

# Realizing the Imaginary: Mental Images and the Instruments of Freedom

**Simone Villani**

*University of Bologna*

**Andrea Altobrando**

*University of Padua*

---

**Abstract:** We provide a phenomenological explanation of the particular function mental images play in the realization of enjoyment and their significance for human freedom on the basis of the idea, drawn from Sartre, that images are not things but rather a way consciousness behaves towards objects. The mental image's matter, which consists of affectivity, knowledge, and kinaesthetic operations, allows imagination to conjure up an unreal item to satiate a desire. However, by foreshadowing enjoyment in the imaginary, the mental image urges consciousness toward a change in the world that would make that enjoyment real. This is accomplished through the development of tools, which rely on the ability to overcome not just a given situation but also courses of goal-oriented behaviour that have already been prepared by the environment. Through this creation, consciousness exerts its freedom within reality, and marks the world as meaningful.

**Keywords:** mental image, freedom, creation, instrument, Sartre.

*“Man can create only insofar as he is his own  
nihilation of being (imagination) and all his  
creations are upheld in Being by Being”*

(Sartre 1992: 527)

## 1. Introduction

The image is not a thing, but a certain way of being conscious of and directed to an object: to imagine an object is to target it through an act that makes it appear as nothing. This is the lesson Sartre's *The Imaginary* can impart

to us regarding the nature of images and imagination. The significance of Sartre's phenomenology of imagination stands out even more when we take into account so-called "mental" images, which appear to demand more effort to be experienced than the "physical" ones because they appear to have no "external" source and support and exist only "within" consciousness<sup>1</sup>. When we refer to "mental images," we are referring to the ones that appear when we lose ourselves in a stream of "visual" thoughts, when we linger in the imagined contemplation of a tranquil landscape, when we become excited thinking about an erotic scene, when we consider eating something appetizing, etc. Sartre has vigorously argued that images are not "inner" duplications of "outer" objects (Sartre 1956, 2004), but rather a way of approaching objects by actively and freely *existing* them. In addition to what is stated in Sartre's most well-known writings on the subject, one can find resources for a still more in-depth phenomenology of the activity that is experienced and carried out through mental images in a partially underappreciated and even disowned work, the *Notebooks for an Ethics*. It is in fact in this laboratorial, experimental and ultimately abandoned<sup>2</sup> long project devoted to the challenge of building a moral free of alienation, that Sartre dwells into the connections between desire and imagination, but also elaborates the notion of *creation* as a way to overcome the notion of *appropriation* that he previously (Sartre 1956) had put at the core of the drive of desire, linking it with art, invention, and the creation of instruments.

In this article we shall use the resources contained in the *Notebooks* to further discuss the operative role of mental images in continuity with Sartre's earlier texts, while paying special attention to the occasionally subtle coherence with them. In doing so, we must keep in mind the particular experimental nature of the *Notebooks*: we must apply hermeneutical charity in interpreting passages that may be in agreement or in conflict with prior works; and, if necessary, we may even diverge from the text and create our own take on the issues under examination from time to time. We will particularly focus on passages from the middle and final sections of the *Notebooks*, where Sartre more directly discusses the function of imagination in the actualization of consciousness' freedom. Although forms of experientiality vary in how they frame consciousness' existence and freedom, it is true that for Sartre consciousness is constantly existing itself freely; for instance, it is evident from *The Imaginary* throughout *Being and Nothingness* that imagination is a component of consciousness' greater aim of transcendence, of overcoming what is given as present. However, because of its unique modality, a mental image does something peculiar: it enables consciousness to focus on an absent object by constructing from within itself the matter that causes the object to appear and deeming that matter as the object's *representative*. This kind of

<sup>1</sup> For a very encompassing treatment of Sartre's theory of imagination, see Bonnemann 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sicard's *entretien* with Sartre in Sicard 1979: 15.

imaginative act enables consciousness to overcome the object's absence in the situation in which consciousness is from time to time embedded, to satisfy a desire prompted by that absence, and to replicate an emotion connected to it that provides comfort, pleasure, or enjoyment. On top of that, the *Notebooks* provide space to view the mental image as a stage in the process of actualizing the enjoyment of the imagined thing itself. This is accomplished by foreshadowing the enjoyment as the culmination of an action that creates a tool, which, in turn, enables the transformation of the current circumstance into a different one in which the enjoyment itself may take place. In this sense, the imagined enjoyment might be seen as a pivotal point in the creation of *instruments* capable of altering the environment to bring about the imagined enjoyment<sup>3</sup>. Because it fosters the actual creation of something new, the mental image demonstrates its operationality not just in terms of allowing enjoyment of the unreal but also on the level of reality.

Our research will begin with Sartre's phenomenology of the mental image, which views imaginative acts as the placing of objects on an unreal plane through their nullification. Addressing the problem of the mental image will be crucial because it will show how dependent the mental image is on consciousness for ongoing support. Affection, knowledge, and kinaesthetic operations will be shown to work together to satisfy a desire by producing an unreal representation of enjoyment. This will drive us to consider what operating area consciousness has when direct access to enjoyment is not possible. The manufacturing of instruments will then be considered as a way to get closer to it and make it a reality.

## *2. A Phenomenological Analysis of the Mental Images in Connection to Images Generally*

Let's start by providing some clarifications on the Sartrean theoretical framework. As was said at the outset, the mental image of an item is not just a *thing* but rather a particular relationship that one's consciousness has with that object. The foundation for the creation of the mental image is the intentional structure of every phenomenon of consciousness, which is that every consciousness is consciousness *of* something, i.e., of something "external" to consciousness. The experience of an inhomogeneity between consciousness and

<sup>3</sup> In elaborating an exquisitely Sartrean theory of instrumentality, scholars have mainly focused on the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, where the notion of tool is developed in relation to that of the practico-inert (Siegler 2022, Cambria 2018). However, it is already in the *Notebooks* that we find a more mature reflection on the notion of instrumentality than the one carried out in *Being and Nothingness*, as Sartre asks what drives the invention of tools and what relationship this creation has with the imaginary. Moreover, it is also in the *Notebooks* that Sartre elaborates a very relevant distinction between a first and second sense of instrumental creation, which we take up in sections 8 and 9.

the object could be described in the following Sartrean terms: “the thing, before all comparison, before all construction, is that which is present to consciousness as not being consciousness” (Sartre 1956: 242).

A mental picture should also be characterized in terms of the essential traits of any image-consciousness. *The Imaginary* provides helpful analyses on this. It is altogether peculiar how the object in-image appears: the object in-image is not *encountered*, like the object of perception. Neither the consciousness’ intention to present it (or that presents it) nor the consciousness of it ever precedes the object. Moreover, such an imagined object is not *real*, but *unreal*, that is, it does not add being to the world, nor does it take it away: the being-in-itself remains intact, and the imaginary object does not exist anywhere, does not occupy a space: it neither adds to the world’s being nor subtracts from it. This characteristic of the imagined object shows that nothing ever *happens* in the imaginary dimension because there is never a mismatch between the imagined object and the consciousness of it. No unexpected event can properly occur in the realm one produces while imagining<sup>4</sup>. By imagining the object, we cannot *learn* anything properly new about it, because it is “given” in the way we spontaneously represent it, and thus it never exceeds the physiognomy that we have given to it. The object gives itself in its entirety, leaving no room for speculation as to what or how it is. It is given as certain because the imaginary item is shown *en bloc*, without delay, and without distance. I can’t be surprised by an image I created in my mind since I only get out of it what I put into it. Contrary to what occurs in perceptual consciousness, the object in imagining consciousness is solely determined by the extent to which it is imagined. Until one imagines something more firmly “in one’s mind,” the sides and aspects of which one only has an undetermined consciousness effectively remain undetermined. In other words, it is entirely feasible that when imagining an object, not all of its features and sides are fully specified; this, however, does not imply that the object isn’t fully given.

### 3. *The Specificity of the Mental Image: Its Analogon*

All that said, what separates the mental image from the allegedly “physical” one is the “matter” of it. Physical image-based imagination is characterized primarily by the fact that the imagined item is genuinely targeted by a “matter”, a part of reality, whose “substance” is real. In other words, if attention is reflexively directed to this “matter,” called *analogon*, the *analogon* is understood to be what leads to (or represents) something else, specifically the imaginary

<sup>4</sup>Due to space limitations, we must disregard the particular instance of *dreaming*, in which consciousness engages in a form of self-deception and accepts the veracity of its own creations, thus enabling the potential of being e.g., terrified by what it experiences.

object<sup>5</sup>. Essentially, *analoga* are portions of being in-itself that are intended as *representatives of something else*. Even though it easily makes sense in relation to physical images, it can get tricky when talking about mental images: what aspect of reality acts as an *analogon* of the imagined object in this case? What possibly may constitute the “matter” of something that truly manifests itself as non-material? Given Sartre’s apparent rejection of the notion that images are intrapsychic or “internal” renderings of ostensibly “exterior” things, this is a cardinal issue. We must, on the one hand, avoid thinking that our phenomenological relationship with this matter is merely one of duplication, thus making the imagined object a copy of an “external” and “material” object; and, on the other hand, search for an *analogon*, a physical component of reality that could serve as the representative of the imagined object.

*The Imaginary’s* analyses of affection, embodiment, and knowledge provide the solution. We must always keep in mind that consciousness in its embodied state is first and foremost the continuing transcendence of a reality that gives itself *affectively*. In the case of mental images, consciousness uses desire as a source of material to project itself beyond the present world. It discovers emotional matter, including cravings and appetites, embedded within its own body and combines them in view of absent or unreal items. The affective way connected to the imagined object gives to it a qualitative depth that can be used to define it on the basis of how it appeared in the experience. It is imaginative *knowledge* that allows this emotive matter (non-organized in itself) to be synthesized into an intentional unity: the object in-image. The type of knowledge that is at work in the imagination is an empty consciousness of relations that is waiting to “posit the relation as an outside” (Sartre 2004: 66), that is, to take on an intuitive, non-conceptual form. In other words, imaginative knowledge creates an image as a mental effort to establish contact with objects: the image is the lower limit to which knowledge tends when it “degrades” into intuitive forms, and the upper limit to which affectivity tends to know itself (that is, to give itself an object, to exhibit itself starting from the synthetic unity provided by knowledge). Therefore, a mental image is a homogeneous synthesis of *affectivity* and *knowledge*. That is not the whole story, though. Not to be overlooked is a third factor, the *kinaesthetic* capabilities of consciousness, which are available as possibilities of the body, and help make the representation of the item “in the mind’s eye” possible. Kinaesthetic impressions, which begin with “certain contractions, certain voluntary movements of the organs” (2004: 81), comprise a corporeal flow of matter that builds an *analogon* that is maintained by the retention and protension of movements. These can be trans-sensory “data” (tactile impressions analogous to visual impressions), trajectory descriptions (an eye movement resembling a wave analogous to a swinging seesaw),

<sup>5</sup> The *analoga* are learned at the pre-reflective level, according to Clayton (2011), who also argued that they are not the thematic object of imaginative intentions, which are instead focused on the imagined *object*. See also Wiesing 1996, Vauday 2005, Sauer 2016.

contracted versions of complex movements (salivation for the image of a roast chicken), or even produced by other muscles (one contracts the tongue for the imagination of biting an object).

What is important is that kinaesthetic matter contributes to creating an “embodied” basis for imaginative consciousness. The affective synthesis created by knowledge and kinaesthetic motions unites the consciousness as a whole in a single representative matter: “the affective substitute is transcendent but not external [...]. The kinaesthetic substitute is at once transcendent and external” (2004: 81). In other words, the kinaesthetic substitute is external in that it “externalizes” the object, that is, it situates it, indicates it, specifies where it goes and what it does; the affective substitute instead is lived in identification with the self, in being fully given, and coinciding with the feeling that aims at the object in-image. The matter of mental images must therefore be understood as a synthesis of affections, knowledge, and kinaestheses<sup>6</sup>. On this basis, it is possible to go further and argue that the “mental” imaginative consciousness simulates the presence by imitating the “behaviour” that the object would elicit in it; we’ll go into more detail about what this implies later. Before that, there is one more distinction we must make about the phenomenology of the mental image, which is closely related to the non-wholly-physical nature of its representational components and tied to the operational and “surpassing” function of imaginative consciousness: its *freedom*.

#### 4. *A Mental Image Is Always to Be Done: Its Nothingness is Sustained by Freedom*

The question of freedom must be understood in the context of the pre-reflective consciousness that underlies thematic acts that produce mental images. An imaginative consciousness shows itself “to itself as an imaging consciousness, which is to say as a spontaneity that produces and conserves the object as imaged. It is a kind of indefinable counterpart to the fact that the object gives itself as a nothingness” (2004: 14). As we’ve already mentioned, the imagined item is actually given to the consciousness as unreal or as nothing. Because of this, it lacks consistency of being, and in order for it to be presented, it must be produced by consciousness itself, as it would not otherwise give itself at all. Indeed, the imagined object does not appear, does not come to existence before consciousness’ choice to make it be and to make it be so or in another way. Additionally, consciousness is required to maintain the presentation of the object because imaginative consciousness “is spontaneous and creative; it supports, maintains by continuous creation, the sensible qualities of its object” (2004: 15). As long as imagination is active, the thing can continue to exist in

<sup>6</sup>In this regard, we think that our reading and development of Sartre’s ideas can also successfully counteract Richard Kearney’s (1998) criticisms of idealism.

the image. This is why when we imagine anything, as long as we are actively directed towards it in our imagination, the object is enriched with the traits that we attach to it; yet, if we turn our attention to something else, the object disappears. One is aware of all of this in a pre-reflective way. This implies that the imagining consciousness knows itself, so to say, as the maker of its own object in-image and of the fact that the object is not provided, or present, *really*, i.e., independently of consciousness' operations. Therefore, the object of the mental imagination requires regular replenishment and maintenance.

Considerations about freedom through imaginative consciousness and its relation with nothingness hint immediately at the fundamental nature of every consciousness, to its "constantly renewed obligation to remake the *Self* which designates the free being" (Sartre 1956: 72). Consciousness neither receives being from anything nor is capable of producing it. Consciousness is nothing of being, that is, pure "superficial" pole of being, which torments, bugs, or pierces it without impoverishing it. Through consciousness the world is organized, discovered, but not modified in its substance: "it is not given to 'human reality' to annihilate even provisionally the mass of being which it posits before itself. What it can modify is its *relation* to this being"<sup>7</sup> (1956: 59–60). Consciousness, in general, *does not* produce being, but remains on the threshold of this being, as if it were its edging, or vacuous efflorescence; however, in the moment of placing itself imaginatively towards being, it has the ability not to change the latter, but to redetermine and change the *relation* it has with it. Consciousness, as nothing of being, always finds itself without foundation, without substantiality, that is to say as non-in-itself, and is thus forced to manufacture itself continuously in order to make itself exist as a correlate of this being, as a transcendent pole of the being it intends: consciousness is "exploding-towards": a center that is not (therefore a nothing) that directs itself (exploding, nullifying) towards what it aims at (the world, the object, the other, etc.). This is made evident by the need one has to continuously create in order to maintain the object of imagination, but it applies to consciousness as a whole because consciousness "is" only in relationship with the object to which it relates, i.e., intends, from time to time. Therefore, in order to redetermine itself, consciousness has to redetermine its intentional objects. It is impossible for consciousness to anchor itself to an essential determination in this cycle of self-reproduction; this condition is consistent with consciousness' irreducibility to any pre-existing determination, i.e., with its unfounded nature. Consciousness is what it is on the basis of what it intends, encounters, experiences, and enacts.

However, as long as consciousness simply exists as perception, it is essentially decided by the in-self. Indeed, consciousness is determined concurrently with every perceptual presentation of the external world. On the perceptual level, the

<sup>7</sup> Translation altered. The original French reads: "Toutefois il n'est pas donné à la réalité-humaine d'anéantir, même provisoirement, la masse d'être qui est posée en face d'elle. Ce qu'elle peut modifier, c'est son *rapport* avec cet être" (Sartre 1943: 59).

world changes consciousness continuously, as opposed to the world changing because of consciousness. In contrast, in the imagination, reality is derealized, or posited as unreal, and, thus, consciousness is freed from its yoke. The fundamental function of imagination is to give consciousness the ability to transcend the environment and the numerous ways in which it finds itself constrained and determined from time to time. In this way, consciousness posits the reality by which it determines itself. As a result, in this process of self-determination, consciousness starts to more clearly<sup>8</sup> feel the urge to perpetually reinvent itself in relation to its imagined object. In order for consciousness to continue to exist in the manner in which it directs itself toward that object, consciousness must constantly recreate itself by creating its own object. According to Sartre, all of these factors add up to the assertion that consciousness can exist as free through imagination. Although other conducts of consciousness also have this negative structure at their core, the nullifying, negative activity of imagination differs from them in that imaginative consciousness actualizes this structure as a crucial component of what qualifies its conduct:

To posit an image is to constitute an object in the margin of the totality of the real, it is therefore to hold the real at a distance, to be freed from it, in a word, to deny it. Or, if one prefers, to deny that an object belongs to the real is to deny the real in positing the object. (Sartre 2004: 183)

The ability of imaginative consciousness to reject the synthetic wholeness of reality as a situation or as an immediate and concrete perception of reality as a world is its distinctive quality. The absence of an object in a situation is the condition of its being posited in the imaginary, which is precisely the presentation of a nothingness of being (the object) starting from an act that denies the situation in which consciousness finds itself. Given a specific situation, the imaginative consciousness withdraws from the determinations it grasps as real, denying them in the imaginary. In other words, if the item is missing, imaginative consciousness inverts reality and makes it present, despite the object's absence from the situation. But to the extent that it does so, it represents the object and determines itself towards it. By using its capability of genesis by negation, imaginative consciousness overcomes the limitations of the real world by assuming a position outside of it. However, when one imagines, consciousness doesn't multiply and give rise to a "imaginary" second consciousness; rather, both world and consciousness remain one, and the imagined object is just intended differently, through an imaginative act.

<sup>8</sup> That is, at the pre-reflective level, apprehending itself as spontaneity. Stawarska (2005) has convincingly argued that, for this aspect of imagination, Sartre took inspiration more from Janet than from Husserl. While Husserl has provided a careful phenomenological description of the pictorial aspect of imagination, Janet has helped Sartre realize the involvement of desire in its functioning, and as its very source.



5. *Imagination Is a Conduct to Satisfy in the Unreal a Lack*

It can be argued that imaginative consciousness does not, as of yet, enable any effective overcoming of the reality that is currently in place or the circumstances in which it occasionally finds itself. The goal of demonstrating a mental image's real operationality seems remarkably distant. One could argue that since imaginative consciousness is genuinely focused on the unreal and imagined, its operations remain unreal and ineffective. However, one must use caution when analysing imaginative activities and keep in mind that consciousness always functions in a *concrete* manner in *concrete* situations. In fact, just because imagination produces a presentification of the world doesn't mean that one should consider it as a passive contemplative attitude, as if while imagining one were in front of a detached and neutral world. If this were the case, an imaginative act wouldn't need to arise in the first place. In reality, the choice to imagine, which is typically made at the pre-reflective level, is explained by returning to the fundamental characteristics of consciousness: as consciousness and, consequently, *conduct*, even though it is a conduct in the face of the unreal, imaginary consciousness is oriented towards the achievement of specific ends: namely, an end that finds in the unreal presentation of the object in the image the way to be realized. In a sense, imagination is always sparked by an urge; it is an attempt to satiate a desire that reality does not permit.

In order to comprehend the operational role of imagination, let's consider imagining a peaceful scene in your mind while you're in a state of disturbance to get relief from this seeing. In truth, what may appear to be a neutral idea or an abstract act of seeing is an attempt to exist the emotive form associated with the tranquil image, i.e., it is an effort to recollect that emotion for oneself, in a sense bewitching oneself, starting from a situation that would not allow such emotion to occur. It is a conduct that is chosen at a pre-reflective level with the intent to evoke a particular emotion and acting on oneself with a specific intention<sup>9</sup>; in this way, the mental image of the object serves as a *witness* of the emotion one wishes to elicit, being recalled in such a way as to put that emotion in its proper context and allowing one to exist in that landscape while experiencing its calming qualities: "we already know [*connaissons*] [the object's] connection with that affective state and we make the object appear because it contains as one of its qualities the power to give rise to this surge of tenderness" (2004: 142). The object in-image is less strong than an object of perception in its ability to determine me as passive in the receptivity of the emotion it arouses: as we stated in the previous paragraph, the object in-image is always supported by my choice to make it be, by a continuous effort to create and sustain it. The feeling evoked by the image, in fact, "is played rather than felt. [...] It is given to reflection as an effort to be joined with that unreal gesture that remains outside its influence and that it does not reach." (2004: 143) This is

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sartre 2004: 140ff.

why the mental image and the associated emotion might be fleeting: all it takes is for consciousness to thematize its imagining act, or rather to get distracted, or for the attributes of the object to degrade as a result of the imaginative act's inactivity. The mental image functions in this manner, completely expressing consciousness's independence at the expense of an (implicit) existential fragility.

The mental image is a consciousness that manifests with a clear purpose, at a specific time, and with a unique effectiveness when conducted in the face of reality. It is a movement of consciousness starting from a situation. But the illustration that we have given also forces us to consider the nature of the mental image more carefully. In reality, the process of overcoming a circumstance to bring about the evocation of an object in a mental image begins with an awareness that the actual situation is not willing to give rise to the feeling prompted through the mental image. It is possible to express such an absence as an awareness of a *lack*. It is crucial to remember that the consciousness of a lack rarely arises as a plain observation, just as viewing an object in a picture is never a wholly objective act of knowledge. As stated in the *Notebooks*, and in continuity with what asserted in *Being and Nothingness*<sup>10</sup>, lack “makes sense only if it is present to itself as a refusal to be a lack. [...] If I lack bread or water (thirst, hunger) I do not *acknowledge* this lack in terms of pure indifference—I reject it (I *want* bread)” (Sartre 1992: 531). In other words, lack arises as a double negation: a negation of what I do not have (i.e., what I lack) in the project of overcoming this absence by the proactive determination to desire something. In a manner similar to this, the mental representation of an object is constructed as a means of rejecting the lack through the imagined existence of that object, which provides in the imaginary what I lack in reality. Only when I pay attention to my lack as itself I do become aware *that* I lack what I imagine; in contrast, I become aware of *what* I lack right away with the imaginative act, in an effort to counteract my lack by presenting what I lack. However, the position of a mental image, which makes my deficiency appear, does not only have a passive effect on my desire; rather, it carries out an important operation of determination, to which we will now turn our attention.

### 6. *The Mental Image Shapes Desire and Enacts Unreal Enjoyment*

Undoubtedly, the imaginary conduct could be interpreted as a bid to escape the genuine lack I currently experience. It is an action that brings the thing I want closer to me and makes it possible for me to experience it, albeit on a different, more abstract level. This is due to the imaginative act's nullifying structure, which posits an object as nothing. As a result, the desire for what I lack becomes more specific through the positing of a mental image, and it targets a particular object:

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sartre 1956: 154ff.

Desire and disgust exist at first in a diffuse state, without precise intentionality. In being organized with a piece of knowledge into an imaging form, the desire is made precise and is concentrated. Enlightened by the knowledge, it projects its object outside itself. But it must be understood by this that it becomes conscious of itself. The act by which the feeling becomes conscious of its exact nature, is limited and defined, this act is one with that by which it is given a transcendent object. (Sartre 2004: 139)

As we previously stated, desire arises from the negation of a lack, that is the resolution of wanting something in order to fill that lack. When I am not yet determined to want a specific thing, i.e. when the object of my desire is not yet specified, desire exists as a still undefined lack, as a scattered and erratic desire for something, as a disturbance, as a restlessness and an unwillingness to stand still, as the craving for something. When I visualize an item that can fulfil my desire, I engage in a seemingly straightforward but actually quite complex action: I negate a negativity (I reject the lack) by creating a positive determination of it (I develop the desire for a certain item). This decision, which has evolved from a stage of diffuse intentionality and coincides with the positing of a transcendent object, is headed in the direction of the growth of a self-aware type of desire. Imagination is the overcoming of a situation in view of something that is not given in the situation; in other words, the positing of an object in-image happens through a determined negation of a being (the situation) and the determination of a negation (the object in the image). What makes such an imaginative act possible, is the organization of the *feeling*, or affective matter, in a form given to it by *knowledge*, which constitutes the object in-image starting from the sensible qualities previously learnt as desirable in an affective, *embodied* manner. The result of this operation is the specification of desire, which is thus concentrated, limited, defined, and increased in intensity.

It's crucial not to downplay this escalation in intensity because this is the point at which the particular interaction between desire and the mental image takes place. The mental image of the object is evoked because of its emotive power and ability to mesmerize consciousness, as was previously shown using the example of a landscape. This evocation occurs precisely when one seeks to exist the object from a place where it is not given as present and is actually given emotionally as what is lacking. Since what I imagine is what I lack and I imagine it to bring it closer, we are in a situation where affective matter directs the building of the object in-image as the correlate of enjoyment, starting with what is lacking. As Sartre puts it,

*Desire* is a blind effort to possess on the representative plane what is already given to me on the affective plane; through the affective synthesis, it aims at a *beyond* that it senses without being able to know [*connaître*]; it is directed at the affective "something" that is now given to it and apprehends it as *representative* of the

desired thing. So the structure of an affective consciousness of desire is already that of an imaging consciousness, since, as in the image, a present synthesis functions as a substitute for an absent representative synthesis. (Sartre 2004: 71)

The idea expressed in this passage is essential. The structure of desire and the structure of imaginative consciousness are closely related since both are able to grasp absence from what is present. We should keep this in mind when we talk about the development of instruments later. For the time being, we should take note of the fact that both desire and imagination are forms of a specific kind of consciousness of transcendence, namely, consciousness of freedom. As such, they both strive towards the same outcome: the presentation of the desired object in an image so that the object appears to come closer to the self. We may see this even more clearly if we observe how a desire for an object develops on the imaginative level: “it is the evocation and incantatory presentification of the object in an image. It already *mimics* gratification” (Sartre 1992: 351). As we said above, the desired object as it appears in-image is evoked for its capacity to arouse the emotional qualities it would induce if it were present. These qualities are present in proxy from the affective and cognitive matter that is organized together with bodily movements to form the *analogon* of the object in-image. Therefore, when the object is imagined, it is imagined to enjoy these qualities, to simulate the enjoyment I would derive if the desired object were real. As a result, the determination that desire makes for itself in an effort to reject what it lacks is already a form of unreal approximation to the object that is capable of filling such a lack—and this implies the postponement of real enjoyment. The imaginative act is in fact an unrealizing act, and the real enjoyment is always delayed as being inaccessible through the imaginative act alone. In actuality, the position of a transcendent object as a desired object “is not a surpassing of the situation through my act, but rather through an internal modification. I push myself to ever greater desire so that the object should appear” (1992: 351). This is important because, if desire arises from the presentation of a mental image on the imaginative plane, this presentation has to be understood as an attempt<sup>11</sup> to make the object of desire appear from a situation that only allows an unreal presentation rather than a real operation, which instead would carry out a modification of the situation to actually give the object<sup>12</sup>.

The mental image is therefore intended as the lived attempt to approach enjoyment of the desired object through its presentation in the image: organizing itself with knowledge in an object form, the affective matter, already given as a foreboding, is specified and organized by giving it an end, which is the object in-image; the body contributes to this synthesis by recreating

<sup>11</sup> Properly speaking, it is an attempt to bewitch oneself, a *magic* attempt. See Bertolini (2000) for an in-depth study on the matter.

<sup>12</sup> We are aware that physical processes like salivation, changes in heartbeat, erection of the genitals, which might accompany a mental image, are undoubtedly real. They are real motions that enhance consciousness and movements that mimic enjoyment in an effort to approach it.

the behaviour it would use in the case of real enjoyment; thus, enjoyment is anticipated, simulating the real one, and the more it concentrates, the more the image is stimulated and lived, the more the desire is strengthened and calls to action. According to the *Notebooks*, “desire, at the moment when it is most laid bare, indicates what its absolute justification would be: if it were to make appear in flesh and blood the being of desire” (1992: 549). This means that the existence of the object of desire begins to exist as a real presence and no longer as an unreal one. We know that consciousness has to necessarily produce the imagined object continuously in order to maintain the being of the object itself. The same is true for the desired object, which

is upheld in being (as absence) by a freedom that exhausts itself in giving this object being (the fatiguing aspect of imagination). If it were held in being as presence by this same freedom, we would finally have a being whose foundation of being would be freedom and a freedom whose justification would be that it upholds Being in its being. (1992: 550)

The discontent we feel when we realize the unreality of our fantasy, coupled with the excitement we feel when we believe our own imagining, explain the aspiration of desire: that the desired object exists *really*, that its enjoyment is real, and that the being of the object of desire comes to be not in the form of an image, and thus as absent, but of a real present thing, whose determination is not, however, antecedent, independent, and pre-existing to the being of the desire, but is *with* and *because of* the desire itself. The “absolute justification” of desire, its supreme fulfilment, would be to be able to *create* the being of its object as presence, that is, to produce being, to generate what one desires and, therefore, to find in its own freedom its own being. Ultimately, creation is the end of desire, and it is to this, i.e. to creation, that we must turn now.

### *7. The Transition from Nothing to Being: Creation and Signification*

When real enjoyment is not possible, consciousness turns to unreal enjoyment experienced in the imaginary, or the presentification of objects in mental images; however, this results in an actual conduct that has real effects on consciousness’ body, proving the mental image to have a phenomenology of operability. We also noted, as Sartre does in his *Notebooks*, that there is an internal tension in consciousness’ experience of unreal enjoyment, a yearning to bring about the object of its desire in reality. This observation casts doubt onto the sufficiency of the resources of the first Sartrean production to explain the situation fully; therefore, we must turn again to the *Notebooks* and ask: what happens to the image if consciousness is willing to create its object, that is, if its goal is to bring about being, and to stop experiencing the desired object on the plane of the imaginary? Do we still need imagination or can we lay it to rest? As we’ve said before, imagination is the capacity to get past a circumstance in order

to posit a nothing beyond the datum. Through the display of a mental image, the desire expresses itself more clearly, amplified, and more precisely. Therefore, the mental image must not only exist in the unreal but also come into actuality if desire is to present itself as a reality rather than limiting itself to the unreal. The conundrum we now need to face is how an unreal object, which is nothing, may come to be(ing); in other words, how does Sartre face the classical ontological question of how to comprehend the transition from nothing to being?

The final sections of the *Notebooks*, which are devoted to the development of an ontological moral and suggest a *conversion* that will liberate consciousness' lived experience from alienation, provide Sartre's general response to this question. Sartre specifically develops the idea of *creation* in opposition to and dialogue with the idea of *appropriation*, which was pinpointed at the conclusion of *Being and Nothingness* as the end of desire (Sartre 1956). The notion of *creation* is invoked at the very core of the human condition<sup>13</sup>, which seems the place where to look for an answer to the aforementioned ontological transition. Sartre writes: "Man is the being through whose mediation Being can create being. This is so because he is both being and nothingness at the same time; because he is nothingness that nihilates itself or Being in a state of decompression" (Sartre 1992: 528). The project of the human being is to negate the being that it is, and it does this by negating both being and itself. If humans were made of pure consciousness, they could not bring their nothingness to being. Human beings are structurally formed as a negation of being, as a practice of annihilating being, and as a perpetual nullification of being as a result of their ontologically liminal status. This is due to the structural negativity that exists in human beings, as described in the previous section: they use their existence as a form of negation, thus overcoming the conditions that confine them. However, coming from nothingness, this existence can only be supported by the for-itself, which means that it is a free existence. Consequently, the crux of the ontological conundrum is resolved: human existence is intrinsically creative because it is free, which is to say that there is a break of naught between the self and the activity that the self undertakes in the world. This means that

[w]e are condemned to create and that at the same time we have to be this creation to which we are condemned. The very structure of freedom imposes this upon us: if freedom is defined in an act as its aspect of being a *first beginning*, it goes without saying that the free act is creation since through it something *begins* which was not. (1992: 515)

Overcoming, negating, being free, and creation come together in a single act as an unbreakable combination of ideas and ways of existence. In the act of

<sup>13</sup> The ontological question is answered here restricting reference to the *human* condition. However, if this solution rules out understanding Sartrean consciousness also as non-human consciousness or even the very possibility of creation as a non-exclusively human possibility, is debated. See Cimatti 2019.

creation, the human being chooses itself as free and as the source of the created world, unjustified and unjustifiable. Consciousness' being, or mode of existence, is its freedom. This freedom entails being the first beginning of something that did not already exist when the decision to cause it to exist was made. Making something from nothing is exactly *creation*. Therefore, creating anything entails bringing something into being without any justification or foundation other than the act of creation itself. Freedom comes from creation. The creation of consciousness, however, seems very peculiar and needs to be clearly explained. We can easily see that when an object is posited by a mental image, a *nothing* (the missing object in view) is generated where no object was before, addressing the situation by a double negative action. This shows clearly that consciousness' creation is distinctive in that it does not create *more* being, does not *add up* being to the Being that there is, but rather that it creates the nothingness of the imagined object, that it brings about the imagined object as a nothing. This is due to the fact that the in-itself is a compact mass of being that is complete in itself, and consciousness cannot bring additional being to Being beyond what there already is. Consciousness is therefore unable to produce being in-itself: "the in-itself is full of itself, and no more total plenitude can be imagined, no more perfect equivalence of content to container. There is not the slightest emptiness in being, not the tiniest crack through which nothingness might slip" (Sartre 1956: 120–121). Therefore, just as it does while generating an imagined object, all that consciousness is capable of making is yet another nothing. But this appears to be pretty inadequate. If consciousness is just capable of creating nothing, how will it be possible to make an imagined item actual in the world or give it reality? This effectively seem to imply that consciousness does not truly produce anything<sup>14</sup>. But we must pay close attention to the nuanced ontological argumentation Sartre invites us to engage in. Consciousness' creation constantly adheres to the structure of consciousness as *nothingness of being*, as "piercing" and "nagging" existence. This means that consciousness has always a relationship with being that is not of empty negation: consciousness is always negation of some determinate being, always intentionality directed towards something that *is*. In the same way, creation is always creation of *nothingness of being*, meaning creation of consciousness *in* being, therefore creation of a new relationship with a determinate being that is negated by the consciousness that intends it. Being cannot be created from nothing, hence there is no issue of generating being in the creation process; creation must act on consciousness as it is the only thing on which it can act. Creation must define itself as the process by which consciousness creates a new consciousness by negating or rejecting

<sup>14</sup>It should be obvious that this type of production differs greatly from what Ricoeur refers to as "image-fiction" in that the latter, at least according to Ricoeur (1981), does not posit anything in reality but only in a fictional dimension. In fact, Ricoeur does not even mention *Being and Nothingness*, where the topic of action is properly handled, or the *Notebooks*, from which we primarily drew our inspiration for what we are proposing here. Instead, he only makes reference to Sartre's writings from 1966 and 2004.

being, which results in a new determination of itself and, consequently, a new determination of being as its correlative. In other words, creation must involve a change in how consciousness interacts with the world. This is related to the creation of meaning, as it is interpreted in the *Notebooks*: “What is new? A *signification*. And what is a signification? An idea realized in being. [...] The signification is a surpassing of being become being” (Sartre 1992: 543–544). Consciousness is unable to directly affect being in the endeavour to realize the imagined object, or to bring nothingness into existence. Instead, consciousness can organize its interactions with the outside world in a way that overcomes resistance and exteriority—that is, the consciousness that one has of a real object such as what precedes oneself, as was not produced by oneself. This inversion amounts to bringing into the world a consciousness of *signification*, that is, a consciousness that makes the real object appear as relevant to one’s experience, to one’s consciousness. And this relevancy is really closely tied with *finality*, because it means, in Sartrean terms, to experience the object as *existing for* one’s consciousness, or to exist the object as that thing whose existence is understood as converging into one’s consciousness as its final end. These two concepts are extremely closely related: in order for consciousness to create, which is to make itself exist as the origin of the world’s being, it must transform its relationships with the world, and this act coincides with the act by which consciousness makes the world exist as the end of one’s decision to make it be (and be so and so). The attempt to *really* enjoy the imagined object is thus configured as the attempt to make that enjoyment the real end of a portion of the real world, and this means to manipulate present things so that they make possible the enjoyment of the desired object as what they tend towards, as their end.

This brings up the question of desire once more. The object in-image *represents* the fulfilment of my desire. In order for it to actually obtain, however, I must *create* its being. However, I cannot bring into existence something just by desiring it, even though this would be my ultimate satisfaction, even though I feel the urge of my desire as a *right* (Sartre 1992: 351) for me to enjoy in reality that thing that I desire in imagination. Riding on this desire, but having stated that no more being can come into being by my decision to make it be, I can only change my relation with the being that’s already there. What I can do is introduce a new *signification* in being, that is to rearrange being so that I do not experience its being as indifferent to me, but rather as *aimed for* my enjoyment, aimed for the enjoyment already existed in the imaginary and that I try to realize in the world. I must act in such a way that the world can actually produce the object I desire, allowing me to enjoy it really and not imaginatively. In other words, the realization of an end in the world is the attempt to overcome being so that it (the end) assumes the consistency of being proper to the in-itself, that the end *turns into* being. It is a matter of making the end be in the manner of the in-itself, so that the world can return itself to consciousness in the dimension of an end that gives itself in-itself, that is, a world giving itself in the order of *finality*.



To give things a new meaning, so that they point to it as their end, is to make something be where it was not, to make things converge towards something that was absent before. By introducing a component of meaning that is not immediately provided by the situation and giving it an appearance of a natural necessity, creation breaks with the experience of the world as a mere *datum*. It entails getting past the appearance of necessity in the context of an imaginary situation we're attempting to make real.

If we accept all the aforesaid, the final question we now need to tackle is: how can one alter their relationship to the outside world and their current circumstances to enable them to truly enjoy what they want? How may being be really rearranged so that it looks to be aimed for one's enjoyment? The answer has to do with the withdrawal from immediate enjoyment, "*postponed* consumption" (1992: 355), or the development of instruments<sup>15</sup>.

#### 8. *Instruments, First Sense: Instrumentality, Repetition, Antiphysis*

When enjoyment is not immediately possible, the invention of an instrument transforms the situation by providing a means to make enjoyment feasible (as its end). This is how we, following Sartre, propose to interpret the instrument, as a route to pursue and accomplish an end, which is the fulfilment of a desire. Does the assumed teleological structure in this creation comes into being from nothing? Is there something in the structure of consciousness that makes it appear before that creation? If we turn to *Being and Nothingness*, we learn that Sartre understands consciousness structurally as the overcoming of any existing situation: "the world as the correlate of the possibilities which I am appears from the moment of my upsurge as the enormous skeletal outline of all my possible actions" (Sartre 1956: 425). The world actually appears to me in the dimension of finality from the very moment of my birth because things as they are experienced are sketches of possible paths I could take. This is explained by the fact that my very existence in the world is projecting myself into the possibilities that I must be, and as a negation of this being that I am. In some ways, the pre-reflective existence I lead in the world already has

<sup>15</sup>It is true that starting from a condition of lack as we have characterized it, the production of instruments is not the only way to make up for this lack: rituals, prayers, myths are alternative ways of doing it. According to the *Notebooks*, "there is within the universe of desire a kind of equilibrium that excludes the necessity of inventing tools" (Sartre 1992: 355), which means that the invention of tools is not a necessary consequence of the impossibility of immediate enjoyment. It is possible for tools to be invented, but not necessary; in fact, man can also invent religion, myth, etc. in order to remain in a state of desire and never get out of it. The possibility of getting out of it, which is always open from the moment when enjoyment is not immediately satisfied, is realized by a free decision of free consciousnesses and is not necessitated by any mono-dialectic historical law (Cambria 2019: 30). In this article, we will concentrate solely on the creation of instruments, which allow for an exit from the world of desire towards an attempt to make the imagined enjoyment real.

the dimension of finality as a suggestion. It appears as an objective quality of things: “thus the world appears to me as objectively articulated; it never refers to a creative subjectivity but to an infinity of instrumental complexes” (1956: 425). Things are presented to me as having a specific purpose, or, to put it another way, as instruments that can be utilized to fulfil that purpose. Conscious movement and awareness of one’s surroundings already suggest an instrumental relationship with them: “In this sense perception is in no way to be distinguished from the practical organization of existents into a *world*” (1956: 424). The world, then, is directly experienced as a field of action and existential possibilities of consciousness. This idea, articulated in *Being and Nothingness* as what we might call the *instrumentality* of things, and which links perception with instruments and practical activity, is maintained and expanded upon in the *Notebooks*:

The tool obeyed nature; that is, perception. And perception itself had the structure given to it by desire. The structure of desire is to take up and to approach the human center. The perceived pathways are convergent and centripetal ones. Therefore the hodological space that surrounds man is a vector space. Yet these paths are conceived as given or, rather, they too are incitations, spells. (Sartre 1992: 354)<sup>16</sup>

In this intricate quotation, by relating instrumentality to the structure of desire, Sartre enriches the phenomenological description of instrumentality. Just as with imagination, though in a different way, perception is linked to desire in the sense of overcoming an indifferent datum, or the mere being-there of objects. I perceive objects as converging towards me because desire teaches me that they are valuable for enjoyment. On the other hand, the object’s desirable *qua* useful attributes are offered as its own, as belonging to a neutral order known as “Nature”<sup>17</sup>, that is, an exteriority with its own laws. These features are often thought of as solicitations that encourage me to appreciate things in particular ways and within given boundaries of manageability; nevertheless, for me they act as enchantments that entice me.

Let’s use a specific example to try to illustrate this idea. If I were to use a tree branch to knock down an apple that lies much higher than I can reach, the branch would appear to me as an appropriate instrument for the job because I would immediately perceive it as a means to fulfil my desire for the fruit, i.e., to realize the possibility of getting to the apple up there at the top. In

<sup>16</sup> What Sartre refers to as “incitations” is quite similar to what is referred to as “affordances” in contemporary psychological and philosophical studies. In addition to the classic Gibson 1966 and 1979, see also the newest Heras-Escribano 2019.

<sup>17</sup> The idea of “nature” plays a critical supporting role in explaining what freedom is across Sartre’s whole body of work. It is important to note that it is consistently and problematically associated with exteriority and inertia (Bene 2015), has non-neutral gender implications (Mussett 2020), and is resisted in a counter-reductionist fashion (Bertolini 2019).

the perception of the tree branch as a tool to achieve my end, to *realize* it, what I experience is the ease with which that same branch presents itself to me as suitable to pursue this end, and this in that “the stick is the mere materialisation of the path between the fruit and my arms, a mere prolonging of my body. It is already contained in the gesture that reaches for the fruit” (Sartre 1992: 354–355). To find in the branch the possibility of reaching for the apple is to materialize the path that my body is unable to take, but which is hinted at by the gesture I make to reach for the apple: the stick *repeats* the movement I would make with my hand, it *prolongs* my arm. As a gesture, that of knocking-down “is not productive. It does not overturn the situation, but rather emphasizes it” (1992: 355). The instrument thus considered presents itself as the *repetition* of a natural movement of the human body, as the *enhancement* of a faculty and order already given.

With that said, this gesture also embodies creativity, which, as we have seen, always implies a negative component. What is invented, what is new and should not be underestimated in this kind of elementary instrument-using, indeed, is the disruption of a natural form of givenness of the branch in the objectual synthesis “branch-of-a-tree.” Thus, the negative activity of consciousness, its derealizing power, allows “to add an element to a new synthetic structure. It goes without saying that breaking a natural form is a kind of liberation, the start of an *antiphysis*” (1992: 355). Sartre engages with the notion of *antiphysis* in *Materialism and revolution*, where he uses it to refer to a human order of ends as opposed to a natural order of law (Sartre 1962b); in the *Notebooks*, *antiphysis* is the beginning of an operation of rupture of the natural order of the world, i.e., of *physis*, and the introduction of a “human” element into it. However, in the case just considered, “this liberation stops halfway because the secondary structure is liberated only to enter into some new, equally natural, synthesis, because it is *demande*d by the desirable object” (Sartre 1992: 355): the tree branch is torn from the synthesis it has with the tree, the other branches, etc. to enter into the new stick-apple-arm synthesis, which is, however, still a “natural” synthesis, i.e. a synthesis immediately recalled by the relationship established between the apple as the desired object and me as the one who desires. Because of this, creation at this level “consists just in envisaging the branch of *that* tree as a stick” (1992: 355), rather than fundamentally overturn “nature”’s order of givenness by introducing a full human-recallable signification into the world, thus causing *antiphysis*.

With this, we have completed the initial stage of the composition of an instrument. The unreal starts to encroach on the real world if we can identify a component of the in-itself as an instrument<sup>18</sup>. This happens when we make

<sup>18</sup> From the aforesaid, it is clear that the situations of instrumentality-consciousness which Sartre tries to capture in his *Notebooks* are not immediately in line with the strict separation of imagination and perception he advocates in *The imaginary* (Part 3, ch. IV). This does not mean that the descriptions carried out in the *Notebooks* require an intermingling of perception

decisions based on our (pre-reflective) consciousness in situations when the intended outcome is not immediately apparent as being within our grasp. The new instrumental synthesis is a *repetition* of a natural synthesis, which means that it was not invented as a new means of presenting the object of desire but rather as a means of using the world's availability to achieve an end through the use of an object's capacity for that end. If we adopt Sartre's perspective, however, this gesture does not correspond with a real creation of being. In fact, the object is surely freed from the indifference of the in-itself to take on a creative form in order to fulfil human being's desires. By this means, the gesture is original, creative, unrestrained, and overcomes the given situation. However, the object's use is repetitive in a "natural" way, incorporating the human body's movement in already predetermined courses.

Nonetheless, creating a new way to interact with the environment and allowing *antiphysis* to manifest at a more radical level requires developing new approaches to traversing the paths that lead to objects. The action is initially provided with the approaches to the desired objects as already "given," predetermined ways of access, including the instrumental ones. This is what Sartre refers to in *Sketches for a Theory of Emotions* as the "pragmatic intuition of the determinism of the world" (Sartre 1962a: 62). The world is learned pragmatically as a path by some channels of execution, as if it were a natural and in some ways inevitable fact that I must jump to reach an apple on a tree and that I must beat it to reach it with a stick: the world already gives itself ordered in a dimension of necessity, which goes hand in hand with the exteriority of the in-itself to myself, its non-finality before the action that "frames" it in a path of enjoyment of my desire. In order to break this determinism and introduce a new element into the world, new avenues of action, a subversion in the texture of reality and an alteration to its structure is required.

### 9. *Instruments, Second Sense: the Invention of a New Human-Referable World*

Let's analyse another example in order to better comprehend the type of productive activity that imagination acts on a situation in order to produce *antiphysis*. Consider that I desire to lift a stone because I can see food behind it or because I assume there is food under it. If I were to be successful in lifting the stone, I would experience the enjoyment I am aiming for. Reaching the nourishment is the fulfilment of my desire, which is already structured as a

and imagination, but they rather hint at situations in which consciousness alternates between the two. Although not unproblematic, this seems to be compatible also with Sartre's notorious example of Pierre in *The imaginary*, where Sartre explicitly denies that Pierre is doubled, and asserts that there is only one Pierre, once imagined, once perceived. This shows that one can in principle be aware of intending the same object in two different ways. What *The imaginary* does not seem to us to discuss, however, is the kind of effect, or space of action, this kind of awareness of the referential co-incidence of the two acts produces or solicits.

transformation of the world in the project of removing the stone. However, the stone is too heavy for me to lift: the world is resisting me. As I scan my surroundings, I see a stone that is similar to the first but this time is easier to handle and seems to be offering itself as a potential instrument for achieving my goal. If my goal is to break the first stone with the second, then we should pay close attention to the level of *antiphysis* I am enacting. When I clash one stone against another, I am simulating a natural motion, that of striking the stone with my fist, and I am enhancing the gesture by “extending” my fist to exert more force. However, it’s possible that the second stone won’t be strong enough to break the first, at which point I’ll start exploring elsewhere. A stick appears to me along with a special ability: I can use it to beat a stone with, but it won’t shatter. What else could I use it for?<sup>19</sup>

The perception of the stone’s inherent determinism makes me think that it needs to be moved upward in order to be lifted. I know this: the stone will be raised as a result of my lifting action. It is not necessary for me to understand this on a reflective or thematic level; rather, I understand this as a requirement, meaning that I understand the stone’s “incitation” to require that I move it in a particular direction in order to lift it. I must thus be able to accomplish this goal, but I am unable to do so by beginning with myself or, at first glance, with the environment I am in. In other words, the goal is presented as something to be reached that is not presently available to me: it is neither a genuine possibility, nor an effective potentiality. The end—which *is* not—must be inserted into the occurrent situation starting from what there is. So, I must figure out a way in the world that is rooted in natural necessities and overturns the chain of references represented by the natural synthesis in which the stone is situated. The path that is thus introduced into the world will have the necessity of the in-itself, but it will be a completely new fact, something created out of nothing: a fully human route to the accomplishment of an end.

I therefore turn to the world once more, but this time with a different attitude: I do not read the natural potential of objects, I do not let the world show me how to move through it, but instead I go in search of an object that can be subservient to my end, guided in my search for the most suitable one by the form that takes my desire, which is the driving force behind my action.

<sup>19</sup> We believe that the so-called horizon-intentionality cannot adequately and completely capture what is happening in this kind of situation. Horizon-intentionality is undoubtedly a part of the entire process Sartre and we are attempting to describe because it is crucial in providing consciousness with a sense of space of determinability for the experienced objects. The level of antiphysis that is responsible for the “creative” act under debate, however, cannot be considered to be provided by it. It may be argued that horizon should be seen as having antiphysical potentialities as well. But for this to work, said in Sartrean terms, the subject would need to be able to “see” beyond what things “naturally” reveal to us, which means it needs something more than perceptual consciousness. In a nutshell, we may state that no modification of objects is properly in view as long as we stay on the perceptual level, and as a result, no creation in the sense we are developing here is feasible.

I do not yet know at a reflective level what it will be: the (instrumental) end is not suggested to me by things, the instrumental synthesis is not in the natural synthesis. Once I'm back to the stick, I project on it a new *instrumentality*: it can be used as a *lever*. I place the stick underneath the stone and then lower the opposite side using my arms. This action of lifting the stone is accomplished by lowering my hands rather than raising them, an action that is "a reversal of the natural indications" (Sartre 1992: 353). Why so? Because what I want to achieve is for the stone to be *raised*, but my action consists in *lowering* the stick; this "reversal" of a homogeneity and of a "given" relationship with nature towards a new way of interacting with it amounts to the realization of a situation of possibilities that would have been impossible to be realized without my intervention. In other words, "the goal is nihilated and cut off from the situation" (1992: 354).

What matters most to our analyses in this case is the connection between the given situation and the positing of one's goal. The latter, as a goal, before being realized, and *as not realized*, affects consciousness and leads it to reconfigure its "natural" movement in the situation in light of what *is* not (the goal itself). Such reconfiguration, however, is not merely imagined, but it is rather imposed onto consciousness by consciousness itself as a possibility to be realized by undertaking a determined course of action:

One interprets the present on the basis of a precise and abstract future. This is the positing of the absolute independence of man in relation to the real. The real is seen in terms of the future; that is, *what* is illuminated on the basis of what is not and one *invents* pathways in the present on the basis of the end. (1992: 354)

We may actually speak about a new way to act in order to achieve a certain outcome because the new course of action was not "naturally" supplied by the existing circumstances. As a result, we can assert that we have actually introduced a human purpose into the world. The enjoyment of human being, the fulfilment of its desire, stands as the end of present reality, of what is provided, and being appears in the dimension of finality. Human being emerges as the maker of the end of the object, as what that thing *is* in view of. More specifically, matter now has the weight of emptiness since its givenness is exceeded in the context of a goal that is imposed by human being rather than provided by things. Said differently, matter is surpassed as my transformative action affirms my independence from it with the position of my goal:

Present matter becomes *indifferent* and passive. It does not have its own pathways toward the future and, consequently, in the nonhuman present there are not magical claims on the future. The future is not potentially in the present. It is a human fact, willed by man, the noematic correlative of an active noesis. By leaning on the lever, man suppresses magic. (1992: 354)

By doing this, the human being no longer allows the world to teach them how to act; instead, the human being establishes a deliberate path leading to the achievement of a goal that not only refers to themselves (the human being) as its final destination, but also has them as its source. Consciousness has not only been able to manipulate nature to attain its goals, but it has also gone beyond simply using natural processes and objects as a means to an end. Starting from a situation that in reality presents itself as insurmountable, consciousness has introduced a new way of moving through reality that would lead to the desired object, it has introduced a way to achieve its end. In this way human being has, by their action, introduced into the in-itself a way that leads to human being themselves, that is to say a path that ends in the fulfilment of a human desire. In this sense, the goal of my creation—to enjoy in reality the desired object—is not realised in imagination but has taken on a material existence.

### 10. *Conclusion*

Mental images are primarily acts and operations that consciousness performs to liberate itself from the situation where lacks are embodied affective experiences. For liberation to be effective in the situation itself, consciousness must go beyond the creation of mental images and direct itself towards reality.

To be true, a mental image is already a way of behaving towards the world. It is the attempt to approximate a desired object. However, as long as consciousness indulges in the entertainment of mental images, even if these can solicit real effects (salivation, erection, palpitation, etc.), and even produce a form of enjoyment of some desires (as in the case of imaginatively induced orgasms), it is the structure of the world that does not change, and enjoyment of desires stays “internal,” or “personal.” To reorganize the world to make it appear as human-oriented, to disrupt its resistance and indifference, the human being has to transform it, and simultaneously produce meaning.

In order to do this, consciousness first has to grasp the affordances of what surrounds it. If nothing is present that could fulfil its desire, consciousness has to find a way to overcome this insufficiency, and that coincides with the manipulation of the world itself, the invention of instruments. At this point, mental representation of the fulfilled desires comes into play again: since the act of entertaining a mental image involves a quasi-enactment of specific body actions and impressions, whenever a new operational path in the environment is envisioned in a mental image, a new manner of inhabiting the (real) world is also prompted. The realization of this new manner of being in the world relates to the initial and most basic realization of freedom, because the world neither demanded nor dictated this new operative path; rather, imaginative consciousness constructed it. In other words, mental images play a crucial part in the actualization of freedom. Without mental images having built the link between the merely imaginary and the real world, all other more complex types of imagination, as well as of freedom and free agency, could not take place.

In conclusion, we could therefore say that mental images engage consciousness from its very roots, requiring its very “matter” to host the enactment of unreal enjoyment. It is still matter, albeit real one, that the tool-making activity tries to reproduce: the matter of the world is re-signified so that reality could present a real enjoyment, an enjoyment built into the real structure of the world and consumed in it.<sup>20</sup>

### Simone Villani

University of Bologna  
Via Carlo Magno 20  
74122, Taranto, Italy  
[simone.villani.lab@gmail.com](mailto:simone.villani.lab@gmail.com)

### Andrea Altobrando

University of Padua  
Piazza Capitaniato, 3  
35139, Padova, Italy  
[andrea.altobrando@unipd.it](mailto:andrea.altobrando@unipd.it)

### Works cited:

- Bene, Adrián. 2015. Nature and lived experience in late Sartre. *Dialogue and Universalism*. (2): 143–152.
- Bertolini, Mara Meletti. 2019. Disumano, inumano e postumano. Alcune riflessioni tra J.P. Sartre e H. Arendt. *Studi sartriani* XIII: 119–136.
- Bertolini, Mara Meletti. 2000. *La conversione all'autenticità. Saggio sulla morale di J. P. Sartre*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Biasetti, P. 2015. Tra alienazione e rivelazione. La critica al concetto hegeliano di «Begierde» nei «Cahiers pour une morale» di Jean-Paul Sartre. *Iride*, v. 28, issue 75, May-August.
- Bonnemann, Jens. 2007. *Der Spielraum des Imaginären. Sartres Theorie der Imagination und ihre Bedeutung für seine phänomenologische Ontologie, Ästhetik und Intersubjektivitätskonzeption, Phänomenologische Forschungen, Beihefte* 2. Hamburg: Meiner.
- Cambria, F. 2018. Organismo, prassi, strumento. Il farsi umano del vivente, *Studi sartriani* XII: 75-90.
- Cambria, F. 2019. Una “moralità concreta”. La ricerca sartriana nel decennio 1939–1949. In J.P. Sartre, *Quaderni per una morale*, transl. F. Cambria, 7–43. Milano-Udine: Mimesis.
- Cimatti, Felice. 2019. L'uomo e il cavolfiore. Da Sartre a Deleuze, dall'umano al postumano. *Studi Sartreani* XIII: 87–100.

<sup>20</sup> The publication of this article has been supported by the research project FACC\_BIRD2121\_01, FISPPA-Department, University of Padova.



- Clayton, Cam. 2011. The Psychical Analogon in Sartre's Theory of the Imagination. *Sartre Studies International* 17(2): 16–27.
- Gibson, James J. 1966. *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Gibson, James J. 1979. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
- Heras-Escribano, Manuel. 2019. *The Philosophy of Affordances*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kearney, Richard. 1998. *Poetics of Imagining*. London: Harper Collins.
- Mussett, Shannon. 2020. Nature as threat and escape in the philosophies of Sartre and Beauvoir. In *The Sartrean Mind*, ed. Matthew C. Eshleman and Constance L. Mui, 515–527. London-New York: Routledge.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 1981. Sartre and Ryle on the Imagination. In *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. P. A. Schilpp, 167–178. La Salle: Open Court.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1943. *L'Être et le Néant*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1956. *Being and Nothingness*, transl. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1962a. *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, transl. Philip Mairet. London: Methuen & Co LTD.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1962b. Materialism and revolution. In *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, transl. Annette Michelson. New York: Collier Books.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1966. *The Psychology of Imagination*, transl. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1992. *Notebooks for an Ethics*, transl. David Pellauer. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2004. *The Imaginary*, transl. Jonathan Webber. London: Routledge.
- Sauer, Noel N. 2016. Sartre on Mental Imagery. *Sartre Studies International* 22(2): 53–79.
- Sicard, Michel. 1979. Sartre. *Obliques* 18–19.
- Siegler, M. 2022. The Dialectics of Action and Technology in the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. *Philosophy & Technology* 35: 47.
- Stawarska, Beata. 2005. Defining imagination: Sartre between Husserl and Janet. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4: 133–153.
- Vauday, Patrick. 2005. Sartre: l'envers de la phénoménologie. *Rue Descartes* 47: 8–18.
- Wiesing, Lambert. 1996. Phänomenologie des Bildes nach Husserl und Sartre. *Phänomenologische Forschungen* 30: 255–281.