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To the Nothingnesses Themselves: Husserl’s Influence on Sartre’s Notion of Nothingness

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ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that Sartre’s notions of nothingness and “negativity” are not, as he presents it, primarily reactions to Hegel and Heidegger. Instead, they are a reaction to an ongoing struggle with Husserl’s notion of intentionality and related notions. I do this by comparing the criticism aimed at Husserl in Sartre’s Being and Nothingness to that presented in his earlier work, The Imagination, where he discusses Husserl more elaborately. Furthermore, I compare his criticism to Husserl’s own criticism of the “doctrine of immanent objects”, in order to show that Sartre’s notion of nothingness is a continuation of Husserl’s criticism, and that he turns Husserl’s own arguments against himself.

KEYWORDS

Sartre; Husserl; nothingness; imagination; realism; intentionality

1. Introduction

The controversial concept of nothingness plays an important role in the philosophy of Sartre.1 With regard to this, Sartre can be placed in a tradition of philosophers who also have a big role reserved for this conception, of which Sartre’s predecessors Hegel and Heidegger are perhaps the most well-known. Sartre places himself explicitly in this line of thinking in his main work Being and Nothingness. Before addressing his own version of the concept, he commits a full section to each of the two thinkers.2 Although he does not agree with their conceptions of nothingness, he still thinks that Heidegger improved upon Hegel, and he himself continues this line of improvement of the concept. His main concern with both thinkers is that they only account for nothingness in general, but do not do justice to concrete cases of nothingness, such as holes, voids and absences.3 These “little pools of non-being”,4 for which Sartre invented the notion

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1 The most well-known case of controversy concerning the notion of nothingness is Carnap’s criticism of Heidegger’s use of the notion. See: Carnap, The Elimination of Metaphysics. Carnap thought the notion to be nonsensical, in the sense that it does not refer to anything real. Sartre received his version of the same criticism in Ayer’s Novelists-Philosophers: V – Jean-Paul Sartre. For a discussion of Ayer’s criticism of Sartre, see: Manser Sartre and le Néant; Richmond, Nothingness and negation.

2 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 17.

3 Ibid., 43.

4 Ibid., 39, 43.

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of négatités or negatities, play a pivotal role in Sartre’s philosophy. It is because consciousness can create and encounter negatities that it is ultimately free. The radical freedom of man is as many would know one of the most well-known theses of Sartre’s philosophy.

In this article I aim to show that the line of influence from Hegel through Heidegger on Sartre’s concept of nothingness is not the only one that can be discerned. While Sartre is clear on the influence Husserl had on his philosophy in general, he only mentioned Husserl briefly when he addresses nothingness in Being and Nothingness, and only to distance himself from his views. However, in his earlier work The Imagination, Sartre discusses Husserl’s ideas on this topic. Although the concept of nothingness is not as elaborately discussed as it is in Being and Nothingness, these works can still reveal the Husserlian influence on Sartre’s notion of nothingness. This influence is rooted in Husserl’s concept of intentionality and his criticism of what is called the doctrine of immanent objects, found in debate concerning our consciousness of non-existent objects. However, in a similar manner as Sartre continues Heidegger’s deviation from Hegel, Sartre also radicalizes Husserl’s criticism of immanent objects by applying it to Husserl’s own theories.

An important preliminary remark is in order: Sartre’s representation of Husserl’s philosophy is often regarded as a misunderstanding. Many followers of the latter considered Sartre’s interpretation of the notion of intentionality, for example, as a deformation of Husserl’s thought. Sartre’s interpretations of Husserlian notions which will be discussed in this article are still fiercely debated in Husserl scholarship. Examples of this are the fact that Sartre regards Husserl’s notion of the noema as unreal, his portrayal of Husserl as an idealist, and the idea that Husserl cannot account for the difference between perception and imagination. Sartre admitted that in his exposition of Husserl’s ideas in The Imagination that he explains “very crudely a very nuanced theory” and that he gives a possible interpretation of an ambiguous text. Later, he admitted that he was creating his own ideas at Husserl’s expense.

One could argue that we should deem “Sartre faithful to the perceived spirit of Husserl’s phenomenology, but not to its word.” This is what I will do, for the sake of this article. I will focus on Sartre’s criticism and praise of Husserl’s thought as it is represented in Sartre’s own texts. However, I will compare Sartre’s ideas to one text of Husserl, Immanent and Real Objects, which was posthumously published and therefore unknown to Sartre.

5 Ibid., 45; Sartre, L’être et le néant, 56.
6 The English translation adds a footnote that this word coined by Sartre has no equivalent in. However, as négatité is to nothingness as entité is to being, we can easily introduce “negativity” as opposed to entity as a similar portmanteau of “negative entity”. See: Stern, Sartre: His Philosophy and Existential Psychoanalysis, 61.
7 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 49.
8 Ibid., 462–63.
10 Sartre, The Imaginary, ix, note 8.
11 Alweiss, ‘Beyond Existence and Non-Existence’.
12 Smith, Husserl, 72.
13 Drost, ‘The primacy of perception’.
14 Ibid., 136, note 20; 137, note 21.
15 Sartre, War Diaries, 183–84.
16 Stawarska, ‘Sartre and Husserl’s Iden’, 12.
17 This text is published as the first part of Intentional Objects, and was written in 1894 and 1985, but was not published until 1979. See: Husserl, ‘Intentional Objects’, footnote 1. It is therefore safe to say that Sartre has never read this text.
think this comparison is justified, as it will enable us to gain a better understanding of the 
core of Sartre’s praise of this spirit of Husserl’s phenomenology.

I begin this article by addressing Sartre’s critique of Husserl regarding the theme of 
nothingness in Being and Nothingness and The Imagination. In the second section, I 
will show that parts of Husserl’s criticism of immanent objects are taken up by Sartre. 
In the last section, I will show how Sartre’s criticism of Husserl can be seen as a radicaliza-
tion of Husserl’s thought. Sartre turns Husserl against himself by applying Husserl’s criti-
cism of immanent objects to his own views.

2. Sartre’s Criticism of Husserl

Sartre introduces the concept of nothingness in Being and Nothingness in the context of 
the question. Immediately after the introduction he reveals the main question of his 
work and the starting point of his ontological system, namely the question of what the 
relation between man and world is. However, as he immediately observes, the very exist-
ence of a question already presupposes the possibility of a negative answer. Hereby Sartre 
introduces the idea of negation. He regards a negation as relating to nothingness, in the 
same way that a particular being relates to being in general. Nothingness is the ground 
for negation; in other words, it is the condition that makes negation. In this case it is 
the negative answer, and not the judgement of the one who asks the question. Thus, “a 
glance at the question has revealed to us suddenly that we are encompassed with nothing-
ness”. Therefore, any complete ontological system must account for both being and 
nothingness. He goes on to discusses the theories of the philosophers before him who 
incorporated nothingness in their ontologies, Hegel and Heidegger. Although Sartre 
views Heidegger as an improvement upon Hegel, both of their conceptions of nothingness 
fall short for various reasons. One of the most important reasons is that they have a too 
broad and general conception of nothingness, namely that it is the negation of the totality 
of being. Therefore, they cannot account for the small pockets of non-being found in the 
world, such as the negative answer to questions, or absent things or persons.

Therefore, Sartre’s own conception of nothingness is that nothingness is the ground for 
such negatities, just like being is the ground for beings. Being and nothingness are, 
however, no logically contemporary polar opposites that govern the structure of the 
world. Negatities are always negations of specific beings: it is only because that we have 
a friend and there is a bar, that he can also be absent there. Being is a plenum which is 
logically prior to nothingness, and Sartre says therefore that “nothingness haunts being” 
and “Non-being exists only on the surface of being”. Nothingness needs being, because 
it needs something that can be negated, while being does not depend on anything else. 
However, for negatities to arise there is a second component needed, namely a human 
consciousness in order to negate being. “It is evident that non-being always appears

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Sartre mentions that he is aware that there is unpublished work by Husserl in The Imagination. See: Sartre, The Imagina-
tion, 134.

18 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 28.
19 Ibid., 29.
20 Ibid., 30.
21 Ibid., 40.
22 Ibid., 39, 45.
23 Ibid., 40.
within the limits of human expectation. It is because I expect to find fifteen hundred francs that I find only thirteen hundred. This opens up another possibility, namely that nothingness is purely subjective and not a part of reality outside of human subjects. Nothingness is then nothing more than the conceptual unity of our negative judgements about reality. A closer look at the example of a friend’s absence at a bar shows that this option does not correspond with our experience.

[...] I myself expected to see Pierre, and my expectation has caused the absence of Pierre to happen as a real event concerning this cafe. It is an objective fact at present that I have discovered this absence [...] By contrast, judgments which I can make subsequently to amuse myself, such as, “Wellington is not in this cafe, Paul Valery is no longer here, etc.” – these have a purely abstract meaning; they are pure applications of the principle of negation without real or efficacious foundation, and they never succeed in establishing a real relation between the cafe and Wellington or Valery. Here the relation “is not” is merely thought.

Pierre’s absence is not merely subjective, as there is no process of judgement involved. That is, you do not need to think about the situation and deduct that your friend is not there. Rather, you immediately see his absence. There is no negativity of other people who are also not there, but are not expected to be there – such as the famous persons in the example. Their absence may be thought of, but one cannot have an intuitive experience of it. Therefore, negativities that exist in the world make negative judgements possible, not negative judgements that “cause” negativities. It is in the context of this option of a subjective account of nothingness that Sartre mentions Husserl:

It is evident that non-being always appears within the limits of human expectation. [...] But is this to say that these non-beings are to be reduced to pure subjectivity? Does this mean to say that we ought to give them the importance and the type of existence of the Stoic “lektos,” of Husserl’s noema? We think not.

Sartre mentions Husserl’s notion of the noema only in passing here, and only to quickly distance himself from Husserl’s views without any real explanation. Further on in the same chapter, Sartre again only distances himself from Husserl, or more precisely from his distinction between empty and filled intentions. This distinction amounts to the difference between merely thinking about something, and having the thing present. If I merely think about Pierre, I have an empty intention of him. If I then see him, my intention is “filled” with his presence: “[I]f I should finally discover Pierre, my intention would be filled by a solid element[.]” However, this cannot account for the experience of things which do not exist, as these things can never fill experiences. In the case of the absence of Pierre in the bar, there is a difference between merely thinking about Pierre, and intuitively grasping his absence at that time and place as discussed above. According to Sartre, an empty intention must be conscious

24 Ibid., 31.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 34–35.
27 Ibid., 31.
28 The stoic notion of lektos is the meaning of a word as opposed to its utterance. See: Frede, ‘The stoic notion of a lekton’.
29 Ibid., 50.
31 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 34.
32 Ibid., 51.
of itself as posing something not-present. Thus, intentions can be full or empty, but they belong to one of these categories, and fulfilment cannot account for the difference between entities and negatities. Even a mere thought poses its object as existent or non-existent.

A few sentences before Sartre begins his critique of empty intentions, he mentions that he already discussed that “the image must enclose in its very structure a nihilating thesis.” This is a reference to the earlier work The Imagination, in which he discusses the problems with Husserl’s theory of imagination. This theme is intertwined with the notion of nothingness, as things that are imagined are usually either not present or do not exist. The classic example, which Sartre also mentions in Being and Nothingness, is that of a centaur. In The Imagination Sartre discusses the same ideas of Husserl more elaborately. First, Sartre says that Husserl’s distinction between empty and filled intentions cannot account for the difference between a real and an imaginary object. Husserl says that a mental image can fill an empty intention in the same manner that a perception can fill one. The example Sartre gives is that of a lark. Husserl’s view suggests that to fill an empty thought about just “lark”, “it is indifferent whether I form an image of a lark or whether I look at a lark in flesh and bone.” Both have the same perceptual content, that is, the same colour, shape, sound, etc., or in Husserl’s terms, hylē. Therefore, this distinction cannot account for the difference between the fact that one of these larks exists, and one does not.

The line of reasoning that puts objects and images on the same plane leads to more problems. Husserl’s own method proves to be problematic in this regard. In the phenomenological reduction, the existence of the world is put in parentheses. What remains of the object is the noema. This noema is, as Sartre quotes Husserl:

\[ \text{[A]}\text{n object in the logical sense but not an object that could exist by itself. Its “esse” exclusively consists in its “percipi”. But this formula must not be taken in the Berkeleyan sense since the “percipi” does not contain here the “esse” as a real element.} \]

The noema is the object as it is presented in consciousness. Husserl invokes Berkeley’s slogan esse est percipi, to be is to be perceived. This refers to Berkelean idealism, the idea that perceived object only exists as objects in the mind of a perceiver. Like in the Berkeleyan view, the noema “exists” in consciousness. However, this is not really existence, as the noema is not an object. It is a presentation of an object of which the judgement concerning the existence is suspended. Therefore, it does not really exist as objects do. Sartre concludes: “Thus the noema is a nothingness (un néant) that has only an ideal existence, a

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 50.
35 Ibid., 43.
36 Sartre, The Imagination, 135.
37 Husserl, Ideas I, 241, quoted in Sartre, The Imagination, 137.
38 The translation of this quote seems to be altered by the translators of The Imagination. Furthermore, in contrast with this passage, Husserl says in the same work: “If anyone reading our statements objects that they mean changing all the world into a subjective illusion and committing oneself to a ‘Berkeleyan idealism,’ we can only answer that he has not seized upon the sense of those statements.” See: Husserl, Ideas I, 129. Again, we are not concerned here with the question whether Sartre’s reading of Husserl was correct.
40 Although Berkeleyan idealism is inspired by Berkeley’s slogan, it is debatable whether this actually corresponds with Berkeley’s own views. See: Waxman, ‘Berkeleyan Idealism: The Inseparability of Existence, Sensation, and Perception.’
type of existence that is close to that of the Stoic λεκτόν [lekton]. 41 This non-being of the noema means, however, that after the reduction, it becomes impossible to distinguish filled conscious acts directed at entities from those directed at negatities.

Before the reduction, we found in this nothingness (néant) a means for distinguishing fiction from perception: the blossoming tree existed somewhere outside of us, one could touch it, embrace it, turn away from it, and then, going back find it again at the same place. The centaur, on the contrary, was nowhere, neither in me nor outside of me. At present, the thing-tree has been put in parentheses, we only know it anymore as the noema of our current perception; and, as such, this noema is an irreal, exactly like the centaur. […] So where is the difference? How is it that there are images and perceptions? 42

It is the phenomenological method itself that causes a shift in nothingness. Nothingness should be that which enables us to distinguish between entities and negatities, or in this case, between real and imaginary objects. By shifting the notion of nothingness to the domain of the purely subjective, all objects become non-beings, which is of course not the case. There is an essential difference between imagination and perception, just as there is an essential difference between seeing Pierre in a café and grasping his absence.

Thus, Sartre’s problem with Husserl’s view is that it becomes impossible to distinguish between imagined and perceived objects for two reasons. First, the combination of empty intentions and the idea that both a present and non-present object can fill them makes it unable to distinguish these two kinds of objects by their perceptual content, their hylē. Second, the irreal nature of the noema makes it impossible to distinguish between real and non-existent objects.

There is a way out of this impasse to be found within the Husserlian framework. The answer to the question of how we must distinguish between images and perceptions cannot be found in either the hylē or the noema, and therefore it must be found in the noesis. Sartre acknowledges that Husserl himself “laid the bases for an intrinsic distinction between the image and the perception by the intentions[.]” 43 According to Husserl, different kinds of conscious acts animate the hylē is in a different manner. In some cases the same perceptual content may be animated as fiction, or as “reality in flesh and bone”. 44 This solution only postpones the question, as one would still have to explain why the conscious acts animates the hylē as imaged or perceived in any given situation. Even if you have contextual reasons to assume something you experience is imagined or perceived, there can still be situations in which you have no motivations to assume which one is the case. 45 “The beginnings of a response” to this problem can be found in Husserl. 46

In the case of imagination the conscious act itself spontaneously generates the object, while in perception the object is passively provided by the world. Although Sartre, “subscribe[s] entirely this explanation”, he still regards it as very incomplete. 47

Thus, the answer to the question how we can distinguish between imagination and perception remains unsolved. It can neither be found in the hylē nor in the noema, therefore it

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41 Sartre, The Imagination, 137.
42 Ibid., 138.
43 Ibid.
44 Husserl, Ideas I, 221, quoted in Sartre, The Imagination, 139.
45 Sartre, The Imagination, 140.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
must be found in the noesis. Although a beginning of such an attempt has been provided by Husserl, it is far from satisfactory. Sartre ends *The Imagination* with the thesis that “The image is an act and not a thing”, and that he will attempt to tackle the structure of the image in another work.48 This work would become *The Imaginary*. We will not go into detail concerning Sartre’s own theory of imagination, but there is one facet of the imaginary act that deserves to be mentioned. He presents four characteristics of the image, one of which is that “the imaging consciousness posits its object as a nothingness”.49 Sartre says that whether an object exists or not is given in the way consciousness posits the object. In perception the object is posited as existing, in imagination it is given as non-existent, absent, existing elsewhere. Sometimes the act is neutral to whether the object exists or not, but this also counts as not positing it exists. Thus, here Sartre makes it first step towards pushing nothingness out of consciousness and into the world, by making it a characteristic of the object.

### 3. Intentionality and Immanentism

Upon until now we have seen that Sartre is very critical towards Husserl when it comes to nothingness. Although in the end Sartre deviates from his views on a fundamental level, Sartre’s ideas concerning nothingness can also be considered a continuation of his predecessor’s thought. This becomes clear in *The Imagination*, in which Sartre is initially very positive and praises Husserl’s way of speaking about non-existent entities: “In any case, Husserl opens the way, and no study of the image can neglect the rich glimpses he gives us.”50 And although he says that he does not always agree with Husserl, Sartre regards Husserl’s remarks on imagination to be “of the greatest importance”.51

Before Sartre presents the problems Husserl’s view runs into, he first presents “a set of fruitful suggestions” drawn from Husserl.52 The notion of the intentionality and the distinction between intentional act and transcendent object it entails, is one of these suggestions. Sartre defines intentionality as follows: “[F]or Husserl, every state of consciousness […] is consciousness of something,”53 and “The object of consciousness whatever it is (save the case of reflective consciousness) is in principle outside of consciousness”.54 He regards it “the essential structure of all consciousness” and states that “There naturally follows a radical distinction between consciousness and *that of which there is consciousness*”.55 For Sartre, this means that there exists nothing whatsoever in consciousness, it is wholly empty. This should not be confused with Husserl’s empty intentions, because those can be filled. The emptiness of consciousness that intentionality implies means that consciousness in principle cannot be filled, as it cannot contain anything. Consciousness is nothing but being directed towards something that is always outside of the experience. Sartre’s understanding of intentionality is thoroughly realist, as he thinks that

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48 Ibid., 144.
50 Sartre, *The Imagination*, 141.
51 Ibid., 129.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 130.
55 Ibid., 129–30.
discoveries made after the phenomenological reduction hold when one returns to the
ordinary world. Therefore, “The phenomenologist, indeed, having put the world ‘in par-
theses’, has not lost it by doing so.”

The principle of intentionality principle would be contradicted, if non-being would be
purely subjective. If this would be the case, than the object would exist, inside of conscious-
ness, and we would therefore not do justice to its non-being:

The temptation was strong to leave […] mythical beings to their nothingness (néant) and
only take into account psychic contents. But Husserl restores to the centaur precisely its
transcendence at the very heart of its nothingness (néant). As much nothingness (néant)
as one wants, but by this very token it is not in consciousness.

Husserl grants the centaur its non-being, by making it an object that transcends conscious-
ness, yet is aimed at by consciousness. This does not mean that it has to exist somewhere in
the outside world – precisely because centaurs do not exist. It also means that it does not
exist inside a kind of imaginary mental realm. is only when the bracketing of the world
comes into play that the nothingness of the noema becomes problematic, but the initial
idea of regarding the objects of imagination to be nothing is received enthusiastically by
Sartre.

According to Sartre, the distinction between intentional act and transcendent object
that stems from the principle of intentionality was introduced by Husserl with the goal of
fighting “the errors of a certain immanentism that wants to constitute the world from
contents of consciousness.” Although Husserl does not himself use the term imma-
mentism, Sartre uses it for theories for which not only non-existent objects, but all
experienced objects are in the first instance purely subjective. These theories come
either in the form of idealism (Sartre gives Berkeley as an example), or in the form
of representationalism, in which the object of consciousness is an inner copy of an
object outside of us. In The Imaginary, Sartre calls the view he opposes “the illusion
of immanence”, a misconception about consciousness which has plagued philosophy for
centuries:

[W]e have so far committed a double error. We thought, without justifying it to ourselves,
that the image was in consciousness and that the object of the image was in the image.
We depicted consciousness as a place peopled with small imitations and these imitations
were the images. […] I will call it: the illusion of immanence. […] [I]f we accept the illusion
of immanence, we are necessarily led to constitute the world of the mind from objects very
similar to those of the external world and which, simply, obey different laws.

The illusion of immanence is the idea that consciousness is a literal place filled with copies
of things in the outside world. Sartre also uses the term “thingism.” Different kinds of
theories fall prey to this illusion. It may be representationalism in which the object of con-
sciousness is always an inner imitation of the object outside, or it may be a theory in which
the difference between imagination and perception is based on the location of the object,

56 Ibid., 136.
57 Ibid., 132.
58 Ibid., 130.
59 Ibid.
60 Sartre, The Imaginary, 5–6.
61 Sartre, The Imagination, 6.
which exists either in the mental container or the outside world. The latter would be the case for theories that consider non-being to be merely subjective.

Sartre’s debt to Husserl becomes more apparent when we take Sartre’s choice of words into account, specifically the “double error” in his formulation of the illusion. At first glance, there seems to be no reason to divide the illusion into two separate errors, as both the image in consciousness and the object amount to the same spatial and thing-like conception of consciousness. However, this has been considered a reference to Husserl’s appendix to the fifth logical investigation, in which he distinguishes two “ineradicable errors” concerning perception. The first one of these errors is the “image theory”. This image theory is the idea that each conscious act addressed at an object outside of us is mediated by an image or “image-representation”. This corresponds to the representationalist Sartre speaks of in The Imagination, in which every act of perception requires a mental image.

The second error is where the illusion gets its name from. Husserl calls it the “doctrine of the ‘immanent’ objects of acts”. This doctrine amounts to the idea that there is a difference between the object that exist within consciousness, whose type of existence is “merely immanent” and actual objects that exist outside of consciousness. This merely immanent existence is supposed to be opposed to the genuinely existing image in the image theory. Earlier in the investigation itself he says that Brentano’s choice of words that intentional experiences contain an object within themselves cause us to commit this mistake. Here Husserl talks about the immanent or mental inexistence of objects in Brentano. The term “inexistence” seems to be used only to distinguish it from the ordinary use of the term existence for outside objects. It should not be confused with the irreality of Husserl’s noema. Husserl gives the god Jupiter as an example of Brentano’s notion of the immanent object. No matter how I describe this act of consciousness, I will never find the object Jupiter in my experience: “it is in truth not really immanent or mental. But it also does not exist extramentially, it does not exist at all”.

This criticism of Brentano is clear: when we describe our experiences we do not find the object of that experience in the experience itself, even when the object does not exist in the outside world. This description corresponds to Sartre’s praise of the transcendence of nothingness in The Imagination. The doctrine of immanent objects as described in the appendix adds to Brentano’s mistake that all conscious acts contain their object – not just the ones concerning non-existent objects. This error “dragged on through the centuries”.

The exposition in the Logical Investigations of this doctrine of immanent objects is rather short, but Husserl discusses this topic more elaborately in the aforementioned text, Immanent and Real Objects. Here, Husserl discusses this doctrine more explicitly in the context of non-existent objects, or “objectless representations”. Here Husserl

62 Cumming, Phenomenology and Deconstruction 2, 46.
63 Husserl, Logical Investigation II, 125.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 126–27.
67 Ibid., 98.
68 Ibid., 99.
69 Ibid., 97, 127.
says that the view is defended by his phenomenological colleague Twardowski, in close connection with Brentano.\textsuperscript{71,72}

Husserl starts by describing several problems of the image theory, and more specifically about the duplication of the object in the case of non-existent objects. If one thinks about something which does not exist, the object may not exist, but there is still an image which represents it. However, the image must exist in order to be conscious of it. This causes two problems. One is that the image of a non-existent object cannot be a true representation, as it cannot exist and represent the non-existence of the object. That would simply mean that it exists and does not exist at the same time. If it is not a true representation it makes no sense to invoke it in order to solve the problem of non-existent objects.\textsuperscript{73}

The second problem is that in the case of an existent object, the image is used to “point at” or make judgements about that object.\textsuperscript{74} However, if there is no object, the image itself is the object on which the experience is focused, thus abandoning the function of the image altogether. Therefore, it again makes no sense to invoke the image theory to solve the problem of non-existence.

The immanent object is introduced as a solution to these problems. It is the idea that every conscious act contains an object, but this object has no “true” existence, it exists “merely intentional”.\textsuperscript{75} Whether the object truly exists or not is judged in a second thought, which is called an existential judgement. In this judgement, the intentional object is compared to the state of affairs in the outside world. The first problem of the image theory seems not to arise, as all intentional objects have the same type of existence, whether the object is judged to exist or not. The second problem also seems to be avoided, as the “pointing” of every intentional object is only determined in the existential judgment, and not in the mere thought itself.

Although it may look like the problems of the image theory are resolved, the doctrine of immanent objects “merely repeats the difficulty, only in different words” and entails the “false duplication which also doomed the image theory”.\textsuperscript{76} The problem of the correspondence of the immanent object to the true object it represents remains. Because the immanent object has another type of existence, it can never truly correspond to the genuinely existing object it represents. It would simply be another object existing within consciousness, and for Husserl it is “totally incomprehensible why we […] allow it to be regarded as only a ‘modified’ existence”.\textsuperscript{77} Things simply exist, or do not exist, regardless of being immanent or transcendent to consciousness.

Furthermore, an existential judgement would only make sense if it is the existence of the immanent object itself that is confirmed or denied. If this is not the case then merely thinking about Berlin and judging that it exists are conscious acts with two different objects. The first one is about the intentional object as it exists inside of consciousness, the second one is about the state of affairs as it exist in the outside world. This also goes for non-existent objects. Merely thinking about Cerberus is thinking about the intentional

\textsuperscript{71} Idem., 349.
\textsuperscript{72} Interestingly, just like Sartre is accused of misrepresenting Husserl, Husserl himself is accused of misrepresenting Twardowski. See: Hickerson, ‘Getting the Quasi-picture’.
\textsuperscript{73} Idem., 347–48.
\textsuperscript{74} Idem., 348.
\textsuperscript{75} Idem., 349.
\textsuperscript{76} Idem.
\textsuperscript{77} Idem., 351.
object “Cerberus”, while the thought “Cerberus does not exist” is about the outside world.\(^78\) This does not make any sense according to Husserl, for “whether we merely represent Berlin, or judge it to be existing, in either case we are dealing with Berlin itself”. However, the existential judgements are per definition not about the immanent object but about a state of affairs in the world. This object always has a mere intentional type of existence, and therefore cannot be judged to truly exist or not. According to Husserl, however, the idea of existential judgements would only make sense to say that the object of the mental act is the same as the true object. Thus, the artificial solution of allowing the existence of mere immanent objects does not solve the problems of the image theory and there is no further reason to assume it.

Although the notion of noema does not yet appear in the *Logical Investigations*, it has been suggested that the notion is introduced to overcome the difficulties of the doctrine of immanent objects, while retaining the idea that conscious acts are intentional.\(^79\) The exact nature of the noema is heavily debated among Husserl scholars.\(^80\) As we are primarily interested in understanding Sartre’s philosophy, I will not go into detail concerning the notion. Instead, let us take a preliminary definition: some take the noema to be the *manner* in which the object is represented, but not itself an object. It is not an accurate representation of the object, but rather a presentation of the object. Even in the case of non-existent objects, there is a manner in which the object is presented. A centaur for example is presented as a half-person half-horse. There is a set of characteristics which make up the noema, but do not correspond to anything in reality. If this were not the case, we could not discern between a centaur and a unicorn.

Combined with the phenomenological reduction, the question whether the noema corresponds to something which exists independent of consciousness is suspended, and we can investigate the noemata to make judgements about the nature of experience without ontological hindrances. This bracketing of ontological judgements also means that the object does not exist within consciousness. An intentional act is always directed outside itself, but this concerns the structure of consciousness, and it is not a statement about the existence of the object outside of consciousness.

As we have seen, this suspension of judgement about the existence of the noema and the subsequent irreality is precisely what Sartre criticizes. The doctrine of immanent objects is a prime example a subjective theory of nothingness Sartre criticizes in *Being in Nothingness*. The immanent object themselves exist, albeit in a diminished “mere intentional” manner, but their negative character comes from subjective judgements, which is precisely that which is criticized by Sartre.\(^81\) Although Sartre ultimately places Husserl’s notion of the noema in the “subjective” category in *Being and Nothingness*, he also praises Husserl’s conception of intentionality and embraces the criticism of immanentism it entails. Sartre is not clear to what notions in Husserl’s work this immanentism corresponds, but seems to regard it as the general spirit of Husserl’s thought. Sartre does, however, incorporate the criticism of the image theory and the doctrine of immanent objects into the notion of the illusion of immanence as is implied by the “double error”. Sartre is justified in merging the errors, as Husserl stresses that they succumb to similar problems – although

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\(^78\) Idem., 350.

\(^79\) Føllesdal, ‘Brentano and Husserl on Intentional Objects’, 89.

\(^80\) Chukwu, *Competing Interpretations of Husserl’s Noema*.

\(^81\) Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 31.
we have to bear in mind that he did not have access to the text in which Husserl described this in full detail. Furthermore, Sartre’s choice of words – immanentism and the illusion of immanence – seems to imply that he emphasizes the second error, the doctrine of immanent objects.

4. Sartre’s Radicalization of Husserl

We are now able to sketch the Husserlian influence on Sartre’s notion of nothingness in Being and Nothingness. We have seen that on the one hand, Sartre is very critical towards Husserl when it comes to the topic of non-being. He criticizes Husserl’s notion of empty intentions and the irreality of the noema. On the other hand, Sartre is very enthusiastic about Husserl’s notion of intentionality, and sees it as the solution to the errors of immanentism that plague the philosophical tradition. In the introduction of Being and Nothingness, Sartre is explicit about his mixed feelings towards Husserl:

Husserl defines consciousness precisely as a transcendence. In truth he does. This is what he posits. This is his essential discovery. But from the moment that he makes of the noema an unreal, a correlate of the noesis, a noema whose esse is percipi, he is totally unfaithful to his principle.82

This passage shows two things. First of all, the fact that Sartre specifically appreciates Husserl’s notion of intentionality – here referred to as the transcendence of consciousness – is not arbitrary. He considers it Husserl’s essential discovery, and elsewhere he says that he regards it to be “the essential principle of phenomenology”.83 For Sartre, rethinking conscious life as intentional is the project of phenomenology. This means that every other notion which diminishes the explanatory power of intentionality is in the wrong. This is also the case for the phenomenological reduction and the irreality of the noema which stems from it. Therefore, the realism implied by intentionality exceeds the idealism of the phenomenological reduction. As this concerns Husserl’s own project, his idealism can be considered a misstep in his own philosophy. Sartre mistook Husserl for a realist and he did not distinguish between Husserl’s and his own project.84 As he would later recall:

[What was very important to me] was realism, in other words, the idea that the world existed as I saw it and that the objects I perceived were real. At that time this realism did not find its valid expression, since, in order to be a realist, one had to have both an idea of the world and an idea of consciousness—and that was exactly my problem. I thought I had found a solution or something resembling a solution in Husserl.85

However, after realizing that he was mistaken in regarding Husserl as a realist, Sartre continued to see his own realist reading of Husserl’s notion of intentionality as the essential principle of phenomenology. What changes in his appropriation of Husserl’s idealism is that in The Imagination he saw Husserl’s idealism as a small misstep, while in Being and Nothingness he sees it as total unfaithfulness.

This unfaithfulness leads us to the second inference from the passage quoted above. In the end, Husserl fell prone to the very ideas he was criticizing. Husserl’s use of Berkeley’s

82 Ibid., 17.
83 Sartre, The Transcendence of the Ego, 6.
84 Sartre, War Diaries, 183.
slogan, even in a diminished form, is a betrayal of phenomenology in Sartre’s eyes. Sartre regarded intentionality to be the weapon against immanentism, and he even singles out Berkeley as an example. Now, it is Husserl himself who – in Sartre’s eyes – succumbs to the very doctrine he was supposed to fight. More specifically, Husserl’s criticism of the doctrine of immanent objects can be applied to Husserl’s own views. Although Sartre could not have known this to the full extent, this is what his criticism of Husserl in *The Imagination* and *Being and Nothingness* amounts to.

Sartre’s criticism of the empty intentions is similar to Husserl’s criticism of the existential judgements. The immanent object is in the first place merely represented, and is only confirmed as existing or not in the existential judgement. In the case of empty and filled intentions, there is first an empty thought about an object, which is filled when the object is encountered, either in reality or in the form of an image. Both theories have in common that there is a second instance needed in order to determine the existence of the object. Husserl criticizes the idea that the mere thought and the judgment have difference objects. In his own theory, the object is the same, but presented in a different way – namely empty or filled. Sartre in turn says when he criticizes the idea in *Being and Nothingness* that this does not do justice to the non-existent object presented. It is not the case that every conscious act is empty and can be filled or not. If this would be the case, negation would again be a sort of judgment and not an intuitive encounter with a negativity. The non-existence or absence of an object must be grasped immediately.

Thus, in both cases, Husserl and Sartre, respectively, argue that a structure in which a second instance is needed to account for the existence of the object cannot account for non-existent objects. Thus, Husserl’s criticism of the existential judgements can also be applied to his own theory of empty intentions. Sartre even says that this idea brings Husserl in dangerous territory:

> We cannot allow that the image comes “to fulfill” an empty consciousness: it is itself a consciousness. It seems that Husserl was here the dupe of the illusion of immanence.

Furthermore, when Sartre discusses the empty intentions in *Being and Nothingness* he says that “it seems that Husserl has not always escaped the thing-illusion”. This seems to be yet another variation of the illusion of immanence and thingism. Sartre thinks empty intentions fall prey to the idea Husserl himself criticizes. This criticism can be applied further, not only to the empty and filled intentions, but to that which fills them, the hylé. This is in general problematic for Sartre. Right after his criticism of the empty intentions and the example of the lark in *The Imagination*, Sartre says:

> It would seem thus that Husserl, while laying down the bases for a radical renewal of the question, has remained a prisoner of the old conception, at least as it concerns the hylé of the image, which would then remain, according to him, the re-emerging sensible impression.

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86 Husserl, ‘*Intentional Objects*’, 350.
87 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 51.
89 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 51.
90 The translation says “materialist illusion”. This is, however, a wrong translation, as the French says “illusion chosiste”, otherwise translated as “thing-illusion”. See: Sartre, *L’être et le néant*, 62; Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, 475.
While Sartre admires intentionality as the base for renewal, he regards the idea that hylê re-emerge in the image a form of immanentism. These re-emerging sensible impressions have to reside somewhere and they therefore exist in consciousness – which is incompatible with Sartre’s idea of the emptiness of consciousness. Sartre’s thoughts with regard to the concept of hylê in general evolved throughout his works. At the end of *The Imagination*, Sartre still states that in order to complete the study of the image the hylê must be studied, while in his own theory in *The Imaginary* he scarcely mentions the concept. In *Being and Nothingness* he ultimately criticizes the notion quite severely:

> In giving to the *hyle* both the characteristics of a thing and the characteristics of consciousness, Husserl believed that he facilitated the passage from the one to the other, but he succeeded only in creating a hybrid being which consciousness rejects and which can not be a part of the world.

Sartre’s radicalization of Husserl is again prominent here. Sartre uses Husserl’s distinction between the intentional act and the object to argue against Husserl’s own notion of hylê. Sartre also stated elsewhere that the hylê was the pinnacle of Husserl’s idealism, causing him to revert to realism.

Let us return to the criticism of immanentism. The second point of criticism that Sartre applies to Husserl’s own views is that of inaccurate representation in the doctrine of immanent objects. Sartre’s criticism of the unreality of the noema is an inversion of Husserl’s criticism. As Husserl says, the intentional object always exists, albeit only in the mind. Therefore, it cannot be an accurate representation of a non-existent object, as the immanent one exists, while the real one does not. A real immanent centaur is not an accurate representation of a non-existent centaur. However, as Sartre says, in Husserl’s own theory, the noema is always an irreal, a non-existent object. If the mental object is always non-existent, the same type of reasoning is valid: an irreal noema of a centaur may be an accurate representation of a centaur, but it is not an accurate representation of an existing object. In both Husserl’s view and the one he criticizes, the mental object always exists or does not exist, but it can therefore never accurately represent both existing and non-existing objects.

Sartre’s notion of negativity can be considered a response to this exact problem. In the case of non-existent objects, a mental object that does not exist cannot be an accurate representation. However, to reduce the mental object itself to a non-existent makes it impossible to distinguish between existing and non-existing entities. As one cannot go back to classic representationalism, the non-existence must not be thought of as something in consciousness, but as something outside of consciousness. Therefore, negatives as objects in the world are introduced. We must not be misled here by the fact that negatives only appear within the boundaries of our expectations – as this is also the case for certain entities, for example, cultural objects such as democracies or money.

Thus, Sartre’s realist conception of nothingness as the ground for negatives can be considered a radicalization of Husserl’s own thought. Sartre’s starting point is Husserl’s own principle of intentionality, but other important parts of Husserl’s theories that concern non-existent objects are shown to be unfaithful to this principle. They are unfaithful

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92 Ibid., 142.
because they succumb to the very immanentism they were supposed to fight. Sartre subsequently applies Husserl's own criticism of the doctrine of immanent objects to his own thought. Sartre regards himself to be continuing Husserl's project where he left off. Sartre keeps the principle of intentionality, but frees it from its idealistic constraints. Even if it is the case that Sartre's reading of Husserl is mistaken, he still shows that a realist account of intentionality can account for nothingness, while an idealist account cannot. For Husserl, intentionality concerned the structure of consciousness, while for Sartre, consciousness is always situated and the transcendent object of consciousness is therefore literally outside of consciousness, in the world. Even in the case when the object does not exist, it is still in the world, as a negativity.

5. Conclusion

We have seen that Husserl can be seen as an important influence on Sartre's concept of nothingness and negativity. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre sketches a line of development from Hegel, through Heidegger to himself. A similar line from those who adhere to what Sartre calls immanentism through Husserl can be traced throughout Sartre's early works, in which the concept of nothingness is not approached primarily ontologically, but in the study of imagination. Just like Sartre radicalized Heidegger's criticism of Hegel, he radicalizes Husserl's criticism of the doctrine of immanent objects by applying the criticism to Husserl himself.

Sartre's move away from Husserl is a good example of his realist conception of intentionality. This realist conception of intentionality captures the spirit of Husserl's phenomenology as Sartre perceived it, to really go to the things themselves as Husserl's own famous motto dictates. Although some scholars say that for certain periods in his oeuvre Husserl also had realist tendencies, for Sartre, this realism meant much more than a technical philosophical notion. Sartre saw in phenomenological realism a turn from scholastic discussions to concrete reality, a bridge between abstract philosophical discussions of academics and existential, ethical and political problems of everyday life. For nothingness, this turn to concrete reality means that it is more than an abstract philosophical concept. Encounters with "nothingnesses" in the form of absences and fantasies are as much a part of our everyday lives as encounters with things are.

Bibliography


