

THE PROBLEM OF BEING AND NOTHINGNESS IN JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

The paper is an epistemic examination of Jean Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness. The study selects some aspects of his epistemic arguments with the view of analysis. For instance, Sartre had in the preliminary pages contends that there is an element of despair in human existence which comes, from the realization that we are limited to what is within the scope of our knowledge. And that we cannot expect more from human existence than the finite probabilities it possesses. By this he rejects elements of a priori knowledge, claiming that it has no place in human nature. The study discovers that Sartre's conception of being appeals to certain kinds of experience such as nausea and joy, and not denote a realm behind the phenomena that the descriptive method, neither is it the object of an "eidetic" reduction of Husserl. Rather, being accompanies all phenomena as their existential dimension. And that this dimension is revealed by certain experiences such as that of utter contingency. Which for him is not rationalistic in nature but possesses element of experience or empiricism. The paper concludes that Jean-Paul Sartre's epistemology is heavily steeped in empiricism, although necessary for all our actual knowledge, yet it is not sufficient to give us the whole knowledge about being and nothingness, since the senses never give anything but instances, that is to say particular or individual truths.

Keywords: Being, Nothingness, Existentialism, Jean Paul Sartre, Epistemology

Introduction

Throughout much of the 20th century, the analytic approach to philosophy launched by Bertrand Russell dominated philosophical thought in the United States. Great Britain. In Germany and France philosophy had a different emphasis, which emerged in the movement of phenomenology and existentialism. These school of thoughts lay more emphasis on the so called objective nature of things; it recommended instead that we explore issues more subjectively, from within our human experience. It is in this light that Jean-Paul Sartre contributed in solving the problem of knowledge. Sartre is an existentialist epistemologist. This means at least two things; First that he is interested in the existential uniqueness of being and not in abstract theories about it, and second, the meaning of being and nothingness from a subjective point of view. His principal contribution to epistemology can be gleaned from his

lengthy essay on *Being and Nothingness*. This paper seeks to evaluate the concepts of 'Being' and 'Nothingness' in Sartre's epistemology.

In his essay on *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre spoke of knowledge in terms like nothingness, which lies at the heart of man like a 'worm' and says that the crucial role of this nothingness is to make a conceptual connection between consciousness and freedom. For the ability to conceive of what is not the case is the cognitive freedom to imagine other possibilities and epistemic judgment.

The Problem Of Being And Nothingness

There is an element of despair in human existence which comes, Sartre says, from the realization that we are limited to what is within the scope of our knowledge. We cannot expect more from human existence than the finite probabilities it possesses. A Priori knowledge for Sartre has no place in human nature. What does it mean "to be"? Sartre's understanding of being appeals to certain kinds of experience such as nausea and joy to articulate the "transphenomenal" character of being; "being" does not denote a realm behind the phenomena that the descriptive method of Heidegger seeks to analyze. Neither is it the object of an "eidetic" reduction of Husserl (the phenomenological method that would grasp it as an essence). Rather, being accompanies all phenomena as their existential dimension. But this dimension is revealed by certain experiences such as that of utter contingency. This is scarcely rationalism, but neither is it mysticism. Anyone can experience this contingency and, once brought to reflective awareness, can ponder its implications. *Being and Nothingness*, pursues conceptually, existential, thought with the aid of phenomenological arguments. What this statement meant according to Sartre is that, concrete knowledge is more meaningful than the abstract aspect of man and this is where being can be known and discovered.

Since man carries nothingness with him at the heart of his being and all his life endeavors to fill this gap, this emptiness or nothingness, is futile, we can understand that he cannot escape freedom because this very nothingness is identical with freedom. We are condemned to freedom and there is no escape from this condemnation. It is not within the power of being to decide whether to be free or not to be free. Being do not choose to be free as we said earlier, thrown into existence (35).

According to Sartre, when man (being) realizes the real nature of his existence with its accompanying responsibility, he is seized with anguish; it is in anguish that man realizes the full implications of his existence. Being, Sartre insists, reveals itself in anguish, but it is only those who have grasped the full implications of this nothingness that can experience this tormenting anguish. Those who have not reflected on the reality of being and have not apprehended its radicality do not experience anguish (40).

Sartre's cognitive ontology on being is a phenomenological ontology. This means that Sartre adopted Husserl's phenomenology and 'existentialized' it to suit his philosophy. In Sartre's ontology, there is no distinction between being and its manifestation, none between the act and the potency of being. These Kantian and Aristotelian distinctions must go. There is no longer an exterior for the existent if one means by that a superficial covering which hides from sight

the true nature of the object. The duality of act and potency falls by the same stroke. The act is everything. The act (existence) of a being is everything that the being is. Besides the act there is nothing, no potency. Sartre insists that being manifests itself exactly as it is and it does this without any intermediary. Here Sartre believes that he is touching the genuine theme of personal existence by emphasizing our relation to nothingness. (Stumpf, 465). "Nothingness", he says, lies coiled in the heart of being, like a worm. Heidegger located the cause of human anxiety in people's awareness of their finitude when, for example, we confront death, not death in general but our own death. It is not only people who face nothingness, Heidegger says, but all beings have this relation to nothingness. Human finitude is, therefore, not simply a matter of temporary ignorance or some shortcoming or even error. Finitude is the very structure of human mind, and words such as guilt, loneliness, and despair describe the consequences of human finitude. The ultimate principle of Being, Heidegger says, is will. Sartre concurs by saying that only in action is there any reality. We are only the sum of our actions and purposes; besides our actual daily lives we are nothing. If I am a coward, I make myself a coward. It is not the result of my cowardly heart or lung or cerebrum, or because of my physiological organism. I am a coward because I made myself into coward by my actions. (465).

Although there is no prior essence in all being, no human nature, there is, nevertheless, Sartre says, a universal human condition. By discovering self in the act of conscious thought, one can discover the condition of all people. We are in a world of inter subjectivity. This is the kind of world in which one must live, know, chose and decide (466). For this reason, no purpose that one chose is ever wholly foreign to another person. This does not mean that every purpose defines me forever but only that we all may be striving against the same limitations in the same way. For this reason, Sartre would not agree that it does not matter what we do or know. But that one is always obliged to act in a situation that is in relation to other people, and consequently one's actions must not be capricious, since I must take responsibility for all my action (466). Moreover, to say that I must make my essence, invent my values, does not mean that I cannot judge human actions. It is still possible to say that my (action) knowledge was based on either error or upon self-deception, for if I hide behind the excuse of my passions, or espousing some theory of determinism, I deceive myself (Sartre, 150).

After establishing the forcefulness of concrete ideas of being, Sartre further strengthen his thought by discussing epistemological values of being. To invent values, Sartre says, means only that that there is no meaning or sense in life prior to acts of will. Life cannot be anything until it is lived, but each individual must make sense of it. To argue that we are the victims of fate, of mysterious forces within us, of some grand passion, or heredity, is to be guilty of bad faith, deceptive knowledge, of in-authenticity. All human beings are guilty of, in principle, of similar in-authenticity, of bad faith, of playing roles, and of trying to disguise their actual personality behind a façade (467). Sartre therefore concludes that if one expresses oneself in a genuine humanity in all things, one will never deceive his or herself, and honesty will then become not only an ideal but the very being of human knowledge.

Anthony Hatzimoysis in his article *Natural theory*, expounds Sartre's description of Being and Nothingness as intuitive knowledge, which is found in a very short section of *Being and*

Nothingness, "Nothingness as a Type of Relation Between the Being-For-Itself and the In-Itself". For Sartre, consciousness's presence to things is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for knowing something (Hatzimoysis, 147-48). In this work, Hatzimoysis raises some serious objections against Sartre's epistemology generally and the notion of Being and Nothingness in particular. According to him, if, for Sartre, intuition is the sole source for justification of our epistemic claims about Being and Nothingness, then intuition is opposed to discourse. Then the question is, is Sartre arguing for some sort of notion of the Given? (150) If so, is Sartre not guilty of appealing to what Sellars calls the "Myth of the Given"? From Hatzimoysis analysis, it would appear that he does not fully appreciate Sartre's description of intuitive knowledge in *Being and Nothingness*.

Sarah Richmond in her essay *Feminist Interpretation of Sartre's theory of Knowledge* puts forth an ontological interpretation of Sartre's notion of nothingness as presented in his *Being and Nothingness*. Throughout the essay, she does not clarify what is meant by ontological. Richmond concedes at one point that Sartre's notion of nothingness is difficult to understand (Richmond, 100). At times, she does not write accessibly. For instance, she reports that, "Sartre concludes that there must be some being that in some way 'is' its own nothingness" (99). Such sentences will definitely confuse new readers of Sartre. Richmond mentions at least two strong objections that traditionally have been raised against Sartre: that Sartre violates the law of non-contradiction (100) and second, like Carnap's criticism of Heidegger's "*das Nichts*," Richmond contends that Sartre's notion of nothingness is nonsensical because nothingness is treated as if it were something. It is not entirely clear if Richmond provides an adequate response to these two criticisms. She critically assesses the inadequacies of some responses to both criticisms but raises some interesting critical objections against Sartre's notion of nothingness (103-04). At the end of the essay, Richmond highlights the significance of Sartre's notion of being and nothingness for contemporary philosophy: that it can account for the "ontology of fictional entities, impossible objects (like the round square), and the objects referred to in statements of their non-existence" (105).

Soren Overgaard seeks to show in his work *Knowing Being* that Sartre's concept of being-for-others in *Being and Nothingness* can account for the encounter with the other in a more adequate way than Husserl's position on inter subjectivity from the *Cartesian Meditations* and Heidegger's account of *Mitsein* (being-with) from *Being and Time*. Overgaard's main argument is that unlike Husserl and Heidegger, Sartre avoids solipsism and establishes the self-other relationship in such a way where the other is encountered as a subject and not merely as an object, especially in the looking-looked relation (Overgaard, 112-14). It is observed that Overgaard makes no mention of the role that empathy plays in Sartre's arguments on inter subjectivity from the *Being and Nothingness*. It is arguable that through the concept of empathy Sartre's theory of 'being' can also demonstrate the possibility of encountering the other as subject.

David Krell in his work *Human Knowledge* approached Sartre's analysis of being and nothingness from an empiricist, inductive, explanatory, experimental, observational and scientific way. (Krell, 85). For Krell, the word experience means a kind of human knowledge that is subject to observation and experimentation. This makes his theory of knowledge of

being to be scientific in method because it aims at merging empiricism with the experimental procedure of science. (98). He simply thought that Sartre's explanation of being and nothingness deals with the analysis of objective human existential as opposed to rationalism which deals with the analysis of being from the subjective point. This naturally explains why Krell like Sartre insists that for one to attain objective knowledge of being one has no choice but to purge oneself of emotion (56). Krell maintains that we should clear ourselves of emotional commitments that becloud our views. The problem with this assertion is that the senses are themselves the sources of this knowledge. One then wonders how sensibility which is the very source of bias, prejudice, can as a matter of fact; sustain the rigorous process of evaluating and ascertaining being and nothingness. One rather thinks that this is the kind of function performed by reason.

By and large, Krell's understanding of Sartre's epistemological analysis of being in its nothingness cannot be thrown overboard for the simple fact that it enlightens us on the act of acquiring the empirical orientation needed for scientific development. Hence, as with traditional epistemologists like Sartre, Krell prefers a scientific procedure because he thinks it to be more modern. That is why he regarded his understanding of being and nothingness as an epistemologico-scientific treatise aimed at liberating the mind from dogma (50).

William L. McBride provides a remarkable account of Sartre as an epistemologically engaged activist in his work *Epistemic Justice* (McBride, 173-83). He faces the challenging task of clarifying Sartre's theory of being and nothingness from the first volume of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. He explains some of Sartre's difficult terminology from the *Critique* better than Sartre himself. This is no easy task. He lucidly analyzes the "being" from the insular individual to the collective humanity, the role that knowledge plays in human formation, and the lack of totalization of being. He describes the process of epistemic formation through the notion of "emergence" (191-92). He could have further developed this point by fleshing out the kind of *emergentism* that he discovers in Sartre's theory of knowledge formation.

In his book *Understanding Knowledge* Marguerite La Caze carefully reconstructs Sartre's explanation on Being and Nothingness that we find in Sartre's last interview, *Hope Now*. La Caze emphasizes that Sartre's explanation on Being and Nothingness is quite controversial because it seems that the interview is not really about Sartre's position but more about Benny Lévy's position, Sartre's secretary (La Caze, 206). For that very reason, LaCaze exclusively focuses on Sartre's responses. La Caze claims that Sartre's epistemology is continuous with his theory of being and nothingness. She also expounds Sartre's concepts of epistemic fraternity, direct democracy, based on the hope of a better future to come (209-12). In his book *The Power of Consciousness*. Onof follows the development of Sartre's account of the self-knowledge from *The Transcendence of the Ego* to *Being and Nothingness*. He interprets Sartre as a "direct realist" in the sense of denying any mediation of mental content between consciousness and things (Onof,33). Onof thoroughly examines how in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre further develops the concept of the self-knowledge from *Transcendence of the Ego* (36-43). His examination centers on the different distinctions Sartre employs in defining a consciousness being (35-39). The distinctions need further clarification; otherwise those new to the topic would be confused by such distinctions. Such readers should consult

Thomas Busch's clarification of these terms (166).

Conclusion

Sartre's epistemological analysis on being and nothingness is very important in the history of philosophy. Sartre insists that not only our reason fails us in the discovery of the ultimate connection of causes and effects in the explanation of being and nothingness, but even after experience beyond those particular instances, which have fallen under our observation (120). The conclusion then is that our tendency to project being past regularities into the future is not underpinned by reason. The problem of induction is to find a way to avoid this conclusion, despite Sartre's argument. After presenting the problem, Sartre does present his own solution to the doubts he has raised. This consists of an explanation of what the inductive inferences are driven by, if not reason. Sartre raises the problem of induction in an explicitly contrastive way. He asks whether the transition involved in the inference is produced: by means of the understanding or imagination, whether we are determined by reason to make the transition, or by a certain association and relation of perceptions." (64). and he goes on to summarize the conclusion by saying that when the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of being to the idea of nothingness, it's not determined by reason.

To state categorically, Jean-Paul Sartre over-emphasized the senses, although they are necessary for all our actual knowledge, yet not sufficient to give us the whole knowledge about being and nothingness, since the senses never give anything but instances, that is to say particular or individual truths.

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