

The Buddhist Pill for Sartre's "Nausea": Phenomenological and Hindu-Buddhist Treatments of Intentionality

Tatyana Petrovna Lifintseva

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with one of the most complicated issues in philosophy – the problem of intentionality of consciousness. The author seeks to answer the question of whether the intentionality of consciousness can be considered a universal anthropological characteristic. Two philosophical positions regarding intentionality are compared on the basis of Jean-Paul Sartre's major works and the sacred texts of Hinduism and Buddhism. The author first identifies certain traits of Western metaphysics, which regards consciousness as something to be revealed and to be described as intentional, and second, takes up the approach Ancient Indian metaphysics' that regards the "depriving" consciousness of its intentionality as having a soteriological purpose.

Key Words: intentionality, being, freedom, subject, subjectlessness, negation, sansaric subject, sacred, profane

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In this paper I dare to step into the unsteady and ungrateful soil of comparativistics and to attempt to compare Western and Indian metaphysics through the philosophical and literary creativity of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980) and through various Buddhist and Vedic sacred texts. The concept of intentionality will be the key in my attempt and my research question is: the possibility of intentionality "to be or not to be" a defining characteristic of consciousness.

It is possible to describe Sartre's philosophy of the 1930's and 40's as "the search for Being." One cannot say that during the epoch he was very original in this aspiration. The permanent philosophical

discussion regarding just epistemology in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century (neokantianism, phenomenology, empiriocriticism, pragmatism) generated an explosion of interest in ontology in the first half of the twentieth century – from the "reigns of being" of George Santayana to "the fundamental ontology" of Martin Heidegger and *Systematic theology* of Paul Tillich. At the beginning of his famous book *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger repeated like a conjuration:

"We should raise anew the question of the *meaning of Being*. ... The concept of "Being" is rather the most obscure of all. ... We see the fundamental necessity of repeating a question on the meaning of Being anew. ... To retrieve the question of Being means first of all to work out adequately the *formulation* of the question" (Heidegger, 1996. pp. xix, 2-3).

First, I am going to address Sartre's fundamental work *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In this text a classical (accepted in Western philosophy) relation of being and

Corresponding author: Tatyana Lifintseva

Address: Tatyana Lifintseva Vlasov st., b. 6, app. 33, Moscow region, Lyubertsy, Russia 140002. National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russian Federation.

Phone: +79099748119

✉ tlifintseva@gmail.com

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thinking, nature and spirit, matter and consciousness, object and subject are transferred by Sartre to a plane of two "regions" of Being: "Being-in-itself" and "Being-for-itself". Briefly... "Being-in-itself", according to Sartre, is "self-identical, undecomposed, dense, massive and compact." It is an absolute passivity; it is what it is, no more than that and any definitions are inapplicable to it. It is indiscernible, undifferentiated, deprived of any qualitative definiteness and self-sufficient; it does not comprise any distinction between "this" and "other". It means that *only* the consciousness ("Being-for-itself") introduces everything into the world: discreteness, plurality, and causality, variability, movement, quantity, quality, and also form, space, time (and, accordingly, mortal destiny), sense, meaning, good, harm, etc. Accordingly, all proceeds from consciousness, the subject. And "Being-in-itself" is absolutely indifferent to consciousness, "Being-for-itself". Within the person this indifference generates a double feeling concerning the world: either a disgust (as in the novel *Nausea*), or a painful envy (as in the cycle of novels *The Roads of Freedom*), but always this is the feeling of absolute otherness and rejectedness.

What does this rejectedness mean for consciousness and what does consciousness mean for Sartre? Consciousness, certainly, is not reduced to knowledge; it is a transphenomenal measurement of being of a subject. "For-itself" literally means "not-in-itself", which means non-equality to itself, an orientation on something other and external to consciousness, e. g. the table, the chair, the tree, the rat's tail, Hegel's Absolute Idea, lost youth, the actual infinity – everything that one can think about. That the consciousness is directed toward "something", toward an "other", means that it is not that "something"; the consciousness is *nothing*. (The analogy with the apofatic theology defining God as "none of created things", as "*nothing*", is rather transparent here. On a related note, in Sartre's novel *Nausea* it is possible to draw analogies with the Christian ascetics: the nausea in Sartre's anthropology seems to substitute the ascetics' Christian disgust for the all carnal and material. This is however a separate theme and we do not have the space to consider it here).

The life of consciousness in Sartre's description appears as a permanent negation

of an external being and its own past, its previous conditions. Being "nothing", Sartre's person "secretes this Nothing as a gland secretes hormones" (Sartre, 1970; p.103). Sartre traces (certainly, not in an exhaustive way) the tradition of the description of consciousness as negative in European philosophy. He quotes Spinoza's formula, "To define means to deny". Hegel admired this saying, and reformulated it in the judgment – "The Spirit is a negative". Additionally earlier in the Scholastics there exist a classical example of a bad artist who painted a lion, but to the spectator, so it would be clear, the artist signed: "This is a lion, but not a dog". Asserting that it is a lion, we thereby deny the possibility for it to be a dog, a mouse, a fish, a unicorn, a comet, etc..

Human activity, according to Sartre, is absolutely unpremiered: a person creates a new existence every time, every moment he or she "chooses him/her-self". But then it turns out that this instant creativity loses any binding principle and dissipates in a set of separate acts which are not at all bound between themselves. But then how is self-identification possible? Why is Jean-Paul Sartre nevertheless Sartre, instead of Mao-Zedong (whom he honored greatly), or not a Parisian homeless (clochard)? Here, strangely enough, Descartes comes, to the aid of Sartre. Yes, Sartre struggled with Cartesian tradition and denied the "thinking substance." But in the article "*Cartesian freedom*" (1957) (in the preface to Descartes' collected works) Sartre makes an attempt of an existentialist interpretation of Descartes. The starting point of Descartes' philosophy, which is the methodical doubt, was interpreted by Sartre as an ability to say "NO", as the negating activity of consciousness, as freedom (See Sartre, 1980, p.238). Descartes wrote: "The mind, using freedom inherent in it, assumes that there is none of things concerning which existence it should feel though the slightest doubt" (Descartes, 1952, p.185). And in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* we read: "Descartes following the Stoics has given a name to this possibility which human reality has to secrete a nothingness which isolates it – it is freedom" (Sartre, 1970; pp.24-25). Therefore, the principle uniting activity of human consciousness for Sartre was a permanence of negation, a freedom.

Sartre paraphrases Descartes: "I deny – hence I exist". The liberation of a person was



thought by Sartre as “the ability to self-isolation.” “If “Being-in-itself” is self-identical and self-sufficient, than, for Sartre, “the consciousness (“Being-for itself”) represents a way not to be coincidence with itself, to escape identity” (Sartre, 1970; p.77). “Nothing is like a hole of Being in the heart of Being”, – is Sartre's well-known aphorism (Sartre, 1970; p.617).

The necessary condition for freedom is choice, and choice is identical to consciousness. Freedom is an ontological characteristic of a person's being. Choosing one, we simultaneously do not choose the other as well. To be free means to be out of everything, outside of a given frame of structure of being. A permanent creativity of consciousness means simultaneously a permanent choice and non-choice of oneself in the world. The choosing act of consciousness is a transformation into “nothing” for every new choice neutralizes the previous experience. Consciousness appears to be a set of free acts of self-determination by the person in his/her being. The theme of human freedom is an axis of all Sartre's doctrine which can be traced throughout his works: it is melancholic in the novel *Nausea*, it has a stoical firmness in *Being and Nothingness*, it is linked with a heroic apathy in a cycle of novels *The Roads of Freedom*, or it is passionate in *The Critic of the Dialectical Reason*.

Now we will consider Sartre's concept of intentionality which is the core for consciousness. Sartre takes this concept from Edmund Husserl (1859 –1938), with a number of changes. Intentionality, as we know, is the concept of a number of philosophical doctrines (not only phenomenology), fixing the feature of human consciousness which consists in its orientation toward any object. In Seneca's philosophy *intention* was a way of movement of the soul (*motus animi*), in Thomas Aquinas' theology - one of intelligence's tools, it is the actualization of its potentiality by means of mastering of an object by consciousness. Husserl developed the idea of intentionality in his *Logical Investigations* (1900), and unlike scholastics, he avoided speaking about “presentness” of an object in consciousness, and, unlike Franz. Brentano (1838 – 1917), did not mention consciousness activity even in its correlation with objectness. According to Husserl, everything that is told about intentionality, concerns only *pure* structures of consciousness. For Husserl everything and

every intentional object (whether it is a physical thing, the city of Freiburg or “a thousandagon”) are equally ideal and belong to consciousness as they are correlated with intentional acts. Husserl understood intentionality as a *general* property of consciousness – to be “*consciousness about ...*”

Sartre makes a certain inversion in relation to the Husserlian concept of intentionality: in which it seems he comes back to the “intention” of the Stoics and the Scholastics, where the consciousness corresponds with... no, not with an object, but with Being. Sartre considers consciousness as deduced on a “confrontation” with Being. Yes, with this dense, not differentiated, passive “Being-in-itself”. Consciousness itself forms the object (or, more exactly, objectness). Therefore, probably, it is necessary to say that Sartre's interpretation of Husserl's phenomenological reduction has allowed him to divorce completely with the heritage of the Enlightenment – the concept of a “human nature”. The human nature “was put outside the brackets” irrespective of, in what form it appeared: whether in a kind of “universal ability of thinking”, “will to power”, or “libido”...

Here we can come to the following conclusion: Husserl and Sartre's intentionality is referred to as immanent to human consciousness. Is it really so? How many efforts were necessary to discover, describe, and eventually prove, the intentionality of consciousness! And after all, whole layers of Eastern spirituality, culture and, of course, philosophy, considered their soteriological mission as depriving of consciousness of its intentionality. I would simply like to show that the representation of consciousness as directed (and directed not to external object, but intentional as such) was known in India more than 2500 years ago, but as a problem that was absolutely opposite to the Western one: in that the intentional condition was considered “not original”, it was a deformed one and soteriological mission consisted in depriving consciousness of its intentionality. I will now try to show how this occurred. I will make it clear that if it is possible (and for the adherents of Vedic religion, Buddhism and Jainism even *necessary*) to deprive consciousness of its intentionality, then intentionality is not immanent to consciousness and cannot be considered a universal anthropological characteristic.



In this paper I do not directly mention Western research on Buddhist phenomenism or the phenomenism of Advaita-Vedanta, though they are widely-known (for ex. *P Hacker, W. Halbfass., P.J Griffiths, K.H Warder, etc.*). I have a different purpose. I understand perfectly well how incorrect it is to lump the Vedic religion and Buddhism together given that there are a great number of distinctions between them (and even within them given their internal diversity). To address this problem, I will also speak about the distinctions between them. And still for the consciousness of Western people the similarities are nevertheless stronger than the distinctions as both currents of Indian thought strongly differ from Western metaphysics and a Western mentality. In the course of research I will "remind" of some concepts of Indian (Vedic and Buddhist) philosophies and religions and what they designate. For example, *Ātman* which is usually correlated with the "immortal soul", although actually they have almost nothing in common. The eternal *Ātman* is an extrapersonal and extraindividual substance which is demonstrated in a person. To open *Ātman* in oneself means to get rid of all sensations, perceptions, images, ideas, representations, conclusions inherent in the person. That is, the soteriological ideal is to get rid of "the world of forms" (*rūpa-loka*) – i. e., space, time (and, accordingly, mortal destiny), objectness, discreteness, sense, meaning, causality, density, extents, colours, light and darkness, taste, smell, etc. *Ātman* should merge with the *Brahman* (the Absolute, in Western understanding) when a person gets rid of the illusion of his/her personal being. *Ātman-Brahman* is perceived as "knowledge" (*veda*), but this is a special, subjectless and objectless knowledge, knowledge as the absolute form of any possible knowledge.

Buddhists go further claiming that there is not and cannot be anything substantive and eternal inside of the person even if it is deprived of anything personal. The person is only a stream of psychophysical elements – *dharmas*, which we imagine as an individual mentality, as a person (*pudgala*) owing to our ignorance, non-vision (*a-vidyā*). Besides, in Buddhism suffering (*duḥkha*) and pleasure (*sukha*) are not opposed to each other as it was accepted, as a rule, in the Western tradition, but the second concept is included in the first: for the Buddhist *all* existence is suffering i. e.

undergoing, both pleasant and unpleasant sensations and events are all part of existence. It is necessary to understand "*duḥkha*" as an ontological "groundlessness" of the person, "unequality" to himself/herself,² a basic dissatisfaction with any form of empirical (*karmic*) existence which always assumes the intentionality of consciousness on any object.

I am going to approach now the most "slippery" part of my research in which I will try to compare two ontologies, the Indian and the Western, which are constructed on absolutely different foundations and therefore are as though at all not subject to comparison. Both in Buddhism and in the Vedic religion the empirical (*sansaric*) subject is considered an illusion, as it has been mentioned already. I am returning to Vedic religion. The individual mentality (soul, *jīva*) is considered to be a thin body (thin, but nevertheless a body), considered as a *false* receptacle, a peel for the *Ātman*. We see here a radical difference between Vedic schools' metaphysics (in particular, of Advaita-Vedanta) from the metaphysics of a created person, for example, in Christian theism, which postulates that the person possesses an individual body (physical) with his/her individual and unique characteristics, also possesses a unique soul and a unique communication of the given body with the given soul, i. e., the self-consciousness of the soul is the center of a person (See Anikeyeva, p.99-105). Therefore, the position of Advaita-Vedanta concerning the mentality-body, mentality-cover for something different, *the higher*, assuming that self-consciousness should also belong to this cover and therefore is strictly opposite not only to Christian, but also almost every Western philosophical, concepts of personal being. And the world of the individual psyches (which is the core for all the Western culture) for the Indian philosophies and religions as the most true candidate for personal being has the most rough corporality which is to be removed the first. There are various steps of thinning, removing this corporality, without leaving any place for individuality at all, but we will not enumerate nor analyze them here.

Let's now come to citations. In "Katha-Upanishad" (one of the earliest poetic Upanishads) it is said:

² We can compare the Buddhist "duḥkha" in this aspect with Sorge (concern) of Heidegger or "Being-for-itself" of Sartre.



“When every desire that finds lodging in the heart of a man, has been loosened from its mooring,

Then this mortal puts on immortality: even here he tastes Brahman. ...

The Purusha, the Spirit within, is seating forever in the heart of creatures:

One must separate him with patience from one's own body

As one separates from blade of grass its main fiber.

Thou should know him for the Bright Immortal, yea, the Bright Immortal”

(*Aurobindo*, 1981; p.240-241).

Transition into this condition also carries the name *chitta-vṛtti-nirodha* (literally – the discontinuation of wandering of the mind). How does it occur? I think, I will not be mistaken, if I say that though some of us who engaged in yoga did so for concern about our health, but, in doing so, perhaps, did not reach the highest steps envisioned by those who originated the practice. And it would be desirable to talk about it. It is created by a wise man Patanjali (II c. B.C.) *aṣṭāṅga-yoga* (octal yoga) the 6th step (*pratyāhāra*) means a discontinuation of activity of consciousness. Practically it is carried out by means of concentration of consciousness on any mental point: it can be the tip of one's nose, the umbilical center, a mental point on a wall, etc. It is not yet the last step – *samādhi*, about which it is absolutely impossible to tell anything in a discursive form, but already here, in *pratyāhāra* ... It is almost impossible for us to imagine nothing except a specific mental point during several hours or even days!... The consciousness loses in this case, speaking the phenomenological language, not only a noematic correlate, but also a noesis.

Western culture and Western spirituality grounded by Christianity do not regard the depriving of consciousness of its intentionality as a soteriological purpose. It is more likely, on the contrary, that Christian ascetics assume ultimate aspiration of the person towards God, so to say, "superintentionality". It is difficult to a Western person to enter the Vedic or the Buddhist "universe", though during the last 150 years very many individuals have tried to do so. And sometimes Europeans or Americans accepted psychotropic substances for this purpose (which by the original adherents of the named religions would be considered as a profanation and even as a

blasphemy). And still... probably, many of us have read the novel of Aldous Huxley *The Doors of Perception*. Huxley describes how he accepted an organic substance – mescaline, received from cactus peyote, causing the deformed conditions of consciousness under the direction of the psychologist. From the point of view of the Brahmanist or the Buddhist it is, of course, a profanation, so to say, "a freebie", but for the Western person it will fit. And so, Huxley felt approximately what the yogin of the Upanishads feels at the first stages of meditation (*pratyāhāra*): the world loses concreteness, objectness; freakish configurations of volumes flowing each other, forms and colors appear at a look, which the consciousness cannot (and does not wish!) to fix as a concreteness, "thisness."³ He calls it "The Beatific Vision, *Sat Chit Ananda*, Being-Awareness-Bliss" (Huxley, 1956; p.18). Huxley also recalls the Zen-Buddhist koan. *The disciple asks the teacher: "What is Buddha?" The teacher answers, pointing to the half-collapsed fence: "This is Buddha". Then – on a heap of manure: "This is Buddha". Then – on a lotus flower: "This is Buddha". Then the teacher says: "Buddha is a round triangle..."* (Huxley, 1956; p.18-19). What does it all mean? It means that at a stage of "awakening" from an illusion of the "objectness" and discreteness of the world the consciousness becomes not participated in an object, it is not directed toward an object (real or imagined), it is not intentional, therefore *everything* is Buddha ... But, receding from Huxley, we should say, that it is only the beginning, it is yet not the Buddhist *nirvāṇa*, here is no *śūnya*, the Great Emptiness, where the impersonal consciousness is deprived of any subjectness and objectness.

Now we will return to J. P. Sartre's famous novel *Nausea* (1939). Here is what the hero of the novel Antoine Roquentin feels:

“Things have divorced their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic and it seems ridiculous to call them or to say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone, without words, defenceless, they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me. ... I could no longer stand things being so close. ... So I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I could not remember it

³ Here it is possible to draw an analogy with painting of suprematists (for example, Kandinsky and his followers)



was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me. ... The roots, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that has vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder – naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness” (Sartre, 1979; pp.125-127).

As we see, for the ordinary Western person who is not engaged in the Hinduist or the Buddhist meditations, depriving the world of its discreteness and objectness is very traumatic. Ernest Cassirer wrote much about it in his *Philosophy of the Symbolical Forms* (1823 – 29). Roquentin, unlike Huxley, did not experiment with a mescaline, but he suffered a heavy neurosis. He did not cause in himself these mental conditions; they as though tormented him from the outside. (Sartre has described it with such talent that the Association of Psychiatrists of France has awarded him the degree of the doctor of psychiatry for the novel). But that suddenly endured nakedness of the material world is traumatic for the consciousness, the Christian ascetics (John the Climacus, for example), and the shramans-eremites of the Vedic religion, and the Buddhists also knew. But they knew how to oppose it. In conclusion, I would like to engage in philosophical hooliganism and offer to monsieur Roquentin, so to say, the buddhist “recipe” of a struggle against nausea. The text is from the third c. B. C. and attributed to a philosopher Nagarjuna. Here also is a speech about a garden, about a landscape that has

something in common with Roquentin’s vision of the park. Thus,

“One version of concentration of thought consists in a choice of any landscape, for example, a garden. It is beheld, observed in all details. It is necessary to remember various flowers growing in it, their arrangement, the trees, inherent in each of them height, the form of branches, the difference in foliage and so, consistently studying all details, but without naming their names bypass the whole garden. Having created yourself a distinct representation about a garden when you can also see it with your eyes closed, as well as with open, begin to delete various details one after another from a combination of attributes making a garden mentally. Gradually flowers change their coloring and form, they flow into each other, they are scattered, and even the dust which has remained from them dissipates. Trees lose foliage, their leaves are compressed, as if entered into a trunk, then the trunk becomes thinner and turns to a simple line. This line becomes even thinner and, at last, disappears. As a result there is only a naked earth. Now it is necessary to take away stones and soil from the earth. The earth in its turn disappears, etc. Such exercises lead to the destruction of representations about the world of forms and matter, to consecutive achievement of pure and boundless space, understanding of infinity of consciousness and, at last, to comprehension of sphere of emptiness (*śūnya*) and sphere where there is neither consciousnesses, nor absence of consciousness...” (Quoted on: David-Neel A., 1932, p.175).

I understand this recommendation would not really help the suffering monsieur Roquentin. Within the context of secular consciousness it is, alas, irresolvable.

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