

Senior Essay on Sartre (Working Title)

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Contents

1	Introduction	5
2	The Cosmogony of Sartrean Ontology	7
3	Endpage	9

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 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.

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 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 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. phenomena (8). 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. Hence, Sartre concludes that the being of phenomena is *transphenomenal*: literally outside the phenomena.

3.0 Endpage

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