

## Development of the Self in Society: French Postwar Thought on Body, Meaning, and Social Behavior

Line Joranger

*Telemark University College*

The development of the self and behavior toward others were heavily discussed during the French postwar era. According to Foucault, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, intersubjective social relations are physical and bodily connections. The physical body is our point of contact with the world, which is a practical world, which we typically engage before any kind of theoretical understanding of what things or people are like. Although there are a number of differences in their ways of thinking concerning the development of the self and social behavior, this paper shows that Foucault and Sartre seem to share Hyppolite's notion that the fulfillment of the absolute self will always be deferred because of an ongoing contradiction in our social behavior.

Keywords: self-consciousness, mental illness, social alienation

The revelation of the underlying ideas that led to discrimination against some groups with regard to both humanity and human rights was one of several reasons that the French postwar intellectual environment included increasing interest in social behavior and the development of the self. De Waelhens (1958) explains the contemporary French interest in social behavior and the development of the self, which he refers to as a body–mind relationship, by the fact that in France, psychoanalysis was paired with phenomenology. According to Spiegelberg (1972), through this pairing, French phenomenology advanced psychoanalysis much more than did psychoanalysis itself. Spiegelberg draws on this context, especially with regard to Merleau-Ponty's body phenomenology, Sartre's existentialism, and Jean Hyppolite's Hegel studies — although, according to Spiegelberg, Sartre, and Hyppolite left their mark to a far lesser extent than

did Merleau-Ponty. In this context, Spiegelberg seems to have forgotten that in 1954, Foucault published two minor texts about the development of the self, and mental illness, that included a focus on the physical body. These works are the book *Maladie Mentale et Personnalité* [*Mental Illness and Personality*] and Foucault's introduction to the 1954 French edition of the Swiss-German psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger's 1930 seminal essay on existential analysis, "Traum und Existenz" ["Dream and Existence"], or "Le Rêve et l'Existence," as it was called in the French edition.

In his introduction, Foucault (1954/2001) explicitly makes the connection between psychoanalysis and phenomenology when he claims that phenomenology and psychoanalysis, with regard to Edmund Husserl and Sigmund Freud, contributed to give humankind back its significance and meaningfulness. Although Foucault did not mention Hegel directly, French postwar thinking on the development of the self in society was largely inspired by Hegel's phenomenological and psychoanalytical thinking. As the French epistemologist Georges Canguilhem (1948-1949) wrote, with reference to Hegel, that in a period of world revolution and world war, France discovered a philosophy contemporary with the French Revolution and one that represented, to a great extent, the full realization of the struggle for recognition and the development of the self.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Hegel instituted philosophical modernity. Commenting on one of Hyppolite's Hegel lectures, Merleau-Ponty stated that all the great philosophical ideas of the past century — the philosophies, and psychoanalysis — had their beginnings in Hegel:

it was he who started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason which remains the task of our century. (. . .) As it turns out, Hegel's successors have placed more emphasis on what they reject of his heritage than on what they owe to him. (1948/1964, p. 64)

Although Hegel, Husserl, and Freud inspired French postwar intellectuals such as Hyppolite, Foucault, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, these philosophers did not believe in the historical development of an absolute self, as Hegel did, nor did they support Husserl's notion that one could arrive at an absolute, universal, unhistorical truth through pure phenomenological thinking or Freud's deterministic statement that every psychosis and every mental illness could be traced back to a death instinct or to libido.

To better understand the content of French postwar thought on the development of the self in society and its relation to body, meaning, and social behavior, I will present an outline of Hegel's phenomenological thought as well

as material from the works of Hyppolite, Foucault, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.<sup>1</sup> Although there are a number of differences in their ways of thinking about the self, this paper shows that Hyppolite, Foucault, and Sartre share the notion that the fulfillment of the absolute self will always be deferred because of an ongoing contradiction in our social behavior.

### *Hegel's Phenomenological Thinking on the Development of the Absolute Self*

In the *Philosophie des Geistes* [*Philosophy of Mind* (1830/2003)], which is part three in the *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften*, Hegel claims that the fight for social recognition is a *life and death struggle* through history that will end in a peaceful political reunion of self-consciousness and reason.

The fight ends in the first instance as a one-sided negation with inequality. While the one combatant prefers life, retains his single self-consciousness, but surrenders his claim for recognition, the other holds fast to his self-assertion and is recognized by the former as his superior. Thus arises the status of *master* and *slave*. (1830/2003, § 433)

Hegel contends that our social life and the commencement of political union emerge in the battle for recognition under the subjugation of a master. Force, which is the basis of this phenomenon, is not based on rights but rather is a necessary and legitimate factor in the passage from the state of isolated self-consciousness into the state of what Hegel calls the universal self-consciousness. The fulfillment of the absolute self is the affirmative awareness of the self in another self. Each self, as a free individuality, has its own absolute independence but, by virtue of the negation of its immediacy or appetite, does not distinguish itself from the other. Each is thus universal self-consciousness and objective; each has “real” universality in the shape of reciprocity insofar as each knows itself to be recognized in the other free man and is aware of this insofar as each recognizes the other and knows him to be free. The reappearance of self-consciousness is, thus, a form of consciousness that is at the root of all true mental or spiritual life, “in family, fatherland, state, and of all virtues, love, friendship, valour, honour and fame” (§ 436). Hegel believes that the principle of the *free* mind is to make the merely given element (*das Seiende*) in consciousness into some-

---

<sup>1</sup>There were, of course, several other French postwar writers who were interested in Hegel and the development of the self in society from a phenomenological and psychoanalytical point of view, including Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Wahl, Louis Althusser, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Daniel Lagache, and Gilles Deleuze. Later, Félix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva. I have chosen to focus on Hyppolite because he was an important French postwar Hegel interpreter at the time; and on Merleau-Ponty's, Sartre's, and Foucault's early works because of their specific focus on the body-mind relationship.

thing mental (*seelenhaftes*) and, conversely, to make what is mental into a (common) objectivity. Free mind or spirit is to be recognized as the self-knowing truth:

Free mind stands, like consciousness, as one side over against the object, and is at the same time both sides and therefore, like the soul, a totality. Accordingly, whereas soul was truth only as an immediate unconscious totality, and whereas in consciousness, on the contrary, this totality was divided into the “I” and the object external to it, free mind or spirit, is to be recognized as *self-knowing truth*. (1830/2003, p. 180)

In Hegel’s phenomenology, there is the concept of a rational development of a dialectical struggle of social and personal liberation, which will end in the fulfillment of the absolute free human being and the absolute knowledge of truth. Social and political development, according to Hegel, are based on the other’s attempts to reduce the other from a subject to a “slave,” which, in turn, leads to social anxiety and battles for recognition. Thus, long before Freud, Hegel saw the meaning of dream and imagination. According to Hegel, sleep is a restitutorial force, an investigation of our daily activities. To sleep and dream is to return to the general nature of subjectivity (§ 398), which is the substance of psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between the state of dreaming and the state of wakefulness. The person who remains dreaming while awake was, according to Hegel, considered mentally ill. Several years before Freud, Hegel saw mental illness as a relapse into an earlier state of soul development — that is, childhood. This is the unconscious playing with natural instinct, or what he calls emotional life (*Gefühlleben*) [§§ 403–408].

Like Freud, Hegel did not see mental illness and rationality as opposites but as two interrelated phenomena that share the same underlying structure in which each informs the other in significant ways. The healthy mind grapples with the same sorts of contradictions and feelings of alienation, the same “infinite pain” that characterizes insanity (§ 382). According to Hegel, people with different personalities react differently to their social environment. In this sense, one can observe that one organic being is more sensitive or more irritable or has a greater reproductive capacity than another — just as we observe that the sensibility of one is different from that of another, and people respond differently to a given stimulus (§§ 404–408).

### *Hyppolite: The Development of the Absolute Self is Forever Deferred*

Hyppolite’s lectures on Hegel were presented for the students of the École normale supérieure. In attendance at these lectures were Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Foucault. His lectures called forth questions about psychoanalysis and the logic of passion, mathematics, the formalization of discourse, and information theory and its application. The lectures explored questions about an existence

that constantly associates and dissolves its relationships. They explained the interaction between the self and the other as a perpetual existential conflict with no democratic progress. In this vein, Hyppolite read Hegel in sharp contrast to the more Marxist-oriented interpretations of another famous Russian–French Hegel interpreter of the time, Alexandre Kojève. Unlike Kojève, Hyppolite described the subject of Hegel’s theories as a tragic component of human existence. Although both Hyppolite and Kojève argued for the historical dimension of the subject’s temporality, Hyppolite’s history of philosophy had no human components and no notions of the subject as an historical actor.

Despite his anti-existentialist view of the human subject and although his theory did not have a specific focus on the human body, Hyppolite read the relationship to the human experience in the manner of most other French existentialists: as a struggle for recognition. Like Hegel, he saw this struggle in relation to the desire to be held in high esteem. However, in *Genèse et Structure de la Phénoménologie de l’Esprit de Hegel* [*Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (1946/1974)], Hyppolite suggested that there is no question of an historical dialectic of recognition evolving as Hegel described it in the *Philosophy of Mind*. Seen in this way, the completion of the Absolute seems forever deferred (Hyppolite 1946/1974, p. 145). There is no rational, dialectical struggle of liberation in which the oppressed enlightens the overlord and vice versa. Life leans more in the direction of what Kierkegaard describes as self-agitation, anxiety, and suffering. For Hyppolite, the alienation of subjectivity means that one never agrees with oneself because one continually becomes another in the endeavor to be oneself:

The self never coincides with itself, for it is always other in order to be itself. It always poses itself in a determination and, because this determination is, as such, already its first negation, it always negates itself to be itself. It is human being “that never is what it is and always is what it is not.” (p. 150)

Thus, the finite subject is not limited in the way that an object can be limited. An object does not know its own limit, which is external to it. The subject continually seeks to transgress its limit; it tends toward the infinite, the unconditioned. This understanding (*Verstand*) is reason (*Vernunft*), but by the same token, it transgresses the very sphere of objects. This infinite is not an object; it is a task whose accomplishment is forever deferred. According to Hyppolite, it is no longer the concept of reason that regulates experience but that of the idea and the infinite practical task in relation to which all knowledge and all knowing are organized. Because the subject always fails in its endeavor to become whole and united, its basis remains always, Hyppolite suggests, in an unhappy consciousness (p. 191). The experience of the self becomes inadequate and incomplete and ceases to correspond with the objects of truth, and our knowledge of death enforces our knowledge of limited time. In the encounter with others,

we learn that the self does not exist all at once but is alternately lost and then recovered. Concretely, this is the very essence of human beings. They are never what they are; they always exceed themselves and are always beyond themselves; they have a future; and they reject all permanence except the permanence of their desire, which is aware of human beings as desire.

According to Judith Butler (1999), it might seem that Hyppolite's vision of death has engaged Freud's (1922) vision in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and that all desire is, in some sense, inspired by a fundamental striving toward death (i.e., the desire to die). However, Butler believes that both Hegel's and Hyppolite's Christianity imply that death, to which consciousness aspires, is itself a fuller notion of life.

Following Kojève and Jean Wahl, Hyppolite restricts himself to the interpretation of death offered in the section of lordship and bondage. He takes seriously the facticity of the body, finitude as the condition of a limited perspective, corporeality as a guarantor of death. The vision of a new life, a life beyond death, remains purely conjectural in Hyppolite's view, but it is a conjectural that holds sway in human life. (1999, p. 91)

Thus, the fact that we never will conform to another human being and the fact that intersubjective forms of cohabitation cause considerable interaction challenges for the development of the self are the lived experience of the infinite. "To cultivate oneself is not to develop harmony, as in organic growth, but to oppose oneself and rediscover oneself through a rending and a separation" (Hyppolite, 1946/1974, p. 385).

#### *Sartre: The Bodily Self for Others — the Bodily Self for Itself*

Like Hyppolite and Hegel, Sartre concerns himself with the development of the self in society. In *L'Être et le Néant* [*Being and Nothingness* (1943/2003)], Sartre contends that we first and foremost meet others as rival consciousnesses, as rival sources of freedom and power. He suggests that our relationships with others are *intersubjective* in the sense that we, in our development of the self, are dependent on others' judgment. This is something we fear and would prefer to escape. In this context, we are, like Hegel, talking about an intersubjective interaction that leads to a predictable interaction of dominance and submission in which we either attempt to overpower the other (the sadistic strategy) or to surrender to the command of the other's mastery (the masochistic strategy). In both cases, Sartre believes, we confirm that there is a need for us, that we are powerful, and that we are substantive. If these strategies are not successful, we have a third option: to withdraw from all relationships to avoid the threat of the other's *gaze*, which can destroy us.

Sartre exemplifies the gaze by relating the experience of a jealous person who observes the other through a keyhole (1943/2003, p. 282ff). The observer enjoys

the feeling of having the body of the other, who does not know that she is observed as an object in his power. However, what the observer does not know is that he is also an object of observation by a third person while he is spying in the keyhole. This sensation of suddenly being discovered promotes, according to Sartre, a feeling of shame that is perceived as humiliating because the observer himself is reduced from being the one who observes and has power to being the observed (the object of the other) at the mercy of a negative judgment from others. Nevertheless, the sensation of being discovered by another leads us from the unreflective consciousness for itself in isolation to the reflective consciousness in the world of others. "It is shame or pride which reveal to me the Other's look and myself at the end of that look. It is the shame of pride which makes me *live*" (pp. 284–285).

Because human relationships are always based on one's attempts to reduce the other as a subject to an object, Sartre believes an equal "we" is impossible to achieve. Thus, according to Sartre, it is understandable that one wants to withdraw from social communication. However, like Hegel and Hyppolite, he argues that this is an impossible solution in the long run. We are nothing if we are not in an intersubjective relationship with the other. In this sense, the other is a necessary source of affirmation of one's own existence. Wanting to rise above this connection is the same as signing one's own death warrant.

In contrast to contemporary existence-phenomenalism, in *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (1946) [*Existentialism Is a Humanism*], Sartre claims that man, in this intersubjective situation, is condemned to be *free* because he has not created himself but is still free: "From the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does" ("*parce qu'une fois jeté dans le monde, il est responsable de tout ce qu'il fait*") [p. 40]. He suggests that man is not only what he conceives himself to be but also what he wants to be. We are nothing but that which we make of ourselves (pp. 29–30). No a priori morals, values, or injunctions exist to support us in life, as Kant and Husserl claim, and there is no materialistic or libidinous determinism or rational social development, as Marx, Freud, and Hegel claim; instead, man is freedom.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre suggests that our basic anxiety is related to the awareness of freedom. Each choice is associated with anxiety because every choice commits us and makes us responsible not only for ourselves but also for others. In this respect, we live constantly in relation to a desired *future* through our projects, expectations, beliefs, and desires (Sartre, 1943/2003, pp. 147–152). How we perceive and relate to our society and our social situation here and now is determined by our desires for the future, such as our wish that our dearest friend will come home from Berlin at any minute. Sartre entirely overturns the assumption that my *choices* are determined by who I am and make me who I am. What we are and what we become are entirely dependent on our choices and intentions. Our responsibility for who we are is therefore total; we can set

ourselves free with regard to our future, and we will have to make the choices that will determine our future.

In *Liminaire Psychologie Phénoménologique de l'Imagination* [*The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (1940/2004)], Sartre emphasizes the tendency to create internal images of ourselves and who we want to be or become. He believes, like Hegel, that it is important to distinguish between objects in the real world (the physical body as such) and objects in the fictional quasi-world (the body as an imagination). Perceptions and imaginations offer not only an escape from a specific and undesirable situation but also an “(. . .) escape from all the constraints of the world [;] they seem to be presented as a negation of the condition of being in the world, as an anti-world” (1940/2004, p. 136). By claiming this, Sartre confronts psychoanalysis by rejecting the notion that something that involves consciousness can also be unconscious. He does not deny that the unconscious exists — only the notion that the unconscious is a place where mystical and meaningful things happen outside of consciousness.

For Sartre, the body is the sediment of the past that we project toward the future. It is that whose surface power is inscribed and that by whose powers such power is “incorporated.” It is the natural symbol as well as the existential basis of culture. In part three of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre dedicates a full chapter to what he believes to be a three-dimensional body as such — that is, the body in relation to society or *for others*, the body in relation *to itself*, and, lastly, the body in relation to an *ontological* notion. Because the body in Heidegger’s terms is “being-in-the-world” and because the body is our being-there in the world, any description of the body has as its correlate a disruption of the world — that is, in Husserl’s terms, the *Lebenswelt*, the life-world.

Sartre claims that the body as being-for-others is a body in a social situation. In this case, the other’s body is meaningful and is not perceived as a thing among things, as if it were an isolated object with purely external relations with other objects (*objets*). He suggests that in this context, there is a radical difference between objects and human beings. Suppose that we see a man in a public park:

If I were to think of him as being only a puppet, I should apply to him the categories which I ordinarily use to group temporal-spatial “things.” (. . .) Perceiving him as a *man*, on the other hand, is not to apprehend an additive relation between the chair and him; it is to register an organization *without distance* of the things in my universe around that privileged object. (1943/2003, p. 278, italics in the original)

Although, in this example, the other is a body by virtue of the fact that I am looking at him and not vice versa, the other is, according to Sartre, perceived as a situated object around whom society is organized. The other’s body is seen as a center of his own fields of perceptions and actions, and the space he inhabits



is the space in which he lives. As already noted, this interpretation indicates two dimensions of the body: the body as being-for-itself (my own body as it is normally for me) and the body as being-for-others (my body as it normally appears to others or, equivalently, the body of the other as it normally appears to me). A third ontological dimension is then generated, so to speak, by the interaction between these first two dimensions: "My awareness of being an object for others means that I also exist for myself as body known by the others" (p. 375).

Frie (1997, p. 60) suggests that although Sartre conflates the ontological dimension of *Mitsein* with the experience of a we-subject, Sartre makes an important point: being-with-others follows from being-for-others. In this, Sartre identifies a dimension of affectivity, revealed, for example, by illness, which he calls "my body on a new plane of existence" (a psychic body) (1943/2003, p. 361), and an "aberrant type of appearance" when my own body appears to me as one object among other objects (p. 377–381). According to Sartre, this objectifying of the body happens when, for example, the doctor looks at my body as a physical object. At that point, "my body is designated as alienated" ("*Mon corps, en tant qu'aliéné*") (p. 376; 1943, p. 393). The experience of social alienation is achieved in and through affective structures, such as shyness, blushing, and sweating. He describes these feelings as a constant consciousness not of the body as being-for-itself but of the body as being-for-others. Sartre believes this constant uneasiness, which is the apprehension of my body's social alienation as irremediable, can determine psychoses such as erethophobia (a pathological fear of blushing), which are merely the horrified metaphysical apprehensions of the existence of my body for others (1943/2003, p. 376). He suggests that the explanation here is that we attribute to the body-for-other as much reality as we do to the body-for-us — or, more accurately, the body-for-other is the body-for-us, but it is inapprehensible and alienated. It appears to us that the other accomplishes for us a function of which we are incapable but that nevertheless is incumbent on us: to see ourselves as we are.

### *Merleau-Ponty: The Holistic Structure of Body, Meaning, and Behavior*

In Merleau-Ponty's concept of the development of the self in society, man is not an object of his surroundings. Merleau-Ponty's relation to the environment is not objective in the sense of something unambiguous and measurable; the human body is not a type of machine, as Descartes suggests. By claiming this relation, Merleau-Ponty rejects Sartre's metaphysical and Cartesian dualism of the body — that is, the body as being-for-itself (my own body as it is normally for me) and the body as being-for-others (my body as it normally appears to the other or, equivalently, the body of the other as it normally appears to me), which is an observable, physical body in society with others. According to

Merleau-Ponty, if I thought of myself and my body in this vein, I would not call it mine and I would not be me. He suggests that it is better to say “I am my body” — that is, my meanings are found in the structures of my body’s behavior, and it is the center of the world in which I exist.

In *Phénoménologie de la Perception* [*Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2002)], Merleau-Ponty suggests that one cannot speak of different realities and different self-consciousnesses or body awarenesses. He refers to an example in which an organist, despite the fact that he plays on a new and unknown organ, soon becomes so familiar with the organ’s characteristics that it cannot be explained by mechanical learning and adaptation. In contrast to Sartre, who rejects that unconsciousness represents meaningful things outside of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that it is because of the sub-consciousness of the bodily self that the organist “installs” (*installe*) himself, so to speak, in the organ and creates an existential self in relation to the musical instrument (1945/2002, pp. 167–168). Our intersubjective social relations with others are thus a physical and bodily connection, which is crucial for understanding ourselves in relation to society and to other people.

True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world with others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I can see, I am an *intersubjective* field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest. (p. 525)

Merleau-Ponty suggests that the essential characteristic of the self is that the body is, or has, a pre-objective relationship with its surroundings. This relationship has intentionality in Kant’s and Husserl’s sense of the word in that the body is directed toward comprehending society. Herein resides the title and significance of his work *Phenomenology of Perception*. The “phenomenon” is what comes into view; like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty wants to regard the phenomenon carefully and without prejudice. What stands out for a trained phenomenologist is a perceptual field that opens up the perceptual body, and this area contains many layers of meaning. In the first layer are the pre-objective phenomena themselves. These phenomena are open, ambiguous phenomena to which the human body responds. The body and its surroundings constitute an internal relational structure in which the two elements mutually refer to each other. This structure is the meaning of Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world, which Merleau-Ponty refers to as being-to-the-world (*être au monde*). By showing how the human body is not mechanically, biologically, or intellectually related to the world but, rather, is existentially related to it, Merleau-Ponty outlines a new way of examining and reinterpreting the body–mind

relationship that extends beyond Heidegger's notions, which do not fully examine the body–mind relationship and the problem of perception.<sup>2</sup>

Although we find many of Merleau–Ponty's arguments about the body–mind relationship again in Sartre's perceptions of the self, his theory does not relate the body specifically to perception, even if he (like Husserl) believes that the body is present in every perception. When Sartre speaks of the position and movement of the body, he refers neither to a spatial object's motion nor to a position in a geometric room. The spatiality of the body is not linked to a position but to a situation. The body is not a point among others; rather, it is the anchor in the world that makes all other coordinates possible. In other words, the body's "here" is an absolute "here" as opposed to the place where I currently find myself. There can never be a "there" for me.

According to Merleau–Ponty, it is important that we move beyond the natural world and rediscover the social world, not as an object or sum of objects but as a permanent field or dimension of existence. Our relationship to the social, like our relationship to the world, is deeper than any express perception or judgment. It is as false to place ourselves in society as an object among other objects as it is to place society within ourselves as an object of thought. In both cases, the mistake lies in treating the social as an object. In contrast to Sartre, Merleau–Ponty argues that our identity and our behavior are presented in such a fundamental and profound way that we only explicitly become aware of them when our usual interaction with society is disturbed by something that is forced upon us, such as mental illness, and in situations similar to what Jaspers calls *boundary situations* (*Grenzsituationen*), which constantly affect our psychic and physical lives (Jaspers, 1932/1971, vol. II, chapter 7). If we attempt to escape boundary situations by managing them with rationality and objective knowledge, we must necessarily flounder. Instead, boundary situations require a radical change in attitude in one's normal ways of thinking. The proper way to react within boundary situations is, according to Jaspers

not by planning, and calculating to overcome them but by the very different activity of *becoming the Existenz we potentially are*; we become ourselves by entering with open eyes into the boundary situations. We can know them only externally, and their reality can only be felt by *Existenz*. To experience boundary situations is the same as *Existenz*. (1932/1971, p. 179, italics in the original)

---

<sup>2</sup>By placing the body consciousness before the mind consciousness, Merleau–Ponty approaches radical behaviorism, which asserts that the human psyche cannot be examined and, thus, that only external and visible behavior remains as the subject of science. Merleau–Ponty himself was aware of the similarity between his work and behaviorism. In *La Structure du Comportement* [*The Structure of Behavior* (1942/2011)], Merleau–Ponty claims that behaviorism and Pavlov's reflexology misinterpreted existence by understanding it in response to stimuli, analogous with the mechanistic cause–effect relationships between objects; see chapter II. "Higher form of Behavior" (pp. 52–128).

In *La Structure du Comportement* [*The Structure of Behavior* (1942/2011)], Merleau-Ponty suggests that we can find in the disintegrated consciousness an illustration of the mind–behavior parallelism in which conscious states run parallel to isolated bodily occurrences. In such a sickness, this isolated body may causally affect our perception so that what I perceive may serve as a subjective veil between me and the real things around me in society. However, the mind and the body of the integrated person are not allowed to disintegrate in this way. This person’s body does not act as a separate cause to introduce distortions into his perceptions. A disintegrated self-consciousness may be parallel to an isolated cycle of physical events, but true consciousness is parallel to society and can hardly be explained logically or by scientific concepts (p. 224).

Like Sartre, Merleau-Ponty’s anti-deterministic view opposes Freud’s attempts to diminish the human psyche into mere sexual desire. He does not believe that anything in the human psyche can be reduced to standardized or logical categories. We always exist within the world, or in *situations*. Referring to Freud’s psychoanalysis, Merleau-Ponty suggests, “there is no explanation of sexuality which reduces it to anything other than itself, for it is already something other than itself, and indeed, if we like, our whole being.” (1945/2002, p. 198)

#### *Foucault’s 1954 View on Body, Meaning, and Social Behavior*

In significant contrast to his later works and to contemporary existentialist thought, in *Maladie Mentale et Personnalité* (1954),<sup>3</sup> Foucault approaches the self by distinguishing between what one can scientifically explain — that is, our physically observable body — and what one cannot scientifically explain — our minds and our inner psychological feelings and perceptions. He presents two approaches to the social self and the mind–body–behavior relationship: a phenomenological, interpretative, non-scientific approach and an explanatory, scientific, neurological approach.

In the first part of *Maladie Mentale et Personnalité*, using the phenomenological first-person perspective, Foucault refers to phenomenological psychiatrists such as Binswanger, Kuhn, Séchehaye, and Minkowski to offer examples of a self-consciousness that would seem unrecognizable for most people but that has become real for the mentally ill person. This self-consciousness is, according to Foucault, effected by the fact that the body often ceases to be a point of reference against the opportunities in the world (“*Le corps cesse alors d’être ce centre de référence autour duquel les chemins du monde ouvrent leurs possibilités*”) [1954, p. 65]. The body becomes unrecognizable to consciousness because its impulses stem from a mysterious exteriority. Foucault refers to one of Minkowski’s patients, who describes how he experiences his body as a body hard as wood, as a body hard

---

<sup>3</sup>This edition is not translated into English. All translations are mine.

as brick, a body black as water, where the teeth are perceived as ends in a drawer made of hard oak tree (p. 66) Occasionally, according to Foucault, we see that full body awareness (that is, the awareness of a physical body in time and space) disappears to the extent that one ultimately has only an awareness of a disembodied life and an unrealistic idea of an immortal existence.

In the fifth and final chapter of *Maladie Mentale et Personnalité*, “*La Psychologie du Conflit*” (“Conflict Psychology”), Foucault uses examples from Pavlov (pp. 91–102) to turn away from his earlier phenomenological view and to offer an explanatory, neurologic, socio-cultural approach to the self and the mind–behavior relationship. Foucault suggests that the consequence of mental illness and alienation is that the bodily nervous system, in “natural” and bioneurological ways, transforms sociocultural conflicts and historical development (the present historical condition) into inner personal life histories, which he believes can lead to paradoxical defense reactions. Foucault emphasizes that Pavlov’s most important contribution to psychology was his study of how external stimuli and environmental conditions can trigger internal anxiety reactions and schizophrenic experiences of self.

Because Pavlov’s research showed that the nervous system as a whole normally manages to balance environmental impacts, Foucault’s concern is directed toward how these seemingly normal nerve functions can be the cause of pathological activities (1954, p. 94). If a person’s central nervous system is subjected to a strong activation (*excitation*), such as violent agitation, Foucault suggests that this will inductively be followed by an inhibitory defense reaction (*inhibition*), followed by a blocking and a corresponding strengthening of the nerve cells’ excitation and inhibition. In normal cases, this reaction will inductively lead to the reduction and eventual cessation of the process. For the mentally ill person, however, the process will only continue in an ongoing cycle. Foucault suggests that in these cases, one can release emotional stress through an organic lobotomy, but he believes that this does not change the patient’s interior work (p. 108). As psychoanalysts do, one can also address a current conflict by appealing to subtle instincts and past events. However, according to Foucault,

When we know that the disease always refers to a dialectical conflict situation, there will be both efficient and functional treatment that takes place in this particular situation. (*Et d’un autre côté, puisque la maladie se réfère toujours à une dialectique conflictuelle d’une situation, la thérapeutique ne peut prendre son sens et son efficacité que dans cette situation.*) [pp. 108–109]

He asks,

If the subjectivity of insanity is both a call to and an abandonment of the society, is it not the society itself we should ask the secret of its enigmatic status? (*Si cette subjectivité de l’insensé est, en même temps, vocation et abandon au monde, n’est-ce pas au monde lui-même qu’il faut demander le secret de cette subjectivité énigmatique?*) [p. 69]

By asking this question and by turning his attention to the external social environment, Foucault turns away from Husserlian and phenomenological inward analysis. With reference to the mentally ill person's difficulty with social affiliation and dialogue, he suggests that a whole social evolution was required before dialogue could become a mode of human interaction (pp. 27–28). This evolution was made possible only by a transition from a society immobile in its hierarchy of moment, which authorized only order, to a society in which the equality of relations enabled and ensured potential exchange, fidelity to the past, engagement in the future, and reciprocity of points of view. Foucault asserts that the patient who is incapable of dialogue regresses through this social evolution; dialogue, as the supreme form of the evolution of language, is replaced by a sort of monologue (p. 28). By losing the ambiguous potentiality of dialogue, the patient loses mastery over his symbolic world and the ensemble of words, signs, and rituals — in short, all that is allusive and referential in the human world. Seeing Foucault's concept of evolution in light of Hegel's master–slave dialectic, the mentally ill person or the person with social fear will, thanks to modern social and democratic developments, both confirm and increase his status as a slave in relation to other more adaptively social individuals.

Like most of his contemporaries, Foucault criticizes Freud's psychoanalysis for camouflaging the unique expression of illness and what he believes to be the authentic and existential dream language, or "dream meaning." He wants to free the analysis of pathological regression from the myth that mental illness is related to a certain psychological meaning (such as Freud's libido), which is seen as the raw material of evolution and which, progressing in the course of individual and social development, is subject to relapses and can revert, through illness, to an earlier state. According to Foucault, we must accept the specificity of the morbid (archaic-like) personality as strictly original. Therefore, the analysis must be conducted further, and this evolving, potential, and structural dimension of mental illness must be completed by the analysis of the dimension that makes it necessary, meaningful, and historical (p. 35).

In his introduction to the 1954 French edition of Binswanger's essay "Traum und Existenz," Foucault (1954/2001) suggests that the essential function of dream analysis is less to revive the past than to make declarations about the future. Such an analysis anticipates and announces the moment at which the patient will finally reveal the secret that she does not yet know and that is nonetheless the heaviest burden of her present. The dream anticipates the moment of liberation to come. It is a prefiguring of history even more than it is an obligatory repetition of the traumatic past. According to Foucault, man has known since antiquity that in dreams, man encounters what he is and what he will be, what he has done and what he is going to *do*, discovering there the knot that ties his freedom to the necessity of the world (1954/2001, p. 113). He criticizes Sartre, who, like Hegel, distinguishes imagination from reality.

According to Foucault, to become totally free from social battles and social restrictions, we must recognize that our imaginative life is as real as our “lived” life (pp. 138–139).

*French Postwar Thinking of the Development of the Self in Society*

With regard to French postwar thought on the development of the self in society and its relation to body, meaning, and social behavior, like Hyppolite, Foucault thinks that modern intersubjective forms of cohabitation have caused considerable interaction challenges for the development of the self in general and for social behavior specifically. With regard to mental illness and antisocial states, dialectical recognition may not be the central issue because life becomes synonymous with anxiety, fear, and distress. In the same manner as Hyppolite, Foucault's notion in *Maladie Mentale et Personnalité* seems to be that the social alienation of the self means that one can never match oneself. The development of the self in society becomes, in contrast to Hegel's view, inadequate, incomplete, and out of sync with the objects of truth.

Because the subject always fails in its endeavor to become whole and united, the basis of self remains, as Hyppolite (1946/1974, p. 191) describes it, always an unhappy consciousness. The development of history is, from this perspective, not rational and liberating, as Hegel and (in many ways) Marx would argue; rather, it is irrational and oppressive because it locks man into specific positions of interaction and patterns of behavior that prevent him from playing out his personal and existential expressions and imaginations. Foucault seems to believe that this type of social anxiety occupies the behavior of the person with mental illness to such an extent that he stops communicating with other people. By withdrawing from all social intercourse, a person with mental illness escapes not only from himself but also from the other's gaze, with the result that he makes his situation even worse by ensuring that the people around him perceive him as an alien (a slave) in his own universe.

In the same vein, although he does not share Foucault's dual methodological approach to the self (that is, a subjective phenomenological focus on the mind and a reflexological and socio-cultural focus on the body), Sartre explains the alienated self by dividing self-consciousness into three parts, the body as being-for-itself, the body as being-for-others, and the body as an ontological dimension: “My awareness of being an object for others means that I also exist for myself as body known by the others” (1943/2003, p. 375). According to Sartre, the self can only be released from the burden of being the object of the other's gaze and judgment by imagining a freedom and an identity in which everything says “I,” fully incorporated in a quasi-world. Opposed to this view, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault (in his introduction to “Traum und Existenz”) seem to believe this “quasi-world” is connected to reality itself. The self — that

is, the mind, behavior, and surroundings — constitute, in this case, an internal relation structure in which they mutually refer to each other.

Like Foucault, Merleau–Ponty’s notion is that our imaginations, movements, dreams, and language represent the situation itself — nothing unreal. For Merleau–Ponty, as for Foucault, one cannot create a scientific method that can study the life of signs within society. Rather, Merleau–Ponty suggests that our existential signs cannot be reduced to a set of facts that are capable of being reduced to others or to which they can reduce themselves. There can be no objective science of subjectivity. We are all that we are on the basis of a *de facto* situation that we appropriate for ourselves and that is ceaselessly transformed by a sort of escape that can never be an unconditioned freedom.

Merleau–Ponty’s holistic notion is that one cannot understand the development of the self in society by using different views and methods to understand and explain the mind and body separately, as Foucault did in *Maladie Mentale et Personnalité*. For Merleau–Ponty the self will not be experienced as a self if one divides it into separate parts because I am my mind and my behavior; my mind and behavior are the center of the world in which the self exists and cooperates with other selves. From this perspective, one cannot speak of a socially alienated self or assert that the development of an absolute self is forever deferred because the self is always absolute in relation to itself and others, even with regard to illness.

Unlike Hyppolite’s concept of the self as an unhistorical actor, Foucault, Sartre, and Merleau–Ponty demonstrate that the self is always in a specific historical and cultural setting searching for subjective and collective meanings. According to these authors, intersubjective social relations involve a historical, physical, and bodily connection that is crucial for understanding ourselves in relation to others. For Foucault and Sartre, the social self seems to be both psychologically and physically active and influential, alienated, and restricted. Because the natural and social self will always resist becoming an object of its surroundings, the self will always strive for development and integration with the world of the other. In this vein, because we cannot escape the judgment of others if we want to become real (cf. Sartre), we shape an illusion of invulnerability. Merleau–Ponty and Foucault claim that this imagination is part of being human and life itself.

### References

- Binswanger, L. (1930). *Traum und Existenz*. Zürich: Girsberger.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Subjects of desire: Hegelian reflections in twentieth-century France*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Canguilhem, G. (1948–1949). Hegel en France. *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses*, 28–29, 282–297.
- De Waelhens, A. (1958). *Existence et signification*. Louvain Paris: Nauwelaerts.
- Foucault, M. (1954). *Maladie mentale et personnalité*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.



- Foucault, M. (2001). Introduction. L. Binswanger, *Le Rêve et l'Existence*. In D. Defert, F. Ewald, and J. Lagrange (Eds.), *Dits et écrits I, 1954–1976* (pp. 93–147). Paris: Gallimard. (originally published 1954)
- Freud, S. (1922). *Beyond the pleasure principle* [C.J.M. Hubback, Trans., second edition]. Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical Press.
- Frie, R. (1997). *Subjectivity and intersubjectivity in modern philosophy and psychoanalysis: A study of Sartre, Binswanger, Lacan, and Habermas*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (2003). *Philosophy of mind* [W. Wallace and A. V. Miller, Trans.]. In *Encyclopaedia of the philosophical sciences, part three* [reprinted edition.]. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (originally published 1830)
- Hyppolite, J.G. (1946). *Genèse et structure de la "Phénoménologie de l'Esprit" de Hegel*. Paris: Éditions Montaigne.
- Hyppolite, J.G. (1974). *Genesis and structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* [S. Cherniak and J. Heckman, Trans.; J.M. Edie, Ed.]. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (originally published 1946)
- Jaspers, K. (1971). *Philosophy* [E.B. Ashton, Trans.]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (originally published 1932)
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). *Sense and non-sense* [H.L. Dreyfus and P.A. Dreyfus, Trans.; J. Wild, Ed.]. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (originally published 1948)
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of perception* [C. Smith, Trans.]. London: Routledge. (originally published 1945)
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2011). *The structure of behavior* [A.L. Fisher, Trans.]. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. (originally published 1942)
- Sartre, J.-P. (1943). *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1946). *Existentialisme est un humanisme*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2003). *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology* [H.E. Barnes, Trans.]. London: Routledge. (originally published 1943)
- Sartre, J.-P. (2004). *The imaginary: A phenomenological psychology of the imagination* ["Routledge," Trans.]. London: Routledge. (originally published 1940)
- Spiegelberg, H. (1972). *Phenomenology in psychology and psychiatry: A historical introduction*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.