

SARTRE'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The formidable canvas of *Being and Nothingness* (1943, Eng. tr. Hazel E. Barnes, 1956) and its Kantian architectonic temper discourages a brief and isolated treatment of the central concept of this *magnum opus*. Consciousness is in fact the subject of this book and the title *Being and Nothingness* (BN) characteristically applies to consciousness in a way in which it does not apply to any other concept with which consciousness is related or from which it has been shown to be distinct. The Kantian style of necessarily passing from one to any or every other concept in his philosophy and the Hegelian predilection for synthesis — drawing the map of the universe including man's nature — are evident in Sartre's thought. We are reminded of Simone de Beauvoir's remark about Sartre's being "enamoured, as ever, of a synthesis"¹ while reading this work. Even a little acquaintance with Sartre's theory of consciousness is enough to make us realize how we find ourselves in the midst of a variety of notions when we try to talk about it. To cite but a few, 'Nothingness', 'freedom', 'responsibility', 'facticity', 'transcendence', 'anguish' or 'bad faith' are so intertwined with one another that it is difficult to resist the temptation of entering into all these when we refer to consciousness. In our limited discussion we shall try to resist it though it is highly improbable that we will wholly succeed. One of the ways in which we may try to do it is to mainly confine ourselves to the discussion of his Introduction entitled 'The Pursuit of Being'. It contains the essence of the work and anticipates most of the ideas which follow. Towards the later part of the paper we shall have an occasion to refer briefly to Sartre's views on 'essence', 'existence' and 'freedom'.

Being and Nothingness is a follow-up work which Sartre undertook after a couple of brief studies of phenomenological nature. The most important of these being *Transcendence of the Ego (TE)* which already sets the background for his major work. Before we set out to explicate and discuss some of the important points about Sartre's theory of consciousness, a few words about his sub-title may not be out of place. By calling it 'A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology' or 'An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology', Sartre tries to make it clear how phenomenological treatment of human reality (which is identified with consciousness) facilitates the elucidation of the ontological problems related to the nature and structure of consciousness. Phenomenology and Ontology sometimes may appear as two different or even incompatible approaches and bringing them together may result in a misalliance. But as Sartre tries to show, the first aim of his analyses is to do away with the dualism of 'being' and 'appearance'² or rather to establish the "identity of appearance and existence" of consciousness.³ This brings the two together in a cooperative venture of disclosing the structure of consciousness and of indicating the ontological consequences of a proper analysis of such a structure. All revelations about the nature of consciousness as well as the kinds of being available to it through knowledge and experience can be obtained through phenomenological understanding.

In Sartre's philosophy, such an enquiry reveals three modes of being: *being-for-itself*, *being-in-itself* and *being-for-others*. Proper explication of the first and some idea of the second will emerge during the present discussion, but these three may be very briefly stated as: consciousness, non-conscious being and the being of one self as confronted by others.

Sartre's account of consciousness begins with the vindication and rejection of Husserl at the same time. He vindicates Husserl's insistence on intentionality (which, of course, is taken from Brentano) and the aptness of the

phenomenological method for the sake of philosophically fruitful analyses of consciousness and experience but rejects his transcendental Ego. Besides Husserl, his initial indebtedness is also evident towards Heidegger for his concept of *Dasein* with which he equates his own concept of consciousness. Literally, *Dasein* means 'being-there' and it reveals the being of consciousness as being-in-the world.

The primitivity of ego having been denied consciousness remains the core of human reality. But this consciousness is not a knowing or reflecting consciousness but an active, living or *motile* consciousness. It is a pre-reflective or a practical consciousness which is the point of departure for him. He says:

"Having", "doing" and "being" are the cardinal categories of human reality. Under them are subsumed all types of human conduct. Knowing, for example, is a modality of being. . . Is the supreme value of human activity a doing or a being? And whichever solution we adopt, what is to become of having?⁴

It is obvious that 'having' is the least important and between 'doing' and 'being' it is the former which gets precedence over the latter. In the Heideggerian sense it is the 'ontic' or practical acts which are more primitive than the acts of ontological cognition. As Sartre holds,

Consciousness is the knowing being in his capacity as *being* and not as being known. This means that we must abandon the primacy of knowledge if we wish to establish that knowledge. Of course consciousness can know and know itself. But it is in itself something other than a knowledge turned back upon itself.⁵

Sartre's definition of consciousness centres around the notion of 'intentionality' of consciousness:

All consciousness, as Husserl has shown, is consciousness of something. This means that there is no consciousness which is not a positing of a transcendent

object, or if you prefer, that consciousness has no "content".⁶

Consciousness is not an object for itself. The being of consciousness is *for-itself* and yet it is always consciousness (of) objects. Sartre tries to get over the Husserlian noesis — noemata dichotomy by conceiving of consciousness as unity of itself with the object and for this reason he prefers to write the 'of' in the phrase 'consciousness of objects' in parentheses. For him, "all consciousness is positional as it transcends itself in order to reach an object and it exhausts itself in this same positing" (*BN*, p. 11). This emptiness or nothingness of consciousness brings out its non-substantial character. And yet it is a necessary datum for itself. In *TE* as well as in *BN* he asserts the self-consciousness implicit in all conscious activity. For him, to be aware is to be aware of being aware. He says that "the necessary and sufficient condition for a knowing consciousness to be knowledge of its object is that it be conscious of itself as being that knowledge". He talks of the absurdity of the view that consciousness can be ignorant of itself — an unconscious. What this consciousness warrants us to infer about the object is not that it exists in itself (realism) but that it exists for me. However, it can be argued against Sartre that if consciousness is always of something transcendent, being not conscious of one's consciousness is after all possible. But it must be noted that Sartre's intent is to show that nothing can be among the contents of my consciousness without at the same time my being conscious of it. The distinction which Sartre has made (earlier in *TE*) between the pre-reflective and the reflective consciousness must also be borne in mind. The pre-effective 'consciousness (of) . . .' is subjective whereas the reflective 'consciousness of . . .' is objective. Sartre accepts the priority of self-consciousness to self-knowledge. The relation of consciousness to itself is not one of knowing but it is "an immediate, non-cognitive relation of the self to itself." (*BN*, p. 12) Self-consciousness is the condition of all knowledge including self-knowledge

or, as he put it, the pre-reflective *cogito*. In Sartre's theory, it is possible to have self-consciousness without self-knowledge but not *vice versa*.

Two minor points arise here. (a) whether Sartre admits of two different consciousnesses and, (b) whether he takes care of the problem of the dualism of *for-itself* and its objects.

(a) In *TE* and *BN* it appears as if he is talking of two different consciousnesses — one becoming the object for the other,

...the reflecting consciousness posits the consciousness reflected — on, as its object. In the act of reflecting I pass judgement on the consciousness reflected — on; I am ashamed of it. I am proud of it...⁷

In fact Sartre avowedly avers the dualistic interpretation of consciousness as two different entities. He also tries to show that "consciousness of self is not dual". These two sorts of consciousnesses can only be distinguished as two modes or stages of different complexity. What is certain, however, is that all reflective consciousness presupposes pre-reflective consciousness but this relation is not necessarily reversible.

Every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself...

It is the non-reflective consciousness which renders the reflection possible...⁸

Though both pre-reflective and reflective consciousness implies self-consciousness, the former is an egoless state which ultimately becomes the condition of one's self-knowledge and egoity. Without an ego, one cannot surely talk of *my* self-consciousness at the earlier stage and therefore Sartre prefers, as shown in *TE*, to talk of a mere self-consciousness of being engaged in an activity, e.g., of adding or counting cigarettes. It is not a mode of knowing but a mode of being. At the level of pre-reflective awareness I

am the thing I am aware of; I am the awareness which is identical with this mode of consciousness.

(b) The intentional nature of consciousness immediately raises the distinction between it and its objects. Along with *being-for-itself*, there arises *being-in-itself* which Sartre characterises as *plenitude* as apposed to the emptiness or *lack* of the *for-itself*. It is said to be the being of the phenomenon and because of its incomprehensibility in complete sense, it can only be stated as *It is*. *Being-for-itself* leads us to *being-in-itself* in its search of its content. But, as pointed out above, if *for-itself* is identical with its awareness, which is always of something other than itself, the object is unified into the subject.⁹ *For-itself* becomes ontologically dependent on *in-itself* as itself it has no content. The relation between the subject and the object becomes one of unity as far as the phenomenological study of the appearances of the *for-itself* is concerned. The attempt to denude consciousness of all its states and contents brings about a total transparency of consciousness through which the in-itself in its various manifestations shines out. Within the phenomenal field, consciousness remains as an openness to the *in-themselves*. Without in-itself, the *for-itself* is a mere abstraction. Its nothingness is the logical outcome of its own being whereas ontologically the in-itself is complete, full and self-sufficient. The mere possibility and indeterminacy of consciousness have been emphasized by Sartre in order to bring home the point that all the realization of its possibilities as well as its snatching away from its indeterminate state is possible against the background of the actual and the determinate which is the *in-itself*. But at the same time

Consciousness is not produced as a particular instance of an abstract possibility but that in rising to the centre of being, it creates and supports its essence — that is, the synthetic order of its possibilities..... Since consciousness is not *possible* before being, but

since its being is the source and condition of all possibility, its existence implies its essence.¹⁰

(The last sentence of the passage just cited is not a variance with the more well-known assertion made in *Existentialism is a Humanism* that "existence precedes essence.")

To sum up the point after these cursory remarks, the alleged dualism remains with Sartre at the ontological level though at the phenomenological level the two are inseparable though distinguishable. At the same time it may also be said that for Sartre, consciousness is causally independent of everything though its contents are dependent on the world. His primary interest lies in revealing the logical structure of consciousness rather than its physiological basis. What appears at the phenomenological level as characteristics of consciousness are not identical with the physiological conditions which precede the former. The distinction reminds us of the one drawn by Moore in *Principia Ethica* between the perception of yellow and the physical conditions (e.g., wave-length etc.) which precede or accompany it. At the same time, it should not be lost sight of that reflective consciousness is distinct from its object. Consciousness of object implies that consciousness and object are distinct. The same conclusion follows from at least one sense of the statement that 'Consciousness is nothing(ness)'.

Sartre says at the same time that consciousness has nothingness in it as its own structure and yet holds that "consciousness is prior to nothingness". Unlike Hegel, he does not want to assign logical contemporariety to both being and nothingness (*BN*, p. 47). Contrary to the in-itself 'the being of the consciousness does not coincide with itself in a full equivalence'. As a possibility it always realizes itself in future and yet remains unfulfilled in terms of all its possibilities and being limited by historicity of facticity. On account of its reaching out of itself towards transcendent objects, the possibilities of various negativities which hover over its fulfilment leading to unfulfilment and

failures and due to its own 'nihilating' activities directed on the *in-itself*, Sartre remarks that

Consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself.¹¹

Consciousness, through its acts, relates to its objects in such a way as to "create a distance between itself and its objects." And therefore, it can produce a negation only "in the form of consciousness of negation."

The development of 'human reality' (a term which Sartre often prefers to 'being-in-the world') is effected through

The series of individual actions which constitute a person's past history, together with those actions which are added to the past by the progressive realization of future projects. But the past and the future are constantly being questioned by the nothingness of the present.¹²

This aspect of being-for-itself has been termed 'temporality' by Sartre wherein, as the first *ekstasis*, the in-itself is nihilated through the past, present and future. In his later work *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960, tr. A Sheridan-Smith, NLB, London, 1976) Sartre brings out the same development through his concept of *praxis* (which replaces *for-itself* of *BN*) as opposed to the *practico-inerte* (substituting the *in-itself*) whereby the individual is constantly engaged in interiorizing the exterior and consequently exteriorizing the interiorized exterior. In *BN*, it is 'desire' which is the *élan* behind all projects and later it becomes the overcoming of scarcity in the midst of needs which is the moving force behind the *praxis*. The method through which Sartre tries to account for the dialectic of this movement is called the progressive-regressive method — an attempt to change one's past by realizing the future.

One point which has been referred to in passing and which has attracted a number of criticisms is Sartre's denial of essence of man. Paul Foulguié, David Roberts and Wilfred Desan, among others, find Sartre either inconsistent or dishonest.

Foulguié tries to distinguish between universal essence and individual essence and thinks that one cannot create the universal essence though the individual essence can be created.¹³ David Roberts holds that "Sartre is cheating when he refuses to talk about essential human nature".¹⁴ And Desan complains that "If For-itself is pure freedom, one is, in fact, presented with an essence of human reality".¹⁵ Thus, many writers on Sartre feel that despite his emphatic disavowal of any essence of human reality or being for-itself, Sartre after all slips into some kind of essentialism. It cannot be denied that some amount of ambiguity persists on this point in the numerous descriptions and the often metaphorical ways of explicating the nature of consciousness, nothingness or freedom. But one must try to understand the anti-essentialistic stance of Sartre's thought against the rationalistic and idealistic positions wherein most of the human characteristics are supposed to follow from the concept of man's essence. Sartre's concern, like Kierkegaard's is with the individual and the major part of his analysis in *BN* centres around the 'individualized consciousness' or bodily consciousness and its various modes of existence given to us through concrete experienceable moments. So, the talk of a universal essence is not helpful for Sartre's purpose. Nevertheless, some very general descriptions about the structure and modes of consciousness may still be offered as second-order statements about consciousness. Besides, Sartre was mainly interested in avoiding some pernicious consequences of essentialism and not so much against the minimum meaning of 'essence' whereby we may identify it as any general description. Moreover, Sartre more often talks of 'human condition' where situation and facticity, for example, are posited

against the possibility of realizing our projects through freedom. The power of nihilating all cases of in-itself is also rooted in human freedom, and thus, in consciousness. The concept of freedom essentially applies to the category of actions, not to the contents of action or states. And one cannot, in this context, talk of the essence of man if he is identified with the content of his action. Paul Tillich, in the vein of the above stated criticisms, tries to impose an essentialist doctrine of freedom on Sartre.¹⁶ Terminological bias apart, if by this it is only meant that all conscious acts are in some sense rooted in human freedom and that the nature of *for-itself* makes it impossible to escape it without falling into what Sartre characterizes as *bad-faith*, then of course it may be acceptable to Sartre. Indeed, Sartre says that the only limit to man's freedom is his freedom. This has given rise to a characterization of his view of freedom as "absolute". Understood as unrestricted freedom, it is often summarily dismissed. But it needs no emphasis that Sartre's notion of freedom operates between the two poles of transcendence and facticity or situation. Analogous to the Marxist concept of 'freedom' which implies that of 'necessity', Sartre holds that all free acts arise within the context of facticity and yet transcend the latter. Where actions in the ordinary sense are not possible, at least in and through emotions and attitudes man's freedom is asserted. In *BN* the admission of 'desire' as the fundamental existential structure of man gives him all the possible and hypothetical freedom to express himself in an apparently unrestricted manner. The realm of desiring is as creatively free as the world of imagination. But the recognition of 'need' within the parameter of 'scarcity' in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* introduces certain external constraints which, to a certain extent, mitigates the range of infinite possibilities available to man at the level of subjective desiring. This brings in a sense of necessity which is more determinate than the acceptance of 'facticity' in *BN*. In the *Critique*, human project is understood as essentially a moment in the scheme of historical totalization. In *BN*, the subjective and

the objective elements both are indeed present but with a definite tilt towards the former where the objective is merely a grist in the will of subjectivity. In the *Critique*, specially in *The Problem of Method*, the position is reversed. Human *praxis* inscribes itself in the *practice-inerte* which includes everything which determines man's experience of finitude. Sartre admits it as having the capacity for deviating human endeavours from the path of realising its goals. As he says,

The material conditions of his existence circumscribe the field of his possibilities. Thus the field of possibles is the goal toward which the agent surpasses his objective situation. And this field in turn depends strictly on the social, historical reality.¹⁷

Sartre of course accepts man's power to transcend the given but this is a far cry from the notion of transcendence as adumbrated in *BN*. Now, the field of possibles toward which transcendence is effected is conceived within the category of social reality. Sartre calls them "social possibles" which "are lived as schematic determination of the individual future". But because of the restrictive or repressive social arrangements most of the individual possible is merely the internalization of a social possible — a "*clandestine future*" which results in the counter-finality in human project.

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NOTES

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de L'age* (Eng. *The Prime of Life*), p. 151. Quoted by Maurice Cranston, *Sartre*, London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962, p. 6.
2. *Being and Nothingness* (1943, tr. H. E. Barnes, Pocket Books, N.Y., 1956), hereafter *BN*, p. 4.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 527-528.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11, Here it may be pointed out that in Sartre's thought the polarity between being and knowing is shifted from the level of epistemology to that of philosophical anthropology.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
9. Sartre says: "To say, Consciousness is consciousness of something is to say that it must produce itself as a revealed — revelation of a being which is not it and which gives itself as already existing when consciousness reveals it." *Ibid.*, p. 24.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
12. Norman Greene, *Jean-Paul Sartre: The Existentialist Ethic*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963, p. 26.
13. *Existentialism*, London: Dennis Dobson, 1963, p. 64.
14. *Existentialism and Religious Belief*, NY: OUP, p. 218.
15. *The Tragic Finale*, NY: Harper and Bros, 1966, p. 162.
16. "Existentialism and Psycho-therapy", *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. I, No. 1.
17. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Problem of Method*, Tr. H. E. Barnes. London, Methuen & Co., p. 93.