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THAT 'NOTHING' IS 'SOMETHING': A CRITIQUE OF SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALISM

I. Introduction

Commonly, why is there *somethingness* and not *nothingness* or *anythingness*? Or if there is nothing, anything, like something; and there is something, anything, like nothing, what, then, is somethingness, and nothingness? Anything is nothing. And everything is nothing. Nothing can be anything. Therefore, nothing is something. Situating the scope of being is essential to that of freedom. These ideas and associated issues bear both on metaphysics and existentialism.

The existentialist movement was not created by any one individual; rather it came into being in different parts of Europe in the 1940's and 1950's (Popkin, 1999:698). The roots of existentialism may be found in the works of several modern philosophers, including Dostoyevski (1821–1881), Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Nietzsche (1844–1900), Heidegger (1889–1976) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) who happens to be the centre point of this critical study. Mostly, existentialism theorizes on existence. It suggests that there is no truth or reality except as man participates in it. The existential approach was developed as a reaction to the two dominant models of psychology: psychoanalysis and behaviorism. While psychoanalysis believes freedom is restricted and determined by irrational forces that are biological and psychosexual in nature and come from the unconscious as instincts and drives, the behaviorist hold freedom is restricted by

socio-cultural conditioning. The existentialist position is that people are basically free to make their own choices; that that is what marks being (Benjamin, *et al*, 1994: 700).

In his *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre contrasts *being* with *nothingness*. First, that “existence precedes essence” regardless of other basic genetic and environmental deterministic elements. One cannot simply will oneself into a bird or will an abusive childhood away. What Sartre existentialism does propose is that since one’s consciousness comes first, one can choose how to respond to or feel about one’s genetic background or environmental characteristics both historically and in the present moment. Taken together, genetics and environment are typically referred to by existentialist as “facticity”, the objective facts about the external world that the consciousness can respond to in a variety of ways. It also means that people have personal responsibility for everything that they do and autonomous individuals, a very popular and comforting belief. The articulation of these and related issues form the main thrust/scope of this work. We might not interest in Sartre’s notion of consciousness/freewill or forlorn as might be on *l’être-en-soi*—the unconscious being of phenomenon, for example flowers, stones. Rather, we shall apply analytical procedures to ruminate on the logico-metaphysical import of Sartre’s existentialism.

II. Existentialism

Existentialism, a post-WWII phenomenon, is a philosophy that emphasizes individual existence, meaning, freedom and choices. Although it has much in common with nihilism, existentialism is more a of a reaction against traditional philosophers, such as rationalism, empiricism and positivism that seek to discover an ultimate order and universal meaning in metaphysical principle or in the structure of the observed world. It asserts that people actually make decisions based on what has meaning to them, rather than what is rational.

Existentialism is a term applied to the work of certain late 19th and 20th century European philosophers who, despite profound doctrine differences, shared the belief that philosophical thinking beginning with the human subject, not merely the thinking subject (Crowell, 2010; Macquarrie, 1972; Oxford, 1995: 259), but the acting, feeling, living human individual (Macquarrie, 14-15). While the supreme value of existentialist thought is commonly acknowl-

edged to be freedom, its primary virtue is authenticity. In existentialists' view, the individual's starting point is characterized by what has been called "the existential attitude" or a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world (Solomon, 1974: 1-2). Many existentialists have also regarded traditional systematic or academic philosophies, in both style and content, as too abstract and remote from concrete human experience (Breisach, 1962:5; Kaufmann, 1956:12). This started with Kierkegaard's existing "authentically" (Lowrie, 1969: 37-40).

Though neither Kierkegaard nor Nietzsche used the term "existentialism", they focused on subjective human experience rather than the objective truths of mathematics and science, which they believed were too detached or observational to truly get at the human experience. Like Pascal, they were interested in people's quiet struggle with the apparent meaninglessness of life and the use of diversion to escape from boredom.

In the first decades of the 20th century, a number of philosophers and writers explored existentialist ideas: Miguel de Unamuno Jugo, Don Quixote, Ortega Gasset, Buber, and Nikolai Berdyaev. Only Berdyaev drew a radical distinction between the world of spirit and the everyday world of objects (Breisach, 173-176)¹⁴ before Marcel introduced important existentialist themes to a French audience in his early essay "Existence and Objectivity" (1925) and in his *Metaphysical Journal* (1927) (Keen, 1967). Jaspers sums-up these thoughts that "Existential-philosophy is the way of thought by means of which man seeks to become himself. This way of thought does not cognize objects, but elucidates and makes actual the being of the thinker" (Jaspers, 1957:40) as Heidegger does, in *Being and Time* presented a method of rooting philosophical explanations in human existence (*Dasein*) to be analyzed in terms of existential categories (*existentiale*). Camus used the analogy of the Greek myth of Sisyphus to demonstrate the futility of existence. In all, a central proposition of existentialism is that existence precedes essence, the idea the absurd, *facticity*, *authenticity*, and *despair* (Sartre, 1947).

III. Sartre's Existentialism: A Synopsis

Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris as the only child of Jean-Baptiste Sartre (Baird, 1999). As a teenager in the 1920s, Sartre became attracted to philosophy

upon reading Henri Bergson's. Acquainted with Simone de Beauvoir in a life-long companionship (Bair, 1990; Fullbrook, 1994), Sartre taught at various institutions all around France and prized his role as a public intellectual and wrote several books on freedom, religion, and being.

His existentialist viewpoint says that "you must exist as a person before it can be said of you that you are such and such type of person." The first principle of existentialism is that man is only what one makes of himself, in the beginning he "is nothing." Sartre eloquently describes this process when he says "we mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterward." According to Sartre, man is not an object, but is a subject. This quality is what gives him his dignity, which derives from our freedom to choose. Sartre urges self-determination and insists upon the equivalence of human dignity and autonomy of the will. Stones, Capybara and the existentialists further claim that this capacity exists only in man. A stone, what Heidegger would consider to be a *sein* type of being and what Sartre would call being-in-itself, is not capable of making choice and therefore it is not free. A stone is restricted to its position in the world. Likewise, a non-human animal, like a capybara, is a being-in-itself. Where the capybara moves about the world and seems to be making choices, those choices can never make the capybara something other than a capybara. The animal will never train for a marathon or make a fire, a capybara will never deliberately change its genetics through science. Man, on the other hand is not restricted, he himself "is freedom, as possibility and openness to the future, an indeterminate potentiality.

Sartre introduced *Being and Nothingness*, his single greatest articulation of his existentialist philosophy, as "an essay in phenomenological ontology." Essentially, it is a study of the consciousness of being. Ontology means the study of being, while phenomenological means relating to perceptual consciousness. He details his rejection of Kant's concept of *noumena*. Kant was an idealist, believing that we have no direct way of perceiving the external world and that all we have access to our ideas of the world, including what our sense tell us. Kant distinguished between phenomena, which are our perceptions of things or how things appear to us and nominal, which are the things in themselves, which we have no knowledge of. Against Kant, Sartre argues that the appearance of a phenomenon is pure and absolute, the *noumena* is not inaccessible, it simply not there. Appearance is the only reality, from this starting point, Sartre contends that the world can be seen as an infinite series of finite appearance. Such a per-

spective eliminates a number of dualisms, notably the duality that contrasts the inside and outside of an object. What we see is what we get (or, what appears is what we know). Sartre outlines the binary distinction between unconscious being (*être-en-soi*) being-in-itself and conscious being (*être pour soi*) being-for-itself. Being-in-itself is concrete, lacks the ability to change and is unaware of itself. Being-for-itself is conscious of its own consciousness but is also incomplete. For Sartre, the undefined, non-determined nature is what defines man since the being-for-itself (like man) lacks a predetermined essence, it is forced to create itself from nothingness. For Sartre, nothingness is the defining characteristic of the being-for-itself. A tree is a tree and lacks the ability to change or create its being. Man, on the other hand, makes himself by acting in the world instead of simply being as the objects-in-itself does, man is an object-for-itself, must actualize his own being (Stumpf and Fieser, 2003).

IV. Being as Somethingness and Nothingness: A critique of Sartre's

Sartre's notion of existentialism has several general and specific criticisms, even though they have the potential to provide a powerful antidote to the idea that resistance and change to the capitalist system we live in today, is impossible, or his basic message that the world can be changed, that we are free to change it, and if we fail to do so, we bear the responsibility—accepting increasingly the limitation upon human choice, the limitation of birth, status in society and the family background. His humanism is lucid in saying that “You can always make something out of what you have been made into” (Popkin, 701).

Invariably, “existence precedes essence” is, many critics argue, contradictory. Specifically, they argue that Sartre makes metaphysical arguments despite his claiming that his philosophical views ignore metaphysics. Marcuse criticizes Sartre for projecting anxiety and meaninglessness onto the nature of existence itself: “Insofar as Existentialism is a philosophical doctrine, it remains an idealistic doctrine: it hypostatizes specific historical conditions of human existence into ontological and metaphysical characteristics. Existentialism thus becomes part of the very ideology which it attacks, and its radicalism is illusory” (Marcuse, 1972: 161). Taken together, genetics and environment are typically referred to by exist-

tentialism as “facticity” the objective facts about the external world that the consciousness can respond to in a variety of ways. What this simply means is that existence cannot precedes essence, in order to have consciousness, one must have a functional brain and the facticity of that brain its genetic characteristics and environmental influences, will give one a nature that will limit one’s attempts to evaluate the properties of a metal using a lens made of the very same metal. In other words, ability to, from time to time transcend one’s nature must, inevitably, come from a nature that permits occasional self-transcendence. Sartre’s existentialism beliefs that denies nature altogether either denies neuroscience and asserts that consciousness comes from something immaterial or requires that our brains act independently of their own structure. In either case, it is extremely unreasonable and leads to equally unreasonable consequential beliefs that require the impossible from one’s fellow man. It is self-delusive and a philosophical dead end. It leads to a total misunderstanding of the nature of man and of man’s possibilities. The ration of consciousness in Sartre is in the mode of conflict, as a relation of recognition each requires the other consciousness to be recognize as consciousness, as free. Now, if I recognize free as free, I’m doing it my master. Others become another person when his will, his liberty is opposed to mine. If the analysis of the light is illuminating, the gaze of others I found its existence people see me so I can see. The *being-for-itself* is also a for-hire (Popkin, 701).

Furthermore, consider the incongruous argument of Sartre (following Heideggerian thinking), that there can only be one being for whom existence precedes essence. This “human reality” arrives first, then defines himself. There is no God to create an identity for man. As Sartre says “he is *nothing*” and it is the existentialist who makes something out of him. This subjectively, in that he defines his essence on his own terms and has the freedom to choose whatever he wants, has not foundation in nature; it could lead to worse anguish and inauthenticity. Also Sartre rejects the notion that is it possible not to choose because, in one not choosing, he has actually made a choice. Fortunately, Sartre agrees that what makes a living body the locus of human personhood is soul, self-awareness, rationality, praxis, language, and self-narration. Unfortunately, he does not stipulate the basis for the existence of those ideas. Besides, Sartre’s notion of human anguish and Heschel’s idea that the question of our nature creates internal conflict. For Sartre, our anguish comes from the knowledge that we have the responsibility to choose our nature that comes from being free of

any objective morality. According to Heschel (1965), we are accountable to an objective truth and are on a journey towards transcendence and a full realization of this truth. The conflict arises in ourselves as we come to terms with our biology and that there is more to our existence than what we make of it. Self-reflection and evaluation is a difficult task that creates in us feelings of anguish but not because we are alone, but because our existence is of such importance to God. Hence Kierkegaard and many others argue rightly that with God there is a transformation from absurdity to optimism and from Nihilism to meaningfulness. Reality we know is not one sided but multi-faceted.

However existence is absurd, life has no meaning. Death is the ultimate absurdity; it undoes everything that life has been building up to. One is born by chance, one also dies by chance; there is no God. One must make use of freedom, only freedom of choice can allow one to escape nausea even though "freedom is appalling" (Stumpf and Fieser, 465).

That existence precedes essence implies our acts create our essence. Humanity alone exists, objects simply are (for example they do not exist *per se*). Animals and vegetables occupy an intermediary position. Plants grows from fruits, live and then die. Animals are born, chew their food, make sound, follow their instincts, and die. Neither plants nor animals makes deliberate choices or carry through with responsibility. Historically, philosophy before Sartre was "essentialist" that is, it was concerned with defining the essence of each species, with proving details about generic traits. It's a technical vision of the world in which one can say that production precedes the existence of an object. For him, "there is no God, no objective system of values, no built-in essence, and most importantly, no determinism" (Stumpf and Fieser, 465).

Furthermore, Sartre delineates three categories within his definition of freedom: The man whom he compare to a stone (makes no choices and is happy in his no-choice); The man whom he compares to plants (not happy, but lacks the courage to take responsibility for his actions); and the man not compared to stones or plants (suffers from freedom, uses freedom for the betterment of his life). But what are plants and stones without the capacity of existence? And why, if one makes his meaning, must one have to evasion or avoid, isolate oneself from them by going to sleep, commit suicide, remain silent or live in obscurity? Or why must he disguise to fool/deceive others and resort to hypocrisy to evoke false emotion (including violence)?

The key problem with Sartre existentialism is that if the consciousness, the thing deciding how to respond to facticity, is not itself made up of facticity of genetic and environmental background and structuring, what then is it? Or how can a consciousness exist produced from no source with a fundamental facticity? By limiting the nature of being to facticity and consciousness, Sartre ignores the obvious gradation of being. At what point is 'thingness' acquired? Is *being* a thing, property, or quality? Or does *being exist* independently of a thing? If *being* is (or reside in) a thing, shall we be more reasonable to say: 'S is a being of the sort...' which translates 'being is being?' Or even if independent of a thing, it translates to 'being is being' which is absurd. Moreover the idea of *being* presupposes an 'other-side': *non-being*. Is the understanding of *non-beingness* not necessary for that of *being* (just as man in relation to woman, day in relation to night, and good in relation to bad)? Every appearance is a thing, an object whether such is conscious of itself or not conceived by some subject.

The serious implication of the foregoing is that Sartre's neglect the day-to-day applicability of the idea of *to exist*. Consider the following saying, for example:

Silence means consent, or you say your best when u say nothing at all.

Here, silence (non-doing, nothingness) amounts to some special act, somethingness. Further, let us refer to the sense in the negative propositions:

No S is P, or Some S is not P.

Both propositions posit, 1. *If anything is S, then that thing is not P*; and 2. *There is a thing S, but that thing is not a P*. even though these propositions deny any interaction between their subjects and predicates, they do portend the existence of those subjects. Similarly, consider the judgment often made of another:

He is not a person.

This statement apparently denies one of existence/personhood (but which means not morally upright person). Similar idioms, following Sartre, essentially disappear.

V. Conclusion

Agreeably with Sartre, in the exercise of his unlimited freedom, man makes his own image, but the choices involves anguish, for one cannot shift the responsibility to others. It is also a fact that, in order to entrench responsibility, one must avoid extreme determinism in human affairs. Beside these, we have attempted to point out that Sartre's separation of nothingness from being does not succeed. The arguments for this conclusion range from common sense, semantic, and thematic in nature. Accordingly, my view of *nothing* is 'non-inclusiveness', 'non-membership', 'non-belongingness', or 'non-involvement' of something with another. Yet any of these does not imply that once a thing does not belong in another then that thing does not belong in anyway whatsoever. Where a thing belongs in A for example, then it may not belong in B or C or D; since it does not then it is nothing to B, C, or D. Therefore, anything is something to the extent it belongs in some category, including nothingness.

Summary

That thing, called *nothing*, is, in the least, *something*. It is something because everything, indeed, anything has a name; and it doesn't matter whether what is being referred to is membered (true), or non-membered (false). This means that there actually are two senses of existence: *something-ness* and *no-thing-ness*; whether it is *some* or *none*, the central being is *thing* or *thing-ness*. This could be demonstrated from the angle of reference (epistemology), meaningfulness (linguistic), inference (Logic), and the relevance of an absence of some certain reality (usually negative and undesirable) in the definition another reality (night-day, God-Satan, good-bad, right-wrong, etc). By the writings of classical and modern theorists, these concepts and perceptions ignite contemplating reality beyond immediate experience dissolving into the following ideas: perception versus independent reality; that every event has a cause vis-a-vis the idea/law of contingency and necessity; corporeality/materiality versus immateriality; tension between essence or existence; and ultimately the scope or nature of being in relation to non-being. Present article argues that for anything to count as nothing, it must be something which essence is *nothingness*. It concludes that, if the essence of a thing is *thing-ness*, and if the essence of nothing is *nothingness*, then, nothing is ultimately something which thing-ness rests in its *nothingness*.

Key words: Being, existentialism, no-thing-ness, some-thing-ness, thing-ness, essentialism.

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