

Senior Essay on Sartre (Working Title)

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这篇文献给那些抚养我长大的人，
我的祖母和我的母亲。

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1.0 Introduction

What is *being*? “Why are there beings at all, instead of nothing?” That was the question, presented in the words of Martin Heidegger, as the *fundamental question of metaphysics* (Heidegger 1). The question of being is both the broadest question, as well as the deepest – those answer must account both for “some elephant in a jungle in India, just as much as some chemical oxidation process¹ on the planet Mars.” (4) Our ability to give an adequate account of being is important, not just on the basis of some abstract, theoretical desire, but as a matter of practical utility too – for to understand the *being* of a human, is to know what is the “characteristic activity” (Aristotle 11) of a *human* being. The broad and fundamental generality that Metaphysics holds in relation to the rest of Philosophy is akin to the relationship between Physics and Engineering – for to understand the laws of the former would allow us to derive the facts of the latter. This makes ontology akin to the theoretical physics of Philosophy, with *being* as the constitutive element of its science – the *elementary particle* of Metaphysics.

It is this question of being which interests me, as a strong theoretical foundation in ontology can lead to further (and even unexpected) applications in more subsequent branches of philosophy. Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* is a monograph which presents a complete, and self-sufficient *system* of ontology, that offers a stronger theoretical underpinning than prior systems we have studied. *Being and Nothingness* descends from a phenomenological background which

¹First published in 1935, Martin Heidegger’s astronomical quip predated the Viking lander (and any practical investigations into the being of Martian surface chemistry) by more than 41 years.

explicitly aims “to eliminate a number of troublesome dualisms from philosophy, and to replace them with the monism of the phenomenon.” (Sartre 1) This approach is entirely different, when compared with Immanuel Kant’s transcendental metaphysics, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* presents and is dependent on a strong and inseparable dichotomy between the noumena and phenomena – a ‘troubling dualism,’ in other words. Sartre rejects this dualism: we postulate that the being of an existent is entirely in the existent’s appearances, and within a few short strokes lay out the opening propositions of an entirely novel *phenomenological ontology*.

What is the primary difference between Sartre’s ontological system, and his phenomenological predecessors, such as Husserl or Heidegger? What is the chief, theoretical innovation, which distinguishes *Being and Nothingness* from other antecedent theories of phenomenology? It is in the place of *Nothingness*, which is central in Sartre’s work. Nothingness is neither just a theme, nor a motif – it is the *fundamental force* of Sartrean metaphysics. It is the relationship between *being* and *nothingness*, like the interactions of an elementary particle in a physical field – that yields the rich and vibrant account of human-reality which Sartre presents. Yet, out of all interactions between being and nothingness, it is the interaction between *our* being, and nothingness, which seems most troubling and mysterious of all. For nothingness is not theme nor motif, not even ‘just’ a framework (no matter how essential) of Sartre’s theoretical system. Nothingness is a necessary and *irreducible* component of *our* ontology, of the very being of *our* self. It is like the vacuum which allows motion, enabling displacement in ontological space. This metaphor of motion is appropriate, for the relationship between nothingness

and our own being is not a static one – but rather, dynamic and troubled.

Complex, turbulent, and mysterious – this is the relationship of *contingency* which I explore in this paper. Contingency is the uneasy relationship of our being-for-itself to its being-in-itself. Unlike all other beings, we alone are not the *foundation* of our being – but rather, our being is defined by *a question of its own being*. This contingency of the being-for-itself seems to be at the core of human-reality. It is from contingency which we derive all the vivid modalities of what it means to be human: the experiences of anguish, desire, love and hatred. How can this one characteristic of our ontology lead to such visceral experiences, which seem definitive of our very humanity? By looking at the question of contingency, we will be able to visit all the major landmarks of Sartre’s ontological landscape, and in the process – come to a better understanding of our own human nature. In this exploration of the contingency of our being, I will take us on a journey that takes us to the heart of nothingness. The very nothingness that, “is neither before being nor after being; nor is it, in a general way, outside being; rather, it is right inside being, *in its heart, like a worm.*” (57)

2.0 The Cosmogony of Sartrean Ontology

What is contingency? What is the nothingness inside our being, and how is the relationship between our being and nothingness a relationship of contingency? How did contingency arise in the first place? In order to answer these questions, which are the more subsequent propositions of Sartre's ontology – we must first take a look at nothingness, and begin with the postulates and definitions of Sartre's system. We must look at how being emerges in the first place – and trace our way through the history of its genesis in which the ontology of our *human-reality*¹ emerges. This process is an ontological cosmogony, and the progression of our science shares familiar motifs with its counterpart in physical cosmology: complete with its own epochs and symmetry-breaking. This presentation will be an analytic overview of Sartre's ontology, a base-camp that we will establish in the pursuit of our question. Hence, we will begin our inquiry into the contingency of our being, with the very cosmogony of Sartrean ontology itself.

2.1 The Foundation of Phenomena

Our investigation begins from the foundation of phenomena – the basic realm of derivative ontological data that is readily accessible to our metaphysics. We happen to live in a world of phenomena – a rich plenum of perceptions that forms the infinite state-space of human-reality. How can we find being, starting from the raw data of the phenomena? Very quickly, we realise that there is a distinction between the *phenomenon-of-being*, and the *being-of-phenomena* – at

¹*Human-reality* is similar to the *Dasein* of Heidegger, although we will use it in the context of Sartre's phenomenology – hence avoiding the original German.

least, a distinction that is possible in the infancy of our incipient ontology. What we seek to grasp is the *being-of-phenomena* – the universal, ontological basis for all phenomena. In contrast, the phenomenon-of-being is the more superficial *appearance* of any arbitrary being – much more accessible to us, but not necessarily the same as the *being-of-phenomena*. “Is the being that is disclosed to me, that *appears* to me, the same in nature as the being of the existents that appear to me?” (6) Can the former (the phenomena-of-being), be reduced to or otherwise lead us to the latter (the being-of-phenomena)?

Unfortunately, such a reduction is not possible – we cannot reduce the subsequent phenomena-of-being to the more fundamental being-of-phenomena. The being of an object cannot come from the object itself: “it is not possible, for example, to define being as a *presence*, since *absence* also discloses being, since not being *there* is still a way of being.” (6) This impossibility of reducing the being-of-phenomena to the phenomena-of-being is explored rigorously by Sartre in his introduction, for even more sophisticated attempts at such a reduction are ultimately an appeal to *knowledge* as a foundation for being – with knowledge necessarily defined as the simple ratio or proportionality between an existent’s being and it’s appearing, i.e. its phenomena (7). Hence, the being-of-phenomena is by necessity separate and irreducible from the phenomena-of-being – which is to say that the being of phenomena lies *outside* of the object of phenomena itself. “In brief, the phenomenon of being is ‘ontological’ in the sense in which Saint Anselm’s and Descartes’s proof is called ontological. It is a call for being: it requires, insofar as it is a phenomenon, a transphenomenal foundation.” (7) Hence, Sartre concludes that the being of phenomena is *transphenomenal*: i.e. outside the

phenomena.²

If the being-of-phenomena is transphenomenal – then where can being lie? What external ‘thing’³ can serve as the foundation for the being-of-phenomena? *Another* being is the only choice that is available for us – for in this stage of the development of our ontological theory, the only two particles of our metaphysics are being and phenomena. Phenomena cannot be the foundation of phenomena – for that would lead to an infinite regression, a circularity. Hence, only another being can be the basis for phenomena’s own being. What is this other being, which serves as the condition for phenomena? Or in other words, if phenomena are merely the appearance of being, but not the being itself – *then to whom do phenomena appear to?* This being is *consciousness* – the being *to whom* there are appearances in the first place. And thus, we posit the first new elementary particle of our ontological cosmology. In our survey of the background of phenomena, we discover a being-of-phenomena which has no immanent source – but a transphenomenal origin. This transphenomenal being-of-phenomena points us towards consciousness, like how the cosmic microwave background radiation of the physical universe points us towards the Big Bang. Hence, as with both – in order to understand the former, we must investigate the latter. At this stage we cannot say anything about the relationship between the being-of-the-phenomena and consciousness – indeed, we know nothing about the ontological structure of consciousness itself. But now we have a direction for our inquiry, and a method not-too-dissimilar from

²This is not to say that phenomena is somehow dualistic. As Sartre carefully explains in the introduction, the being of an existent is in “the series of appearances that manifest it.” (Sartre 1) The being of an object is its phenomena – but here we are inquiring after the metaphysics of phenomena itself.

³Single quotes, i.e. scare quotes, are used to designate concepts provisionally or rhetorically.

an astrophysicist peering back into the progression of the Big Bang. We trace phenomena towards consciousness, and proceed to investigate the ontology of consciousness itself.⁴

2.2 The Ontology of Consciousness

What is the ontology of consciousness? Are we certain that there is such a being as consciousness at all? To begin, it does not appear that the being of consciousness is certain – for while we assert that “phenomenon must appear to a being”, such an assertion does not seem self-evident. After all, it is possible as a thought experiment for the metaphysician to imagine a world with ‘being’, but without consciousness. But such a world would also fundamentally be without phenomena – there is ‘being’ but no appearance. And further yet, the ontology of this hypothetical world is unstable, for the so-called ‘being’ postulated cannot derive its foundation from anywhere. This lemma is presented by Sartre when he states that “consciousness is not *possible* before being but instead comprises – in its being – the source and condition of all possibility, its existence implies its essence. This is felicitously expressed by Husserl as its [i.e. consciousness’s] ‘factual necessity.’” (14) This factual necessity is akin to a certain *anthropic principle*⁵ of ontology. Consciousness does not necessarily have to exist, but the fact that it exists makes its non-existence inconceivable. As we live in a world with consciousness, we can accept this factual

⁴Here I actually depart slightly from the original progression of Sartre’s rhetoric. Sartre first explores knowledge in further detail, as knowledge is a more direct embodiment of the relationship between the being-of-phenomena and the phenomena-of-being. It is only after establishing the ontology of knowledge, does Sartre then turn towards the *knower* of the knowledge, which leads us to consciousness. The progression towards knowledge first, then consciousness – is a necessity of the synthetic nature of presenting a new metaphysics *ab initio*. Thankfully, as his descendents, we may present his ideas analytically.

⁵The *anthropic principle* refers to the biases which favour the existence of an observer, for the fact that we exist to observe in the first place. The term is borrowed from physical cosmology.

necessity as granted – it is the axiom of our metaphysics.

Thus, Sartre asserts the existence of the *being-of-consciousness*. But we have not yet understood the relationship between the being-of-consciousness and the being-of-phenomena yet. What is the relationship between phenomena and consciousness? Is it not the case that phenomena *appears* to consciousness? Can we claim that these appearances are held within consciousness, in the same way that we would speak of “becoming conscious of ‘something?’” Sartre asserts that consciousness is fundamentally *positional*. “All consciousness is consciousness of something. In other words, there is no [act of] consciousness that does not *posit* a transcendent object, or if you prefer, consciousness has no *content*.” (9) This contentless nature of consciousness is significant, for it clarifies that this act of positing is not like the admixture of two beings, but only a grasping of what consciousness posits towards. “Consciousness is positional in that it transcends itself to reach an object and is exhausted by this act of positing.” (10) This positional nature of consciousness is also the reason why the ontology of consciousness is a *transcendence*: “transcendence is a constitutive structure of consciousness, which is to say that consciousness is born *bearing on a being that it is not*.” (22) Borrowing from Husserl’s phenomenological vocabulary, consciousness in this positional sense is also referred to as *thetic*: pertaining to a *thesis*, an object of consciousness which we have *posited* towards.

Now we gain an account of consciousness which ascribes to its ontology the following characteristics: It is contentless, and positional. It posits towards a being that is outside the being-of-consciousness itself, a *transcendence*. Is this account of consciousness ontologically complete, or even sufficient for our purpose? Can we

now begin to explicate the being-of-phenomena, from this hypothesised being-of-consciousness? Not yet. For this provisional consciousness of ours, with the above parameters and terms, fails to account for one important (and perhaps even definitive) attribute of consciousness: we are conscious *of* our consciousness. What does it mean to be conscious of our consciousness? “The necessary and sufficient condition for a knowing consciousness to be knowledge of its object, is that it should be conscious of *itself* as being this knowledge.” (10) Our thetic, positional consciousness satisfies the first half of this criterion. Our provisional consciousness posits towards its object⁶, which we give the name *knowledge*. However, we have failed to account or provision a means for which our consciousness is “aware of itself as being this knowledge.” To quote Sartre on the strict necessity of this condition:

If my consciousness were not consciousness of being conscious of a table, it would hereby be conscious of the table without being conscious that it was so, or, alternatively, it would be a consciousness that did not know itself, an unconscious consciousness – which would be absurd. (10)

Hence, in order to elucidate the relationship between the being-of-phenomena and the being-of-consciousness, we must first complete our account of the being-of-consciousness with an account for this second term. Like the physicist at the blackboard, we discover that our initial equation does not add up to the sum of

⁶At this stage of our ontology’s development, the phrase *object* must contain the bare minimum of ontological significance. When we refer to an “object of consciousness” in these cases, we strictly mean the grammatical object: the being that which consciousness posits towards. Concepts such as *objectivity* are strictly undefined now, and can only be derived later.

the particle which we observe. How can we account for this ‘self-conscious’⁷ component of consciousness? Or using Sartre’s terminology, this *consciousness-of-consciousness*? The first and theoretically simplest method, is for us to appeal to *reflectivity* as a foundation for this consciousness-of-consciousness. Consciousness is positional. Why not allow consciousness to be conscious of itself? In this case, thethetic object of consciousness would *be* consciousness – our consciousness posits towards our consciousness, in other words. This approach is simple, but not improperly so – after all, it possesses a theoretical elegance, a certain balance and self-sufficiency.

Unfortunately, a closer investigation reveals an antinomy. If consciousness is itself the cause for the consciousness-of-consciousness, then what allows the antecedent consciousness to be conscious? This reflection of one consciousness against another, a *dyadic* relationship – is absolutely unbounded in its progression:

If we accept the law of the knowing-known dyad, a third term will become necessary for the knowing in its turn to become known, and we are placed in a dilemma. Either we stop at some term within the series ... – in which the phenomenon in its totality collapses into the unknown (i.e., we always come up against a reflection that is not conscious of itself and is the final term) – or we declare an infinite regress to be necessary, which is absurd. (11)

⁷Although the phrase self-consciousness is a more succinct term for the consciousness-of-consciousness, we will refrain from using it – both in order to stay faithful to Sartre’s own terminology, as well as to avoid any confusion with *self-presence*, a concept which we will elaborate in later sections.

As Sartre himself recognised, if we attempt to bound this progression, our limit is arbitrary and externally imposed: “the phenomenon in its totality collapses into the unknown”. And if we do not constrain this regression, we achieve an infinite regression, a circularity. Like the physicist, we had tried to “balance the terms” of our equation by changing a sign, positing a reflective particle-antiparticle pair. But very quickly, we realised that such parameters leads to asymptotic growth, an unbounded meta-physical binding-energy. This particle that we posit is unstable since it requires infinity, and as a result it cannot exist in our ontological cosmology.

How can we account for this consciousness-of-consciousness then? To begin, our previous exercise has demonstrated that consciousness cannot be dyadic: we cannot split the being-of-consciousness into two symmetrical components. Likewise, through a proof via induction, we can also demonstrate that consciousness cannot be split into *any* number of components – the being-of-consciousness must be unitary. Is it possible to account for our consciousness-of-consciousness in a unitary manner, where the very nature of our being-of-consciousness contains the ‘self-consciousness’ which we seek? Sartre explores this possibility through the meta-physical thought experiment of reflection: We reflect upon our consciousness – imagine being conscious of a feeling, a desire – whatever object that through your awareness, you (i.e. your consciousness) *posit* towards. Now imagine reflecting upon that [reflected] consciousness from a moment ago: you think about your consciousness of desire, of the object:

In the act of reflection, I bring judgements to bear on my reflected consciousness; I am ashamed of it, I am proud of it, I want it, I reject

it, etc. The immediate consciousness that I have of perceiving does not allow me either to judge, or to want, or to be ashamed. It does not *know* my perception, or *posit* it: all that is intentional within my current [act of] consciousness is directed outward, towards the world.

(11)

What does Sartre discern, from the fact that our original consciousness of perception (the immediate consciousness from the above passage) does not contain any ‘thing’ which allows our subsequent judgement? It is a subtle observation that recognises how our subsequent reflecting consciousness, does not *contain* the judgements which it invokes on the reflected consciousness. To clarify Sartre’s demonstration, let us consider his steps in more detail: Our subsequent reflecting consciousness is a positional, thetic consciousness. The thetic object of the reflecting consciousness, that which it *posits* towards, is the original reflected consciousness (that feeling, or desire, as per our thought experiment). And of course, the original reflected consciousness has that feeling, or desire, as its thetic object (that which it *posits* towards). Nothing in this above progression *contains* the judgements themselves. That shame, that pride, that desire, that rejection – all of these judgements yielded by the act of reflection is nowhere to be found in the positional objects of either the reflecting consciousness, nor the original reflected consciousness. Hence, our current account of the ontology of consciousness is inadequate, for it does not agree with the raw data of our own human experience.

What conclusions can the metaphysician draw from this ontological thought experiment? It is a demonstration of the inherence of our consciousness-of-

consciousness, which is present in every act of positional consciousness that we take. “This spontaneous consciousness that I have of my perception is *constitutive* of my perceptual consciousness. In other words, any positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself.” (11)

Hence, we may derive the following conclusion. The being-of-consciousness is not only a thetic, positional consciousness, but it is also a *non-thetic*, non-positional consciousness. To use Sartre’s terminology, this is the *pre-reflective cogito* of consciousness, the “immediate and non-cognitive relationship of self-to-self.” (11)

This is not a dichotomy or dualism, we have not re-introduced the dyad which was demonstrated to fail. But rather, to quote Sartre:

We can express this [the nature of consciousness] in these terms: any conscious existence exists as the consciousness of existing. We can understand now why the most basic *consciousness of consciousness* is not positional:⁸ because it and the consciousness of which it is conscious *are one and the same*. In a *single movement*, consciousness determines itself as consciousness of perception, and as perception.

(12)

Thus, we have completed our account of the ontology of consciousness at this stage of our metaphysical cosmogony. This definition of the being-of-consciousness possesses the following characteristics: It is a contentless, positional being, that posits towards a thetic object. This object of consciousness is by necessity outside of consciousness, hence the being-of-consciousness is transcendent. However,

⁸Sartre asserts that our *consciousness-of-consciousness* is not positional. This is the pre-reflective *cogito* of consciousness, which allows us to be aware of what our positional consciousness posits towards. It is not positional, because as our demonstration earlier has shown – our self-awareness does not (and cannot) be in the form of positing towards our consciousness.

this act of thetic positional consciousness is one and the same with a certain ‘self-consciousness,’ properly defined as a pre-reflective cogito that is constitutive and unitary with the thetic act of positing itself. Thus, we have fulfilled all the terms that our equation requires – the metaphysician at her blackboard is able to balance her ontological particle. This is the ontology of the being-of-consciousness. Only now with this understanding, are we able proceed, and examine the relationship between phenomena and consciousness.

2.3 The Big Bang of Sartrean Ontology

Let us now step back, and take an inventory of our incipient ontological theory. The metaphysician sets aside her chalk, and glances up at the propositions of her metaphysical system. What are the elements available to us within our domain of discourse? We began with phenomena, the raw sensory data of our existence. We separated phenomena into the phenomena-of-being, and the being-of-phenomena, the latter which we seek. Furthermore, we realised that the being-of-phenomena points towards consciousness, – so setting aside the being-of-phenomena for the moment, we embarked on an investigation of the being-of-consciousness. Now, after a careful series of demonstrations and thought experiments, we reach a clear and well-defined definition for the being-of-consciousness itself.

What is the being-of-consciousness? It is a thetic, positional consciousness *of* some impression. But more importantly, every act of consciousness is also an absolute non-thetic precognitive awareness of itself, as the consciousness-of-consciousness. This unitary ‘self-consciousness,’ the awareness of the self in every act of positioning – is the source of our *subjectivity*. “Consciousness is a real subjectivity, and an impression is a subjective plenitude.” (21) This subjective

plenitude refers to our absolute access and unity with the object of consciousness. When I am conscious of a sensation, every part of that sensation is available to me – there is nothing ‘hidden’ or inaccessible behind that sensation. “The phenomenon of being, like any basic phenomenon, is disclosed immediately to consciousness ... what Heidegger calls a ‘preontological understanding.’” (24) That sensation simply *is* a part of me. No part of what I am conscious of can be concealed from me, for the very act of positing towards an object of consciousness also necessarily implies my own consciousness of my consciousness. This was the conclusion of our earlier demonstration, and any rejection of it would result in an “unconscious consciousness,” an absurdity. From this world of positive, pure subjectivity, there can be no separation from the self, no objectivity. Everything is simply one with the self, an absolute solipsism of being.

What does this sort of world look like? Let us engage in an act of speculative metaphysics, for the sake of illustration alone. This is the ontology of the Point, a one-dimensional universe in the world of Edwin Abbott’s novel *Flatland*. When the two-dimensional denizens of Flatland visit “Point-land”, they enter a one-dimensional world with neither distance nor separation. Here there is only a single Point – who is the sole inhabitant, monarch, and universe in one. The Point is a being-of-consciousness who embodies this subjective plenitude in full: he perceives all things, even the attempts at communication by the Flat-landers, as thoughts originating within his own consciousness. There is no objectivity, no externality – only self. This short vignette is a surprisingly evocative demonstration of the metaphysics of a world without separation or distance, a world without *nothingness*.

With that thought, our Metaphysician picks up her instruments, and looks back upon our blackboard. How can we prevent a similar fate for our own ontology? What must we do, to allow the existence of an independent, *objective* world, where appearances are “connected by a principle that does not depend on my whim?” (4) What can allow us to derive the rich, phenomenal world of our human-reality, from this suffocating plenitude of the self? A metaphysics with only one particle is a static one, a sterility. There has to be a *force* which brings about change. Thus, we reach the core of Sartre’s ontological thesis – his metaphysical discovery. It is through *nothingness* which we find the being-of-phenomena. Specifically, the foundation of our objective, phenomenal world – comes from the being-of-phenomena, *as the non-being of the being-of-consciousness*.

[If] we want the phenomenon’s being to depend on consciousness, the object will need to distinguish itself from consciousness not through its *presence*, but through its *absence*, not through its plenitude but through its nothingness. If being belongs to consciousness, the object must differ from consciousness not insofar as it is another being but insofar as it is a *non-being*. (21)

How does this look like? What does it mean for an object to “differ from consciousness, as a non-being?” Here is an image that we can use to understand the full force of Sartre’s demonstration. Let us begin with the world of the being-of-consciousness, in its full, undiluted subjectivity. What is this world? It is a singular world, a pure subjectivity. It is the ceaseless mantra of “... *I am, I am, I am, I am* ...,” endless in its totality. This universe is isomorphic and homogenous – and any object that attempts to derive its being from this universe will instantly lose itself

in this ceaseless mantra, becoming one with the “*I am*” of subjectivity. After all, the very being of consciousness is its own ‘self-consciousness.’ Hence, the only way for an object to exist at all, as something *separate* and apart from consciousness – is as a non-being of consciousness, a defiant “*I am not.*” Or in Sartre’s words: “To be conscious of something is to confront a full and concrete presence that *is not* consciousness.” (21) Only through its being as a non-being-of-consciousness, does the ceaseless mantra of “*I am, I am, I am, ...*” get interrupted, by something that consciousness “*am not.*” The being-of-consciousness is like a luminiferous aether, which reaches and spreads and is only stopped by the dense, opaque nothingness of what it is not.

Thus, we discover the ontology of the being-of-phenomena. The being-of-phenomena is in relation to the being-of-consciousness, not through a generation or derivation, or indeed any positive action at all. But rather, *the being-of-phenomena is a non-being of the being-of-consciousness.* This nothingness at the heart of the being-of-phenomena is the chief ontological innovation of Sartre’s phenomenological ontology. Nothingness is a fundamental force, the addition of which triggers a rapid expansion of our metaphysics, an ontological Big Bang. From the stable, singular solipsism of pure subjectivity, we achieve a baryogenesis. All of a sudden, the sterile plenitude of our subjective universe is struck by an ontological inflation, yielding a world of metaphysical matter, of the being-of-the-phenomena. This is the cosmogony of Sartrean ontology, – the birth of *phenomena* in the universe. And with this baryogenesis, we also reach a crucial *asymmetry* in our metaphysics – the introduction of *contingency* into our being.

2.4 Being-for-Itself, Being-in-Itself, and Self-Presence

What happened here, now that we introduced nothingness into our metaphysics? What does it mean to say that we have introduced contingency into our being? For our consciousness to be thetic and positional, it must posit towards an object, a phenomenon – that is not itself. This is what Sartre means, when he says “consciousness is born bearing on a being that it is not.” (10) Hence, every act of positional consciousness is an act of self-negation, a *questioning*. Every time our consciousness posits towards an object, it is asking: “Is this being, *my* being?”⁹ This is how Sartre arrives at his definition of the being-of-consciousness, as a being which contains within itself, a question of its own being: “Consciousness is a being for whom in its being there is a question of its being, insofar as this being implies a being other than itself.” (23) But what sort of being is the kind those very ontology contains “a question of its [own] being?” Right now, this is a puzzling question, it may not seem important or particularly essential at first glance. However, as we follow the question along its path, we will reveal the first fundamental asymmetry of our metaphysical cosmology: that of the *being-for-itself*, and the *being-in-itself*.

Being-in-Itself

Let us begin our investigation. “What sort of being, is one whose very ontology, is a question of its own being?”¹⁰ It’s clear that consciousness belongs to this

⁹Sartre’s actual demonstration is more nuanced: the very act of questioning necessitates a negation – for to ask of a being is to allow the possibility of its non-being.

¹⁰The obscurity of this sentence is due to my avoidance of using words like ‘nature’, or ‘meaning’, in fear of introducing ontological confusions. A more casual formulation of the same question can read as: “What is the nature of a being, that is defined by a question of its own being?”

category of beings – but it is hard to think of any other beings which share a similar ontology. And of course, a simple enumeration of elements which fulfil a certain category, is a poor way of understanding the category itself. However, we may begin our inquiry by looking at the inverse of our question – by asking: “What sort of being, is one who is *not* a question of its being?” If a being is not a question of its being, then wouldn’t it simply *be* its being? Stripping away the rather unfortunate contortions of our language, a being that *is* its being would simply be an identity:

$$A = A \quad (2.1)$$

Identity is not just a simple unity of being, but the highest degree of “adequation” possible in ontology. Sartre is specific in stressing the absolute totality of an identity’s self-coincidence, putting it as the logical limit unification.

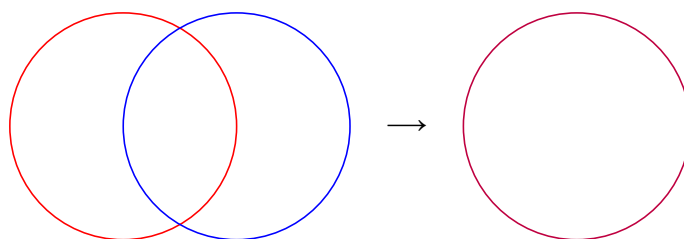


Figure 2.1: The Limiting Relationship between Unity and Identity

In Sartre’s own words:

We are able to characterise the principle of identity as “synthetic,” not only because its scope is limited to a particular region but above all

because it gathers within itself the infinity of density. “A is A” means:
A exists in the form of infinite compression, in an infinite density.
Identity is the limiting concept of unification ... at its extreme limit,
unity vanishes and passes over into identity [Figure 2.1]. (123)

This “infinite density” of being comes from our original rejection of dualism within our ontology – there can be nothing hidden behind being. “That adequation, which belongs to the in-itself, is expressed in this simple formula: being is what it is. In the in-itself there is not a single particle of being with any distance from itself.” (123) Thus, we are introduced to the first category of being, the kind which does not contain any question of itself – the kind of being that simply *is* itself, *in* itself. This is the *being-in-itself* of Sartre’s metaphysics.

The [being] *in-itself* is full of itself, and it is impossible to imagine a more complete plenitude, a more perfect adequation of any content to its container: there is not the slightest emptiness in being, not the slightest fissure through which nothingness might slip. (123)

What are some examples of this new category of being? The *being-in-itself* is the being of material things, of simple existents. The chair, the rock, that glass of apricot cocktails at the café¹¹ – the ontology of all these things is the being-in-itself. After all, an apricot cocktail *is* an apricot cocktail – its being is infinite in its density, there can not be anything more to it or less. There is no “fissure through which nothingness might slip.”

¹¹According to the (possibly apocryphal) tale by Sarah Bakewell, Existentialism began when Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Raymond Aron met at the Bec-de-Gaz café over some apricot cocktails.

Being-for-Itself

Hence, if the infinite density of being is definitive of the being-in-itself, perhaps we can investigate the ontology of the being “who is a question of its own being” by looking at how it differs. The only example of such a being in this category is our being-of-consciousness, to which Sartre turns to in his examination: “Consciousness is characterised, on the contrary, by its decompression of being. Indeed, it is impossible to define it as self-coincident.” (123) Sartre examines this relationship of non-identity through the proxy of a linguistic investigation, by looking at the ontology of the reflective pronoun “himself”:

The “himself” represents, therefore, an ideal distance, within the subject’s immanence, in relation to himself, a way of *not being his own coincidence*, of escaping from identity even while positing as its unity – in short, a way of being in a constantly unstable equilibrium ... (126)

What is this “ideal distance”, which Sartre characterises as the departure from identity? This distance of being, away from being, through the question of its own being, is *self-presence*. For the being-of-consciousness is in a relationship with itself, not as an absolute unity and co-incidence of itself – but in a relationship where it questions itself, at a distance. In every question, the “questioner must be able to take a sort of nihilating step back in relation to the thing he is questioning, he escapes from the casual order of the world and extricates himself from the glue of being.” (59) This “nihilating step back” is that ideal distance:

The principle of identity is the negation of any type of relation within being-in-itself. On the contrary, self-presence presupposes that an in-

tangible fissure has slipped inside being. If it [the being-of-consciousness] is present to itself, that is because it is not completely itself. Presence is an immediate degradation of coincidence, because it presupposes separation. (127)

What is the material of this “intangible fissure” which has slipped into our being-of-consciousness? If presence is an immediate degradation of coincidence, what is it a presence *of*? This separation within us cannot be conducted by any other being – because then the ontology of our consciousness will become pluralistic – a relationship of being with being, a dualism. “The introduction of an external and qualified element from outside the *cogito* into the unity of a prereflective *cogito* [i.e. another being] would break its unity and destroy its translucency; there would be something in consciousness that it was not conscious of, something that did not exist as consciousness.” (127) Hence, the separation within our self-presence is *not* a being, but rather is a *nothingness*. This is the same nothingness which founds the being-of-phenomena – only now, it is present as a force within our being-of-consciousness. Our being-of-consciousness is not a being-*in-itself* – because it is separated *from* itself, by the nihilating question *of* itself.¹² As its ontology is defined by this question *for* itself, Sartre rightfully defines the ontology of our being-of-consciousness as a *being-for-itself*.

Thus the for-itself must be its own nothingness. The being of consciousness, as a consciousness, is to exist *at a distance from itself*, as self-presence, and this zero distance that being bears within its being

¹²The italicisation of *in*, *from*, and *for* is for especial emphasis. All three prepositions designate a certain distance and separation of the being-of-consciousness to its own being. This internal relationship will be elaborated with greater clarity in the coming paragraphs.

is Nothingness. Thus, in order for an *itself* to exist, the unity of this being must involve its own nothingness, as a nihilation of the identical ... for-itself is the being that determines itself to exist, insofar as it is unable to coincide with itself. (128)

This being-for-itself, which stands at a constant distance away from the adequation of its own being, is described by Sartre as *contingent*. It is contingent because *it is not the foundation of its own being*, since its very being is its own question: “The being-of-consciousness, insofar as this being is in itself *in order to* nihilate itself into the for-itself, remains contingent, i.e. consciousness does not have any capacity to give its being to itself, or to receive it from others. ” (132)

Hence, we complete the presentation of the two fundamental categories of Sartrean ontology. They are the *being-in-itself*, and the *being-for-itself*. The being-of-consciousness is a being-for-itself, and the being-of-phenomena is a being-in-itself. These are the underlying ontologies behind the beings that we began our investigation with – fundamental particles yielded by the lysis of larger wholes. These categories of being are defined by their relationship to with nothingness, with the being-in-itself being a pure plenitude of being, and the being-for-itself as separation, a question. Thus, as the entrance of Nothingness into our cosmology triggered a baryogenesis, with it, nothingness has also introduced the first of the fundamental asymmetries into our metaphysical universe. In our universe, there exists such a being whose being is not in-itself, but for-itself. It is a specific being that is not the foundation of its own being, but rather, a contingent being.

It is, the *human being*.

3.0 The Contingency of Human Existence

We are contingent beings. This is the fundamental ontology of the human existence, the metaphysics of our humanity. A human being is no more than a being-for-itself, cloaked in the flimsy body of its own facticity. Our being is defined by our *ontological act*, the constant fleeing of our for-itself away from the in-itself of facticity. But why contingency? Why is our being defined by this nothingness, which lies within us like a worm in the heart? What does it *mean*, in terms of the most concrete and vivid modalities of interaction, that characterise the human experience? This contingency of being is not simply an obscure ontological derivation, like some law of quantum metaphysics only apparent at the smallest scales or the highest abstractions. But rather, nothingness is a fundamental force, which warps the very space-time of the human-reality. The experience of our being is characterised by a mortal struggle of our for-itself, and it is through this conflict in which the most vivid experiences of our human-reality emerge.

Contingency is at the heart of our being. And the first, and perhaps most personal experience of our for-itself with contingency, manifests through the phenomena of *anguish*: our most immediate conception of the possibility of our non-being.

3.1 Anguish as an Existential Anxiety

What is anguish, as an experience of human-reality? What distinguishes it from other emotions, and why is it *existential*? Sartre is clear to distinguish anguish from the more ordinary emotion of fear. “Anguish is distinguished from fear by

the fact that fear is fear of beings in the world, and anguish is anguish before myself.” (66) It is this reflective nature, of an “anguish before myself,” that holds the key to the ontological meaning of this emotion. “The preparation of artillery that precedes an attack may provoke fear in the soldier undergoing the bombardment, but he will begin to feel anguish when he tries to foresee the behaviour through which he will resist the bombardment, when he wonders if he will be able to ‘hold out.’” (66) Will I hold out? Or will I crumple, under the stress of my situation? That question, that uncertainty – is a hesitation which points towards our being. For I am not steel nor iron, a material object. The magnitude of my strength is not a rating, a measurement of kilopascals or newton-meters. If I was a being-in-itself, I would simply perform to the adequation of my being, with no questions involved. An iron bar has a tensile modulus, a compressive strength. It will always *be* those properties, never more, but also never any less.

In contrast, as the being-for-itself, I always have the possibility of *not* being, my being. The soldier undergoing bombardment might be trained to withstand fire, to have undergone extensive drills and exercises. Indeed, the soldier should have all the means of resisting the attack, as fortitude is characteristic of a soldier-being. But yet, at the moment of the bombardment, we realise that our resistance is just as equally *possible* as our capitulation. There is no *foundation* for our being, no matter how much we wish it to be. The soldier possesses every opportunity of abandoning his or her post, just as much as they possess the possibility of remaining steadfast upon their ground. “In other words, by constituting a specific course of action as *possible*, and precisely because it is *my* possible, I realise that *nothing* can oblige me to take this action.” (69) Nothing can oblige me to be who I am – no argument can

be made from determinism or “psychophysiological parallelism.” I can be a coward, just as much as I can be brave. In fact, the very meaning of bravery must come from the *possibility* of cravenness. Hence, this is why anguish often comes about in moments of danger, daring, or difficulty – for in these trials of character, we are forced to strip away the more mundane material which hides our ontology – and we come face-to-face with the void within us, the dizzying vertigo of not-being, our being.

Thus, as human beings – we are cursed with this experience of anguish. This anguish is inescapable, for *freedom* comes from the same contingency that yields our angst. Indeed, the ability to derive freedom as the non-being of our being is one of Sartre’s ontological innovations – it is the reason why nothingness is essential to our ontology. Anguish is one of the ways in which we can directly experience our freedom, as an immediate conception of our being (as opposed to a more abstract, rational conception of it). “It is in anguish that man becomes conscious of his freedom, or alternatively, anguish is freedom’s mode of being as consciousness of being; it is in anguish that freedom is, in its being, in question for itself.” (66) This metaphysical movement is sophisticated, for it allows us to ground our freedom on an ontological basis, making it inseparable from our humanity. “In this way freedom is not *a* being: it is man’s being, i.e. his nothingness of being.” (579) But this freedom comes at a cost, which is that deep, ontological insecurity. “Human-reality is entirely abandoned, without help of any kind, to the unbearable necessity of making itself be, right down to the last detail.” (579) This abandonment is an ontological neurosis, a fundamental anxiety of our self. And as Sartre goes on to demonstrate – the most visceral and ontologically threatening manifestation

of our existential anxiety, comes from our *being-for-the-Other*.

3.2 The Existential Terror

What is the Other? As a being-for-itself, in the primordial past of the Sartrean Cosmogony, we may very well begin with no conception of the Other. To understand the *existential terror*, let us first take a step back into that world. Imagine being at the dawn of the baryosynthesis. I am a for-itself, a first-class transcendence who is the source of my own nothingness. I live in a world of oak trees and bubbling brooks – all of which act according to principles “not of my own will.” What sort of existence is this? What manner of being is available, to this primordial for-itself? It is a world of phenomena, of course – for we have already achieved the asymmetry of the for-itself and the in-itself. It is also a free world, founded on the same nothingness that yielded phenomena in the first place. I am free to explore this world through the projects of my freedom – to grasp the in-itself of nature, as instruments of my will. In this way, it is a world of *meaning*. My being grasps the situation of its own facticity in the light of its aims and desires, and in doing so – I endow the world with relations, all of which leads back towards me. That bubbling brook is a plenitude of being, insofar it is an in-itself. But it can *mean* fresh water, a respite from heat, or a treacherous obstacle, depending on whatever aims I project. There is still anguish in this world, yes. But whatever questions I have of my being – it is still fundamentally my being, my own *ontological act*. This is the Edenic existence of the primordial for-itself, a Ptolemaic ontology.

This is the world which we fall from, the moment, we meet the *Other*. For what *is* the Other? The Other is not a being-in-itself. It is a being-for-itself, a first-class transcendence just like me. The moment our eyes meet, I recognise

myself in the Other – and this recognition yields an indisputable proof of his Other-ness as a transcendence. “The Other is not an object. He remains, in his connection to me, a human reality; the being through he determines me in my being is his pure being.” (338) But yet, the Other *is not* myself – and all of a sudden, my privileged position as the source of all meaning is jeopardised:

[The Other] appears as a pure disintegration of the relations that I apprehended between the objects in my universe ... Thus, all of a sudden, an object has appeared that has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place, everything still exists for me, but now an invisible and frozen flight towards a new object penetrates everything. The Other’s appearing in the world corresponds, therefore, to a frozen sliding away of the universe in its entirety, to a decentering of the world that undermines the centralisation I simultaneously impose. (350 – 351)

In this manner, the existence of the Other degrades the primacy of our own being – and through this act of “decentering”, we yield *objectivity*. For the meaning of the world is no longer entirely dependent on me. It is factored by the presence of the Other, who is just as capable of grasping the world as objects of their consciousness. And it is through this objectivity, that we experience *existential terror* at our encounter with the Other. We are forced, face-to-face with our contingency, the moment we meet the Other’s *gaze*. For when the Other looks at me, I become an *object* of the Other. I am frozen at the moment of the *look*, not as the free transcendence of the for-itself, but as an in-itself, a being-in-the-world. For Sartre, the most immediate and visceral perception of this objectification takes

the form of the phenomenon of *shame*:

It is shame or pride that reveals the Other's look to me, and myself at the furthest point of [the Other's] gaze; they make me *live*, and not *know*, the situation of being looked at. Shame is shame of *oneself*, it is the *recognition* that I really *am* this object being looked at and judged by the Other. (357 – 358)

Why is shame so indicative of the ontological dimension of this *existential terror*? It is because the motion of being-looked-at (by the Other) is a twofold movement, that highlights our contingency both as an in-itself, but also as a lack of being as the for-itself.

In the moment of the look, we are first objectified by the Other. We are robbed of our transcendence, reduced to an in-itself. This reduction comes from the fact that the Other is free – “the Other's freedom is revealed to me through the disturbing indeterminacy of the being that I am for him.” (359) But it is this indeterminacy of the “being for him” that puts us into the most acute crisis. For not only am I a being held captive as the object of an alien consciousness, that being which *is me* has a foundation that is completely contingent on the Other's will. What is my being-for-the-Other? It is *my* being – that is indisputable? But what is it? That depends on the Other – and whatever forms it take, good or bad – is both me, but also fundamentally inaccessible to me. “To be looked at is to grasp oneself as the *unknown object of unknowable assessments*, and in particular, evaluative assessments ... being seen constitutes me as a *defenceless being for a freedom that is not my own*.” (365) Thus, my being is not only contingent on the basis of my own non-being – but my being is contingent on the basis of a freedom

that is both outside of me, and fundamentally inaccessible to me.

This is why the Other is a source of ontological terror. If anguish is the existential anxiety that not-having a foundation for our being, then our being-for-the-Other is the existential terror of being contingent solely on the whims of a foreign freedom.

Insofar as I am the object of values that enter in to qualify me – without my being able either to act upon this qualification or even to know it – I am enslaved. By the same token, insofar as I am the instrument of possibilities that are not my possibilities, ... which negate my transcendence in order to constitute me as a means towards ends of which I am ignorant, *I am in danger*. And this danger is not an accident, but the permanent structure of my being-for-the-Other.

(366)

But yet, there is something different about this contingency that we experience at the hands of the Other. With anguish, we experience the possibility of our non-being, as the question of our being. However, when we encounter the Other – what we experience not necessarily a *contingent being*, but rather a *being that is contingent at the hands of the Other*. There is a slight, but important nuance in this distinction. For in our being-for-the-other, we are no longer a *contingent being* – but rather, a being that is contingent in the Other's freedom. We are endangered by this freedom, but not necessarily endangered in our being. This difference is definitive of our existential terror, yes – but it is also the root of an intoxicating possibility. What happens if we try, to found our being, through the Other?

This attempt, is what Sartre calls love.

4.0 The Teleology of Contingency

5.0 Conclusion

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