We have seen that while Sartre holds that consciousness is always pre-reflectively aware of its ontological nothingness, it alienates itself if it chooses to adopt the fundamental project of bad faith. It may appear, therefore, that the alienation of consciousness only ever emanates from, and is grounded in, consciousness’s own activity.

However, Sartre explains that ‘whatever our acts may be [...] we must accomplish them in a world where there are already others and where I am de trop in relation to others’ (BN: 431). Because consciousness always exists in a world inhabited by other consciousnesses, understanding consciousness requires that we engage with its relationships to others. This will disclose that consciousness’s relationship with others can also alienate it.

Sartre’s analysis of social relations is not, however, one-dimensional. In the first instance, it seeks to disclose consciousness’s ontological relation to the other. This level of his analysis discloses that the other is not an aspect of consciousness’s ontological structure; the other is an aspect of the objective situation that consciousness exists. Because the other is not an aspect of consciousness’s ontological structure, the other’s disclosure only arises when it is encountered by consciousness. This leads Sartre to show that the primordial manner in which the other relates to consciousness is through what he calls ‘the look.’ In turn, this leads to a discussion of the various ways in which consciousness’s pre-reflective fundamental project shapes its social relations.

But to outline his account of social relations, Sartre first engages with the way he thinks Husserl, Hegel, and Heidegger understand social relations. His aim in doing so is to clarify his own position and demonstrate how he differs from his predecessors. Sartre’s reading of Husserl and Heidegger does not directly concern us here and so I will not
engage with it in this volume; I will, however, engage with his critique of Hegel.

Sartre on Hegel’s theory of intersubjectivity

To discuss Hegel’s views on intersubjectivity, Sartre reduces Hegel’s theory of intersubjectivity to the master/slave dialectic. Hegel’s master/slave dialectic describes a particular way consciousness understands itself in the long developmental journey it must make to fully understand its ontological structure. This shape of consciousness arises when consciousness realizes that it cannot fully understand itself by simply negating an inanimate object to affirm its independence. With this realization, consciousness understands that its self-understanding is dependent on the establishment of a specific relationship with a living other in which both consciousnesses recognize each other’s freedom.

In the first instance, Sartre recognizes and praises Hegel for establishing an important constitutive bond between consciousness’s being and the being of the other. But while Sartre recognizes that ‘Hegel’s brilliant intuition is to make me depend on the other in my being’ (BN: 261), he criticizes Hegel for being both epistemologically and ontologically optimistic.

According to Sartre, Hegel is epistemologically optimistic because he maintains that consciousness can know the pure subjectivity of the other. Sartre’s strict subject/object ontological dualism rejects this; consciousnesses are ontologically opposed: ‘Between the other-as-object and Me-as-subject there is no common measure, no more than between self-consciousness and consciousness of the other. I can not know myself in the other if the other is first an object for me; neither can I apprehend the other in his true being – that is, his subjectivity’ (BN: 267). The ontological chasm between two consciousnesses means that it is not possible for one to know the ontological subjectivity of the other.

However, while Sartre insists that consciousness can never know the ontological subjectivity of the other, he does recognize that consciousness can experience the subjectivity of the other. This occurs through language and certain forms of social relation. But while consciousness can experience the subjectivity of the other, this experience does not disclose the nothingness that defines consciousness’s ontological structure. This is because, for Sartre, to know the other is to objectify it, which nihilates the nothingness that defines its ontological structure. We cannot understand the other by experiencing it. Understanding the