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Forms of Life and Subjectivity
Rethinking Sartre's Philosophy



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1. The Phenomenological Ontology of Forms of Life

1. Introduction

I derive the conception of the form of life as an ontological unit from the ontological distinction made by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) between the principle and the series. This distinction is intended to show a unitary conception of being, for the principle refers to the being-in-itself as that which does not change and which is the condition of possibility of the series of appearances that consciousness apprehends. The distinction between the principle and the series is therefore another way of saying that if the object we experience is not the object as being-in-itself, the former is principled by the latter in our phenomenological grasp of it. This, according to Sartre, eliminates the Kantian duality between noumenon and phenomenon. The principle is not beyond the series; on the contrary, it is found constituting the series: it is in each of the elements of the series. This analysis will serve me in a fundamental way to understand human actions as objects intended by our consciousness. So, the actions I apprehend are shaped by a principle. If I have different experiences of the same action, its principle—or essence, in a general sense—will be maintained and can be grasped in it. The turn I propose at this point in the argument is that, human actions being cultural products, i.e., behaviours that are performed with a purpose that is not only individual but also cultural and social, their realization—and not only their apprehension—must require a principle that constitutes the series. The ensemble of our acts must also be a series that realizes or actualizes a principle which is in each of them and serves as their essence; it provides their unity and their coherence, that is to say, their

meaning. This principled series is what I call the form of life. With this shift I propose to establish a phenomenological ontology of forms of life.

In the successive sections of this chapter, I explore the consequences of the form of life now understood as a principled series. The first thing I establish is the distinction of being and meaning which completes that of principle and series. For if being is the principle that governs the series, that series takes on meaning through the principle. That is to say, if human actions are principled series, then they are actions that are performed with meaning for the one who performs them. The form of life is that unity in which being and meaning are synthetically united. For, as has been established above, it is a series of actions that are principled, that implies that without the principle not only would they not have meaning, but they would not be performed either. This leads me to examine this dichotomy from a phenomenological point of view. That is, my experience of the principled actions and of my form of life as a totality. For the series of actions that constitute my form of life can be understood as a principled series. That series constitutes my experience of my form of life. Therefore, if phenomenologically, I have experiences of each action, experiences that I call praxical images, the ensemble of my possible praxical images is a total image of my form of life, which I call anthropical image. Both are the image-consciousness, following Sartre's analysis of consciousness and imagination in *L'Imaginaire* (1940). If my possible praxical images are my possible meaningful actions, the anthropical image is the image of what it is to be human for me. The latter is the principle, in turn, that constitutes and gives meaning and coherence to the actions that I can conceive as possible for myself.

After having made my case, I submit this phenomenological ontology to critique in dialogue with a different ontology, the one held by the philosophers of new realism. I defend the ontology of forms of life against the ontology of new realism, which assumes that objects, ideas, beliefs and phenomenological experiences are equally facts. This drives me to make the ontological distinction of actuality and potentiality with respect to the praxical images (consciousness of my actions) and the anthropical image respectively (consciousness of the totality of possible actions as an image of being human). The anthropical image is the condition of possibility; the framework of meaning in which the praxical images arise. If I consider both as mere facts on the same level,

I lose the ability to establish a transcendental phenomenology, and thus to consider that my actions emerge from the consciousness I have of myself as a human being.

At this point, taking up Sartre's distinction between being-in-itself and being-for-itself, I conclude that the form of life as an ontological unit cannot be understood only as being-in-itself, for then, actions as perceived objects would be meaningless for the one who performs them. And neither can we exclude these and remain only with the being-for-itself, as the consciousness we have of our actions and the meaning they have for us, for then, the form of life would be in potentiality and not in actuality. In fact, for the form of life to exist absolutely it requires that it be understood as being-in-itself-for-itself. For not only does it have in itself its own possibility, that is, in its total consciousness or anthropical image, but also, for the ensemble or series of actions that we perform with meaning to be considered our form of life, it has to be a principled behaviour, and therefore, an object perceived and experienced with meaning. The correlate of this is that if every action is endowed with meaning, i.e., emerges as a principled action, it can only be shared as a form of life if other agents also share the principle or anthropical image from which they derive. This image is not only a self-image but also that of a human being in the midst of the world.

2. Form of Life and the Principle of the Series¹

Sartre's onto-phenomenology, as presented in *Being and Nothingness*, gives a firm account of the nature of actions based on the distinction between the phenomenon and being. But to make more explicit the articulation between these two members of the opposition, he adduces that the phenomenon can be better considered as finite and being in terms of the infinite, what qualifies it for 'the structure of the appearance' or 'the principle of the series':

This new opposition, the 'finite and the infinite', or better, 'the infinite in the finite' [*l'infini dans le fini*], replaces the dualism of being and

1 Sections 2 and 4 of this chapter have been expressed earlier in Daniel Rueda Garrido, 'Towards a Cultural Phenomenology of Actions and Forms of Life', *Review of Contemporary Philosophy*, 18:1 (2019), 80–118, <https://doi.org/10.22381/RCP1820194>.

appearance [*l'être et du paraître*]. 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 [*Tout entier dedans en ce qu'il se manifest dans cet aspect*]; it shows itself as the structure of the appearance, which is at the same time the principle of the series [*la raison de la série*]. It is altogether outside, for the series itself will never appear nor can it appear.²

The first idea to be discussed is that of the infinite in the finite, which Sartre said comes to replace the phenomenological dualism: being and appearance. So if it comes to replace the old opposition mentioned, what is the contribution of this new opposition to our understanding of our phenomenological experiences? On the one hand, this new distinction gives the sense of the inexhaustibility of being, which is infinite, and thus, although within the appearance, not reduced to it. And on the other hand, to see the phenomenon as intrinsically finite is to recognize that in our experience we cannot directly grasp the being of the phenomenon, although, somehow it is as the background and the possibility for our phenomenological experience. Sartre makes a practical indication of how what is finite can be grasped as infinite. But the appearance, although finite, because it can only be understood in relation to the series to which it belongs, must be grasped as infinite: 'If the phenomenon is to reveal itself as transcendent, it is necessary that the subject himself transcend the appearance toward the total series of which it is a member. He must seize Red through his impression of red. By Red is meant the principle of the series [*le rouge, c'est-à-dire la raison de la série*].'³ Sartre offers a powerfully intuitive statement to account for the principle or structure of the series within the phenomenological experience. And the question that he really tries to answer is the question that I need to settle to be able to consider the phenomena outside of the reductive view that conceives of them as identical to being, and conversely, thus to posit that the being of the phenomena is not exhausted within the phenomena. If we continue with the example that Sartre himself proposed, Red would fulfil the principle of my phenomenological experiences of red objects, and thus Colour would have to be the principle of my phenomenological

2 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956 [1943]), p. xlvii. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 13.

3 *Ibid.*, p. xlvii. In *L'être et le néant*, p. 13.

experiences of coloured objects. And if this is true, I would have a principle for every series of phenomena. And certainly, those principles would grasp the being of the series as well as of each of its phenomena. But one question is still demanding an answer: what makes the phenomenon a phenomenon of the series? That leads us to explore the relation between the phenomenon of being and the being of the phenomenon, which can help us to understand how phenomenological images relate to their principle. The phenomenon of being is what something is itself, it refers to itself; whereas the being of the phenomenon, a more complex concept, is not what is beyond the phenomenon but a kind of condition of possibility of the phenomenon: the table exists qua table, justified in its being no more than what it appears, and 'the being of the phenomenon although coextensive with the phenomenon, cannot be subject to the phenomenal condition—which is to exist only in so far as it reveals itself—and that consequently it surpasses the knowledge which we have of it and provides the basis for such knowledge'.⁴ The being of the phenomenon is thus something that does not reveal itself totally in the knowledge we have of the phenomenon. For Sartre, the being of the appearance is not just appearing; that would account for George Berkeley's approach of *esse est percipi*. He does not reduce the being of the phenomenon to what can be known of it. Our knowledge is only regarding the phenomenon of being.

But let us take one step further to provide the foundation for the next section of this work. If the phenomenon reveals being, and at the same time the being of the phenomenon is outside of it, as what does not appear, what exactly is this outside? In order to be able to answer this question, namely the relationship between the being and the appearance, Sartre adds in his analysis the third element: the object. Until now it has been presupposed, but now we are to identify its fundamental position within the conceptual outline just drawn. So, we could inquire for a more precise meaning of what we can hold to be outside and within at the same time, for Sartre himself indicated that what appears, that is, the phenomenon, is only an aspect of the object, but the object is altogether in that aspect and altogether outside of it. By the object, we must understand the being of what appears to us. The

4 *Ibid.*, p. 1. In *L'être et le néant*, p. 16.

following paragraph provides Sartre's main insight into the object to help us solve our previous inquiry:

The object does not possess being, and its existence is not a participation in being, nor any other kind of relation. It *is*. That is the only way to define its manner of being; the object does not hide being, but neither does it reveal being. The object does not hide it, for it would be futile to try to push aside certain qualities of the existent in order to find the being behind them; being is being of them all equally. The object does not reveal being, for it would be futile to address oneself to the object in order to apprehend its being. The existent is a phenomenon; this means that it designates itself as an organized totality of qualities. It designates itself and not its being. Being is simply the condition of all revelation. It is being-for-revealing [*être-pour-dévoiler*] and not revealed being [*être dévoilé*].⁵

The important notion to be addressed here is that of the identity between the object and being: the object does not reveal being, but it is being (and being is all its qualities). In the object we have the foundation of our experiences; it is considered metaphorically to be the hard rock that cannot be drilled beyond. And as the foundation does not reveal being, nevertheless it is the being revealed by the phenomena held as the essence. Being is the condition of all revelations, it is not revealed being, but being for revealing. So, in this sense, we apprehend the existent, the object, as a phenomenon, that is, as an organized totality of qualities. However, in keeping the object as the being itself, Sartre's conceptualization in its ontological scope has cancelled the possibility of dealing with cultural objects, as I hold human actions to be, for they do not designate themselves but a deeper cultural principle that can be taken as the possibility of a particular series of actions. What follows is devoted to developing further this statement.

At this point in the argument, we are ready to introduce the other key concept needed to understand the relationship between the principle or structure and the series of phenomena. Sartre conceives of a dialectical relationship between being and phenomenon in terms of potentiality and actuality: "Thus the outside is opposed in a new way to the inside, and the being which-does-not-appear, to the appearance. Similarly,

5 *Ibid.*, p. xlix. In *L'être et le néant*, "être est simplement la condition de tout dévoilement: il est être-pour-dévoiler et non être dévoilé", p. 15.

a certain “potency” [*puissance*] returns to inhabit the phenomenon and confer on it its very transcendence, a potency to be developed in a series of real or possible appearances [*la puissance d'être développé en une série d'apparitions réelles ou possibles*].⁶ It is important to highlight that the potentiality is given to the appearance by the being which-does-not-appear. That absent being is conversely actualized by the series of phenomena, and this series can be multiplied precisely because the phenomena are the actualization of a certain being that we have already stated to be the being taken as an object, that is, as being-in-itself. This provides the real possibility of having several and distinctive experiences of the same object, and all of them can be understood as actualizations of the intrinsic possibilities of the same object, which is not exhausted in these actualizations.

If we apply the above conceptualization, related to the series and the principle, to the subject/agent of actions, then we hold that actions are apprehended as phenomena and they are in the position of showing to the subject their essence within the phenomenological experience,⁷ after a reflection grounded in self-consciousness, which, according to Sartre, is the way the subject makes possible the being of the appearance: ‘it is the non-reflective consciousness which renders the reflection possible [...] Thus in order to count, it is necessary to be conscious of counting [...] In other words, every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself [*la conscience non positionnelle de soi*].⁸ Only by being aware of what we are doing can we do it and only by doing it consciously can we establish the being of the phenomenological images of our doing to appear. Although that seems true of actions in terms of phenomenological images, it is not the same if we deal with a perceived action taken as an object, which, as we have shown above, is considered to be the being or principle of the series (of actions). Being does not appear itself, for it is an object. So we cannot apprehend the object as present but only as absent.⁹ And here is where the Sartrean concept of nothingness or the being as non-being comes

6 *Ibid.*, p. xlvii. In *L'être et le néant*, p. 13.

7 As Husserl envisaged in terms of ‘being already there’; see Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. li.

8 *Ibid.*, p. liii. In *L'être et le néant*, p. 19.

9 *Ibid.*, p. lx. In *L'être et le néant*, ‘l'être de l'objet est un pur non-être. Il se définit comme un manque’, p. 27.

along, which makes possible the being of the appearances. Thus, being is concluded to be a transphenomenal being, that is, the possibility and the principle of the phenomena. Being for Sartre is thus revealed in its existence through its essence, for the phenomena of the series imply the object as the constitutive principle, which cannot be known in the way its essence is known through the phenomena, but can only be apprehended as a revealing intuition in the consciousness.

After Edmund Husserl, Sartre defines consciousness as the consciousness of something, that is, the consciousness of being conscious.¹⁰ And that consciousness is the perfect match for being, because 'consciousness is a being whose existence posits its essence, and inversely it is consciousness of a being, whose essence implies its existence; that is, in which appearance lays claim to being'.¹¹ And this transphenomenal being for consciousness is itself in itself (*lui-même en soi*). The above indications of Sartre's phenomenology amount to considering the action as an object, the being of our images of it, and, thus, the principle of the series, a principle that is presupposed for the phenomenological images to be possible (and that is in itself, not designating something out of it); and finally, a principle that can only be intuited in our own consciousness, as the possibility of our experience, but that can never be reduced to our very same experience. If the object of consciousness is being-in-itself, the consciousness of the object is being-for-itself. And if the object is an action, then, the consciousness of the action (inasmuch as it is) is its meaning. Then, a series of actions that are meaningful because they share a principle is what can be denominated a 'form of life'. The form of life is, thus, the object that reveals itself insofar as its actions require meaning, for without the latter there would be no actions, that is, it is a being-in-itself-for-itself. As an object, it is being-in-itself, but, as a cultural object, it is being-for-itself, for it is an object only insofar as it is meaningful. Finally, the form of life as constitutive principle is in all the actions, but as their possibility is always beyond them.

It must be concluded that the concept of a form of life solves the Sartrean dichotomies by presenting an ontological unit in which being

10 *Ibid.*, p. lxi. In *L'être et le néant*, 'a conscience est conscience de quelque chose: cela signifie que la transcendance est structure constitutive de la conscience; c'est-à-dire que la conscience naît portée sur un être qui n'est pas elle', p. 28.

11 *Ibid.*, p. lxii.

and consciousness are necessary and complementary to the point of constituting an inseparable unity. The principle of this ontological unity is no longer being as being-in-itself—that is to say, as an external thing that always escapes us when we try to grasp it—but this thing or being-in-itself is now, as a cultural thing, principled by consciousness or for-itself. It is the turn from epistemology to the theory of action. Or, if you will, from knowledge to practical life. Being is cultural and practical, in the sense of being lived out in action. This turn puts Sartre’s philosophy in the twenty-first century, in which dialogue with postmodernism, irrationalism and the technologies of life is essential. The world and humanity have definitely left behind the solidity they presented to classical philosophy, and more than ever is it urgent to understand that we are what we do and that we do what is determined by the being we have wanted to be, even without *knowing* it.

3. Actions: Being and Meaning

I claim that since actions are culturally constituted (as all action takes place in a particular socio-cultural group), then our phenomenological images of them are also ‘structured’ or constituted by that same cultural principle under which the actions are performed.

Following Sartre’s argument, then, actions as existent are being, that is, the possibility of the phenomenon; actions have in turn an essence, but because actions are not a given in nature and rather are embedded in socially organized communities, actions are culturally constituted. Hence, the essence of being is cultural, but being is the possibility of the phenomenon, which is the one that reveals being—the phenomenon reveals being in its essence, what Merleau-Ponty calls the intrinsic characteristics of the object [*sont fondés sur quelque caractère intrinsèque de l’objet*].¹² But because the being of the phenomena is not exhausted within the phenomena, as stated by Sartre, yet it rules over the series of phenomena endowing them with unity, that is why the being of the phenomena is also the being of the series: ‘it requires as phenomenon, a foundation which is transphenomenal. The phenomenon of being requires the transphenomenality of being [*Le phénomène d’être exige*

12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1945]), p. 28. In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 32.

la transphénoménalité de l'être].¹³ And likewise, if the phenomenon reveals the being of an action (which is the essence of an existent), and that being is its cultural constitution (as the conventional behaviours of a form of life), then, as culturally constituted, that action is not isolated but within a network of meanings. This brings us back to the experience of the world in its cultural configuration, retracting it from the reductionist vision of empiricism; or in Merleau-Ponty's words: 'empiricism distort[s] experience by making the cultural world an illusion, when in fact it is in it that our existence finds its sustenance'. This conclusion fits with poststructuralist claims such as that of Michel Foucault, who viewed the subject as a cultural construction,¹⁴ and partially that of Judith Butler related to gender (who denies the equivalence rather frequent in philosophical debates of poststructuralism and constructivism),¹⁵ and generally connects with that trend of philosophical inquiries parting from Friedrich Nietzsche,¹⁶ and together with the hermeneutic tradition itself, that holds that the world is given to us in interpretations.¹⁷ However, if the view that I endorse is in line with the mentioned tradition, actions although cultural products are seen still as objects and thus as part of a cultural ontology. Therefore, drawing from the above, I am prepared to argue in this chapter that the phenomena (as phenomenological images of actions), although made possible by being as existent, are essentially cultural as a single phenomenon as well as a part of a series. Moreover, I show that, just as in a singular action, the unity of the series of phenomena is provided by the action as an object as well as by the essential meaning of the action as it presents itself to our consciousness, so the unity of several actions is provided by a form of life and its essential meaning understood as the principle that rules the former and as their possibility of being.

13 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. L. In *L'être et le néant*, p. 16.

14 Samuel Bagg, 'Beyond the Search for the Subject: An Anti-Essentialist Ontology for Liberal Democracy', *European Journal of Political Theory* (2018), 1–37, advance online publication, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885118763881>.

15 Judith Butler, 'Reply from Judith Butler', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 96:1 (2018), 243–49.

16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

17 For Nietzsche's constructivism, see Justin Remhof, 'Defending Nietzsche's Constructivism about Objects', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 25:4 (2017), 1132–58.

There are here some key concepts that need to be articulated within a wider phenomenological view, in particular that of Merleau-Ponty, for whom phenomenology

is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences [*et tous les problèmes, selon elle, reviennent à définir des essences*] [...] But phenomenology is also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence [*replaces les essences dans l'existence*], and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity' [*leur 'facticité'*] [...] It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is [*c'est l'essai d'une description directe de notre expérience telle qu'elle est*].¹⁸

The question that I next consider in what follows is that if actions are part of the world, and in order to give a proper account of them it requires the phenomenological reduction to essence, and if actions have a cultural genesis and principle (in terms of cultural behaviour) as even evolutionary biology have proved,¹⁹ are we not entitled to infer that our phenomenological images of actions (essence) are culturally formed? I submit that the answer cannot be negative for human actions neither belong to a material nor to an idealistic ontology,²⁰ that is, actions are neither solely material nor ideal objects, but cultural. Therefore, if we hold that phenomenology searches for the essence of actions, and actions are as defined above, then their essence must necessarily entail a cultural principle (understood as the intrinsic meaning of phenomenological images and the identity and unity of the series). This last remark might be thought to conflict with Merleau-Ponty's claim that phenomenology 'places essences back into existence', if we understand existence as a bare life, but certainly is not the case if instead we hold that human life is anchored in a particular community and a particular form of life, and that, consequently, if human existence is given in a cultural world, then the existence is also cultural and thus meaningful: that is, we place essence into existence and existence into essence, without obliterating either of them.

18 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. vii. For original see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. i.

19 See Bagg, 'Beyond the Search for the Subject'.

20 See Stephen Barker and Mark Jago, 'Material Objects and Essential Bundle Theory', *Philosophical Studies*, 175:12 (2018), 2969–86.

But in order to hold that our phenomenological images grasp the action's principle, we need to admit that what we perceive is based on some intrinsic characteristics of objects and not merely associations or transfers from our inner world (as empiricism wants); then we can give a proper account of human life [*le 'monde humain' cesse d'être une métaphore pour redevenir ce qu'il est en effet, le milieu et comme la patrie de nos pensées*].²¹ It is important to emphasize within this phenomenological tradition that in describing our images of actions, we are able to identify intrinsic characteristics of the action performed or being performed, and that these are not characteristics added by the subject or somehow merely a subjective construction. This claim can be supported by the well-known fact that phenomenology contests the universal synthesis of Immanuel Kant, in which the object becomes united in our experience. And that Husserl consequently believed that the object already had unity and that we experience it as united, hence the eidetic analysis means a description and not a reconstruction of the object. That is, our mind does not construct the object by means of psychological synthesis, yet the object is as such present to our intuition or consciousness, and only then can we describe it in its essential features, the noema.²²

So far thus, we have argued that actions are part of the world I have experience of. But actions more than any other aspect of the world are qualified to be considered culturally formed. Therefore, actions, as given in my phenomenological experience, are also culturally formed in terms of being principled by a cultural construction that rules the series of phenomena. So, parting from Sartre, we find in Merleau-Ponty another source for the phenomenological approach I am here endorsing. If Sartre advanced that phenomena must have a principle that gives them structure and identity, we hold with Merleau-Ponty that the phenomenological images of actions are in fact telling us intrinsic characteristics of them, characteristics that informed the images and that can be known by reflection upon its description. And to that point, the horizon of the world is the horizon of the consciousness.

21 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 28. In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 32.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

4. The Image as a Synthetic Unit

Sartre, in his work *L'Imaginaire* (translated as *The Psychology of Imagination*, 1948), in which he follows Husserl and Heidegger in crucial points, proposes that imagination is the essential structure of human consciousness, although not its only function. In this way, consciousness is a stream of images with which we (as situated consciousness) present objects to ourselves. These images are syntheses of different aspects and are not inside our mind, a fallacy that he calls the 'illusion of immanence', but the images themselves are our consciousness, that is, they are the matter and form of our consciousness.²³ Following Husserl, he distinguishes between matter (or *hylé*), which can be physical or psychical, and form, which is always that of being a representative entity, that is, the form of the image is to be an analogue of the object to which it is intentionally directed. This relationship is the intentionality of consciousness. Thus, to describe images is to describe how consciousness, in terms of 'complex structures', 'intends certain objects'.²⁴ Specifically, therefore, the images whose material is psychical, the French philosopher will tell us, are what we call mental images,²⁵ but he introduces within the group of images equally those

23 Sartre's criticism of the so-called 'illusion of immanence' can be traced back to the philosophy of Henri Bergson. See Henry Somers-Hall, 'Bergson and the Development of Sartre's Thought', *Research in Phenomenology*, 47:1 (2017), 85–107.

24 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948 [1940]), p. 8.

25 The concept of mental image, although it is the hegemonic psychological concept until the nineteenth century, already in the times of Sartre was seriously discredited by the incipient behaviourism, a tendency defended equally by relevant philosophers of the analytic tradition such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle, who rejected the concept of mental image as the meaning of linguistic signs. It will be in the 1960s and 70s, with the emergence of the computational and functionalist theory of the mind, that the revival of the mental image concept occurs. Briefly, I will point out that the debate about the nature of mental images is still open today. This debate is broadly established between three proposals: (1) The quasi-pictorial or analogous theory, defended by Stephen Kosslyn, William Thompson and Giorgio Ganis, in *The Case for Mental Imagery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), which models the image as a digital photo in which the spatial distances of real objects are maintained. (2) The propositional-descriptive theory represented by Zenon Pylyshyn, who opened the debate in 1973 and who refutes the concept of mental images and proposes instead a sort of computational representation of unknown lexicon and syntax, as a *mentalese* (in Pylyshyn, 'Return of the Mental Image: Are There Really Pictures in the Brain?', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 7:3 [2003], 113–18). (3) The enactive theory, which conceives the mental image as a

that are constituted by a physical material, such as paintings, sculptures, imitations, performances, and so on.

As is well known, the French philosopher made an early distinction between two levels of consciousness, that would be a fundamental concept in his work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and that he would never abandon throughout his later work (perhaps with the exception of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*). These two levels of consciousness are that of pre-reflective consciousness and that of reflective consciousness. Although this distinction becomes more complex in later works, briefly, for the purposes of this section, it is sufficient to indicate that the pre-reflective consciousness is that which serves as a condition for the possibility of reflective consciousness, and in which a judgment has not yet been realized about the existence or not of the object; for that reason, he also denominates it non-positional consciousness (a notion that cast aside the Freudian unconscious). Reflective consciousness, also called positional consciousness, on the other hand, expresses a judgment about the object and is built on pre-reflective consciousness. The pre-reflective consciousness is the foundation of the reflective, and, as he says in *Being and Nothingness*, the cogito of Descartes is not really the ultimate foundation, because the cogito in the expression 'I think, then I exist' can only be given as a reflection on the consciousness of thinking. And that thought prior to reflection is a non-reflective thought, which in *The Psychology of Imagination* equates to the imaginative consciousness. The image is considered to be the essential structure of consciousness and thought, and that is why Sartre wrote: 'The concept can appear as pure thought on the reflective level, and on the non-reflective level, as an image.'²⁶ The concept as non-reflective consciousness is an image, therefore, constitutes our thinking and this, as has been stated by different authors recently, relates it to the foundation of thought made by Johann Fichte through the logic of images,²⁷ who, on this background, could

cognitive function parallel to that of perception, that is, by means of the activation of the same processes that are activated when we have before us an object to perceive; see Nigel J. T. Thomas, 'Are Theories of Imagery Theories of Imagination? An Active Perception Approach to Conscious Mental Content', *Cognitive Science*, 23:2 (1999), 207–45. See also, Robert R. Holt, 'Imagery: The Return of the Ostracised', *American Psychologist*, 19:4 (1964), 254–66.

26 Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, p. 162.

27 Sartre's approach resembles Fichte's Science of Knowledge (*Wissenschaftslehre*), where he supports a logic of images. For Fichte, mental images are pre-reflective

affirm 'that nothing can get into the understanding except through the power of imagination'.²⁸

Since images constitute our thinking at a pre-reflective level of consciousness, before elucidating their role in the understanding of action, it is necessary to show what are the elements that intervene in the creation of the image as a synthetic unity. These elements are intentionality, knowledge, feelings and movement.

Some of the key concepts used by Sartre in his phenomenology are taken from Husserl, as is the case with intentionality, a concept that for the French author was undoubtedly one of the great contributions of Husserl (drawing on Brentano's idea). This concept, as it is known, allows a third way to the alternatives of idealism or realism. The real, external object, which is posited as existing and philosophically necessary, as Fichte also maintained (at least in his works of the Jena period),²⁹ is an object that consciousness reaches by presenting it as an analogue, that is, consciousness presents itself as an analogue or representative of the real object. To identify the object of consciousness is what Sartre, with the phenomenological tradition, called intentionality: 'The mental image does envision a *real thing* [*une chose réelle*], which exists among other things in the world of perception. But it envisions that thing by means of a mental content [*à travers un contenu psychique*].'³⁰ This mental content is what Sartre calls the analogue, which is 'as an equivalent of perception' when we cannot bring to us directly the object

thinking on which are based our reflections, according to Alessandro Giovanni Bertinetto: 'The intellect, for Fichte, is the understanding of this structure that we have just performed in virtue of our reflection on the image. [...] The basic and genetic structure of thinking is the *image* as synthesis of intuition and concept and as unity/difference with the being.' See Bertinetto, 'The Role of Image in Fichte's Transcendental Logic', in *La question de la logique dans l'idéalisme allemand, Europaea Memoria: Studien und Texte zur Geschichte der europäischen Ideen*, ed. by Guillaume Lejeune (Bruxelles: Olms Verlag, 2013), pp. 94–108 (p. 100). For a comparison between Sartre's and Fichte's philosophies, see Lucia Theresia Heumann, *Ethik und Ästhetik bei Fichte und Sartre: Fichte-Studien, Supplementa* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009).

28 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. by A. E. Kroeger (London: Trübner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1889), p. 231.

29 See Tom Rockmore, 'Fichte, German Idealism and the Thing in Itself', in *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism*, ed. by Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 9–20 (pp. 17–18).

30 Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, p. 76. In *L'imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940), p. 110.

as a perception.³¹ But in addition, he maintained that the appearance of the object intended by the consciousness was made possible by elements that formed its materiality. The first one is the knowledge of the object that the consciousness intends to present to itself; in fact, all intentionality is intentional knowledge, for we can only think about what we know and in the way we know it, so the consciousness presents the object according to the knowledge it has of it, and it is, in fact, an act, for 'it is what I want to represent to myself', and thus, 'an image could not exist without a knowledge that constitutes it'.³² And that is why the knowledge we have of an object precedes the knowledge as a constituent of the image, for the former is only knowledge of relations and meaning, while the latter is an imaginative knowledge: the knowledge in a free state (not yet contributing to the synthetic unity of the image), as mere meaning, becomes imaginative knowledge in order to foster an image-consciousness. This knowledge, as we shall see below, is given by the situation in which consciousness is found as being-in-the-world, a concept borrowed from Heidegger and developed by Sartre in his own particular way.

The feelings are also consciousness of something; that is to say, they also intend an object that is thus transcendent to our consciousness. Because he distinguishes between reflective and non-reflective consciousness, feelings enter also within this distinction. The feeling of hatred is not the consciousness of hatred: it is the consciousness of Paul as hateful (Sartre's example). That means that the non-reflective consciousness is already charged with certain feelings evoked together with the object as analogue: an emotive consciousness that only by reflection becomes object of itself, or in Sartre's words, 'a feeling is not an empty consciousness [*une conscience vide*]: it is already a possession [*il est déjà possession*]. Those hands present themselves to me under their affective form.'³³ And thus, when we desire an object, because we can only desire what already has moved us affectively, '[my] desire is a blind effort to possess on the level of representation what I already possess on the affective level'.³⁴ With regards to movements (what

31 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 101. In *L'imaginaire*, p. 141.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

brings us closer to the envisioning and performance of actions), the kinaesthetic impressions that we have when we write, for example, are analogues of an imaginative consciousness, since, for a movement to be completed, the image-consciousness of the complete movement seems to be required. Referring to the looping movement when drawing an eight, Sartre illustrates the point with this remark: 'If I envisioned eight as a static form through the movement, it will naturally be this form only that will be unreally visualized on the real kinaesthetic impressions'.³⁵ In this case the protentions of the drawing (to use a word indebted to Husserl's phenomenology of temporality), that is, the movement of a loop, can be grasped only if it is operated alongside an imaginative loop, and the direction of the loop is the meaning of the movement (that means also that knowledge about how to draw an eight is required).

We are now prepared to face the role that imaging consciousness can have for the understanding of a particular human action. Initially I follow Sartre in his description of the act of imitation or the actor's performance, a description that provides an important strategy for understanding the action carried out by another person. When an actor plays a role, that is, performs an impersonation, the body movement and everything that the actor wears and does become signs that carry meaning; our consciousness of those signs motivates the image-consciousness of the character that the actor is interpreting. It is not perception itself that causes our image of the character, but our consciousness of the meaning of the signs, the latter being real objects. The essential role of the sign is that of guiding and orientating the consciousness: 'They must clarify and guide consciousness.'³⁶ The consciousness of meaning, aided by the knowledge that we have of those signs, motivates the imaginative consciousness by which we bring before us not the actor but the character that he is impersonating. But the crucial point is 'how there takes place the functional transformation of the perceptive object from the state of significant material to that of representative material'.³⁷ Actually, it is the affective meaning, that Sartre calls the *sens*, what gives unity and density to the signs perceived, that is, the intentional knowledge of the signs awakens an affective reaction which

35 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

is incorporated in the intentional synthesis from the very beginning; this *sens* is a feeling which constitutes our imaging consciousness of the object as a particular character (expression of the object's presence), in the same way that, while one painting of Venice makes us feel that it has grasped the *sens* of Venice, another painting does not (the *sens* is thus the emotions that accompany the image-consciousness and provides its identity and presence). Therefore, according to the above, the material of the imitation is the human body, which is the analogue of the unreal object (the image-consciousness of the actor's performing character): 'The transformation that occurs here is like that we discussed in the dream: the actor is completely caught up, inspired, by the unreal [*l'acteur est happé, inspiré tout entier par l'irréel*]. It is not the character who becomes real in the actor, it is the actor who becomes unreal in his character [*c'est l'acteur qui s'irréalise dans son personnage*].'³⁸ The actor himself with his body, his words and affections becomes an analogue of the character. And the same happens when the actions of other people are imitated; in that case, the actions we perform are analogues to the images of those actions (as synthetic unity of our knowledge and feelings). So, by imitating the actions with which we identify ourselves, we become unreal through their analogues, and we are possessed by their unreality.³⁹

The phenomenological description that Sartre presents to us of how we understand an action supports our conviction that consciousness can give us the keys to the study of human actions. So far I have focused on the explanation of how our imaging consciousness accesses the fundamental features of the character represented by the actor. And I added that in a certain way it can be understood that in society, when we imitate the behaviours of others and even our own, like the actors, we use our body, feelings and words as analogues of the action that our imaging consciousness has brought in front of itself. From now on,

38 *Ibid.*, p. 278. In *L'imaginaire*, p. 368.

39 Flynn insisted on the use of the word 'irreality', a closer translation of the French *irréalité*, instead of 'unreality', which, however, I here deploy because it is used in the English version of the work and thus also the quotations I make from it. In any case, it is important to understand unreal/irreal as the object of our imaging consciousness which is presented to us in its absence in opposition to the real objects of perceptual consciousness. See Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 108.

I shall call the image of an action a praxical image, that is to say, that activity by which consciousness intends a certain action as an absent object.

There is, however, still a need to discuss how our consciousness of action responds to action as a real object, that is, as being-in-itself. It seems obvious that if our image-consciousness is constituted by our intentionality, knowledge and affections, a description of it, can say much about us as subjects, but can it tell us also something about the action itself, that is, about the characteristics of the action and who is doing it? In this last sense, it must be advanced that for the phenomenological ontology of Sartre, consciousness, due precisely to the intentionality, captures the essential features of the object (in this case, of the action) through a noematic reduction and insofar as we intend it as a distinctive object. Thinking of a behaviour like eating with chopsticks, first requires that we have knowledge about that practice so that we can bring it before us, and in fact, we will bring it in an affective modality, be it attraction, interest, rejection, and so on. But the truth is that our knowledge may not be complete and correct, for our feelings may be ill-founded. As we said above, therefore, the imaging consciousness of that practice will say much about the subject and something general about the real object, the being-in-itself, which will not be exhaustively assimilated. So, what guarantees can we expect for the knowledge of an action? The difficulty would be that the real object that we intend to bring before us, as an object of perception is exhausted in its externality and lack of meaning, and as an image, requires that the real world be denied or placed in parentheses, thus constituting a world in which this image makes sense. That image-consciousness can only appear if the real has been annihilated and has been made a situated world, Sartre will tell us. But what is the relationship between the image and the world, and both with regard to the real? And how can the consciousness of my actions teach me something about myself and my world, if not about the action itself as an image?

This means that to be able to think of an action, I must put the action itself in parentheses, and induce a totality in which such action could have meaning. That is how Sartre put it regarding an image in general:

An image, being a negation of the world from a particular point of view, can never appear except on *the foundation of the world* and in connection

with the foundation [*ne peut jamais apparaître que sur un fond de monde et en liaison avec le fond*] [...] it is just this being-in-the-world [*être-dans-le-monde*] which is the necessary condition for the imagination.⁴⁰

This totalization is not of the whole world but of a given situation or the world from a perspective, in which this and other actions could be constituted as a whole. Such a totalization does not refer to the universal man capable of performing the particular action we want to understand, but a man in a given situation; that is why to that totalization I call the anthropical image as the specific image of human being that is projected in the particular action with which there is some identification. This anthropical image is then also the correlate principle of a certain form of life, understood as the set of actions as real objects or beings-in-themselves. In the next section, I turn to these two concepts and how they narrow down the claim for the revealing of a form of life as a meaningful being.

5. Praxical and Anthropical Images

So far, we have characterized the phenomenological method used by Sartre and we have faced some of the questions that arose when using it to understand human actions. We must emphasize that from the phenomenological approach proposed by Sartre in his early works and especially in *The Psychology of Imagination*, the study of actions, such as that of objects, seems unable to show more than a certain intelligibility of one's consciousness and the world within which the objects are intended. It tells more about the subject than about the world and the objects. Nevertheless, already in the mentioned work, an ontological approach is envisaged, indebted to Heidegger, which in *Being and Nothingness* will take on greater clarity and definition. It is from this essentially dialectical and negative approach that I propose we should now depart for the study of human actions and the outline of a philosophy of forms of life.

Before examining human actions from the phenomenological method, it is necessary to indicate the core problem from which some of its difficulties arise. The problem can be expressed through the assertive proposition that 'consciousness cannot be a faithful instrument

40 Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, p. 269. In *L'imaginaire*, p. 356.

of investigation of external reality'. The phenomenological approach proposed by Sartre is an approach in which the image-consciousness teaches us nothing. This idea is repeated on different occasions throughout his early work, both in *The Psychology of Imagination* (1948) and in *What is Literature?* (1949). And, in fact, it means that we cannot grasp out of the image anything that we did not know before or that we have not posited. But is it true that the image does not teach us anything? Does not perhaps teach us the limits of our knowledge and the intentionality of our feelings? And even more, does it not teach us the partiality of our perspective and, therefore, the situation from which we realize our understanding? At the very least, the image teaches us about our consciousness and our form of life through a reflective position. And although we admit that the image does not teach us details of the real object and does not even teach us anything general that we did not already know in some way (due to the feature of unreality of the object), the truth is that the constitutive intentionality of the image does teach us something, I claim: it teaches us what we should hold as *the essential and defining elements in the object*, otherwise, we could not even think of it. For example, when we think of chopsticks, we have *in front of us* an image of long or short sticks, white or coloured, being used or not, and so on; but the essential features of the chopsticks can be described if, in fact, we are thinking of chopsticks. Sartre himself takes this ontological position from *Being and Nothingness* onwards, and clearly in *The Family Idiot* as this quotation proves:

While a part of the object *is revealed as it is*, by revealing to us what we are (that is, our relation to it and our anchorage), we can hope, at the end of an extended quest, to achieve that reciprocity of position (the object defining us to the same degree that we define the object) which is the truth of the human condition.⁴¹

According to this, and taking Sartre's theoretical apparatus further, the image can lead us to understand not only certain ontological laws of human action as a cultural product, but it can also show us the way to understand the content or meaning of actions principled by the form of

⁴¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821–1857*, Vol. V, trans. by Carol Cosman (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993 [1972]), p. 5. The italics are mine.

life as a synthetic totalization, that is, as an anthropological image, pointing thus more than to a general anthropology (which would be the aim of Sartre's quotation above, that is, *the human condition*), to a philosophy of forms of life.

Returning, then, to the difficulties that this task presents, it is convenient, to begin with, to draw attention to the image that the agent has of his own action, for, by means of it, I will relate to the three criteria or laws for the study of actions. In this case, we refer to the image that the agent has formed in his pre-reflective consciousness and by which the action to be performed appears before him. But this action, as a praxical image, is not exactly what is realized in reality, for the real action, with its real consequences, is formed as an analogue to the praxical image, following Sartre in his description of the impersonation and the works of art. And, in fact, extracting consequences for the study of action, the praxical image could be the analogue of a real action, and, at the same time, the unreal object that is intended to be *translated* into reality by the representative entity or analogue that is the action performed by the agent himself. In this case (as well as in the case that the praxical image does not become a real action), the agent, as a real person, would have become unreal, since he would have been possessed by the unreal object that is the praxical image. But the unreality of the agent, insofar as it depends on the unreality of the praxical image that he tries to bring to reality, can only be given by the postulate of a world in which this image is possible and from which it receives its meaning. The praxical image, therefore, to appear, presupposes the constitution and negation of reality as a world: 'to posit the world as a world or to "negate" it [*poser le monde comme monde ou le néantir*] is one and the same thing'.⁴² And that *world* postulated by the praxical image as the whole with respect to the part, that *world*, I say, is an enveloping totalization with respect to the agent, and, as such, is prior to the praxical image and, therefore, it is its condition of possibility. This totalization is, thus, a unit of meaning that, as the motive of all its possible images, is equally unreal. The possibility of the appearance of an image requires that totalization, which constitutes the intentionality, knowledge and feelings of the potential images.

42 Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, p. 267. In *L'imaginaire*, p. 354.

This totalization is, from the point of view of the agent, necessary for the realization of his action, for it is necessary for the appearance of the image of his intended action or praxical image.⁴³ I take this as a necessary condition for understanding and performing actions, and I denominate it the *law of totalization*. In this sense, the image requires an identification with the *world* that it is a part of. And this identification is reproduced when the agent thinks about the action, for the action arises and is made possible by this totalization, which, in turn, is the set of possible actions to which we refer as a form of life. But this form of life, as an unreal whole, expresses a way of being human, or set of all possible praxical images. As we said above, to give more precision to my conceptualization, I call anthropical image to that enveloping totalization. And, just as between the image and the totalization there is a relation of identification, the agent establishes (or reinforces) an identification with the whole when performing an action that is made possible by it. But when this identification does not obtain, but the action is required, the agent becomes alienated (this is an issue I will deal with in following chapters). We can refer to this principle or law of action as the *law of identification*.⁴⁴ The actions that are performed under this identification with the totalization tend to be constituted in proper habits, and these are those that, in turn, reinforce the form of life as a totality. And since the image is made possible by that synthetic unit that I have called anthropical image as a correlate of a form of life, the identification with it entails an imitation of those actions that appear as images, whether of actions performed by the agent himself

43 Following Sartre, I distinguish also between totality, as a fixed and external whole, and totalization, viewed as a whole in which the subjects integrate themselves progressively throughout identification. The former, I use in relation to actions and forms of life (being-in-itself or what is seen as necessary), and the latter, in relation to praxical and anthropical images (being-for-itself or what is seen as possibilities). For reasons that will become clearer as the reading progresses, because the form of life is a being-in-itself-for-itself, as a totalization it is at the same time always a totality, in the sense of containing possibilities that become necessary and vice versa, necessities that are the condition of possibility of further integration.

44 This law of identification has been endorsed throughout the history of philosophy by many authors, but recently, in the philosophy of action and mind, it is probably Harry G. Frankfurt who is its most prominent supporter, interpreting it as a 'second order desire' (reflection on and identification with the first order desire), which is the key concept for a compatibilist theory of free will, as I have already mentioned in the 'Introduction'. See Harry G. Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', *Journal of Philosophy*, 68:1 (1971), 5–20.

or another agent. As the possible actions for the agent depend on the synthetic totalization that constitutes their images, the *law of imitation* presupposes in the agents a tendency to imitate the actions of their form of life through analogues of their praxical images, which in turn, takes possession of them (as Sartre viewed the possession of actors by the unreal, the character represented).⁴⁵ These three laws, or criteria, of totalization, identification and imitation, I claim, are necessary to understand human action, which turns into habits throughout the process. It provides us with an understanding of human action from the point of view of the agents themselves, as well as their motivations for action, since it is the synthetic totalization that I call anthropical image, insofar as it is the condition of possibility of all images, which must be taken as the motivational principle of the latter; the real action as a being-in-itself is never a motive for the image.

However, the laws of action that have been described do not yet form a philosophy of forms of life, because this requires not only the way in which we perform the actions, but also precise contents that can become a description of what a human being is. A general anthropology would then require universal contents, a demand that we have tacitly denied when we realized (taking Sartre's ideas further) that our images constitute a synthetic unit or anthropical image that is the experiential correlate of a form of life. That is to say, and here we echo the ontological stance of Sartre, our praxical images and our anthropical image, although they are not caused by the actions of the form of life as real objects (the form of life would be a set of actions with a common ground), they do presuppose their existence, and the images necessarily appear as an illumination of that real world from which they distance themselves to take perspective.⁴⁶ Therefore, the image, although it does not correspond to the action as a real object in its details, does bring before us the intentional meaning, which can be taken as the essence

45 Among the authors who have argued in favour of a law of imitation as the principle of social actions is Gabriel Tarde, *Le lois de l'imitation* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1921), and William McDougall, *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (Kitchener, ONT: Batoche Books, 2001 [1919]).

46 Sartre seems to follow closely here, as in other parts of his thought, what Fichte endorsed in his doctrine expressed in *The Science of Knowledge*: 'image is not at all possible without a thing; and a thing—at least for the Ego—is not possible without an image' (p. 225).

of the object in question.⁴⁷ Thus the meaning of our images, made possible by that synthetic unit of our consciousness that I have called the anthropical image, always presents us with those praxical images that pertain to an imaginative totalization correlated with the actions of our form of life. So a general anthropology would be limited by those laws that we have called the laws of totalization, identification and imitation, because the agents only conceive and imitate actions that are part of the anthropical image with which they identify themselves. In this way, a description of the contents of human actions can only be carried out through an approach of partial totalities, that is, through a phenomenological ontology of forms of life. This does not mean that the agent cannot think of actions that belong to other forms of life, because, of course, as agents, we intend actions according to our real exposure to other forms of life. This only means that in order for these praxical images to be meaningful and to be freely and spontaneously brought into the real, the agent seems to require a kind of identification with them and with the anthropical image that principles them.

6. Form of Life and New Realism's Ontology: A Discussion

In this section, I would like to submit this phenomenological ontology of forms of life to confront with the recently emerged trend in philosophical ontology known as new realism. In refuting the homogeneous notion of reality as well as the status given to actions within this contemporary philosophy, I conclude that the phenomenological images of our actions are already invested with 'cultural' meaning and that they are ontologically diverse from their principle of being as actuality and potentiality respectively.

The new realism is a contemporary contribution of philosophers from different countries gathered around the idea of an ontology against that

⁴⁷ The Sartrean onto-phenomenology appears as a third way between phenomenology and speculative realism. For this debate, see Lorenzo Girardi, 'Phenomenological Metaphysics as a Speculative Realism', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 48:4 (2017), 336–49; and Dan Zahavi, 'The End of What? Phenomenology vs. Speculative Realism', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 24:3 (2016), 289–309.

of postmodernism and hermeneutics. Their more outstanding members are Maurizio Ferraris, who wrote the *Manifesto of New Realism* in 2012,⁴⁸ Giuliano Torrenco and Markus Gabriel. In this section, I mean to present and discuss briefly some of Ferraris' proposals on social ontology and human actions.

Ferraris shares new realism's ontology in his social approach. According to new realism, everything that is the case is real, and thus exists.⁴⁹ Ferraris makes a first distinction between what he calls ω -reality: 'what is there whether we know it or not, and which manifests itself both as a resistance and as positivity',⁵⁰ and ϵ -reality: 'the reality linked to what we think we know about what there is'.⁵¹ The first is an ontological reality, and refers to facts, while the second is an epistemological reality, and indicates the relation between the subject and the first type of reality, and the way in which we know it, which also is real regardless if it is true or false. In this fashion, new realism overlaps epistemology and ontology. New realism, as seen in Ferraris, distinguishes reality as facts from reality as it is known by subjects. If there are facts, then reality cannot be reduced to interpretations modelled by the subject, and this assertion goes against what Markus Gabriel calls constructivism: 'Constructivism assumes that there are absolutely no facts in themselves and that we construct all facts through our multifaceted forms of discourse and scientific methods. There is no reality beyond our language games or discourses.'⁵² Within this ontology, Ferraris distinguishes four categories of objects: 1) Natural objects, which exist in time and space independently of the subjects; 2) Ideal objects, which exist outside space and time independently of the subjects; 3) Artefacts, which exist in time and space depending on the subjects for their genesis; and 4) Social objects, which exist in time and space depending on the subjects for their genesis and their persistence.⁵³ So, they claim that there are natural (stones, water, etc.) and ideal objects (numbers), which do not depend

48 Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto of New Realism* (New York: SUNY Press, 2015 [2012]).

49 Markus Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. 7.

50 Maurizio Ferraris, 'New Realism, Documentality and the Emergence of Normativity', in *Metaphysics and Ontology Without Myths*, ed. by F. Bacchini, S. Caputo and M. Dell'Utri (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 110–24 (p. 111).

51 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

52 Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, p. 3.

53 Ferraris, 'New Realism, Documentality and the Emergence of Normativity', p. 112.

on the subjects existing, while artefacts and social objects depend on subjects existing. Therefore, new realism's conceptualization poses to my proposal some unavoidable questions, regarding 1) The status of actions in terms of being and meaning, or meaningful beings; and 2) The ontological status of praxical and anthropical images.

Regarding the ontological status of actions, for new realism actions, as depending on subjects, are social objects themselves, for promises and promulgations of constitutions are both social objects. And that they are objects means they are entities, which in addition, are brought about within a social community and life. The existence and persistence of these objects depend on subjects existing, although as objects they are real, regardless of our knowledge of them, and thus they belong to the ω -reality; so, if actions, as endorsed in this chapter, are culturally constituted objects, are they also real regardless of our apprehension of them? The question requires that we focus on the phenomenological distinction between existence and essence in relation to actions. If new realism proposes the definition of social objects within the ontology in which objects are facts independently of our knowledge of them, I have argued that although actions are objects as existent and as the possibility of our praxical images, at the same time, only through our praxical images of them can they be (in essence), for I can only recognize an action as such if I apprehend it in its essential image, that is, in its cultural meaning. However, the possibility of their being existent is not reduced to my apprehending of them, but also requires the form of life in which that action has been generated, which entails the apprehension of the series of praxical images that are in potentiality within the anthropical image. In other words, actions are not isolated facts, which the sole denomination of facts requires, and actions would be isolated indeed if it were not because they are meaningful, and their meanings are connected in a network of connotations that constitute that image (essentially meaningful) that I denominate the anthropical image. Only by looking at actions as being and meaning, I argue, can we make sense not only of actions as essentially cultural objects, but also of the forms of life they constitute. Hence, cultural constructivism requires ontology and vice versa: the study of intrinsically meaningful objects. Therefore, because I put forward in previous sections of this chapter that actions are non-being if they are not for us and they are not given

in their essential meaning to us in our experience of them, I refute new realism's view on the grounds of this lack of insight regarding actions being intrinsically cultural and thus essentially connected to a network of meanings: bare actions are merely existent, non-being.

Regarding the ontological status of praxical and anthropical images, for new realism everything is real, and even our thoughts are facts,⁵⁴ in the sense that they have a certain ontological consistency regardless of our apprehension of them and thus beyond epistemological considerations, as expressed by Markus Gabriel: 'New realism assumes that thoughts about facts exist with the same right as the facts at which our thoughts are directed. Thoughts about facts are just more facts.'⁵⁵ If what Gabriel says is correct, then we can infer that actions are facts and in the very same logic the meaning of the actions as given to me in my apprehension of them is also a fact: The meaning of the praxical image is a fact. But what does it mean that the meaning is a fact? Although it is a sort of given, we can define a fact as something that exists (minimal definition). So, according to this definition, at least, at first sight, we cannot say that meaning exists, as in the essential meaning that we take the praxical and the anthropical image for, and the reason is that they precisely are the essence of an existent. However, we could call the essence also the being of the object (actions) as Sartre does, and thus we could rightly say that the being of the form of life is the anthropical image and the being of the actions are the praxical images. Could this allow us to conclude that both praxical and anthropical images are facts? We must bear in mind one observation before we answer that question. As can be derived from the definition above, facts are all facts, there are not types of facts or different ways of being a fact. Gabriel himself has been quoted conveying that 'thoughts about facts are just more facts'. Hence, if we give our approval to the definition of praxical and anthropical images as facts, we are saying that they have the same ontological consideration as bare actions (existent) and forms of life, and also that there are no distinctions between them, which we have proved above are respectively the series and the principle of the series. However, that does not seem a sound argument for, on the one hand, if the meaning and the object

54 Bernardo Kastrup, 'On the Plausibility of Idealism: Refuting Criticisms', *Disputatio*, 9:44 (2017), 13–34.

55 Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, p. 6.

are equally facts, the relationship between being and essence is broken down, which in itself could be accepted, but not the consequence of it: if both are facts, both can be apprehended separately and with no relation to each other, but how can I apprehend a meaning independently of the object or the essence independently of the existent? And likewise, on the other hand, if praxical and anthropical images are facts (because they are meanings or thoughts), that ontological homogenization erases also the different modes of being from each of them. If both are meaningful images that stand for the essential meaning of an existent, the relationship between them is of potentiality-actuality, for the praxical image is the meaningful image I apprehend in my phenomenological experience of an action, but the anthropical image is the principle of it and of the remainder of the series, which unifies the praxical images from their being in potentiality. The praxical image actualizes both the anthropical image, as the ultimate meaning that every praxical image within the series connotes, and the very being of the action in our consciousness as praxical image. Likewise, the form of life is the action in potentiality and both actions and forms of life are respectively in a potentiality-actuality relationship with the praxical and the anthropical images. Hence, the potentiality is a way of being different from that of the actuality which gives sense to the relationship between our actions and our forms of life and the anthropical images and the praxical images, but if we cancel this difference by means of rendering them mere facts, then we lose sight of the principles and remain attached to the isolated members of the series as bare objects and absurd phenomena.

7. Conclusion: Form of Life as Being-in-Itself-for-Itself

However, one of the main objections we could raise to my exposition of this phenomenological ontology is an objection concerning the relation between being and meaning. Is it even possible to look at the objects as being and as meaning at the same time? Are meaning and being identical? Is there a causal relationship between them or any other sort of generating process? I believe that all those questions make sense, and they need some answers to get some secure grounds for the view endorsed above, to the extent that the soundness of my arguments depends on them. I would like to start by facing first the questions

related to the possibility of the conjunction of being and meaning, and thereafter those questions raised above concerning the type of relation between being and meaning.

Regarding the possibility of the conjunction of being and meaning, first, I have to clarify that I endorse this view only in what actions refer to, not to all objects. So, actions are objects, but not all objects are actions. Can being and meaning go together? To start with, I believe it would be useful to take a few moments to reflect on our intuitions on this matter as expressed by commonsense and conveyed by our cultural creations. It is hard to deny that on many occasions, when looking at some people's behaviour, even if we apprehend the behaviour as behaviour, nonetheless, we lack the 'type of knowledge' that renders it meaningful to us, this being the type of knowledge about what they are that is not something outside of them. That is, if we fail to grasp the meaning of their moving their arm in a certain way, then we fail to recognize this cultural meaning and miss seeing the movement as a greeting. Here I have to emphasize that the meaning, as argued above, is not a kind of label attached, a view which I refute altogether. On the contrary, I endorse the view that, in cultural settings, meaning is intrinsic to being, as identical to its essence (meaningful phenomena), to the extent that meaning is what being is for; and, in turn, being makes it possible for the meaning to appear. In terms of logic, only what exists can bear meaning. I could draw from Bertrand Russell's logical existents,⁵⁶ which were considered the possibility of the predicative component in a proposition, but I think there is no need for that at the present point of my argument, for, from the very same phenomenological tradition starting with Sartre, I can suggest a solution. For Sartre, being was held both as existent and as essence, then to be is to exist in a sense, for the object must exist as condition *sine qua non* to be apprehended in its being, considered now as essence. In a like manner, an action, in order to have meaning, first has to be, in the sense of existing; but Sartre's own account gives us also the authority to conclude that what we apprehend is actually the essence and not the action in its existence, as bare action. Therefore, in order to be for us, as subjects of phenomenological experiences, actions have to

56 See Russell Wahl, 'Russell's Theory of Meaning and Denotation and "On Denoting"', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 31:1 (1993), 71–94; Mark Textor, 'Towards a Neo-Brentanian Theory of Existence', *Philosophers' Imprint*, 17:6 (2017), 1–20.

bear some meaning intertwined with the other members of the series. That is to say, although, on the grounds of its own being—as existent—an action only counts for us as culturally meaningful.

The proper question to ask at this point is how is it possible that we did not recognize the meaning of actions if we nonetheless are able to recognize them as behaviour? To deal with this objection, we need to recall Sartre's phenomenology as stated above regarding the principle of the series. We can have the image of somebody moving his arm, and miss that somebody is greeting us, even if moving his arm is the same as greeting us, and not a different action.⁵⁷ And that is because even if the praxical image is intrinsically meaningful, as image it requires the identification of the essential meaning that, in turn, requires and presupposes the totality of images or the anthropical image, that is, the principle of the series, in the same way that the praxical image in relation to the action held as being requires and presupposes the form of life. If we think of simple actions such as shaking hands, holding hands or giving a hug, all of them as represented here are objects that only through our phenomenological experience can be apprehended with meaning. For instance, shaking hands means a greeting, holding hands and giving a hug means a way of showing affection for others;⁵⁸ that is, they are perceived objects that, however, convey a meaning. But that meaning is cultural, and that, in turn, entails that it connotes other meaning held as its principle; and more importantly, as a consequence of my arguments, supported by Sartre's phenomenology, we can only know the meaning of the praxical image, which emerges from the anthropical image as meaningful unit, but remains out of the reach of our knowledge, the actions as being object and the form of life as a series of actions/objects. What we can know of in relation to actions can thus only be given in our praxical images (subjective experience), and what we can know of in relation to our forms of life can only be given in the anthropical image (the image made of all possible praxical images, and the meaning connoted by its series of meanings).

57 John Schwenkler, 'Understanding "Practical Knowledge"', *Philosophers' Imprint*, 15:15 (2015), 1–32.

58 Although it falls out of the scope of this work, from this statement can be inferred the difference between human actions and animal behaviour: animal behaviour does not bear meaning, let alone cultural meaning; according to this view, their behaviour would be closed up in itself, as bare actions, in terms of perceptual stimulus-response.

Concerning the relation between being and meaning, I think that their relationship is less problematic once we have come to terms with the previous question. As has already been argued, actions are objects whose being (essence) can be revealed in the praxical image. That they are objects has to be put in relation with the consideration that they are cultural objects (culturally produced), so in the praxical image (its essence), we apprehend the meaning of an action, which is the cultural knowledge we can have of it, and from which we can know the principle of the series, which is the anthropical image, as the meaning connoted by the intrinsic meaning of the praxical image. Therefore, meanings connote meanings and phenomena intend actions; there is not a causal or generating process between meaning and phenomena, they are two sides of the same coin. But, of course, as the two sides, they require each other: being for meaning, and meaning for being. And together, drawing from Sartre, the praxical and anthropical images are revealed being and meaning, whereas actions and forms of life are being and meaning for revealing.

The form of life as a being, and therefore, as a totality, must be understood as the principle that constitutes its series of actions. This distinction is based on Sartre's distinction explored above between the ontological principle and the series of phenomena that appear before our consciousness. Now, if the form of life is both action and meaning (or meaningful actions), so are the subjects, as incarnations of the former. Meaning is the consciousness we have of our actions, what they mean for us; for they all have a meaning, otherwise we would not carry them out. If the form of life is the constitution of all its actions, and these are objects or being-in-itself, so too is the form of life, but in both cases, being cultural objects, they are a being-in-itself that is maintained only because they are also being-for-itself. That is, if it did not have a meaning, the form of life would not be. The for-itself is the intuitive understanding of such a meaning.

But this implies, once again, that there can be no facticity—in this case, actions—without meaning. Or in other words, it cannot be that actions are mere objects and existence a mere fact; on the contrary, both existence and actions are meaningful being. That I do not recognize the meaning of an action does not imply that it has not been performed with a particular meaning (as mentioned above), and the same can be

said of existence understood as a form of life. For the form of life is existence with meaning for the one who lives it. And there cannot be pure existence, that is, being-in-itself. A similar rectification was made by Eric Voegelin with respect to the Sartrean concept of existence as a fact:

An intellectual like Sartre, for instance, finds himself involved in the conflict without issue between his assumption of a meaningless facticity of existence and his desperate craving for endowing it with a meaning from the resources of his *moi*. He can cut himself off from the philosopher's inquiry by assuming existence to be a fact, but he cannot escape from his existential unrest. If the search is prohibited from moving in the In-Between, if as a consequence it cannot be directed toward the divine ground of being, it must be directed toward a meaning imagined by Sartre. The search, thus, imposes its form even when its substance is lost; the imagined fact of existence cannot remain as meaningless as it is but must become the launching pad for the intellectual's Ego.⁵⁹

For Voegelin, the In-Between refers to divinity's gospel, which makes his correction to Sartre somewhat weaker, since postulating divinity in order to make sense of existence requires, in turn, postulating a justification for that divinity. The latter only succeeds in diverting the problem away from the human being to divinity, and ultimately leaving it suspended in an act of faith. If Voegelin's critique is to be effective, it has to be based on human existence itself. Hence the concept of form of life as in-itself-for-itself has advantages here. Existence is not a mere fact or a mere succession of absurd facts, existence is a form of life, or in other words, all existence is lived in a form of life, i.e., as a series of meaningful actions. And that meaning is not given to it by a divinity, but by the form of life itself. When the subjects identify themselves with a form of life, they identify with a meaningful type of existence. Only that form of life or existence with which they do not identify appears to them as absurd, without it being absurd in itself, because it is a meaningful life for those who live it and who therefore identify with its meaning. It is not necessary to postulate a divine being or gospel to explain why our form of life has meaning for us: the form of life is an existence that has in itself its meaning, and subjects adopt it by acting and living according to that meaning.

59 Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works*, Vol. XII: *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, ed. by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 176.

Actions and forms of life are, therefore, being-in-itself-for-itself. And this conclusion makes us see the foundation of the being that we are. For now we can answer the question that Sartre left unanswered about the being of actions: 'If we granted that being is revealed to man in "acting," [*dans le faire*] it would still be necessary to guarantee the being of acting apart from the action [*l'être du faire en dehors de l'action*].'⁶⁰ For Sartre, the being of action requires a foundation on a being that is transphenomenal. So, if we are our actions, and our being is revealed in our actions, what is the being of our acting? What the conclusion of our research leads us to suggest is that the being of acting is the form of life as anthropical image, from which all its possible actions emerge, i.e., its praxical images. The form of life, as *in-itself-for-itself*, is the being of the action as *in-itself* or perceived object in the world and the being of our acting as *for-itself* or consciousness of acting within the possibilities determined by the anthropical image.

60 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. li. In *L'être et le néant*, p. 17.