

Death, Contingency and the Genesis of Self-Awareness

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The exact nature of self-consciousness is a problem that has occupied a central position in contemporary philosophical thought. Despite a wide variety of approaches, however, a common assumption in almost all theories is that adult consciousness functions as the norm and appropriate starting point for an investigation in this area. Indeed, in general, philosophers have made the presupposition that they can deal with issues in their field – whether, for example, this involves emotions, knowledge, or perception – purely as these are manifest in an adult form.

To consider childhood experience in the light of these topics could of course ultimately prove to be irrelevant, but this is something that would have to be shown. And, indeed, there is evidence that the contrary is indicated, given that in psychology such a vast emphasis has been placed across a diversity of methodological approaches precisely on the significance of childhood experiences in forming or determining their counterpart states of adult consciousness.

As distinct from the insights of this latter discipline, however, there are specific elements in philosophy as such that can contribute uniquely to our knowledge of the genesis of self-awareness. For the orientation here is not clinical. So whereas, for example, Freud's use of the notion of the reality principle regarding the genesis of egological self-awareness does give us philosophical insight, his concern here is primarily to delineate a psychic faculty with a distinct function in terms of which, ultimately, healthy and neurotic or pathological behavior can be understood. By contrast, the philosophical theories to be examined stem from a different tradition in which there is a theoretical concern with the nature of consciousness *per se*,¹ and it is this factor which will be seen to enable us to gain new understanding of the genesis of self-awareness. In

what follows, the issue of the nature of self-consciousness will therefore be considered from a philosophical point of view, in order to show that the phenomenon of self-consciousness can not be grasped fully without an understanding of certain decisive childhood events. For the sake of clarity the material will be divided into three sections.

Section One

Death as the Catalyst for Self-Awareness

In his autobiography *Si le grain ne meurt*,² Gide provides us with two philosophically compelling descriptions of an anguished genesis of selfhood when dealing with those events during which he gained an initial and clear, although incipient, experience of self-awareness. The first centers on an incident which occurred when he was at most ten years old. He was sitting at lunch with his parents, who were upset, having just received news of the death of a four-year-old nephew. From one or two elliptical references the child came to grasp what had happened, and in spite of hardly ever having met his cousin and having "no particular feeling for him," he immediately felt that "a very ocean of grief [had] rolled over [his] heart"³ and he wept inconsolably:

. . . nothing was of any avail, for I was not exactly weeping for my little cousin's death, but for something I could not understand, an indefinable anguish or terror which was not surprising I could not explain to my mother since I am incapable of explaining it any better today.⁴

The second experience occurred at about age eleven, shortly after his father's death. Gide was alone with his mother, having been at school in the morning:

What had happened? Possibly nothing. . . . Then why did I suddenly break down? Why did I again feel, as I fell convulsively sobbing into Mama's arms, that indefinite anguish, the very same exactly that I had felt at my little cousin's death? It was as though the special sluice-gate of some unknown, unbounded, mystic sea had suddenly been opened and an overwhelming flood poured into my heart. I was not so much unhappy as terrified; but how was I to explain it to my mother? All she distinguished through my sobs were, repeated again and again, these blind, despairing words: "I'm not like other people . . . not like other people!"⁵

Gide describes both of the above events as "two flashes, two strange thrills that momentarily stirred the darkness [of my child-

hood]"⁶ but, as just seen, he is incapable of explaining their nature or origin. His perplexity is however quite understandable. For although both experiences are in some way obviously motivated by the phenomenon of death, there is no clear connection between this and (1) the genesis of the experience of self-awareness, as manifest by those "two flashes . . . that momentarily stirred the darkness" and (2) this experience as occurring in a mode that can best be described as "privative": in the sense that Gide came to an explicit awareness of himself as being fundamentally different or apart from others.

The allure of the above two passages becomes even greater when Gide goes on to suggest that there is indeed what would amount to a solution to the problems raised above, as can be seen when he writes: "I must say, however, that in later life, on reading certain passages of Schopenhauer, I suddenly seemed to recognize my own particular anguish."⁷ For the intellectual sleuth, however, frustration is the order of the day, since one's hopes are no sooner raised than immediately dashed. Gide continues:

Yes, it is a fact that in order to understand [and here in place of the desired passage Gide simply left a blank space] it was the recollection of my first *Schäudern*, with the announcement of [my cousin's] death that, in spite of myself, I quite involuntarily evoked.⁸

Vis-à-vis the all-important blank space and missing clue, these are simply dismissed with a casual footnote: "I'm not going to attempt to cite it – would be far too long."⁹ Being bereft of the key and instead saddled with the problems 1 and 2 above, what therefore needs to be done in what follows is to try to reconstruct from Schopenhauer's theories the idea of what Gide could have been referring to.

It should hence first be noted that Schopenhauer upholds the Kantian phenomenal-noumenal distinction, with the profound difference that the thing-in-itself, instead of being beyond the realm of direct experience, is rather directly equated with the will. Schopenhauer, in discussing its nature, writes that "[t]he will as thing-in-itself is entire and undivided in every being"¹⁰ and that:

Our true self, the kernel of our inner nature, is that . . . which really knows nothing but willing and not willing, being contented and not contented, with all the modifications of the thing called feelings, emotions and passions. . . . The will itself, alone and by itself, endures; for it

alone is unchangeable, indestructible, does not grow old, is not physical but metaphysical, does not belong to the phenomenal appearance.¹¹

The phenomenal world, by contrast, is said to be characterized by transience and divisibility, or in Schopenhauer's terms, "subjectivity" and "individuality."¹² Furthermore, we are told that "everything material is nothing but the phenomenon, the visibility, the objectivity of the will-to-live."¹³ As regards intellect or consciousness, we are told in a similar vein "that knowledge in general is conditioned by plurality and difference"¹⁴ and that

consciousness presupposes *individuality*; but this belongs to the mere phenomenon, since, as the plurality of the homogeneous [i.e., the will], it is conditioned by the terms of the phenomenon, time and space . . . consciousness is possible only where the true inner being runs out into the phenomenon.¹⁵

Similarities notwithstanding, Schopenhauer thus also profoundly shifts the Kantian ethos with its emphasis on rationality. For as we have seen – and in a move presaging Freud – reality as will, or the thing-in-itself, is said to be such that it "really knows nothing but willing and not willing, being contented and not contented" so that, relative to Kant, the ontological status of knowledge is lowered: "The subject of knowing . . . is a secondary phenomenon, arising out of the objectification of the will."¹⁶ With this in mind we can then turn to the well-known topic of Schopenhauer's pessimism:

. . . let us now consider what as a rule comes to man in satisfactions of any kind; it is often nothing more than the bare maintenance of this very existence, extorted daily with unremitting effort and constant care in conflict with misery and want, and with death in prospect. Everything in life proclaims that earthly happiness is destined to be frustrated, or recognized as an illusion.¹⁷

Why is this so, and why is it that, "[l]ife presents itself as a continual deception, in small matters as well as in great"?¹⁸ For present purposes, there are two reasons which can be mentioned. The first is that it is simply the empirical case that human existence is difficult because of the vicissitudes of what in contemporary terms could be called contingency: "accidents," Schopenhauer tells us, "[bring] all calculations to naught."¹⁹ In addition, given the overriding ontological primacy of the will with its irrationality and associated characteristics, as noted above, life is bound to be frustrating and often unfulfilling: ". . . its desires are unlimited, its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire gives birth to a new

one."²⁰ If, however, such is the case, then why is it that humans by and large fear death as much as they do? For recognition – that is to say intellectual apprehension – of either of the above reasons would clearly suffice to enable knowledge to judge life as problematic and vain, so that death would in fact be welcome. And this is precisely what knowledge does, which is why Schopenhauer writes:

[K]nowledge . . . , far from being the origin of that attachment to life, even opposes it, since it discloses life's worthlessness, and in this way combats the fear of death.²¹

But where, then, does the fear in question originate from? The answer, it can now be understood, is from the will. For this is a totally nonrational and driving force which simply seeks or strives to exist: "the omnipresent will-to-live,"²² as Schopenhauer describes it. This is why he writes:

. . . fear of death has its roots directly in the will; it proceeds from the will's original and essential nature, in which that will is entirely without knowledge, and is therefore the blind will-to-live.²³

On the basis of the above, we can now return to the case of Gide. Schopenhauer's explanation of the irrational fear of death perfectly captures the tone and mood of the young child's intellectually inexplicable experiences in the face of the demise of both his cousin and father. Indeed, the very irrational and overwhelming force generated by the fear of the will in the face of death is perfectly reflected in Gide's having written that "a very ocean of grief rolled over my heart" and that he wept "for something I could not understand, an indefinable anguish or terror. . . ."

This claim can be further substantiated by first noting that, on the model in question, young children exhibit a predominance of intellect over will. For the point is made that for the child the nervous system is proportionally larger relative to other bodily systems than in stages of development to follow, while desire, as primarily manifest via sexuality, is as yet undeveloped.²⁴ Hence Schopenhauer writes:

From this it can be explained why children in general are so sensible, reasonable, eager to learn, and easy to teach, in fact are on the whole more disposed to and suitable for all theoretical occupations than are grown-up people.²⁵

As puberty approaches, however, we are told that the will starts to manifest itself and gradually thereafter gains ascendancy:

Childhood, which is predominantly theoretical and eager to learn, is then followed by the restless age of youth, now boisterous and impetuous, now dejected and melancholy. . . .²⁶

What all this implies, however, is that at precisely the ages in question Gide's will would have begun to manifest its presence and hence, on the one hand, the surging or escalating experience of the terror of death. On the other hand, the as yet innocent child Gide, with his intellect still highly operative, would simply not have accrued sufficient knowledge to have enabled him to be intellectually apprised of the vanity of life, and thereby to mitigate the severity of the experiences in question.

Concomitantly, Schopenhauer also stresses that the child displays a degree of objectivity and openness to reality that disappears in inverse proportion to age. Thus, drawing an analogy with genius, Schopenhauer writes:

. . . every genius is already a big child, since he looks out into the world as into something strange and foreign, a drama, and thus with purely objective interest. Accordingly, just like the child, he does not have the dull gravity and earnestness of ordinary men, who being capable of nothing but subjective interests, always see in things merely motives for their actions.²⁷

Applied to the two experiences under consideration, this line of thought implies that Gide, as a child, would still have exhibited a degree of unprejudiced objectivity sufficiently strong so as to have enabled him directly, albeit intuitively, to confront the existence of the fear in question: an ability or gift all too easily lost with increasing age and to growing "subjective interests." Thus Schopenhauer's theory explains not only the overwhelming fear of the child Gide, but also the latter's being intellectually disconcerted at the occurrence in question.

The problem, however, still remains as to how the above theory can account for the experience of what was termed "privative subjectivity" thanks to which Gide gained a first clear grasp of his own self, in the mode, however, of his being unlike others. Given what is now known of Schopenhauer, though, it could be said that intellectual recognition of the fear of death for the child carried with it a commensurate recognition of finitude and separation; not at all in the sense that a number of abstract concepts were grasped or assimilated but rather that the young subject gained an intuitive recognition of himself as a finite and limited entity, and thereby one apart and different from others. Put in Schopenhauer's terms,

it could be said that the cognitive component of Gide's apprehension of death and finitude would have resulted in his grasping himself as a mere phenomenal entity; one thus of necessity limited or "individual," and hence – *qua* an intellectual and individual as opposed to a species being – "different," i.e., phenomenally different from others.

Schopenhauer himself does not address this specific issue of the genesis of self-awareness, but the above hypothesis is completely compatible with the ontology that he develops vis-à-vis the existence of the I, or so-called ego. Thus, on the one hand we are told that:

. . . the intellect springs from the organism, and thus from the will, and so without this could not exist. Without the will it would find no material and nothing to occupy it, since everything knowable is just the objectification of the will.²⁸

On the other hand, whereas the intellect is ontologically dependent on the will, it is also the case that:

Since the will, for the purposes of comprehending its relations with the external world, produces in the animal individual a brain, the consciousness of itself first arises in this by means of the subject of knowledge, and this subject comprehends things as existing and the I, or *ego*, as willing.²⁹

That is, the will is dependent on the intellect as manifest in the I, or ego, to move to the point where it is no longer merely a blind force but rather possesses self-consciousness as well. Or in other words: "The secondary world of the representation must be added for the will to become conscious of itself. . . ." ³⁰ Ontologically speaking, therefore, the I, or ego, arises from an interdependence between will and intellect; and it is precisely at the stage of Gide's two experiences in question that the mutual interplay between these two factors – as opposed to the dominance of one or the other – comes most naturally into play, as already seen.

Not only is the above interesting in its own right; it is also historically important. It shows that Gide's intuition was correct in supposing that Schopenhauer could somehow account for the experiences of terror and grief in question as well as explain the phenomenon of what is in fact the genesis of self-awareness as a privative phenomenon.

Moreover, it can now also be noted that, although for very different ontological reasons, the same conclusion can be substantiated

from a contemporary point of view, namely that of Heidegger. What follows will of course be an extrapolation, both in the sense (1) that when death is spoken about in *Being and Time* this is simply assumed to refer to adult experience; and (2) that the entire question of the genesis of self-awareness would presumably have been relegated to the merely ontic realm of empirical psychology for Heidegger himself. These factors notwithstanding, it is nevertheless interesting for our purposes to pay special attention when, in this work, we are told that the resoluteness becomes authentically what it can be when it can be *Being-towards-the-end which understands*, that is to say, an anticipation of death.³¹ Hence it is when being is truly open to the possibility of death that Dasein becomes able to take resolute control of its own existence *qua* finite being and thereby live authentically. Heidegger elaborates on this issue in more detail when he writes:

When, by anticipation, one becomes free for one's own death, one is liberated from one's lostness in those possibilities which may accidentally thrust themselves upon one; and one is liberated in such a way that for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among the tactical possibilities lying ahead of that possibility which is not to be outstripped.³²

That is, when one is resolute by virtue of truly anticipating or facing death, one's life takes on a sense of control, definition, and self-determination which is lacking when one is pulled this and that way by external or extrinsic forces as a result of not facing the reality of one's being a unique and finite creature. In this same light, Heidegger in fact talks of the passage from inauthentic to authentic existence when he notes that:

[Dasein] must first *pull itself together* from the *dispersion and disconnectedness* of the very things that have "come to pass"; and because of this, it is only then that there at last arises from the horizon of the understanding which belongs to inauthentic historicity, the *question* of how one is to establish a "connectedness" of Dasein. . . .³³

Being resolute in the face of death – i.e., one's own death – is what gives definition, and truly unified consistent purpose, to one's existence. How then is one to make the jump from these claims about the adult state to talk about the childhood event in question? Although obviously inferences, there seem to be two good grounds in terms of which the above can be applied to the advent of self-awareness. We should recall that Gide spoke of "two

flashes, two strange thrills which momentarily stirred the darkness [of his childhood]." But this is to say that prior to the event in question, there was simply darkness or relative lack of order and focus: certainly not at all in an absolute sense but rather in that the child's experience was of a patchwork nature, moving and developing in tandem with stimuli and interests that lacked an overall and distinct sense of unity and purpose. Analogous to the acceptance of death providing the authentic adult with an overall focus, it could then also be said that the experience of death on the child's part is what provides – or better yet, precipitates – a sudden focus and sense of overall unity previously either lacking or inchoate at best. In addition, it could be argued that since death for Heidegger is the sole and ultimate arbiter for the experience of a truly unified self, this feature of human experience presumably did not make itself manifest *de novo* in the adult state only, but presumably had its roots far earlier in the individual's life: and what better point for its full assimilation and impact than at the point that it could serve to unite the child's experience, thereby to result in the initial and startling experience of self-awareness in question.

The above theory can be further substantiated if it is now noted – in Heideggerian terms – that what the two events described by Gide also make apparent is the subject's preontological apprehension of his own death, an experience automatically involving anxiety, and hence Gide's having written that ". . . I was not exactly weeping for my little cousin's death, but for something I could not understand, an indefinable anguish or terror. . . ."

In response to all the above it could however be objected that many children never do experience the death of anyone close, so that this is therefore simply too narrow an experience to be able to account for the advent of privative subjectivity as a general childhood phenomenon. Instead, it could be suggested that apart from the experience of death, there are other situations in which the child finds him vulnerable and unable to cope with a given reality; and that these types of events too – precisely by virtue of being traumatic – could serve the same function of making the subject concomitantly aware of his isolation and difference and thereby bring about the experience of privative subjectivity.

In order to examine this alternative model let us in what follows therefore turn to see what Sartre has to say concerning the phenomenon of the genesis of self-awareness, a move which will in turn then allow the analysis of Gide's situation to be evaluated in more detail.

Section Two

Contingency as the Catalyst for Self-Awareness

In light of the issues just raised, there is no finer work to turn to than that of Sartre's *Baudelaire*,³⁴ for here is a book that within an existential context shows how the role that one takes on as an adult can be largely a function of privative subjectivity. Before proceeding, it should however be stressed that, although Sartre goes further than Gide in making relevant issues philosophically explicit, it will still be necessary to develop certain important themes beyond the scope of what is actually given in the text.

We can then best start with Sartre's point that Baudelaire was only six when his father died. He was always pampered and catered to by his mother and adored her in turn. Indeed, because of their relationship the boy came to be protected from what many others of his age would already have experienced, namely, the vicissitudes of an independent and external environment. That is, so powerful an influence did the mother exert that the child was shielded from, and thereby denied, the experience of contingency. As Sartre notes:

The mother was an idol, the child *consecrated* by her affection for him . . . because he was completely absorbed in a being who appeared to be a necessary being . . . he melted into the absolute and was *justified*.³⁵

This blissful state of security, Sartre notes, was however shattered when in 1828 the mother remarried, a blow compounded by the fact that the child's new stepfather was a harsh and authoritarian general. Baudelaire, Sartre stresses, never recovered from what he experienced as this profound form of rejection, and hence the portrayal of the former's subsequent and incessant reproach to his mother and the world in general: "When one has a son like me . . . one doesn't remarry."³⁶

This event in turn precipitated Baudelaire's first clear experience of himself as one individual unequivocally apart from others. Sartre moreover makes it clear that one is dealing here with the particular manifestation of a general phenomenon. He writes: "Each of us was able to observe in childhood the fortuitous and shattering advent of self-consciousness."³⁷ In elaborating on this fundamentally important experience, he makes the point that the subject's experience of himself takes place, as with the case of Gide, in what can be termed a "privative" mode, since the experience of self occurs only relative to his being different, or apart from, or opposed to others.

Given, therefore, that Baudelaire was precipitated from a state of unquestioned security into one experienced in terms of rejection and isolation, one can see why Sartre characterizes the experience in question as privative. For, once aware that he had been rejected, Baudelaire's initial experience would certainly have been one of being other than, or apart from, the newly formed unit mother-stepfather. That is, putting the matter in Sartrean nomenclature, one can intuitively see how – vis-à-vis the issue of self-awareness – on being cast from a state of oblivion of self as separate, Baudelaire's overwhelming experience of selfhood was his becoming aware of himself in the mode of a being whose being was such as to be other than that of the Other.

What has just been discussed however leaves a number of pertinent questions unanswered. Although the example would *prima facie* appear to be similar to that of Gide, is one indeed justified in saying that the phenomenon in question occurs universally? And if so, what factors in general bring it about, since, as can be seen from the two cases discussed, the circumstances surrounding any particular instance would appear to be highly idiosyncratic? Since Sartre gives us no direct answers, in what follows it will be necessary to extrapolate beyond the scope of the text and look at a number of Sartrean themes – as these are now understood in terms of the child's world. What, it should therefore first be asked, was it that initially precipitated Baudelaire's experience of privative subjectivity? On the model to be developed one can say theoretically – in contradiction to the point of view of Schopenhauer or Heidegger – that it was not the apprehension of death and finitude which proved to be overwhelmingly anxiety-provoking for Baudelaire so much as a first clear experience of himself as a separate entity vulnerable in the fact of contingency. In practice, however, it is clearly not the case that the child came to grasp his own individual existence in the light of the abstract concept of contingency. Rather, on the hypothesis in question, Baudelaire experienced himself for the first time as a distinctly separate entity threatened, and thus vulnerable, in the face of the vicissitudes of the world.

To substantiate this claim we need to turn to a yet earlier stage of development where, using the work of psychologist Paul Guillaume, it can be shown that the fact that he is incapable of dealing with his environment or world first forces the young child to become inchoately aware of the existence of some form of separation between himself and the Other.³⁸ Once again, however, the

matter here is put heuristically, for there is as yet no sense whatsoever of either an independent self or anything like a clear experience of there being an independent Other. Rather what Guillaume shows is that the inability to cope with his environment gradually leads the child to develop a functional sense of himself as being apart from that Absolute being who serves to make an otherwise recondite environment accessible to him. Hence the child's nascent experience of separation carries with it an inchoate sense of his being dependent on that being relative to whom he is so inept and maladroit.³⁹ There is, however, still nothing like an explicit realization of self – as in the cases of Baudelaire and Gide – while the actual state of dependence in question continues.

It is however made clear that some event occurs abruptly to disrupt this as yet amorphous state and bring the subject's sense of self suddenly into explicit focus: a state which can be explained in terms of a gestalt switch involving an instantaneous and novel experience. Moreover, this view can indeed be attributed to Sartre since he himself spoke of the "shattering advent of self-consciousness." This idea of there being a sudden gestalt switch can also be seen to have been borne out not only by Gide's description of this same phenomenon, when he wrote of the "two flashes . . . which momentarily stirred the darkness [of his childhood]," but in addition by Sartre's use of Richard Hughes's *A High Wind in Jamaica*. Thus Sartre quotes Hughes as writing that the ten-year-old heroine, Emily, "had been playing in the nook right in the bows . . . when it suddenly flashed into her mind that she was she. . . ." ⁴⁰

What is it, then, that brings about this sudden gestalt shift? The answer would seem to lie in what has been noted about dependence and contingency above. Suppose that contingency indeed obtrudes itself into the child's experiential field, but that the Other as Absolute cannot or will not further shield the former so as to promote or continue the sense of dependence and belonging in question. As a result, the nascent sense of self is transformed. For with the sudden disappearance of support and a concomitant lack of a sense of belonging, the experience of what was the Absolute becomes the experience of an absolute Other; while the child's previous inchoate experience of himself as other-than-the-Absolute now at least momentarily focuses to become one of an independent self, in the sense of being other than or apart from this absolute Other.

The advantage of the above model is that it enables us to explain

the cases of both Gide and Baudelaire. Thus, as regards the former, it will be recalled that it was his encounter with death that impelled Gide to his first experiences of selfhood as both sudden and privative. Both of these features can now be explained if it is noted that Gide's relationship to his mother was extremely cloying and, as in the case of Baudelaire, she too played a vastly overprotective role during his youth. Even such a figure, however, was unable to protect her son from the vicissitudes or contingency of the world as manifest by the two deaths in question. In this way Gide's sense of identification with an Absolute was at least momentarily shattered, thereby precipitating a sudden grasp of selfhood, but in a privative mode.

Returning to the case of Baudelaire, we recall that while Sartre provides a telling description of the genesis of privative subjectivity, no detailed explanation for its advent is offered. The argument employed in the example of Gide can now however be applied *mutatis mutandis* to that of Baudelaire. Interestingly enough what must then be stressed is the primary difference between the two cases. For Baudelaire's mother was not unable, but rather refused, to shield her child from the direct onslaught of contingency when she remarried, shattering the child's sense of dependence and belonging and in turn forcing a previously inchoate sense of separation and self into focus. The function of the two mothers, in their respective roles of Absolute-become-absolute-Other, is thus profoundly different. For the Absolute cannot shield the child from contingency in the case of Gide, while it in effect refuses to do so in the case of Baudelaire.

The advantage of this approach is therefore that it can account for both cases, in contrast to the model in which death alone is supposed to trigger the experience of privative subjectivity. For when Baudelaire suffered rejection at the hands of his mother, it would then have to be supposed that this resulted in his becoming aware, via an urgent, inchoate sense of foreboding, of his own ultimate demise; and hence the experience of finitude and his being different from others. Such a theory could now however be claimed to beg the question. For it is not at all apparent that death was encountered by Baudelaire at the time of his rejection, leading to the state in question. Indeed, it is not apparent that this phenomenon had at the time any part at all to play in the genesis of the form of subjectivity in question.

The response of Schopenhauer's theory as developed to this

point would undoubtedly be that as a function of his will, the precience that the child has of his own death is so emotionally overwhelming that, taken in conjunction with his relative ignorance, it overrules the possibility of anything like an intellectually explicit comprehension of the phenomenon of death, and hence the resultant experience of separation and finitude.

Moreover, this same point could be made from a Heideggerian perspective. For it could be claimed that it is ultimately the possibility of death that above all provides meaning or focus for the child at the precise moment when, for the first time, he comes to explicitly grasp his finitude and uniqueness as one. Thus it could be said that death provides a focus for the way in which Baudelaire interprets contingency, rather than its Sartrean contrary, and hence that its possibility is still the ultimate – albeit not at all necessarily surface – arbiter for the genesis of privative subjectivity.

How then is this conflict to be resolved? The answer can be based on a criticism leveled at Heidegger in *Being and Nothingness*. For here are a series of ideas significant in their own right which also allow us to further explicate Schopenhauer's position on the genesis of subjectivity.

Section Three

Is Death the Ultimate Arbiter of Life or Rather a Contributing Factor Delimiting the Scope of its Experience?

Turning now to the criticism in question we can note that according to Sartre, Heidegger has presented us with too idealistic an account of death.⁴¹ This phenomenon is said to be "the peculiar possibility of *Dasein*"⁴² as well as its "final possibility."⁴³ Hence being authentic involves facing death resolutely so as to incorporate or integrate this realization as a dominant feature into my mode of existence. But this in turn means that I appropriate death totally; in the sense that it becomes the meaning of my life, or the complete and ultimate, but intensely personal, arbiter which individuates and structures the quality of my existence. For thinkers in this tradition Sartre writes that: "Death is no longer the great unknowable which limits the human; it is the phenomenon of my personal life which makes of this life a unique life. . . ."⁴⁴

This, however, is to vastly underplay the factor of contingency as this affects the phenomenon of death in human existence. In speak-

ing of being authentic à la Heidegger, Sartre gives the analogy of someone standing resolutely and long on the scaffold only to suddenly meet his demise in an influenza epidemic.⁴⁵ That is – from the vantage point of Sartre’s realism with its emphasis on resistance constantly encountered by the subject in dealing with contingency⁴⁶ – there is an aspect of death which must be recognized as simply being beyond the possibility of appropriation vis-à-vis the world one constitutes, so that the attempt to assimilate it totally is false and bound to fail. Concomitantly, the criticism is made that when Heidegger speaks in universal terms of “resolute decision”⁴⁷ in the face of death, this is to hypostatize the phenomenon, describing it in terms of the Other’s perception of a particular agent’s death, i.e., in third-party terms. By contrast, an ontology with more emphasis on realism should let us see that I can only authentically deal with death as one among many manifestations of contingency and as partially structuring my life rather than dominating it. Stated from a different point of view, Sartre’s criticism allows us to go so far as to understand that death must for the most part be dealt with, and mediated through, the context or ground of contingency. It is not a pure event in the sense of existing as the *sine qua non* directing a particular life, and can only be conceived of ontologically as what is in effect an occurrence in its own right by virtue of abstraction. That is, death taken as “my own most possibility” is an idealist illusion.

A good concrete illustration of this criticism can be found by looking further at the case of young Emily from Hughes’s *A High Wind in Jamaica*,⁴⁸ a character we saw Sartre use to illustrate his point about the sudden genesis of privative subjectivity. For present purposes it can be noted that the young girl and a number of other children are captured by pirates and initially left relatively undisturbed to wander the ship. Sometime after the advent of explicit self-awareness described earlier, however, circumstances become manifestly more difficult and menacing for the heroine, for an elder friend is raped and Emily herself directly, albeit inadvertently, is involved in the death of an adult captive. It is in the light of these unsettling events that we are then told:

. . . those times of consciousness, which had begun with a moment of such sublime vision, were both growing on [Emily] and losing their luster. They had become sinister . . . she would remember that she was Emily who had killed, and who was here, and that Heaven alone knew what was going to happen to the incompetent little thing, by what mira-

cle she was going to keep her end up. Whenever this happened, her stomach seemed to drop away within her a hundred and fifty feet.⁴⁹

What is intriguing about this passage is that in the context of such threatening circumstances it could quite reasonably be claimed that the reoccurrence of privative subjectivity was due to Emily's having to face death as a very real possibility. And yet this is precisely what in effect Hughes rejects to the extent that he clearly sees the genesis of this phenomenon as rather being set off in the light of contingency. For, extrapolating somewhat on the text, what the above passage shows from the child's point of view is that her pressing circumstances, conceivably including the possibility of death, heighten the urgency and quality of the experience of contingency – a fact which then gives rise to the reoccurrence of privative subjectivity. That is, death is at most a contributing feature giving rise to the phenomenon in question, but certainly not the originating or causative one. But this is to say that were one to steadfastly apply a Heideggerian analysis and insist that it was death alone which gave rise to Emily's self-awareness, this monolithic explanation would simply pass over the subtlety and struggle characterizing one attempting before all else to cope with the vicissitudes and obstacles of the process of life *per se*. That is, Emily's struggle and concomitant rise of self-awareness has to do with the difficulties she encounters in life, as opposed to her first coming to terms with the process of appropriating death as her own most possibility.

Vis-à-vis the issue of death and the genesis of self-awareness, how would Schopenhauer then fare where Heidegger has in effect failed? Given everything said up to this point it may at first sight appear as though when confronted with the above case the response would be the same *mutatis mutandis* as the Heideggerian one. That is, that it was the prepubescent girl's being confronted with the possibility of death that evoked the violent response of a will independently stirring and becoming more manifest, in turn evincing a sudden but still objective intellectual apprehension of her internal state in the form of the phenomenon of self-awareness.

This solution is however too limited and hence unsatisfactory. To see why this is so let us spell out more explicitly what is already known about self-awareness for Schopenhauer and ask what the ontological support is upon which our limited, intellectual apprehension of self is grounded. The response is clear: even though it always remains somewhat hidden, the unifying substratum in question is the will:

... it alone is unalterable and absolutely identical, and has brought forth consciousness for its own ends. It is therefore the will that gives [consciousness] unity and holds all its representations and ideas together, accompanying them, as it were, like a continuous ground-bass.⁵⁰

The same point essentially is put in somewhat more epistemological terms when Schopenhauer writes that the will “. . . gives unity and sequence to consciousness . . . by pervading all the representations of consciousness. . . .”⁵¹

But then, returning to the example of Emily, this then implies that it is not at all the prescience and possibility of death in this case, but rather the frustration suffered by the will being obstructed or thwarted, which results in the child’s experience of self-awareness as an intellectual concomitant. For recall that:

Our true self, the kernel of our inner nature, is that . . . which really knows nothing but willing and not-willing, being contented and not contented, with all the modifications of the thing called feelings, emotions and passions. . . .⁵²

That is, on a Schopenhauer-type model there is discontent and frustration suffered by the will as a result of Emily’s – *qua* inexperienced materially embodied will – feeling unable to cope with her surrounding circumstances. But then given that the will unifies and is manifest in all the representations of consciousness, this upheaval on the part of the will or “true self” is surely quite as likely to give rise to the phenomenon of self-awareness as an intellectual concomitant as is the possibility of death. Indeed, it could be argued that from a child’s point of view it is far more the prospect of an immediately overwhelming contingency rather than the more abstract or distant possibility of death that is going to be taken into both emotional and intellectual account.

More specifically, it can now be seen that Schopenhauer inadvertently provides us with what is in fact only half an explanation regarding the issue of self-awareness. For he tells when, but not how, this phenomenon comes about. That is, in his theory it makes good sense that the rise of the will at the period during which the intellect is still innocent and open would result in a first phenomenal apprehension of self – i.e., a self as unique and limited – were there to be a sudden discontinuity or shock in the experience of the will. But although we can therefore directly extrapolate as to when this event would occur, there is no material provided that would specify for us what exactly the nature of the traumatic and disruptive expe-

rience in question would have to be like. In retrospect, Gide's example involving death can thus be seen to be a very natural candidate, but what the example of Emily also shows is that it would be wrong to generalize upon the former and claim that it was the factor of death alone which could result in the experience in question.

The same point can be seen to hold *a fortiori* for Schopenhauer's theory when applied to the case of Baudelaire. For here it is the sudden and traumatic separation from his mother which engenders the experience of privative subjectivity. Once the possibility of death alone being the necessary catalyst for the genesis of self-awareness is rejected, however, this separation too can be seen to function quite adequately on Schopenhauer's model in that it can account for "the shattering advent of self-consciousness" experienced by the young boy. That is, the sudden trauma of his no longer being intensely and intimately involved with his mother would undoubtedly have resulted in extreme frustration on the will's part: and hence the concomitant intellectual experience of limitation and self-hood. Moreover, it would also be most reasonable to suppose that from a child's point of view the experience of separation for Baudelaire would have been quite as traumatic as that of the two deaths for Gide. Indeed, it could be argued that the latter was at least left with one parent, whereas the former in effect experienced himself as all of a sudden being totally isolated and alone.

Thus when all is said and done, we have two philosophical theories which allow us to account for a broad spectrum of cases involving the genesis of self-awareness, namely, those of Sartre and Schopenhauer. Moreover, although vastly discrepant in the ontologies they espouse, both systems share in common the crucially important feature that it is a certain extreme quality of confrontation with – what in contemporary terms would be called – contingency that helps to bring the first explicit states of self-awareness about. In addition, these two theories, precisely because they incorporate the notion of contingency, succeed where a neo-Heideggerian theory attempting to account for this same phenomenon fails; and this by virtue of its having placed categorical emphasis on the phenomenon of death as the ultimate arbiter whereby finitude and limitation can be truly recognized.

In conclusion, it can now be seen how crucial a role the explication of childhood can play in the analysis of these philosophical theories. For the material examined above shows that not only is the very nature of consciousness *qua* self-identity shaped by young and

newly fledged awareness, but in addition that failure to account for this type of sentience can lead to biased assumptions that adversely affect what is said about adult experience. So, for example, although beyond the scope of this article, the above still nevertheless allows us to point out that by hypostatizing death and placing too little emphasis on contingency, the emergent self in a Heideggerian model is forced *a priori* into what amounts to a shadow existence. For it is made to always subsume life, as learned and dealt with via contingency, under the aegis of death. That is, the theory does not allow for the process of living to be explicated as an end *sui generis* so that death, although obviously profoundly important, has to be understood in the context of life rather than its contrary.

Notes

1. It would clearly be unreasonable to suggest that, based on a theoretical versus clinical distinction, there is an absolute, or black-and-white, dichotomy between philosophical theories concerning the nature of consciousness as opposed to psychological ones. This difference does however suffice for present purposes in that the task at hand is to establish what, within the tradition, a philosophical inquiry as such can tell us about the genesis of self-awareness. I have discussed some of the contrasts between Sartre, the philosopher, and Freud, the psychologist, on aspects of the nature of adult consciousness in an article entitled "Freud contra Sartre: Repression or Self Deception?" in *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 21, no. 3 (October 1990).

2. André Gide, *Si le grain ne meurt* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1945). Also, *If I Die: An Autobiography*, translated by Dorothy Bussy (New York: Random House, 1935). The book first appeared in 1920. I have kept to the translation except where I felt that changes were absolutely necessary.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 134. (*Ibid.*, p. 108.)

4. *Ibid.* (*Ibid.*)

5. *Ibid.*, p. 135. (*Ibid.*, p. 109.)

6. *Ibid.*, p. 133. (*Ibid.*, p. 108.)

7. *Ibid.*, p. 134. (*Ibid.*)

8. *Ibid.* (*Ibid.*)

9. *Ibid.* (*Ibid.*)

10. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, translated by E.F. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 325. Henceforth WWR.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 324.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 325.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 499.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 573.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 574.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 573.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 466.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 498. If the will is eternal why does it then fear death? Because, says Schopenhauer, it is only aware of existence in phenomenal form, in fact obtaining this apprehension via the intellect. (See *WWR*, p. 498.)
24. *WWR*, pp. 393–394.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 394.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 395.
27. *Ibid.* Schopenhauer gives what he takes to be biological evidence that this same phenomenon also occurs in nonhuman species. See *WWR*, p. 396ff.
28. *WWR*, p. 277.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edwin Robinson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), p. 353.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 441–42.
34. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1967). Also *Baudelaire*, translated by Martin Turnell (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1950). I have kept to the translation except where I felt that changes were absolutely necessary. I have discussed the issue of the genesis of subjectivity in Sartre's view in more detail in an article entitled "Childhood, Subjectivity and Hodological Space: A Reconstruction of Sartre's View of Existential Psychoanalysis," in *The Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, forthcoming.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 19. (*Ibid.* pp. 16–17.)
36. *Ibid.*, p. 20. (*Ibid.* p. 17.)
37. *Ibid.*, p. 22. (*Ibid.* p. 19.)
38. The Other in this case is usually a parent. I have discussed this earlier stage of development in a paper entitled "Sartre and Guillaume: Conflict Child and Other," which was presented to the Sartre Society meeting in New York, October 1985.
39. The dependence relation in question is obviously a very complex one. For the clearer the child's awareness of separation becomes, the greater becomes his sense of being vulnerable, and hence a growing sense of dependence results. On the other hand, and at the same time, an increasing ability to deal with his environment will tend to at least somewhat undermine the apparent powers of the parent or Absolute.
40. Sartre, *Baudelaire*, p. 22. (*Ibid.* p. 19.)
41. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant: essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1943), pp. 615–16. Henceforth *EN*. Also *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 532–33. Henceforth *BN*. *BN* is cited before *EN* in what follows. Sartre's criticism is obviously concerned with adult experience, but will be seen to be applicable to the childhood issue at hand as well.
42. *BN*, p. 533. (*EN*, p. 616.)
43. *Ibid.*, p. 534. (*Ibid.*, p. 617.)
44. *Ibid.*, p. 532. (*Ibid.*, p. 616.)
45. *Ibid.*, p. 533. (*Ibid.*, p. 617.)
46. I have dealt fully with this issue in an article, "Sartre on Perception and the World," in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 14, no. 2, (May 1983).
47. *BN*, p. 533. (*EN*, p. 617.)
48. Reference is made to the same text, which however appeared under a different title. Thus see Richard Hughes, *The Innocent Voyage* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1929).
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 261–62.
50. *WWR*, pp. 139–40.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 329.