Realism and Contingency:
Elaborating a Viable Sartrean Response to Rorty's Anti-Realism

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In

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After freedom, there is probably no other commitment more important to Sartre’s philosophy than his commitment to realism. From his early rejection of the “digestive philosophy” of his day which understood knowledge in terms of the assimilation of the objects known to internal constituents of the mind, to his latter pursuit in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* of the “Truth of History,” Sartre has always been committed to our capacity to know reality as it is, not just a mental representation or interpretation which tells us more about ourselves than it does the world. And yet, Sartre has also never denied the perspectival character of knowledge. All of our attempts to know the world are carried out within the parameters of a project which is interested in realizing something in the world. There is no ‘god’s eye view’ for Sartre, no point of view above it all from which we might gain a contemplative grasp of the world, unconditioned by the limitations of our embodied perspective onto the world from a point of view within it. This combination of themes brings Sartre into an interesting point of contact with postmodernist concerns with knowledge and truth. Sharing many of their insights into the historically contextualized nature of human knowledge, Sartre parts company with them in his assessment of the critical implications of these insights for a realist construal of knowledge. As such, his thought appears to offer a path through postmodernism to a form of realism that would be informed by postmodernism rather than dismissive of it.

The possibility of such a Sartrean perspective onto and beyond postmodernism has been recently taken up by David Detmer and John Duncan. While Detmer casts his net wide, taking on a variety of postmodernist authors, Duncan focuses his critical energies on Richard Rorty. In this essay, I will follow Duncan’s focus and examine the critical possibilities which Sartre provides in relation to Rorty, arguably one of the more philosophically sophisticated representatives of postmodernist thought. Beginning with a review of what Detmer and Duncan have already done on this score, I will argue that the possibility of a coherent Sartrean realism that would build on Rorty’s insights without simply denying them is made problematic by Sartre’s understanding of contingency: the non-conceptual character of the real which Sartre elaborates in *Nausea* in literary terms as the “obscene nakedness” of existence and in *Being and Nothingness* in more philosophical terms as the “full positivity” of being-in-itself. An examination of the roots of Rorty’s rejection of realism can help us to see how Sartre’s conception of contingency sits uneasily with his realism. And so I will argue we need to attend more closely to the question of how we should understand Sartre’s conception of contingency or, more precisely, what we can take from Sartre’s conception which
can be brought into synch with his concerns with realism. Taking guidance from Fiona Ellis, who has already addressed this question, and John McDowell, who has made the idea of the conceptual structure of reality one of the lynchpins of this thought, I will sketch the parameters of what we can take from Sartre’s conception of contingency and what we must leave behind in fashioning a Sartrean form of realism that could serve as a viable alternative to Rorty's anti-realism.

Beginning with Detmer’s work, he recognizes the affinities between a Sartrean and postmodernist take on truth. All truth, for Sartre, is given from a subjective vantage point. I encounter the world in terms of my project which always involves a set of values and expectations. To cite an example from Sartre with which Detmer works, a crag may be encountered as an obstacle I must overcome in clearing a field or an aid to viewing the countryside, depending on my aims. But, unlike the postmodernist, Sartre recognizes that, given the project which provides my orientation to the world, some crags will be greater obstacles than others and some will be better aids than others. Such facts are only discernible from a subjective vantage point, but it does not follow that they are not objective facts. Sartre can agree with Rorty that the world demands no particular vocabulary, no particular project that would serve as an absolutely privileged vantage point onto the truth. But Sartre enables us to see how recognizing this postmodern insight is consistent with our realist intuitions that it is the world itself which makes our statements true or false, given any particular vocabulary or project. It is my particular interest in the crag which enables me to see it as an obstacle. But it is the crag itself which refutes my statement that it is an easy obstacle to remove when it resists my efforts to do so. As Sartre himself generalized this point in *Being and Nothingness*, “it is through the for-itself that the meaning of being appears. This totalisation of being adds nothing to being; it is nothing but the manner in which being is revealed as not being the For-itself, the manner in which there is being.”

These realist insights go missing in Rorty's account of truth. As he puts his own position most succinctly: “What philosophers have described as the universal desire for truth is better described as the universal desire for justification.” As our only basis for believing we have the truth is the justification we have for a proposition, the pursuit of truth viewed as something other than the pursuit of justification is an empty notion. And justification is always relative to norms of justification which Rorty stresses are always specific to the language game of one’s culture. What is a well justified proposition for us, given our epistemic norms, might be only a prejudice for
someone else with different norms. And the adoption of one set of epistemic norms or another, one vocabulary or another, can only be decided on the pragmatic grounds of the utility of those norms or that vocabulary relative to our desires and interests. Finally, as these desires and interests are contingent, depending to a great extent on one's socialization, the ultimate basis for the adoption of any particular set of norms can only be ethnocentric in character - a matter of loyalty to people like ourselves with shared hopes and aspirations for life.

Detmer raises several objections to this constellation of commitments. But as my concern is not with either criticizing or defending Rorty's position, but with exploring the cogency of a Sartrean alternative, I will focus on what I believe is Detmer's most basic point relevant to that concern. Detmer grants to Rorty that "the world cannot make our vocabularies right" and that "vocabularies, though not truths, are indeed relative to our purposes." But this does not preclude the possibility that "given a certain vocabulary . . . a specific claim made within it (is) made true or false by something outside it" and also that "some vocabularies will be better or worse suited to disclosing what reality is like." This is, of course, just the Sartrean realism discussed earlier. Though the crag may be described as an obstacle or an aid, depending on our projects, it is the crag itself that will make our statement that it is an easy obstacle to remove true or false. And while the crag may be understood in illuminating ways as either an aid or an obstacle, understanding it as nutritious food or a remarkable insight into quantum mechanics is not on at all. Given its immediate plausibility, why does Rorty resist this realistic way of construing the matter?

The key for Rorty, I think, lies in what Robert Brandom describes as Rorty's "anti-idealist commitments to the world of causally interacting things" which, though it "causally constrains our applications of vocabulary" does not have "a conceptual structure." Rorty acknowledges that the world causes us to speak a certain way. The world is always causally responsible for the sensory experiences we have which, in connection with our linguistic training, dispose us to speak in one way or another. But to claim that we know something involves more than being causally disposed to utter certain assertions rather than others. It requires an appeal to reasons, to other assertions which can stand in a relation of justification to our claim. As Donald Davidson puts it, "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief," as it is only another belief that can have the conceptual structure that allows it to stand in an inferential relation to the belief for which we seek justification. The world, understood as a network of causally interacting things which stands in a purely causal relationship to us, is simply not up to the task of serving as a reason for our beliefs as it lacks that sort of conceptual structure. I can only justify my belief that the
crag is an easy obstacle to remove by appealing to other beliefs I hold regarding the crag. I can also talk about how the world causally constrains this application of my vocabulary, giving rise to sensory experiences which make it impossible, given the constraints and resources of my vocabulary, for me to believe anything else. But this is still not to talk of the world making my belief true. Making beliefs true is a matter of justification, of moving in what Wilfred Sellars calls the “logical space of reasons,” not the worldly space of causes.\textsuperscript{xii}

If it is Rorty's commitment to the world lacking conceptual structure which is behind his resistance to talk of the world making our beliefs true or false, then it is not clear how Sartre can come to our aid here as Sartre appears to share this commitment with Rorty, a commitment he articulates in terms of the contingency of the real. It is through being-for-itself that meaning comes to being-in-itself which, apart from its being there for consciousness can only be said to be, in-itself, what it is.\textsuperscript{xii} It is “full positivity” which can “encompass no negation.” And since for Sartre ‘all determination is negation’, the in-itself must be prior to any determination.\textsuperscript{xii} That this lack of determination precludes any conceptual determination is driven home in \textit{Nausea} where he has Roquentin describe existence as “divorced from . . . names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of things, nameless things.” Roquentin's vision of the chestnut root in the park is also illuminating as it is clear that the existence of the root is indifferent to our concept “root”: “Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me, filled my eyes, brought me back unceasingly to its own existence. In vain to repeat: 'This is a root' - it didn't work any more.”\textsuperscript{xiv} Construed in this way, we may be able to understand the world as causally constraining the application of a vocabulary, as Rorty accepts. The presence of a ‘root’ that is utterly indifferent to our concept “root” might, by virtue of our linguistic training, still causally dispose us to speak of it as a root.\textsuperscript{xv} But it is inconceivable how the world, so construed, could make our beliefs concerning it true or false, how it could give us a reason for thinking them true or false. For Roquentin, the ‘root’ he saw in the park gave him no reason to think that it was truthfully a root or anything else, for that matter, which we might determine with concepts. Though, in a different frame of mind not afflicted with the nausea, he may be disposed to refer to it as a root, he also knows in the park that what he refers to as a root does not have the sort of determination or structure to justify any conceptually determinate assertion about it at all.

At this point, however, Detmer would undoubtedly rejoin\textsuperscript{xvi} that despite these difficulties, we still need to account for why the crag permits us to know it as a difficult obstacle to remove rather than an easy one or, for that
matter, as a crag as opposed to nutritious food or a remarkable insight into quantum mechanics. Why is one way of speaking of the crag so useful while others are not? And the only plausible explanation available is that even though reality does not demand just one way of speaking of it, just one vocabulary rather than another, some vocabularies help us to see more of what is true of the world than others do and, given some vocabulary, some beliefs will be true of the world while others will be false. If the crag makes it impossible to believe it is an easy obstacle to remove, the most likely explanation is that this belief is simply not true of the crag. To be clear, I believe Detmer is right here and also that the lack of a realist conception of truth, for Rorty, leaves him saddled with this question in a way that tells against his position. But accepting this point does nothing to help us understand how the world can make these beliefs true or false if it does not have the conceptual structure that would enable us to see how the world can stand in an inferential or justificatory relation to those beliefs. We can we explain the utility of a belief by referencing its truth. But if we are not clear about the realist notion of truth we are referencing here - how the world can make a belief true - then the explanation, though correct, is not helpful.

In the end, there are only two ways to challenge Rorty's rejection of a realist conception of truth and elaborate a Sartrean form of realism as a viable alternative. We must either reject Rorty's Sellarsian understanding of what it is to make a belief true as something that makes sense only in the “logical space of reasons” or reject his commitment to the world lacking conceptual structure. Duncan appears to follow the first path when he argues that, together with Sartre's rejection of any internal contents of consciousness – mental representations - that might mediate our relation to the world, Sartre's commitment to the contingency of the world secures “a thoroughly ant-idealist realism” in which consciousness is in direct contact with a reality which “precede(s) any putative conceptual explanation.” Rorty shares with Sartre the rejection of any mental representations which might mediate our relationship to the world, making us directly aware of only our own representations of the world, rather than the world itself which we would know only inferentially on the basis of those representations. But he does not consider “the possibility of a consciousness so thoroughly purified that it would be awareness without representation.” It is this failure to recognize the possibility of consciousness as a direct, unmediated form of contact with the real that Duncan argues is Rorty's primary problem. As Duncan reads Rorty, it is this key oversight which leads Rorty to reject consciousness in favor of a reductive behavioral view which “suggests that selves are mere webs of habits for action without awareness.” And this, Duncan argues, creates problems not merely for our understanding of truth.
(Detmer’s primary concern with Rorty), but for the very possibility of “even consider(ing) that suggestion. To consider the idea that awareness has no place in the human would require being aware of the suggestion itself, and so would refute it.”

Duncan is right that Sartre's non-representational view of consciousness is an important aspect of his realism. Only in this way can we grasp how we are aware of the world itself, rather than our own internal, mental representations of it. But Duncan’s criticism of Rorty ignores what Rorty finds problematic about the notion of consciousness. Rorty is clear that one can accept his epistemological point about knowledge “while cheerfully 'countenancing' raw feels, a priori concepts, innate ideas, sense-data, propositions, and anything else a causal explanation of human behavior might find helpful to postulate.” It is only when consciousness plays an epistemological role in helping us to understand how we are capable of knowing the world that Rorty finds its invocation problematic. As long as we are content to invoke consciousness for non-epistemological reasons as, for instance, a form of non-cognitive contact with the world, a pre-conceptual sensory awareness that might play a role in causing us to have beliefs about the world but plays no role by itself in justifying those beliefs, Rorty has no problem with the notion. In other words, Rorty has no axe to grind about any particular phenomenological or psychological conception of consciousness per se., but only about its epistemological function in providing us with states of awareness that would function as warranting grounds for our knowledge: non-conceptual foundations for our truth claims. When consciousness plays this epistemological role we fall prey to what Sellars calls “the myth of the given”: the idea that claims to knowledge may be justified by appeal to immediately given states of awareness or, as Sellars puts it, “self-authenticating non-verbal episodes.” Even as simple a mode of awareness as being aware of something as green, to take one of Sellars’ examples, only possesses epistemic authority as a warrant for claims we make of a thing’s being green in a context of other conceptually articulate beliefs we hold. I must also have reason to believe that I am viewing the object under observational conditions that are appropriate for an accurate sighting of green objects (not under unusual lighting conditions, for instance) and that I am not red/green color blind, among other things. It is his epistemological concern with the myth of the given that leads Rorty away from the concept of consciousness in his work.

Does Duncan's invocation of a Sartrean vision of consciousness as an unmediated contact with reality avoid the problems of the myth of the given? In principle, it could, but given Sartre's commitment to the contingency of
the real, it is hard to see how it does. It could be conceded, for example, that Roquentin is in direct contact with the reality we call the chestnut tree root. But if that reality is indifferent to our concept of a root in the way Roquentin supposes it is, it is hard to see how my direct conscious contact with it could warrant any claims I make about it as a root or, for that matter, any claims I make about it as anything at all. This is especially true given the particular interpretive spin Duncan places on Sartre's notion of contingency. Relating it to Sartre’s concerns with objective forms of idealism, Duncan suggests that even reductive materialistic accounts of nature draw "dangerously close to objective idealism, since the conclusion that any event can be explained, in theory, by formal laws carries the implication that reality is fundamentally governed by rational forms." If stressing the contingency of the real is meant to counter even this sense of "objective idealism," then no scientific explanations of natural phenomena which appeal to formal, natural laws can capture the truth about these phenomena. On this view, it is difficult to make out a straightforward sense in which it could be true that the earth orbits the sun as this claim is a part of an explanation of our solar system which appeals to formal, natural laws. If this is a form of realism, it can be only a non-epistemic form of realism which assures us that we have a direct pre-conceptual awareness of reality, not an epistemic form of realism which would assure us that when we make, for instance, well justified scientific claims about nature we are gaining insights into what nature really is.

But perhaps this is not precisely what Duncan wants to claim about contingency in the end. He appears to moderate his understanding of contingency when he describes Roquentin's experience of nausea as merely an awareness of things independent "of their particular utilities," a point which would be consistent with respecting the scientific intelligibility of natural phenomena subject to natural laws concerning the operation of forms of causality that make no reference to final causality. Shortly after this he further qualifies what he means by contingency: “Of course, this does not mean that the cosmos must be in continuous, formless flux. In this respect, all that realism-all-the-way-down requires of the cosmos is that its objects and processes not be fundamentally determined according to rational form. The cosmos will always be in some specific set of processes exhibiting some specific configuration of patterns.” If these processes and patterns confer a conceptual intelligibility onto the world, making it possible to recognize a root as a root, then we have salvaged the scientific intelligibility of the world. If they are such as to make it possible for us to recognize, say, a seat as a seat then we have also salvaged the cultural intelligibility of the world of social artifacts. Perhaps all Duncan and Sartre mean by contingency, then, is that no conceptual
intelligibility we find in the world is absolute in the sense of absolutely guaranteed. A seat can really be a seat but also many other sorts of things besides, depending on our use of it. A root can really be a root but the laws of nature, the patterns of causality which are responsible for its functioning as a root, ultimately depend on material circumstances that are themselves contingent in that they might have been different. Perhaps all Roquentin means when he speaks of "nameless things" is that things are much more than we can capture in our names for them rather than that things can never, in principle, be appropriately conceptualized in one way or another by this or that name.

With this we are moving in the direction of a more modest understanding of contingency and effectively begin to take the second option for challenging Rorty's rejection of a realist conception of truth: rejecting his commitment to the idea that the world lacks conceptual structure. On this more modest view of contingency we accept that the world has a structure which can be accurately conceptualized. And this is all we need to make sense of how our concepts can help us to gain a true understanding of the world. The thought of a world with conceptual content in this sense has been most recently and constructively elaborated by John McDowell. McDowell's efforts in this regard are derived from his work with Sellars' critique of the myth of the given and his critical concerns with Rorty's belief that experience plays no epistemic, justificatory role in the constitution of our knowledge of the world. Attempting to stay true to Sellars' insights while distancing himself from what Rorty makes of those insights, McDowell argues for a conception of experience that would involve more than a causal sensitivity to the world but rather a conceptually mediated "openness to the world." Although reality is independent of our thinking, it is not to be pictured as outside an outer boundary that encloses the conceptual sphere. That things are thus and so is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that very same thing, that things are thus and so, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world. With McDowell we find the elaboration of a direct realism that has affinities with Sartre's realism in at least one important respect: when we are not misled by experience, we are aware of the world itself, not some representation of the world that would leave it an open question whether our representation accurately corresponds to reality. But there is also a striking difference in McDowell's emphasis on what he calls the "unboundedness of the conceptual": that "there is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally, the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks is what is the case." This latter point would appear to fly in the face of Sartre's commitment to the contingency of the real. But, as we have seen with Duncan's essay, there may be
reason to pursue a more modest interpretation of contingency that, at the very least, would not be antithetical to McDowell's thesis.

It is the possibility of this more modest interpretation of contingency which Fiona Ellis explores. Sympathetic to McDowell's efforts, she attempts to make a case for a Sartrean conception of the relation between concepts and reality which would align itself with McDowell's thesis of the unboundedness of the conceptual. xxx Aware of the textual obstacles to such an interpretation, she notes those passages which would appear to indicate an undifferentiated, formless conception of reality. Sartre refers to the “undifferentiation” of the in-itself as well as its lack of diversity, multiplicity, negation and relation to anything other than itself. xxxi These characterizations of the in-itself found in Being and Nothingness together with Sartre's account of the contingency of existence in Nausea together make an impressive textual case for a Sartrean view of the real which is wholly non-conceptual, indifferent to the concepts we deploy in attempting to understand it. And yet there is also Sartre’s emphasis on the way the for-itself brings nothing to being but a disclosure of being as it is. To return to a particularly important passage from Being and Nothingness quoted earlier: “it is through the for-itself that the meaning of being appears. This totalisation of being adds nothing to being; it is nothing but the manner in which being is revealed as not being the For-itself, the manner in which there is being.” xxxii It is hard to reconcile these two threads of Sartre's thought. For instance, how can our consciousness of the multiplicity and diversity of reality be nothing but a revelation of being if there is no multiplicity and diversity – only “undifferentiation” - in the real itself?

Ellis's approach to this problem is to suggest that “Sartre's claim that it is through human reality that multiplicity comes into the world is to be understood as making the point that it is by virtue of our capacity to conceptualise the world that we can discover multiplicity in it. . . . the claim may simply be that non-being is that by virtue of which we confront the world in its multiplicity.” xxxiii On this view, the nihilating activity of the for-itself is not responsible for the being of the determinate structure of the real as we apprehend it, the presence of a multiplicity of distinct, conceptually determinate things in conceptually determinate relation to other things: this root one meter below that seat, and so on. It is not as if, without this nihilating activity, the real would lack, as Sartre otherwise suggests, all diversity, multiplicity, negation and relation to anything other than itself. Rather, as Ellis proposes, the nihilating activity of the for-itself is only responsible for the being there of that determinate structure, its disclosure to us. Our concepts do not bring conceptual determinations into a world which, in itself, lacks them,
but rather enables us to discover a conceptual structure inherent in the real itself, a determinate structure that is conceptualizable.

Though, as she admits, this view does not fit well with Sartre’s other references to a conception of the in-itself which suggests a lack of differentiation, conceptual or otherwise, she does unearth some interesting passages to support her interpretation. In particular, there is one which occurs in the context of Sartre’s discussion of the appearance of being as “this” and “that.” Sartre writes concerning the “cleavage” of being into “this” and “that,” “Thus cleavage comes from being, but there is cleavage and separation only through the presence of the For-itself to all of being.”

Here Sartre appears to be saying as clearly as anywhere else in his work that the differentiation we find between beings, in the plural, is really there in being as it is in-itself. But without consciousness it could not be there for anyone. In further support for her interpretation, we can turn to Sartre’s discussion of facticity where the issue of the “this” and “that” emerge again: “the material connection of a particular ‘this’ to the ground is both chosen and given. It is chosen in so far as the upsurge of the for-itself is an explicit and internal negation of a particular ‘this’ on the ground of the world: I look at the cup or the ink-well. It is given in the sense that my choice operates in terms of an original distribution of the thises which manifests the very facticity of my upsurge.”

Here the ground of the upsurge of the for-itself is not an undifferentiated being but an independently differentiated “original distribution of . . . thises” whose relations to one another constitute my facticity. Though the thises may be indifferent to these relations they appear to really be there after all, a part of the fabric of being that constitutes the ground for the emergence of our consciousness of being.

In the end, Ellis concludes that Sartre intends for us to understand the world “without any particular purpose” rather than as undifferentiated. Closely echoing Duncan’s comments about things independent “of their particular utilities,” she goes on to observe that this is consistent with seeing the world as structured causally, in the way our scientific understanding of the world demands. In this way she argues we can regard the work of consciousness as that of “construal rather than construction.” But this, I would hasten to add, should not imply a passive conception of knowledge as mere receptivity. This would be about as antithetical to Sartre’s conception of human reality as we could get, not to mention its utter implausibility independent of any Sartrean considerations. Clearly, the development of the concepts we use to understand the world is a constructive work. And as the multiplicity of conceptual frames of reference make evident, it is a constructive work that need not be carried out in
one way only. Sartre states the tension between construction and construal in knowledge most succinctly in *Truth and Existence* when he articulates the goal of knowledge in this way: “To construct in order to reveal the unconstrued.” This is surely the aim of our constructive development of concepts: to construct concepts which allow us to attend to the world in such a way that we notice things about it we would otherwise miss – to construct in order to construe. The world, of course, is much more than can be captured in any particular conceptualization of it. A root is never *just* a root. There are indefinitely many other ways of regarding it which may unveil aspects of it which would simply go unnoticed if we could only think of it as a root. As Detmer correctly observes, the world demands no *particular* vocabulary. But this does not mean that a root is not really what we conceptualize as “a root,” that it is somehow indifferent to this conceptualization of it, as Roquentin’s experience in the park suggests. Or, if there is a sense in which it is indifferent to it, it is not indifferent to its conceptualization as a root in the same way it is indifferent to its conceptualization as a remarkable insight into quantum mechanics. The root is not beyond conceptualization per. se., but only more than can be captured in any particular conceptualization of it.

On this way of understanding the contingency of the real, we can accept that there is more to the reality of the root than we capture in our conceptualization of it as a root. We can also accept that the root lacks any real purpose for its existence. It did not grow, as Aristotle thought, ‘in order to’ supply the tree with water. It is just that trees which do not happen to grow roots are unlikely to survive and reproduce. We can also accept that the root is contingent in the most basic meaning of this term: there is nothing absolutely necessary about the root. Though the root may be a necessary product of a causal chain which we can understand in terms of the operation of natural laws, this chain of causality could not have produced a living thing such as a tree with roots if, for instance, our planet did not happen to fortuitously come together in a “Goldilock’s Zone” around our sun (not too hot, not too cold) hospitable to the evolution of life. Beyond that, it is conceivable that the natural laws which make the evolution of life possible on our planet might have been different and, indeed, might very well be different in other possible universes.

What is unacceptable is just that the root is a “nameless thing” with no determinate structure that can be appropriately conceptualized as a root. Or, to take issue with another way Sartre puts his point in *Nausea*, we must at least qualify Roquentin’s contention that “the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence.” Certainly a root is not the same sort of thing as a circle, to take Sartre’s example of an inhabitant of the world of
explanations and reasons. A circle is an ideal entity wholly defined and wholly explained by our concept of it as a circle while no root has ever been wholly defined and wholly explained by our concept of it as a root. But this does not mean that there is a sharp ontological divide between the world of concepts and the world of existence, “between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally, the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case.” It only means that the world of existence is much more than can be captured in any particular conceptually mediated attempt to explain it. We must accept that the root is conceptually explainable, that it has the right sort of determinate structure to permit our concepts to illuminate it in at least limited ways. If we reject that, insisting on a stronger conception of contingency that would institute a genuine ontological divide between “the world of explanations and reasons” and “the world of existence,” we undermine the possibility of a form of realism that would enable us to understand how our concepts can illuminate the real, how we can “construct in order to reveal the unconstructed.”

Of course, the question can still be asked: is this really Sartre's conception of the contingency of the real? Certainly, it does seem to be in synch with some of what Sartre says, but just as surely not with everything. As such, I would not put forward this more modest conception of the contingency of the real as a faithful articulation of this notion as we find it elaborated in Sartre's texts. Hazel Barnes put it best, I think, when she concludes that “Sartre has not adequately discussed the nature or being of the objects on which consciousness depends for its being.” If she is right, then the question we pose to ourselves is, perhaps, not best thought of in hermeneutic terms, as an attempt to clarify Sartre’s own understanding of contingency, as Sartre's own thought on this subject may simply be too ambiguous and ill defined to permit a univocal answer. We would do better to raise this question primarily in analytic terms: what conception of contingency can we take on board, regardless of the different thoughts Sartre may have had regarding it, and still elaborate a Sartrean form of realism - one that stays true to his understanding of the goal of knowledge “to construct in order to reveal the unconstructed” - that may serve as a viable alternative to Rorty's anti-realism? The modest conception of contingency whose broad parameters I have sketched here is, I believe, the correct answer to this question. We can fashion a Sartrean form of realism which will enable us to recognize that it is the world itself which makes our beliefs true. But doing that requires that we reject the idea advanced by both Rorty and Sartre of an ontological divide between the space of concepts and the real. In order to have epistemic bearing on our conceptually determinate beliefs concerning it, the world itself must have the sort of
determinate structure which can be conceptualized in illuminating ways by those beliefs.

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iv. Detmer, Challenging Postmodernism, 103-104.

v. Detmer, Challenging Postmodernism, 105.

vi. Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 251.


viii. Detmer, Challenging Postmodernism, 147.


xii. See Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 29: "Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what it is."

xiii. See Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 29 and 256. Also see 28 where Sartre speaks of the "undiifferentiation of the in-itself."

xiv. Sartre, Nausea, 125 & 129. Also note “I murmur: ‘It’s a seat,’ a little like an exorcism. But the word stays on my lips. It refuses to go and put itself on the thing.” (125)

xv. Given his understanding of freedom, Sartre would not be entirely comfortable with speaking of the world causally disposing us to speak of it in one way or another. My point here is only that a world indifferent to our concepts of it may permit us to see ourselves standing in a causal relation to it, as Rorty accepts, but not an epistemic relation in which it would warrant the application of any particular concept as true of it.

xvi. See Challenging Postmodernism, 124.


Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” 169.

Duncan, “Sartre and Realism-All-the-Way-Down,” 100.

xxi. Perhaps Duncan's claim here rests on the totalizing character of reductive materialism's claim that "any event can be explained... by formal laws." But it is not explained why the range of the claim over *all* events should make a difference here, why it would not be idealistic to only claim that *most* events can be so explained, for instance. And if the point here does not concern the range of the claim then it would appear to hold not only for reductive materialistic accounts of nature, but for any scientific account, reductive or not, which would explain natural phenomena in terms of formal, natural laws.

xxii. I will not address the apparent inconsistency between Duncan's different ways of characterizing contingency. My only aim here are to show the lack of tenability of his attempt to maintain a strict view of the non-conceptual character of the real and to see how the beginnings of a more viable conception of contingency begins to emerge in other things he has to say about it which, in the end, recognize the conceptually determinate nature of the real. Perhaps there is a way of squaring these different characterizations of contingency in a way I cannot see and any apparent inconsistencies are *merely* apparent. My own *suspicion*, however, is that it is the very lack of tenability, for a realist at least, of an understanding of reality as non-conceptual that leads to an almost inevitable ambivalence in any attempt to maintain it. In the end, I believe this is probably what is behind Sartre's own apparently incompatible characterizations of the real as concerns contingency in his work (see below in discussion of Ellis). The inadequacy of an understanding of reality as non-conceptual betrays itself in the way we find textual transgressions of the idea in the works of those who attempt to advance the view.


xxv. I am referencing Roquentin's experience of his seat in *Nausea*: “I murmur: ‘It's a seat,’ a little like an exorcism. But the word stays on my lips: it refuses to go and put itself on the thing. It stays what it is, with its red plush, thousands of little red paws in the air, all still, little dead paws.” Sartre, *Nausea*, 125.

xxvi. Certainly this thought would be consistent with scientifically warranted speculations about the “multi-verse” in which our universe is seen as only one among many different universes with different laws of nature depending on the initial conditions of each universe's formation. See, in particular, Alan Guth, *The Inflationary Universe* (Vintage, 1998).

xxvii. ... and Donald Davidson's and Robert Brandom's belief, as well.

xxviii. McDowell’s *argument* is too involved to go into here. As such, I only present his ideas as an alternative to Rorty's – an alternative that leads in what I am arguing is a direction that is necessary for a viable form of realism.


xxiii. Ellis, “Sartre on Mind and World,” 34.


xxxix. See again, in particular, Guth, *The Inflationary Universe*.

