

“ONE MUST IMAGINE

WHAT ONE DENIES”:

How Sartre Imagines The Imaginary

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Beginning with Plato, the Western tradition of philosophy has prioritized perception over imagination as providing privileged access to being. The image has been treated as a copy or appearance of something which originally exists independently; it is therefore conceived as a deceptive imitation of the so-called “real thing.” Jean-Paul Sartre, in his early work, *The Imaginary*, investigates this historical division from a phenomenological standpoint. In a preliminary remark to Part I of the text, Sartre outlines his goal there as an effort “to describe the great ‘irrealizing’ function of consciousness, or ‘imagination,’ and its noematic correlate, the imaginary.”<sup>1</sup> Following Husserl, he disavows the empirical tradition of thinkers like Hume who understood images as “small imitations” of real things located within a passive consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he conceives the image as an intentional act of consciousness in relation to its object. More specifically, he describes it as “a certain way in which consciousness presents to itself an object.”<sup>3</sup> In what will be a continual engagement with his predecessors, Sartre hopes to reenvision the imagination from a Husserlian perspective as a way consciousness relates to objects by making them “irreal,” designating the irreal objective domain “the imaginary” in the process.

Despite Sartre’s explicitly nontraditional view regarding the image, however, the very formulation of his project assumes the priority of something “real” to be “irrealized.” Thus, metaphysical considerations are clearly supporting his theoretical framework from the outset, however much he claims to be operating within the bounds of the transcendental reduction. And yet, Sartre’s project does not merely culminate in a series of contradictions as detailed in the relatively scarce commentary on this text; rather, something more happens through Sartre’s work as he undertakes the project.<sup>4</sup> Though he does not recognize the implications of his investigation at first and at times outright denies the inevitability of his findings, Sartre’s thinking nonetheless succeeds in nihilating the traditional thing-image binary.<sup>5</sup> In effect, he imagines something other than his situatedness within the philosophical reality of his time. As will become clear, this thought could only occur spontaneously, for the advent of the imaginary is not produced in an act of will. Accordingly, this essay attempts to trace the movements of Sartre’s project in its transformative process.

For the sake of conceptual lucidity, it is divided into three “moments” which parallel Sartre’s own accounts of perception, willed imagination, and spontaneous imagination. In the first moment, Sartre provides a relatively straightforward phenomenological analysis of the traditional distinction between perception and imagination. In the second, it becomes clear that Sartre’s investigations trouble this opposition, but he resists his findings, leading him to logical inconsistencies. Finally, in the last moment, Sartre affirms the inevitable conclusions of his project in a recounting that undoes and re-solves what has gone before.

## Philosophical Reality: Imagination and Perception

Sartre's preliminary remarks implicitly uphold a distinction between what is "real" and what he calls "irreal."<sup>6</sup> Initially, he accounts for this opposition through his analysis of the difference between the perceiving and imaging consciousnesses. Perceiving consciousness observes the object by "making a tour" since "though it enters whole" into perception, the object is given only "one side at a time."<sup>7</sup> Because it cannot be observed in its entirety from any given vantage point, Sartre explains, "I must *learn* objects, which is to say, multiply the possible points of view of them."<sup>8</sup> The object is therefore "the synthesis of all these appearances," rendering perception "a phenomenon of an infinity of aspects."<sup>9</sup> Using Husserl's cube example, he explains that it is only possible to see three sides at a time, so one is unable to ascertain that the cube is truly a cube until she has observed it from a variety of different profiles in succession, confirming that it actually has six sides. "The cube is indeed present to me, I can touch it, see it," he observes, "but I can never see it except in a certain way, which calls for and excludes at the same time an infinity of different aspects."<sup>10</sup>

The imaging consciousness by contrast is limited. According to Sartre, one no longer needs to "make a tour of it" because the image is given immediately in its entirety.<sup>11</sup> Whereas in perception, objects are slowly learned through observation, images are given whole as they are and are therefore not learned at all. Providing another example, this time of a sheet of paper on a table, Sartre discerns that "[e]ach new orientation of my attention, of my analysis, reveals to me a new detail: the upper edge of the sheet is slightly warped, the end of the third line is dotted, etc. But I can keep an image in view as long as I want: I will never find anything there but what I put there."<sup>12</sup> This leads Sartre to characterize perception as an "infinity of relations" and "a kind of *overflowing* in the world of 'things'" whereas he regards the image as having "a kind of essential poverty."<sup>13</sup> The image's elements maintain only a few relations between themselves and do not maintain a relation to the world at all. According to Sartre, consciousness has to present the object of the image to itself as if it were the object of perception, and because of this aspect of its presentation, the image's "contents retain, like a phantom, a sensible opacity," only *seeming* to be an object of observation.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, he further maintains that the image differs from perception in that while perception can mislead and be corrected upon further observation, the image is "a certainty."<sup>15</sup> This deceptively observational quality of the image leads Sartre to call "the attitude in relation to the object of the image ... '*quasi-observation*.'"<sup>16</sup>

The relationship between perception and imagination continues to prove important for Sartre's analysis in the first part of *The Imaginary* since the knowledge one obtains from perception makes imagination possible. This is because here he understands the image as a synthesis of the concrete knowledge one already has of perceived objects with elements which are "more properly representative."<sup>17</sup> Clarifying this somewhat in the subsequent chapter, he defines the image as an act of consciousness "that aims in its corporeality at an absent or nonexistent object, through a physical or psychic content, that is given not as itself but in the capacity of 'analogical representative' of the object aimed at."<sup>18</sup> From the "ground of perception," imaging consciousness makes objects which are not present to perception appear by using "a certain matter that acts as an *analogon*, as an equivalent of perception."<sup>19</sup> Although a "sensible residue" remains of the perceived object, Sartre insists that the image is characterized by a transcendence with respect to perception; it represents sensible qualities "in its own way."<sup>20</sup> Sartre's understanding of the image as transcendent, however, somewhat counterintuitively limits imaging consciousness. He explains: "The object as imaged is therefore contemporary with the consciousness I have of it and is exactly determined by that consciousness: it includes in itself nothing but what I am conscious of; but, inversely, everything that constitutes my consciousness finds its correlate in the object."<sup>21</sup> Hence, the imaged object's existence is exhausted in the consciousness which posits it. It is nothing outside of that consciousness, and it exists only in so far as that consciousness is positing it. At the same time, though "inversely," that which constitutes the imaging consciousness – the *analogon*, which corresponds to the perceived object – also correlates to the object of the image. Thus, consciousness first must learn objects through acts of perception, only after which can it combine that knowledge with certain peculiar sensible qualities to represent to itself the object as imaged. For Sartre then, perception exhibits a transcendental priority with respect to imagination.

Despite the dissimilarities he attributes to the perceiving and imaging consciousnesses, Sartre holds that the same objects can be either imaged or perceived. Rejecting any theory of consciousness which would posit a world of images apart from a world of things, he claims that "every object is susceptible to functioning as a present reality or as an image."<sup>22</sup> For Sartre, "[t]he two worlds" are instead "the imaginary and the real," and they are "constituted by the same objects."<sup>23</sup> Thus, the "attitude of consciousness" and not its object distinguishes perception from imagination.<sup>24</sup> This distinction allows Sartre to make further developments in Part III of *The Imaginary*, where he reveals "the image and the perception" as representations of "the two great irreducible attitudes of consciousness."<sup>25</sup> "It follows" from this, he infers, "that they exclude one another."<sup>26</sup> Imaging consciousness corresponds to an annihilation of perceiving consciousness and vice versa. "As long as I look at this table," Sartre explains,

I cannot form an image of Pierre; but if all at once, the irreal Pierre surges up before me, the table that is under my eyes vanishes, leaves the scene. So these two objects, the real table and the irreal Pierre, can only alternate as correlates of radically distinct consciousnesses: how could the image, under these conditions, contribute to the forming of consciousness?<sup>27</sup>

Sartre thus disagrees with contemporary psychological theories which would introduce images into perception, asserting that “I always *perceive more and otherwise* than I see.”<sup>28</sup> While certain formal structures of perception explain why one perceives otherwise than one sees, Sartre thinks that the way intentionality constitutes objects can explain why one perceives more than one sees. In aiming at a given object, “a mass of empty intentions” determine that object through relations between aspects of it that *are* present to consciousness and aspects of it which *are not* present to consciousness.<sup>29</sup> Sartre employs an example of an ashtray, which perceiving consciousness constitutes in part through a visible upper face and in part through an invisible underneath that is structurally implied. This act can give rise to an image of the underside as a secondary phenomenon; however, he insists that the empty intentions involved in perception are “radically heterogeneous with imaging consciousness.”<sup>30</sup> They “posit nothing separately” and “are limited to projecting onto the object, as a constituting structure, barely determined qualities,” which are “almost possibilities of development.”<sup>31</sup> There is, he maintains, something about the structure of the perceived object itself that determines the way consciousness constitutes it, and further, the aspects of the object that consciousness is unable to present to itself make the object’s constitution possible. By contrast, Sartre claims, imaging consciousness detaches the empty intentions and posits them “for themselves, to be *made explicit* and to be *degraded*.”<sup>32</sup> He thus characterizes the image as finite and static, maintaining its opposition to a potential perceptual overflowing.

## The Will to Imagine the Irreal and the Real

Though Sartre characterizes perception as an overflowing of consciousness, he nonetheless maintains that consciousness is able to possess the objects it presents to itself in this act. By contrast and despite the apparently limited nature of the image in Sartre’s account, possession is impossible for imaging consciousness because the imaged object is always “affected with the character of irreality.”<sup>33</sup> This distinction leads Sartre to analyze the irreal object as such, observing that even though it is indeed present to consciousness, the object’s irreality renders it “out of reach” at the same time.<sup>34</sup> As a result, he thinks, one can only act on the irreal object in an irreal manner. “Renouncing being served by my own hands, resorting to phantom hands that will deliver irreal blows to this face,” Sartre muses, “to act on irreal objects, I must duplicate myself, *irrealize* myself.”<sup>35</sup> He contends here that “I” cannot act on the

imaged object; rather, consciousness must also image itself in order to act on the object that it has also imaged, creating an imaginary double of itself in order to act in the imaginary. Due to its “irreality,” the image is not only out of the reach of any “I” who would attempt to possess it, but what’s more, no “real” perceiving unified “I” is capable of willfully acting on the image.

Sartre further undermines any causal relationship between the “I” and the will with respect to the image. Irreal objects, he says, “do not claim an action” or “a conduct of me” because they “wait” in “pure passivity” without making demands.<sup>36</sup> “[T]hey are neither causes nor effects,” acquiring the “feeble” lives they have from the sheer spontaneity of consciousness.<sup>37</sup> The image thus appears to consciousness spontaneously rather than through any willfully productive act therein; its appearance does not require any action on the part of the consciousness in which it happens to appear. And yet, Sartre also holds that the image is an *act* of consciousness. The irreal is neither an automatic tendency of the object nor a mechanical reproduction of the mind. Citing Pierre Janet’s work on psychasthenia, Sartre affirms an apparently incompatible claim – that “the obsession is *willed*, reproduced by a kind of giddiness, by a spasm of spontaneity.”<sup>38</sup> Refusing to take into account “distance and difficulties,” for Sartre, the act of imagination is characterized by “something of the imperious and the infantile.”<sup>39</sup> Consciousness produces images, he maintains, in an effort “to *make* the object of one’s thought, the thing one desires, appear in such a way that one *can* take possession of it.”<sup>40</sup> In what he calls “an incantation,” imaging consciousness “strives to obtain these objects in their entirety,” despite the impossible nature of such a task.<sup>41</sup> According to Sartre, this means that irreal objects do not appear in the same way that real objects appear in perception. While the object as perceived is always given “from a *point of view*,” the object as imaged is “‘presentified’ under a totalitarian aspect” from “several sides at once” in an attempt to make it appear as it is in itself.<sup>42</sup> Sartre likens the irreal object to a child’s drawing of a silhouette, in which “the face is seen in profile, and yet both eyes are drawn.”<sup>43</sup> At this point in the text, Sartre clearly begins to reach contradictory findings. He has shown that consciousness cannot produce the image in a willful act; at the same time, however, he has asserted that consciousness produces the image in a willful though ultimately unsuccessful effort to possess the object of desire.

Rather than attempting to resolve the matter here, Sartre continues with his investigation. The foregoing analysis of the irreal object leads him to specify its world. For Sartre, however, speaking of a world of irreal objects is “an inexact expression” used only “for greater convenience.”<sup>44</sup> According to him, “a world is a dependent whole, in which each object has its determinate place and maintains relations with the other objects.”<sup>45</sup> On his view, the objects composing it make a world what it is according to a “double condition”: the objects “must be strictly individuated” and “they must be in balance with an environment.”<sup>46</sup> Because irreal objects fail to fulfill this double condition, there cannot, technically speaking, be an irreal world. To begin, irreal objects are not strictly individuated in the way that real objects

are since “there is at once too much and not enough in them.”<sup>47</sup> Sartre observes that these “evasive” and “ambiguous ... phantom-objects” are “at once themselves and things other than themselves,” supporting “contradictory qualities.”<sup>48</sup> This ambiguity is essential to the irreal object, and Sartre speculates that because it is never really itself, the “suspect” nature of the object as imaged haunts consciousness and elicits fear in the imagination. Despite his recognition that a perceived tiger would indeed frighten its perceiver, Sartre finds something “eminently reassuring” in a “clear and distinct perception.”<sup>49</sup> He seems to indicate that at least when one perceives a tiger lunging toward her, she can rest assured that the tiger is really there (and perhaps protect herself). The imaged tiger, however, is “too much”; one never can identify it as such, for its nature is to contain a multiplicity of alternate associations. Here, Sartre makes clear that the irreal is not to be trusted. There is a truth to be found in perception, but imagination is deceptive. This puts him squarely within the age-old tradition of Western philosophy, which situates truth in the “real thing” perceived with clarity and distinctness and associates the image with a false resemblance.

Sartre acknowledges that the irreal object admits of a certain depth because of its ambiguity; nevertheless, he is quick to insist again on the “essential poverty” of the irreal object due to the sparsity of its spatio-temporal determinations: it is “not enough” to “constitute a strict individuality.”<sup>50</sup> For, he observes,

[t]his object that I pretend to produce in its totality and as an absolute is basically reduced to a few meagre relations, a few spatial and temporal determinations, which, without doubt, have a sensible aspect, but which are *stunted*, which contain nothing more than I have explicitly posited—aside from that vague ambiguity of which I spoke.<sup>51</sup>

Again, Sartre’s investigation here arrives at conclusions of which his theoretical framework cannot admit. In analyzing the irreal object, he reveals that it cannot easily be distinguished from the real object in terms of magnitude. Just as the perceived object opens upon an infinite surplus with respect to what is actually present to consciousness, the imaged object’s essential ambiguity makes it impossible to limit its individuality to any particular determination. Still, Sartre maintains his prior distinction by emphasizing the difference between the empty intentions necessary to constitute the perceived object and the detached and separately posited existence of the image. One knows, he argues, that any new qualities one might attribute to the irreal object “are not already *in* the object in an implicit state.”<sup>52</sup> At “any instant,” Sartre insists, one can “stunt” the irreal object’s existence whereas one is despite oneself “carried along” to observing the real object’s implicit qualities.<sup>53</sup> It is therefore implied that the existence of the real object carries with it a kind of independent necessity. One cannot help but constitute it with certain qualities because it “really” has those qualities. The irreal object by contrast is characterized by contingency insofar as Sartre insists despite his contrary findings that one constitutes the irreal object however one pleases, rendering it dependent upon the consciousness which constitutes it for its existence. Despite his claim to

be conducting a phenomenological investigation, Sartre is clearly relying upon certain traditional metaphysical assumptions about the self-sufficiency of substance, which subsists independently from any perceiving consciousness. And yet, the imaginary object does not so easily conform to metaphysical categories due to the ambiguity which Sartre describes as essential to its nature. Like the real object, the irreal object escapes the control of the consciousness which constitutes it.

It is perhaps in light of these inconsistencies that Sartre attempts to differentiate the will from spontaneity. He expects that one could object to his analysis by pointing to the fact that one can make imaged objects move.<sup>54</sup> In an effort to address this criticism, he reveals that acts of the imaging consciousness can be formed by either the will or a spontaneity which is prior to willing. When an image is formed by the will, he argues, one is unable to move an inanimate image after the fact without destroying the original object. Because the irreal object lacks both a determinate identity and a world which would govern permanence, causal relation, and interaction, the willed imaging consciousness is unable to endure change. Any change made to the image therefore results in a different image or what is the same – the disintegration of the initial image. Hence, in order to will an irreal object to move, Sartre holds that one must have already constituted it as moving. “Nevertheless,” he asserts, “what the will cannot obtain could be produced by the free spontaneity of consciousness,” such that “[a]n imaging consciousness can appear suddenly” and “can of itself vary freely and conserve for a moment its essential structure.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, the image can undergo transformation when it occurs spontaneously prior to an act of willing, which destroys the irreal object in its attempt to change it.<sup>56</sup> Here, the autonomy of consciousness is clearly undermined. Whereas Sartre has attempted to maintain the image in a relation of dependency with respect to consciousness, consciousness itself has again proven to have very little control over the image as it presents it to itself. A willed act of imaging consciousness is unable to change the object it posits, and a spontaneous act of imaging consciousness occurs independently of the will. Sartre accordingly returns his attention to the will, which “quickly reclaims its rights” over the spontaneity of imaging consciousness; for as soon as “one wants to develop the image” and attempts to will some variation of it, “everything is broken.”<sup>57</sup> “Thus,” he concludes,

I can produce at will — or almost — the irreal object that I want, but I cannot make of it what I want. If I want to transform it, I must in fact create other objects; and between them there will necessarily be holes. From this, the image acquires a discontinuous, jerky character: it appears, disappears, reappears and is no longer the same; it is immobile and it is in vain that I try to give it movement: I can succeed only by producing a movement without the moving body that I attribute to it in vain. Then all of a sudden it reappears in motion. But all of these changes do not come from it: just as the movements of this beautiful violet spot which remains in my eyes after I have looked at the electric lamp, do not come from the lamp but from the spontaneous and willed movements of my eyeballs.<sup>58</sup>

That which Sartre attributes to the image here – an impoverished, sparse character – seems to result not from the nature of the image as such but from the intervention and failure of the



will to determine it. The irreal object as it spontaneously arises before consciousness, however, is not necessarily so impoverished. For as Sartre has already shown, in spontaneity the image can appear and transform with continuity. Given this possibility, Sartre's electric lamp example seems more problematic. One can stare at a lamp to intentionally produce a lovely violet spot in one's eye, but often an unintended or "spontaneous" glance can produce the same effect without one's having willed it. In the case of the image, however, the irreal object manifests differently when it is subjected to the will than when it arises spontaneously.

Nevertheless, Sartre both maintains that the irreal object depends upon consciousness for its existence and situation and upholds his earlier inference that it does not fulfill the second condition necessary to justify the existence of an irreal world. On his view, the irreal object is out of balance with its environment because "it is presented without any solidarity with any other object."<sup>59</sup> In fact, Sartre contends that "it has no environment" but is rather "independent" and "isolated."<sup>60</sup> For him, irreal objects "are always given as indivisible totalities" or "absolutes" which confront consciousness as "strange beings that escape the laws of the world."<sup>61</sup> Whereas perceptual consciousness constitutes its objects as simultaneously interacting in a world regulated by causal laws, imaging consciousness does not require the acceptance of any regularity or normativity as a result of the existence it constitutes. The image is, according to Sartre, "*without consequence*" since "it acts on nothing and nothing acts on it."<sup>62</sup> Thus, even when an imaging consciousness contains more than one object, it cannot be said to constitute a world since objects do not interact with one another according to physical laws. For instance, he characterizes the imaging consciousness as "constantly surrounded by a cortège of phantom-objects," which can appear as real objects would in an act of perceiving consciousness despite retaining their distinct character as imaged.<sup>63</sup> The imaginary cortège can, however, "just as easily" contain phantom "virtues, kinds," and "relations," which he does not associate with perception.<sup>64</sup> Despite the inconsistencies he finds in his account, Sartre thus continues to maintain a radical break between the irreal and the real.

Yet, while he renders illegitimate the imaginary world envisioned in Part I, these peculiarities of the image lead him to conclusions that he is unable to sustain at this point in the work. He claims, for example, that due to their disregard for worldly laws, irreal objects provide consciousness with "a perpetual 'elsewhere,'" inviting consciousness to escape the world by offering to consciousness something other than "the constraints of the world."<sup>65</sup> He ventures that irreal objects "seem to be presented as a negation of the condition of *being in the world*, as an anti-world."<sup>66</sup> In a note following this proposition, however, he denies that this is truly the case; it is an escape in appearance only. Gesturing toward his conclusion, he insists that in reality, "every image ... must be constituted 'on the ground of the world.'"<sup>67</sup>

## Sartre's Spontaneous Conclusion: "Consciousness and Imagination"

Sartre begins his concluding remarks with a metaphysical question, one which "has been gradually disclosed by these studies of phenomenological psychology": "what are the characteristics that can be attributed to consciousness on the basis of the fact that it is consciousness capable of imagining?"<sup>68</sup> The question can, he notes, be reformulated from the standpoint of "critical analysis": "what must consciousness in general be if it is true that the constitution of the image is always possible?"<sup>69</sup> Although he thinks that this question can best be broached from a phenomenological standpoint, Sartre expressly capitulates to his Kantian-minded readers and opts for a "more oblique method" of investigation. In this vein, he reformulates the question once more: "what must consciousness be in order that it can imagine?"<sup>70</sup> In other words, Sartre plans to undertake a transcendental analysis. Accordingly, he reveals that he will relate the results of that analysis to those of Descartes' *cogito* in order to compare the imaging consciousness' conditions of possibility to those of consciousness in general.

As he embarks upon this plan, however, he returns to a phenomenological perspective as he reminds the reader that any object of consciousness corresponds to "a *thesis* or positing of existence."<sup>71</sup> At this point, he reviews and elaborates upon the distinction between imagination and perception that he has upheld throughout *The Imaginary*. The theses of the imaging and realizing consciousnesses are, he maintains, "radically different" insofar as "the type of existence of the imaged object *in so far as it is imaged* differs in nature from the type of existence of the object grasped as real."<sup>72</sup> The imaged object is posited as absent, and it is this "fundamental absence" or "essential nothingness" which, for Sartre, continues to differentiate the imaged object from the object of perception.<sup>73</sup> This leads him to reformulate his guiding question once more: "What therefore must a consciousness be in order that it can successively posit *real* objects and *imaged* objects?"<sup>74</sup> Such a question, he thinks, requires that one "make an essential observation" regarding once more the "difference between being *aimed at emptily* and being *given-as-absent*."<sup>75</sup> To illustrate this difference, he provides an example of a tapestry which is partially hidden behind a chair. As he gazes at it, consciousness presents the tapestry's hidden designs as continuing behind the legs of the chair and therefore as existing but veiled. "It is *in the manner in which I grasp what is given* that I posit as real what is not given," he concludes. Then he explains what he means by "real":

Real in the same sense as that which is given, as that which confers on it its signification and its very nature. ... To perceive this or that real datum is to perceive it on the ground of reality *as a whole*. This reality is not the object of any special act of my attention but it is co-present as the essential condition of the existence of the reality currently perceived.<sup>76</sup>

It thus remains necessary for Sartre to posit an independently-existing reality apart from consciousness as the condition for the possibility of realizing consciousness. In order for consciousness to make a given reality present, there must exist some reality that is not dependent upon it such that consciousness can from that ground posit particular entities as real. This formulation quite explicitly reveals a metaphysical inheritance based on a traditional concept of substance albeit with a manifestly Kantian flavor.

Such a theoretical framework can only oppose the image to the real in a binary fashion. Thus, Sartre characterizes “the imaging act” as “the inverse of the realizing act.”<sup>77</sup> In order to imagine the hidden parts of the tapestry, he explains, one must “isolate” the empty intentions which give sense to the tapestry as perceived and “give” them to oneself as they are “in themselves.”<sup>78</sup> This act, however, presents the tapestry’s aspects as absent. “Certainly, they really exist over there under the armchair,” Sartre admits, “but as I aim at them there where they are not given to me, I grasp them as a nothingness for me.”<sup>79</sup> “Thus the imaginative act is at once *constituting*, *isolating*, and *annihilating*.”<sup>80</sup> At this point, he is able to “grasp the essential condition for a consciousness to be able to *image*.”<sup>81</sup> It must, he claims, “have the possibility of positing a thesis of irreality.”<sup>82</sup> For Sartre, this means that “consciousness must be able to form and posit objects affected by a certain character of nothingness in relation to the totality of reality.”<sup>83</sup> To explain this, Sartre distinguishes between a portrait as real and the same portrait as imaged. The material canvas with its paint and frame, etc., serves as an analogon for the imaged object, such that, were the real portrait to burn, the image would remain unaffected. In relation to the totality of the real then, the “irreal object” appears “out of reach.”<sup>84</sup>

Thus, the real and the irreal are not merely distinct in terms of the attitude of the consciousness that posits them; more than that, they radically negate each other in their constituting acts. “To posit an image,” Sartre infers, “is therefore to hold the real at a distance, to be freed from it, in a word, to deny it.”<sup>85</sup> Understood thus, Sartre uncovers a “double-condition for consciousness to be able to imagine.”<sup>86</sup> Consciousness must be able “to both posit the world in its synthetic totality” and at the same time “posit the imagined object as out of reach in relation to that synthetic whole.”<sup>87</sup> Sartre defines the world as “the totality of the real, so far as it is grasped by consciousness as a synthetic *situation* for that consciousness.”<sup>88</sup> To posit the image as out of reach with respect to the world thus conceived is for Sartre also to “posit the world as a nothingness in relation to the image.”<sup>89</sup> Hence, the real and the irreal are here conceived as mutually exclusive. In order to think one, the other must be negated.

This opposition leads Sartre to further considerations. “It is impossible,” he says, “for [consciousness] ever to produce anything other than the real” if it is mired in the world and unable to escape.<sup>90</sup> Consciousness must instead be capable of “standing back” from the world, therein negating or “nihilating” it.<sup>91</sup> But moreover, for consciousness to be able to posit the world itself as a synthetic whole in the first place, consciousness must be able to “stand

back” from or nihilate the world; therefore, to constitute the world as world and to nihilate it are “one and the same thing.”<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, consciousness is only capable of such an act from its concrete and lived situatedness within the world. For this reason, any negation of the world is “always the world denied from a certain point of view.”<sup>93</sup> Sartre thus points to the individual consciousness’ situation as “the concrete and precise motivation for the appearance of a certain particular imaginary.”<sup>94</sup> Because consciousness is situated in the world, the world must be grasped as a world where the image is not in order for the image to arise. This allows Sartre to “finally grasp the connection of the unreal to the real.”<sup>95</sup> Because every apprehension of the real as a world is “always, in a sense, free nihilation of the world” from the point of view of an individual consciousness, apprehension of reality “tends of its own accord to end up with the production of unreal objects.”<sup>96</sup> It follows from this, Sartre thinks, that the noematic correlate of a free consciousness “should be the *world* that carries in itself the possibility of negation ... by means of an image.”<sup>97</sup> “Reciprocally” though, negating the world from a particular point of view by means of an image is only possible “on the ground of the world and in connection with that ground.”<sup>98</sup> He thus concludes that “although, by means of the production of the unreal, consciousness can momentarily *appear* delivered from its ‘being-in-the-world,’ on the contrary, this ‘being-in-the-world’ is the necessary condition of imagination.”<sup>99</sup>

Sartre again resists the findings of his investigation. On the basis of his understanding of real objects existing in a world regulated by laws, he clearly discovers that in order for any act of perceiving consciousness to occur, the world must be constituted and therefore also negated. This means that the imagining consciousness as that which can transcend the actual world in creating other possibilities must be involved in order for perceiving consciousness to stand back from the reality of a given situation and posit the world as a whole. While Sartre’s reasoning seems to make obvious the reciprocal role imagination and perception must play in the constitution of both acts of consciousness, he nevertheless maintains perception’s priority as the only legitimate “ground.” Consequently, the image is once more relegated to the status of mere appearance.

Sartre’s analysis does not terminate at this point but rather starts afresh. He goes on to recapitulate his findings and in so doing allows certain inevitabilities that he had previously denied to surface. To begin, he reformulates his guiding question once again, this time in Cartesian terms:

What is the free consciousness, in fact, whose nature is to be consciousness *of* something, but which, for this very reason, constitutes itself in the face of the real and surpasses it at each moment because it cannot be other than ‘being-in-the-world,’ which is to say by living its relation with the real as *situation*, what is it, in fact, if not simply consciousness as it is revealed to itself in the *cogito*?<sup>100</sup>

Recasting the doubt which makes possible Descartes' famed "I think, therefore I am," Sartre reveals the nihilating-constituting act of consciousness that posits the world as at the same time constituting "the apodictic intuition of freedom."<sup>101</sup> The fact that consciousness constitutes itself as situated in a world means that it nihilates the reality of that situatedness in the world in order to constitute it as a totality. In so doing, consciousness surpasses the real in positing it as real since to apprehend the real is to "stand back" from it and view a given situation as a whole. "Being-in-the-world," as Sartre understands it, involves this continuous nihilating-constituting act which posits the real as its situation; it is thus that consciousness lives its relation to the world. Reflecting on this, Sartre reaffirms that consciousness must be free in order to live its relation to the real in this way; consciousness is not mired in its situation but negates and surpasses it in the very act of apprehending it.


Nevertheless, Sartre has throughout the text maintained that consciousness cannot be consciousness of nothing; rather, consciousness as such is always consciousness of something. "Nothingness can be given only as an infrastructure of something," he contends; it is "an experience that is, on principle, given 'with' and 'in.'"<sup>102</sup> Sartre follows Bergson in maintaining that any attempt to conceive "the nothingness of existence *directly* is by nature doomed to fail."<sup>103</sup> And yet as he has shown, any apprehension of the real as situation implies negation. Logically then, Sartre acknowledges that "if the nihilating function belonging to consciousness ... is that which renders the act of imagination possible, it must be added that, reciprocally, this function can be manifested only in an imaging act."<sup>104</sup> It is thus "the appearance of the imaginary before consciousness that allows us to grasp that the nihilation of the world is its essential condition and its primary structure."<sup>105</sup> Since imagination requires negation, he reasons, negation "can only ever be realized in and by an act of imagination."<sup>106</sup> That which is negated, he infers, "cannot be a *reality*, since this would then affirm what is being denied."<sup>107</sup> Yet if something is negated, then the object of negation must be something. Therefore, Sartre deduces that "the object of negation must be posited as imaginary."<sup>108</sup> In other words, "[o]ne must imagine what one denies."<sup>109</sup> For Sartre, "the sense and value" of this insight lies in the fact that "all apprehension of the real as world implies a hidden surpassing towards the imaginary."<sup>110</sup> "[E]very existent," Sartre insists, "as soon as it is posited, is consequently surpassed"; still, "it must be surpassed *towards something*," and this "concrete 'something' towards which the existent is surpassed" Sartre defines as the imaginary.<sup>111</sup> This means that any awareness of *what is* is only possible through its negation, which is at the same time its surpassing toward something other. He concludes that the imagination is "the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom" and that "every concrete and real situation of consciousness in the world is pregnant with the imaginary in so far as it is always presented as surpassing the real."<sup>112</sup> While Sartre maintains that "the unreal is produced outside of the world by a consciousness that *remains in the world*," he recognizes that "in its

turn” the imagination as “a psychological and empirical function” has become “the necessary condition for the freedom of empirical humans in the midst of the world.”<sup>113</sup>

These considerations allow Sartre to bring together his previous analysis of the empty intentions necessary to the constitution of the real object and the unreal, which before was said to be radically distinct and separate from realizing consciousness. Here, he affirms that “the imaginary represents at each moment the implicit sense of the real.”<sup>114</sup> The imaginary act, as he now understands it in its “proper” designation, consists in making the sense of these empty intentions overt. This “specific positing” of what is implicit in the real results in a “collapse of the world,” which becomes “no more than the nihilated ground of the unreal.”<sup>115</sup> The image in its “proper” sense thus corresponds to a willful attempt at subjecting an imagining consciousness to isolation and presentation, which renders a collapse of the world and meaning. Consciousness’ attempt to willfully make present the empty intentions necessary to make sense of the world produces nonsense, a reproduction of certain aspects of a given situation but in accordance with another logic. Nevertheless, the pre-willing spontaneity Sartre discovers earlier in his analysis is clearly involved in making sense of what is given by means of what is absent. Any coherent appearance of the world – including oneself, one’s relations to others and things, one’s present and historical situation, etc. – happens through a spontaneous occurrence which is prior to willful action.

Finally, Sartre arrives at his work’s conclusion regarding the imaginary. “All imaging consciousness,” he explains, “maintains the world as the nihilated ground of the imaginary and reciprocally all consciousness of the world calls and motivates an imaging consciousness as grasping the particular *sense* of the situation.”<sup>116</sup> And yet, he goes on, “[t]he apprehension of nothingness cannot occur by an immediate disclosure”; rather, “it is realized in and by the free succession of consciousnesses, the nothingness is the matter of surpassing the world towards the imaginary. It is such that it is *lived*, without ever being posited for itself.”<sup>117</sup> The imaginary gives significance to a world which is never fully present, resists possession, and cannot be positively comprehended. Essential to this world, therefore, is a nothingness which cannot be immediately disclosed or posited for itself; rather, it is lived. Thus, for Sartre, “there could be no realizing consciousness without imaging consciousness, and vice versa.”<sup>118</sup> “[I]magination,” he affirms, “far from appearing as an accidental characteristic of consciousness, is disclosed as an essential and transcendental condition of consciousness.”<sup>119</sup>

Sartre’s own project in *The Imaginary* can be interpreted in this light. Each surpassing of the tradition amounts to its negation and each time the tradition is negated, it is transformed into something else. Sartre can only apprehend the imaginary from his situatedness within the reality of the history of philosophy, which maintains the image in opposition to the real as its degraded copy; however, the very work of apprehension requires a nihilation of that history and the arrival of its beyond. Each time he denies his discoveries, Sartre is, according to his very text, imagining them. The nothingness which gives sense to

the Western privileging of perception could only be realized through the free succession of Sartre's own conscious writing as he labored through the work which has heralded a thought of *The Imaginary*. This essay has been an attempt to reflect on Sartre's struggle, which is also of course a transcending. 

## Notes

- 1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2010), 3.
- 2 Ibid., 5.
- 3 Ibid., 7.
- 4 For a detailed account of the contradictions which arise in Sartre's analysis, see Edward Casey's "Sartre on Imagination." There, he provides a critique of what he considers to be "three areas of weakness": "the analogon, the relationship between the real and the [irreal], and the relation of imagining to knowing or reflective thinking." According to Casey, the weaknesses in Sartre's text can all be attributed to "an inadequate description of the phenomenon of imagining itself," whose "definitive eidetic analysis" is "confined to the first twenty pages" of *The Imaginary*. Casey also treats the influence of the rationalists on Sartre's theory, which he thinks renders Sartre prey to what he calls an "intellectualist Illusion." Edward S. Casey, "Sartre on Imagination," in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1981), 146–7, 165 (footnote), 158–160.  
  
Paul Ricoeur considers both Sartre's and Gilbert Ryle's theories of imagination in light of Kant's distinction between productive and reproductive imagination. For Ricoeur, both thinkers ultimately fail to treat imagination in its productive capacity, reducing it to the traditional original-copy model constitutive of reproductive imagination. On his reading, Sartre ultimately privileges the picture over fiction, leaving him unable to account for fiction "on its own terms." Paul Ricoeur, "Sartre and Ryle on the Imagination," trans. R. Bradley DeFord, in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1981), 167–173.
- 5 "Nihilation" here follows upon Sartre's own usage, and therefore neither the transcendence of the traditional thing-image binary nor the elimination of difference between the two would fully capture the theoretical implications at work in the deployment of this term. Rather, apprehending the difference between the thing and the image leads to their mutual contamination and prevents privileging one as more originary or essential than the other (as the history of philosophy has considered the thing with respect to the image). The third section of this essay undertakes a more detailed analysis of "nihilation" in this text and the term's importance for interpreting Sartre's project. See "Sartre's Spontaneous Conclusion: 'Consciousness and Imagination.'"
- 6 The French *irréel*, usually translated into English as "unreal," will prove important in Sartre's analysis of the imaginary. This essay keeps with Webber's Anglicization of the French since what is usually indicated by the English word "unreal" does not necessarily capture Sartre's usage. Because his analysis ultimately opens upon a reconsideration of the traditional real-unreal binary, and in particular the impact of what he designates as "irreal" on what is "real," this seems to be a fruitful translation. For more on Webber's translation, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, xxviii.
- 7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 8.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., 9.



12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 10.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 9.

18 Ibid., 20.

19 Ibid., 18. An exhaustive account of the *analogon* in Sartre's *The Imaginary* is not within the scope of this essay. For a defense of this concept which takes into account Sartre's later work on consciousness and temporality, see Cam Clayton's "The Psychological Analogon in Sartre's Theory of the Imagination."

According to Clayton's interpretation, "we should understand the psychological analogon in terms of the embodied materiality of past subjectivity rather than as the retention of an originary, objective presence." Cam Clayton, "The Psychological Analogon in Sartre's Theory of the Imagination," *Sartre Studies International* 17 (2001): 21.

20 Ibid., 53.

21 Ibid., 11.

22 Ibid., 20.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 120.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 121.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 122.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 125.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 126.

39 Ibid., 125.

40 Ibid. (emphasis added).

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 132.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 133.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 134.

55 Ibid., 134–5.

56 Based on this distinction between a willed imaging consciousness and one which occurs spontaneously, Norihide maintains a corresponding difference between what he calls a “voluntary image” and the imaginary. In a footnote, he suggests two aspects of Sartre’s concept of the imaginary: “a creative one – to recall or produce something that is not present – and an apprehensive one – to function in the apprehension of the present real object.” Mori Norihide, “The Image and the Real: A Consideration of Sartre’s Early Views on Art,” *Aesthetics* 16 (2012): 14–15, and 23 (footnote).

According to Stawarska, the distinction (between a willed imaging consciousness and a spontaneous one) corresponds to the influences of Husserl and Janet respectively. She espouses Janet’s clinical research on obsession as “the source of an account of imagination which emphasizes the creative and unrealizing potential of the imagination.” Beata Stawarska, “Defining Imagination: Sartre between Husserl and Janet,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2005): 151.

Given the foregoing analysis of the irreal object, however, it is not clear that Sartre can maintain a strict distinction between the image as willed and the image as spontaneous occurrence. More specifically and based on Sartre’s own account, it is not clear that any image can be willfully produced in the strong sense. While maintaining consciousness’ capacity to produce images, Sartre also demonstrates that any product of consciousness resists the willful control of its creator. “Thus,” he remarks, “I can produce at will – or almost – the irreal object that I want, but I cannot make of it what I want.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 135.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 136.

62 Ibid., 135.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 136. Norihide treats the distinction between what at this point in the text is a necessarily *perceptual* world and an *imaginary* “world” which consequently cannot strictly classify as such. He interprets the imaginary “world” in a metaphorical sense. On Norihide’s reading, the “degradation of knowledge” and “belief” in the irreal object “as if” it were an object of perception results in a “relaxation” of the double-condition necessary to the constitution of a world, changing the quality of consciousness. This change in quality allows consciousness to attribute “worldliness” to the imaginary “world” as an “additional property.” Norihide, “The Image and the Real,” 17–18.

In his concluding remarks, Sartre himself seems to relax his conception of that in which a world consists, allowing for the imaginary production of something beyond the world in which one is situated. This imaginary beyond is certainly other than any given perceptual world of the present. Nonetheless, it is not merely a metaphorical quality attributable to imaginary objects, but a nihilation and potential transformation of that world. More on this in the subsequent section of this essay.

65 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 136.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 201 (footnote).

68 Ibid., 179.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., 180.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 181.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid., 182.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 183.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 184.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

- 89 Ibid.
- 90 Ibid.
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Ibid., 185.
- 95 Ibid.
- 96 Ibid.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Ibid.
- 99 Ibid., 185–6 (emphasis added).
- 100 Ibid., 186.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 Ibid., 187.
- 103 Ibid. (emphasis added).
- 104 Ibid.
- 105 Ibid.
- 106 Ibid., 188.
- 107 Ibid.
- 108 Ibid.
- 109 Ibid.
- 110 Ibid.
- 111 Ibid., 187.
- 112 Ibid.
- 113 Ibid., 186.
- 114 Ibid., 188.
- 115 Ibid.
- 116 Ibid.
- 117 Ibid.
- 118 Ibid.
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