

nothingness and emptiness

nothingness and emptiness

nothingness and emptiness

nothingness and emptiness

nothingness and emptiness

nothingness and emptiness

nothingness and emptiness

a buddhist engagement with the ontology of jean-paul sartre

steven w. laycock

This page intentionally left blank.

Nothingness and Emptiness

This page intentionally left blank.

Nothingness and Emptiness

A Buddhist Engagement with the
Ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre

Steven W. Laycock

State University of New York Press, Albany

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany
© 2001 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address State University of New York Press,
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, NY 12207

Production by Michael Haggett
Marketing by Anne M. Valentine

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Laycock, Steven William

Nothingness and emptiness : A Buddhist engagement with the ontology
of Jean-Paul Sartre / Steven W. Laycock.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-7914-4909-2 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7914-4910-6 (pbk. : alk.
paper)

1. Sartre, Jean Paul, 1905— 2. Sunyata. 3. Nothingness (Philosophy)
I. Title.

B22430.S34 N64 2001
111'.092—dc21

00-056275

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
The Radiance of the Lotus	1
Chapter One Dancing with the Light	9
Chapter Two Light upon Light	35
Chapter Three Questioning Sartrean Questions	65
Chapter Four Nothingness	83
Chapter Five Emptiness	107
Chapter Six Making Nothing of Something	131
Chapter Seven The Myth of Repletion	155
Chapter Eight The Possibility of the Possible	175
<i>References</i>	197
<i>Index</i>	211

This page intentionally left blank.

Acknowledgments

The author is gratefully indebted to the following publishers for permission to reproduce copyrighted material:

Passages from *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*, copyright © 1993, by John D. Caputo. Used by permission of Indiana University Press.

Passages from *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika* by Nagarjuna, translation copyright © 1995 by Jay L. Garfield. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

Passage from *Out in the Open*, copyright © 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, by Margaret Gibson. Reprinted by permission of Louisiana State University Press.

Passages from *Zen: Poems, Prayers, Sermons, Anecdotes*, translation copyright © 1963, by Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto. Used by permission of Doubleday Press.

This page intentionally left blank.

The Radiance of the Lotus

The lotus, resplendent symbol of the awakened mind, exfoliates in enigma. Is it an explosion, a cosmic detonation, flinging its energy outward? Toward what? From what center? Do we rather see, not dynamism, but quiescent serenity, loveliness eternally distilled, a vision disturbed only by the gentle lapping of the waves? Or is it that “[t]he film suddenly stopped, and the picture on the screen remained fixed—but alive” (Sekida 1992, 201). Have we somehow surprised the detonation in a moment beyond time, disclosing its dynamism in “a breathtaking continuum of the present” (201)? What we *see* of the lotus, what appears, is presented as an enigmatically silent burst of color and light, quiet uproar, motionless explosion, occurring upon, within, as an expression or manifestation of, the supporting waters of the pond. It is as if the stillness and motionlessness of the pond, mating with the savage dynamism and biting beauty of the sun, gave birth to a being of few days, yet, in its presence, eternal. And it is as if the event of parturition, though never completed, were always complete: the salience of the lotus not repudiating its expressiveness. In its wild radiance, the lotus evinces the serenity of the pond.

Nor is the pond free from enigma. Its quiescence is both a glass and a mirror. The ingenuous settling of stones at the bottom, the effortless grace of the savvy koi patrolling the pond, are seen *through* the waters. Yet—and at the same time—the overhanging leaves, the wisps of evanescent cloud, the idols of one’s own visible presence, are cast *upon* the waters. The waters are indecisive, hesitating, ambiguous: transparent? reflective? Or does the pond play a double game? Does it, simultaneously or in succession, wear two very different masks? Or again, is it not rather indifferent to such meriment, leaving the masquerade to others? The pond keeps its secret. The answer remains undisclosed in its presentation. The blackbird, arrested in its flight, lites upon the arched wooden bridge (*merle au pont*), peering without comment at the pond below, its “mind quiet as water in the fissure

of Being” (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 235). And mindful of the enigma, the plucky visitor decries:

When through the water’s thickness I see that tiling at the bottom of a pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections there; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without this flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it *as* it is and where it is—which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place. I cannot say that the water itself—the aqueous power, the syrupy and shimmering element—is *in* space; all this is not somewhere else either, but it is not in the pool. It inhabits it, it materializes itself there, yet it is not contained there; and if I raise my eyes toward the screen of cypresses where the web of reflections is playing, I cannot gainsay the fact that the water visits it, too, or at least sends into it, upon it, its active and living essence. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 182)

Within the water, there is neither “here” nor “there.” Or rather, “here” and “there” do not designate the coordinates of an absolute Cartesian grid. The waters of the pool are uncontainable, unlocalizable.

And the lotus itself shares, though differently, this refusal of containment. The quiet-exuberant lotus flings itself, flings its *self*, centrifugally beyond all bounds. Its ecstasy, its savage habit of being perpetually beyond itself, is a negation, a warning. “Do not presume that I will succumb to your snares. I am a being of pure freedom.” Do not assume, with Sartre, that I am subject to “*violation by sight*,” that “[w]hat is seen is possessed,” that “to see is to *deflower*.” Do not suppose that “[e]very investigation implies the idea of a nudity which one brings out into the open by clearing away the obstacles which cover it” (1971, 738). “You cannot grasp me, seize me, lay hold of me. To know me is to *be* what I am, to throw yourself away.” In Suzuki’s words, “To know the flower is to become the flower, to be the flower, to bloom as the flower, and to enjoy the sunlight as well as the rainfall. When this is done, the flower speaks to me and I know all its secrets, all its joys, all its sufferings; that is, all its life vibrating within itself” (cf. Sohl and Carr 1970, 85). Or rather, it is no longer *I*, the snarling, red-fanged, predator, ripping away the veil of appearance (the *Schleier des Seins*) from my quivering victim, who am thus informed. For the lotus speaks only to those who do not pursue, who, in Dogen’s words, allow the myriad things to advance and experience themselves. With the unadorned simplicity of Gary Snyder’s verse:

A flower
 for nothing;
 an offer;
 no taker; . . . (1991, 264)

The lotus communicates with those who are capable of authentic *Gelassenheit*, releasement, letting-be, and, in Heidegger's sense, authentic "greeting" which "bespeaks mindfulness of the differential origin of manifestation; it holds in memory (*Andenken*) the enigma of the Differing as that which already-was (*das Gewesene*). In contrast to conceptual grasping, the gesture of greeting releases that which presences to show itself in its essential 'whiling'" (Fóti 1992, 51). Irigary perceives that "the Buddha's gazing upon the flower is not a distracted or predatory gaze, it is not the lapse of the speculative into the flesh, it is the at once material and spiritual contemplation that provides an already sublimated energy to thought" (1991, 171). The enlightened regard is not "incisive." It does not "penetrate"; it does not "grasp." Though *prajñā*, etymological kin to the Greek *prognosis*, suggests a "knowing" (*jñā*, *gnosis*) "into" (*pra-*, *pro-*), the "into" does not designate a vector of intrusion. Knowing, like our encounter with the furtive denizens of the wild, occurs within a domain of beings who, without threat, are allowed to advance, as we remain silent, motionless, open, practically breathless. "Buddha contemplates the flower without picking it. He gazes upon this other than him without removing it at its roots. Moreover, what he gazes upon is not just anything—it is a flower, which perhaps offers us the best object for meditation on the adequation of form to matter" (171). The lotus communicates in its wholeness, in its organic indissociability from the turbid ooze of the reality in which it is rooted, and as an expression of all-that-is, only when we find ourselves quiet and still among beings (*inter esse*), with an "inter/est" which is no idle curiosity, nor even the insistent passion to "know," but an openness, a wonder, which as Burke (1990) discerns, "is the originary question that the look addresses to the world, but, unlike the questions of cognition, does so without expectation or demand . . ." (93). Indeed, "[t]he philosopher's manner of question is . . . not that of *cognition*" (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 101). We cannot wrest the secret, extract the secret. Yet, in words spoken on Merleau-Ponty's behalf, this openness, this wonder, the authentic vitality of the question, "provides a reflective and intuitive access to Being which philosophers of intuition and reflection quickly sought to close up by trying to prove that the answer was already contained in the question; for them the 'meaning' of Being was prior to the question, for it was contained a priori in the mind . . ." (Burke, 88). Both intuition and reflection, as commonly understood, assume a do-

main to be dis/covered, dis/closed, un/veiled, in effect, denuded. But the repudiation of disclosure, of a presence prior to presentation (a being, in Heidegger's idiom, prior to Being), prior, in fact, to the demand for disclosure, in which "[t]he unknown object is given as immaculate, as virgin, comparable to a *whiteness*," or "like a woman whom a passerby catches unaware at her bath" (Sartre 1971, 738), is not the occasion for despair. "Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, or to be present at everything, . . . One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and multiple uncertainties. Perhaps nature is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons?" (Nietzsche 1974, 11–12). We shall not lapse into the nihilism of the question without an answer. The refusal of dis/closure "does not mean that the ontological question has no answer. On the contrary, it means that we do not know a priori what answers are forthcoming. It means that if answers come, it will be only as a result of our having recognized the interrogative space, the abyss, within which alone Being can freely and continually manifest itself" (Burke, 89). Though alien in spirit to those who would seek a "verbal substitute for the world we see" (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 4), the vision of Buddhism, no less than that of Merleau-Ponty, is no more hospitable to the nihilists, the "negative metaphysicians" who "proclaimed that 'what is essential cannot be said any longer'" (Golden and Jamison 1990, 399).

But the lotus is not only ecstatic, not only "beside itself," beyond self, empty of self, its *self* being exactly its refusal of self-coincidence, it is, in all of its glorious richness, in every fibre of its detail, exactly *such* as it is. In its brilliant outburst it remains serene, still, untroubled. Not merely to *think*, but most genuinely, to *see* is to confine oneself to a single phenomenon "that one day stands still like a star in the world's sky" (Heidegger 1971, 4). The lotus, this curiously frozen explosion, is an anchor in the heaving midst of the world's fluidity. Though it throws itself freely, without reserve, into the "interrogative space" of wonder, it is nonetheless a *response* to the wonder which it pervades. It is answer dissolving into question; question condensing into answer. In the splendid verse of Bunan (1602–1676 C.E.):

The moon's the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were,
Yet I've become the thingness
Of all the things I see! (Stryk and Takash 1963, 15)

The emptiness of the lotus is in no way compromised by its suchness. Bunan, standing among the flowers of this world, quietly lifts the floodgate and is inundated by their presence. Dōgen, in a wholly concordant vision,

sees “flowers of emptiness.” Presence and absence, suchness and emptiness, are not separate cabinets in which the world’s cups and the world’s saucers are kept. Nor are they incompatible manners with which the same cups and the same saucers comport themselves. They are indissoluble verities.

But a final enigma. Kelp, perhaps the earliest ancestor of the lotus, was first to master the paradox of dipolarity, driving its roots downward into the nourishing depths only to grow upward toward the empowering light, the tension between depths and heights, earth and the heavens, shadow and illumination, being integral to its very life. The lotus knows this secret and more. To be sure, dipolarity informs its *being*. But its *appearing* is no less dipolar. Buddhism has always made much of the fact that the resplendent lotus, the burst of enlightened awareness, the detonation of self flinging its fragments into the void, is nonetheless rooted in and draws deep nourishment from the lightless depths of samsāra. The lesson, however, always comes as a surprise, not because we suspect the lotus of rootlessness, but because the brilliance and salience of its exfoliation dominate the eye so thoroughly that its rootedness is overlooked. It may be that “the ‘flower’ of philosophy” is “the heliotrope or sunflower” (Rovatti 1988, 127), but the sunflower’s visible stalk affords no astonishment at its rootedness. The contrast, however, between the radiant lotus blossom which breaks and expresses the mirror-like, glass-like surface and the murky roots is maximal. The eye, if not the mind, takes the blossom as its all. To be reminded of the roots breaks the spell of exclusive absorption in presence.

But there is our sagacious avian companion, the *merle* perched observantly *au pont*, who will not be deceived. The enigmas we have sensed—the interpenetration of temporality and the timeless, transparency and reflection, self and selflessness, presence and absence, light and dark, appearance and reality, the visible and the invisible—are patterns of reciprocity, entwinement. The lotus is the site of manifold crossings and recrossings. Its being, then, is that of the chiasm, the abyssal locus, the “interrogative space,” of the chi, the *X*, the determinable indeterminate, the enigma. The pages that unfold before you are, in the spirit Merleau-Ponty’s (1969) posthumous deposit, *The Visible and the Invisible*, mindful of the chiasm, and therefore unsympathetic with the dualizing tendencies, however rarified, of Sartre’s thinking. And they are no less imbued with wonder at the miraculous blossoming of enlightened mindfulness, and dedicated to the Buddha’s liberating and unobtrusive envisionment. I offer, at this site of wonder, a sustained meditation on Buddhist meontic phenomenology.

But our purpose is not the simple rejection of Sartrean ontology. Sartre said of his relationship with Merleau-Ponty that “[a]lone, each of us was too easily persuaded of having understood the idea of phenomenology. Together, we were, for each other, the incarnation of its ambiguity” (1965,

159). Sartre and Merleau-Ponty form of themselves a chiasm, a framework of reciprocal encroachment, or in an idiom to be cultivated, a dyad of “seemings,” each (we shall assume) wholly compatible with the landscape of phenomenality, neither required by it. The strategy adopted here is rather a specification of that developed in *Mind as Mirror* (cf. Laycock 1994): namely, the effort to keep logical alternativity, the incompatibility of the two “seemings,” alive while remaining mindful of their failure of adequation (untruth). Immanence thus receives into itself the wedge of inconsonance, and cracks open, rendering up the smooth identity of being and appearing and becoming thus transcendent. Paradoxically, then, the confrontation of Sartrean immanentism (consciousness *is* as it *appears* to itself to be) beside the Merleau-Pontyan view that “a sufficient reduction leads beyond the alleged transcendental ‘immanence,’” that immanence explodes into the transcendence of interpenetration, “the *Ineinander* of the spontaneities . . .” (1969, 172), in full awareness of the lack of preferability between the two views, culminates in a preference for the Merleau-Pontyan vision of omni-transcendence.

The ontology of Sartre’s great “essay,” his magnificent essay, his extraordinary venture, *Being and Nothingness*, rests upon his phenomenology like a book upon a shelf, like a bust upon a pedestal. It offers a reconstruction, a patterning, of phenomenological intuition which “makes sense” of these insights, which transforms isolated glimmers into systemic illumination. The possibility of reconfiguring the pieces of the puzzle to form a different image argues only against the necessity, not the wisdom, of Sartre’s vision. But we must, from the outset, declare a different sense of the bond uniting phenomenology and ontology. While we shall not pursue the Heideggerian path of conflating the two, it will be clear that the pedestal rests upon the bust as much as the bust upon the pedestal.

If “[o]ntology is the interrogative word of adoration in the ear of Sigé the Abyss” (Burke 1990, 83), then phenomenology is the paradoxical reply. “Paradox no longer marks a deficiency; it becomes the evident sign, that which reveals the indissoluble relation between the question and the response” (*Le paradoxe ne marque plus une déficience; il devient le signe évident, le révélateur de l’indissoluble relation entre la question et la réponse*) (Timmermans 1990, 298). Ontology—not question, but questioning—precedes the ontic: the phenomenal presence (the “thingness” in Bunan’s word) of the response invoked. Response—presence, the ontic—is called forth by ontology; and phenomenology interrogates this deposition. Ontology, if you will, is the earnest, ingenuous, unsuspecting wonderment of the earth’s first child at the dawn of Being. But before the first few curious beams break the horizon, there are the still and timeless hours of the night. As Bataille instructs us, “night . . . is nothing, there is nothing in IT which can be felt, not

even finally darkness” (Bataille 1988, 124–5). The earth-child’s capacity for boundless wonder is predicated upon another illimitable: the intimate recollection of eternal night—a night, not of terror or despair, not of nihilistic abandon, but of a maternal embrace so deeply enveloping as to dissolve the glaring, angular projections of detail into the gloaming, and finally into a nightfall of openness and unimpeded acceptance.

Phenomenology, with its epochē, its suspension of assent, is the movement of suspicion, the wariness (awareness) of a mind acquainted with error, aware that the sun’s effulgence can blind no less than heal the wounds of ignorance, and unwilling to substitute enthusiasm for truth. As “[t]here is no absolute error” (Merleau-Ponty 1988, 38), there is also, on the conceptual plane, no unqualified absolution from error. Ontology marvels at presence. It communes directly, without reservation, with the splendid suchness (*tathatā*) of the lotus. Phenomenology investigates the roots of this exhibition, the “how?” of appearing, leading us thus in the direction of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Ontology and phenomenology, the lotus and the chiasm, interpenetrate, illustrating of themselves both chiasmatic reciprocity, *Ineinandersein*, and lotus-like integrity and fullness. There is no interrogation without positive deposition, no suspicion without a moment of child-like acceptance, no suspension without commitments to suspend. But equally, there is no lotus without roots, no phenomenal display without conditions, no “thus” without a “how.”

Sartre would find in this intercoupling of wondering acceptance and vigilant interrogation the very condition for self-deception. “To believe is to know that one believes, and to know that one believes is no longer to believe. Thus to believe is not to believe any longer because that is only to believe—this in the unity of one and the same non-thetic self-consciousness . . .” (1971, 114). Self-deception is grounded in the instability of a commitment permeated by the nonpositional awareness of this commitment, an awareness which, inasmuch as openness is also a questioning, tinctures the commitment with a certain “questionableness.” If Sartre has, indeed, disclosed the infrastructure of self-deception, then the chiasmic embrace of ontological receptiveness and phenomenological suspicion participates in bad faith. We shall have to see, however, whether unstable conviction is the recipe for self-deception, whether the interpenetration of wonder and wariness amounts to “the inner disintegration of my being” (116), and, moreover, whether Sartre’s assumption of unquestionable givenness which supports an overhanging ontology is not, in another sense, deceived.

A Buddhist phenomenological ontology would sacrifice neither the innocent nor the wary, neither the immediate resonance of com/passion nor the dispassionate clarity of wisdom, neither the tranquility (*samatha*) of absorption nor the insight (*vipassanā*) of genuine discernment—so long, that

is, as they are balanced (*sammā*), and in this sense, “right.” In the words of that consummate distillation of supreme wisdom (*prajñā paramitā*), the sūtra (thus, suture) of the palpating, compassionate-wise heart-mind (*hṛdaya*), “[f]orm is emptiness; emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness” (Lopez 1988, 19). And as Lopez reminds us, “[t]here is a critical difference between form being empty and form being emptiness . . .” (58). It is, finally, this fathomless insight of the Heart, the crux, the crossing, the chiasm, a Buddhist phenomenological ontology is concerned to plumb.

He who holds that nothingness
Is formless, flowers are visions,
Let him enter boldly!

—Gido (1325–1388)

(cf. Stryk and Takash 1963, 9)

Chapter 1

Dancing with the Light

The lotus, in its salience, in its ecstasy, stands out, dominates the ground of its appearance, absorbs the mind in its presence. It is the mind thus spell-bound, thus captivated, a mind like the imprudent moth entranced by the flame, incautious, unmindful of condition or consequence, that, in our present acceptation, we shall call “consciousness” (*viññāna*). Consciousness, in this sense, is, not by contingent befallment, but trivially, by definition, un-awakened. In so far as a figural salience dominates the field of consciousness, suppressing awareness of marginal presence, to that extent awareness is diminished, attenuated; and to that extent, also, the mind drifts among evanescent dream shadows, haunted by shades of presence that whisper from the dark only to vanish. Under Wittgenstein’s pen: “*Our* life is like a dream. But in our better hours we wake up just enough to realize that we are dreaming” (Engelmann 1968, 7). In Fichte’s arresting delineation:

There is nowhere anything lasting, neither outside me, nor within me, but only incessant change. I nowhere know of any being not even my own. There is no being. *I myself* know nothing and am nothing. There are only *images*: they are the only thing which exists, and they know of themselves in the manner of images . . . I myself am only one of these images; indeed, I am not even this, but only a confused image of images. All reality is transformed into a wondrous dream, without a life which is dreamed about, and without a spirit which dreams; into dream which coheres in a dream of itself. (Fichte 1965, 89)

The title, *Buddha*, The Awakened One, is the occasion of an implicit analogy: enlightened awareness is to the flickering half-light, the drowsy play of light and darkness, presence and absence, which we here designate “consciousness,” as consciousness is, in turn, to the dream-state with its gossamer phantasms. In Hayward’s interesting gloss, *awakened* connotes “the dispelling of confusion, or the dissipation of disorder, entropy” and *one* designates the “dynamic blossoming of all potentialities in an individual . . .” (Hayward 1989, xi). And we can empathize with Bataille’s anguished lament: “Am I awake? I doubt it and I could weep” (1988, 34). The Buddha was not, in our sense, conscious. He was awakened, fully aware: *sammā sambuddhasa*.

The marked disparagement of consciousness typical of Buddhist thought would seem perplexing without its implicit contrast with awareness. It would seem, for example, merely perverse to hold that grasping after (*upācarā*) consciousness (*viññāna*) is one of the five ways of bringing suffering (*dukkha*) down upon our heads, and that to release consciousness, to let it go, to liberate it, no longer to be lulled into a state of semi-somnambulance, is, then, to ignite the lamp of awareness (*sati*). Consciousness is the fifth of the *skandhas*, the five modes of erroneous self-identification, clinging to which is given as the summary formula for all sentient suffering. The exclusive identity, the nucleus of egocentricity and selfishness, which isolates us from others, and which conditions all antipathy and all greed, is the product of our “identification” with objectual form (*rūpa*) and with the four remaining skandhas having the intentional function of “naming” or designating (*nāma*): sensations (*vedanas*), thoughts (*saṃjñā*), habitual dispositions (*sanskāra*), and finally, consciousness (*viññāna*). It would seem merely wanton, as well, to regard consciousness as the third link (*nidāna*) of the twelvefold chain of contingent becoming (*bhava-chakra*). Each link of the chain is a necessary condition for its successor, the last, in turn, a condition for the first. To break *any* link is therefore to break *every* link in the chain. Elimination of the evident ills of ignorance (*āvidyā*), craving (*tṛṣṇā*), and suffering (*dukkha*), spells the abolition of consciousness which, by parity, must also be regarded as an evil. Again, it is *consciousness*, not *awareness*, which is the offense.

Bataille speaks of “the disguised suffering which the astonishment at not being everything, at even having concise limits, gives us” (1988, xxxii). Oceanic assimilation, pantheistic self-identification, is not an adequate response to suffering, but merely the engorgement, the obscene distension, of the self. And so long as *ātman* retains, in our conceptual imagination, the least trace of private individuality, its identification with *Brahman* is not spared this opprobrium. The inner security and illumination which can set aside our incessant and ever-more-subtle attempts to seize upon our actions

in the act, to grasp them “red-handed,” in Husserl’s (1982) idiom, in order to provide—for ourselves—a cognitive foundation for our deluded sense of ourselves as agents evaporates in the sunlight of enlightened awareness. And “since reflexivity has dissolved, the moment wherein the human mind is ‘together’ and, thus, capable of knowing (naming) *other things* no longer exists. The human mind cannot constitute for itself the identity of other things” (Magliola 1986, 8). The dissolution, the “emptying,” of identity into difference is thus concomitant with the annulment of *nāma-rūpa*, the constellation of *skandhas* which would otherwise nourish our various modes of self-identification. The *skandhas* comprise the “concepts with which we identify ourselves as true presence . . .” (Coward 1990, 78–9), and the depresentation of the self, its self-liquidation, leaves nothing for our egocentric grasp. An authentic Buddhist philosophy is inaugurated with the decisive suspension of self-identification, writ small or large. And “no longer to wish oneself to be everything is to put everything into question” (Bataille 1988, xxxii). Indeed, “[m]aking oneself questionable is an important element in getting under way” (Caputo 1993, 175). The decisive step beyond a merely conceptual philosophy in the direction of liberation is “to relate oneself to all ‘things’ in an *empty* relationship, i.e., in total freedom” (Streng 1967, 82). In Caputo’s scathing remark, “the sort of *philia* philosophy is—*amor intellectualis*—goes well enough with a cold heart . . .” (121). But if our heart lies with our treasure, then what, in our aberration, we most deeply cherish is what orients our benighted sense of limited, thus exclusive, identity. We identify with what we value. And if the *skandhas* comprise the various dimensions of our narrow and restricted value-orientation, then to value consciousness is to value the mere phosphorescence of awareness, to submit to the spell of apparition. Sartre is nowhere more lucid than in his clipped identification of “the being of the self: it is *value*” (1971, 92). Yet spirituality impels “the elimination of private standpoints and values” (Murti 1987, 259).

“Even the sharpest sword cannot cut itself; the finger-tips cannot be touched by the same finger-tips. Citta does not know itself” (cf. Murti 1987, 317–8). *For* the mind there *is* no mind. Or in Dōgen’s words, “Since there is no mind in me, when I hear the sound of raindrops from the eave, the raindrop is myself” (Kotoh 1987, 206). And *pace* Husserl (1982), the intentional act is not present in the act, and thus cannot enter into an attentive description of live perception. It may be that “the universal category of all [cognitional] teleology is the *wish to see*, and even the *wish to be seen*” (Trotignon 302). But the passion to exhibit oneself in self-presence is futile and blind. And the foreclosure of awareness inherent in the “wish to see” one thing as distinct from another is the dynamic of *avidyā*: “the blindness of all organismic striving” (Parsons 1976, 7). As the ancient Sthaviras main-

tained, consciousness “is like a *magic show*—because it deceives and cheats us” (Murti 1987, 224). And Mehta explains that “‘magic’ is only the name of a category employed to indicate what a blind spot prevents one from seeing . . .” (1987, 28). This “blind spot,” that which sees and cannot be seen, that which, in our anxiety, in our troubled attempts to found ourselves, reflectively to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, we seek to see, is, in a specific sense, our *self*. Reflection offers at best “a maze of speculative mirrors through which we are lured in the hope of seeing ourselves as we really are, at the source of the light by which we see ourselves” (Llewelyn 1988, 203). Yet as Sartre discerns, “the consciousness which says *I Think* is precisely not the consciousness which thinks” (1972, 45). There is a rent in the fabric of our reflective self-awareness. Self as *agent*, the agency of seeing, is precisely *not* self as *patient*, self as seen. The “self” which *knows* is precisely *not* the self which is *known*. To be sure, “[a] Cartesian does not see *himself* in the mirror; he sees . . . an ‘outside’ . . .” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 170). Dews corroborates that “there is nothing *inherent* in a reflected image which reveals to the onlooker that it is his or her *own* image, and the subject cannot appeal to any third term for knowledge of identity of the two poles, since this would involve an infinite regress” (1988, 21). And to appropriate the image, to see it as an image of *oneself*, is, as Sartre insinuates, of questionable merit: “Not all who would be are Narcissus. Many who lean over the water see only a vague human figure. Genet sees himself everywhere . . .” (1964, 7). Was Genet, then, a mystic, who “sees himself in everything and all things in himself” (Puligandla 1985, xiv)? And was Sartre? Late in his life, Sartre was able to see “himself,” the “self” of consciousness, everywhere: “I find it everywhere. . . . there is no in-itself that could get away from the for-itself, nor a for-itself that should not be provided with the in-itself” (Fretz 1980, 236). But the hemorrhage which severs the medium from the matter of consciousness, the vital “no one” (awareness) from the languid “someone” (a general patterning of events of consciousness) does not import an ontological disjunction. We have no experiential warrant for positing a substantial subject, even a subject afflicted with the annoying habit of vanishing in the face of its object. In Wittgenstein’s insightful deposition, “nothing *in the visual field* allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye” (1974, 57). To say that the empirical ego is an impassive *Gestalt*, an object, is not to prize a putative duality of egos apart. There are not two. Anonymous awareness may found, but does not participate in Cartesian categoricity. Paradoxically, discrimination becomes nondiscrimination. Sartre approaches the Buddhist view in his conception of a “detotalized totality,” the unity of consciousness and its object, bonded by internal negation, in which consciousness is experientially absent. Still, the for-itself functions as a category of Sartre’s ontology. And awareness is transcategorical. Zen speaks of

the “Great Self” and the “small self.” But it is important to see that the Great Self is not, in any recognizable sense, *a self*—or *an* anything. To distinguish the “small” (empirical) self, the self *seen*, from the Great Self is not, then to distinguish it *from anything*. Speaking of the blind spot in our understanding of ourselves, Bataille observes, that “it is no longer the spot which loses itself in knowledge, but knowledge which loses itself in it. In this way existence closes the circle, but it couldn’t do this without including the night from which it proceeds only in order to enter it again” (1988, 110–111). Merleau-Ponty sagely signifies the supplement to visible existence, that which effects this closure, the agential self, as “one” to emphasize its ineluctable anonymity. And this chimes with Hegel’s view that “the thought in question is not *someone’s thought*, but pure thought, thought in itself. Yet the self *is* the thought; and this self is . . . itself a universal thinker *in general*, not a particular thinker” (Molino 1962, 7). Occhamite in its ontological sparseness, in fact ontologically abstemious in the most radical sense, Buddhism takes the *one*, the [*some*]one, to bespeak entirely too much, and replaces it by *zero*, “someone” by “no one.”

The *act* of perception is not concealed off-stage only to be surprised in its effacement in the last act of reflection. Merleau-Ponty was searchingly cognizant of this truth: “I should say that there was there a thing perceived and an openness upon this thing which the reflection has neutralized and transformed into perception-reflected-on and thing-perceived-within-a-perception-reflected-on” (1969, 38). Reflection discloses *not perception*, but *perception-reflected-on*. The modification is serious, indeed. And “[t]o reduce perception to the thought of perceiving, under the pretext that immanence alone is sure, is to take out an insurance against doubt whose premiums are more onerous than the loss for which it is to indemnify us . . .” (36). Sartre sharpens the point:

. . . the viewing of oneself by oneself, that is, the reflective consciousness which views the series of non-reflected moments of consciousness, in general merely supplies syntheses that are too simple; with parts that are ejected and crowded out, with continuities that are sharper or less sharp than in non-reflected consciousness. In brief, it provides primarily an object that is poorly constituted, that strives too much towards unity, that is too synthetic. It does not supply the truth of the non-reflected consciousness. A truth, which doesn’t exist, because there is no divine consciousness which supplies the veritable synthesis, a truth which is nothing else as the unreflected consciousness itself. However the synthesis that is brought about by the reflective consciousness always contains the defect of being a *consciousness*, a synthesis by con-

sciousness which is bent on achieving a total unity. Whereas the true unity of the non-reflected consciousness is in reality given in the non-reflected consciousness. But this unity is not itself explicit; it does not present itself as such, but we live it in the non-reflecting and in the unity, so that the reflective unity is a unity of the second degree and a unity which as such falsifies the true unity. (Fretz 1980, 231)

As Duméry observes, “philosophy always comes after life. Philosophy is a recovery of life, but it cannot be identified with life. . . . Reflection lives on concrete life” (1964, 5–6). If perception is “live,” then perception-reflected-on, bloodless, cold, its life now past, is assuredly dead. The perpetrator: reflection—a virulent parasite. We must, then, forsake “the temptation to construct perception out of the perceived, to construct our contact with the world out of what it has taught us about the world . . .” (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 156). It “dissimulates from itself its own mainspring,” constituting the world from “a notion of the world as preconstituted” (34).

Consciousness, for Buddhism, is a *skandha*—thus, in one of its luxuriant senses, a *dharmā*: “the key-word of Buddhism” (Sangharakshita 1987, 118)—and for Merleau-Ponty, equivalently, an integral feature of phenomenal display. Merleau-Ponty advances an entirely noematic characterization of consciousness. Starkly: “To be conscious = to have a figure on a ground—one cannot go back any further” (1969, 191). This formula, repeated a few pages hence—“‘to be conscious’ = to have a figure on a ground” (197)—identifies consciousness with the *écart*, the phenomenal estrangement, of the dominant from the recessive internal to noematic presentation. Consciousness is *phenomenal*. Though “contrast elicits depth” (Whitehead 1978, 114), there is no need to posit an agency “off-stage,” perpendicular to the phenomenal display. Consciousness is not, to press the suggestions of Sartre’s term, “positional.” It does not stand at a distantiated *position* with respect to its object. It does not open a dimension of depth across which thing communicates with eye, for depth, not to be conceived as a dimension invisible *in principle* (a notion which contravenes the fidelity to lived experience intrinsic to phenomenology), is rather “the experience of the reversibility of dimensions . . .” (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 180). Depth is either an experiential “nothing,” a line of sight which vanishes precisely because it runs endwise from the eye “or else it is my participation in a Being without restriction, a participation primarily in the being of space beyond every [particular] point of view” (173). The primal contrast which institutes consciousness is swallowed up in a spaciousness, an environing emptiness, which, though not removed from the figural object, remains, nonetheless, “the means the things have to remain distinct, to