

# From freedom to writing

## The curious case of value

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### Value in the early Sartre

The concept of value comes as a great challenge in the field of phenomenology, in Husserl, Scheler and Sartre. The challenge is the following: maintaining a radical subjective approach to the understanding of reality — how phenomena appear to one's consciousness — while trying to find the criteria for a moral philosophy: a system of values which does not amount to relativism. Until the end of his oeuvre, Sartre would struggle to find a solution to this tension between subjectivity and objectivity, and the legacy of existentialism may have been affected by this difficulty.

However, Jean-Paul Sartre did explore options to circumvent this tension. In *L'être et le néant* (1943), Sartre primarily grounds his ethical thought on the opposition between authenticity and bad faith. To bypass this binary, he invests further this tradition of value in *Cahiers pour une morale* (written in 1947-48). Being free means creating value at every instant of our existence. Continuously, as conscious beings, we make sense of the world by valuing its elements.

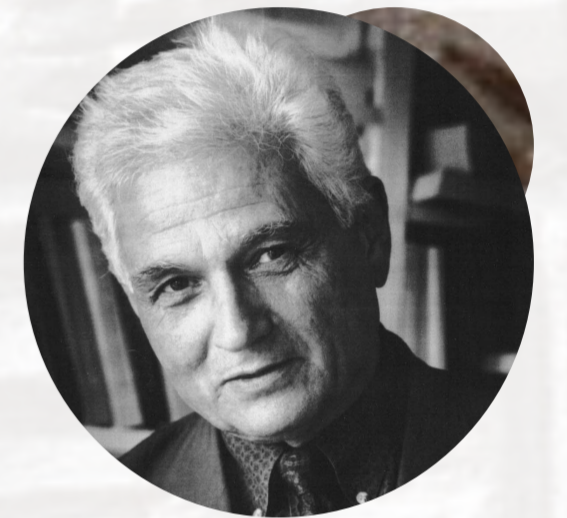
### Value, freedom and traces: l'existence au défi de l'écriture

This dialogue between Sartre and Derrida, through the term of value, leads us, therefore, to two conceptual chains: consciousness-freedom-value, and consciousness-writing-value. The term *value* may seem too polysemic. But all forms of valuation are ultimately existential processes: whether we value a material product within an economy, or whether we debate the value of kindness over intelligence, or whether we study the aesthetic value of a film, it always happens through this fundamental process that allows us to make sense and to prioritise items of our environment: valuation.

### Value in a material reading of Derrida

The concept of value is less explicitly present in Jacques Derrida's oeuvre. However, we can find it through an indirect route, across his work and some of the new disciplinary approaches that he has inspired. In *La voix et le phénomène* (1967), Derrida contests Husserl's persistent association of consciousness with an experience of presence, to recall how consciousness is always spread across time (retention, protention), thus constituting a network of traces.

Traces, or writing. Through a well-known, revolutionary approach, Derrida suggests that the structure and singularity of writing can be found across reality, far beyond the sheet of paper or characters on a screen. And yet, the latter, 'restricted writing', has a particular history in our species. Jack Goody and Walter J. Ong, two contemporary anthropologists corroborated some of the intuitions of *De la grammatologie* (1967), confirming that writing systems had one specific psychic and social function when they emerged five millennia ago: the conservation of (economic) values across time. ■



The fact, however, that we now consider as an internal process — valuation — what seemingly marked the *raison d'être* of a major technology, when it emerged — writing — does open fascinating questions. Can we imagine, for instance with Bernard Stiegler, that we have progressively internalised an operation that was once done outside of us, through external traces? But if so, would that indicate another, unsuspected dimension of the valorisations our consciousness constantly performs: don't we need 'internal technologies' of conservations of values, when we compare any new situation with our pre-existing frames of reference? The final question is the hardest: if any value is fundamentally conditioned by a larger network of values, can we still, with or without Sartre, consider the hypothesis of human freedom?