

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, *NOTEBOOKS FOR AN ETHICS: THE ONTOLOGY OF THE GIFT*

In his 1943 *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*¹, Jean-Paul Sartre concludes that the relationship with the other is always characterized by conflict. No need to be a Sartre scholar to be familiar with the quote *L'enfer, c'est les autres* or Hell is: Other People. In his 1960 *Critique of Dialectical Reason*², the other is understood as the realm of alienation: the other is that which can take hold of, control, our freedom. Like in *Being and Nothingness*, the existence of the other results in a struggle for freedom; this implies that the relationship with the other is always characterized by conflict. In the following, I will focus on a text Sartre wrote in the period between the publications of the two above-mentioned works, more precisely on his exploration of the gift in his posthumous *Notebooks for an Ethics*.³ Sartre's interest in the debate on the gift was triggered by Marcel Mauss, who inspired him to rethink the theme of the other—Sartre was at that time looking for a way to think about the other as the other, a path, to be sure, that he abandoned later on.⁴ I propose to follow this alternative route by re-reading some passages on the gift as they appear in *Notebooks for an Ethics*. *Notebooks* was written in 1947 and 1948 as an attempt to redeem a promise formulated near the end of *Being and Nothingness*, namely to elaborate on the ethical implications of the work and to publish an ethics in the future. However Sartre left that project, and the texts remained unpublished until 1983, three years after his death.⁵

Though Sartre presents his analysis in *Being and Nothingness* as a phenomenological-ontological essay, it is the influence of Hegel that makes any relation between the being-for-itself (*l'être pour-soi*) and the being-in-itself (*l'être en-soi*) in it possible. When it comes to Sartre's philosophy of the other, the influence of Hegel's master-slave philosophy is immense: Sartre

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943). Translated as *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956).

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). Translated as *Critique of Dialectical Reason: The intelligibility of history* (London/New York: Verso, 1991).

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Cahiers pour une morale* (Paris, Gallimard, 1983), Translated as *Notebooks for an Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴ Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2012). Translated as *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990).

⁵ Although the *Notebooks* is, as the title suggests, a bunch of sketches, it is easy to read the text as a whole, since new themes are broached and related to each other within the framework of the text, themes like violence, recognition, the appeal, conversion and the Apocalypse, all in existentialist terms.

understands the relation between being-for-itself and the being-in-itself as a dialectical relation. It is quite impossible to explain such a coupling of phenomenological and ontological interpretations of being on the basis of Husserlian or Heideggerian texts alone. Sartre is original when he understands dialectics in phenomenological terms: this is in fact his entire project, from *Being and Nothingness* to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The struggle for freedom is the struggle of the animate being-for-itself in a world that is inanimate being-in-itself: a world in which the other appears to be-in-itself as well. This line of thought eventually leads him to the being-for-others—*l'être pour-autrui*—which refers to the external self that exists as an object in the eyes and minds of others. In *Being and Nothingness*, the other appears as the object that limits the freedom of the being-for-itself: the other objectifies the being-for-itself into a being-in-itself, leaving the being-for-itself no longer the center of the universe.

It is in *Notebooks for an Ethics* that Sartre tries to overcome this situation of original conflict, of violence, of our relations with the other. And simultaneously, in *Notebooks*, he widens the initially narrow individual sphere into the social sphere. *Notebooks* represent the crucial shift from a preoccupation with individual freedom to a political commitment that is of major importance to the development of Sartre's philosophy.

One of the main questions in *Notebooks* is how to overcome the oppression of the other that comes with the freedom of being-for-itself. In other words: is it even possible to have co-existing, free *being-for-itselfs*? The answer to this question might alone result in a feasible ethics in a Godless universe without fundamental values and without the possibility of a foundational ethics. And this is where the gift comes in. Perhaps the *being-for-itself* can give, instead of only take?

The following article elaborates on the phenomenological status of the gift in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, which is, as mentioned above, interwoven with dialectics. The phenomenological implications of the gift have been discussed recently by many others.⁶ Yet, Sartre's phenomenological approach of the gift is entirely different more specifically: Sartre's approach is related to the other as described in *Being and Nothingness*. Together with *Being and Nothingness*, *Notebooks* harbors a highly original and rather unexpected philosophy of relations with the other on the basis of Sartre's interest in the gift as conceived by Marcel Mauss.

From a historical point of view, it is clear that Sartre like many other French intellectuals at the time was highly impressed by Mauss' famous essay on potlatch and the gift, and by Georges Bataille's reaction to it.⁷ Sartre was well

⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, *Etant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France 1996/2002). Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1991).

⁷ Sartre refers to Bataille. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, two vols. (New York: Urzone, Inc. 1988). The first volume was originally published in France as *La Part Maudite* in 1967. Sartre was acquainted with an article version of Bataille's comments on Mauss. It is likely that Sartre's friendship with Michel Leiris, who was friendly with Bataille, is of crucial importance as well, as it was Leiris' *L'Afrique fantôme* that motivated Sartre to look at people and their relations in a different way and to take

acquainted with various French anthropologists and their work—they were well-represented on the editorial board of *Les Temps Modernes*, of which Sartre was the editor in chief.

Alienation and Oppression

It is interesting to see how this generation of French intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century, exploring their own reactions to colonialism—the French *mission civilisatrice*—struggled with the problems of primitivism, which they sometimes interpreted to mean ‘authenticity’ and ‘alienation’ at other times. Primitivism is a theme that in different guises pops up throughout French philosophy, in anything from debates on exoticism to *La Pensée sauvage*. The intellectuals’ struggle with their own nation’s colonial violence goes a long way to explain the major part anthropologists played in the French intellectual debate at the time. People were fascinated by the primitive, which in our time would likely be considered colonialist, but that fascination nonetheless managed to play an important part in changing the self-image of France as a colonial power. Sartre was highly interested in the anthropologist discourse on primitives—he was well acquainted with the works of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Georges Dumézil, who explored the primitive stage of man—but felt there was a deep rift between the postulated primitive stage of man and his own notion of human consciousness as radical freedom.⁸

In *Notebooks*, the primitive stage is understood as the human condition of alienation. This contrasts sharply with the interpretation of the primitive man as a non-alienated, authentic man in the tradition that ranges from Rousseau to Victor Ségalen. In the latter line of interpretation, the primitive man is the authentic man, befouled and oppressed by colonialism.

Rousseau coined the term *bon sauvage* to refer to the primitive that is uncorrupted by so-called civilization; he represents the anti-colonialist stance, troubled by the guilt implied by Paul Gauguin’s gazing Tahitian women. The Rousseauean position considers alienation the result of the oppression and humiliation imposed by colonialists from a culture that is alienated itself. Here, it is the Western gaze that violates the authenticity of the primitive.⁹ Colonialism from this perspective is the violent oppression of humanity, as opposed to being supportive of humanity. In retrospect, and taking into account his political stance in the Algerian war, Sartre is the anti-colonialist par excellence. However, his argument is entirely different than the one that equates primitive with authentic. Contrary to Rousseauean noble savage adepts, Sartre clearly distinguishes between oppression and alienation.

serious notice of the works of Lévi-Strauss and Leiris’ early 1930 teacher Marcel Mauss.

⁸ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *La mentalité primitive* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1922), and Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna – Essai sur deux représentations indo-européennes de la Souveraineté*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1940).

⁹ This anti-colonialist position is found in the Western Orientalist gaze as described by, among others, Edward Said.

Sartre still faces the main problem of *Being and Nothingness*, the one that arises from his supposition that the human condition is the ultimate condition for radical freedom. *Notebooks* shares the ultimate Marxist goal, which is to free humanity from oppression, but Sartre rejects the Marxist argument that consciousness is determined by history and social class. To Sartre, freedom is the ultimate consequence of being human. It is clear that alienation and oppression are threatening this freedom, but in what way? In *Being and Nothingness*, human reality is already 'beyond-itself': 'Human reality is in fact always being that is beyond its being there.'¹⁰ In *Notebooks*, this 'beyond' equals the other: alienation is understood as the original quality of the relation between the other and me.¹¹ In other words: we humans are not 'the same,' but we are alienated from each other. This is why alienation is understood as the original relation between me and the other: the other is other insofar as he is alienated from me. The other is other to us, insofar as we are the other to him.¹² Since we cannot but understand ourselves through the agency—or rather the look, the perspective—of the other, we are alienated to the depths of our being.¹³ This follows a line of reasoning Sartre launched in *Being and Nothingness*, namely that there is no positive content, no me-ness or innermost being in subjective being-for-itself anyhow. Sameness, then, is not understood as same-subjectivity, but as 'the internal essence of each person insofar as it is frozen by the other's look,' as Sartre writes in *Notebooks*.¹⁴ Our look constitutes our control over the other, because through the look, the other is an object among other objects. This is where oppression begins. Oppression is the *use* of the look. While alienation is inherent to being-for-itself, oppression may be one of its effects. Sartre also believes oppression is in a way contagious: 'I oppress because I am oppressed [...]An oppressor is someone who transmits to others the oppression that he undergoes.'¹⁵

This is why Sartre draws a sharp distinction between oppression and alienation, the difference being that oppression can be overcome, while alienation cannot: alienation is ontological-phenomenological, that is, inherent to the structure of consciousness, while oppression becomes political. We can free ourselves from oppression, but not from alienation, since alienation is part of us on an existential level, on the level of our being.¹⁶ Oppression is a contingent fact of history, while alienation is an existential condition of being. The entire project of *Notebooks for an Ethics* can be understood as a moral mission to eliminate oppression from human life—to be sure, the project is an ethics. The project and vocabulary may be Marxist, but the analysis is not: Marxism does not explain the existence of oppression,

¹⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 549.

¹¹ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 370.

¹² Sartre, *Notebooks*, 367.

¹³ Which of course also touches on the 'I' or 'me' that, in the manner of *Being and Nothingness*, finds itself 'nothing', 'not being' the other—hence, the Hegelian influence. I will come to the role of the look.

¹⁴ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 367.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sartre's views on this point are close to those of Lacan: he observes that the individual is primarily the other, and that the individual's sameness is actually a construction of otherness. Clearly, he already recognized Lacan's congeniality—and quoted him—at the time he wrote *Notebooks*.

because Marxism understands alienation in materialistic terms. Marxism fails to recognize even the difference between alienation and oppression.

The gift

Since there are others, and since we live with others, alienation cannot be overcome. In *Being and Nothingness*, we saw that it is the other who annihilates my freedom: not owing to any bad intention, but simply because the other co-exists with us. As mentioned above, Sartre's ethics asks whether it is possible to have a universe inhabited by co-existing *being-for-itselfs*, a universe in which the other does not make us and our world into mere objects—the latter of course implies that the other deprives us of our freedom. What we need, and what Sartre is looking for in *Notebooks*, is recognition of the freedom of the other, recognition that is ethically and phenomenologically understood as a gift. Let us for a moment return to the project of *Being and Nothingness* and reread Sartre's consideration of the gift. Mauss describes the role of the gift in a negative, destructive way and understands the gift as something that is firstly material and secondly economical.¹⁷ Sartre, for his part, rejects the notion of giving as a primitive, even barbaric practice. He writes: 'the gift casts a spell over the recipient' and 'to give is to appropriate by destruction while utilizing this destruction to enslave another. Generosity then is a feeling structured by the existence of the Other and indicates a preference for appropriation by destruction.'¹⁸ Apparently, generosity enslaves rather than liberates. That is the explicit though limited part the gift plays in *Being and Nothingness*.

In the *Notebooks*, Sartre resumes his analysis more elaborately: 'So we finally come to the form of exchange that corresponds in this society to the circulation of goods and that produces their accumulation in the form of private property. This is the potlatch or subjugating gift. I indicated earlier that in an alienated society, all behavior must be alienating, even generosity. The potlatch is alienating generosity. At the level of the potlatch, the bond of friendship is indiscriminately that of non-friendship, generosity is indiscriminately subjugation, the gift of entering into debt, the indemnification of interest.'¹⁹ It is clear that Mauss considers the potlatch an act of both friendship and violence. According to Sartre, the gift is basically reciprocal to the extent that it is the basis for an economy. However, he adds, phenomenologically speaking, the period between the act of giving and the reaction of the recipient basically mortgages the gift: the recipient is

¹⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 594, 'Actually the gift is a primitive form of destruction. We know for example that the potlatch involves the destruction of enormous quantities of merchandise. These destructions are forbidden to the other; the gifts enchain him. On this level it is indifferent whether the object is destroyed or given to another; in any case the potlatch is destruction and en chaining of the other. I destroy the object by giving it away as well as by annihilating it; I suppress in it the quality of being mine, which constituted it to the depths of its being; I remove it from my sight; I constitute it—in relation to my table, to my room—as absent; I alone shall preserve for it the ghostly, transparent being of past objects, because I am the one through whom beings pursue an honorary existence after their annihilation. Thus generosity is above all a destructive function.'

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 368.

burdened with an obligation. The giver challenges the recipient. Therefore, it is hard to say whether the potlatch is ultimately an act of friendship or one of violence. Receiving a gift is not a hostile act. But temporality may possibly—not necessarily—turn the gift into an exchange. Duration appears as an almost material object that mediates between two acts that determine one another.²⁰ The physical gift, the thing, is thus merely one kind of incarnation of the gift: the temporal part of the gift enters the material world, and transgresses. We will come back to this analysis, but first we return, a last time, to *Being and Nothingness*.

The look

Let's take a closer look at *Being and Nothingness*. At first glance, it appeared the gift hardly came up at all. But when we reread the famous chapter about the look—*le regard*—we notice a striking resemblance between the phenomenological structure of the gift and that of the look.²¹ Also, it is in this chapter that the look first becomes an issue in French phenomenology: the issue has in no way been prepared, nor can it be traced back to the phenomenologies of the German masters Husserl and Heidegger, yet it will have a profound effect on French philosophy and philosophers such as Levinas, Lacan and Foucault. According to Sartre, it is the look that reveals to me the fact that the other is a free subject, like me, and this fact deprives me of my free subjectivity. The look of the other objectifies us: through their eyes, we are objects. The look of the other is not rooted in my intentionality; their look is not a background for me to appear against. The look of the other is irrevocably given to me and it is a gift I cannot reject. The appearance of the other by the gaze, says Sartre, implies a disintegration of my universe: 'this relation which I call "being-seen-by-another," far from being merely one of the relations signified by the word man, represents an irreducible fact which can not be deduced either from the essence of the Other-as-object, or from my being-as-subject.'²² In other words, it is the look of the other that cannot be put between brackets, which the phenomenological reduction would demand: that look is inalienably given to me. Phenomenologically speaking, the look is a gift. This generosity is by no means to be understood as an act of the other who is able to give me something, say, a gift of love. Thinking that the other initially merely exists, to then subsequently give me some gift would be a mistake. The look simply informs me of the existence of the other. This is the phenomenological meaning of the gift as given-ness, yet this can only be captured in a very special Sartrean way: we are not given an object, but we are given an awareness, since the world is revealed to us as a universe of objects, 'beings-in-themselves,' not of subjects. This implies that creation is only possible on the side of the being-for-itself—free consciousness—and not on the side of the world, or the being-in-itself.

Only now we are able to understand why the gift of the other promises to be both phenomenological and ethical at the same time. The phenomenological given-ness of the other is taken for an ethical given-ness by the other, as generosity.

²⁰ The potlatch reappears in Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. P.107.

²¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 'The Look', 340-400.

²² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 257.

A question that does not come up in *Being and Nothingness* but is discussed in *Notebooks* is whether it is possible to understand the gift as intentional: can we shoe-horn the master-slave relation out of our relation with the other? Not to take, to violate, to colonize, to oppress, but to give away?

Generosity

Conversion is one of the key issues in *Notebooks*. Sartre understands conversion as the freeing of the self from enslavement by the being-in-itself. In fact, the purest form of conversion undoes alienation, which is understood in terms of an original sin. And conversion naturally always takes place in a situation, a context, to which according to Sartre all the oppressed have access. And for a moment, it is as if Sartre is heading towards the type of generosity Descartes describes in his *Passions of the Soul*, a generosity that is considered the highest virtue possible.²³ According to Descartes, generosity remedies all the ills and vices connected to the passions, such as jealousy and envy, hatred, fear and anger.²⁴

While the look of the other is understood to deprive us of something in *Being and Nothingness*, the *Notebooks'* generous gift bears the promise to do just the opposite. Sartre subsequently tries to understand this on an ontological, phenomenological level.

The ontology of the gift

In Sartre's dualistic, even dialectical *Being and Nothingness* universe, the universe in which the being-for-itself—subjectivity as nothingness—cannot be understood in terms of the objectivity of the being-in-itself. There exists a gift that consists not of an object, not of a thing, but of the awareness that the other is a conscious being rather than an object: a gift, therefore, consisting of pure consciousness. Thus, subjectivity can no longer be interpreted in terms of objects, as is done with regard to the primitive human condition. Now, the question arises whether it is possible to freely give such a gift. To further explore that question, Sartre outlines 'an ontology of the gift' in *Notebooks*.²⁵

In order to understand the gift ontologically, the gift must be unconditional and disinterested, for as long as we expect the other to give us something in return, we are not giving a gift, rather we are trading, exchanging—one good turn deserves another, right? Through the gift, we detach ourselves from the worldliness of the world. Let's read a few passages that may elucidate this: 'I disengage myself from the world wherein my image was buried, I no longer have the same relation with being-in-itself. I sacrifice my image and at the

²³ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 371: '...not through violence, but on the contrary through generosity'.

²⁴ René Descartes, *Les passions de l'âme* (1649), translation *Passions of the Soul* (London: Hackett Pub Co Inc, 1989): 'So I think that true generosity, which brings it about that a person's self-esteem is as great as it legitimately can be, consists only in (i) his knowing that nothing truly belongs to him except this free control of his volitions, and that his good or bad use of this freedom is the only valid reason for him to be praised or blamed...' (§ 153).

²⁵ Sartre, *Notebooks*, the passage starts at 368.

same time disengage myself from it.' And 'Annihilation through the gift disengages me as a pure for-itself transcending its situation.'²⁶

This disengagement is understood as a detachment from the self as a being-in-itself. This is what Sartre calls a conversion: the total suspension of all images or identities or fetishisms of the self. And this can only be done to the other: the other provides an opportunity for radical transcendence. The other is neither understood as a trade partner, nor as a creditor or as one more powerful than us, but as an opportunity for the radical detachment of the ontological being-in-itself. One might object that this should at least involve giving or offering objects, but Sartre points out that, actually, the gift is not an object, not any gift-wrapped present, but a gesture: a phenomenological gesture. What's more, it is a gift that recognizes the other as a free being, detached from the essence of the world.

The gift implies reciprocity of recognition, which Sartre does not table in *Being and Nothingness* and is lacking in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in which the other is fraternally recognized as equaling the self, as one who shares our goals: 'The gift presupposes a reciprocity of recognition. But this reciprocity is not a reciprocity of gifts. [...] It is not the gift as the thing that is given, but recognition itself. This recognition is first of all the recognition that the gift was not provoked by some interest, that it is a pure freedom that created the world for me, thereby setting up an interhuman relation.'²⁷

The gift in the new interpretation of *Notebooks* is therefore a liberation—notably, from the world. 'It is a break, a refusal to believe, a refusal of being caught up in the world, a refusal of narcissism and of fascination for the world.'²⁸ This thing that is given is no longer an object of consumption, but the recognition of the other and our mutual freedom. As a concept, the gift changes the role of the other: the other no longer controls my freedom. It introduces mutuality and by this mutuality, we free ourselves from the other of *Being and Nothingness*. Contrary to Levinas, Sartre considers the gift—at least in this pure form—the procurer of mutual freedom, as long as we and the other are in a situation in which neither of us are forced to accept the gift, for instance due to hunger or threat of death.

It now becomes clear why and how Sartre introduces the theme of the gift in his search for an ethics. It creates a chance of an ethics, but seems to slip out of his hands as soon as it enters the material world. We have already come across the problematic role of materiality as a threat to freedom. It is the fact that a gift is material that enslaves the being-for-itself, which is obliged to receive and to reciprocate, to counter-give. The being-for-itself is controlled by the other, through materiality.

This becomes even clearer when we read Mauss on the role of the counter-gift as pay back, which can only be understood as one half of an economic exchange. Although Sartre warns that giving and counter-giving may degenerate into economy, it is only the counter-gift that destroys the gift of the material object. But as long the counter-gift is expected, the gift is not

²⁶ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 369.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

actually a gift—again: it is one half of an exchange. This is why Sartre says that the structure of destruction is already implied in the gift. 'In every gift there is a negativity as regards the situation and the bonds of propriety in general.'²⁹ But this is only possible because there was an initial gift, which had a 'positive structure of creation.'

This positive structure of creation always takes place on the level of freedom, of acting. But for this reason, the gift is also an affirmation of our freedom in the face of the world and the other.³⁰ The gift, even on this level, is a structure of oppression. The other, according to Sartre, might react with anger and destroy the situation by refusing to recognize the gift. But in this case, Sartre continues, 'he refuses to recognize himself too.'

Alienation and the Gift

Summarizing, we may say that:

1. The gift presupposes the existence of the other. This implies there is recognition: without any other, there cannot be any gift or giving at all.
2. The gift, therefore, is a form of communication, and giving establishes a relation and therefore transcendence. Otherwise, we would remain in the sphere of the same, of the self. The other is given to us, insofar as it possesses us.
3. Alienation is understood as the impossibility to understand ourselves in solitude.
4. Giving is an act that can change the status quo. But in order to do so, it must materialize. The materialized gift becomes a social institution, as it transgresses the course of time or: the interval between the first gift and what it leads to, such as the obligation to counter-give.
5. The material gift as a social institution implies the counter-gift.

And now we find ourselves in the circumstances of a primitive society. Have we made any progress? The gift has transformed into an obligation to counter-give; our obligation to counter-give equals the other's usurpation of us. This is why the gift is destructive: it destroys freedom. This is the essence of potlatch. In hosting the potlatch, we give ourselves face; if we don't, we will lose face. During the potlatch, no-one can refuse; no-one has the right to refuse.³¹ The counter-gift is destructive since it destroys the gift as such. During the potlatch, the giving is performed as destruction.

It is important to note that, thus interpreted, the gift is analogous to the look. Like the potlatch giving, the look of the other cannot be ignored on a phenomenological level. The look enslaves, possesses. The look, again, is a gift.

The only way to demonstrate our freedom is by giving. The gift is evidence of the fact that we are not enslaved. But at the same time, there is no way to realize this unless we accept the game of the gift, the potlatch game. We have to enter that arena to secure the right to give and take. And there can only be

²⁹ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 371.

³⁰ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 372.

³¹ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 373.

one winner. There is always just one who gives and one who receives. This is a rite, a game, or, as Sartre calls it: a festival. We have to enter an arena in which we might lose. Without this game as a context, without a potlatch, there can be no gift at all. And a potlatch is only possible in the presence of the other. The potlatch denies the freedom of the other—being obliged to counter-give means being obliged to submit to the other's being for itself, to the other's freedom. The existence of freedom is established as a fact by the obligation to counter-give.³²

Magic

Sartre's philosophy is dualistic, with two ontologies, two phenomenologies, and the fact that the 'pure' gift is only understood on the side of consciousness therefore poses a problem. Sartre's dialectical phenomenology is based on the contrast between consciousness—the freedom of being-for-itself—and the world—the being-in-itself. There is no material gift as such, and giving pre-supposes a free consciousness—hence, we assume plants and even animals do not give each other gifts.

Above, we touched upon the role of the materiality of the gift. Sartre calls the part the material plays a 'magical' one: the material gift is given by a free consciousness and this is a magical act. Sartre uses the term magic to refer to a degenerated form of consciousness in which animate freedom has been replaced by the inanimate 'thingness' of the being-in-itself. In the Sartrean-Cartesian dualistic universe, magic is the only way for the world and for things to influence the *res cogitans* or consciousness of the *being-for-itself*. In other words, Sartre uses the term magic to refer to the (self-) deception or false belief involved in the assumption that there is actually an interface between the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself. False belief, (self) deception: Sartre also calls it *la mauvaise foi*: bad faith. It is also magical, insofar as the being-in-itself is possessed—seized, forced into submission—by the other.³³ The material sphere is intrinsically bound up with the fetishism and object-culture of primitive societies. Put in terms of *Being and Nothingness*: there is no freedom in primitive relationships, only thingness, only being-in-itself, because the being-for-itself permanently understands itself as a thing.

There is yet another way of putting this in Sartrean terms: the actual gift is *imaginary*. We then need to take the crucial role Sartre attributes to the imaginary into account.³⁴ The non-material gift is imaginary. It cannot be reduced to the material present. The thing is not even a representative of the gift. In other words, it is the gesture that counts, not the material thing itself. What we give is the gift, is the gesture, independent of the material thing. Perhaps we have bought something the recipient already owns, or something they don't like at all, but that doesn't really matter. Only children and 'primitives' take the material present for the gift—which is why potlatch

³² Sartre, *Notebooks*, 375.

³³ Inanimate objects have life powers attributed to them—note that this also plays a crucial role in Marx' fetishism philosophy.

³⁴ Which Raoul Kichmayer states in his contribution 'Don et générostité, ou les deux chances de l'éthique', in Aragües, Bietlot and others, *Écrits posthumes de Sartre*, II (Paris: Vrin, 2001) 101-134, p. 109.

partakers were obliged to actually burn or destroy the material presents accumulated during the potlatch.

Talking about the imaginary—the realm of freedom, since it is not bound up with material reality—Sartre follows Lévy-Brühl and argues that in the primitive mindset, all observational data are interpreted within the framework of a particular *Weltanschauung*.³⁵ A flaw in such a *Weltanschauung* does not lead to its abandonment. At this level, Sartre transforms Lévy-Brühl's work into a phenomenology, stating that perception equals fascination. In this view, there is no freedom of perceiving, but perception is already a function of a given meaning. In such a world, there is no given-ness in the phenomenological sense of the world: its human beings live in an enchanted, magical world that is governed by objects rather than by free human consciousnesses.

Note that here Sartre interprets anthropology ontologically: he tries to reveal the ontological and phenomenological implications of anthropological findings. The primitive human condition, thus, is obsessed with objects or artifacts; its world is one of fetishism; of being-in-itself contrary to the free human condition of the Sartrean being-for-itself: 'So the whole of man is in the primitive, not as a totality yet-to-come but as concrete negativity and the pure power of always being other than what he is.'³⁶ Primitive man, in Sartre's perception, joins the world of objects, the magical world: the world of objects taken for a world of living things. We might call this bad faith in reverse order: to understand the being-in-itself in terms of the being-for-itself, rather than vice versa.

At this point, the theme of possession starts to play an important role in *Notebooks*. Possession is the offering up of freedom to the other. Sartre quotes Michel Leiris on his investigations in Ethiopia describing the *zar* as a spirit that is able to dominate the world of the living.³⁷ Such a spirit can take possession of the human body, entrancing a living human being. The trance is a sign or message that has to be deciphered by the magus. Long before Jean Baudrillard won fame with his introduction of the term, Leiris named such signs *simulacra*—likenesses or imitations—actors in a human theatre in which it remains unclear what is real and what is not.

We can be under the magical spell of the other as well as under the magical spell of an object, for instance under the spell of the potlach's material presents that oblige me to repay. According to Sartre, this is what alienation truly is, since my subjectivity is understood as the other's objectivity. The soul is understood in a negative way: we do not have a soul—the proposition Sartre defended in *Being and Nothingness*—but we are possessed by a soul, for instance in the form of the totemic ancestor.³⁸ A soul, then, fills the empty seat of the being-for-itself. In primitive, sedentary societies, mana, soul and possession go together—or perhaps it would be better to say that they do in

³⁵ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 355.

³⁶ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 360.

³⁷ Michel Leiris, *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar* (Paris: Plon, 1958).

³⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 364.

our notion of such societies.³⁹ It is reminiscent of the *mauvaise foi* or bad faith in *Being and Nothingness*, the attitude towards myself in which we understand ourselves in terms of thingness, of the being-in-itself.⁴⁰

Sartre lays the groundwork for his use of the bad faith-concept as early as 1939, in the text *Esquisse des fondements pour l'œuvre* in which the term magic plays a central role.⁴¹ The magical discourse is not new to the Sartre reader, but only through *Notebooks* does it become clear that the looking described in *Being and Nothingness* equals an act of the other that is taking possession of my freedom. Gift, possession, magic: they are all part of Sartre's dialectical ontology, connected to the crucial role of the look. Let's read a long passage from *Notebooks*:

'Yet the Other is also an Other for Others, they look at him while he is looking at me, they can take his name away from him, etc. In this moment, the magical power of the Other passes over to another Other and from there to yet another and finally to me, not as me but as other than the Other. So there is a circulation of Otherness. It is always somewhere else, it leaps from one to the Other. This is due to the fact that it is originally the *Look* that pierces through me, but that gets extinguished as soon as I look back. The result is that the look is always somewhere else than where I am looking. It is behind me, above me, has left the man I am looking at, etc. It finally becomes the pure possibility of objectification and actualization of every subject as Other. It becomes a magical force or *mana*. But we need to comprehend that it is not, as for French sociology, a force immanent in society (which would mean making society a higher of subjectivity). On the contrary, it is the potentiality of Otherness as such, it is the form power the Other has to actualize me as Other.'⁴²

It's a fascinating quote, because looking is understood as a magical force—not magical because of the act of looking itself, but because the look is capable of ossifying, reifying: of turning the other into a thing. Sartre says that rather than a sociological process, it is a process that removes us from the sphere of the subjective. The look is an instrument of possession and thus of oppression. Sartre's views here are in line with Alain's 'L'homme est toujours un sorcier pour l'homme'.⁴³ Social relations are magical by character. This implies that social relations are at the same time alienating and inescapable.

The look of the other is the Sartrean equivalent of Freud's *Über-Ich*, like Leiris' mana or soul, because it takes possession of a formerly free consciousness.⁴⁴ And, again, it is this 'primitive mind' that is reminiscent of

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 'Bad Faith', 86-116.

⁴¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* (Paris: Hermann, 1995) First edition 1938.

⁴² Sartre, *Notebooks*, 362.

⁴³ Quoted by Sartre, *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions*, 58.

⁴⁴ Michel Leiris, *La Croyance aux génies 'zar' en Ethiopie du Nord* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1938).

the Christian idea of the soul as possessed by God.⁴⁵ Religion, to Sartre, therefore, is alienation, incantation, opium, magic, in short: the renunciation of freedom. Primitive society is a society possessed by beliefs. In religion, man projects his subjectivity outside of himself as objectivity. Being religious is, in this sense, self-sacrificial.⁴⁶

Concluding remarks

The above line of thinking is an attempt by Sartre to formulate an ethics on the basis of the gift—an unsuccessful one, by his own estimation. Nevertheless, the phenomenological and anthropological explorations of the gift are of great interest and Sartre's interpretation of them highly original. Sartre's *Notebooks* shed light on his otherwise incomprehensible turn from individually focused ontology and phenomenology to politics. In *Notebooks*, Sartre tries to bridge the methodological gap between alienation and oppression by reformulating the ontological phenomenology of the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself. He tries to overcome the failure to describe an ethics on the basis of *Being and Nothingness* alone, which was an ethics on the ontological-phenomenological level. At this stage in the development of his philosophy, the concept of the gift plays a crucial role.

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⁴⁵ Sartre, *Notebooks*: 'The Christian religion: (...) to see *oneself* with the eyes of God.' (16) 'In the first place, we see the importance of the look (*le regard*). In looking, God may have the evil eye. The eye is always evil because it fixes things.' (364) '...it is my soul that possesses me. My soul is created by God, illuminated by God, that is, assimilable to the eternal truths that it contemplates' (365).

⁴⁶ Sartre, *Notebooks*, 439.