

Founded on Nothingness

An Essay on the Relationship Between Sartre's Ontology and Ethics

“Ethical Implications,”¹ the last section of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, started an extensive debate about the compatibility of Sartre's ontology with the ethics he foreshadowed therein.² In *Sartre's Two Ethics*, Thomas C. Anderson examines both *Being and Nothingness* and *Notebooks for an Ethics* in an attempt to reconstruct the first moral system developed by Jean-Paul Sartre. He concludes that Sartre's ethics is workable overall, though it has some rough points and logical flaws.³ One of the largest problems ailing Sartre's first ethics is the conflation or over-extension of terms central to Sartre's ethics such as “value” and “freedom.” Both definitions rely significantly on Sartre's use of negation as explained early on in *Being and Nothingness*. In this paper I will discuss how Sartre's negation-based ontological framework presents the grounds for the difficulties found in his first ethics.

Sartre defines values as nonexistent goals or ideals which, though strived-for, remain “beyond being.” For example, we “can grasp nobility in a noble act.”⁴ While the act serves as an instructive instance of the nobility, the trait itself does not exist in the world. Anderson points out that this definition of value universalizes one of the term's “perfectly legitimate meanings,” but ignores other uses of the word which are themselves legitimate.⁵ In Sartre's definition I could say that I value marriage and my marriage is a relationship which points toward that value, but it is impossible for my relationship with my wife to *be* valuable. In Sartre's view, I would always be valuing a conceptual picture of relationships or of this relationship in particular — both of which are nonexistent ideals. While this definition of value is sensible, I agree with Anderson that Sartre overreaches when he claims that this is

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness, A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (New York: Citadel Press, 1956), 543.

² Thomas C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company), 2.

³ Anderson, 82 - 83.

⁴ Sartre, 64 - 69.

⁵ Anderson, 84 - 85.

always the case with value, and that any value taken as actually existing in the world is rendered merely a “fact among other facts.”⁶ In common usage, and I think definitionally, value is in some cases incarnate in existing things in the world. My wife is valuable to me, as is our relationship, nature, my memories and my cat. These things are not conceptual non-entities, but real concrete instances of value, things which I value without pointing beyond them to a nonexistent ideal. Sartre’s definition of value does not allow any space for these beings.

It is understandable that Sartre places value as a specific type of negation given his analysis of negation. The only thing which is not brought into the world through negation is an undifferentiated being in-itself and it is quite clear that value is not that pure being. Even if value were a part of being in-itself, it would be through negation, or as a *négativité*, that it could be differentiated into a value itself.⁷ This poses no serious problems until Sartre claims that what makes value distinct from other types of negations is that “value is ‘the lacked;’ it is not ‘the lacking.’”⁸ What he means by this is that a negation is only a value if the negation involves pointing beyond what is toward an ideal. For example, an act would be noble because it points toward the concept of ideal nobility, but as the example of nobility, is not itself the ideal. It is because value is “always and everywhere the beyond”⁹ that Sartre’s concept of value excludes things which Anderson and myself believe are in fact values despite their being real existing things. For Sartre, value shares a primary character with all negations, which is that it is always a lack, negation, or non-being. It cannot be an existent positive thing. Sartre himself encounters this commitment as problematic when he posits that freedom — which exists in the world as a fundamental part of human reality — be taken as our primary value.¹⁰ Freedom itself, however, is defined somewhat problematically.

⁶ Sartre, 69.

⁷ Ibid, 550.

⁸ Ibid, 69.

⁹ Ibid, 69.

¹⁰ Anderson, 62 - 62 and Sartre, 546.

The radical freedom of the individual is, for many, one of the central attractions of Sartre's ontology. It is certainly integral to the functioning of his ethics. However, like value, Sartre's definition of freedom leaves out parts of the concept which many people think are essential to the definition of the word itself. When thinking about freedom, the common conception can be broken into two parts, what I call *freedom-to* and *freedom-from*. Freedom-to includes our autonomy, the ability to experience making a choice and acting on it. Freedom-from is more passive. It encompasses concepts like the first amendment or freedom from slavery or persecution. One might say that freedom-to relates to actions, and freedom-from relates to consequences which are externally placed upon us.

For Sartre, freedom "means only the autonomy of choice."¹¹ Freedom thusly defined makes Sartre's radical claims about the freedom of humans somewhat less potent. If freedom "does not mean 'to obtain what one has wished' but rather 'by oneself to determine oneself to wish,'"¹² it is not at all clear why this freedom should be such a central part of human reality, or why it is called "freedom" rather than "sentience" or "consciousness." Indeed, Anderson suggests that this freedom is "a dubious one at best, since it does not involve the ability to freely select among genuine alternatives."¹³ If the Sartrean self is free and cannot be otherwise, then what does this tautological definition of freedom really accomplish? Additionally, it is of note that Sartre's freedom explicitly excludes freedom-from. For Sartre, freedom-from is completely a part of one's facticity. It is part of our facticity if our speech is protected by the first amendment, and therefore an American is not *more* free to speak, just less likely to be persecuted for it. For this reason, Sartre doesn't see freedom-from as a freedom at all, as both an American and a non-American are both equally free-to speak.

This situation becomes more confusing when Sartre argues that "freedom, since it does not distinguish between choosing and doing, compels us to abandon at once the distinction between the

¹¹ Sartre, 459.

¹² Ibid, 459.

¹³ Anderson, 85.

intention and the act.”¹⁴ Therefore freedom is not merely the mundane ability of every human to make choices between options presented to them, but also to act upon those choices with intent. Surely if freedom disregards any distinction between choice and action then a prisoner in a cell is not free to escape, since they cannot act upon their intention. Sartre, however, claims that they are. Similarly to his definition of value however, Sartre’s answer to this contradiction hinges upon a conflation of terms. Sartre argues that a prison “is always free to *try* to escape,” (emphasis mine) regardless of whether or not they actually succeed (or even have a chance at success).¹⁵ I submit that in this sense, Sartre is right that a prisoner has freedom-to, however the freedom most people are concerned with in the case of the prisoner is freedom-from. For example, is it not reasonable to assume that the act of a prisoner trying to escape is their intention to be free from the oppression of captivity?

Because Sartre’s definition of freedom is inherently tied to negation, it includes only freedom-to and makes no room for freedom-from. It explicitly excludes freedom from slavery, captivity or economic oppression, though this exclusion is not consistently carried out with clarity in his writing. Sartre would argue that those are not freedoms, but situations of our facticity. We are “abandoned” into whatever state of imprisonment, slavery or oppression we find ourselves in at the moment, and freedom refers only to our ability to act or move forward from the present.¹⁶ Freedom, like value, is experienced in surpassing the moment. For Sartre, freedom, consciousness and human reality are all ways in which we know ourself, and all are brought into the world by our ability to make negations. Anderson points out that, in laying his foundation for this argument, Sartre uses concepts like “man,” “freedom,” and “nonbeing” almost interchangeably.¹⁷ Thus, some of the central concepts to Sartre’s ethics rests at least to some extent on terminology which often times seems to be misleadingly named or obscurely defined. Given that these problematic terms are both defined by Sartre’s concept of negation in *Being and*

¹⁴ Sartre, 460.

¹⁵ Sartre, 459 - 460.

¹⁶ Ibid, 55.

¹⁷ Anderson, 12.

Nothingness, one is compelled to look toward it for a foundational cause from which Sartre began to back himself into a corner.

As the title *Being and Nothingness* implies, negation plays a gigantic role in Sartre's ontology. Sartre argues that we are constantly in the process of negation, and that this is how consciousness is self-conscious.¹⁸ In a sense, we only know what we are (or anything for that matter) through a list of things that we are not. When we look for a justification as to why Sartre places negation in such a primary role, the division of the world into two categories — “being” and “nothingness” — seems a bit arbitrary. Sartre begins *Being and Nothingness* as a phenomenological pursuit of being. Negation makes its way into the picture when he states that “What being *will be* must of necessity arise on the basis of what *it is not*.”¹⁹ This statement has two interesting consequences for the rest of the work, both of which will directly affect the problems we are discussing in his first ethics.

First, Sartre gives little or no explanation for why he chose to place negation at the center of his understanding of the world or the human condition. His claim that “Being is *that* and outside of that, *nothing*.”²⁰ is both true and tautological. It is, however, not a conclusion reached, so much as an assumption made. In the introduction, Sartre states that the reality of a phenomenon “is that it *is* there and that it *is not me*.”²¹ Thus, he has already begun to use this method of thinking negatively to identify and define concepts over twenty pages before he introduces the idea as a method. The rest of the introduction builds this reality of phenomena into a concept of Being, in which “Being is what it is.”²² Thus it is not surprising that Sartre describes the concept of Being as “suddenly... encompassed with nothingness.”²³ From the beginning of the work, being is defined only by negation, tautology or both. It appears, therefore, Sartre implies that being and nothingness are simply polar opposites which obviously

¹⁸ Sartre, 28.

¹⁹ Ibid, 5.

²⁰ Ibid, 5.

²¹ Ibid, xlvii.

²² Ibid, lxvi.

²³ Ibid, 5.

become primary in any inquiry into the nature of being. Surely they are linguistic counterparts, and are difficult to discuss in isolation given the nature of language. Given how little attention Sartre actually gives this nuance, it is hard to tell whether he is claiming they are ontological counterparts as well, or if he simply assumes that language and ontology are mirrored.

While the necessity of including non-being in a discussion of being could be seen as a linguistically centered approach, Sartre makes an additional claim about non-being which gives negation a much broader power in his writing than is conferred by its necessary presence. Sartre refers to non-being as “a new component of the real.”²⁴ In this, Sartre is arguing that non-being exists in the world. That is, it is not only a lack of being, but the presence of emptiness. Through example, Sartre claims that negation is experienced as a phenomenon which exists discretely in the world.²⁵ Since he has already established that we cannot go deeper into the world than experienced phenomena, this allows him to identify consciousness, freedom and non-being and still have consciousness be a substantial entity.²⁶

Combining these two facets of Sartre’s concept of negation, however, we run into the problem which begets the difficulties encountered in his accounts of value and freedom. Since being must be described negatively (through non-being) and negations have an equal weight as existents for Sartre (in terms of phenomenological description), the rest of his ontology deals with nothingness in much greater detail than being. He has attempted to escape dualisms which “have embarrassed philosophy,”²⁷ and ended up in a new dualism. Sartre even recognizes this problem at the beginning of the first chapter, comparing it to the relationship between Descartes’ cogito and extension.²⁸ This new dualism is mirrored throughout Sartre’s ontology in the relationship between the self and the other, the for-itself and the in-itself, and in the foundational concepts of his ethics discussed above. It is one of the distinctive features of Sartre’s ontology.

²⁴ Sartre, 5.

²⁵ Ibid, 10-11.

²⁶ Ibid, xlviii-xlix

²⁷ Ibid, xlv.

²⁸ Ibid, 49.

For his ethics, Sartre's being/nothingness dualism is the foundational cause of many critic's dissatisfaction. Many argue that Sartre's commitment to human freedom and his claim that humans create value causes problems for his first ethics. It is true that both freedom and value do prove to be problematic topics, however their problems are based upon the ontology which forms them. From the beginning of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre presents a system in which is easy to discuss one's judgement and reaction to events or objects, but very difficult to address the interaction between people, events or objects.

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