# Existential Rationalism

Draft

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In the 1987 introduction to her book on Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, first published in 1953, making it the first book on Sartre to be published in English, Iris Murdoch notes that 'In the twenty years after the war [World War II] Sartre was probably the best-known metaphysician in Europe' (Murdoch 1987, 9). Murdoch notes, however, that while well-known 'among professional thinkers,' the reality was, she adds parenthetically, that most of these professional thinkers simply '(…ignored him)' (ibid.). Today it would likely go uncontested to say that Sartre is best-known not for being a metaphysician but for being an existentialist. But even Sartre's influence as an existentialist, and existentialism more generally, has waned in recent decades, giving way to the rise of post-structuralist philosophy in France and analytic philosophy among Anglo-American philosophers. This neglect of Sartre, and existentialism more broadly, is unfortunate, and in this essay I will return to Sartre's existential project, and his metaphysics in order to demonstrate its relevance to recent analytic metaphysics and, perhaps surprisingly, to rationalism.[1]

To align Sartre's project with rationalism may appear to be a fool's errand, for although existentialism may appear to be many things, there is one thing that it seems clear it is not—namely, it is not a rationalist project. If we take Spinoza's rationalism as our guide, for instance, then a central assumption among rationalists, as Michael Della Rocca puts it with respect to

[1] Not as surprising for Iris Murdoch, given her book is subtitled, *Romantic Rationalist*. For reasons to be laid out in this essay, the rationalism we read into Sartre will differ from Murdoch's.

Spinoza's own philosophy, is 'the intelligibility of everything. For Spinoza, no why-question is off limits, each why-question—in principle—admits of a satisfactory answer' (Della Rocca 2008, 1). In short, the central claim of rationalists is that 'for each existing thing, there is something in virtue of which it exists, something that explains its existence (Della Rocca 2003, 89); or, as Shamik Dasgupta states it, 'A metaphysical rationalist is someone who endorses the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), the principle that everything has an explanation' (Dasgupta 2016, 379).

For the writers associated with existentialism, by contrast, what is highlighted is precisely what we are unable to explain, which perhaps explains why 'professional thinkers' have ignored Sartre and existentialism. In the famous scene from Sartre's novel *Nausea*, for example, where Roquentin, the main character, sits before the root of a tree in a park, what was most striking about this experience (what comes to be called nausea) is the inability to explain things, such as *this* root. As Roquentin describes the situation, the root before him 'existed in such a way that I could not explain it' (Sartre 1964 [1938], 175), and this despite having abstract categories and functional explanations that helped him and us to identify and understand what a root is and does. For Roquentin, 'The function explained nothing: it allowed you to understand generally that it was a root, but not *that one* at all' (ibid., *emphasis in original*). In contrast to the rationalists who believe that 'everything has an explanation,' that there are no brute, inexplicable facts, for Sartre existence itself, the existence of *that* root, is brute and inexplicable—'the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence' (ibid., 174). On this point, as well, Albert Camus, despite asserting that he is 'not an existentialist' (Camus 1968, 345), will nonetheless accept the existentialist rejection of 'absolute rationalism' (ibid.), and he admits that

his 'notion of the absurd,' whereby we come to recognize the limits of what can be explained, is 'the first of my truths' (23), and a truth that he aligns with 'this "nausea," as a writer of today calls it…' (ibid. 11).[2] It seems safe to say, therefore, that existentialism is not a form of rationalism.

I will push back against this assumption and argue that the existentialism found in Sartre, among others, is indeed a form of rationalism, an existential rationalism as I will call it. I will argue that while existentialists such as Sartre will indeed refuse a rationalism that accepts 'the intelligibility of everything,' they will accept the rationalist appeal to a fundamental grounding that underlies our everyday experiences and explanations of things. Put simply, I will argue that what grounds all determinate entities and relations, according to an existential rationalist, is not a fundamental intelligibility that could, in principle, satisfactorily answer every why-question, but rather it is the fundamental, paradoxical nature of sense inseparable from problems that grounds the determinate solutions that become the means whereby explanations come to be made. To state it differently, and in terms used within the literature on grounding relations, we have the determinate relations, functions, predicates, and satisfactory answers to the why-questions we do, such as how and why a tree root functions as it does, has the properties it has, etc., *in virtue of* problems, or what I have called, extending arguments found in the work of Gilles Deleuze, problematic Ideas.[3]

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[2] For Camus, as with Sartre's understanding of Nausea, the absurd is the encounter between a brute fact or existence and our inability to explain and give sense and unity to this brute existence, to that root for instance. 'The absurd,' Camus claims, 'is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation' (22-3). In short, it is the confrontation between a rational mind attempting to make sense of existence and the brute existence that eludes, as Sartre himself argued, explanations. As Camus pithily encapsulates this point, 'To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason' (27).

[3] See Bell, *An Inquiry into Analytic-Continental Metaphysics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming)

To begin to set the stage for the arguments to follow, I want first to clarify some terminology, and especially for readers who may be unfamiliar with the work of Deleuze, although not much that I will be doing here hangs on Deleuze's own project, other than the paradoxical nature of sense which I will use as my starting point. Deleuze's theory of sense is notoriously difficult, and much has been written on it, though for purposes of this discussion the important point we will develop is made early in *Logic of Sense*, where Deleuze details what he takes to be the '*paradox of regress, or of indefinite proliferation*' (Deleuze 1990 [1969], 28, emphasis in original) that is associated with sense. Here is the key passage:

> Sense is always presupposed as soon as I begin to speak; I would not be able to begin without this presupposition. In other words, I never state the sense of what I am saying. But on the other hand, I can always take the sense of what I say as the object of another proposition whose sense, in turn, I cannot state. I thus enter into the infinite regress of that which is presupposed. This regress testifies both to the great impotence of the speaker and to the highest power of language; my impotence to state the sense of what I say, to say at the same time something and its meaning; but also the infinite power of language to speak about words. In short, given a proposition which denotes a state of affairs, one may always take its sense as that which another proposition denotes. (ibid. 28-9).

As will be discussed below (§5), Deleuze's understanding of sense develops a number of lines of thought that were prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century, including those of Husserl and Sartre. In developing Deleuze's understanding of sense, I will highlight its paradoxical nature, stressing the dual tendencies whereby sense is both differentiating and dedifferentiating (hereafter, de/differentiating when referring to this dual, paradoxical nature of sense). On Deleuze's understanding of sense the differentiating tendency is fairly straightforward—we can continually differentiate between what we have said, in a proposition$_1$ for instance, and the sense of this proposition$_1$, and we can further differentiate the sense of a proposition$_2$ that refers to the sense of the first proposition$_1$, and the sense of this proposition$_2$, a

sense that can in turn be referred to by yet another proposition$_3$ with a sense, and so on *ad infinitum*. The dedifferentiating tendency is precisely what accompanies and generates the differentiating tendency—namely, the fact that the sense of a proposition is not to be identified with any determinate or differentiated proposition or state of affairs. No matter how exhaustively we differentiate and determine what it is that was said, sense is not to be confused with these determinate matters for it simultaneously involves the dedifferentiating tendency that undermines the identity one might take to hold between the sense of a proposition and the determinate proposition that expresses this sense. This is the paradoxical nature of sense, the de/differentiating tendencies of sense, that will loom large below as we set forth the way sense grounds, according to the existential rationalism put forth here, the determinate nature of the content of our lives, and determinate such that it can then come to constitute explanations.

To motivate our move to the paradoxical nature of sense as fundamental ground, we will turn, in the first section (§1 Individuals), to discuss Shamik Dasgupta's arguments against the reality of individuals. As an avowed metaphysical rationalist, Dasgupta's arguments will begin to clarify the way we take the determinate to be grounded in problematic Ideas. In the second section (§2 Essence and Existence) I will take up the theme of essentialism and bring into the mix Michael Della Rocca's critique of Kripke's essentialism. By doing this I will clarify the relationship between essence and existence, as understood by both Sartre and Spinoza, and, ultimately, shine a new light on Sartre's famous claim that existence precedes essence. In the third section (§3 PSR and Grounding) I will turn to two ideas that are central to rationalism—the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) and grounding. In this section I will contrast Della Rocca's strong version of the PSR with Dasgupta's weaker version in order to set the stage for my

argument that problematic Ideas are to be understood to be the PSR. The fourth section (§4 Weights and Measures) motivates the move to problematic Ideas, and further clarifies their nature, by returning to Dasgupta's argument that autonomous facts are general, qualitative facts. The turn to problematic Ideas maintains a form of Dasgupta's arguments that calls upon a plurality of autonomous facts that ground a plurality of dependent facts, and they maintain a form of Della Rocca's argument that claims the only consistent form of rationalism is one that denies the reality of distinct object and accepts monism. In the fifth section (§5 Transcendental Field) I will argue that Sartre's critique of Husserl, and the concept of transcendental field he develops as part of this critique, sets the stage for problematic Ideas as argued for here. Deleuze's philosophy, I will also argue, can be seen to be a further development and refinement of Sartre's moves towards an understanding of problematic Ideas as the PSR. In the sixth and final section (§6 Progressive-Regressive Method), I will return to *Nausea*, and to the problem of existence. Understood in light of the arguments of the previous sections, we will now be able to see this problem of existence as Sartre's efforts to develop an existential rationalism where it is sense, as expressed in problematic Ideas, that is the PSR for all phenomena.

**§1 Individuals**

To begin to see why the determinate itself is grounded, according to the existential rationalism being proposed here, in the paradoxical nature of sense, we can return to Sartre. In particular, we can return to Roquentin's realization that 'the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence' (Sartre 1964 [1938], 174). Even as Roquentin sat before the root, perhaps quite confident that what he saw was the root of a particular tree he could also identify, and a root whose function relative to the tree he understood reasonably well, he nonetheless encountered

the limits of this understanding, or 'this feeling of comfort and security,' as he put it, 'gave way to a deep uneasiness: colours, tastes, and smells were never real, never themselves and nothing but themselves. The simplest, most indefinable quality had too much content, in relation to itself, in its heart' (ibid., 175-6). What is this excess, the 'too much content' that brought on uneasiness and nausea and undermined the 'comfort and security' of having identified and explained the root? Is this excess the noumenal thing-in-itself, as Kant might understand it, the transcendental object that assures the synthetic unity of all the properties associated with this root but is not to be confused with any of these properties, with any of the representations of the root? Is this excess, as Bertrand Russell puts it, the "this" referred to when one says, for instance, 'this is red,' and when 'One is tempted to regard "this is red" as a subject-predicate proposition…if one does so, one finds that "this" becomes a substance, an unknowable something in which predicates inhere, but which, nevertheless, is not identical with the sum of its predicates' (Russell 1940, 97). As we will see, the Sartrean answer to these questions is no.

The reason Sartre would not associate the 'too much content' with the 'this' that is the unknowable subject of the many predicates that inhere in this subject is precisely because the properties themselves are too excessive to even identify a determinate this, and thus even an unknowable this, or a Kantian thing-in-itself, becomes undermined by the excess that is too much content for any determinate this. To clarify this point we can turn to the recent work of Shamik Dasgupta. In a series of essays Dasgupta has argued that the world, at bottom, is constituted by qualitative facts and not by individuals that may be thought to support or underlie such facts. The reasons Dasgupta gives to argue against the fundamental reality of individuals will shed light on Sartre's position as well. Stated simply, for Dasgupta 'qualitative facts make

no mention of any particular individual' (Dasgupta 2017, 7), such as 'Someone is the president, orange is more similar to red than to blue,' and 'individualistic facts,' Dasgupta notes, are true or false depending on 'how things stand with a particular individual (or individuals)' (ibid.), and Dasgupta's central thesis is that individualistic facts are ultimately grounded in, or they are what they are, in virtue of qualitative facts. The problem with this move, however, is that it becomes difficult to show how qualitative facts can necessitate and explain the existence of any determinate individual, or it is difficult to show how any particular individual is grounded in qualitative facts. To borrow Dasgupta's example, we can begin with 'just a few of Obama's qualitative properties, such as being born on a small island and being well educated' (Dasgupta 2014, 8), but these properties alone do not necessitate the existence of Obama for, as Dasgupta points out, 'it is possible for someone to have those qualities and yet for Obama not to exist' (ibid.). There are no doubt many people who were born on a small island, were well educated, and yet are not Obama, and thus those qualitative facts do not necessitate or explain Obama's existence. Can we then necessitate the existence of Obama by further differentiating the properties that would pick out Obama and no other individuals? Could we simply take the spatiotemporal location of Obama's birth, plus the qualitative facts tied to the chronological events that follow this birth (studying at Occidental College in the 1980s, transferring to Columbia, etc.), to be sufficient to necessitate the existence of Obama as a distinct, determinate individual? For Dasgupta the answer is no, for the qualitative facts that may seem most relevant to Obama's existence do not necessitate Obama's existence for 'there is a possible world in which there are qualitatively identical local conditions…even though A [Obama] does not exist' (Dasgupta 2017, 16). In other words, since qualitative facts hold irrespective of any particular individuals that are what they are in virtue of these facts, the challenge is to account for

individualistic facts on the basis of qualitative facts. 'The only qualitative fact that might necessitate A's [Obama's] existence,' Dasgupta admits, 'is the qualitative state of a very large region of spacetime—perhaps the state of the entire cosmos' (ibid.). With this move, however, we bring into play qualitative facts that are clearly irrelevant to Obama's existence, such as 'the state of Alpha Centauri' (ibid.). The problem, therefore, of claiming that qualitative facts are the ground for individualistic facts is one of satisfying the expectation 'that a grounding explanation must both necessitate and be explanatorily relevant' (ibid.).

These difficulties, as Dasgupta admits, may lend further support to our natural intuitions and habits which simply assume the reality of individuals. We may argue, contra Dasgupta, that we can point to the history of Obama that began when a 'particular sperm fertilized a particular egg' (ibid. 9), etc., as well as the life histories of Obama's parents, their meeting and having a baby, etc. The set of such facts should be sufficient, we are inclined to think, to pinpoint the existence of Obama. In each of these cases, however, we are already presupposing the existence of determinate individuals, and certain individualistic facts—the sperm, egg, Obama's parents, etc.—when the problem for Dasgupta is precisely one of showing how a set of qualitative facts grounds individualistic facts, and hence both necessitates and is explanatorily relevant to such facts. Now we could retort to this point by adopting Kripke's arguments and claim that Dasgupta's problems are unnecessary for we need not do without individuals. As Kripke argues, once we have rigidly designated Obama's parents, and Obama as well, then they exist necessarily in every possible world where they exist (more on this in §2). For Dasgupta, however, the only way we have of determining and differentiating one individual from another, and hence of rigidly designating this individual and not another one, is through the qualitative

facts that ground these individuals, and yet these facts do not necessitate and explain the existence of any rigidly designated individual.

As Dasgupta develops his argument in favor of the view that the world is constituted by qualitative facts, he differentiates it from bundle theories of individuals; that is, the view that holds individuals are constructed out of their qualitative properties, with individuals being nothing over and above this bundle (along Humean lines). For Dasgupta, by contrast, he takes a generalist approach, and the generalist, he argues, 'bypasses individuals and simply constructs facts out of properties instead' (Dasgupta 2009, 36), and the facts that are constructed, the individualistic facts, do not specify any determinate individual but rather a plurality of individuals—that is, the plurality of individuals that satisfy the facts constructed out of these qualitative properties. Now the qualitative properties that Dasgupta sees as grounding the facts that are true of a plurality of individuals are, as we will see below (§4), susceptible to problems that come with accounting for the determinate nature of and differences between individuals, but for now we can see that qualitative facts are not capable of grounding any particular, determinate individual, nor do we need them to do so. To bolster this central point, Dasgupta uses an analogy with physics, arguing that just as absolute velocity, 'the velocity of a material body through absolute space rather than relative to another material body' (ibid.), is thought by physicists to be both '*physically redundant and empirically undetectable*,' then so too 'consistency demands we adopt the same attitude about primitive individuals' (ibid., *emphasis in original*). In other words, if qualitative properties are the only way to detect and differentiate individuals, then a primitive individual, a 'this' distinct from its qualitative properties, is undetectable and qualitative facts are

sufficient, on their own, to ground and hence necessitate and explain the facts we want to understand.

Dasgupta's conclusion from these arguments is that we can do away with individuals for they are unnecessary to the explanations we seek. All we need are a plurality of fundamental qualitative facts to ground a plurality of individualistic facts, with no determinate individual being grounded by any particular fact. We will return to clarify these arguments below (§4), but we can see that for Sartre as well, as Roquentin voices his argument, 'the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence' (Sartre 1964 [1938[, 174) precisely because one cannot, on Dasgupta's arguments, ground or explain any determinate individual, *this* root for instance, on the basis of any particular set of qualitative properties, facts, or functional explanations. For Sartre this follows, as the argument gets developed in *Being and Nothingness*, from the claim that 'Consciousness is a being whose existence posits its essence' (Sartre 1956 [1943], 24). Put differently, the determinate nature or essence of something, such as a tree root, is grounded in the nature of consciousness, which consists of not being that which consciousness is consciousness of. To clarify this point, and further detail the problematic nature of determinate individuals, or the grounding of the determinate in the problematic, paradoxical nature of sense, it will help to shift our focus to the relationship between essence and existence.

**§2 Essence and Existence**

In what is perhaps his most cited quote, the relationship between essence and existence figures into Sartre's very understanding of existentialism. In his famous essay, "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre argues that what catholic existentialists, such as Karl Jaspers and Gabriel

Marcel, and atheist existentialists, such as Heidegger, Camus, and Sartre himself, all 'have in common is simply their belief that existence precedes essence…' (Sartre 2007 [1945], 20). Clarifying this point, Sartre adds that 'We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing' (ibid. 22). A human first exists as a conscious being, according to Sartre, and it is only then that they begin making sense of the world they encounter, determining the essence and nature of things. Stating this point in the context of the discussions of the previous section, for Dasgupta we only make sense of things and identify things by virtue of a plurality of qualitative properties. For Dasgupta, therefore, there is no pure individual or essential object that accounts for or makes possible the various qualitative properties that come to be true of this individual. Stated again in Sartre's terms, there is no essence to an individual, no concept that precedes and predetermines the way this individual will exist. For human beings, at least, though we will generalize Sartre's view below (§3) to include all determinate things, their existence is grounded in the fundamental qualitative properties that allow us to differentiate one thing from another. In other words, the essence of an individual is made possible by the various ways in which this individual comes to be described and differentiated; or, existence precedes essence.

We would be remiss if we assumed at this point that these conclusions are uncontested, that existence precedes essence and it is thus a plurality of qualitative facts that ground the facts we have about individuals, even though these facts do not ground any particular individual. Most notably, Saul Kripke launched an effective and influential attack upon the Russellian theory of descriptions whereby an individual is taken to be a variable in a propositional function that

relates a set of descriptions to an object (the variable), and when this variable is replaced by an argument that results in a true proposition then we have identified the individual. For example, when the propositional function, $\exists$ x (x is the author of Waverley), becomes a true proposition when x is replaced by Scott then we have identified the author of Waverley (see Russell 1905). An important motivating factor behind this theory, for Russell, is that it enabled him to deal with problematic cases regarding non-existent entities such as the present King of France or round squares. One can speak meaningfully of such things, and fiction abounds with non-existent entities, but we need not commit ourselves to the reality of these non-existent entities, in the manner of Meinong, for the entities are simply variables in propositional functions and in the case of non-existent entities there simply are no arguments that will replace the variables to yield a true proposition. Look as we might, there is nothing out there that is the present King of France, much less one that is bald. Kripke, however, finds Russell's theory to be too limiting and unable to handle cases where it seems intuitively obvious that we can refer to the same individual in counterfactual situations, situations that are not true of the individual in the actual world. To use Kripke's example, we could take the descriptor, U.S. President in 1970 and wonder what would have been the case had Hubert Humphrey been President in 1970. For Kripke, and in a manner echoed by Dasgupta, such descriptors do not necessitate any particular individual for we can imagine other worlds that differ from the actual world, worlds where Nixon is not President in 1970, Trump is not President in 2018, etc. Kripke will refer to these descriptors as 'not rigid' (Kripke 1980, 49), but Kripke adds, in contrast to Russell (and Dasgupta) that the individual named by Humphrey 'designates that object wherever that object exists,' and thus Kripke claims that this 'designator can be called strongly rigid' (ibid.). When we consider possible worlds where Humphrey wins the 1968 election, Kripke argues, contra David Lewis, that we are not

speaking of a counterpart to Humphrey that resembles Humphrey in every way except for the fact that they won rather than lost the 1968 election. As Kripke puts it, in this counterpart scenario, 'we are not talking about something that might have happened to Humphrey but to someone else, a "counterpart",' and Humphrey himself could probably 'care less whether someone else, no matter how much resembling him, would have been victorious in another possible world' (ibid. 45, n. 13). According to Kripke what Russell's theory of descriptions misses, as well as Lewis' counterpart theory, is precisely the fact that an object that is rigidly designated exists essentially, and thus it is the same object referred to in every possible world. In short, for Kripke it is in the essence of an object that is rigidly designated to precede the possible worlds where this object exists, and where different descriptors are applied to this object in these worlds.

Michael Della Rocca (2002) has challenged Kripke's essentialism, arguing in short that Kripke's arguments are circular and presuppose the truth of essentialism in the arguments used to support it. Della Rocca homes in on two types of intuitions at work in Kripke's arguments. The first is the 'Humphrey intuition' (Della Rocca 2002, 239), the intuition that it is indeed the same Humphrey that is being referred to in different counterfactual situations; and the second is the 'Hesperus intuition' (ibid. 238), or the sense that although it is indeed the case that Hesperus (the evening star) is Phosphorous (the morning star), it also seems clear that 'Hesperus might not have been Phosphorous' (ibid. 243). The first intuition maintains the metaphysical necessity of identity—e.g., it is not possible for Humphrey not to be Humphrey—but the second conflicts with this necessity since it seems possible that Hesperus might not have been Phosphorous. To account for the Hesperus intuition, Della Rocca points out that Kripke relies on descriptive

properties and the way similarities and differences in these properties are used to explain how it is that we come to think that Hesperus might not have been Phosphorous when, in fact, they are one and the same object, namely Venus. Whereas the Humphrey intuition takes Humphrey to be essentially self-identical independent of the possible ways he may be referred to, the Hesperus intuition takes into consideration the different ways Hesperus and Phosphorous are referred to. The question these approaches leaves Della Rocca with is 'why should the Hesperus intuition and the Humphrey intuition be treated so differently. Why, for Kripke, does the Hesperus intuition require treatment in terms of epistemic similarity, whereas the Humphrey intuition does not require such treatment' (ibid. 239). Della Rocca's answer, in short, is that there is no reason other than the presupposition that modal properties such as necessity are reference-independent. Even the Humphrey intuition, as Della Rocca points out, is not immune to considering different descriptive contexts, such as assuming *it is* the same Humphrey that is referred to who possibly wins the 1970 election but *it is not* the same Humphrey that is referred to if we think of Humphrey as a light switch (ibid. 230). In the end, therefore, Della Rocca argues that Kripke's arguments simply assume that 'modal properties are reference-independent' (ibid. 227) and then he arbitrarily excludes instances where this assumption is threatened.

Della Rocca's arguments against Kripke's essentialism follows a familiar pattern that reflects Della Rocca's commitment to Spinozistic rationalism, to the view, recall, that asserts 'the intelligibility of everything' (Della Rocca 2008, 1). Borrowing from F.H. Bradley's own arguments in favor of rationalism (especially Bradley 1893, chapters 2-3), Della Rocca will challenge claims that rely on arbitrary distinctions and relations that have no grounds or explanation—in short, he will reject brute, inexplicable facts. If one attempts to ground, for

instance, the relation, R, between two terms, A and B, in A, one could reasonably ask why not ground the relation in B, since B is involved in the relation? We could ask the same question if we ground the relation in B instead of A. If one grounds the relation in a special relation, AB, then we have yet another relation to account for, this being the relation between AB and A and B, and so on ad infinitum as the famous (or infamous) Bradley regress gets going. Returning to Kripke's arguments we can see that here as well, according to Della Rocca, we have a distinction between two types of intuitions that appears to be arbitrary and ungrounded, other than simply being grounded in the unexplained assumption that the modal property of necessity is 'reference-independent', and thus we have an argument that fails to meet the rationalist demand for explanation, for a grounding that accounts for the distinctions that are at work in one's arguments.

With this return to rationalism, we can return to Spinoza, and to Sartre who confided in Simone de Beauvoir early in their relationship that he 'wanted to be Spinoza and Stendhal, both at the same time' (Beauvoir 1984, 132). Sartre notes the affinity of his arguments with Spinoza's early in his *Transcendence of the Ego* (1936), when he claims that 'Consciousness (like Spinoza's substance) can be limited only by itself' (Sartre 1960 [1937], 39). And it is precisely because substance, or consciousness for Sartre, can only be limited by itself, that it is absolute. Sartre is clear on this point, arguing that 'the existence of consciousness is an absolute because consciousness is consciousness of itself,' and what this means for Sartre is that 'the type of existence of consciousness is to be consciousness of itself. And consciousness is aware of itself in so far as it is consciousness of a transcendent object' (ibid. 40). A consequence of this nature of absolute consciousness is that we have, for Sartre, 'a "phenomenon in a very special sense in

which “to be” and “to appear” are one’ (ibid. 42). That is, consciousness is both consciousness of something, a transcendent object, and it appears to itself as consciousness of consciousness of something. With this move Sartre avoids a Bradley regress for there is no relation between consciousness and another consciousness that would reflect upon it, and hence a relation that would need to be accounted for and explained; rather, as Sartre puts it, ‘there is no regress here, since a consciousness has no need at all of a reflecting consciousness in order to be conscious of itself’ (ibid. 45).

As Sartre develops these arguments further in *Being and Nothingness*, the echo of Spinoza becomes stronger: ‘Consciousness is a being whose existence posits its essence, and inversely it is consciousness of a being, *whose essence implies its existence*…’ (Sartre 1956 [1943], 24; emphasis added). By invoking the notion that consciousness is consciousness of a being ‘whose essence implies its existence,’ Sartre recalls the very first definition of Spinoza’s Ethics: ‘1D1: By cause of itself I understand that *whose essence involves existence*, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing’ (Spinoza 1985 [1677], 408; emphasis added). There are differences between Sartre and Spinoza, however, and it is in unpacking these differences that we will be able to provide the details for what is involved in an existential rationalism. Most notable of the differences is that substance, for Sartre, is consciousness, and ‘the nature of consciousness,’ Sartre argues, ‘is to be what it is not and not to be what it is’ (Sartre 1956 [1943], 113). In Sartre’s terminology and adding to the arguments from *Transcendence of the Ego*, it is in the nature of consciousness, or a being-for-itself as Sartre calls it, not to be the beings that consciousness is consciousness of, and yet in being nothing but consciousness of something this something, or being-in-itself, comes to be something for a

consciousness and hence have a nature, meaning, or essence. This is the sense then that the essence of being-in-itself implies the existence of a being-for-itself. In-itself, being simply is, brute, and without explanation or reason unless a being-for-itself brings reasons to the scene—and hence we are led again to Sartre's claim that existence precedes essence.

For Spinoza, by contrast, the meaning or nature of that which is does not hold in virtue of a consciousness that is not this being; rather, for Spinoza it is in the nature of substance itself to be such that its very being implies an intelligible ground or explanation, or this substance (or God) is nothing less than the intelligibility of being itself. As Michael Della Rocca puts it, for Spinoza 'existence is coextensive with intelligibility…to be is coextensive with being intelligible, and to be intelligible to some degree goes hand in hand with existing to some degree' (Della Rocca 2012, 159). For Sartre, and again by contrast, the emphasis is placed on consciousness as that which exists in the mode of not being what it is a consciousness of, and as a result the stress will not be on conceiving, if by conceiving we mean gaining intelligibility and making sense. For Sartre there is a non-coincidence of consciousness and being, or there is 'an impalpable fissure [that] has slipped into being' (Sartre 1956 [1943], 124), a 'Nothingness [that] lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm'(ibid. 56), and thus the for-itself, consciousness, 'is nothing but the pure nihilation of the In-itself; it is like a hole of being at the heart of Being' (ibid. 786), a hole or nihilation that 'is sufficient to cause a total upheaval to happen to the In-itself. This upheaval is the world…' (ibid.). It is thus a fundamental nonsense, or rupture and nihilation, that is coextensive with the upheaval that is the world, and it is in the world where things make sense. For Spinoza, however, there are no holes, fissures, or nihilations that bring about the upheaval that is the world. To the contrary, for Spinoza the substance that cannot be

conceived except as existing is a substance that is indivisible and suffers no nihilation, no fissures, no unintelligible, nonsensical brute existence.

With these differences between Sartre and Spinoza in hand, we can now begin to see to what extent there is a shared rationalist project, as I am arguing, or whether Sartre simply did not understand who he wanted to be when he wanted to be Spinoza and Stendhal. We can do this by turning to what is central to most rationalist projects, as was noted at the beginning of this essay—namely, the rationalist commitment to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), the view that everything must have a reason why it does or does not exist. This in turn will lead us to a discussion of grounding, for it is often thought that what exists, the determinate realities that we encounter and seek to explain, are grounded in a reality that accounts for them and offers a satisfactory explanation that answers all our why-questions.

**§3 PSR and Ground**

A core commitment among rationalists, as we have seen, is to the view that there is a reason to be given for everything, or as Dasgputa puts it, they are committed to 'the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), the principle that everything has an explanation' (Dasgupta 2016, 379). Despite agreeing on this point, the acceptance of PSR has come in different flavors or styles, and these reflect the standards that are put forth with respect to what counts as a satisfactory explanation or ground, and an explanation that satisfies any possible why-question. For Della Rocca, as we will see, only an absolute, single substance, a monism without a multitude of distinct objects, provides the sufficient ground for all our explanations. We can call this the strong version of the PSR. For Dasgupta, by contrast, a multitude of 'autonomous facts,' as he puts it, will be

sufficient to provide the adequate explanations the rationalist seeks. We can call this the soft version of the PSR. Unpacking the reasons behind these contrasting approaches to PSR will set the stage for the view I will argue for—namely, that it is the paradoxical nature of sense expressed by problematic Ideas that grounds the determinate diversity of things, or it 'is the sufficient reason of all phenomena,' as Deleuze puts it (Deleuze 1994 [1968], 222), and as such provides the basis for the explanations we give and receive.

We can quickly arrive at Della Rocca's strong version of the PSR by returning to our earlier arguments regarding Kripke's essentialism, where we saw that Della Rocca claimed that there was no non-arbitrary reason offered for the distinction between the Humphrey and Hesperus intuitions. We noted at the time that this argument typified the style of argument one finds in many of Della Rocca's other essays, and arguments that reflect a commitment to Spinoza's, and Bradley's, rationalism. The argument, in short, is that what ultimately fails are all non-monistic attempts to provide the ground for the answers to our questions, where the answers to these questions allow for a diversity of distinct phenomena or entities. If we accept the apparent diversity of phenomena, and the equally apparent relations these phenomena have to one another—e.g., causal dependency, logical dependency, and grounding dependency, among others—then we are left with the Bradley regress that arises when we attempt to account for these relations (recall our earlier discussion). If to avoid these difficulties, as Leibniz does (see Della Rocca 2012), we affirm instead a diversity of indivisible substances that do not interact or relate with one another—they are monads with closed windows as Leibniz puts it—but only appear to relate through a God-created pre-established harmony, then the problem of relations returns in accounting for the relationship between God and the infinite diversity of created

monads. It is at this point, Della Rocca argues, where Leibniz shies away from the rationalist demand that all facts and relations be grounded, that there be no brute facts. In the case of the relation between God and created monads, Leibniz ends up, as Della Rocca puts it, with 'This real causal relation [between God and monads, that] seems to be – on Leibniz's own terms – a not-fully grounded, partially free-floating, brute fact, a violation…indeed, of the PSR' (ibid. 155). What Leibniz ought to have done, and what Spinoza did do Della Rocca argues, is to reject the reality of distinct substances and accept that there is only one substance that is the ground and sufficient reason for everything. When faced with the rationalist dilemma, therefore—'either reject a multiplicity of objects and states or reject the claim that relations are grounded' (ibid. 158)—Spinoza rejects a multiplicity of objects rather than, as Leibniz does, accept a multiplicity of objects and reject instead that all relations are grounded, allowing, as we saw, that the relation of creation between God and monads is ungrounded. Spinoza thus remains consistent with his rationalist convictions, unlike Leibniz, and this is as it should be, as Della Rocca puts it more recently: 'the only consistent form of rationalism is one that accepts a form of monism and denies any multiplicity of distinct objects' (Della Rocca 2017, 479).

As we will see below, Della Rocca will qualify his strong version of PSR, making room for the diversity of distinct objects we encounter in our daily lives. For Dasgupta, by contrast, such qualifications are unnecessary for he will not adopt a strong version of the PSR. Dasgupta is quite upfront, arguing that if his qualitativism is defensible then this is because it is 'sufficient to explain the individualistic facts,' otherwise one will 'have to endorse an eliminativism about individualistic facts and claim that there are no such things' (Dasgupta 2014, 8). Now since denying the reality of individualistic facts 'is an intolerable consequence' for Dasgupta (ibid.),

whereas for Della Rocca this denial is simply the natural consequence of a consistent form of rationalism, it becomes critical for Dasgupta to show that general qualitative facts can indeed ground individualistic facts (ibid.).

At the basis of Dasgupta's account, to sketch it briefly, is a distinction he makes between brute and autonomous facts. As with Della Rocca and rationalists in general, Dasgupta rejects any explanation that is grounded in brute facts. Stated simply, brute facts, or what Dasgupta also refers to as fundamental facts, 'are those that are apt for having a ground and have one' (Dasgupta 2016, 385), though it is not given. The attempts to ground relations, as we saw Della Rocca develop Bradley's line of argument, led either to a brute fact that arbitrarily grounds the relation, such as explaining the relation between A and B by A rather than B, or it led to the Bradley regress of ungrounded facts. Autonomous facts, by contrast, are those 'not apt for having a ground in the first place' (ibid.). Autonomous facts play, on an analogy Dasgupta develops with proofs, the role of a stipulative definition, of which we cannot ask a why-question for the definition simply states what it is. If we define a line as the shortest distance between two points, we are not inclined to ask what accounts for or explains this fact since this is simply what a line, by definition, is. Autonomous facts, in other words, are groundless, according to Dasgupta, not because they are brute facts that are apt to be grounded, facts about which one could legitimately ask a why-question, but they are facts to which it would seem illegitimate to even ask such why-questions. In the case of water being taken to be $H_2O$, Dasgupta argues that to ask what it is that makes it the case that water is composed of $H_2O$ 'is misguided in the something like the same sense that a request for a proof of a definition is' (ibid., 388), and thus $H_2O$ provides us with an autonomous fact. With this distinction between brute and autonomous

facts in hand, Dasgupta lays forth his form of rationalism, and for him it assumes a version of the PSR whereby why-questions regarding substantive facts 'must terminate in some autonomous facts' (ibid., 397). Dasgupta's rationalism, therefore, is one that accepts, unlike Della Rocca's strong version, a multiplicity of distinct objects, or in this case a multiplicity of autonomous facts.

To unpack these different versions of the PSR further, let us turn to examine in detail an example Dasgupta spends some time on—the academic conference. This example is telling, and important, for rather than focus on facts that may appear to carve nature at the joints, such as $H_2O$ or other similar natural kinds, academic conferences are cultural phenomena. Despite their cultural provenance, Dasgupta nonetheless believes that questions regarding what it is that makes it an academic conference, why it is a conference and not something else, terminates in an autonomous fact. As Dasgupta puts it, when thinking that 'there must be something about the event in virtue of which it counts as being a conference…[and we consider that] [p]erhaps the answer has to do with how various people are acting, e.g. that some are giving talks, others are asking questions, etc…[then we are providing a] grounding explanation of why a conference is occurring' (ibid. 381). An academic conference, therefore, is not a brute fact, a groundless fact, but rather a substantive fact that terminates in an autonomous fact—in this case, Dasgupta is clear that the autonomous facts are, as he says 'is plausible,' simply how 'various people act (some wrote papers, others read them, all converged in a hotel to discuss, etc.)' (ibid. 410). There is thus, for Dasgupta, something 'about the nature of ground or the nature of conferences [that] implies that it is impossible for there to be brute conferences. Other examples abound' (ibid.). In

other words, there is a multiplicity of facts about the world that are grounded, and to which satisfactory answers can be given.

The question to be asked at this point is whether the distinction between autonomous and brute facts is itself grounded, or whether, as Della Rocca might put it, this distinction violates the PSR. At the heart of the distinction, as we saw, is whether it is even legitimate or not to ask a grounding question, a why-question. Whereas one could ask why the relationship between A and B is grounded in A and not B, it would seem not to be legitimate to ask why a line is the shortest distance between two points—that is simply what a line, by definition, is—or why a conference (as Dasgupta says is 'plausible') is simply people acting in certain ways—that is just what a conference is. But is it indeed the case that autonomous facts are not apt for grounding, and hence illegitimate to ask why-questions about them? Outside the stipulative definitions given in proofs, which Dasgupta admits is a helpful analogy to explain the nature of autonomous facts (ibid., 385), the case of conferences seems to be open to further questioning as to why it is grounded in those facts and not others. We can echo Quine's questions regarding what it is in virtue of which John is a bachelor, a question we address by grounding it in the autonomous fact that bachelors are unmarried men, to which, it would appear, it would be illegitimate to ask why this is so—that is simply what a bachelor is (Quine 1980, 23). Quine, however, famously argues that even here, if we are willing to 'make drastic enough adjustment elsewhere in the system' (ibid., 43) of our beliefs, then we could have occasion to doubt whether John is a bachelor in virtue of being unmarried. As Della Rocca has pointed out in reference to Quine's essay (Della Rocca 2013), Quine is basically arguing that the distinction between analytic and synthetic

statements is arbitrarily drawn. No matter where we draw the line and claim these are autonomous facts, grounding facts, and those are not, will be a line that is arbitrarily drawn.

Aware of Quine's arguments as most philosophers are, Dasgupta is also aware that he is developing arguments that have departed from the Quinean view of metaphysics that had been dominant for many decades. As Schaffer characterizes the change, in the recent trend we ought no longer to ask 'such questions as whether properties exist, whether meanings exist, and whether numbers exist' (Schaffer 2009, 347), and answer such questions through an analysis of a logical translation of our best scientific theories to determine what is bound by the existential quantifier—that is, what entities is the theory committed to (see Quine 1980 [1948]). What we should be asking instead, Schaffer argues, and speaking on behalf of the recent interest in grounding as well, is not whether these entities (properties, numbers, etc.) exist, for the working assumption is 'Of course they do!... [but] whether or not they are fundamental' (ibid.). When we come to grounding relations themselves, to facts that are the way they are—such a conference is going on, there is water in the glass, etc.—in virtue of other grounding, or autonomous facts (such as people acting in certain ways, $H_2O$ in the glass, etc.), this grounding relation is itself taken to be a primitive, a relation that does not need to be grounded. This point is repeated frequently within the literature on grounding, and it is also held by Dasgupta who claims that the notion of autonomy 'is a primitive notion' (Dasgupta 2016, 384).[4] More importantly, Dasgupta

[4] See also Schaffer 2009, who builds his 'neo-Aristotelian framework…[for metaphysics] around primitive grounding relations' (347); Fine 2012 puts forth a 'pure theory of ground' that uses four operators to capture different grounding relations, all of which he takes to be 'primitives' (55); and Audi 2012 takes the 'in-virtue-of' relation to be one that 'expresses a primitive, noncausal relation of determination, which I call *grounding'* (686, *emphasis in original*).

takes autonomous facts to be essentialist facts,[5] and just as Kripke developed the Humphrey intuition, recalling our earlier discussion, which holds that the essence or nature of a thing is prior to the possible ways this thing might be referred to or described (such as winning or losing the 1968 Presidential election), so too for Dasgupta 'essentialist facts are prior to the possibilities: the essentialist facts about the things give us the raw materials, as it were, and only then do the possibilities detail different ways for that raw material to be' (ibid. 395). Della Rocca's critique of Kripke, discussed earlier (§2), can thus be seen to be bringing the Quinean view, whereby the essence of a thing, what it is, depends on the theory we have that describes and refers to things, critically to bear on a 'pre-Quinean picture' (ibid.), or the view whereby the essence of autonomous facts precedes the possible ways they may exist.

Before turning to show that Della Rocca's criticisms of Kripke are also applicable to Dasgupta's notion of autonomous facts, I will narrow in on the generalist nature of autonomous facts—that is, Dasgupta's important claim that as generalist facts autonomous facts are neither determinate individuals in themselves nor do they ground any particular individual but rather a plurality of individualistic facts. The nature of such facts becomes most evident as one attempts to ground facts regarding weights and measures. Turning to this theme will also bring us to the notion of problematic Ideas wherein I will follow Plato's call not to rush to the one or the many while ignoring what happens in between.[6] Problematic Ideas, I will argue, are what happens in between, and they provide a ground for the multiplicity of determinate facts that Dasgupta calls

[5] See ibid., 389: 'It is not that there is some independently given domain and the essentialist facts are certain facts about what properties they have. It is rather that the essentialist facts specify *what the domain is* in the first place. It is those kinds of facts that strike me as autonomous.'

[6] See *Philebus* 17a: 'the wise men of the present day make the one and the many too quickly or too slowly, in haphazard fashion…they disregard all that lies between them.'

for, the differentiating tendency of sense as discussed above, while at the same time they are irreducible to any determinate facts or relations, as Della Rocca gestures towards, or the dedifferentiating tendency of sense.

**§4 Weights and Measures**

To discuss weights and measures, let us take a cup of coffee. The cup weighs 350 grams, to which is added 500g of coffee at 205°F, and the coffee itself has a distinct flavor profile, and a profile coffee tasters tend to agree upon and use to assess the coffee. As we take up these three ways of attributing properties to the coffee—by weight, temperature, and taste—we will come upon a common presumption, namely that these properties are intrinsic properties of the coffee itself, or of whatever object we may happen to be weighing and measuring. The coffee cup weighs 350g because that is part of the intrinsic nature of the cup itself, its mass and weight, and the property we attribute to the cup, its weight in grams, is simply a conventional representation of that intrinsic property. Wherever we take this cup, and whatever conventional standards of weights and measures we may use, the cup and coffee have the same weight they have, intrinsically. In the case of temperature, it is commonly held to reflect the mean kinetic energy of the substance we are measuring, and yet this mean kinetic energy is nonetheless taken to be a property that is intrinsic to the liquid coffee in the cup. There may be variations throughout the volume, but on average the kinetic energy of the liquid is as the measured temperature represents it. And the taste of the coffee, finally, although related to objective properties of the coffee itself, including temperature, is something that requires the collaboration of coffee tasters who work, in groups, to develop tasting schedules that they then take to represent the flavor profile that is

intrinsic to the coffee itself—e.g., this Ethiopian coffee has tastes of blueberry, blood orange, and milk chocolate.

Dasgupta's generalist approach to autonomous facts challenges these assumptions about the intrinsic nature of weights and measures. There is no determinate, intrinsic property to an object that is then represented by the weight or measure we apply to it. In the case of mass, for instance, Dasgupta notes that it is widely recognized to be a determinable that has 'two kinds of determinates…a determinate intrinsic property it has independently of its relationships with other material bodies…[and] determinate mass relationships with one another, such as x being more massive than y or x being twice as massive as y' (Dasgupta 2013, 105). Dasgupta rejects the first, arguing that terms that refer to properties as if they were intrinsic are simply shorthand for the second, and thus 'we can use "kilogram" as a convenient way of storing and communicating information about mass ratios even if the sentences containing it are not true' (ibid. 123). In other words, our tendency to think about determinate things with determinate, intrinsic properties, etc., or what I have referred to as the primacy of the determinate (see Bell forthcoming), is a mistaken and unnecessary way of thinking about the world. For Dasgupta, in fact, and developing an analogy with absolute velocity that we have already discussed (in §1), even if there are determinate individuals that have intrinsic properties such as mass, etc., they 'would be undetectable in a very strong sense: the structure of the physical laws governing our world would guarantee that they could never have an effect on our senses' (ibid. 106). What we have instead, Dasgupta argues, are a series of relationships that provide, through comparison and in generalist terms, a ground in virtue of which the cup of coffee has the weight it has, with the coffee at the temperature it has, etc. That in virtue of which something has the weight, etc., it has, therefore, is

not a determinate property that is intrinsic to an individual object, but rather 'the in virtue of relation is irreducibly plural, in the sense that a plurality of facts Y can sometimes hold in virtue of another plurality of facts X even though no Y when taken on its own holds in virtue of anything' (ibid., 126). Understood in this way, if we take the set K of all kilogram facts and the set R of all facts about mass relationships, then according to Dasgupta 'the members of K (plurally) hold in virtue of the members of R even though no kilogram fact taken on its own holds in virtue of anything' (ibid.). In other words, the kilogram fact concerning my coffee cup, the fact that it is 350g, does not hold in virtue of any determinate property intrinsic to the cup itself, nor does it hold in virtue of any single, determinate fact that grounds it, but rather it is one of a plurality of facts that holds in virtue of the set R of all facts about mass relationships.

To clarify this point we can look to the challenges that were involved in creating the temperature scale we now use as if it simply represented intrinsic properties of that which is being measured. In his book, *Inventing Temperature* (Chang 2004), Hasok Chang details the difficulties that were involved as numerous people, over the course of the 18$^{th}$ and 19$^{th}$ centuries, attempted to nail down the property associated with the temperature—the fixed point—at which water freezes or boils. Among the many factors that could vary the temperature at which water boils, for instance, a higher level of oxygen than normal dissolved in water will result in water boiling at temperatures well above 100 degrees centigrade, in a phenomenon known as superheating (Chang 2004, 17-23). Similar difficulties were encountered when attempting to fix the temperature at which water freezes. Marc Wilson has made related arguments, beginning with the claim that if temperature is indeed taken to be mean kinetic energy, which is a view Wilson claims is 'generally false' (Wilson 1985, 228), though widely held to be true, then this is

an assumption that is only relevant for a classical ideal gas at equilibrium and not to most other substances or to substances in dynamic contexts. If we take a thermometer, for instance, Wilson points out that it 'will not function properly in an environment full of shock waves or if applied to objects at extremely high or low temperatures' (Wilson 1982, 563). This leads Wilson to conclude that 'Except in trivial cases, almost no universal detection devices exist; instruments which can detect the presence or absence of P in any object whatsoever in any context' (ibid. 563). What does eventually lead to the emergence of the thinking of a determinate temperature as an intrinsic property that a particular substance has is the result, both Chang and Wilson will argue, of a convergence of relations whereby, to restate Dasgupta's point, a set of real physical properties in varied contexts comes to be associated with a set of temperature predicates. As Wilson argues, it is only because 'we obtain approximately similar readings from such a wide variety of distinct devices, for example, gas thermometers, liquid in glass thermometers, thermocouples, so called "sonic" thermometers, etc.' that we are then able to refer to the physical properties associated with temperature as being freed from their 'operational underpinnings' (Wilson 1985, 244). In other words, and to restate Dasgupta's plurality of grounds thesis, the temperature of my cup of coffee is what it is in virtue of a plurality of conditions—convergence of a variety of devices on the temperature at which water boils; amount of oxygen dissolved in water; use of glass thermometer within proper parameters; temperature range within suitable parameters (not too high, too low); no shock waves present; etc.—make it possible to apply the predicate with confidence, even though no single determining condition is sufficient by itself to account for the temperature of this particular cup of coffee.

Let us now return to autonomous facts. Earlier we noted that for Dasgupta autonomous facts are essentialist facts, or they lay out the domain of what is the case in advance of the possibilities that may come to exist with respect to that domain. In light of Chang's and Wilson's discussions of the processes associated with arriving at the facts we do regarding temperature, we can further understand the reasons why the set T of temperature facts, to build on our earlier discussion, holds in virtue of set R of temperature relations and parameters. Set R, however, is not an autonomous fact that determines the domain of temperature in advance of the possibilities that may come to exist within the domain where temperature measurements are taken. Set R is itself the result of ongoing dynamic processes where predicates such as temperature (e.g., '…is 205°F) that come to be applied to things are themselves inseparable from these processes that attempt to track phenomena. Recognizing the heterogeneous factors at play in these processes, Wilson is upfront and admits that what 'drives the argument of [his] book [*Wandering Significance* (2006)] is the thesis that the often quirky behaviors of ordinary descriptive predicates derive, not merely from controlled human inattention or carelessness, but from a basic unwillingness of the physical universe to sit still while we frame its descriptive picture' (Wilson 2006, 11).

Building on this claim we can echo Della Rocca's criticism of Kripke's essentialism, namely Della Rocca's argument that Kripke's reliance on a distinction between a Humphrey intuition and a Hesperus intuition was arbitrary for while the Hesperus intuition depended, according to Kripke, on the ways in which the object (Hesperus) is referred to and described, it was unclear how the Humphrey intuition was immune to such limitations. We would not think, for example, that Humphrey is a light switch in another possible world. The same could be said

of the set R of temperature relations; namely, why is set R not apt for further grounding, and hence immune to further why-questions, and thus an autonomous fact according to Dasgupta, when, and in line with Wilson's and Chang's arguments, the very set of R facts was itself the result of a series of why-questions? It appears arbitrary, therefore, to exclude further questions and possible descriptions that may alter the nature and facts associated with set R. As Della Rocca might put it, there seems to be no grounded, unarbitrary basis for distinguishing between set R as an autonomous, essentialist fact, and set R as an ongoing process of describing and tracking the phenomena of a universe that won't sit still.

In defense of Dasgupta, we could stress at this point, as he no doubt would, that we are not to confuse an autonomous fact with an individual fact, meaning a fact about an individual. Autonomous facts, as essentialist facts, are not individual facts in the way we think of Humphrey as an individual (recall §2). They are general, qualitative facts and not quantitatively individuated and distinct facts. As we have seen, for Dasgupta primitive individuals are '*physically redundant and empirically undetectable*' (Dasgupta 2009, 36), or they are idlers (see Dasgupta 2017). On this point, however, we could push Dasgupta by drawing on one of Deleuze's key arguments from his book *Difference and Repetition*—that is, his argument that it is a mistake to think of qualitative facts as self-identical facts, even if they are not quantitatively self-identical and distinct individuals. Dasgupta himself admits that he has replaced one primitive self-identity—individuals—with another—quiddities or qualitative properties—though for him it is a price worth paying since it accommodates the work in fundamental physics.[7] For

[7] In published dialogue between Dasgupta and Jason Turner, Turner presses Dasgupta: 'Suppose you dispense with fundamental individuals because they are idlers, but go no further. Then, as we agreed earlier, the generalist view you endorse quantifies over quiddities. If you concede that these are idlers, then the view is just as lousy with idlers as the original individualist view. This is the idlers' revenge' (Dasgupta 2017, 38). To which Dasgupta responds:

Deleuze, by contrast, rather than thinking of qualitative properties as self-identical quiddities, Deleuze instead argues that 'qualities are signs which flash across the interval of a difference' (Deleuze 1994 [1968], 223). In other words, qualities are themselves grounded in processes that cannot be reduced to self-identity—they are grounded, as Wilson put it, in the 'basic unwillingness of the physical universe to sit still.' When qualities are taken to be self-identical grounds, or primitive relations as Dasgupta and others do, then the dynamic of Della Rocca's Spinozist argument returns. When we attempt to ground a determinate relationship between two determinate entities, we end up either with a regress or we are unable to ground the relationship in a non-arbitrary manner. This led Della Rocca to the conclusion that 'the only consistent form of rationalism is one that accepts a form of monism and denies any multiplicity of distinct objects' (Della Rocca 2017, 479). Dasgupta, by contrast, attempts to maintain a consistent form of rationalism that does accept a multiplicity of general, qualitative facts—the autonomous facts. To the extent, however, that autonomous facts are self-identical quiddities, and the ground for a domain of individualistic facts, then the problem is again one of grounding this relation and difference between autonomous and non-autonomous facts, facts that do and do not warrant further why-questions, and the attempts to provide this ground, as we have seen, ultimately run afoul of Della Rocca's Spinozist rationalism.

Despite the differences with Dasgupta that we have highlighted here, Della Rocca recognizes the motivation behind the efforts to embrace a multiplicity of distinct objects, for how

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'Yes, the generalist view under discussion does have one kind of idler: the quiddities. So it isn't perfect. But the Corresponding individualist view has two kinds of idlers: quiddities and individuals. With respect to the principle that idlers are a vice, the generalist does better' (ibid.). With respect to the relation to physics, Dasgupta is clear, '…physics is "blind" to the primitive individuals themselves and "cares" only about the qualitative facts about the system' (ibid., 11). Qualitative facts or quiddities, however, and as I have been arguing here, are equally problematic, though turning to problematic Ideas as ground is one way to avoid these problems.

could he not since they seem to be at the forefront of our everyday experience. To accommodate a multiplicity of distinct objects, Della Rocca claims there are degrees of being between the outright denial of distinct objects and the sole acceptance of one substance. We could say that in taking this step Della Rocca is following Socrates' call, as expressed in the *Philebus*, to avoid being like 'the wise men of the present day [who] make the one and the many too quickly or too slowly [and]… disregard all that lies between them (17a). Degrees of being, or problematic Ideas, are what happens in between the monism that denies the reality of distinct objects and the pluralism that accepts a plurality of distinct, autonomous facts. To put this in the terms to be developed here, problematic Ideas serve as the ground for the nature of the determinate, or they express the paradoxical nature of sense, and hence both the differentiating tendency to continually differentiate the determinate, and the dedifferentiating tendency that eludes and undermines the determinate. Dasgupta's efforts to develop a metaphysical rationalism that grounds the PSR in a multiplicity of autonomous facts reflects the differentiating tendency of sense. Della Rocca's Spinozist (and Bradleyan) claim that PSR is grounded in the intelligible nature of a single substance, and a substance that is not to be confused with any multiplicity of distinct objects, reflects the dedifferentiating tendency of sense. In the next two sections we will set forth an existential rationalism whereby the PSR is understood to be the ground that expresses the paradoxical nature of sense, and in this way we will see that it follows both Dasgupta and Della Rocca in important ways, but more importantly it heeds Plato's call not to rush to the one and the many.

**§5 Transcendental Field**

Returning now to Sartre's novel, *Nausea*, and to Roquentin's experience before the tree root, we can now recontextualize his sense that 'colours, tastes, and smells were never real, never themselves and nothing but themselves,' and that '[t]he simplest, most indefinable quality had too much content, in relation to itself, in its heart' (Sartre 1964 [1938], 175-6). In the experience of qualities that were 'never themselves' and had 'too much content' in relation to themselves, Roquentin is indeed experiencing a sense of groundlessness, but not the groundlessness that comes with autonomous facts, facts that are not legitimately open to further why-questions, which is precisely why Dasgupta calls such facts '*autonomous*,' for they are 'not apt for being grounded in the first place, if the question of why it obtains does not legitimately arise' (Dasgupta 2016, 383). Why-questions do not arise with respect to autonomous facts for they are the ground that satisfactorily answers such questions without themselves being in question.[8] Roquentin's experience, by contrast, is not one that satisfactorily answers questions; to the contrary, the experience is excessive to the point where he neither knows what question to ask, what would even be the target of such a question, and hence he wouldn't even begin to know what would constitute a satisfactory answer. Roquentin's experience is also not a unitary, quasi-religious experience where everything comes to be experienced as one, whether in the form of Spinoza's third kind of knowledge that intuitively grasps the singular, indivisible nature of God/Nature, or as the type of religious experience William James studied.[9] What Roquentin is encountering, I shall argue, is the nature of problematic Ideas.

[8] As Dasgupta puts it, 'If we explain the mountain's existence in terms of autonomous facts then the question as to why those underlying autonomous facts obtain does not even arise…The child's question of why there is a mountain here will then be answered…' (ibid.).
[9] For James' discussion of unitive experiences, see his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1987 [1902]).

To explain this point, we can first recall the paradoxical nature of sense as de/differentiating, as tending both toward differentiated properties, qualities, quantities, etc., *and* as tending toward that which undermines the determinate and differentiated. This undermining is key. As problematic Ideas, they are Ideas in a standard interpretation of Plato—that is, as Ideas they are not to be confused with any of the determinate, particular entities that participate in, or resemble these Ideas (dedifferentiating tendency), and they at the same time provide the ground in virtue of which the many determinate entities are what they are (differentiating tendency). What makes the Idea *problematic* is precisely the paradoxical nature of sense and its undermining tendency. In other words, in contrast to the view that an Idea is, as it is often assumed Plato maintained, a simple, self-identical essence that is independent of and precedes the many ways this Idea exists in the world by those particulars that participate in and resemble this Idea, a problematic Idea is problematic because it expresses the undermining tendencies of sense. Stated differently, a problematic Idea is not a determinate, self-identical Idea, nor a qualitatively distinct and autonomous fact, but is rather a problematic tendency toward both the self-identity of an Idea, of an essence that precedes existence, *and* toward an undermining of identity.

We can clarify this point by returning to Sartre, and to his long essay, *Transcendence of the Ego*. Although heavily indebted to Husserl's thought, and especially to his use of the notion of intentionality to understand the nature of consciousness as consciousness of something, Sartre nonetheless claims that Husserl shied away from following these thoughts to their natural conclusion. In particular, Sartre claims that if we are to engage in a proper phenomenological description of the contents of that which is given to consciousness, that which is constituted in

the very intentional act that is consciousness, then Husserl's notion of the pure transcendental ego will not be something we can accommodate. By claiming this pure transcendental ego is the source of the constitutive acts of consciousness, Husserl takes an object of consciousness, the ego or I as that which is already constituted by an act of consciousness, and then turns it into the condition for the possibility of constitutive acts of consciousness. For Sartre this move is unnecessary. We need simply to situate consciousness as always already engaged in the acts that constitute a world of subjects and objects that are there for consciousness. The constituted world of subjects and objects that emerge are thus not prefigured by the identity of a transcendental ego, Sartre argues, but rather by a transcendental field. As Sartre describes it,

> The Transcendental Field, purified of all egological structure, recovers its primary transparency. In a sense, it is a nothing, since all physical, psycho-physcial, and psychic objects, all truths, all values are outside it; since my me has itself ceased to be any part of it. But this nothing is all since it is consciousness of all these objects. (Sartre 1960 [1937], 93).

Sartre will stress this point again towards the end of his essay, emphasizing the absolute nature of consciousness (as discussed earlier), whereby its nothingness is precisely the upsurge that is the world. Sartre will thus argue that 'The world has not created the me; the me has not created the World. These are two objects for absolute, impersonal consciousness, and it is by virtue of this consciousness that they [me and World] are connected…It [absolute consciousness] is quite simply a first condition and an absolute source of existence' (ibid. 105-6). It is this 'source of existence' that characterizes Roquentin's experience of nausea, and as such it is a source both of existence (differentiating tendency) and of the undermining of things (dedifferentiating tendency). It is just point that Deleuze stresses as he remarks on the significance of Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego*. Rather than follow Husserl and attempt to contain the paradoxical nature of sense within the already given and predetermining identity of a transcendental ego or

object, a grounding *me* or World, Sartre moves, Deleuze claims, toward an understanding of 'the true genesis…[that] may occur only within a transcendental field which would correspond to the conditions posed by Sartre in his decisive article of 1937 [i.e., *Transcendence of the Ego*]: an impersonal transcendental field, not having the form of a synthetic personal consciousness or a subjective identity. The foundation,' Deleuze concludes, 'can never resemble what it founds' (Deleuze 1990 [1969], 98-99). In other words, the impersonal transcendental field is not a field populated by already determined identities, whether these be subjective identities or the identity of objects, but it is the condition that grounds such identities.

To avoid Husserl's mistake, therefore, we need to understand how it is that the foundation does not resemble what it founds, and as Deleuze takes up this challenge and extends Sartre's arguments he finds that one can go further than Sartre and stress the importance of immanence. In particular, whereas Sartre was correct, according to Deleuze, to see that the subject (I or me) and object (World) are constituted objects that transcend consciousness, the impersonal transcendental field is, on Deleuze's reading of Sartre, still a field traversed by an absolute consciousness, and a consciousness immanently tied to the constitution of both a subject (I or me) and an object (World). 'Were it not for consciousness,' Deleuze claims in his final published essay, 'the transcendental field would be defined as a pure plane of immanence, because it eludes all transcendence of the subject and of the object' (Deleuze 2001 [1994], 26). In other words, if immanence is to be understood as the condition that does not resemble the conditioned, then it ought not to be thought of as being immanent to that which constitutes the transcendent objects, for then it is still an immanence to something. For Sartre a transcendental field is indeed an immanence, but an immanence to consciousness, but 'we can speak of a plane

of immanence,' Deleuze claims, 'when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself' (ibid., 27).[10] This is an immanence, in short, that is not to be confused with, nor does it resemble, the realities conditioned by immanence. Similarly for problematic Ideas, as understood here, and in a manner sympathetic to the projects of both Sartre and Deleuze, determinate identities have their identity and reality in virtue of problematic Ideas, and yet as ground problematic Ideas do not resemble that which they ground.

Turning now to how problematic Ideas found, without resembling, determinate identities, we can return to our discussion of weights and measures. What we saw in this discussion was that the answer we give to the simple question, "what is the temperature of this substance (say the coffee in this cup)?", presupposes a host of conditions that make it possible to give an answer. In certain circumstances, one method will not give us an accurate measurement (if there are shock waves or the temperatures are too extreme), so the answer to the "what is the temperature?" question is possible in virtue of having already addressed questions such as when, where, how, and in what circumstances are we taking the temperature? This shift in questions is also reflected in the shift that has occurred in analytic philosophy, as we saw Schaffer describe it

[10] Deleuze's argument takes a decidedly Spinozist turn at this point in his final essay, which is unsurprising given the influence of Spinoza throughout much of Deleuze's work. In short, Deleuze sets up a distinction between transcendental field, plane of immanence, and a life that mirrors Spinoza's distinction between modes, attributes, and God/Nature. As a mode is understood by Spinoza to be the 'affections of substance; that is, that which is in something else and is conceived through something else' (1D5), a transcendental field is an immanence to something else, an absolute consciousness for Sartre. Deleuze's claim that the plane of immanence is what we have 'when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself' also mirrors Spinoza's claim that attributes are what the 'intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence' (1D4), and since they constitute the essence of substance 'Each attribute of one substance must be conceived through itself' (1P10). And finally, just as God is not just infinite in kind, conceived through itself in the manner of an attribute, but an 'Absolutely infinite' (1P13, 1P11) substance, or God, 'consisting of infinite attributes' (1P11), so too 'a life,' for Deleuze, 'is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss' (Deleuze 2001 [1994], 27). It would take us too far astray to explore Deleuze's Spinozism in this essay (for more see Bell 2021, and Bell,forthcoming), but at the very least it is safe to say that in taking on important aspects of Spinoza's project, Deleuze, like Sartre before him, was not far removed from Spinoza's rationalism. For a defense of Deleuze's Spinozist rationalism, see Peden (2014).

earlier. Whereas the Quinean approach to metaphysics entailed answering a series of "What is X" questions whereby one sets out to determine whether certain things—numbers, properties, etc.—exist or not, the more recent trend has been to a pre-Quinean view, or neo-Aristotelian in the case of Schaffer, where it is not a matter of what exists that is important but how things exist, whether they are ground or grounded, fundamental or derivative. We find a similar awareness of the shift in questioning in Deleuze's work. Deleuze remarks that it 'should be noticed how few philosophers have placed their trust in the "What is X?" in order to have Ideas. Certainly not Aristotle. … Once the dialectic brews up its matter instead of being applied in a vacuum for propaedeutic ends, the questions "How much?", "How?", "In what cases?", and "Who?" abound' (Deleuze 1994 (1968), 188). I will call these latter questions relevance questions, and the former truth questions. With respect to autonomous facts and their ability to answer why-questions, we saw that the assumption that these facts are not apt to be grounded gives way, as in the case of temperature, to relevance questions. Dasgupta partially addressed this point by arguing for a plurality of grounds. That is, there is no determinate relation between an individual fact and its determinate ground; rather, there is a plurality of autonomous facts that ground a plurality of individualistic facts, and yet none of these individualistic facts, taken by itself, can be connected precisely to the determinate, autonomous fact that grounded it. For Dasgupta, however, and in a manner comparable to the approach Husserl takes that Sartre, and later Deleuze, would challenge, the plurality of grounds do indeed resemble that which is grounded, even if not individually. A determinable and distinct *set* of individualistic facts, K (such as kilogram facts), holds in virtue of a determinable and distinct *set* of autonomous facts, Y (the set of mass relations, for example), and it is precisely this self-identity of both determinable sets, K and Y, even if this is a vague and general self-similarity rather than a particular and determinate self-

identity, is just what Deleuze, following Sartre, challenges. Moreover, it is the nature of problematic Ideas to provide the ground for the determinable and determinate nature of set K, for instance, while not resembling or presupposing its own self-identity or self-similarity. More to the point, problematic Ideas are not what assures the identity of K, whatever determinate identity or set of identities (One or Many) this may entail, but rather they assure that K becomes other. Relevance questions are those questions that explore the when, how, where, and in what cases K both is what it is (differentiating tendency) and when, how, and in what cases it becomes other (dedifferentiating tendency).

The rational existentialism we are developing by following on the suggestions of Sartre and Deleuze thus entails a different sense of grounding, and likewise a different sense of how we are to understand the PSR. Rather than seek a fundamental ground that satisfies all our why-questions in virtue of its stable self-identity and question-terminating nature, the question of grounding gives way to relevance questions—when, how, in what cases, and by whom does this become something other than what it is. The approach taken here is sympathetic to the arguments we find in Jessica Wilson's "No Work for a Theory of Grounding." In short, for Wilson there is no work for a theory of grounding because 'the problem with Grounding,' and in all the various forms we find it discussed in the literature, 'is not that it is general; it is *way too* general' (Wilson 2014, 42; emphasis in original). Reflecting the dedifferentiating tendency of problematic Ideas, most discussions of grounding, Wilson argues, have abstracted too far away from the real work of determining precisely how, when, and in what circumstances one things provides an explanation for another, and as a result it 'renders it [a theory of grounding] useless on its own' (ibid.). According to Wilson, sufficient work can be done if we focus on '"small-g" grounding

relations,' such as 'type or token identity, functional realization, the classical mereological part-whole relation…the determinable-determinate relation, etc.,' for this work is indeed 'capable of answering these crucially basic questions about the existential, ontological, metaphysical, and causal status of metaphysically dependent goings-on' (ibid. 6). As we follow through on the grounding questions and pursue the differentiating tendency of problematic Ideas, we come upon relevance questions and find we need to shift our focus, or alter our approach, take on particular 'small-g' grounding relations, depending on how we address these questions. Where an existential rationalism that appeals to problematic Ideas as ground differs from Wilson would be with how we understand the dedifferentiating tendency. It is not simply an excess of abstraction, a move that is *way too* general, but it is also, and more importantly, a move that assures the undermining and transformation of identity, including the identities at work in the 'small-g' grounding relations such as the determinable and the determinate.[11] Relevance questions therefore target not only the cases and circumstances when one should use certain 'small-g' grounding relations to do the work of explaining the various 'metaphysically dependent goings-on,' but it also discerns the limits to the identities tied to these relations, the circumstances when, how, and in what cases the determinable, for instance, becomes other and it too no longer does the work we ask it to do. It was just such situations that Sartre sought to understand, in *Nausea* and in his other works. As Roquentin discovered, for example, there are times when our everyday efforts to explain phenomena, to identify and answer why-questions, fails to work, and it is at these times where relevance questions become pressing. In his later work Sartre develops what he calls the 'progressive-regressive method' that seeks, I would argue, to develop an effective way of taking up these questions. We will draw this essay to a close, then, by returning

[11] For more on this see Bell…

to where we began, to an encounter where ‘the world of explanations and reasons’ (Sartre 1964 [1938], 174) no longer holds.

**§6 Progressive-Regressive Method**

As Roquentin sat on the park bench, looking at the root of the chestnut tree, the experience of nausea left him unable to ‘remember it was a root any more,’ for ‘words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use…’ (Sartre 1964 [1938], 171). But what came with this experience as well was the sense of existence itself:

> …all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer (ibid.).

To state the transformation that occurs here in the terms we used in the previous section, the comfort of knowing and naming what surrounds Roquentin—the root, park gates, bench, etc.—gave way, or was undermined by the sense of existence that is not captured by that which answers to a “What is X?” question. It is in this context where ‘this feeling of comfort and security’ that comes with being able to answer our “What is X?” questions ‘gave way to a deep uneasiness: colours, tastes, and smells were never real, never themselves and nothing but themselves. The simplest, most indefinable quality had too much content, in relation to itself, in its heart’ (ibid., 175-6). For Sartre, as expressed through Roquentin, what is ‘suddenly unveiled’ and has ‘too much content’ to be contained by an ‘abstract category’ is existence, and it is existence that prompts the shift to relevance questions when the ‘comfort and security’ becomes undermined gives way to ‘deep uneasiness.’

This shift to relevance questions is also a shift to grounding questions, questions that seek to understand the grounds that address our questions. In contrast to a Dasgupta/Della Rocca approach to grounding questions, where the ground provides a satisfactory answer, an existential rationalism calls upon problematic Ideas as ground, and as a result there is a shuttling back and forth between both the determinate and stable, that which answers the "What is X?" questions, and existence (adopting Sartre's sense of the term here), that which undermines 'the diversity of things, their individuality,' and reveals it to be only 'an appearance, a veneer.' In *Search for a Method*, Sartre attempts to develop a method that will help us to navigate this shuttling between determinate individuality and existence, between that which satisfies the "What is X?" (or truth) questions and that which brings about relevance questions. As his focus had shifted to political matters at this time, Sartre's method would be primarily turned on human beings, who are to be defined by their projects, which entails an 'immediate relation with the Other than oneself, beyond the given and constituted elements,' with the already determinate and individuated, in a project that is a 'perpetual production of oneself by work and praxis" (Sartre 1963, 150-1). We are thus neither at rest in the given and constituted, nor are we at rest in praxis for the latter is what Sartre calls 'existence, and by this we do not mean a stable substance which rests in itself, but rather a perpetual disequilibrium…' (ibid., 151). The progressive-regressive method is the result of Sartre's efforts to track these human projects.

At the heart of Sartre's progressive-regressive method is a 'differential' approach to analyzing one's projects. Borrowing from Merleau-Ponty, Sartre argues that '[t]he meaning of our study here must be a "differential," as Merleau-Ponty would call it' (ibid., 137).[12] In

[12] See Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1945]), 123-4.

particular, we need to look to 'the difference between the "Common Beliefs" and the concrete idea or attitude of the person studied, the way in which the beliefs are enriched, made concrete, deviated, etc.' (ibid.). Put simply, and generalizing beyond the case of human projects to problematic Ideas as the PSR for all phenomena, the focus must be on the "differential" between the determinate and given that is the solution to the problematic, and the problematic that undermines 'the diversity of things, their individuality.' Problematic Ideas are the differential that are nothing less than the differentiating tendency towards the determinate that we found in Dasgupta, and the dedifferentiating tendency that undermines the determinate that we found in Spinoza and Della Rocca. There is no pure problematic, separate and distinct from the solutions it makes possible; nor are there solutions separate from the problematic, solutions that have resolved and eliminated the problematic once and for all. There is, rather, a perpetual disequilibrium between the two tendencies, a disequilibrium Sartre calls existence and I call, in order to generalize it, problematic Ideas.

One way to think of the task associated with adopting the method that seeks the differential between the "Common Beliefs" and the 'concrete idea or attitude of the person studied' is that it entails discerning the thresholds where relevance questions enter the scene. When one encounters a situation where their previous ways of doing things do not work or are looked upon by others with a "who are you and why are you doing that?" look on their face, as may happen when traveling or among people with a different set of "Common Beliefs," then relevance questions can quickly take center stage. Why, where, how, and in what circumstance did I deviate? One way to avoid such deviations, and the eyerolls these bring, is simply to do what others do, and in particular others who in this circumstance you take to be most likely to be

doing things the right way. Kierkegaard stresses this theme in his work and offers an example of a person at a dinner party who, whe 'a dish is served, and one does not know how it should be eaten: he would look around until he saw how others did it, and so forth' (Kierkegaard 1968 [1846], 219). The drawback of this approach, as Kierkegaard notes, is that we simply become 'a sort of marionette, very deceptively imitating everything human' (ibid.), everything others do, without becoming ourselves. As Sartre takes up this issue, it is inevitable that we take on a form of life that becomes our variation of the common, our form of bad-faith to borrow Sartre's own term. Stated in the manner inspired by the *Philebus*, our life projects perpetually oscillate between traditional expectations that are given to us as a solution without a problem, though never in the pure state as separate and distinct from problems, and a life that varies and problematizes any given tradition, though again in a way that is never purely separate and distinct from the givens of one's situation. It is for this reason that Sartre sets out to 'approach the study of the differential upon the basis of a totalizing demand' (Sartre 1963, 138), by which he means our tendency to make sense of a given situation by taking a totalizing approach (dedifferentiating tendency of making *sense*) that provides consistency and coherence to a diversity of given phenomena (differentiating tendency of making *sense*). Any variations or deviations we may find in the person being studied, therefore, are not to be thought of 'as anomic contingencies, as chances, as non-signifying aspects, quite the contrary,' Sartre stresses, 'the singularity of the behavior or of the conception is before all else the concrete reality as a lived totalization' (ibid.).

To clarify this totalizing tendency and how it can help us to understand the singularity of behavior as meaningful rather than anomic or non-signifying, we can briefly bring in the

importance of narratives to this process. Most relevant for our purposes is Ricoeur's understanding of narrative. Ricoeur develops a theory of narrative to further Heidegger's critique of the 'ordinary representation of time as a linear series of "nows"' (Ricoeur 1980, 170). Rather than think of time as a linear series of nows, Ricoeur argues that the nature of time is to be thought of as a narrative whole that is not to be confounded with the determinate events and moments, and yet this narrative whole makes sense of these events, much as the totalizing effort Sartre discusses makes sense of a behavioral idiosyncrasy. As Ricoeur states this point, '…the time of the simplest story also escapes the ordinary notion of time conceived of as a series of instants succeeding one another along an abstract line oriented in a single direction…the story's conclusion is the pole of attraction of the entire development. But a narrative conclusion can neither be deduced nor predicted…a conclusion must be acceptable' (ibid. 174). Stated in the terms I have been developing here along Sartrean lines, a narrative entails a differentiating process that tends towards and makes sense of a determinate series of events, facts, and details, and a narrative entails a dedifferentiating process that is irreducible to the many determinate details while makeing them 'acceptable' in a way that is neither formally deducible nor predictable. For Sartre this latter process is precisely the totalizing that forms the basis for his progressive-regressive method.

We can now turn to the progressive-regressive method itself. For Sartre this begins with the determinate givens of a situation. From these givens we then proceed in 'an analytic, regressive moment' that seeks to reveal the interplay between relevance and truth questions, and how relevance questions provide a ground for the determinate that then answers certain truth questions, questions that are in turn susceptible to problematization, to relevance questions, and

thus to more determinate solutions that address other truth questions, and so on.[13] What the regressive method sets out to do, therefore, is to discern those moments from which the totalizing process then progresses, the key moments or events that are problems that then become totalized or solved in a generative narrative that becomes one's sense of self. To clarify by way of example, we can begin, as Sartre did, with the fact that Gustave Flaubert was an author who wrote the novel *Madame Bovary*. Through the regressive method, we return to Flaubert's childhood, and to the problematic events that marked turning points or inflections points, and from there the shift focuses to 'the progressive method…[where] the problem,' as Sartre sees it,

> Is to recover the totalizing movement of enrichment which engenders each moment in terms of the prior moment, the impulse which starts from lived obscurities in order to arrive at the final objectification—in short, the project by which Flaubert…will constitute himself inevitably and indissolubly as the author of *Madame Bovary* and as the petit bourgeois which he refused to be. (Sartre 1963, 146-7).

Among the earlier moments in Flaubert's life the regressive method reveals, Sartre claims, were when Flaubert realized he could not equal his older brother's success, his father's relationship with his boss (recognized only obscurely), among others, and the progressive method allows us to see how subsequent moments followed upon these moments, with each later moment building upon and being built by the consequences of the former. As Sartre puts it in his multi-volume work on Flaubert, 'a man – whoever he is – totalizes his epoch to the precise degree that he is totalized by it' (FI5, 394). In short, the regressive method turns to the facts and analyzes them to the point where a threshold is reached, where the determinate nature of the fact gives way to a

[13] Merleau-Ponty will criticize Sartre on this point, or at least he will criticize the theory of time Sartre developed in *Being and Nothingness*, nearly twenty years before *Search for a Method*. By thinking of 'political time [as being]…atomized for him into a series of decisions taken in the presence of death,' Sartre inevitably reduces the communist party to being nothing but 'pure action…an ideal,' and as a result 'it is difficult to see how pure action could have gradations in reality; it is either completely pure or it is nothing' (Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1955], 117). By developing the progressive-regressive method, there are no pure actions or pure givens—there is a perpetual oscillation and disequilibrium between these two poles. The poles themselves are abstractions and the reality of human praxis occurs between these abstractions, and by degree as Merleau-Ponty was calling for.

problematizing process, to relevance questions that prompt a solution that gives rise to new determinate facts and situations with their own threshold moments that bring about yet more relevance questions, and so on until we get to the object or person from which we started—e.g., Flaubert the author of *Madame Bovary*.

When Sartre's monumental, multi-volume biography of Flaubert was published in 1972, he had stopped writing fiction (*The Condemned of Altona* [1959] was his last published literary work), and his philosophical focus had shifted from phenomenology to Marxism, but in key respects the philosophical issues taken up in *Nausea* continued to motivate Sartre up to his final works. In particular, and as I have been arguing throughout this essay, Sartre set out to reconcile his rationalist sympathies (his desire to be Spinoza!) with a recognition of the pervasiveness of contingency and freedom. From the perspective of traditional rationalism, including Spinoza's, Sartre may appear to be attempting the impossible task of squaring the circle. Indeed, many of the most common ways that rationalist philosophers understands the PSR are not an option for Sartre. If we take as a core assumption of rationalist philosophers Spinoza's claim that 'For every thing a cause or reason must be assigned either for its existence or for its non-existence' (1P11D2), then this is an assumption that is ruled out for Sartre. As we have seen, a consequence of Roquentin's experience of nausea was that 'the diversity of things, their individuality' had simply 'vanished' (Sartre 1964 [1938]). Given this situation one is unable to account for a causal relationship precisely because there are, in the midst of nausea, no determinate individuals available to enter into such relations. This difficulty has led some to deny the reality of a multiplicity of distinct objects and argue instead for the monistic nature of reality that is the PSR

for the appearance of distinct objects. This is how Della Rocca reads Spinoza.[14] This option is also not available to Sartre, and this because the monistic reality, according to rationalists such as Spinoza, necessitates the existence of that which follows from this reality. For Sartre, by contrast, and in line with his efforts to allow for contingency and freedom in his philosophy, existence is not necessitated but simply is, and for no reason. This was one of Roquentin's central insights: 'The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is simply to be there…' (ibid. 176). This rules out other forms of essentialist grounding as well, such as Dasgupta's claim that substantive facts are grounded in autonomous facts, facts that are essentialist and hence necessary. Yet another option is to follow Kit Fine's approach to understanding ground as a distinctively non-modal relationship. In his well-known argument (Fine 1994), Fine points out that the singleton of Socrates—that is, the set that contains only Socrates—exists necessarily if Socrates exists, and if Socrates exists then the singleton also exists necessarily. Intuitively, however, Socrates does not depend upon his singleton, and thus modal properties such as necessity do not adequately track the distinctive asymmetrical relationship that is grounding. Fine's essay has led to an upsurge of interest in the topic of grounding, with many debating whether or not it is a distinctive relation, and precisely how so if so.[15] This option is also not available to Sartre. Although Sartre would certainly deny modal properties to existence, he also denies there is a distinct relation between a ground and grounded. For Sartre there is simply being, existence, and nothingness. It is by virtue of consciousness, for Sartre, and its nihilating activity, that we have the beings for consciousness, or the 'veneer' of individuality that was undermined as nausea took hold. Consciousness, however, is not a

[14] Though Schaffer too on monism (Schaffer 2010), though he also accepts a causal relation (Schaffer 2016), in part because the cosmos is a determinate reality.
[15] See Koslicki (2012) for a general account and defense of Fine's arguments, and Daly (2012) for a skeptical reading of Fine.

determinate something, nor even an indeterminate or determinable something, that grounds the 'diversity of things'—it is nothing, and as such it forever haunts the individuality of things with the contingency and freedom that threatens to undermine them.

It should be clear then that Sartre's efforts to incorporate and give credence to contingency and freedom also threaten to undermine his efforts to uphold a form of rationalism. Indeed it does, but rather than throw in the towel and abandon the project, Sartre, I argue, maintains both horns of the dilemma, and he does so by grounding the 'diversity of things' in sense. Although Sartre only develops this line of argument implicitly, it becomes more explicit in Deleuze's work where it is the nature of sense as ground, and I have extended this work further by arguing that ground is sense as expressed in problematic Ideas, that is both the sufficient reason (PSR) for the 'diversity of things, their individuality,' and the reason for their undermining and transformation. With *Nausea*, Sartre began to flesh out the details of this existential rationalism, and he continued to return to it, as we have seen, throughout his writings. With the progressive-regressive method in particular, Sartre set out to begin with things, in all their determinate individuality, including authors such as Flaubert, and as he works through his analysis he discerns moments where both de/differentiating tendencies are noticeably at work. A determinate way of doing things, a particular individual, object, custom, etc., comes to be problematized, dedifferentiated—i.e., it expresses the problematic Idea that is its sufficient reason—and in doing so this frees a way forward (progressive method) to other determinate solutions in the wake of the problematized moment. In the case of Flaubert, as we saw, this process led him, according to Sartre, to choose to become an author, and an author who

identified strongly with female characters.[16] A Sartrean (and Deleuzian) existential rationalism does not claim that there is a satisfactory answer for each and every one of our why-questions, and even though Sartre does answer the question, why did Flaubert become an author?, the question and answer, simply by virtue of being posed, entails a problematic Idea that may well problematize the answers we give. Instead of aspiring to attain an answer to all our why-questions, therefore, an existential rationalist ought to develop a taste for problems, for the problematic Ideas that are inseparable from each and every thing. Sartre had indeed begun to sketch a rationalism that embraced both the PSR and contingency and freedom, and we can now see why Deleuze, who develops these arguments more thoroughly, considered Sartre to be his teacher.[17]

**Conclusion**

Returning to where we began, to Iris Murdoch's book that sees in Sartre a romantic rationalist, we can now see that Sartre was indeed motivated by rationalist concerns. For Murdoch, however, Sartre's rationalism set out to pursue a 'purifying reflexion' (Murdoch 1987, 119) that targets our bad faith tendencies to assume that our objectified, constituted natures, traditions, values, etc., are foundational and we are instead to use our reason to pursue a 'purifying reflexion' that enables us to undo these bad faith tendencies and live a life that accepts, in all sincerity and good faith, the irreducibility of consciousness. This leads Murdoch to the conclusion that the 'rationalism of Sartre is not geared on to the techniques of the modern world; it is solipsistic and romantic, isolated from the sphere of real operations' (ibid., 106). The practical, problem-solving

[16] See Sartre (1972).
[17] "He Was My Teacher" is the title of a short piece on Sartre that Deleuze wrote soon after Sartre declined the Nobel Prize for literature. See Deleuze 2004 [1964], 77-80.

goals of rationalism, therefore, are not, Murdoch claims, among the goals Sartre shares. In the reading of Sartre's existential rationalism offered here, however, I have argued that it is not a 'solipsistic and romantic' rationalism. For Sartre, as we saw, consciousness is an absolute, in the manner of Spinoza, and is, as Sartre put it, 'quite simply a first condition and an absolute source of existence' (Sartre 1960 [1937], 106). To isolate this absolute consciousness from others is to limit and differentiate this consciousness, to make of it a solipsistic center, and hence this is to take the conditioned, in this case the determinate difference between the solipsistic center and the 'sphere of real operations,' as the fundamental condition of things, and thus fall into another version of the mistake Sartre identified in Husserl's work. As we have argued in this essay, Sartre opens a path that attempts to avoid this mistake, and with the concept of problematic Ideas I have shown how we can extend Deleuze's own development of Sartre's insights and bring them into conversation with the concerns of contemporary analytic metaphysics. Sartre's metaphysics may be little known today, but as I have argued it continues to be relevant.

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