Reading Notes:

On Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, a Study in Phenomenological Ontology

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Abstract

A collection of notes, quotations, and miscellaneous remarks written during my reading of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, in fulfilment of my Senior Essay at St. John's College. Sections and subsections are identical with Sartre's work, while sub-subsections (e.g. 1.3.1) are entirely my own.

Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 I: The Idea of the Phenomenon

Summary

In this section, Sartre introduces us to the problem of modern philosophy, which is its usage of incompatible dualisms. He shows how Phenomenology seemingly resolves these dualisms, but then introduces a dualism of its own: that of the finite and infinite, insofar appearances are concerned. He defines phenomenology as a philosophy in which the *being* of existents are not somehow 'behind' the appearances of said existents (e.g. as Immanuel Kant's ontology posits), but rather *the being of an existent is in its appearances*. Sartre then concludes that in order to properly know the nature of such a being, we must investigate the being of appearances in further detail.

1. As a preface, Sartre states that one of the accomplishments of modern philosophy was to reduce 'existents' to merely the "series of appearances that manifest it" (Sartre 1).

2. This is done in order to eliminate certain 'troublesome dualisms.'

   (a) Such as the dualism of the internal, versus the external.

3. "An appearance refers to the total series of appearances, not to some hidden reality that siphons off all the existent's *being* for itself." (2)

4. **Noumenal world** versus **Phenomenal world**: by noumenal, we mean the material (and potentially inaccessible) world outside of us, versus the phenomenal world which consists of what appears to us. The phenomenal world can be understood as our mental world, in a sense.

5. Sartre proceeds to give us **a working definition of Phenomenology:**

   (a) The being of an existent *is in it's appearances*. "For the being of an existent is precisely the way which it *appears*" (2)

   (b) The phenomenon is the *absolute-relative*. It remains relative, because the phenomenon has to *appear* to someone. However, it is absolute because the appearance is not merely our perception of a deeper, transcendent being.

   (c) But rather, the *appearance is being*.

6. The benefit of phenomenology as opposed to other competing ontologies (e.g. Immanuel Kant's transcendental metaphysics) is that it resolves the 'troublesome dualisms' of an internal versus external being. However, it brings out new problems:

   (a) The **dualism of the finite versus the infinite**: An object (i.e. existent) has an infinity of appearances, as there are an unlimited amount of phenomenal subjects to which the object can appear.

   (b) This infinity is necessary for an *objective phenomenology*. "The reality of this cup is that it is there, and that it is *not* me." (4)

      i. "We can express this by saying that the series of its appearances is connected by a *principle* that does not depend on my whim." (4)

   (c) However, keep in mind that as subjects, *we only see a finite set of appearances for any given existent at any given time.*

      i. And yet, the existent must have an infinite series of appearances.

      ii. Hence, there is now **a dualism between finite and infinite appearances**.

      iii. By resolving the dualism of the internal and the external, phenomenology has seemingly introduced a new dualism.

   (d) "Thus, a *finite* appearance indicates itself in its finitude, but at the same time in order to be grasped as an appearance-of-that-which-appears, it demands to be surpassed towards the infinite." (4).

   (e) Hence, the nature of the phenomenon's being has certain *transcendent* properties. What are these properties?

7. Recall that the essence, or being of an existent is now completely in its appearance. Hence, in order to properly ground phenomenology, we must investigate the *being* of the appearance itself.

1.2 II: The Phenomenon of Being and the Being of the Phenomenon

Summary

Sartre presents an important distinction between the *phenomenon-of-being*, and the *being-of-phenomena*. We wish to study the latter, not the former – even though strictly speaking we only have access to the former (right now, at any rate). Sartre asks us

whether or not the phenomenon-of-being is reducible to the being-of-phenomena, to which he concludes this reduction is not possible. This is because any phenomena (appearance) is founded on being: specifically, Sartre says that "being is the condition of a phenomena's disclosure" (7). Hence, the being-of-phenomena is not in the phenomena itself, but rather has a *transphenomenal foundation*. That is the ultimate conclusion of this section.

1. **Eidetic reduction**: *"a technique in the study of essences in phenomenology whose goal is to identify the basic components of phenomena. Eidetic reduction requires that a phenomenologist examine the essence of a mental object, with the intention of drawing out the absolutely necessary and invariable components that make the mental object what it is. This is achieved by the method known as eidetic variation. It involves imagining an object of the kind under investigation and varying its features. The changed feature is inessential to this kind if the object can survive its change, otherwise it belongs to the kind's essence."* (Wikipedia)

2. We wish to study the nature of *being*. We define earlier on that the being of any existent is in its phenomenon. Hence, we wish to study the *being-of-phenomenon*. However, *being* itself is also a phenomenon – that's how we can talk about and reason about it.

   (a) Hence, there are two concepts we need to understand clearly:

   (b) **The phenomenon-of-being**: an appearance of being.

   (c) **The being-of-phenomenon**: the being of appearances. (This is what we want to study!)

3. "Is the phenomenon-of-being [that we can reason about] identical to the *being-of-the phenomena*?" (Sartre 6)

   (a) After all, remember – the purpose of our investigation is in the *being-of-the-phenomena*.

   (b) Which admittedly, we can only reach through the intermediary of the phenomena (the appearance) of being.

   (c) These are somewhat tricky and nit-picky differences, but it is important to keep them in mind!

4. The being-of-phenomena cannot be simply resolved into the phenomenon-of-being (7).

(a) This is because phenomena itself can only exist on the foundation of being. Sartre calls being "the condition of all disclosure" for appearances.

5. This leads to a certain important ontological insight, which is that *"knowledge alone cannot account for being, i.e., that the being of the phenomenon cannot be reduced to the phenomenon of being"* (7).

6. "The phenomenon of being requires the transphenomenality of being." (7)

   (a) "Although the being of the phenomenon is co-extensive with the phenomenon, it must escape the phenomenal condition in which existence is possible [only as a condition] that it is revealed [i.e. a phenomenon]" (7).

7. I'm not sure if I understand this completely, but essentially Sartre concludes that the being-of-phenomena has a transphenomenal nature, where it is grounded in something that is not strictly just phenomena.

1.3   The Prereflective Cogito and the Being of the Percipere

Summary

In this section, Sartre asks whether or not the being-of-phenomena can be found in *knowledge*, which is the proportionality of an appearance's *appearing* (e.g. we have more knowledge of a phenomenon, when it appears more strongly to us). He examines this knowledge-hypothesis of being (my term for it), before concluding that it is not an adequate answer, for to place the being of phenomena into knowledge invites an infinite regression.

He then (rather confusingly) goes on a tangent where he resolves this infinite regression, by showing that knowledge is related to consciousness – for in order to know (percipere) something (a percipi), there has to be a knower (percipiens). He examines the nature of the percipiens (consciousness), and elaborates on it's characteristics. The most important is that consciousness is *positional*, namely that it *posits* towards something (i.e. an object of consciousness). But otherwise, consciousness is itself contentless and empty.

Finally, he explains how consciousness is self-conscious. He first posits that consciousness is by necessity self-conscious, and demonstrates the inadequacy of a simple consciousness-of-consciousness approach, because that too leads to an infinite regression. Instead, he shows that the self-consciousness of consciousness lies in a certain *non-cognitive, non-positional consciousness*, which he calls the *pre-reflective*

cogito. It's called pre-reflective, because it is prior to the more ordinary positional (i.e. reflective) cogito.

In the most confusing part, he demonstrates that this pre-reflective cogito is an essential characteristic of consciousness itself, and that they are one and the same. Every act of consciousness is both a consciousness of an object (positional), and conscious of itself. This is justified using Husserl's factual necessity. With this, he finishes his digression on the nature of consciousness.

1. Some introductory Latin definitions:

    (a) **Percipere**: Infinitive. To perceive, to learn, to secure.

    (b) **Percipi**: Passive, the perceived.

    (c) **Percipiens** The perceiver.

1.3.1 The Knowledge-Hypothesis of Being

2. Sartre addresses the hypothesis that the being of an appearance (i.e. being-of-phenomenon) is rooted in the way that it *appears*.

    (a) "The being of an appearance is proportionate to its *appearing*" (8).

    (b) This hypothesis attempts to reduce the being-of-phenomenon to a simple matter of our knowledge (where knowledge is taken as the proportion of an existent's appearing to us).

3. In Sartre's latin vocabulary, he christians this knowledge-hypothesis with the following proportionality: The phenomena-of-being appears to a perceiver, as a *percipi* to an *percipiens*. This proportionality is *knowledge*.

    (a) Hence, under the knowledge-hypothesis, the being-of-phenomena lays within knowledge.

    (b) However, this hypothesis is inadequate, since we essentially move the burden of "where is being" on towards knowledge:

4. "If any metaphysics presupposes a theory of knowledge, it is equally true that any theory of knowledge presupposes a metaphysics" (8).

5. A potential response to this inadequacy of the knowledge-hypothesis is to state that the being of the percipi is founded in the being percipiens, i.e. the perceiver.

    (a) "One might allow that the percipi refers to a being that escapes the laws of appearance while stil maintaining that this transphenomenal being is the

subject's being." (9)

(b) This points us towards the direction of consciousness. Could the being-of-phenomena lie within consciousness?

(c) In order to properly evaluate the knowledge-hypothesis of being, we must have a good understanding of consciousness. This is what Sartre does next.

1.3.2 Understanding Consciousness (As a Potential Resolution for the Being-of-Phenomena)

(d) Sartre presents a very Husserl-style **phenomenological definition for consciousness**:

    i. "As Husserl showed, *all* consciousness is consciousness *of* something. In other words, there is no [act of] consciousness that does not *posit* a transcendent object" (9)

    ii. Consciousness is a *posit*-ional consciousness of objects in the world, where consciousness has no content, but only aims to reach (or in other words, *posits*) towards objects.

    iii. "Every knowing consciousness can only be knowledge of it's [posited] object" (9).

    iv. Essentially consciousness is an action towards things (it posits). It is not an object which has content.

(e) However, even though consciousness is a contentless action towards an object, *consciousness must always be aware of its own consciousness towards said object.* In other words, the act of consciousness must be conscious of itself being said act.

    i. This is absolutely necessary, otherwise if I was conscious of an object without being conscious that I am conscious of an object, I would become an *unconscious conscious*, which is an absurdity.

    ii. However, this strict requirement that consciousness must be aware of itself, also leads to it's downfall so far as a hypothesis for the being-of-phenomena as consciousness, which Sartre will present in the following.

1.3.3 The Inadequacy of Consciousness-of-Consciousness

6. "The reduction of consciousness to knowledge effectively imports the subject-

object duality within consciousness" (10).

7. Furthermore, recall how consciousness must be aware of itself? This leads to a consciousness-of-consciousness. But wouldn't that consciousness need another consciousness, e.g. a consciousness-of-consciousness-of-consciousness? This by necessity leads to an infinite recursion.

   (a) "Either we stop at some term within the series – in which case 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).

1.3.4 The (Reflective) Non-Positional Consciousness Towards Positional Consciousness Hypothesis

8. In order to prevent the absurdity of this infinite recursion, we cannot have an isomorphic relationship of consciousness-to-consciousness. Rather, we must have an "immediate and non-cognitive relationship of self to self" (11).

   (a) "Any positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself"

9. My understanding of this step is not very clear, but the essential meaning is as follows. Every act of consciousness must have a relationship to itself which is non-consciousness (or at least, non-positionally conscious). Sartre provides the following example, which I will reproduce:

   (a) Imagine yourself counting cigarettes (sartre's example). You count that there are twelve of them. That's an objective property which you are *positionally* conscious of (i.e. your consciousness posits the twelve-ness of these cigarettes).

   (b) However, this positional awareness (i.e. consciousness) of the number of cigarettes appears to you *as a direct, immediate property of the world.* You don't have a positional consciousness of counting them.

      i. "I do not "know myself as counting". Proof of this can be seen in the fact that children who are capable of spontaneous addition are unable to *explain* afterwards how they did it."

   (c) Hence, any positional act of consciousness contains a reflective act that is non-cognitive and non-positional.

10. "Thus, reflection lacks any kind of primacy in relation to the reflected consciousness: it is not by the means of [reflection] that the [primary, positional] consciousness is revealed to itself" (12)

    (a) "On the contrary, non-reflective consciousness is what makes reflection possible. There is a prereflective *cogito*, which is the condition of the Cartesian [positional, primary] cogito" (12)

11. In summary, consciousness is contentless and positional. However, consciousness itself requires a reflection against a non-cognitive, non-positional act of consciousness, which Sartre calls a pre-reflective *cogito*

12. What is the nature of this pre-reflective *cogito?* Sartre explores it next.

1.3.5 The Nature of the Pre-Reflective Cogito

13. **The pre-reflective cogito**, i.e. the non-positional consciousness is essential to the positional consciousness.

14. We cannot talk of positional consciousness at all, without acknowledging that it is integrally tied with the consciousness of itself. Sartre puts this into more definite words:

    (a) "Any conscious existence exists as the consciousness of existing. The most basic consciousness of consciousness is not positional, because it and the consciousness of which it is conscious [i.e. the aforementioned positional consciousness] are one and the same."

    (b) "In a single movement, consciousness determines itself as consciousness of perception, and as perception" (12)

    (c) "[This integral consciousness of self] is the only possible mode of existence for any consciousness of something" (13).

15. Let me try to explain the above in my own words. The syllogism is thus:

    (a) Consciousness is positional and contentless.

    (b) However, to be conscious of something, we must *also* be conscious of our consciousness of something. We must be conscious of our positional consciousness.

    (c) It is not possible to have this second consciousness to be the same as the first consciousness, for then we would yield an infinite regression, which is absurd.

(d) Hence, the second consciousness must be by necessity non-cognitive.

(e) We conclude that the consciousness of consciousness must be integral to the first consciousness.

16. It's not the best explanation, but it captures the gist of Sartre's idea.

1.3.6 Sartre's Elaboration on the Nature and Qualities of Consciousness

17. Given the above understanding of consciousness, Sartre proceeds to explain and explicate certain characteristics. I'll give a rough sketch of the points he makes:

18. Consciousness in its being implies the existence of its essence. There's no essence behind consciousness. This is justified by **Husserl's doctrine of factual necessity**:

    (a) Consciousness does not necessarily have to exist. But once it does exist, its non-existence is inconceivable.

19. "Consciousness is prior to nothingness, and "derives from being"" (15)

20. "This does not imply at all that consciousness is the foundation of its being."

21. The sort of conclusion of this section is that consciousness has a certain bootstrapping nature – it's derives from it's own being (?)

22. "[Consciousness] is a pure "appearance," where this means it exists only to the extent to which it appears. But it is precisely because consciousness is pure appearance, because it is a total void (since the entire world is outside it), because of this identity within it between its appearance and its existence, that it can be considered as the absolute" (16).

1.4 IV. The Being of the Percipi

1.

2 Part I: The Problem of Nothingness

2.1 Chapter 1: The Origin of Negation

2.2 Chapter 2: Bad Faith

3 Part II: Being-For-Itself

3.1 Chapter 1: The Immediate Structures of the For-Itself

3.2 Chapter 2: Temporality

3.3 Chapter 3: Transcendence

4 Part III: Being-For-The-Other

4.1 Chapter 1: The Other's Existence

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4.3 Chapter 3: Concrete Relations with the Other

5 Part IV: To Have, To Do, and To Be

5.1 Chapter 1: Being and Doing: Freedom

5.2 Chapter 2: To Do and To Have

6 Conclusion

A Bibliography

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B Technical Notes

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