

AN EXISTENTIALIST'S ETHICS

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CONTEMPORARY existentialist philosophy appears to be fundamentally ethical in its origin and motivation. Essentially concerned with man's status in the universe and its implications for behavior, the existentialist often adopts the tone of the Old Testament prophets. He extolls the virtues of authenticity and legitimate anguish; the life of bad faith, the attempted escape from freedom, warrant his scornful disapproval. The moral—and perhaps moralistic—aspect of existentialism is pervasive and unmistakable.

This is especially clear in the case of Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy of freedom. Existentialists in general and Sartre in particular argue that an analysis, not of human nature, indeed, but of, say, "the universal human condition" reveals that certain kinds of behavior are morally appropriate and others morally reprehensible. My aim in this paper is to show that Sartre's analysis of "the universal human condition" is quite inconsistent with morality in anything like the ordinary sense. We might think that attempt otiose in view of Sartre's notorious rejection of "absolute values." But in spite of his claim to dispense with absolute morality, Sartre's philosophy, like other existentialist philosophies, is through-and-through ethical. A concern with the human condition and its implications for morality is the moving force behind Sartre's thought. "Bad faith," "responsibility," "anguish,"—these and other ethical notions play a central role in Sartre's philosophy of freedom. Though he has in one sense rejected "absolute values" (in rejecting any ethical system based upon an essentialist metaphysics) in another sense he accepts the absolute values of authenticity and good faith, recommends these values to others, and passes moral judgment upon those who live in "bad faith."

Sartre's ethics is grounded in his theory of freedom. I shall try to give a fairly clear if truncated account of that theory, followed by an examination of the implications of the theory for morality. In the last section I shall try to show that the arguments by which he supports this radical theory of freedom are incon-

clusive in that they rest at worst upon puns and at best upon ambiguities.

A. *An Ontology of Freedom*

The title of Sartre's main philosophical work is *Being and Nothingness*.¹ Since it is the doctrine of nothingness that is crucial to Sartre's account of freedom, it is best to begin by examining that doctrine. Nothingness, or negation, plays a central role in Sartre's philosophy from the start. Indeed, the very posing of the "ontological question" immediately leads to a confrontation with nothingness: "What being will be must of necessity arise on the basis of what it is not. Whatever being is, it will allow this formulation: 'Being is *that* and outside of that, nothing.' Thus a new component of the real has just appeared to us—non-being" (BN 5). The posing of the ontological question, according to Sartre, reveals not-being in a triple way. In the first place, the fact that the question is asked presupposes that the questioner is ignorant; *ignorance*, as a *lack* of knowledge, is a kind of non-being. Secondly there is the possibility of a negative answer: The ontological question is as follows: "Is there any conduct which can reveal to me the relation of man with the world?" (loc. cit.). Since we do not know the answer, we face the possibility that the answer might be negative, that as a matter of fact there is no such conduct. And every negative judgment presupposes not-being.² Third, the existence of the question presupposes the existence of an answer and therefore of *truth*, another form of not-being.³ Why is truth a form of not-being? Apparently for the following reasons: since truth is different from what it is the truth about, and since it is always true *of* being, truth must be not-being. If truth is always *about* being and therefore distinguished from it, it cannot *be* being and therefore must be not-being

¹ Tr. Hazel Barnes (New York, 1956). I shall use the abbreviation 'BN' to refer to this work.

² Below p. 252 I shall examine this statement and try to outline the argument by which Sartre supports it.

³ BN lxvii-lxviii, 5. It is never clear from Sartre's account whether he thinks there are a number of different kinds of not-being, or only one kind revealing itself in different situations. But that difference is not important for my purposes here.

or nothing. Further, truth always involves distinction and limitation; if it is true to say that this is a table, then this must not be a chair. But being as it is in-itself is a plenum, completely opaque and full (BN 74). There are in it as it is in-itself no distinctions and no limitation. Hence truth cannot be being; it must, therefore, be not-being. If being is an absolute plenum with no limitation at all, then judgment and truth cannot be in being, since in any judgment I distinguish the object of judgment from everything else, thereby introducing limitation and distinction. Hence the very existence of the ontological question reveals to us that not-being lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm (BN 21).

We have now discovered not-being. It appears to be a "component of the real," of crucial importance for ontology. But the appearance of not-being is puzzling. Being cannot, of course, give rise to not-being, for from being, only being can come (BN 23). On the other hand, sheer "nothingness is not" (BN 22); this means among other things, says Sartre, that sheer nothing lacks the power to nihilate itself. What does *that* mean? So far as I can make out, something like the following: To *be* requires a certain power; an act of being requires an ontological force or energy. To nihilate being, to not-be, Sartre apparently thinks, requires an analogous force. And therefore sheer nothing, since it has no force at all, cannot have any power with which to nihilate itself.⁴ The origin of nothingness presents a paradox. Being cannot introduce it; neither, it seems, can nothing. The introducer of nothingness into the world must have very special qualities: "The being by which Nothingness arrives in the world must nihilate Nothingness in its Being, and even so it still runs the risk of establishing Nothingness as a transcendent in the very heart of immanence unless it nihilates Nothingness in its being *in connection with its own being*. The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world

⁴ The essential ambiguity of Sartre's use of the word "nothing" is what makes the above statement seem so puzzling. As a matter of fact, Sartre is implicitly distinguishing "nothing" in the sense of sheer unadulterated nothing from "nothing" in the sense of "absence of being in-itself." The latter is not, or not in every case, at any rate, *sheer* nothing, for not-being in the sense of for-itself is (1) a kind of representation, and (2) an introduction of form into being. This ambiguity is in the last analysis fatal to Sartre's philosophy, I think, and I shall deal with it below pp. 250-254.

is a being such that in its Being, the Nothingness of its Being is in question. *The being by which Nothingness comes to the world must be its own Nothingness*" (BN 23). What can this mean? There is Nothingness in the world in the peculiar sense of distinction and opposition and limitation. This could not come from being, since being is a Parmenidean whole, void of all distinction or qualification. On the other hand, this Nothingness cannot come from sheer nothing for the latter has not the power of "nihilating" anything. Mere nothing has no power at all. It is inert. Yet the act of being nothing, in the special sense of introducing limitation and distinction into a formless whole, requires a certain ontological power. Since sheer nothing does not possess this power, and since being cannot of course be the source of nothing, a third thing seems to be required—a being which can introduce Nothingness. Now this cannot be being in the sense of the in-itself. On the other hand, it must have nothingness within itself in order to be the source of Nothingness in the world. This nothingness which it has within itself cannot have come to it from some other source, since neither being nor nothing could produce it. Therefore the being by which Nothingness enters the world must be its own Nothingness.

Extraordinarily puzzling at best, this may be sheer nonsense. But the important thing to recognize is that this being which is its own nothingness is consciousness, or human reality (BN 24). Sartre's next question is this: what must man be if he is the being through which nothingness enters the world? The answer is that he must have, or rather be, *freedom*. Freedom is identical with the being of human reality, *constitutes* it. *Man is freedom*. This means that man must be able to be *distant* from the world (loc. cit.); he must be able to *detach* himself from the world; he "retires behind a nothingness" (loc. cit.). That ability to other the world, to be at a distance from it, to negate it, is freedom. Thus the fact that man is a nothingness (in Sartre's peculiar sense) constitutes his freedom; man, as the one by whom nothingness comes into the world, cannot be being. For if he were, then he could not be the source of distinction and limitation. Man is therefore a nothing, a lack of being, a hole in being (BN 617). "Freedom in its

foundation coincides with the nothingness which is at the heart of man. Human reality is free because it is not enough" (BN 440).

Human reality is its own nothingness. For the for-itself, to be is to nihilate the in-itself which it is. Under these conditions, freedom can be nothing other than this nihilation. It is through this that the for-itself escapes its being as its essence; it is through this that the for-itself is always something other than what can be said of it. For in the final analysis, the for-itself is the one which escapes this very denomination, the one which is already beyond the name which is given to it, beyond the property which is recognized in it. To say that the for-itself has to be what it is, to say that it is what it is not, to say that in its existence precedes and conditions essence or inversely according to Hegel that for it "Wesen ist was gewesen ist"—all this is to say one and the same thing; to be aware that man is free. . . . I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself, or if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free (BN 439).

This is about as clear a capsule statement of Sartre's doctrine of freedom as he gives. Freedom is logically contingent upon the fact that man is a nothingness. Man is "wholly and forever free" (BN 441). The fact that he is a lack of being, that "The for-itself is nothing but the pure nihilation of the in-itself" (BN 611), is the ground of the freedom of the for-itself. In fact the for-itself is this nihilation and is its freedom: therefore the freedom of the for-itself is identical with its negative character.

B. *Specific Freedom*

But Sartre goes on to give a more concrete account of human freedom.

1. We have freedom from the passions. We are never determined by our passions; we freely choose to give in to them when we do. We can always decide to resist passion, to live a life in which it is not a determining factor. In the last analysis this is because insofar as the self or consciousness is a nothing, the passions cannot get a purchase on it (BN 518). Our every decision (and every action implies decision) is completely free.

2. We are free from our motives. Choice is free from motives both as psychological pushes and pulls and as rational

considerations leading us to act in one way rather than another. Freedom from motives in the psychological sense is a result of the fact that there is no centrum or ego to which motives can adhere. But we are also free from motives as rational decision-making considerations. Rational deliberation is always specious since before deliberating we have already decided which sorts of reasons we will allow to have weight. Thus the choice has already been made before deliberation begins. In *Existentialism*,⁵ Sartre recounts the case of the young man who has come to him for advice. In coming to him, Sartre claims, the young man had already made his decision, for he knew what sort of advice to expect. Had he wanted different advice, he would have gone to a priest or a communist. And it follows that we make our decisions prior to deliberation or the rehearsing of reasons. Indeed, he holds that choice and consciousness are finally one and the same thing (BN 449-453). As Wilfrid Desan says in his excellent book *The Tragic Finale*, "For-itself, Nothingness, Human consciousness, Freedom, Free Choice are, in Sartre's system, one and the same thing."⁶

3. If man is free from passions and motives, he is also free from the in-itself. The latter, says Sartre, can affect only being; it cannot touch not-being. There is nothing in consciousness, which is a nothing, upon which the in-itself could get a purchase. Thus the for-itself, or consciousness, is outside the causal series; hence it cannot be determined by the in-itself (BN 435).

4. In the for-itself, existence precedes and formulates essence; man is therefore free from his essence. The following is Sartre's attempt to explicate this oft-repeated slogan:

What is meant by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it.

⁵ Tr. Bernard Frechtman. (New York, 1947), p. 32.

⁶ (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 101. Desan's book combines a sympathetic approach with a lucid exposition; when the subject is Sartre, this is a real achievement.

Not only is man what he conceives himself, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust towards existence. Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism (*Existentialism*, p. 13).

The essential point here is the statement that man is only what he wills himself to be. Our essence is always in the past. The total ensemble of truths about a man are truths about his past. We can place no *a priori* limits upon his future choices; since man is a nothing (i.e., quite free) he has no nature which limits or defines him; he defines himself as he goes along. It is in choice that man defines himself or constitutes himself, thus giving himself an essence. And since a man's essence is always in the past, we can make an essential judgment of him only after he is dead. For he is always free to choose a new essence. Hence Sartre quotes with approval the maxim of the Greek tragedians: "Never count a man happy until he is dead" (BN 510). The essential meaning of the doctrine that existence precedes essence, then, is that man has no nature or defining characteristics prior to his existence as a choosing being who *decides* what he will be.

5. Finally, man is free from antecedently fixed values. Human reality creates values; it does not discover them.

The existentialist, on the contrary [i.e., as opposed to those who believe that there are values independently of human choice] thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is that we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoevsky said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." That is the very starting point of existentialism, and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to. . . . If God does not exist, we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimate our conduct (*Existentialism*, p. 27).

Hence there are no values existing prior to choice. In choosing, we define value; any choice is unjustifiable and "absurd" in the sense that it can have no rational justification or sufficient reason (BN 479). For the very standards in terms of which a choice could be justified are logically posterior to that choice (loc.

cit.). There are not good choices and bad choices, for every choice as a choice defines the good (*Existentialism*, p. 20); hence denominations such as "good" and "bad" are inapplicable to choice. Human reality or the for-itself, therefore, is not bound by any system of pre-established values; it has absolute freedom with respect to values.⁷ Man is absolutely and completely free—from his essence, from the in-itself, from his passions and motives. As Desan says, "Sartre's freedom is something absolute; he rejects all determinism whatever . . . consequently he presents us with a freedom more acute than, possibly, has been seen in two thousand years of philosophy" (op. cit., p. 107). Now this doctrine of freedom, insofar as it follows from the central premisses of Sartre's ontology, is a liability as well as an asset. If the doctrine is false Sartre's ontology is refuted by *modus tollens*. Sartre recognizes that human reality seems to be limited by a whole host of factors. I am limited by physical laws, by my environment in the form of my nationality, social class, education, and the like, by my inherent capacities or lack of them for certain kinds of endeavor, etc. Unlike a horse, I am not free to run a mile in two minutes, and I cannot become a philosopher without a modicum of intelligence.⁸ I seem to be limited by the nature of the world, by my cultural milieu, by my inherent abilities, and by many other factors. How does Sartre deal with these objections?

The whole realm of factors which seem to limit freedom is called "facticity" (BN 481). This includes five kinds of facts: my place, my past, my surroundings, my fellow brethren, and my death.⁹ Sartre deals with facticity by means of two kinds of arguments.

1. An obstacle is always an obstacle *for* someone; it is constituted as an obstacle by the fact that someone has chosen

⁷ In a way this is the crux of Sartre's ethical doctrine as presented in *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism*. In the next section I shall try to show that this implication of his ontology makes morality in anything like the ordinary sense completely impossible.

⁸ There seems to be less than universal agreement upon this point.

⁹ BN 485. These are for the most part self-explanatory, and there is no need to discuss them in detail; my place, for example, is just my physical position in space and time.

a goal with which it is incompatible. A mountain is an obstacle only for someone who has chosen a course which involves crossing it. *In itself*, the mountain is not an obstacle; it simply is. In general, an obstacle is an obstacle only because of choice; it becomes an obstacle only after choice, and thus in a sense freedom or the for-itself *chooses* its obstacles. How, then, can they be said to be limitations upon freedom? "In particular, the coefficient of adversity in things cannot be an argument against our freedom for it is by us—i.e., by the preliminary positing of an end—that this coefficient of adversity arises. A particular crag, which may manifest a profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will be on the contrary a valuable aid if I want to climb upon it in order to look over the countryside" (BN 482). This argument will work with any kind of obstacle. Let us suppose that I am a professional baseball player and I suddenly decide to become a concert pianist. Is not my lack of musical training an obstacle to the realization of my ambition? Certainly not, says Sartre. My lack of musical training is not in itself an obstacle. It becomes an obstacle only if I decide upon a course of action presupposing a good deal of musical training. And therefore it is my decision that constitutes the obstacle. I have *chosen* this obstacle in choosing to become a pianist; it cannot, therefore, be thought of as a restriction of my freedom. Sartre's first way of dealing with facticity is to maintain that insofar as a choice sets up or constitutes its own obstacles, they cannot be regarded as limitations upon freedom.

2. But Sartre has a second way of dealing with facticity. He distinguishes between freedom of choice and freedom of achievement. "In addition it is necessary to point out to common sense that the formula 'to be free' does not mean 'to obtain what one wishes' but rather 'by oneself to determine oneself to wish' in the broad sense of 'choosing.' The technical and philosophical concept of freedom, the only one which we are considering here, means only the autonomy of choice" (BN 483). So far so good. This seems to mean that though indeed I cannot *accomplish* anything I choose, I can nevertheless choose to accomplish it. If I am in prison, I can choose to be at liberty, though of course there is no question of my actually *being* at liberty. But in a very puzzling paragraph he goes on to *deny* that we can distinguish choice from

action; this allows him to distinguish merely *longing* or *wishing* from *choosing*, avoiding the empty truism that I can always desire, or choose in the sense of desire, to do or be something which as a matter of fact is quite impossible to me. If choice involves action, then I can choose only that which as a matter of fact is possible for me to accomplish—at least in a sort of preliminary way (BN 484). But if this is his meaning, then of course choice is very definitely limited. Hence it is difficult to see just what Sartre means here; but insofar as this second way of dealing with facticity is an argument at all, it is an assertion that though we have not freedom of accomplishment, we do have freedom of choice. This seems to be the point of his distinction between the “philosophical technical sense” of freedom and the common-sense or ordinary sense.

There is another puzzling thing about these ways of dealing with facticity: they seem to be inconsistent with one another. For the first presupposes what the second denies—i.e., the first argument is an argument with respect to the ordinary sense of freedom according to which freedom entails the possibility of accomplishment. Hence if the second argument is valid the first fails to make an essential distinction, and if the first is valid, the second proceeds from an improper distinction. One can try to validate absolute freedom in either one of these ways, but not in both.¹⁹

The doctrine of absolute freedom is crucial to Sartre's philosophic endeavor. As we might expect, it is a common theme in his novels and plays. In *The Age of Reason*, Mathieu glumly reflects about his condition as a human being:

Even if he let himself be carried off, in helplessness and despair, even if he let himself be carried off like an old sack of coal, he would have chosen his own damnation: he was free, free in every way, free to behave like a fool or a machine, free to accept or refuse, free to equivocate: to marry, to give up the game, to drag this dead weight about with him for years to come. He could do what he liked, no one had the right to advise him, there would be for him no good nor evil unless he brought them into being. All around him things were

¹⁹ Below (p. 254) I shall try to show that neither suffices to demonstrate an absolute freedom in a sense strong enough to support Sartre's conclusions.

gathered in a circle, expectant, impassive, and indicative of nothing. He was alone, enveloped in this monstrous silence, free and alone, without assistance, and without excuse, condemned to decide without support from any quarter, condemned forever to be free.¹¹

And in *The Reprieve*: "Half way across the Pont-Neuf he stopped and began to laugh: liberty—I sought it far away; it was so near that I couldn't touch it; it is in fact myself. I am my own freedom."¹²

C. *Absolute Freedom and Morality*

Sartre's moral philosophy follows from his doctrine of absolute freedom. In this section I shall indicate the implication for ethics Sartre draws from this doctrine, and then try to show that it is inconsistent with any kind of morality. Sartre's ethical doctrines center about the notions of responsibility and anguish.

1. He holds that the doctrine of absolute freedom implies absolute responsibility. "But if existence really does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him" (*Existentialism*, p. 19). Since we constitute ourselves, since we choose our own essences, whatever we are is the result of our own choice. Hence we are responsible for what we are. If I am a failure, it is only because I have chosen to fail; there is no one and nothing to blame but myself. But our responsibility extends considerably further than this. I am responsible, says Sartre, not only for myself, but for all mankind. "In fact, in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all" (*Existentialism*, p. 20). In choosing myself, I choose man; hence I am a kind of universal legislator: "The man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the

¹¹ Tr. Eric Sutton (New York, 1952), p. 320.

¹² Tr. Eric Sutton (New York, 1951), p. 363.

person he chooses to be but also the law maker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself cannot help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility" (*Existentialism*, p. 24). A man who acts must always ask himself "Am I really the kind of man who has the right to act in such a way that humanity might guide itself by my actions?" (loc. cit.).

I am responsible for whatever I am, and, in addition, in choosing myself I act as a universal legislator who sets up standards for the whole of mankind. But even this is not the extent of my responsibility. As the for-itself, I am the being by whom nothing, and therefore truth, comes into the world. We have noted that in-itself apart from man is a pure undifferentiated whole, a Parmenidean plenum in which there are no distinctions and about which, therefore, nothing can be said. Whatever actual structure the world has is a result of the free activity of the for-itself. A passage from *La Nausée* will make clear Sartre's view of the for-itself as it is apart from the negating activity of human reality:

And then all of a sudden, there it is, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality was only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful obscene nakedness.¹³

Structureless and without form, the in-itself is like Aristotle's prime matter. And therefore, says Sartre, I *choose* my world. For I give to it whatever characteristics it actually has. I constitute it as a world characterized by the law and structure it exhibits. And I do this as a free individual. This is what distinguishes Sartre from any kind of Kantianism: for Sartre, the structures imposed by the for-itself upon the in-itself do not flow from any kind of inner necessity, nor are they given in the nature of reason. I freely choose them; I could have chosen others.¹⁴ Thus:

¹³ (English title: *The Diary of Antoine Roquentin*), tr. Lloyd Alexander (London, 1948), pp. 170-171.

¹⁴ This might be the "existential psychoanalytic" explanation of radical insanity. The psychotic has simply given a different structure to his world.

The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man being concerned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being. We are taking the word "responsibility" in its ordinary sense as "consciousness of being the incontestable author of an event or of an object." In this sense the responsibility of the for-itself is overwhelming, since he is the one by whom it happens that *there is* a world; since he is also the one who makes himself be, then whatever may be the situation in which he finds himself, the for-itself must wholly assume this situation with its peculiar coefficient of adversity, even though it be insupportable. He must assume the situation with the proud consciousness of being the author of it, for the very worst disadvantages or the worst threats which can endanger my person have meaning only in and through my project; and it is on the grounds of the engagement which I am that they appear. It is therefore senseless to think of complaining since nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what we are (BN 554).

The point of this passage is clear: man is absolutely and totally responsible since he is absolutely and totally free. In his choice he defines himself, he defines the other, and he constitutes the world, not by creating it or giving it being, but by giving it whatever limitation, differentiation, form, and meaning that it has.

2. The result of this fearful responsibility is anguish. Man is anguished because he *alone* must choose, and because he *must* choose. He is anguished also because he has no guarantee that he will not, at some future date, choose a different essence for himself and therefore cease to be as *this* man. Anguish appears when we realize that there is nothing between us and our lives; when we realize that we are entirely free and therefore utterly responsible. In *The Reprieve* Mathieu contemplates the fact that the coming war has completely cut him off from his past. "I am free," he said suddenly. And his joy changed, on the spot, to a crushing sense of anguish."¹⁵ Anguish is the way our freedom reveals itself to consciousness. It is the consciousness that nothing separates me from any possibility whatever (BN 32). We cannot escape anguish. We may try—to try to escape anguish to adopt the attitude of "bad faith" (BN 43), but such an attempt is doomed to failure, for we *are* anguish just as we are freedom. Even in bad faith we do not escape anguish, for in order to try to escape

¹⁵ Op. cit., p. 352.

it, conceal it from ourselves, we must already know it (BN 45).

Such is Sartre's doctrine of the responsibility and anguish following from our absolute freedom. This doctrine seems to take crucial moral notions very seriously. But in the last analysis the doctrine of absolute freedom undercuts the very possibility of morality. Sartre's responsibility and anguish are a delusion. Every choice, he tells us, is unconditioned and completely contingent; there is nothing to which it can appeal, and it is therefore "absurd." "It is absurd in this sense; that the choice is that by which all foundations, all reasons come into being, that by which the very notion of the absurd receives a meaning. It is absurd as being beyond all reasons" (BN 479). Every choice defines both value and rationality. But if that is so, then it is impossible to make a wrong choice. As we have seen,¹⁴ and as Sartre constantly repeats, my choice defines value; prior to my choice there is no right or wrong. But then my choice, in defining the right, can never be mistaken. *Whatever I choose is right by definition.* Sartre is surreptitiously holding on to the meaning of responsibility appropriate to a world in which there are objective values which I may decide to realize or to reject. But if there is no value exterior to choice, then this notion of responsibility is no longer appropriate or even meaningful. If every action, every decision, constitutes a moral *Weltanschauung*, then there is no possibility of guilt, and no point to anguish. I am then a being whose every decision constitutes the moral standard and who by definition cannot commit a wrong.

For Sartre, *every action, every choice*, is necessarily right. But morality presupposes that there is a something morally at stake when I choose or act; there is the possibility of right and wrong, better or worse. For Sartre these distinctions disappear; the notion of a wrong action is for him analytically impossible. And if every actual action is right by definition, there can be no distinction between right and wrong. If the notions of *Action* and *Choice* analytically entail that the action or choice in question is right, then to say that "X is a right action" is to say no more than

¹⁴ Above, pp. 241-242.

"X is an action." This doctrine makes negative moral judgments impossible and positive ones otiose.

And thereby the notions of responsibility and anguish lose their point. Sartre tells us of a military commander who has decided to send men on a mission that may cost them their lives. The man is anguished. But why should he be? If we think of the preservation of human life as a value prior to any choice on our part, we can understand his anguish—he is forced to choose a positive disvalue. But if his very choice constitutes value, then no matter what he chooses, he will be right. Why then be anguished?

Sartre is not unaware of the difficulty and makes an attempt to reply to it. In *Being and Nothingness* he tries to show that, appearances to the contrary, his doctrine does not mean that action and choice are merely arbitrary and capricious. His doctrine there is that every action and every choice is an expression of a more fundamental, aboriginal choice—the choice by which we define our being (BN 464). And therefore a man's actions can be guided by reference to this fundamental and original choice. But the difficulty with this, as an answer to the charge that any choice is morally arbitrary, is that it is *logically* impossible, in Sartre's system, for anyone to contradict his fundamental choice. He is, of course, completely free to make a choice inconsistent with the aboriginal choice he has been expressing; but in so doing he simply makes a new aboriginal choice (BN 464-465). If my moral standards are defined by my fundamental choice, and if in acting inconsistently with these standards I am simply making another fundamental choice, then any action or choice is morally correct by definition. Therefore this reply to the objection I have raised seems to miss the mark completely.¹⁷

In *Existentialism*, he gives a different answer to this kind of objection. There he tells us that certain choices are dishonest, based upon manifest errors, and constitute a rejection of freedom. The man who denies his freedom is taking refuge in "bad faith." But it is man's nature to desire freedom; we *are* freedom. There-

¹⁷ As a matter of fact, there is in Sartre's philosophy no reason why a person could not oscillate between several different projects or initial choices—this might be the "existential psychoanalytic" explanation of multiple personality.

fore to try to escape freedom is to be either a "coward or a stinker" (*Existentialism*, p. 51). But this is obviously an inadequate answer. For if man desires freedom by his very nature,¹⁸ how can anyone fail to desire it? If the basis of the obligation to desire freedom and to accept it is that as a matter of fact we *do* desire it, then anyone who refuses to desire it has by that very fact destroyed the basis for his obligation to desire it.

The conclusion seems to be that Sartre's theory of freedom is quite inconsistent with morality. Any choice is as good as any other; there is no possibility of making a moral mistake. And that is fatal to morality. An absolute freedom, like a thorough-going determinism, undercuts the very possibility of morality.

D. *The Argument for Absolute Freedom*

Sartre's theory of freedom makes it impossible to draw a distinction between right and wrong, and therefore it cuts off the very possibility of moral endeavor or action. In this section I propose to examine some of the arguments by which he seeks to establish this theory of freedom. I hope to show that the doctrine results from a series of confusions. Sartre's nihilistic ontology, it seems to me, involves a number of puns upon the word "nothing." We remember that the doctrine of freedom followed from the fact that human reality is a Nothingness.¹⁹ Sartre seems to mean this quite seriously; as Hazel Barnes says in the introduction to her translation of *Being and Nothingness*, ". . . when Sartre speaks of a Nothingness, he means just that and is not using the word as a misleading name for a new metaphysical substance" (BN xxi). It is because the for-itself is a Nothingness that being can have no effect upon it, that it has no ego or centrum upon which motives and passions could adhere, and that it is cut off from the past.²⁰ The sense of "nothing" involved in the argument for the doctrine of freedom is the ordinary sense according to which "nothing" signifies the absence

¹⁸ Insofar as Sartre is saying that man *must* desire freedom by his very nature, he seems to be contradicting the doctrine of absolute freedom and the doctrine that existence precedes essence.

¹⁹ See above, pp. 237-239.

²⁰ See above, p. 239.

of everything whatever. But this is not the only sense of "nothing" for Sartre. There are at least four important senses of "nothing" involved in *Being and Nothingness*, and as I hope to show, the argument for freedom depends upon confusing these senses.

(1) Sheer nothing. Nothing in this sense would occur if there were no being(s) anywhere of any kind. Nothing in this sense is impossible and unthinkable, according to Sartre, for nothing depends upon being. Why? Nothing is the *negation* of being, and if there were no being, there could be no nothing either. There is an internal relation of *otherness* between being and nothing, such that nothing could not "exist" without being; he does not hold that the relation extends the other way, for being can get on very nicely without nothing.²¹

(2) The common or garden variety of nothing: nothing as the absence of all being in the broadest coherent sense (though dependent upon the existence of being "somewhere else" so to speak). In this sense, nothing is a kind of local absence of any kind of subsistence or existence. (2) is distinguished from (1) in that (1) is impossible and inconceivable; (2) is nothing in the broadest *possible* sense. It is nothing in this sense that underlies the argument for freedom.

(3) Nothing as the presence of qualities incompatible with the in-itself and therefore as the absence of the latter. This sense includes *truth*, which is *about* and therefore other than the in-itself, *form* in the sense of differentiation, quality and individuality (since being as it is in-itself is a qualityless and formless plenum), and the *reflection* of being in (or as) consciousness. That consciousness is a nothing in sense (3) is hardly startling, since it means only that consciousness cannot be identified with its object.

(4) Nothing as the *source* of nothing in sense (3). This is the sense in which Sartre tries to show that for-itself is a Nothingness. But since the argument for freedom depends upon

²¹ Sartre has apparently overlooked the fact that his analysis of sheer nothing provides an easy answer to the fairly standard existentialist question "Why is there anything at all?" If nothing cannot exist without being, then since the absence of being would be nothing, the necessary condition of the absence of being would be the presence of being. Therefore the concept of the absence of being is self-contradictory and absurd, and being is necessary.

the assertion that the for-itself is nothing in sense (2), Sartre can make out his case only if he can show that sense (4) entails sense (2). Let us see how he attempts this.

Every question (and questions emanate from consciousness) involves a triple negation. In the first place, there is *ignorance* on the part of the questioner; secondly, there is the possibility of a negative reply, and every negative judgment presupposes not-being; thirdly, every question presupposes *truth*, another form of not-being.²²

(a) In what sense is ignorance not-being? "Thus the question is a bridge set up between two non-beings: the *non-being of knowing* in man . . ." (BN 5). Ignorance is the non-being of knowledge where knowledge is possible. And if consciousness is a necessary condition of knowledge, then ignorance presupposes and is a sign of not-being in sense (3) (as the absence of the in-itself, which by definition is not conscious). Where there is ignorance, there is consciousness and therefore an absence of the in-itself.

(b) The question also presupposes the possibility of a negative answer, and every negative judgment presupposes the existence of not-being. "The necessary condition of our saying *not* is that non-being be a perpetual presence in us and outside of us, that nothingness haunt being" (BN 16). But it is surely not nothing in sense (2) that is presupposed by a negative judgment. In judging, e.g., "this is not a table" I am surely not judging that "this" is a nothing. I am instead saying that it is *other* than a table; that it *excludes*, stands opposed to, a table. And it can do this only on the basis of *being* something else—say a chair. To take Sartre's example (BN 9), if I judge that Peter is not in the cafe, I am not attributing a kind of nothingness to Peter. I am judging either that the cafe is filled with things other than Peter, or that Peter is somewhere else. The category of otherness, of opposition, is all that is required to make a negative judgment, and the relation of otherness presupposes being on the part of both terms. Hence the negative judgment presupposes nothingness only in the sense of otherness—more specifically, otherness of some

²² See above, pp. 236-237.

particular existent. For the only judgment which could involve otherness of everything whatever would be a judgment involving sheer nothing in Sartre's sense (1). Hence the negative judgment, like ignorance, presupposes nothingness only in sense (3) insofar as it involves differentiation and individualization which by definition are excluded from the in-itself.

(c) In what sense is *truth* not-being? Sartre has two answers to this question. In the first place, truth, insofar as it is about being, it is distinguished from being and other of it. It is therefore nothing in sense (3). Secondly, truth involves limitation and distinction; in judging that *x* is a horse, I am distinguishing *x* from all non-horsy entities (BN 10). And insofar as the in-itself is an undifferentiated continuum, truth is again nothingness in sense (3).

Accordingly, all three of the "negatives" implied by the question turn out to be nothingnesses only in sense (3)—nothing as the absence of being-in-itself by virtue of the presence of qualities incompatible with the latter. Now Sartre holds that consciousness is a nothingness on the grounds that it is the source of nothingness in sense (3). Consciousness is the source of differentiation, quality, and individuality—in a word, *form*. This introduction of form into the in-itself Sartre calls "nihilation." Hence, "the for-itself is nothing but the pure nihilation of the in-itself" (BN 617). "The for-itself has no reality save that of being the nihilation of being" (BN 618).

The upshot of this is that the for-itself is nothing only in the sense that it is the origin of *form* or *quality*. But this sense of "nothing" is to be sharply distinguished from "nothing" in sense (2); it would be plausible to hold that Kant's noumenal self, for example, is nothing in sense (4) though not in sense (2). The fact that consciousness is nothing in sense (4) gives us no grounds at all for holding that it is nothing in sense (2). For Sartre, consciousness clearly is an existent of *some* sort. It is a reflection of being; it is the source of form and limitation; it has the ability to know; and it is the source of truth. The fact that consciousness is a nothing in *this* sense surely does not imply that the for-itself cannot have an ego, or that it cannot be in any way determined by being; the argument for freedom depends upon

the supposition that the for-itself is nothing in sense (2). And insofar as this is the case, the whole argument falls to the ground. For it involves a confusion of sense (2) with sense (4). When Sartre argues that I am free from the past because separated from it by this nothingness which I am, when he argues that since I am a nothing I cannot have an essence, and when he argues that insofar as I am a nothing, being cannot in any way affect me, he is in every case confusing these two senses of "nothing." When we realize that for Sartre the self is nothing only in the sense that it introduces form and qualification into being, the argument loses all appearance of plausibility.

The proper conclusion, then, is that Sartre's ontological argument for absolute freedom is involved in serious confusion. If Sartre really means to hold that consciousness is nothing at all, then it makes no sense to talk about its being free, anguished, the sources of truth, etc. But if he does not mean that it is nothing in the literal sense, then his arguments for freedom collapse. And if his ontological arguments for absolute freedom are unconvincing, we may expect that the way in which he tries to take care of the traditional objections to a theory of absolute freedom will also be less than adequate. As we have seen Sartre's way of dealing with facticity was as follows: an obstacle is always an obstacle *for* someone; it becomes an obstacle only by virtue of a choice with the accomplishment of which it is inconsistent.²³ A mountain is an obstacle only to someone who wants to get to the other side. In itself, it just is. And therefore in choosing a goal, I choose as obstacles all those things which are incompatible with realizing that goal. Hence I choose my own obstacles, and they cannot possibly be thought of as limitations upon my freedom. Now Sartre is surely correct in maintaining that an obstacle is always an obstacle *for* someone, and in particular is an obstacle in that it is incompatible with the execution of a choice. Nevertheless it is a mistake to say that therefore I choose my own obstacles. For I do not choose the connection between X, my goal, and Y, the element of facticity incompatible with that goal. This incompatibility appears to be a simple given; this is just the way the

²³ See above, pp. 242-243.

world is. The fact that the law of gravity and the constitution of my muscles prevent me from leaping a ten foot wall is not a result of my choice. Sartre has not shown that obstacles do not limit my freedom.

Now Sartre has an answer to the above line of criticism. For he maintains not merely that I choose my own goals, but that I *choose* the world.²⁴ Consciousness is the source of whatever qualities the world has; and consciousness *freely* gives the world its form and character. Thus I really have chosen not only my goals, which may turn out to be inconsistent with some fact about the world, but also those facts and the inconsistency between them and the accomplishment of my choice. This follows from the fact that I freely give to the world whatever qualities and characters it possesses. But this doctrine is simply preposterous. And it is also self-referentially inconsistent. For if it is really the case that we individually and freely (i.e., arbitrarily) choose the truth, then the whole noetic enterprise becomes senseless and self-defeating. Sartre's ontology then becomes a merely personal expression of *his* choice; no better though no worse on its own grounds than an ontology according to which human reality completely lacks freedom. If each of us lives in a world of his own choosing, then the world of absolute freedom which Sartre has chosen is rationally no more compelling than any other. There is an ultimate subjectivism involved in Sartre's ontology—a subjectivism which stultifies the notion of truth and makes knowledge impossible. A theory of absolute freedom, like one of absolute determinism, is self-referentially inconsistent. If Sartre is right, there is no reason to think that he's right.

While it is true that Sartre holds this extreme doctrine of absolute freedom, he does not hold it consistently. And thus in spite of repeated assertions of absolute freedom, man, on Sartre's view, is limited to a very considerable degree. Though he insists that human reality has no antecedent essence, he nevertheless holds that the role of the for-itself in the world is limited and circumscribed by many conditions. In a sense, the whole point of Sartre's philosophy is the attempt to describe the predicament of man in a world without God (*Existentialism*, p. 211). And though Sartre

²⁴ See above, p. 246.

does not admit that man has an essence, he does speak of "a universal human condition":

Besides, if it is impossible to find in every man some universal essence which would be human nature, yet there does exist a universal human condition. It's not by chance that today's thinkers speak more readily of man's condition than of his nature. By condition they mean, more or less definitely, the *a priori* limits which outline man's fundamental situation in the universe. Historical situations vary; a man may be born a slave in a pagan society or a feudal lord or a proletarian. What does not vary is the necessity for him to exist in the world, to be at work there, to be there in the midst of other people, and to be mortal there. (*Existentialism*, p. 40).

Elsewhere he speaks of "an ensemble of abstract conditions which constitute the human situation." Now the difference between "an ensemble of abstract conditions" or "a universal human condition" and an essence seems to be mostly verbal. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre provides a sort of inventory of the most significant attributes or characteristics of the for-itself. What is this but to describe its essence? Man cannot escape the desire to be in-itself-for-itself; he cannot escape anguish; and he cannot escape responsibility. He is *defined* as "the being who tries to become God" (BN 566). And these constitute very significant limitations upon him. He is not free to choose to live in a world in which it is possible to be both for-itself and in-itself. Nor is he free to escape his anguish. ". . . the original tendency of the for-itself is towards being: this project of being or desire or tendency toward being does not proceed from some psychological differentiation or contingent event; it is not distinguished from the being of the for-itself. The for-itself may be defined as the being which tries to become God. This is the fundamental structure of the for-itself" (loc. cit.). Hence it is perfectly clear that the for-itself has a fundamental structure, that it is limited by the laws of logic (since the only trouble with being for-itself-in-itself is that this happy condition is self-contradictory) and by the actual constitution of the world. Sartre himself finds it impossible consistently to maintain a doctrine of absolute freedom. And this is a case where his inconsistency does him credit.

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