Phenomenology as it is commonly understood is the process by which reality is apprehended by human perception but Sartre’s emphasis is on the subject’s interpretation of reality. This interpretation – the site of the subject’s agency in Sartre’s schema – is what constructs the subject’s reality in the first place. This paper attempts to examine some of Sartre’s key ideas in *Being and Nothingness* and how he attempts to tweak Phenomenology to include ‘agency’ and ‘free acts’, ideas that he used in his later Marxian phase. Through the ideas of Lukacs and Jameson we see how this reconciliation between Existentialism and Marxism cannot be effected theoretically, and how in Sartre’s philosophy the human condition is ontologized, while losing sight of its materialist/historical moorings. The last section of the paper looks at Sartre’s ‘free acts’ through a reading of Bergman’s *Persona*, a film that effectively complicates the structure of individual consciousness – the individual does not have the purposeful and meaningful structure of Sartre’s conception but is instead riven by circumstances forming his/her consciousness. In this manner, I argue that the film makes a case not only for an existentialist but also historical scheme.

Existentialism, broadly speaking, is a philosophy that posits itself against metaphysics. It claims to shift the focus of philosophical enquiry from the abstract to the concrete – that is, from an unchanging essence to the concrete, contingent human arena. This has been seen as the red herring of existentialism – if it speaks against an essence or an unchanging principle and focuses on concrete particulars, how can it be consolidated into a branch of philosophy? Existence is that which is; and essence is what it is. Philosophy has hitherto been the mediating point to explain the what. The earliest example would be Plato’s *Republic*, where the Idea is the essence and phenomenon is merely the imitation of the idea.

Sartre’s existentialism however makes claims to the, now commonplace, ‘existence precedes essence’. This means that instead of explaining the idea behind the phenomenon, Existentialism draws attention to the phenomenon. The methodology behind studying existence as concrete phenomena, called Phenomenology, forms the crux of existentialism. Phenomenology, taking from the Greek word ‘phaenomenon’ which means ‘to appear or ‘to show’, is the study of matter as it is perceived by the subject. It has been talked about variously by theorists, notable among them being Kant and Husserl; but it suffices to say that the emphasis is on the subject’s apprehension of reality. This theory was mostly up against scholasticism, which, according to it, had not adequately effected the split between the particular and the universal but had instead replaced divinity with a secularized essentialism. The intent then is to make the study of ‘reality’ more scientific; to examine and theorize through inductive logic the perceptive apparatus of the human being.

Sartre’s phenomenology is somewhat different. His theoretical focus is not simply on the indeterminate existence of man (like Camus), but on creating a philosophy whereby man could negotiate with this indeterminacy and make his life meaningful through a series of reflective actions. In other words, take ‘involuntary action’ out of existence. For this he is
indebted to Heidegger’s concept of dasein. Dasein (being-there) is a state of man where he is thrown into a pre-structured world, and must slowly forge an ‘authentic life’ for himself. While for Heidegger an authentic life can be lived through the cognition of death, for Sartre it can be lived through the cognition of the ‘negative’ or the ‘lack’ in life.

Phenomenology acts on the supposition that consciousness determines reality; whereas historical-materialism works on the belief that consciousness is reflective of socio-economic reality. Thus it is unsurprising that phenomenology is seen as antithetical to a historical-materialist philosophy due to the value it confers on the human cognitive apparatus. However, Sartre supposed his theory to be a viable (and appropriate) companion to a historical-materialist philosophy. The logic behind this belief was that existentialism focuses on the human and Marxism focuses on the social, and so they don’t really contradict each other. According to Jameson:

‘When Sartre describes the relationship of an ‘ideology’ (existentialism) to a ‘philosophy’ (Marxism); he implies thereby that a genuine contradiction could only take place between two entities of the same type – between two ‘philosophies’. (Jameson, 84)

This paper will examine this very contradiction using concepts extracted from Being and Nothingness and positing it against Lukacs and Jameson’s thoughts on Existentialism. It will culminate in a brief study of Bergman’s Persona and how the filmic medium explores ideas of consciousness and identity not merely theoretically but also experientially.

From Being to Social Being

It is true that Marxism does not focus on the human, except through labour. Even Marx’s originary idea of man as species-being is closely tied up with the self-realization of man through work on the ‘sensuous external world’ or nature. This kind of work is not a result of ‘need’ or sustenance on the part of man, but the realization of his ‘species-life’. In other words, in such a formation, work is an attribute of the species or community of man, and not an individuated activity.

There might be a romantic strain detectable in this, but the formulation of the concept of the species-man is primarily pitted against the Hobbesian ‘nasty and brutish’ individuated man. It is reclaiming the idea that matter in its natural state is not in a state of turbulence. It also recalls the fact that man is fundamentally tied up with the work he does, and that his consciousness of ‘being’ derives from it. The concept of the species-being is in direct opposition to Existential philosophy that claims that man has no unvarying essence, although the species-being is not an attempt to essentialize man’s nature. In fact, it is a reminder that there is nothing like ‘pure subjectivity’, but man-in-community.

While describing ‘free acts’, Sartre claims that the individual is ‘condemned to freedom’ and therefore must perform ‘free acts’ to determine his/her reality. The ‘free acts’ are performed on the basis of the perception of ‘negativity’ on the part of the individual. This is a highly subjectivized and particularized account of Being.

Sartre extended the idea of ‘negativity’ in human perception to include the concept of ‘scarcity’ in matter. This he posed as an ontological condition. Since nature and matter are scarce, it produces in man the ‘need’ to work on it and produce for his own sustenance. While he might think that the concept of scarcity makes his formulations more ‘materialist’ the tenor of it remains abstract.
‘The idea of scarcity has struck many critics as being more Malthusian and Darwinian than Marxist.’ Jameson says this while also acknowledging that ‘Sartre’s initial negations, and the stress he lays on scarcity, have the advantage of restoring to primitive societies (no matter what their property system) that dimension of misery and toil, early death, misery and earth scraping desperation we know has been theirs, and of restoring to history its inhuman, nightmarish quality which myths only serve to distract us from.’

What one can glean from this is: Sartre might have begun with the intention of talking of ‘scarcity’ in materialist terms but he fails to locate his theories of reality adequately within the context of social relations. The result is that, contrary to his aims, Sartre’s theory of ‘scarcity’ and ‘need’ end up as abstractions.

Another problem is that the ideas of ‘negativity’ and ‘scarcity’ differ not in degree but in kind. In the human context of ‘negativity’, the human perception of negativity is primary, and in the social context of ‘scarcity’ social reality is primary. White talking of ‘scarcity’ Sartre aims at extending his idea of ‘negation’. The resulting connection is a tenuous one.

Lukacs in talking of existentialism in the section entitled ‘Method as Attitude’, says:

‘The phenomenological method believes it has discovered a way of knowing which exhibits the essence of objective reality without going beyond the human and even the individual consciousness.’ If the methodology is that of phenomenology or ‘intuition’, it is not possible to widen the scope of theory. To be fair, Sartre tries to talk of the individual in social terms. ‘Need’ deriving from scarcity could echo the fact of man being alienated from his work, making it a means of purely physical sustenance. But this would need excessive extrapolations as his theories do not clearly articulate the ‘species’ aspect of man’s ‘being’.

**Individual Consciousness and ‘free acts’**

As mentioned before, for Sartre, Being is defined though ‘lack’. Lack or ‘nothingness’ is an ontological fact. He makes clear that the nothingness referred to is not a pre-condition to Being, but is contained in the very heart of Being. Every object or action has its own lack-of-object and lack-of-action. In other words, the existence of the object/action that is cut off from its essence is just a series of empty variables that exist (or not). What is left is the expectation of the unavailable in the available.

The individual subject perceives reality through ‘intuition’. Intuition simply means that the subject uses his cognitive faculties to apprehend reality, and through this experience, comes to conclusions about the nature of that reality. As a theorist influenced by phenomenology, this is the epistemological basis for Sartre’s understanding of the individual consciousness, except for the additional clause of ‘negativity’. For Hegel, Being exists in a dialectical relationship with Essence, or as Sartre puts it ‘Being is surpassed in Essence’. The immediate presence is a manifestation of the Essence, so presence/absence are not cut-off and co-dependent variables as Sartre suggests. For Sartre, the individual intuits the presence/absence of an object, and then comes to conclusions about the nature of its essence. And since this is the case, the nature of the phenomena perceived is merely the sum of its properties. The presence of a phenomena and a perceive of the phenomena is the sum total of the requirements for an object/action to reveal itself. There is no truth-content that preceded the action, no inherent value to it. Not only is there no essence, what we call ‘essence’ is the composite of all possible manifestations of the object. In other words, the essence is all appearance. The hecceity of an object does not exist.
On the one hand Sartre claims that the principle behind the object is the object; on the other he suggests that to understand the object we need to understand the ontology surrounding the object. Therefore the apprehension of the object requires the apprehension of the objects it is surrounded by; or the concepts that it operates by. Therefore we can see that he borrows from Hegel’s idea of the relationality of objects and phenomena, but the relatedness of objects does not point to meaning beyond it. There is no teleology and therefore no dialectic involved in Sartre’s formulation of reality. The only dialectic that Sartre talks about is that between presence and absence, which he talks about in the essay entitled ‘The Dialectical Concept of Nothingness’. Presence and absence do not exist in a binary relationship with each other but are dialectically related. In other words, absence is contained in the heart of the presence. But this is a static explanation of phenomena and does not contain the dynamism of Hegelian dialectics.

**Sartre and psychoanalysis**

Sartre rejects the surface-depth model of psychoanalysis. According to him, consciousness or the ego is a knowable entity and psychoanalysis with its theories of the subconscious does not allow for a determinate and coherent ego. More importantly, psychoanalysis renders man un-free, since his actions and reactions are guided by his subconscious and hence the possibility of complete self-knowledge does not exist. One of important concepts of Sartre is the idea of ‘biography’ – according to him, man’s biography is something he decides on his own. The events and experience that are meaningful are those that are chosen by him – this way, man makes his own meaning and defines the teleology of his life. Furthermore, the experiences might be part-reality and part-invention, but it doesn’t matter since they don’t hold any significance except in man’s mind.

This brings us to a slight contradiction – if Sartre rejects the idea of unconscious as determining motivations as solipsistic, how then is this premium put on the consciousness not solipsistic? In fact, he rejects the idea of the unconscious and coins what he terms as ‘bad faith’ – something that sounds suspiciously like Freud’s repression. An individual is said to exist in ‘bad faith’ when his conscious mind believes in something that the sub-conscious mind rejects.

Contrary to Sartre’s belief, Freud’s unconsciousness is not by definition solipsistic. In *Civilization and It’s Discontents*, Freud clearly states that individual neurosis provides a basis for analysing collectives. The aim of the individual is happiness, that is, the ‘pleasure principle’ but this desire for pleasure has to be mediated by reality, or what Freud calls the ‘reality principle’. In its confrontation with objective reality, man’s desire for pleasure is often thwarted and frustrated, thus necessitating man to adapt their pleasure in accordance with reality. The repression that the conscious mind effects when confronted with a traumatic event leads to neurosis or an unhappy consciousness. Freud’s unhappy consciousness finds some parallels with Hegel’s unhappy consciousness. According to Hegel the unhappy consciousness of the individual comes from a confrontation of the individual with objective reality, which is essentially Freud’s ‘reality principle’. The essence of the individual is denied to him because his instincts are denied. Therefore he is in a state of ‘un-freedom’. The two stages Scepticism and Stoicism that Hegel uses to illustrate his point are states of false-freedom, as it does not confront objective reality and will necessarily dissipate. Therefore, far from being solipsistic, the individual’s neurosis can point to social and collective neurosis. Neurosis/repression is not merely a biological category. The objectivity and clarity that Sartre seeks by eliminating the unconscious and its implications end up making his thesis more reductive.
The master-slave dialectic puts the individual in a historical context and describes the subject’s social-ontological position. On the face of it, the master is the superior of the two; but his consciousness actually owes its existence to the identity of the slave. The master enslaves and objectifies the slave. This soon leads to a paradox – the initial feelings of mastery are replaced by uneasiness, and the master does not feel acknowledged by the ‘object’ that the slave has become. He needs a ‘subject’ to validate his position, once the confident ‘being-for-self’ that he experienced is reduced by reality to a dependent state. The stoic master’s sense of reality is, in the final instance, influenced by objective reality. Consciousness is disposed to think of itself as ‘essential’, especially if it can afford to (temporarily) lose sight of objective reality.

Sartre agreed with the master-slave dialectic, even attempting to build on it. His emphasis was on the power-struggle that existed between the master and slave and how in the end one attained mastery over the other. However, there are subtle points of difference in Hegel’s master-slave and Sartre’s appropriation of the master-slave. For him, the master and the slave situation arises when two ‘totalities’ or monads engage in a power struggle and one attains mastery over the other. The party that is overpowered is negated, and self-objectifies himself through the gaze of the master.

Through this it is clear that Sartre believes that man’s actions are determined by his social relations, and that within the master-slave scheme all acts are necessarily ‘un-free’. How then does he reconcile this with the idea of ‘free acts’ which he delineates in Being and Nothingness? The answer is: philosophical suicidevi. Man decides what the essence of his life is going to be and turning his back against the man-world split – which in existentialist terms is called the ‘absurd’. The absurd is when man experiences incongruity between his desires and what the world offers – something that plays out in the neurosis that is implicit in Freud’s repression, Lacan’s mirror stage, Hegel’s master-slave dynamic. The dissonance is made apparent in each of these formulations. The freedom of self-definition is merely the attribution of freedom by man. Yet one would not imagine Sartre agreeing with Hegel when the latter says, ‘Freedom in thought is only the notion of freedom, not the living reality of freedom itself.’

Even if one does not subscribe to the idea of ‘philosophical suicide’ in the sense that Camus meant it, it is tempting to accept it in the context of Sartre’s claim that the onus of determining reality is on the individual’s perception of reality. This is because when this happens, the risk of a reified view of reality is high. According to Lukacs the individual with his limited cognitive apparatus is not capable of perceiving things in totality but only a local aspect of available reality (unless he has trained himself to critically understand totality). In fact, this faith in the individual’s cognitive apparatus is an attribute of modern philosophy and empirical rationality.

According to Sartre, being is conditioned by social facts but consciousness can have intellectual freedom. But this is wrong since consciousness too can be conditioned by social facts.

Persona/Persona

The movie Persona begins with the image of the camera rolling and then a jump-cut into the next image, which is of a cartoon film strip in rapid motion. The obvious explanation of this is that the director is drawing attention to the artifice of his art but it is not merely that. This meta-technique is intrinsically connected with the idea of ‘persona’ or role playing. The director’s vision is not organically connected with either the content or form of the work of
movie but is a series of artistic decisions he makes. Meta-art draws attention to art that is conscious of itself as a craft, but it is also an alienating device that prevents the audience from identifying with the actors and the events. This scene is followed by random images that evoke fear – a sheep being culled, a giant spider, body innards – and then a series of sleeping figures. The random horrific images can be seen as the phantasmagoria of the unconscious – repressed content which reveals itself willy-nilly in a sleep-state. The sleeping boy awakens to find an enlarged image of his mother projected against a wall at close-range. The image on the wall merges to form the features of another woman. The meaning of the scene is not explained, but the audience notes the significance of the boy; he is a retrospectively explainable figure. This forms the first section of the film.

The second section opens with a nurse, Alma, being assigned to take care of a patient and being informed of the nature of her malady. The patient, Elisabeth Vogler is an actress, who, while performing on stage suddenly stopped short, looked around and laughed. Since then, she has not spoken a word, nor is there any indication that she will speak. She is said to be of sound mind and body, and her actions are her own conscious doing. The psychoanalyst that interacts with her claims to know the nature of her decision. Elisabeth has realised that all of life is role-playing and that the way to be conscious and resist what Heidegger calls the ‘thrown-ness’ of the human being in the world is to play no role. This ‘thrown-ness’ into the world, is a world where social relationships and codes have already been defined and man is left to grapple with it. She makes the choice to become mute, and through this self-mastery achieve the self-reflexive state of true ‘being’. As noted before, for Sartre, this is the genuine recognition of the negative in the world; that the world is constituted as a lack. But lack is also self-annihilating, and this is where the paradox of Sartre’s formulation lies. When a person reappropriates his/her being from the world through negation how can he direct the course of his life through performing roles? One might say that he stops playing roles inadvertently but is conscious of his own performance as performance. If one identifies life as profoundly negative, it follows that to be an ‘authentic’ being one becomes a ‘negative’ too – by not speaking, Elisabeth Vogler becomes an absent presence.

In the third section, the nurse Alma and Elisabeth set off to a beach-side home that is not being used, ostensibly for the improvement of Elisabeth’s ‘condition’. What gradually happens is that the nurse confides in Elisabeth, talking incessantly of troubling instances from the past. Elisabeth gains her confidence by her understated affection and silence. Initially the nurse seems to be undergoing a talking-cure – their roles are reversed, the nurse is the patient and Elisabeth the doctor. Alma feels more and more under the influence of Elisabeth. Soon, however, there is a rupture, when Alma discovers a letter written by Elisabeth to her psychoanalyst, revealing Alma’s secrets and also saying that ‘it is fun to study her’. From this point onwards, the audience sees that unravelling of Alma, and she finds that she is completely in the power of Elisabeth. ‘It is fun to study her’ is a masterstroke in objectification and Alma finds herself slave to Elisabeth. They begin resembling the originary myth of the master-slave. Hegel’s master-slave is a reflection of social relations and the terms of the ‘unambitious nurse’ and the ‘great actress’ are bandied about, but this does not seem to be the emphasis of the movie. Persona psychologises the master-slave dialectic, showing both the slave and the master by turns as dependent and uneasy. There is even a physical scuffle that is a pretend fight-to-the-death. Sartre too talks about the master-slave in psychological terms. Popularised by the phrase ‘hell is the other person’ from No Exit, Sartre claims that dyadic relationships are designed for one to overpower the other, since its structure is that of two ‘freedoms’ trying to retain their autonomy. Autonomy for both is not possible due to the mutual ‘look’. Eventually, one person’s look objectifies the other, and the latter is under the
influence of the former. In *Persona* there is a telling scene in which Alma imagines Elisabeth come into her room and look at her; while she had done no such thing.

The third section of the film is a confused medley of actions. Elisabeth’s husband visits them and seems to voluntarily mistake Alma for Elisabeth. This seems to suggest the merging of the master-slave; since after all they are in a dialectical relationship with each other. Another significant scene is one where Alma sits Elisabeth down and dictates to her that her anxiety vis-à-vis life and role-playing is because she has failed in the role of the mother. Alma goes on to say that this feeling has grown upon her over the years, ever since someone from long ago told her, ‘Elisabeth, like a woman and an artist you have it, practically under your belt, but you lack motherly feelings.’ It is important that Alma dictates to Elisabeth what she does not know and has no means of knowing. This episode connects to the earlier scene where her son sits faced by a giant digital picture of his mother. This is again a meta-comment on the movie, where the director as well as Elisabeth can claim any motivation and make it cinematically real. This invokes Sartre’s idea of the biography, where the individual creates his own life by imaginatively constructing his own significant moments; whether true or false. On the face of it many theoretical formulations of Sartre can be traced in the movie *Persona*. But in the end this question of the authorship is wrought with extreme uneasiness. Phenomenological content is not merely a negative or a positive but a complex contradiction in the midst of which the subject exists.

The question in conclusion is this: Why does Sartre seem to meet theories half-way? The phenomenological, the materialist, the psychoanalytical? Bourdieu, speaking from a very different field of vision, seems to hit upon the reason for this. Bourdieu says:

‘He (Sartre) tries, against Freud and Marx combined, to tear the ‘being’ or the ‘creator’ away from every kind of reduction in general – from genre, from class – and to assert the transcendence of the ego against the aggressions of genetic thought.’

The being or the creator here is the intellectual, who is his own organizing principle. This, Bourdieu calls the ‘hubris of the absolute thinker’.

**Works Cited:**


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1 Inductive logic would involve generalizations and not abstractions and would therefore be a more organized study.

2 In fact, it would not be right to paint the all existentialist thinkers with the same brush. Understandably, they looked at each other as chief antagonists rather than thinkers whose
theories they were rejecting wholesale. My paper will not go into the fine print of these differences (for example between Heidegger and Sartre and Camus) but in many particulars these differences, otherwise made much of, were but slight.

iii Another major focus on existentialism was the idea of ‘authentic living’. Involuntary or unreflective action was considered to be the opposite of authentic living.

iv In fact, according to Marx, Hegel’s dialectic was ‘standing on its head’ as Hegel gave the Idea primacy and all social and economic phenomena as just a manifestation of it.

v Sartre’s idea is also comparable to C.S. Peirce and Saussure’s theory of infinite semiosis, which also has its origins in Hegel’s ideas of relationality. This is significant, as these structuralists also claimed the individual perception to be the organizing principle behind the otherwise chaotic signs.

vi Philosophical Suicide was a concept developed by Camus in the *Myth of Sisyphus* to describe all the Existentialist thinkers (Sartre, Kierkegaard) who did not integrate the idea of man’s *unhelmliche* (homelessness) as an essential ontological fact but tried by different means (in Sartre’s case social responsibility and in Kierkegaard’s case theism) to overcome it.