ex-istence). Two, it is rationalistic insofar as it aims to derive claims about reality from the certainties that

Anti-Representationalism and Direct Realism in Kant and Husserl," in *Husserl und die klassische deutsche Philosophie*, eds. Faustino Fabianelli and Sebastian Luft (New York: Springer, 2014), 79-92.

⁶⁷ Meillassoux uses the term "speculative materialism" to describe his own position in *After Finitude*, but he is customarily acknowledged as one of the fountainheads of speculative realism. He has, however, attempted to distance himself from it in more recent years. See Sparrow, *The End of Phenomenology*, 147.

⁶⁸ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 7.

⁶⁹ See Lorenzo Girardi, "Phenomenological Metaphysics as Speculative Realism," *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 48, no. 4 (2017): 336-349.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

are given within the correlation. The crucial question, then, is whether Sartre's materialism may be considered a form of speculative realism in virtue of its similarity to Meillassoux's realism.

What may be considered the "litmus test" for whether a phenomenologist has succeeded in moving beyond the correlation, at least insofar as Meillassoux is concerned, is whether they can admit a contemporary scientific account of the provenance of the "arche-fossil," defined as any material "indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life" and, therefore, consciousness.⁷⁰ Meillassoux argues that:

Confronted with the arche-fossil . . . every variety of correlationism is exposed as an extreme idealism, one that is incapable of admitting that what science tells us about these occurrences of matter independent of humanity effectively occurred as described by science. And our correlationist then finds herself dangerously close to contemporary creationists: those quaint believers who assert today . . . that the earth is no more than 6,000 years old, and who, when confronted with the much older dates arrived at by science, reply unperturbed that God created at the same time as the earth 6,000 years ago those radioactive compounds that seem to indicate that the earth is much older than it is.⁷¹

Clearly, Sartre's materialism fails Meillassoux's fossil test because of its commitment to deriving claims about being (both ontological and metaphysical) only from the certain evidence that phenomenological reflection delivers. However, there are

⁷⁰ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 10.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

good reasons to reject this test as the ultimate test for realism. Not only does it seem to demand too much of realism – namely, that it grant us epistemic access to reality *and* prehistoric reality – it also passes over the point that scientific hypotheses about the origins of the arche-fossil are different from many others, such as “this piece of lithium will burn red,” in one very important respect: their truth or falsity can never be demonstrated, only their likelihood. We cannot, in all certainty, rule out the possibility that the arche-fossil *could have* come to be structured as it is by means other than those suggested by the empirical evidence. It could, for example, have been planted on earth by an evil demon, experimenting aliens, or even God 6,000 years ago! Although these hypotheses do not mesh well with what we do know about “reality,” scientific theories about the origins of the arche-fossil can never meet the standard of certainty required for a phenomenological proof. The acceptance of what science tells us about ancestral events that pre-exist our ex-istence, then, can only have its basis in *faith* – faith in the accuracy of contemporary scientific hypotheses about a “then” that was never given to any human consciousness.⁷²

So, even though Sartre fails Meillassoux’s test for realism, he believes that he can build his materialism on more robust ground. If he is right that we can rationally derive materialism from the apodictic certainty of the pre-reflective thought, then there is no need to ground materialism in speculation or in merely probable evidence (even very

⁷² Meillassoux could respond to this by arguing that his leap of faith is the lesser of two evils, since he maintains that strong correlationism paves the way for fideism by justifying “belief’s claim to be the *only* means of access to the absolute,” which makes all beliefs about the absolute equally permissible. *Ibid.*, 46. Indeed, a primary aim of his speculative project is to provide a rational refutation of fideism. An important implication of this paper, though, is that this aim may be equally well served by a Sartre’s derivation of the existence of an exteriority from the phenomenology of the internal relation between thought and being.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

highly probable evidence). Sartre cannot therefore be ranked among the speculative realists because he simply refuses to speculate. But does that mean that he's not a realist?

V

How are we to evaluate the success of Sartre's materialism as a defense of realism? It certainly seems strange to hold that "any realism requires" us to limit ourselves to affirming "that the being-in-itself of human activity . . . is an absolute within its own sector and in its own place," as Sartre does.⁷³ But then he also cautions that we must understand the practical field of human-reality as an interiority that produces itself within exteriority if we are to prevent it from being "engulfed in ideality, dream and epiphenomenalism."⁷⁴ The thought here is that the only acceptable "realism" is a materialism that can both accommodate what phenomenology teaches us about human-reality and affirm the existence of a reality that is independent of us. And Sartre's materialism does both these things. On the one hand, it holds that human-reality is the only "reality" for us and, on the other, it holds that there is an inhuman exteriority to human-reality whose existence can be detected from our position within it. Sartre's materialism is not a full-blooded realism, though, because it denies that we have any epistemic access to reality beyond being able to know that it exists outside our "reality," for only its existence can be derived from the embodied apprehension of the "drift" of the practico-inert in mortality consciousness. As such, Sartre's materialism can only offer a minimal account of reality and it cannot affirm that we perceive objects as they really are. Nonetheless, it makes significant progress toward realism by deriving the existence of a reality beyond ours from the analysis of a

⁷³ Sartre, *Critique*, Vol. 2, 324.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 325.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

specific form of consciousness, and it could potentially inspire more robust defenses of realism.

This potential can be brought out by contrasting Sartre's materialism with *hermeneutic realism*, which responds to, and opposes, speculative realism. To take one influential example, consider the "meta-metaphysical nihilism" (MMN, hereafter) of Markus Gabriel. Gabriel describes MMN as a form of ontological realism because it opposes radical constructivism and ontological idealism through its affirmation that "domain-like field-structures" have an existence that is independent of our agreed criteria for identifying them.⁷⁵ It aims to show that metaphysical concerns about a real world beyond appearances are redundant because the difference between the objects themselves and their "senses" is "functional and not substantive."⁷⁶ This is to say that objects' appearances are as "real" as the objects themselves, since the "senses" objects take on for us are not appearances apart from "reality" but part of its fabric. Due to its incorporation of both objects and senses into its concept of "reality," Gabriel situates MMN in the middle ground between a metaphysical realism that seeks to gain knowledge of the "world without spectators" and a constructivism that is solely concerned with "the world of the spectators."⁷⁷ To be sure, MMN may be considered "realistic," like Sartre's materialism, as it denies that "reality" is a totality independent of our experience,⁷⁸ grants

⁷⁵ Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁸ Sartre's *Critique* theorizes human-reality is a totalization in-progress: something that totalizes itself as opposed to something that is totalized from without. Similarly, Gabriel dismisses the idea that "reality" can be fruitfully conceived of as a totality and suggests it has the quality of "incompleteness" because of our continual involvement and adaptation of it. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 18.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

us direct access to “reality,”⁷⁹ and embraces epistemological pluralism.⁸⁰ However, MMN denies that there are any real external conditions for our human-reality, which makes it an anti-metaphysical position rather than a minimally metaphysical position. So, although Sartre’s materialism occupies the same middle ground as MMN between realism and constructivism, it is much closer to realism.

Further, it is worth noting that Sartre’s initial existentialism has been read to expound a form of proto postmodernism.⁸¹ And if postmodernism is understood as a system of thought that puts us in direct contact with the obscene incarnation of “the Thing,” in contrast to modernism, which emphasizes that “the intersubjective machine, works as well if the Thing is lacking,”⁸² then this reading is apt. This interpretation of postmodernism draws upon the Lacanian concept of “the Thing” (*das Ding*) as “dumb reality”: that which is the “beyond-of-the-signified” and thus unknowable.⁸³ The Lacanian Thing can be interpreted as that which is directly encountered through Sartrean nausea. Nausea has a technical sense in the context of Sartre’s phenomenological ontology, where

⁷⁹ Gabriel dismisses the skeptical argument from hallucination in a similar manner to Sartre: by emphasizing the way that hallucinations can be open to reality. Just as Sartre holds that hallucinators can always realize that the content of their hallucination is unreal if they are able to subject them to phenomenological analysis, Gabriel argues that hallucinations can be open to reality by providing the example of Laura, a neuroscientist and expert on hallucinations who can tell when she is hallucinating. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁸⁰ Gabriel’s acceptance of a “plurality of real worlds” entails that there is no objective perspective on “reality” and, hence, no single correct apprehension of the sense of any part of it. *Ibid.*, 16. Sartre’s “dialectical nominalism” has the same implication as it holds that the historical dialectic is constituted by “a multiplicity of totalizing individualities,” as opposed to a singular reality that transcends the praxis of individuals. See Sartre, *Critique*, Vol. 1, 37.

⁸¹ See Tilottama Rajan, *Deconstruction and the Reminders of Phenomenology: Sartre, Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) and Nick F. Fox, *The New Sartre: Explorations in Postmodernism* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

⁸² Slavov Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 145.

⁸³ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book VII, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 54-5.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

it is defined as consciousness's "non-positional apprehension of a colorless contingency" and of oneself as a "*de facto*" being.⁸⁴ It is experienced through "a *dull* and distanceless taste that accompanies me even in my efforts to escape from it" because it is "my taste;" it is a revolting self-awareness that continually reveals my body as an object that transcends my awareness of it. As Tilottama Rajan puts it, Sartrean nausea is an encounter with the body as "the exteriority of the inside."⁸⁵ To my mind, this highlights an important continuity between Sartre's theorization of nausea in *Being and Nothingness* and his analysis of mortality consciousness in the *Critique*. Both nausea and mortality consciousness are direct encounters with the Thing in each of us. The "pure in-itself" of the body is the non-positional object of nausea and this object is equivalent to a "corpse" for Sartre insofar as it figures a body that is not lived.⁸⁶ Mortality consciousness can be understood as what happens when this same aspect of the body – its "corpse aspect," if you will – becomes the positional object of consciousness.

Like other postmodernist and proto-postmodernist thinkers, Sartre destabilizes concepts of epistemic certainty, identity, and univocal meaning by illuminating existence's lack of conformity to logical and conceptual systems; yet he does not abandon epistemology altogether in the manner of Heidegger or his followers. As Sebastian Gardner observes, he does not limit himself to ontology but, rather, uses ontology to show how previous philosophical attempts to address epistemological concerns have gone

⁸⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 52.

⁸⁵ Rajan, *Deconstruction and the Reminders of Phenomenology*, 71.

⁸⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 464.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

wrong⁸⁷ and, I would add, to provide a solid foundation for at least some metaphysical knowledge.

As the contemporary debate on realism in the continental tradition has given rise to a peculiar dispute between opponents over whose position is the humblest,⁸⁸ and the speculative realists appear to be losing, Sartre's metaphysically minimal materialism has a clear advantage over many contemporary articulations of realism. In breaking out of the longstanding anti-realist tradition in continental philosophy since Kant, speculative realists seem to place too much faith in reason and are frequently accused of hubris in making claims about a reality that transcends us.⁸⁹ They are charged with "(self-)inflationary bombast" on account of their tendency to jump into metaphysical speculation, without giving due attention to the situation of the subject who speculates.⁹⁰ Sartre's materialism is more humble than speculative realism, but bolder than hermeneutic realism since does attempt to deliver some metaphysical knowledge. While its claims to metaphysical knowledge may be minimalistic, they are realistic. This strongly suggests that it represents fecund resource for metaphysical investigations that remains largely untapped, since it affirms the existence of a mind-independent reality from a perspective that is keenly aware of its situation within human-reality.

⁸⁷ Sebastian Gardner, *Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness': A Reader's Guide* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), 59-60.

⁸⁸ Braver, "A Brief History of Continental Realism," 261-2.

⁸⁹ Zahavi, "The End of What?" 301. Alison Assiter also holds that when "speculative realists move from the domain of rationally justified speculation to claims about what we can know to be the case ... they move into a pre-Kantian dogmatism that Kant could easily refute" in "Speculative and Critical Realism," *Journal of Critical Realism* 12, no. 3 (2013): 283-300, 293 here.

⁹⁰ Josh Robinson, "Speculation Upon Speculation; Or, a Contribution to the Critique of Philosophical Economy," in *Credo Credit Crisis: Speculations on Faith and Money*, eds. Laurent Milesi, Christopher J. Müller and Aidan Tynan (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 244.

Penultimate draft. Forthcoming in the *Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 3 (2022). Please cite published version.

In conclusion, this analysis of the development of Sartre's realistic metaphysics reveals Sartre to be unique among the canonical twentieth-century phenomenologists in virtue of pushing the limits of what can be known about the metaphysical conditions for human-reality farther outward than any other.⁹¹ And yet, he is conspicuous by his absence from the metaphysical debate in continental philosophy. The fact that the development of Sartre's metaphysical views is a missing chapter in the history of philosophy is perhaps best explained by the tendency of scholars to concentrate on his initial existentialism. For instance, Tom Sparrow – one of the most influential critics of the phenomenological tradition in the debate – argues that while “the being of the *percipere* and the being of the *percipi*” appear to “exist independently of one another” in Sartre's work, the “evidence for this independence is neither forthcoming nor pursued by Sartre.”⁹² However, we have seen that even though Sartre denies that the being of consciousness (the *percipere*) and its objects (*percipi*) can exist independently of one another, he nevertheless uncovers evidence for the independent existence of an inhuman reality in the second volume of the *Critique* through his phenomenological analysis of mortality consciousness.⁹³

⁹¹ This is with the possible exception of Levinas, whose treatment of death in *On Escape* and *Time and the Other* is similar in important respects to Sartre's, although his conclusions are not materialist in the way that Sartre's are. See Bettina Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2019 Edition), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/levinas/>>.

⁹² Sparrow, *The End of Phenomenology*, 70.

⁹³ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2017 annual conference for the British Society for Phenomenology and at a Cardiff University Philosophy Work-in-Progress event in 2018. I am grateful to the audiences at both events for their comments, and to Jonathan Webber and an anonymous reviewer for their insightful feedback on drafts of this paper.