

SARTRE AND IMAGINATION

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Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Psychology of Imagination* has been read for its insightful contributions to the study of the imagination, but I believe that the work has important consequences for Sartre's overall enterprise that have not been generally recognized. Many of the central ideas that come to maturity in Sartre's major work, *Being and Nothingness*, are found here in their germinal form. To prove the point, I would venture to assert that imagination may fruitfully be considered in terms of the later *Being and Nothingness*. That is, it is illuminating to express Sartre's concepts of the image and the imaginative act in terms of the structure of the "for-itself" and the "in-itself." To substantiate this assertion, in this paper I will exposit Sartre's conception of imagination as described in *The Psychology of Imagination* and then show that this early analysis of the imagination can be stated, without violence to it, in terms of the "for-itself" and the "in-itself." Finally, in order to substantiate my claim, a particular act of imaginative consciousness will be analyzed utilizing the structure of the "for-itself" and the "in-itself."

To emphasize the parallels between *Being and Nothingness* and *The Psychology of Imagination*, it is interesting to note that Sartre begins *Being and Nothingness* with a point of controversy, the failure of both the realist and idealist conceptions of being (3-37). And he begins *The Psychology of Imagination* in the same argumentative fashion. Sartre takes issue with the generally-held conviction that imagination is nothing more than poor copy of perception. He contends that images have an existence that is distinct from the existence of objects. In other words, there are two kinds of existence. Something may exist as a thing, or it may exist as a consciousness. We will find that the former is an "in-itself" and the latter is a "for-itself." If one attempts to observe the world in a search for images, it soon becomes apparent that one cannot perceive images in the same way that one perceives

objects. This phenomenon is due to the fact that images do not have "object" or objective existence. Thus images cannot be weak imitations of perceptions since perceptions may be only of objects.

Images exhibit four main characteristics that differentiate them from objects: (1) the image is a form of consciousness; (2) unlike objects, images are not subject to observation in a perceptual mode, but they do exhibit the phenomenon of quasi-observation; (3) the imaginative consciousness posits its object as a nothingness; and (4) the image is spontaneous, that is, consciousness creates and maintains the image, yet it is not posited as an object per se. An image is a consciousness and is therefore "for-itself," whereas everything that is not consciousness is an "in-itself."

Sartre has thus determined that the image cannot be defined in terms of perception. It is appropriately defined by consciousness. But what about consciousness itself? Sartre does not consider this question in full in *The Psychology of Imagination*. He broaches the metaphysical question that is at the heart of consciousness, but the issue is not adequately explored until the publication of *Being and Nothingness*. Nonetheless, the issue is laid out in *The Psychology of Imagination* in its elementary stages. More succinctly, *The Psychology of Imagination* sets the stage for the ontological description of consciousness that follows in the later work. By way of example, Sartre asks in *The Psychology of Imagination*: ". . . what must be the nature of consciousness in general in order that the construction of an image should always be possible?" (259) In order to begin to understand the question and its advanced solution, one must remember a fundamental precept of phenomenology, that is, "consciousness is always consciousness of something." Following this slogan, one realizes that without consciousness, the world would have no meaning. Consciousness is thus involved in both perception and imagination. The fact that consciousness is inexorably tied to the things of perception constitutes its facticity. But now it is asked, "How is imagination, in particular, related to consciousness?" First, it is realized that the consciousness of

an object includes a noetic act that posits that object as real. But when one posits an image, the real is absent. In this noesis, one is aware that nothingness is an essential and defining feature of the image. Consciousness is such that it is able to posit unreal objects as well as real objects.

There is then a perceptive as well as an imaginative consciousness. In acts of perception, if the observer is confronted with a physical object such as a wooden box, she posits not only the front side of the box as real, but the back side as well, even though it is not given to her in direct perception or observation. In an act of imagination, just the opposite is the case. The image is posited as unreal. It is presented to consciousness as absent. There is or should be no pretense concerning the reality of the image, and it is thus understood how nothingness is a defining feature of the image. Sartre claims, "Thus the imaginative act is at once *constituting*, *isolating*, and *[an]nihilitating*" (263). It is a constituting since the imaginative act creates and maintains the image. It is an isolating because the image is created at a distance from the world of real objects. And it is an [an]nihilitating because it posits the imagined object precisely where it is absent.

Another misconception that Sartre wishes to dispel is that imagination can be equated with memory or anticipation. If one remembers something, he is not bringing that memory forth as "given-in-its-absence," rather it is "given-now-as-in-the-past." Stated more simply, it is not an act of imagination because the past, though past, is real. An argument dependent on the real may also be given for the anticipation of the future. To use Sartre's example, if while playing tennis one anticipates the position of the ball and moves toward it, that person is anticipating the future in terms of the real. The ball may not be precisely where it was thought that it would be, but is nonetheless in a correct range or zone of possibilities as defined by the reality of the situation. On the other hand, one may imagine a future that has nothing in particular to do with specific anticipations. The image of such a future is presented as a nothingness to consciousness.

If consciousness is such that it may imagine, it is

essential that consciousness is able to posit the unreal. A certain nothingness is found at the very center of the image and the imaginative act. But the negation found in the image cannot stand alone because it is a nothingness. Without the real there could be no unreal. In an act of imagination, one is carrying out a denial of the real world. Two things must be able to occur if consciousness is to have imaginative powers according to Sartre: ". . . it must be able to posit the world in its synthetic totality, and, it must be able to posit the imagined object as being out of reach of this synthetic totality, that is, posit the world as a nothingness in relation to the image" (266). If consciousness were such that it was "in-the-midst-of-the-world," imagination would not be a possibility. Consciousness must be able to back away from the world, that is, to take a position in relation to the world so that it can be seen in its "synthetic totality." Consciousness must be free not only to posit the world, but to negate it as well. It is precisely because consciousness can take a position on the world that the world can be negated. This negation is necessary for the positing of the unreal object. The unreal object is a nothing (no thing) in relation to the world of things that is negated in the act of imagination. The image is always presented on the background of a negated world. Then it is essential that consciousness "be-in-the-world" instead of "in-the-midst-of-the-world" if it is to imagine. If it were "in-the-midst-of-the-world," consciousness could not take a position on the whole of the world. Without the constitution of the "synthetic totality" of the world, the world could not be negated. But it is the nature of consciousness that, though it is necessarily related to the world because of its facticity, it is nonetheless free to assume a position in relation to the world.

After the above analysis, it may now be seen how the translation of the imaginative consciousness into the terms of the "for-itself" and the "in-itself" is possible. As has been previously noted, consciousness could possibly appear "in-the-midst-of-the-world" or "in-the-world." If it were "in-the-midst-of-the-world," consciousness would be an "in-itself." This situation would demand that all consciousness

would be consciousness of real objects, and consciousness would be precluded from constituting the synthetic totality of the world. But consciousness, as has been shown, is "in-the-world." Thus consciousness is a "for-itself." Otherwise, imagination would not be possible. Consciousness is free to withdraw from the midst of the world, from the world of the "in-itself," in such a way that it takes a position on the world. Consciousness, of course, can never be completely free of the "in-itself" since it is determined by the "facticity" of consciousness. Nonetheless, the relative freedom of consciousness to take a position on the world enables consciousness to constitute and to negate the synthetic unity of the world in a single stroke. As Sartre says, "Thus to posit the world as a world or to 'negate' it is one and the same thing" (267). As the world is negated, one is able to posit the unreal, that is, the image in relation to the negated totality. Thus, the positing of the image (for-itself), in whose center lies negation (negation of the in-itself), is an expression of the being-in-the-world and freedom (for-itself) of consciousnesses. Consciousness, as a "for-itself," has the capacity of free play between the real and the unreal, the "in-itself," and the "for-itself." By being able to nihilate the "in-itself," consciousness introduces the "for-itself." Consciousness is acutely aware of its lack. Whereas the "in-itself" is complete and overflows in the fullness of its being, the "for-itself" expresses its own lack through negation.

One should now be able to describe a particular act of imagination in terms of the "for-itself" and the "in-itself." Suppose I bring to mind, through recollection, the memory of the painting I once owned. And before my mind's eye, I recall the painting "given-now-as-in-the-past." I remember the rusted fifty-one Ford with its left door open and the broken back window. I also recall the field, the tree, and the broken barbed wire fence. The brush strokes and the detail of the Ford emblem on the back of the representation of the car are complete in my memory. In the above description, when I recall the painting, I remember it as an object, as an "in-itself" that I once possessed. It is the object and the event

of a past time. Even the memory of the circumstances surrounding my loss of the painting is an "in-itself." The object of the past is brought forward to the present as it was given as an "in-itself" in the past.

But suppose that I imagine that I own the painting in my present circumstances. I posit the image of the painting on the wall above the computer I am now using. The imaginative object before me is a "for-itself." The painting itself is elsewhere, and its reality has been negated by the image that I create and constitute. The image before me has at its heart a negation: it is the negation of the real object, the "in-itself" that I once owned. The image before me is a "for-itself" since it is a form of consciousness and therefore cannot be an "in-itself." I only seem to observe the image as I would an object of perception. The image of the painting is a "no thing" that is created by my consciousness in an imaginative act. It is not posited as a real thing or as an "in-itself." The image is a "given-in-its-absence."

Therefore, in an act of imagination, the image is produced as a "for-itself" on the background of the "in-itself" or the world. It is first constituted and then denied by consciousness. The image is a direct expression of the freedom of consciousness, which is founded on a lack, a lack of the fullness described by the facticity of the "for itself" that is not found in the "in-itself." Consciousness is "being-in-the-world," but it withdraws from the world in gaining a point of view on the "in-itself" and thereby expresses its freedom in the imaginative act as a "for-itself."

In sum, *The Psychology of Imagination* appears to lay out a schema that sets the course of the later *Being and Nothingness*. The latter work was a needed addition to the Sartrean corpus because the scope of the former work was too narrow to deal decisively with the more interesting ontological question of the nature of being itself. Nonetheless, the seeds for *Being and Nothingness* were germinated in *The Psychology of Imagination*.

WORKS CITED

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square P, 1966.

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