Selves and Personal Existence in the Existentialist Tradition

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The status of the self within the existentialist tradition appears problematic, as one reviews the literature. On one hand, Kierkegaard, who is often regarded as the founding father of the tradition, has one of his pseudonymous authors refer to the self as "the chief thing in life" and "the highest thing, the only thing which truly has significance." On the other hand, Sartre, who is often regarded as the paradigmatic existentialist, is widely interpreted as denying the reality of a self altogether. Among commentators, apparent differences of an equally sharp nature can be found. On the one hand, David Cooper writes, "The Existentialist does not have, and is not interested in having, a concept of the self"; and Robert Solomon, in listing the basic characteristics of phenomenological existentialism, includes "rejection of the self." On the other hand, William Barrett laments the fact that twentieth century existentialists such as Heidegger and Sartre, in sharp contrast to Kierkegaard, have failed to advance theories of "a stable self."

What then, is one to make of such a variety of statements? Do existentialists typically affirm or reject the reality of a self? Are they even interested in the concept? Is there a typical existentialist view at all, or is there radical diversity within the tradition, or perhaps even a sharp division? Are the so-called phenomenological existentialists (such as Sartre) opposed to other existentialists (such as Kierkegaard) on this issue? If so, does the difference stem from the methodology of the former group? Or is the status of the self tied

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to differences of religious outlook? (For instance, does "self" really function as a coded term or buzzword for "soul," such that the real issue at stake is immortality?)

Another matter of confusion is the relationship between selves and personal existence. Is the self the very core of personal existence, the source of modes of behavior that distinguish us from objects and other animals? If so, then denials of a self are tantamount to denials of personal existence itself. But do existentialists—even if they reject the notion of a self—wish to go that far? That question raises a further one as to the relationship of the existentialist tradition (hereafter referred to simply as "the tradition") to postmodernist thought. If existentialists do reject the notion of a self, should they be seen as precursors to the poststructuralists? Does the tradition represent a moderate alternative to the extremes of Cartesianism and postmodernism (and thus serve as a last line of defense against the latter), or should it rather be seen as a slippery slope that leads ineluctably into the latter?

Clearly, there is work here to be done for these are important questions that deserve answers. I shall address many of them explicitly, and others indirectly. My basic approach is to distinguish between entity-based and process-oriented views of personal existence—a move that allows us to discern a great deal of unity within the tradition in place of apparent discord. This thesis concerning unity within the tradition on this matter cannot be substantiated without comment on the views of a number of thinkers within it. Accordingly, I take the following group to be representative (but not exhaustive) of the tradition: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, Ortega y Gasset, Sartre, Marcel, and Merleau-Ponty. What I shall be doing in much of the discussion is simply assembling some reminders as to what each of these philosophers actually did say on our topic. In light of conflicting reports among commentators, this part of the discussion is indispensable. As I do this, however, I am led to address questions concerning the relationship of the so-called phenomenological existentialists (hereafter referred to as PES) to others in the tradition. Also, the discussion brings into focus a significant ambiguity in talk about selves and personal existence.

1. SELVES AND PERSONAL EXISTENCE

The primary thesis of this paper is that much of the confusion about the status of the self within the tradition can be dispelled by distinguishing between entity-oriented views and process-oriented views of personal existence. I argue that existentialists typically reject the former, but affirm (and are much interested in) the latter. When we approach the subject through this perspective, much of the apparent discord noted earlier is effaced. The basic distinction is
suggested by Heidegger’s “Care and Selfhood” section of Being and Time (hereafter BT). Let us briefly review it before moving further.

Heidegger rejects any conception of “a self-thing” (BT 370), as some sort of entity that is simply given. He credits Kant for recognizing the impossibility of reducing the “I” to a substance, and with “making a more rigorous effort to keep hold of the phenomenological content of saying ‘I’” (BT 366). However, in Heidegger’s view Kant fails to penetrate “to the selfhood of the I qua self, and approaches it only as ‘subject’—i.e., the selfsameness... of something that is always present-at-hand” (BT 367). Heidegger seeks to escape from the idea of self as substance or even as “subject,” where either includes the notion of a kind of substratum that serves as a ground for the particular elements of one’s mental life. His shift in terminology, from Selbst to Selbstheit, reflects that move. If Dasein’s essence lies in its existence, he states, then “I-hood and selfhood must be conceived existentially” (BT 365). Accordingly, Heidegger shifts the focus from the possible existence of a self-same substratum to the act of “saying I.” In doing this, he moves from concern with an entity to concern with a process, and emphasizes the active rather than passive nature of selfhood. “Saying I” is something we do—not just a state of affairs we observe.

However, it turns out that “saying I” is not a simple matter, for the I that we all begin with is not as fully ours as it might be; it is the I of das Man. Thus, Heidegger’s analysis of authenticity constitutes the core of his view of selfhood. Selfhood is seen to involve a process of individuation, in which (through anxiety, awareness of death, and “the call of conscience”) a person emerges from the state of being only a “we” into the state of being a distinct “I” as well. Ultimately, then, selfhood is an ongoing process—one of acquiring an identity that one has actively formed rather than passively received. Heidegger’s process view of personal existence reflects his conviction that persons are essentially different than objects. Unlike objects, which apparently can exist passively, persons must achieve their being—at least within the authentic mode.

Heidegger uses the terms “I-hood” or “selfhood” to designate the active process of personal existence—the process wherein a human being becomes more fully an “I,” or a fully individuated person. It is not viciously circular in this context to speak of a human being developing into a person, for the two may be distinguished by reference to development; the former may be seen as achieved at birth (if not before), while the latter may be regarded as requiring further forms of development beyond formation of the body. Or, we might
simply speak of weak and strong senses of personal individuation. Humans are individuated in a weak sense by the fact that they are born into the world as distinct physical beings. For purposes of being identified within society, our individualized physical structure is sufficient (fingerprints, dental records, etc.). All we must do to maintain this rudimentary, physical individuality is to stay alive. However, members of the human race often emphasize that there is more to being a person than simply being a living organism. (In the next section we shall review a variety of suggestions as to what comprises this additional dimension.) Overall, it might be said that while beings who are born with a physical human form are immediately human, they only become fully individuated persons in time, by means of social input and individual initiative—a process that is both relational and durational.

The notion of process fits easily with the idea of an active dimension of our being as persons. The problem with self talk is that it steers us away from process and activity toward the picture of some sort of entity that is simply given, and that has its being all at once (which simply "is what it is," in Sartre's terminology, or "already" has its being, in Ortega's). Merleau-Ponty speaks of, "that epithet, 'subject,' 'mind,' or 'ego,' with which the philosopher wishes to distinguish me absolutely from the things," but which "reintroduces a phantom of reality within me," with the end result that I am after all seen as "a res cogitans—a very particular, elusive, invisible thing, but a thing all the same." At worst, talk of a self merely conceals the living, outwardly visible person into some sort of fixed, immaterial thing, in the vain hope that somehow this inner reproduction of the outer can explain personal activities. At best, it would seem that talk of "a self" or "the self" is superfluous—simply an indirect way of talking about persons. For instance, one says something like, "the self is never satisfied with its lot," when one just as easily could state that "a person is never satisfied..." There is no apparent gain in such self talk, and there is a cost; we have moved needlessly into a realm of abstraction, for we know what persons look like, but not selves. (Thus, it seems, we should always be suspicious about statements in which any form of agency is ascribed to selves. It is persons who choose, will, think, and act in the world, not selves.)

2. THE "OTHER EXISTENTIALISTS"

There are two wings of the tradition, the so-called PEs (Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty), and other existentialist thinkers who did not embrace Husserl's legacy, either because they preceded it or because they found it problematic. To put it this way, to speak of two groups of existentialist philoso-

phers, is to express what might be termed the moderate view. The extreme view is that only members of the first group are existentialists in the fullest sense, or that they are the only existentialists who are philosophers in the fullest sense. For instance, Warnock writes that embracing the phenomenology of Husserl is a necessary condition for being an existentialist philosophers. Zaner and Ilde adopt this line as well: "it was phenomenology which made philosophical existentialism possible." Warnock is willing to refer to members of the non-phenomenological wing as existentialists, but not as philosophers; on the other hand, Zaner and Ilde stop short of classifying Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as full-fledged existentialists. Rather, the latter are seen as "proto-existentialists" and "forerunners of existentialism proper," "precisely because neither had the transcendental method of phenomenology at their disposal."

I reject the extreme view as pernicious and unjustified. Not only does it grossly underplay the brilliant and sometimes unsurpassed contributions of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to the tradition, but it also suggests that twentieth century existentialist thinkers such as Jaspers and Ortega, who were openly critical of Husserl's program, must be regarded as perverse or incompetent, in their unwillingness or inability to make use of it. Moreover, there are enormous problems with the underlying premise of this view, that a rigorous methodology informs the work of Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. A rigorous method should yield similar results in similar cases (otherwise, it is not rigorous), but we shall see that these thinkers are far from being in accord on many subjects they consider. The "other existentialists" considered here deserve to be regarded both as full-fledged existentialists and as philosophers (as evidenced by the influence they have exerted on the other wing). In this section we shall briefly note some of their views on our subject. The unacquainted with their work may be surprised to find that it affords a rich and multi-faceted framework for a process view of personal existence.

Kierkegaard, more than any other thinker in the tradition, tends to speak of "the self," or "a self," as if it were an entity. However, much of this self talk is found in Either/Or, where it is abundantly clear that he is concerned with an on-going process and not a self-thing. The ethical person, as opposed to the

10 Ibid., 22.
11 A different criticism is offered by Cooper: what IS the method that phenomenological existentialists supposedly adopt? After all, he states, they all reject "the two ingredients in Husserl's philosophy which deserve to be called 'methodological'..." Cooper, pp.
12 Kierkegaard, op.cit.
aesthete, is one who is capable of carrying through projects undertaken, standing by vows made, acting in accord with values professed. Such earnest, resolute behavior actually creates the continuity in one’s life that constitutes a person’s identity—one’s “self.” Thus, the self about which Kierkegaard writes is a possible reality that can be gained or never developed, or developed but then lost. Those properties could never be predicated of self-things such as a Platonic soul, a Cartesian thinking substance, or a Husserlian transcendent ego. Self-things such as those are given, independently of individual initiative. They are thus necessary and universal aspects of human reality, Kierkegaard, by contrast, is concerned with possibilities in the realm of freedom, and thus with aspects of human reality that are variable and contingent—but certainly no less important for being so.

The other work of Kierkegaard’s that is permeated with self talk is Sickness unto Death. Here “the self” is analyzed in terms of freedom as an on-going task of synthesis—the need for achieving and constantly maintaining a delicate balance between conflicting aspects of personal existence such as possibility and necessity, infinitude and finitude. It is even more obvious in this discussion that we are not dealing with an entity that is simply given but rather a complex state that is difficult to achieve and sustain. (The relatively stable and enduring entity that is given is, of course, the physically individuated human being—the necessary base for any subsequent process of personal development that may occur.) The fact that the individual is responsible for generating and sustaining this complex state is precisely the basis for Kierkegaard’s passion in proclaiming the task. For individual responsibility carries with it the possibility of failure, and failure in this case is tragic.

Karl Jaspers builds upon this general picture. In Volume Two of his three volume work, Philosophy, he rejects the phrase, “the I” as “an artificial noun” which reflects “our inability to avoid objectifying everything we speak of,” and instead uses the category, “I Myself” (P 16, 27). This move is simple but profound. He is not primarily interested in some formal principle of “I-ness” which—as necessary and universal—would essentially be impersonal. Rather, he is interested in individuated personal existence, and in processes through which each of us can most fully exist as persons. He speaks of our personal mode of existence as Selbstsein, or self-being (P 33-46), and he uses the term “Existenz” to designate the full potential of self-being in its various dimensions (e.g., freedom, unconditional action, and communication).

Although the grammatical form of some of his statements might lead careless readers to think of Erzeint as some sort of entity, Jaspers is most explicit in emphasizing its radically "nonobjective" (as in unobjeect-like) nature. In sharp contrast to our common conception of the mode of being of objects, Erzeint must bring itself into being—it is "self-originating" (P. 17). For "objective thinking," of course, this is unintelligible; it can only appear as "an emergence from nothing" (P. 58–59). But for Jaspers there is a difference of kind between our mode of being as Erzeint and the being of physical things (including our own bodies): "Objective reality is what corresponds to our perception at large; existential reality is unconditionality at the decisive moment" (P. 17). Moreover, for Jaspers Erzeint not only must bring itself forth (through acts of volition and communication), but its being is not secure even after it has once been achieved. Unlike the tendency to endure that objects appear to possess, the being of Erzeint is always precarious, always faced with the possibility of non-being.

It is thus not my existence that is Erzeint; but, being human, I am possible Erzeint in existence. I exist or I do not exist, but my Erzeint as a possibility, takes a step toward being or away from being... in every choice or decision I make (P. 4).

Jaspers discusses in detail the various components of the highly developed state that we terms Erzeint, including communication, historicity, being unconditional, and the experience of boundary situations (P. 17–292). All of these aspects of Erzeint are to some extent developmental; that is, they are not given, but rather depend upon abilities and attitudes that may be developed over time. Again, it may be noted that there is nothing circular in the basic idea of individuals developing into what Jaspers terms Erzeint. Individual human beings are a given, the event of being born as a member of the species is sufficient to bestow that status. But in Jaspers' view "individuality as such is not Erzeint" (P. 6), for the latter involves much more than being physically distinct.

On the subject of personal existence, there are striking parallels between Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel. In his essay, "The Ego and Its Relation to Others" (hereafter EO), Marcel writes that while a "pre-existent ego can only be postulated," what is needed is "to give a careful account of the act which establishes what I call myself..." (EO 14). He finds that "I establish myself as a person insofar as I assume responsibility for my acts," and "insofar as I really believe in the existence of others and allow this belief to influence my conduct" (EO 22). These are processes through which "I produce myself," and create a "presence," which is essentially different from the being of objects (EO 15). "Presence denotes something rather different and more comprehensive than..."
the fact of just being there; to be quite exact one should not actually say that an object is present" (EO 15). Even one’s presence to oneself "is not a fact which we can take for granted," for "it is liable to be eclipsed and must constantly be reconquered." 16

Marcel is not interested in some self-thing which precedes our choices and behavior and makes us what we are. Rather, he states, "the personality is not to be conceived of apart from the act by which it creates itself," and "the personality cannot in any way be compared to an object of which we can say it is there, in other words, that it is given . . ." (EO 25). "Participation" is the term Marcel uses to signify this active dimension of personal existence. One does not fully exist as a person by remaining in the observer mode. One must "put oneself forth," in acts of disposability and fidelity. Such acts are creative in the strictest sense, for they bring into being a reality (I myself) that otherwise would not be. It seems quite apparent, then, that both Marcel and Jaspers emphasize our active participation in a process of personal development rather than our passive possession of a self-thing.

José Ortega y Gasset is another thinker in the tradition who sometimes speaks of "the self," but it is clear that he too has a process and not an entity in mind. In his essay "Man the Technician" (hereafter MT), he identifies the self with a person's fundamental project. Speaking of "an aspiration, a project of life," he states, "this we feel to be our true being; we call it our personality, our self," and he adds that "each man's self . . . is nothing but this devised program" (MT 111–112). Humanity's mode of being is radically different from that of all things, for the essential feature of the latter is already to be whatever they are (MT 113). By contrast, "man begins by being something that has no reality . . . he is a project as such, something which is not yet but aspires to be" (MT 112).

Here again we find an emphasis on the active nature of human reality, in contrast to the relatively passive nature of anything we regard as an object. To emphasize his point as strongly as possible, Ortega states that he is neither a body nor a soul, insofar as either is regarded as thing-like:

I am not my body . . . Neither am I my soul . . . Body and soul are things, but I am a drama, if anything, an unending struggle to be what I have to be. The aspiration or program I am, impresses its particular profile on the world about me, and that world reacts to this impress . . . (MT 113).

Furthermore, there is nothing automatic or inevitable about the process—nothing to guarantee its successful realization. Indeed, in sharp opposition to

16Gabriel Marcel, "Obstinance and Fidelity," in Homo Utens, ed. et al., 132.
the Cartesian view that humans are essentially thinking beings, Ortega states that thought itself is not a secure characteristic of humanity, but rather is "always in danger of being lost." Thus, "being man signifies precisely being always on the point of not being man, being a living problem, an absolute and hazardous adventure, or . . . drama!" He finds this "dramatic" characteristic of humanity in general to be present at the individual level as well:

...at times what happens to man is nothing less than ceasing to be man. And this . . . holds of our own individuality. Each one of us is always in danger of not being the unique and untransferable self which he is. The majority of men perpetually betray this self . . . and to tell the whole truth, our personal individuality is a personage which is never completely realized . . .

For Ortega, self is our aspiration, the most comprehensive plan of action we are able to form by periodically refraining from the immediate, reactive state he terms altercation; from that perspective, it makes sense to assert that such a self may never be formed, is often betrayed, and in any case is never actualized as fully as it might be.

In this section I have surveyed attempts by various members of the tradition to distinguish personal existence from object-like being, including selves-things such as egos, minds (conceived as thinking things), and souls. These thinkers view personal existence as a process, and moreover as one that does not obtain automatically, but only through the active participation of the individual. For that reason, it may fail. For each thinker, personal existence involves abilities of various sorts—"saying I" with a voice of one's own rather than that of das Man (Heidegger), resolute behavior transcending immediacy (Kierkegaard), unreserved communication (Jaspers), "disposability" to others (Marcel), transcending altercation to conceive and implement plans of action (Ortega). To the extent that these abilities fail to be actualized, personal existence does not obtain; instead, we are faced with human beings who are individuated only in the weak sense (i.e., as distinct physical bodies), but not with persons in the fullest sense.

I use the term "personal existence" rather than "person" throughout this discussion, because of the common tendency to regard a person as a thing (even if different from most other things). From the perspective of the thinkers considered here, a person is of course partly a thing—a living body—but also something else. However, this "something else" is not a ghostly inner entity that directs our personal activities, but rather the entire set of abilities

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19 Ibid., 25.
that underlie those activities and make them possible. (Here we may take Ryle’s logical behaviorism as our model: in his analysis the term “mind” does not designate an entity—a thinking organ—but rather a set of abilities, such as the ability to use language and to calculate. In this discussion I am, in effect, extending his analysis beyond the meaning of “mind” to the meaning of “person.”) The development and manifestation of abilities is of course a process, not an entity. The term “personal existence” is used with the hope that it may serve to counter our natural tendency to objectify that of which we speak, and thus to regard persons as things.

Before considering other existentialist views, we might pause to consider some implications of the preceding views for the question of the overall relation of the tradition to postmodernist thought. (I return to this question in the final section.) The views just discussed exhibit a major difference from those of postmodernists, insofar as the former are essentialist in nature. That is, the existentialists discussed thus far tend to regard certain orientations and abilities (e.g., resoluteness, reflection, and genuine communication) as necessary conditions for being a person in the fullest sense; and any such talk does commit one to some form of essentialism. These analyses, then, are essentially transcultural and ahistorical: they are intended to apply to all persons at all times. For postmodernists, by contrast, the very categories of individuality and subjectivity may even be seen as relative to times and places.

3. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXISTENTIALISTS

I have tried to indicate some ways in which the non-Pe’s have contributed to our understanding of personal existence as a developmental process, and of course I have leaned heavily upon Heidegger (a prominent member of the phenomenological wing) as well. Matters are somewhat different with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. As I see it, Sartre actually offers us several views, beginning with one that is at odds with the other analyses considered thus far. By contrast, as a sharp critic of Sartre’s notion of “being for-itself,” Merleau-Ponty does emphasize the individuated, personal nature of human reality. However, his concern is more with necessary and universal features of personal existence than with those depending upon the effort and initiative of the individual, and so his work too is not so easily grouped with that of the others.

Since Sartre is so widely taken as the most representative thinker of the tradition—and because I deem his early views on our topic to be the least representative—I have found it necessary to give him the most attention. The task is difficult, because I aspire to do justice to the complexity of his views, but without allowing the length of my account to destroy the balance of the discussion as a whole. We may distinguish between the early, extreme view of The
Transcendence of the Ego\(^2\) (hereafter \(TE\)), the greatly modified (but still negative) view of \textit{Being and Nothingness}\(^3\) (hereafter \(BN\)), and the very different view that is at least implicit in the \textit{Notebooks}\(^4\) and in later writings. (For the sake of brevity, I shall henceforth speak of the early, middle, and later Sartre to refer to the positions found in these works.) I trace a progression in these writings, from a framework that is vaguely hostile to the very notion of personal existence, to one more in line with other views in the tradition.

The thrust of the analysis in \(TE\) is as follows: the ego appears to reflect consciousness as both the source and the ideal unity of the various aspects of our mental life (\(TE\) 61, 77). It is both given to, and construed by, the consciousness that apprehends it (\(TE\) 80–81). In that sense, it may indeed be considered to be “real”—at the phenomenological level. However, this phenomenological self appears only within “impure reflection,” which is a mode of interpretation of experience that goes beyond what is strictly presented (\(TE\) 63, 64). For “pure reflection,” the ego is found to be neither a source nor a unifying element for the contents of consciousness. It is in actuality a bad faith construct, projected to mask the radically spontaneous and autonomous nature of unreflective consciousness, and thereby to create the illusion of control over a process that is essentially “beyond freedom” (\(TE\) 100). Moreover, it is not only a dishonest and cowardly conception, but also a “profoundly irrational one,” as a sort of object-like being that nevertheless is responsible for the most active aspects of consciousness (\(TE\) 80–81).

Sartre is doing something more radical here than attacking the tendency to reduce a person to a thing (in the form of an ego), for he identifies the idea of an ego with the very notions of “the I” and “the me.” Since “the I, with its personality, would be a sort of center of opacity,” the overall question for Sartre is nothing less than “whether personality is a necessary accompaniment of consciousness” (\(TE\) 37; emphasis mine). His conclusion is that “absolute consciousness, when it is purified of the \(I\), no longer has anything of the subject (\(TE\) 106). Sartre’s radical agenda, then, is to show that consciousness is essen-

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\(^5\) My understanding of what I term “the later Sartre” is heavily indebted to Thomas C. Anderson’s fine study, \textit{Sartre’s Two Ethics} (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1993). However, my three-fold classification does not correspond with his treatment of Sartre’s three critics (despite the title) at all. Indeed, my “later Sartre” still falls within “the first ethics” discussed by Anderson.
tially an impersonal, spontaneous upsurge, and thus that the very notion of personal existence—the being of an "I" or personality—is at best derivative and secondary. This reading is supported by Sartre's attempt to account for the unity and individuation of consciousness in impersonal rather than personal terms. That is, rather than linking the unity and individuation of consciousness to physically embodied persons, Sartre seeks instead to account for these characteristics in terms of the nature of consciousness itself, along with its objects (TE 37–40). Overall, we are left with at least a suggestion that the very notion of personal existence is dispensable, and that it is tied to a confused, if not dishonest, mode of consciousness.

However, in BN Sartre has quite moved away from the claim that consciousness is essentially impersonal in nature. He now states that, "The concrete consciousness arises in situation, and it is a unique, individualized consciousness of this situation and (of) itself in situation" (BN 141), and situation includes "my place, my body, my past, and my position" (BN 629). Moreover, Sartre not only implies the personal nature of consciousness, but explicitly analyzes it in terms of two "immediate structures of the for-itself": "presence to self" and "the circuit of selfness." The former is a "relation between the subject and himself," a presence involving a duality which is at the same time a unity—but a unity that does not pass into a pure identity (BN 123–124). It is thus a "perpetually unstable equilibrium," a "perpetually evanescent relation" (BN 124, 140). The second aspect of consciousness as personal involves not presence, but absence: "what one is in the form of lack constitutes selfness or the second aspect of the person" (BN 157). This, termed "the circuit of selfness," is "the relation of the for-itself with the possible which it is," and the latter is what the for-itself lacks, in order to be itself (BN 155). That conception merges with Sartre's notion of value, which allows him to state, "the being of the self . . . is value," and "value is the self insofar as the self haunts the heart of the for-itself" (BN 143, 144).

The detailed nature of Sartre's analysis may obscure some radical shifts in his thinking. First, rather than associating personal consciousness with the presence of an ego, he now writes: "the ego is far from being the personalizing pole of consciousness, without which it would remain in the impersonal stage," and "what confers personal existence on a being is not the possession of an Ego—which is only the ego of the personality—but it is the fact that the being exists for itself as a presence to itself" (BN 155, 157). In other words, the earlier treatment of personal existence in TE has been superseded by his analysis of "presence to self" and "selfness." Moreover, Sartre has moved sharply away from viewing consciousness as temporally atomistic. In TE he refers to "the instantaneousness of consciousness," and writes that "each instant of our conscious life reveals to us a creation in nihilo . . ." (TE 63, 98–99).
However, in *BN* he states, "the being of the cogito... has been transcended toward value and possibilities," and so "we have not been able to keep it within the substantial limits of the instantaneous of the Cartesian cogito" (*BN* 158).

Together, these two adjustments in Sartre's outlook amount to a change from thinking of personal existence in terms of a self-things, which he (virtually) denied, to thinking in terms of a self-process, which he affirmed. He has quietly moved on to a conception of a self-process—*ipsaritie*—as an "infinite movement" and an "unstable equilibrium" on one hand, and as a never-ending quest for the absent/present supreme value of consciousness, on the other. However, this conception of personal existence remains under the dominance of a negative theme: the necessary but futile "desire to be God." *Ipsaritie* essentially involves the pursuit of value, which is ultimately tied to the quest of consciousness for a more stable form of being. Ultimately, this hunger of consciousness for the impossible ideal of the in itself for itself is seen not only as dominating human experience, but even as informing the very structure of consciousness.

The picture of our situation presented in *BN* is probably the one that is most widely known: human reality is essentially consciousness, which is itself both radical freedom and (thus) a "nothingness"—except for its one essential feature, "the desire to be God." However, over time Sartre actually abandoned each of these points, just as he had discarded the earlier view of *TE*. In the *Notebooks*, "the desire to be God" is no longer viewed as necessary and universal. This basic orientation, so central and pervasive in *BN*, can be transcended by enlightened individuals—a process Sartre terms "conversion." Conversion allows us to escape the necessary conflictual relationship with the Other that Sartre had emphasized, and permits even the possibility of "authentic love," in which we "rejoice" in the Other's being and seek to shelter it. More generally, the possibility of conversion means that humanity is no longer condemned to a futile pursuit; it is now truly free to develop as best it can, without the metaphysical burden it had been forced to carry. In later work, the goal of human action is "integral humanity" or "human plenitude," and its achievement or failure is not predetermined.

Even greater changes follow. An older Sartre reported that he found his earlier views on absolute freedom to be incredible. Moreover, by the time of

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1 See Anderson's discussion of this *op. cit.* 52–54, 57–58.
3 Anderson, 115–117; there Anderson also quotes Sartre (in his Home lecture, and in his last interview, with Benny Levy) as speaking of "the fully alive human organism" and "complete human beings."
his study of Flaubert he found it useful to replace the very category of consciousness with that of "lived experience." The latter category, he stated, marks a change from the "rationalist philosophy of consciousness" found in BN toward the notion of a process that is "obscure to itself," insofar as it involves "a constant totalization... which cannot be conscious of what it is." And (in accord with the shift from consciousness to lived experience), Sartre finally seems to appreciate fully the physical, embodied nature of human existence. While BN abounds with statements about human reality as "Being-for-itself," in his Critique of Dialectical Reason he states that there is no such thing as man—only people—and so the true dialectic "must proceed from individuals and not from some kind of supra-individual ensemble," and "praxis presupposes a material agent" (the organic individual). With these changes, the move away from the early view of human reality as grounded in a purely impersonal, spontaneous consciousness—which somehow individuates and unifies itself—is complete. Humans are now seen as material beings, struggling against various forces (e.g., "the praxico-inert"); and not as being lived by an impersonal spontaneity that is "beyond freedom" (as in TE), or by a consciousness with its own agenda (as in the unavoidable drive to realize the in-itself-for-itself, in BN). In his later outlook, then, Sartre finally arrives at a framework that allows for the on-going development of physically individuated beings into persons in the fullest sense. In doing so, and in repudiating his own, earlier views, Sartre finally joins others in the tradition.

Given the fact that ultimately Sartre himself could not accept his early and middle views, it is hardly surprising that so many others felt the same way, and sought to disassociate their thought from his. This includes Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Much of the latter's work can be seen as a critical response to Sartre's tendency to identify human reality with "being-for-itself." As reminders of this, I shall simply mention two relevant points in The Phenomenology of Perception: (henceforth PP): the primacy of existence over thought in personal existence, and the lack of "transparency" in consciousness. The first is expressed in his contrast between the "merely verbal" formulation of Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," and what he terms "the tacit cogito." "Behind the spoken cogito," he writes, "there lies a tacit cogito, myself experienced by myself," and this "presence of oneself to oneself, being no less than existence, is anterior to any philosophy..." (PP 403, 404). Thus, "it

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2 Ibid., 31.
is not the "I am" which is pre-eminently contained in the "I think", nor my existence which is brought down to the consciousness which I have of it, but conversely the "I think" which is re-intergrated into the transcending process of the "I am", and consciousness into existence" (PP 383).

The second point is closely tied to the first. The early and middle Sartre identifies human reality with consciousness, which is regarded as thoroughly "translucent": "a consciousness ignorant of itself" would be an unconscious, which constitutes an absurdity (BN 11). By contrast, Merleau-Ponty states that at the very heart of our deliberate mental life we find "not the absolute transparency of thought wholly in possession of itself, but the blind act by which I take up my destiny as a thinking nature and follow it out" (PP 374). The thinking process is, from start to finish, a fundamentally obscure operation—as regards both its genesis and its significance (PP 393). Thus, our embodied and individualised existence precedes our consciousness, and thought is as much a personal activity as any other project we undertake. Within this framework the idea of lucid consciousness is replaced by the always incomplete and ambiguous awareness of individuals in their interactions with their surroundings. Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty writes, "even a philosopher's thought is merely his way of making explicit his hold on the world, and what he is" (PP 155).

In these ways, among others, Merleau-Ponty gives due recognition to the personal dimension of human being. However, what we do not find in his work is an emphasis on the developmental aspects of personal existence—ways in which we may fail to become persons in the fullest sense, or succeed in varying degrees. As one commentator puts it, although Merleau-Ponty acknowledges both the pre-personal and personal levels of experience, it is the former (the body-subject in relation to the world) that absorbs his interest. She concludes that while his thought "is insufficient for the development of a philosophy of the person . . . it is his merit to have done the ground-work for such a development." 38

We have already considered Heidegger, of course: it was his distinction between personal existence as a (given) self-thing and as an active process (that can be achieved to varying degrees) that served as our starting point. - The

39 Space does not permit a discussion of the later Heidegger as well, but I would like to caution against the assumption that after his "turn" he was indifferent, if not hostile, to the idea of personal existence. That the point is at least debatable should be obvious from the fact that the Heidegger scholar David Farrell Krell could write: "If there were a dramatic turn of this sort . . . it would be a turn, not from man to Being, but from the neutral designation Die see to homo-humans, in der Affekt, die Sich-lieben; in other words, a turn from Being to Man. Intimations of Mortality (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 49.
separation of Heidegger from Sartre and Merleau-Ponty was a strategic move, designed as a first step toward undermining the widespread tendency to isolate the three PEs as qualitatively different from the others. I have emphasized continuity between Heidegger and the other existentialists, as well as discontinuity among the PEs (and within Sartre's own writings), as a way of exposing deficiencies in the methodology view (mentioned earlier). However, I have done so in an attempt to elicit appreciation of a greater continuity within the tradition as a whole.

According to the methodology view, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty had access to 'the transcendental method of phenomenology,' lacking which the other existentialists were qualitatively inferior (either not full-fledged existentialists, or not philosophers). Husserl, of course, envisioned the method he advocated as "rigorous," meaning presumably that it would yield the same results to all who used it; otherwise, it could hardly serve as the necessary basis for securing philosophy as Wissenschaft. The methodology view, then, naturally leads toward the presumption that the PEs essentially speak with one voice on matters of significance they have all considered. For if they disagree, but their thinking is directly tied to use of a common method (as adherents of this view contend), then the conclusion seems unavoidable that the method leads those who use it to different results, and so cannot be regarded as rigorous. And, in the absence of rigor, it is hard to see why the method would be so important.

Although it may not be immediately apparent, the methodology view leads away from the perspective offered here, by highlighting Sartre's early views on personal existence in TE. The reason is this: if the PEs have access to a rigorous method, such that the results of their thinking are compatible, and such that their work is superior to that of other existentialists, then TE emerges as the paradigmatic text on the topic of selves and personal existence, because it is the most explicit and sustained discussion of that subject within the tradition. Given the presumption of unity inherent in the methodology view, there is no clear reason to deny TE a preeminent position in assessing the existentialist outlook on our topic. By contrast, I have attempted to show that TE actually affords the least representative view. Sartre himself moved away from it, and other members of the tradition never held it—except for its simple, negative feature, criticism of the self as ego. It is of course true to affirm that much as the typical existentialist view, but it tells us very little (as the following section will indicate).

Before closing, I wish to clarify what may appear inconsistent—my repeated reference to two sorts of existentialist thinkers (PEs and non-PEs) in conjunction with my attempt to discredit their rigid separation in the methodology view. As stated earlier, recognition of two wings of the tradition repre-
seeks a broader, more tolerant view, in opposition to those who would rather equate existentialism (or "philosophical existentialism") with the work of the PEs. (It is often proponents of the latter view who would rather not speak of two groups of existentialist thinkers.) Moreover, there does seem to be some sort of difference between those who are regarded as PEs and the others. For both these reasons, talk of two wings of the tradition seems reasonable. However, I would argue that what distinguishes the two groups is not a difference of methodological procedure (resulting in a qualitative difference in their work), but rather a difference of interest and emphasis: the PEs display greater interest in necessary, universal features of human reality, while the non-PEs tend to emphasize contingent, variable ones. But this is a matter of degree, not a difference of kind; this point does not warrant the conclusion that the two groups employ qualitatively different approaches, or that the work of one group is philosophically (or existentially) superior to that of the other.

4. Nietzsche, and the Ambiguous Denial of Selves
In this closing section I address two topics rather than one, but the first shades into the second. Nietzsche poses difficulties similar to those posed by Sartre for my discussion (multiple views, some of which seem contrary to my thesis, and the problem of doing justice to the complexity of his thinking in a very brief space). Overall, my strategy is this: I simply acknowledge the many sides of Nietzsche's thought, thereby declining the burden of explaining away all passages which seem to contradict my view. Having done that, it seems incumbent upon me only to indicate that one side of Nietzsche involves a concern with personal existence and its flourishing. And that much, of course, is easy. But I hope to use the opportunity to introduce some readers to one of Nietzsche's less visible (at present) writings, and also to motivate interest in the final part of the discussion. That there are many sides of Nietzsche should, at this point, be beyond dispute. In the words of one writer, "... any new Nietzsche must engage directly with the incommensurability of interpretations," for "the face of the new Nietzsche is to be a field of implacably opposed and mutually exclusive interpretations which are nevertheless gathered under a single name, ..." Of course, postmodernist readings of Nietzsche are presently in vogue. (Abandoning the attempt to find "the one true Nietzsche" is itself a bow to their influence. In return, I ask only that postmodernists allow other readings, and not insist upon their Nietzsche as the real one.) Thus, I realize fully how out of step with the times it is to point to the personalistic Nietzsche, but

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*Barrett notes this difference in his discussion of "The Two Existentialisms," but (following Heidegger and using the "ontological" distinction) he presents it as more than a matter of interest and emphasis. See What is Existentialism?, 152–158, 162–168.*
there it is—undeniable, if unzeitgemäß. Here I allude to the little essay bearing Schopenhauer's name, and its plethora of anti-postmodernist themes (rendering it even more untimely now than when it was published).

"Schopenhauer as Educator" [hereafter SE] is a sustained reflection on the nature of culture, which Nietzsche finds to be nothing more or less than the production of true human beings (SE 141)—more specifically, "the production of the philosopher, the artist, and the saint, both within us and without us" (SE 140). Nietzsche identifies the root of all true culture as "the longing to be reborn as saint and genius," and adds that the presence of talent without that longing—more intellect or cleverness—actually hinders rather than promotes culture (SE 142). He considers dangers of personal development that confronted Schopenhauer, and which face us all: isolation, despair over finding truth (to which dialectical prowess is a contributing factor), and loss of self-esteem due to awareness of limits in one's talent or of one's "moral will" (SE 140–141). He criticizes the fact that philosophy tends to be nothing more than "a critique of words by other words," and states that the only real test of a philosophy is whether one can live by it (SE 187). He speaks of the need to be open and simple, and to live without concealment (SE 140). And he refers to his desire when he himself was seeking an educator, to find one who could "teach me again to be simple and honest in thought and life, that is to say to be untimely," in contrast to an age in which persons have "become so complex and many-sided that they are bound to become dishonest whenever they speak at all..." (SE 153). Many more reminders of Nietzsche's actual statements could be assembled, but I assume that poststructuralists are willing to concede this one early work, and then to emphasize the radical changes that followed.

However, I wish to make a brief case that the main concerns of SE were not simply superseded in later work—they persist all the way through. The theme of personal development certainly remains prominent in Zarathustra. More significantly, we continue to find it even in the late work, Twilight of the Idols [hereafter TI]. There Nietzsche still affirms the importance of Bildung, and of educators, and (in that same context) he speaks of culture as "what matters most" (TI 509, 510). (Of course, it is here that Nietzsche appears to reject the idea of individual responsibility [TI 500–501], "mental causes" [TI 502].)


A small part of this argument would include the fact that Nietzsche does, after all, explicitly comment on SE at the end of his life, in Ecce Homo,trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1967), 976–977. Had he regarded it as an embarrassment, one would expect at least some allusion to the radical change in his views; there is not a single negative word.

and the very idea of “a doer” or “subject” [II: 495]. However, in this same work we find repeated emphasis on the importance of resisting immediate reaction to stimuli and impulses, which is necessary for “disciplining oneself into wholeness” [II: 177; 167, 511, 334], as well as Nietzsche’s conception of freedom as “the will to assume responsibility for oneself” [II: 542], which he offers in contrast to the view that—in these times—one can simply rely on instincts, without the need for pruning conflicting instinct systems [II: 515–
516]. In *The Antichrist* he describes the general problem he poses as, “what type of man shall be bred, shall be willed,” and then notes that the “higher type” has appeared by accident in the past, but has never actually been willed (emphasis his). This would be a strange comment indeed for one who was not interested in the development of persons—and even stranger for one who rejected the notion of will altogether.

The preceding remarks may stimulate reflection on the apparent inconsistency among many of Nietzsche’s statements about “the subject” and “the will.” I suggest that much apparent inconsistency (but not all) within his remarks can be dispelled by means of the entity/process distinction employed thus far. Nietzsche clearly rejects “free will,” as a faculty that magically defeats causal influence, thus permitting freedom, and indeed the very notion of “the will” or “a will,” as any sort of distinct faculty. However, even that does not entail a rejection of volition, as the active aspect of personal existence—our ability to put forth effort, as we seek to bring various aspects of the world (including our impulses) under our control, or power. Nietzsche rejects a will—thing, but not a will-process, or volition. Similarly, while Nietzsche clearly rejects “a self” or “a subject” as an inner, invisible entity behind the scenes that generates thoughts, choices, or actions, he certainly does affirm (in the vast majority of his statements) the reality of physical persons who can do this. Moreover, he (for the most part) thinks that persons have the potential to develop these abilities more highly, and he (often) appears quite interested in the question of how this potential can best be actualized.

5. Conclusion

The ambiguities in Nietzsche’s views of a self or subject are helpful for our understanding of confusions about the confused status of personal existence in the tradition as a whole. It is clear that existentialists all reject the notion of a self—thing, such as a Platonic soul, a Cartesian thinking substance, or a Husserlian ego. However, confusion is generated when commentators simply emphasize


In this I follow George A. Morgan; see *What Nietzsche Means* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 90–94.
this negative point—the rejection of a self—without attempting to indicate the alternative, process view of personal existence that existentialists typically affirm. It is important to make the latter move because self talk is often associated with personal capacities for volition, choice, agency, and reflective thought. In that case, the denial of a self or subject may be taken as a denial of those capacities; at very least, one is left wondering about the scope of what is being rejected.

For example, the self may be identified with "that which thinks," (as, for instance, Kant appears to do in his discussion of the paradox of pure reason.1) If so, then the conclusion that there is no self may be taken to mean that there is nothing which thinks, no thinker. Thus, the overthrow of Cartesian metaphysics might seem to some (persons unclear on the point now being made) to warrant the conclusion that the very idea of a thinker is untenable, and one that few philosophers today take seriously. However, there is a clear and obvious alternative to that line of thought, which is that it is persons, and not egos or selves, that think.2 (We experience persons as "thinking things" in countless situations throughout each day, but never egos.) Under that alternative, the nonexistence of self-things does not entail the nonexistence of thinkers.

A similar ambiguity attends denials of selves as centers of will, agency, etc. Is it these abilities that are being denied, or only their association with an immaterial self-thing? The ambiguity is fully present in a statement such as this: "There is no inner self that thinks, wills, and initiates action." Does that mean only that there is no inner thing—in addition to the physical, visible person—that performs these acts? Or does it mean that the appearance of such performances—even by physical, visible persons—is illusion? (It might noted that the ambiguity of self talk is augmented by the ambiguity of the term, "inner," which can indicate a full-blown Cartesian dualism, but is often used merely as a synonym for "personal"—as in, "one's inner life.")

The denial of acts of thought, will, etc. by physical, visible persons is, of course, far more radical, and less plausible, than the denial of selves that do this behind the scenes. Thus, for those who wish to promote the popularity of

1In Kant's Theory of Self-Consciousness C. Thomas Posey begins with the words: "How are we to give an cogent account of the self? That is, what can be known about what Kant, in a tellingly cautious phrase, calls 'this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks'" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, 45).
2I am indebted to Danielle Dahan for clarity on this point. See Existentiated Critique of Cartesian Selves (Lanham, MD: Barnes & Noble Books, 1994), 1, 46.
3Thus, for instance, Cooper takes Solomon to task for speaking of existentialist interest in the remarkable inner richness and expanse of the self, stating that "This is the reverse of the truth." Cooper, 46. Cooper has a point, but we know that Solomon agrees with him on the issue of (Cartesian) selves: the ambiguities of "inner" and of self talk in general are getting in their way.
the former view, but who may be unable or unwilling to justify their stance. ambiguity has its advantages. It is easy enough to move from the difficulties of Cartesian metaphysics to the conclusion that the self or subject is an outmoded concept; and from there it may seem a short step to the view that the personal dimension in human reality has been discredited. However, "personal" does not have to mean "of, or pertaining to, an ego"; rather, it can (and usually does) mean "of, or pertaining to, persons." And there do seem to be persons, as beings capable of qualitatively different behavior than that of rocks, trees, or even dogs. Of course, the existence of persons thus conceived can be denied, but that would appear to require a significant appearance/reality dichotomy, requiring the sort of foray into metaphysics that most postmodernists (for instance) would rather avoid.

The distinction drawn here between selves and personal existence is intended to forestall the ambiguities we have noted. Let us be clear as to whether we are identifying personal existence with a given (thus universally present) self-thing, or instead viewing it as a contingent, precarious process that may fail (at any number of levels). If we make this distinction explicit, then it will be apparent that the denial of selves is not tantamount to the denial of personal existence. In turn, this permits appreciation of the possibility for which I have argued here, that while existentialist thinkers have uniformly rejected the existence of selves, they have nevertheless displayed a keen interest in process views of personal existence.

In closing, let us briefly review some answers to other questions posed at the outset. I have argued that there is no sharp division within the tradition on the status of selves and personal existence; from that it follows of course that there is no sharp division on this issue that is grounded either in methodology or in religious outlook. The largest remaining question concerns the relationship between existentialist and postmodernist thought; specifically, does the process view of personal existence described here lead continuously into the postmodernist outlook, or does it constitute a clear alternative? This is obviously too large an issue to be settled in a few paragraphs. It admits of no easy answer, and among the commentators already mentioned, opposing views can be found. 10

On the one hand, in the existentialist view presented here the core elements of full personhood are not a secure possession; they are hard won through effort.

10 It might be noted that the question of life after death is not necessarily tied to the presence of an immortal self-thing termed "soul"; at least, not for those (Christians) who affirm the idea of a resurrection of the whole person rather than the liberation of a soul from its bodily prison.

and choice (along with social input), and easily lost. Such an approach may be seen as opening the door to more radical accounts in which no real unity, totality, or identity of the person is even possible. On the other hand, existentialists typically regard personal existence (and its various component abilities and orientations) not only as possible, but also as valuable—perhaps supremely so. This outlook is far-removed from postmodernist writings in which goals such as unity, constancy, coherence, dialogue, and reasonableness or reflectiveness may not even be seen as desirable—apart from questions about their attainability. And, of course, the fundamental question regarding freedom of the individual always looms before the two camps; it might even be said that one cannot be an existentialist without affirming individual freedom, or a postmodernist without denying it.

My own view is that the existentialist outlook does constitute a realistic and moderate position, one that is able (to borrow words from Calvin O. Schrag) "to split the difference between the traditional concept of the self as an abiding and immutable substance and the postmodern predilection for an elimination of the vocabularies of subject and subjectivity per se." In the existentialist view, personal individuality is relational rather than self-contained, durational rather than instantaneous, possible rather than given, and partial rather than complete; in a word, it is finite rather than absolute. However, it need not for that reason be regarded as unreal or illusory (just as limited, finite freedom need not be seen as unreal). Indeed, I find the strength of the existentialist position to lie precisely here, in its contrast to "all or nothing" mentalities that would identify personal existence with the presence of fully unified and transparent selves, and then judge the reality of both together.

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Calvin O. Schrag, The Self after Postmodernity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 156-158. This description of the work of Julius Kristeva by Schrag fits his own outlook nicely, as well as mine. However, Schrag persistently speaks of "the self" and of "selves" even to the point of writing, "I meet other selves... I shake their hands". Schrag, without offering any definition of the term, or any defense for its use in place of "person". Apart from that, I applaud this book, which draws deeply (though not exclusively) from the existentialist tradition.