

Being and Time

Phenomenology is the most eminent modernist school of thought that attempted to produce a systematic ontology in which being is not opposed to its appearances. Mainly responding to two of the most influential figures of phenomenological thought, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre adopted as his starting point their shared principle that there is no “dualism of appearance and essence,” that is, that the “appearance does not hide the essence.” Rather, the “essence of an existent . . . is the manifest law which presides over the succession of its appearances.” The “being of the phenomenon” (as opposed to the “phenomenon of being”) is nothing other than this “principle of the series” of its appearances. And though Sartre’s phenomenological devotion initially tempted him to assert that “essence, as the principle of the series, is definitely only the concatenation of appearances,” and hence “itself an appearance,” he soon had to recognize that essence spills out from the contained “well connected series of its manifestations” due to nothing less than *infinity*—something which cannot ever appear. For “the existent . . . cannot be reduced to a *finite* series of manifestations since each one of them is a relation to a subject constantly changing.” Although “an *object* may disclose itself only through a single *Abschattung*”—in a single adumbration, shading, aspect, or profile—“the sole fact of there being a subject implies the possibility of multiplying the points of view *on* that *Abschattung*,” and “[t]his suffices to multiply to infinity the *Abschattung* under consideration.” Thus, Sartre concludes, what the phenomenological enterprise has succeeded in doing is not “overcoming *all* dualisms” that oppose “interior to exterior” or “being” to “appearance,” but rather “converting them all into a new dualism: that of finite and infinite” (Sartre, 3, 5, and 7). In short, one first thing

that phenomenology shows is, in Jacques Lacan's summarizing phrase, that "where there is being, infinity is required" (1998, 10).

If it were creeping into our phenomenological immanence from some out-worldly heaven it would be fairly easy for secular thought to get rid of infinity; but this is not the case. Infinity is stubbornly wedded to phenomenological experience as such, insofar as the appearance presupposes a perceiving subject, and hence a theoretically infinite multiplicity of "points of view" from one of which any given subject may perceive the appearing object. Of course, as the fact that this infinite multiplicity of gazes is posited only "theoretically" indicates, *infinity* remains also within phenomenology a *transcendent* category, that is, a category that is never given empirically—there can never be empirically an infinite number of people perceiving an object—yet, this transcendence is enfolded in immanence, insofar as it does not emanate from some extra-empirical beyond but is rather the effect of empirical experience itself. This *enfolding of transcendence within the plane of immanence* is constitutive of what can properly be called *secular* thought.

Eventually, Sartre concludes this section of *Being and Nothingness* by acknowledging that, even though "there is nothing behind the appearance," nevertheless, the being or "the essence of the appearance is an 'appearing' which is no longer opposed to any *being*." Well, then, as he subsequently wonders, "there arises a legitimate problem concerning *the being of this appearing*" (Sartre, 6–7). The answer to this question is arguably summarized in Lacan's statement: "if beyond appearance there is nothing in itself, there is the gaze" (1981, 103)—by which I emphatically invite us to understand the gaze "of the Other, the capital Other, [which] is already there in every opening . . . of the unconscious" (130). This "capital Other" is not simply the symbolic order, understood as a given society with its ideological systems, laws, and so forth, as in many of Slavoj Žižek's or Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's, and others' writings. True, no society is ever given in its totality as an object to be perceived by an empirical subject, and, by that token, we can say that empirically "society" is impossible" as a whole—and is, hence, transcendent to experience (including several other inferences that Laclau and Mouffe draw from this, such as that society consists of "purely relational identities," something that, as will eventually become clear through the line of argument presented here, results from the fact that being itself is relational) (Laclau and Mouffe, 114). But what is often missed in this all-too-easy reduction of Lacan's "capital Other" to society—a phenomenon

in which we are immersed in our everyday experience—is the fact that here we are speaking of the *totality* of society. And the moment we speak of (the) *totality* (of whatever)—just as when we speak of infinity—we enter a realm that operates according to entirely non-empirical modes of temporality and laws. That the “*the unconscious is outside*” certainly means that it is society, the external world itself—but *qua totality*, that is, as something that is altogether outside experience itself (insofar as experience is given to consciousness) (Lacan 1981, 123). In turn, that neither totality nor infinity can be given empirically (consciously) means that in order to talk about them presupposes above all figuring out their spatio-temporal coordinates and specific structures—which pertain not to actuality (consciousness) but to a virtual (unconscious) transcendence that is inseparable from the empirical (conscious) plane of immanence. “Secular” does not mean the elimination of transcendence; rather, *the “unconscious” is the Freudian/psychoanalytic term for indicating precisely this enfolding of transcendence within immanence* required by thought in order for it to become truly secular. To introduce a reference to which we shall have plenty of opportunities to return, “the true formula of atheism is not *God is dead*” but “*God is unconscious*” (Lacan 1981, 59). And it is this unconscious or total or infinite multiplicity of gazes—an all-seeing omniscient gaze—that, no matter how secular thought is, renders being conjunctive with infinity and, hence, with immanent transcendence.

We can find a concept that offers us a good idea of what immanent transcendence is in Walter Benjamin’s “Absolute.” As Fred Rush writes, “for Benjamin, the profane world of finitude is of an entirely other order from the Absolute,” so that “an ‘infinite approach’ of the profane to the Absolute is an impossibility” (70). Paraphrasing Rush’s statement, I would say that the “empirical” world of “human looks” or gazes is of an entirely other order from transcendent Infinity, so that an infinite approach of the empirical to Infinity is impossible. In other words, the gaze *qua* real is not an infinity of human looks, but, as Sartre will point out further on, the place from which the subject cannot see itself.

Returning to Sartre, immanent transcendence is a way of going beyond simply “replac[ing] the dualism of being and appearance” with “a new opposition, the ‘finite’ and the infinite,” since the relation in question is actually that of “the infinite in the finite.” For “the appearance, which is *finite*, indicates itself in its finitude, but at the same time in order to be grasped as an appearance-of-that-which-appears, it requires that it be surpassed toward infinity” (Sartre, 6). In other words,

and specifically in terms of set theory, being is not-all, that is, a non-totalizable set insofar as what is supposed to be enclosed within the set is also outside it. As Sartre proceeds to write:

What appears in fact is only an *aspect* of the object, and the object is altogether *in* that aspect and altogether outside of it. It is altogether *within*, in that it manifests itself *in* that aspect; it shows itself as the structure of the appearance, which is at the same time the principle of the series. It is altogether outside, for the series itself will never appear nor can it appear. Thus the outside is opposed in a new way to the inside, and the being-which-does-not-appear, to the appearance. (6)

There is nothing behind appearance, but the appearance offers itself in two ways: on the one hand, as appearance in its finitude, and, on the other hand, as being-which-does-not-appear, the series itself of infinite appearances and their points of view, which “will never appear” and which allows for any concrete appearance that, by simply appearing, functions as the principle of the series. On the one hand, we have finitude, appearance, and the concrete point of view from which it appears; on the other hand, we have infinity, the all-seeing gaze under which the entire series of appearances would appear, but never does. Hence Lacan’s two other succinct formulations: “there is no Other of the Other” and “the gaze I encounter . . . is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other” (1998, 81; 1981, 84). “There is no Other of the Other” is another way for saying “there is no gaze of the Other,” for the gaze of the Other (i.e., the gaze of the entire series of appearances) is the infinity of all possible points of view; as far as experience is concerned, therefore, there is no such gaze, since the infinity of all possible points of view could never determine me to perceive the appearance from any finite point of view. On the other hand, I do nevertheless perceive appearances only from a finite perspective, and if I am capable of doing so it is only because I imagine a specific (finite) gaze on the part of the Other. It is by imagining a specific gaze there where there is only an infinity of gazes that the object can appear at all and that the series of appearances is subjugated to a principle and obtains the structure specified by this appearance. The gaze, therefore, is altogether *within*, in that it manifests itself *in* the aspect of the finite gaze I imagine in the field of the Other; but it also is altogether *outside*, for the gaze itself, as the infinite series of possible points of view, cannot appear.

Let us also note a further point about the gaze that will become crucial in the discussion of biopolitics in part 2. If I can imagine a specific gaze in the field of the Other it is precisely because no such gaze is given to experience, for in truth the gaze is the non-appearing infinity of gazes. The finite gaze emerges due to its reference to the infinity of gazes, which is itself entailed through its reference to the finite gaze. In one word, *the gaze is the cause of itself and, as such, it is both self-referential and the power or potentiality of actualizing itself*. In fact, that the gaze is the potential of self-actualization entails the (Spinozian) principle that the essence of the whole world (substance, in Spinoza's terms) is itself the power of self-actualization. For, as Sartre writes, the body as "a point of view supposes a double relation: a relation with the things *on which the body is a point of view* and a relation with the observer *for whom the body is a point of view*" (Sartre, 433). In other words, "my being-in-the-world, by the sole fact that it *realizes* a world, causes itself to be indicated to itself as a being-in-the-midst-of-the-world by the world which it realizes" (419). In realizing the world which, at the same time, is what realizes ("causes") my body as a being-in-the-midst-of-the-world, my body and the world are one and the same "flesh" which is both the cause and the effect of itself.¹

Turning now to the temporality of being, once we are beyond the dualism of being and appearance, and we conceive of being in monistic terms—according to which being "is altogether *in* that aspect [of appearance] and altogether outside of it"—then we are forced to acknowledge that *being pertains to two distinct spatio-temporalities*: finitude, *qua* appearance, and infinity *qua* gaze of the entire series of appearances or being-which-does-not-appear.

This ontological thesis is far removed from the basic Kantian premise that time and space are transcendental categories of perception (appearance), not of being or the thing-in-itself (the latter standing for Kant in a dualistic opposition to appearance). Kant's premise that "space and time, together with the appearances in them" are "nothing existing in themselves and outside my representations," is the logical conclusion deriving from the dualism that opposes representation (appearance) to being-in-itself (1977, 82, §52c). Since this dualism has now collapsed, we can no longer maintain that the categories of appearance are not also categories of the being-in-itself. Rather, if appearance involves two spatialities and temporalities, it is only because being itself involves two: *finitude, insofar as it appears, and infinity insofar as it does not*. Going farther back than Kant, the old (Platonic) hierarchy in which appearance

is inferior to being collapses, as the appearance cannot be considered an adulterated simulacrum of the being-which-does-not-appear or of the series to which it belongs, since the given appearance and the entire series of appearances presuppose one another.

Our preliminary conclusion therefore is that the (Kantian) *a priori categories of thought* through which we perceive appearances are in truth *intrinsic to being itself*. It is being in itself that appears and does not appear. Being is the appearance and the series of appearances that can never appear. Finitude and infinity, therefore, are being's own temporal attributes.

Sartre arrived at the same conclusion: "temporality can be only a relation of being at the heart of this same being. . . . Temporality *is not*. Only a being of a certain structure of being can be temporal in the unity of its being" (194–195). Yet, as we shall have the chance to see throughout part 1, Sartre's conception of temporality is limited by—and his phenomenological ontology after all fails to grasp entirely the relation between time and being partly due to—the fact that he reduces the "being of a certain structure of being" to the being of a for-itself exclusively conceived as human consciousness.