

Knowledge*

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1. Introduction

Knowledge is a notion that occurs throughout Sartre's philosophical writings. From his early forays in phenomenology (Sartre 1970, 200a, 2004c part A), to his late engagement with dialectical reason (1960-1985 vol I: 30n, 31n, 502), *connaissance* is a term that appears in almost every twist and turn of Sartrean argumentation.

Yet, discussions of Sartre's conception of knowledge are anything but common. How may we best interpret that peculiar phenomenon of paucity of references to knowledge in the secondary literature, and overabundance of that term in Sartre's own texts? Part of the explanation, in my view, lies in the fact that knowledge for Sartre is, what we may call, a *contrastive* notion: knowledge is what consciousness--including one's primary relation to oneself, to one's own body, to other beings in a situation, and to the world--is *not*.

But what exactly is that notion with which so many other notions apparently get mixed up, and with which they ought not to be confused? In this chapter I shall sketch an answer to that question by considering a section from *Being and Nothingness* where Sartre sets knowledge itself as the focus of his discussion (2003: 195-203).

Our discussion will be limited in its focus: it will not address Sartre's views on knowledge throughout his voluminous output, nor will it try to account for every occurrence of 'knowledge' in *Being and Nothingness*; instead, it will pay close attention to particular paragraphs of one section of that book. However, the discussion will be quite broad in its intended implications, as it will provide the required background for exploring a general question, which here will be simply stated, but not addressed: whether Sartre's positive claims about knowledge allow it to fulfill the contrastive role with which it is bestowed in his philosophy.

I begin with a brief statement of Sartre's account of knowledge, for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with his philosophy. Sartre's account includes some standard philosophical terms, employed in a sometimes non-standard way; hence, I clarify the meaning of those terms,

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by showing how it differs from the meaning they carry in the work of other philosophers, and by drawing on parts of Sartre's work that are relevant to a correct understanding of those terms. In the course of my presentation I pose some critical queries and sketch some answers, so as to better clarify the Sartrean approach to knowledge.

2. Intuition and Belief

Knowledge worthy of its name is intuitive; any non-intuitive relation to an object is withdrawn, as soon as intuition is attained; and intuition concerns the presence of consciousness to its object. Those are, in outline, the three pillars on which Sartre's theory of knowledge stands. Let us take a closer look at them.

Sartre begins his discussion by discriminating genuine from substitute forms of knowledge: there is only one type of knowledge, properly speaking, and that is "intuitive knowledge" (2003: 195). Before we explore the exact meaning of that phrase, it is worth noting that Sartre introduces knowledge not in terms of what it is about (thus, he does not claim, for instance, that nothing can count as knowledge unless it captures Platonic forms, Aristotelian *eide*, or Husserlian essences); neither in terms of how it relates to other doxastic phenomena (such as justified belief, or warranted opinion); nor in terms of the alternative grammatical constructions of the relevant verb ('to know *that*', 'to know *how*', or 'to know *an* object'). Yet, specific views about each of those matters are entailed by his analysis, as we shall soon see.

Intuitive knowledge, simply put, is knowledge procured by intuition. But what is intuition? In ordinary parlance, intuition stands for the (seemingly) ungrounded but (apparently) indubitable apprehension of some fact. In contemporary epistemology, intuition has been systematically examined under different headings. Take, first, a cluster of theories that approach intuition through the notion of belief, asserting that intuitions *are* beliefs (Lewis, 1983), or that they are *dispositions to* believe (Van Inwagen, 1997), or that they are attitudes in which a proposition *seems* to be true, as opposed to a belief's wholehearted commitment to a proposition being true (Bealer 1998). Those are all important suggestions but, unfortunately, not very helpful in making sense of the Sartrean approach to intuition. Sartre does not relate intuition to belief or to a similar kind of propositional attitude. In the section on knowledge, belief is peculiarly absent, and when it does enter the discussion in other parts of *Being and Nothingness*, it is not in order to illuminate intuition, but with a view to highlight, for instance, the ontological interplay between *croyance*, on the one hand, and *mauvaise* or *bonne foi*, on the other (2003: 93-94).

Apart from the absence of relevant textual evidence, there is an important reason for being reluctant to think of intuition as identical to, or otherwise dependent on, belief. If intuition were similar to belief, the question would promptly arise as to how, for Sartre, intuition is justified. But that question simply does not arise: within the Sartrean system, intuition is not in need of justification because intuition itself is the ultimate source of justification.

'Intuition' has also been the name given to a method, according to which philosophy advances through an experience of focused sympathy, which enables us to move into the inner being of a phenomenon, such as duration, or the self (Bergson 1992: 159, 172, 185-188). The influence of the 'method of intuition' is evident in Sartre's aversion to both rationalism and empiricism in their dogmatic versions, his emphasis on lived experience (*le vécu*), and his understanding of temporality as an 'original synthesis' rather than a mere aggregate of unrelated instances. However, what is valuable and distinctive in the Bergsonian method of intuition, is its emphasis on the intellectually demanding and time-consuming character of meticulously attending to the various aspects of an ever-unfolding process--and such emphasis is lacking in Sartre's use of intuition, in the current context. As soon as intuition is achieved, an object is given effortlessly, and for what it is. This does not commit Sartre to the view that all sides of an object are given at once, and in the same manner. (For a sketch of the Sartrean analysis of visual experience, see my (2011) chs 2 and 5, and ch. 6 for the concomitant issues pertaining to Sartre's phenomenological account of a thing's essence).

If we are to identify correctly the theoretical precedents of the Sartrean employment of 'intuition', we might as well look at the two philosophers mentioned in the section on knowledge: one is Husserl, and the other is Descartes.

3. Intuition and Discourse

The section on knowledge opens with a distinction between 'intuition' and 'deduction'; and that distinction appears to be a direct descendant of Descartes' view that when we "review all the actions of the intellect by means of which we are able to arrive at knowledge," we "recognize only two: intuition and deduction." Intuition is "the conception which an unclouded and attentive mind gives us," whereas deduction denotes "all necessary inference from other facts that are known with certainty" (Descartes 1988: Rule III). The Cartesian view, however, could illuminate the Sartrean theory, subject to two important qualifications.

First, the order of intuition and deduction is reversed: for Descartes, intuition provides the principles from which deductive reasoning ought to proceed; for Sartre, "deduction and discursive argument... are only instruments which lead to intuition"; and when intuition is achieved, discourse and deduction "are effaced before it" (2003: 195).

Secondly, a Cartesian intuition is primarily a means by which we acquire secure knowledge of conceptual relations; just by examining various concepts, and thus *a priori*, we can intellectually grasp that one includes the other--for instance, that the concept of God includes the notion of eternal existence; Cartesian intuition, in other words, informs us primarily about true propositions. In Sartre's discussion, though, intuition is not the revealing of *a priori*, conceptual truths: intuition is 'of a thing' and pertains to the relation of consciousness to 'the being' (2003: 196).

It is evident that Sartre subscribes to the traditional distinction between 'discourse and deduction' on the one hand, and 'intuition' on the other. What is perhaps less clear is why exactly he gives priority to latter. It might be suggested that Sartre simply takes for granted the ordinary distinction between two french verbs for knowing: *connaitre*, which is of persons or things, and *savoir*, which is about true propositions. Intuition, as we saw above, concerns not propositions but things. And since Sartre here examines not *savoir*, but *connaissance*, he is right to privilege intuition over alternative types of knowledge that concern propositions, such as deduction or discourse.

That suggestion is correct, but it simply elaborates on what Sartre is doing, not on the reasons why he is doing it; we are still owed an explanation for Sartre's choice of *connaitre*, rather than *savoir* as the focus of his philosophical analysis. Such an explanation can be constructed with elements from Sartre's account of knowledge. To correctly identify, though, those elements, as well as the pattern in which they are weaved, we need to shift the focus of our discussion from epistemology to ontology.

4. Intuition and Presence

We have been told so far to what intuition is opposed (discourse and deduction) and what it is of (a thing or the being). Sartre completes his introduction of intuition by bringing in another notion: presence. He writes that "intuition is the presence of consciousness to the thing." (2003: 196).

We may understand this definition of intuition by invoking, and slightly elaborating upon, an example, offered by Sartre, about the different ways in which some one person--call him 'Pierre'--is experientially given to me: as a mental image, through photograph, and in a drawing. In imagining Pierre "certain details are lacking, others are suspect, the whole is very blurred. There is a certain feeling of sympathy and pleasantness that I want to respore to the face but which will not come." I grab a photograph from a drawer, and that gives me "all the details of his face... but the photograph lacks life; it presents perfectly the external traits of Pierre's face; it does not give his expression." I then find a caricature where his features are "deliberately distorted,... yet, what is missing in the photograph, vitality, expression, is clearly there in the drawing: I 'rediscover' Pierre." (*L' Imaginaire*: 40-41)

In this example an object (Pierre) is given to (Sartre's) consciousness through different media: first as a mental image, then through a photograph, and then by a vivid caricature. Despite the differences between the cases, aptly captured by Sartre's narrative, there is a common experiential theme: Pierre is given to consciousness as absent.

Consider now what would happen if, while Sartre was ruminating about a recent conversation he had with his friend, Pierre knocked on the door and walked into the study: he would not longer be conveyed by some *medium*, through which Sartre would try to capture his friend: Pierre would be *unmediatedly* given to Sartre. Pierre also would not longer be well or badly *indicated* by various (psychological, photographic, or drawn) pieces of evidence: Pierre himself is not *evidence about* Pierre, or something that *indicates* Pierre, or from which we may *deduce* Pierre; being in the room, Pierre is no longer *re-presented*; rather, he is *presented* to Sartre. This unmediated experience of presence gives the core meaning of intuition.

Sartre, to be sure, is not the first philosopher to think of intuition in those terms. Husserl, as Sartre is happy to acknowledge, was there well before him. Husserl's talk of "originally presentive consciousness" and "originally presentive intuitions" purports to convey the kind of consious event from which genuine knowledge originates (Husserl, 1913, sec. 19). Sartre locates the difference between Husserl and himself, in what might sound like a pedantic point, i.e., that whereas Husserl thinks that in intuition it is the object that is present to consciousness, for Sartre, 'being-present-to' is only possible for a being that is conscious of itself being in a certain situation: "being-present is an ekstastic mode of being of the for-itself," and, therefore, intuition is not the presence of the thing to consciousness but "the presence of consciousness to the thing" (2003: 195-6).

Sartre will then devote a section of seven, densely written, pages in spelling out this sentence (2003: 196-202). The reader will more easily follow that section, if she appreciate its basic argumentative point: Sartre defends his conception of intuition as consciousness' presence to an object, by laying out what has to be the case about consciousness, so that knowledge of an object be possible.

5. Consciousness and Knowledge

Sartre's oft repeated claim, throughout his writings, that *conscience* is not *connaissance*, should not make us loose sight of the fact that, properly speaking, knowledge is one of the many modes of consciousness. It would be absurd to claim that while someone is acquiring knowledge of an object, her consciousness is switched off, or even that it is directed away from the object of knowledge to which she is currently attending. In Sartrean terms, we may say that knowledge is first and foremost an instance of "being-in-the-world," which is a "synthetic totality of which consciousness, like the phenomenon, constitute only moments" (2003: 27). Hence, to understand knowledge, we need, first, to make sense of how consciousness is related to whatever is conscious of; and, secondly, to see what sets knowing apart from other modes of one's conscious relation to the world.

The former task is what preoccupies Sartre, in the section under consideration. He argues, briefly, as follows: for consciousness to be, it has to be consciousness *of* some thing; but to be conscious of any thing, it has, at a minimum, to be conscious of itself as not being the thing of which it is conscious. However, consciousness cannot be conscious of itself before being directed to its object, simply because consciousness is not a thing--it is itself *no* thing, but the revealing intuition *of* things. Consciousness' intending of a thing, reflects back on itself, rendering consciousness the reflection of that thing on which it is reflected; the reflection is something of which consciousness is always necessarily (non-positionally) aware of, while it is (positionally) aware of its object. Indeed, consciousness is (*nothing* but) that (non-positional) presence to itself being (positionally) present to its object. The conscious being is self-presenting, a being for-itself, directed towards a being in-itself, of which it is conscious.

This line of reasoning effects the transition from discussion of consciousness to an analysis of being. Driven by his view of intentionality as a conscious being's transcendence toward the world, Sartre maintains that the for-itself is outside itself, in the in-itself, since it defines itself by what it is not: "In knowledge, taken as a bond of ontological being, the being which

I am not represents the absolute plenitude of the in-itself." That further entails that in knowledge, "the only type of being which can be encountered and which is perpetually *there* is the *known*. The knower is not..." in the sense that "he is nothing other than that which brings it about that there is a *being-there* on the part of the known--a presence" (2003: 200).

Sartre puts emphasis on the immediacy of the relation between consciousness and the world. However, immediacy may not be mistaken for fusion. The knower cannot disappear in the known, and the known can never be absorbed by the knower. The absorption of the known by the knower is disallowed by Sartre's forceful critique of idealism: the object of knowledge is not a aethereal item locked in a mental box, but part of the reality toward which consciousness is directed. And the total disappearance of the subject in the object is not possible, because consciousness never ceases to be (non-positionally) aware of itself being (positionally) conscious of its objects.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on immediacy appears, to me, to jar with Sartre's frequent allusions to the unbridgeable duality that characterizes knowledge. If there is one claim about knowledge that readers of *Being and Nothingness* will find repeated in almost every section of that book, is Sartre's warning that *conscience* ought not to be modelled on *connaissance*, since the latter involves a "subject-object dualism" that is destructive of the seamless unity that characterizes consciousness' immediate relation to itself (2003: 8-9; cf. Part I ch. 1 sec. V, Part II, ch. 1 secs I and V--and most of 2004c Part A). An attempt to render 'dualism' compatible with 'immediacy' in the case of knowledge, should take into account Sartre's ontology of Negation; but that is the topic for another occasion.

6. Concluding Remark

Sartre offers an analysis of knowledge in terms of presence, and unpacks that notion by showing the ontological bond that connects consciousness with the world. A careful study of his theory will reward the reader both for the rigor of its argumentation, and the richness of its phenomenological detail. Nevertheless, certain conceptual issues remain unaddressed by Sartre--and it is not clear to me how they might be resolved in the context of his analysis. I shall close on a critical note, by briefly articulating one of those issues.

Let us grant Sartre the view that knowledge of an object is indeed a matter of presence. Does this view allow for consciousness' being present to an object, without acquiring

knowledge of it? The question arises because it is not unreasonable to claim that you may be present to an object, even carefully attend to it, yet fail to know it.

If Sartre acknowledges that one's being present to an object does not entail that one knows it, he should have been more explicit about it. He could have specified, for instance, the circumstances under which the ontological bond between the for-itself and the in-itself does not guarantee knowledge; or, in simpler terms, the cases in which consciousness' attending to a thing, does not deliver knowledge of it. However, no indication as to how we may tell the successful from the failed cases is given in the section devoted to knowledge. We may distinguish, here, between two groups of epistemically unsuccessful cases. One concerns the main topic of Sartre's discussion, that is perceptual, esp. visual knowledge. The relevant cases of illusion and hallucination are not explored in the section on knowledge; and when they are discussed by Sartre, it is in a very different context and with a different purpose, i.e. for illuminating the workings of imagination (2004a, Part 3). The other group of cases of epistemic failure concerns a type of consciousness' relation to an object, which is, again, not addressed by Sartre. Those are cases in which consciousness is present to its object, yet one fails to have knowledge of that object, because one lacks understanding, as it is evidenced by one's inability to give an account of that which one claims to know. But 'giving an account' to back one's cognitive claims is a discursive phenomenon, and as such lies outside the province of Sartre's, otherwise masterful, analysis of intuitive knowledge.

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