

Being and Nothingness

"Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."

"I am responsible for everything ... except for my very responsibility, for I am not the foundation of my being. Therefore everything takes place as if I were compelled to be responsible. I am abandoned in the world ... in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant."

"[H]uman reality does not exist first in order to act later; but for human reality, to be is to act."

In a nutshell

There is no essential nature at the heart of our being. We are free to invent a self and create a life as we wish.

In a similar vein

- Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex* (p 44)
- Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* (p 126)
- Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* (p 156)

Jean-Paul Sartre

Existentialism often attracts a "life is meaningless" caricature, but in fact its best-known exponent, Jean-Paul Sartre, was actually one of the greatest philosophers of human freedom. It is not easy to arrive at this realization, however, because of the sheer difficulty and weightiness of his most significant work, *Being and Nothingness*.

In the introduction, for instance, Sartre defines consciousness as "a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself." Heidegger's influence is apparent in such impenetrability; what could it actually mean?

To understand, we should start with Sartre's basic division of the world into two: things that have consciousness of self (beings "for themselves"); and things that do not (things "in themselves," the objects around us that make up the world). Consciousness exists for itself because it can comprehend itself. Most of the book is devoted to this kind of consciousness, and what it means to those who truly have it: human beings.

Central to Sartre's thinking is the view that people have no essential "essence." In fact, when humans analyze their own being, what they find at the heart of it is nothing. Yet this nothingness is something great, since it means that we are totally free to create the self or the life we want. We are free in a negative way, since there is nothing to stop us being free. Sartre remarks, "man being condemned to be free carries the whole weight of the world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being."

Being and Nothingness caught the mood of postwar France in which all the old certainties had crumbled away. If France's existing value system had got it into such a mess in the war, was it worth anything? Sartre represented a new way of seeing and being. People could choose their future, and it was this apparently new philosophy that excited a generation.

Freedom and responsibility

Not simply are we responsible for what we do, Sartre says, we are responsible for our world. Each of us is living out a certain "project" with our life, so whatever happens to us must be accepted as part of that. Sartre goes so far as to say that "there are no accidents in life."

Post-War France

He gives the example of being called up to fight in a war. It is wrong to think of the war as something external that comes from outside and suddenly takes over our life. In fact, the war must become *my* war. I could always get out of it by killing myself or deserting, but for one reason or another (cowardice, inertia, or not wanting to let down my family or my country), I stay in the war and "For lack of getting out of it, I have *chosen* it." A war depends on its soldiers for its existence, and I have "decided that it does exist." There is no point in seeing it as a block of time removed from my life, taking me away from what I really want to do (pursue a career, have a family, and so on); by being in the war I must take full responsibility for it and for my time in it. "I choose myself from day to day," as Sartre puts it. Humanity's state of being is a constant choosing of one's self. People may wish that they lived in another time to avoid being in the war, but the fact is that they are part of the epoch that led to war, and to be in any other time would contradict that. "Thus, I *am* this war" — my life is an expression of the era in which I live, so to wish for some other life is a meaningless, illogical fantasy.

We are "abandoned" in the universe, Sartre says. Anguish comes from the realization that we are not "the foundation of our own being" (i.e., we did not invent ourselves, or choose our own birth) and neither can we be the foundation of being for other people. All we can do is to choose the meaning of our being, seeing everything in the world as an *opportunity* (whether used, not used, or lacking in the first place). Those who realize that they choose the meaning of their own being, even if it is a frightening thought, are absolutely free. They can live without excuses, regrets, or remorse, and take absolute responsibility for their actions.

The human goal is to realize and appreciate our own being and our freedom. Other goals that we create as substitutes for this indicate a "spirit of seriousness," which mistakenly suggests that what I am *doing* is all-important. As Sartre notes, "Success is not important to freedom." To be free, we do not have to attain what we wish, we simply have to be free to make a choice.

Living as if our actions are all-important, or spending our life trying to live up to some kind of universal moral value system, is a kind of bad faith. Only by truly choosing for ourselves what we will be every minute, creating our life like it is a work of art arising from this total freedom, do we realize our potential as a human being.

Sartre's statement that "Man is what he is not and is not what he is" means that we cannot escape our "facticity," the concrete facts of our existence like our gender, nationality, class, or race. All of these provide a "coefficient of adversity" that makes any kind of achievement in life an uphill battle. And yet, neither are we simply the sum of our facticity. The problem is that we shrink

back from doing totally new things, things that are out of character, because we value consistency in ourselves. Consistency, or character, is both a form of security and the lens through which we view and make sense of our world, but it is largely an illusion. Despite all the limiting factors of our existence, we are freer than we imagine, Sartre says.

Bad faith

Sartre's famous concept of "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*) rests on a distinction between two types of lying: the regular lie, which implies "that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding," whose lie relates to something in the world of objects, expressing the view that I and others are separate; and the lie to oneself, a lie of consciousness that does not involve a separation between deceiver and deceived. This second lie is less black-and-white but more serious, since it involves a flight from our freedom. As Sartre puts it:

"Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of lying. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth."

Bad faith requires a person to accept matters on face value, and rests on a resistance to the idea of uncovering things completely to find the truth. If not an outright lie, it is persuading oneself not to look too closely, in case something is found that one does not like.

Sartre spends several pages rebutting Freud. Freud believed that people's choices and actions are constantly hijacked by their unconscious mind, but when Sartre sat down to read Freud's cases for himself, he found that the people on the Viennese doctor's couch were simply examples of pathological bad faith. Another Viennese psychiatrist, Stekel, agreed with Sartre, and wrote, "Every time that I have been able to carry my investigations far enough, I have established that the crux of the psychosis was conscious." Indeed, Sartre would have welcomed the revolution in cognitive therapy of the last 40 years, which dismisses the idea that we are sabotaged by subterranean urges and stresses that we can in fact condition our thinking.

Nevertheless, freedom is a burden, which is why so many people escape into bad faith. Sartre notes that bad faith may be a normal way of life, with only occasional, brief awakenings to good faith. Those of bad faith can see quite clearly what they are doing, but choose to deceive themselves as to its meaning. He gives the example of a woman who has agreed to go on a first date with a man. Though she does not try to prevent his acts of flirtation and

pronouncements of love or affection for her, at the same time she does not wish to make any kind of decision about the relationship. So what does she do? To keep enjoying the charm of the evening, she reduces the man's statements to their literal meaning only. When he says to her "I find you so attractive," she is careful not to accept any other meaning (such as I want to sleep with you, or I want to get serious with the relationship). When he takes her hand, she does not want to destroy the evening by withdrawing it, so pretends to herself that she has not noticed her hand is in his. Seeing her own body as a mere object has the effect of preserving her freedom. She has made no commitment; or at least, this is how she chooses to see it. However, in separating her body, or the "facts" of the situation, from her transcendent self (her true "I," if you like) she is creating a lie to serve a particular purpose: maintaining a sense of freedom or noncommitment.

Everyone operates between bad faith and good faith all the time, but Sartre says that it is possible through "self-recovery" to achieve authenticity, which simply means a person "being what they are." For such a person, candor "ceases to be his ideal and becomes instead his being." This does not happen naturally; a person becomes sincere, or what they are, only as a conscious act.

Freedom and relationships

It may seem an obvious question, but why are human beings obsessed with relationships? Sartre's answer is that, although each of us is an individually conscious being, we also need others to see us and "make us real." The problem in relationships is that we try to turn other free consciousnesses (people) into objects, which is never possible.

The implication of Sartre's views is that our best chance for happiness or success in relationships is to recognize and allow the other's freedom, despite our natural wish to "own" them. We need to see the person as a free being, not simply the sum of their facticity. We can try to make others dependent on us emotionally or materially, but we can never possess their consciousness. "If Tristan and Isolde [the mythical love pair] fall madly in love because of a love potion," Sartre writes, "they are less interesting" – because a potion would cancel out their consciousness.

It is not solely the person we want to possess, as an object, but their conscious freedom to *want us*. Not even a pledge or a vow measures up to this; in fact, these are nothing compared to the full giving of a person to another in spirit. As Sartre puts it, "the Lover wants to be 'the whole World' for the beloved." To the other person, "I must be the one whose function is to make the trees and water exist." We must represent to them the final limit of their

freedom, where they voluntarily choose to see no further. For ourselves, we want to be seen by the other not as an object, but as something limitless:

"I must no longer be seen on the ground of the world as a 'this' among other 'thises', but the world must be revealed in terms of me."

Romantic relationships are so potent, Sartre says, because they join together one person's state of Nothingness to another's Being. In plain terms, when we fall in love with someone they seem to fill a hole. We rely on the Other to make us exist (otherwise, we are the state of Nothing). Yet we are perpetually insecure in love because at any moment we can become, instead of the center of the lover's world, merely one thing among many. Thus, for Sartre this push and pull between objectivity and subjectivity are at the heart of all conflicts and unresolved issues in love. Relationships are a perpetual dance between lovers wanting to perceive each other's freedom and wanting to see each other as an object. Without the other being free, they are not attractive, yet if they are in not some way an object, we cannot have them. It is only in recognizing the other's total freedom that we can ever be said to possess them in any way. Perhaps, reducing ourselves to an object to be used by the other, but voluntarily, is in a strange way the height of being human, since it is a kind of giving that goes against the very nature of humans to be free – a gift like no other.

Sex and desire

Sartre sees sexual desire as having much less to do with the sexual organs than with states of being. We are sexual beings from birth to death, yet the sex organs do not explain our feelings of desire.

We do not desire someone merely for pleasure, or simply because they are a vessel for the pleasurable act of ejaculation; as noted above, we desire a *consciousness*. There is a big gap between normal desire and sexual desire, he points out. We can desire to drink a glass of water, and once we have drunk we are satisfied. It is that simple. But sexual desire *compromises* us, Sartre notes. Consciousness becomes "clogged" by desire; to put it another way, it invades us. We can let this happen or try to prevent it, but either way the sexual appetite is not the same as others, since it involves the mind, not only the body. We say that desire "takes hold of us" or "overwhelms us," phrases that we do not tend to use in relation to hunger or thirst, for instance.

Sartre likens sexual desire to being overcome by sleep, which is why we seem to have little power over it. Consciousness gives way to merely being a body, or in his words, "The being which desires is *making itself body*." At the same time, during sex we wish to make the other person only flesh (thus also

revealing ourselves as only flesh). Not only do we want the other person rid of all clothes and adornments, we want that body to be an *object*, no longer moving:

"Nothing is less 'in the flesh' than a dancer even though she is nude. Desire is an attempt to strip the body of its movements as of its clothing and to make it exist as pure flesh; it is an attempt to incarnate the Other's body."

The caress, Sartre says, "causes the Other's flesh to be born," awakens desire in them, and at the same time makes us realize ourselves as a body, one that belongs to the world. The interplay between mind and body he describes in this way: "consciousness is engulfed in a body which is engulfed in the world."

Final comments

For a person who said that appreciating one's freedom and state of being was more important than "bourgeois" achievements (he refused the Nobel prize, for instance), Sartre's achievements were great. Notwithstanding his remark that "Success is not important to freedom," could it be said that he left us with a recipe for success?

Clearly, yes. Apart from the broader ethic of individual freedom, the recipe is to "insert my action into the network of determinism." By this he meant that we must accept the milieu into which we have been born, yet be willing to transcend it. We must accept the grain of our particular universe, and yet be creative in our pursuit of a meaningful life. The whole of *Being and Nothingness* is a warning not to let the apparent facts of our existence dictate its style or nature. Who we are is always a project of our own making. Sartre himself lived out this philosophy. The death of his father when he was quite young meant that there was no pressure to model himself on his parent, and he felt free to invent himself as whatever person he wished.

Consistent with their refutation of all bourgeois or middle-class values, he and fellow philosopher Simone de Beauvoir never married or had children, but their union of minds made them one of the great couples of the twentieth century. For most of their lives they lived in apartments within a stone's throw of each other and would spend several hours a day together; they admitted that it was difficult to know which ideas in their writing originated with one or the other. Their thoughts on being, love, and relationships remain some of the most penetrating ever written.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Sartre was born in Paris in 1905. His father was a naval officer who died when his son was only a year old. Sartre was raised by his mother, a first cousin of philosopher and missionary Albert Schweitzer, and his grandfather, a doctor who provided him with a knowledge of the classics.

He attended the prestigious École Normale Supérieure, where his reading of Henri Bergson's *Time and Free Will* sparked his love of philosophy. He became deeply influenced by Hegel, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, and was well known at the École for his practical joking. In 1929 he met Simone de Beauvoir, who was at the Sorbonne. Their relationship would include affairs on both sides and the sharing of lovers of both sexes.

Sartre was conscripted during the Second World War, serving as a meteorologist. He became a prisoner of war and was later discharged from military service due to ill health. Being and Nothingness was a product of this rich period, as were *The Flies* (1943), *No Exit* (1944), and *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1944). He collaborated with existentialist Albert Camus briefly before working on *The Roads to Freedom* (1945), a trilogy of novels about the philosophical and political viewpoints on the war. Another landmark title is the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960).

Sartre traveled widely, visiting Cuba to meet Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara. In 1964 he refused the Nobel Prize for literature, but it was awarded to him in any case. His constant smoking and amphetamine use made his health deteriorate; he died in 1980 and is buried in Paris's Montparnasse Cemetery.