

Senior Essay on Sartre (Working Title)

Shen Zhou Hong St. John's College

January 30, 2022

Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	The Cosmogony of Sartrean Ontology	4
2.1	The Foundation of Phenomena	4
2.2	The Ontology of Consciousness	6
2.3	Attempts to Derive Phenomena from Consciousness	10
2.4	Consciousness and Nothingness	11
3	The Contingency of Human Existence	12
4	The Teleology of Contingency	13
5	Conclusion	14
6	Endpage	15

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 Mechanics – 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* inherits from a phenomenological background which 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 subsequent theories of phenomenology? It is in the place of *Nothingness*, which is central in

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.

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. And this relationship between nothingness and our own being is not a static one – but rather, it is troubled in its dynamism. Complex, turbulent, and mysterious – it is this relationship of *contingency* which I aim to explore. 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 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 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. 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 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 phenomenon-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 phenomenon-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 phenomenon-of-being is explored rigorously by Sartre in his introduction, for even more sophisticated attempts at such a reduction is 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. it’s 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.

If the being-of-phenomena is transphenomenal – then where can being lie? What external ‘thing’¹ 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 is merely the appearance of being, but not the being itself – *then to whom does phenomena appear to?* This being is *consciousness* – the being *to whom* there are appearances in the first place. And thus, achieve the first breakthrough 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 in a process not-too-dissimilar from an astrophysicist peering back into the progression of the big bang. We trace phenomena towards consciousness, in order to investigate consciousness itself.²

¹Single quotes, i.e. scare quotes, are used to designate concepts provisionally or rhetorically.

²Here 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.

2.2 The Ontology of Consciousness

What is the ontology of consciousness? And how does consciousness relate to the being-of-the-phenomena? Does consciousness ‘give’ phenomena being, or perhaps ‘generate’ being for phenomena? Phenomenon leads us towards consciousness, but what is their exact relationship? 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* of ontology. Consciousness does not necessarily have to exist, but the fact that it exists makes its non-existence inconceivable.

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) “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? 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: since our provisional consciousness posits towards its object³, 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 proceed 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 the particle which we observe. How can we account for this ‘self-conscious’⁴ 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, the thetic 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 certain theoretical elegance, a balance and self-sufficiency.

Unfortunately, a closer investigation reveals an antinomy. If consciousness

³At 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.

⁴Although 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 closer to Sartre’s own terminology, as well as to avoid any confusion with *self-presence*, a concept which we will elaborate in later sections.

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)

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 the 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 elucidate this further, consider the steps of Sartre’s demonstration carefully: 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 it’s *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. This thought experiment of the reflection can be represented in more rigorous information-theoretic forms, as the formal data-structure of an *linked list*.⁵ And it will likewise demonstrate the absence of these judgements, which are manifestations of the consciousness-of-consciousness, which every act of *thetic* positional consciousness necessarily contains.

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 un-

⁵A linked list is a form of data-structure in Computer and Information Science. Linked lists contain nodes, each having a data and a reference. The parallels between Computer Science and Ontology are deeply intriguing, for the former is almost a practical implementation of the latter.

derstand now why the most basic consciousness of consciousness is not positional: 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, 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. Now with a solid understanding of consciousness, we are able to examine the relationship between phenomena and consciousness. We proceed onwards, with the next step of our ontological deduction.

2.3 Attempts to Derive Phenomena from Consciousness

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. However, it is important for us to keep in mind that the *only* well-defined aspect of our ontology at this point is the being-of-consciousness. Our elucidation of the being-of-phenomena is provisional and incomplete – we are only able to state that it points us towards consciousness, but not of its relationship at all. However, now that we understand the being-of-consciousness, we can attempt to complete the inequality – and see how the being-of-consciousness relate to the being-of-phenomena, which we seek.

To begin, is it possible for us to 'derive' the being-of-phenomena from the being-of-consciousness? In this manner, would it be possible for us to state that

consciousness ‘generates’ the being-of-phenomena, from within itself? In any of these cases, we are essentially attempting to reduce the being-of-phenomena to the being-of-consciousness itself – the act of derivation or generation ultimately attributes the cause of the phenomena’s being to the being-of-consciousness. This reduces the being-of-phenomena to knowledge. There are two possible means in which such a reduction can be achieved: through either a relationship of *relativity*, or a relationship of *passivity*. Relativity posits a definite relationship between the being-of-phenomena and the being-of-consciousness, with phenomena serving as a junior partner in the personal union. However, such a relativity does not reject the being of the being-of-phenomena itself, hence relativity alone is insufficient for the reduction. “Relativity does not excuse us from the need to examine the *percipi*’s being.” (18) The only other possibility is to reduce phenomena to a passivity – where like an empty vessel, its being is given by the being-of-consciousness. Unfortunately, Sartre also demonstrates the impossibility of this reduction: “[Passivity] is a relation between one being and another being, and not between a being and a nothingness. It is impossible for the *percipere* [being-of-consciousness] to assign the *perceptum* [phenomena] its being, because in order to be assigned anything, the *perceptum* would already need to be given in some way and thus to exist before receiving its being.” (18) Hence, we are forced to conclude that the being-of-phenomena is irreducible to the being-of-consciousness, and therefore *phenomena must have its own being*.

2.4 Consciousness and Nothingness

3.0 The Contingency of Human Existence

4.0 The Teleology of Contingency

5.0 Conclusion

6.0 Endpage

Bibliography

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Ed. and trans. Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. [Web](#). Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics: New translation by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. Connecticut: Yale University Press, 11 Aug. 2000. [Web](#). Rpt. of *Einführung in die Metaphysik*. Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1935.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. and introd. Sarah Richmond. Forew. Richard Moran. New York: Washington Square Press, 1 Sept. 2021. [Web](#). Rpt. of *L'Être et le Néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*. Éditions Gallimard, 1 Jan. 1943.

Technical Notes

This essay is typeset using \LaTeX , an Open Source document typesetting language by Donald Knuth, and version-controlled via Git. The git repository containing notes, source code, and revision history is available here:

<https://github.com/ShenZhouHong/sartre-essay>

This essay is written using the EssayTemplate, an open source \LaTeX essay template designed for the Humanities by Shen Zhou Hong. It is available at:

<https://github.com/ShenZhouHong/EssayTemplate>

This \LaTeX essay is also available in Microsoft Word, OpenOffice, HTML, and plain text upon request.