

Jean-Paul Sartre

(Part – 1)

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- *Being and Nothingness* can be characterized as a phenomenological investigation into the nature of what it is to be human
 - Thus it be seen as a continuation of, and expansion upon, themes characterising the early works of Sartre.
 - Sartre's distinction between two kinds of transcendence of the phenomenon of being.
 - (i) the transcendence of being, and
 - (ii) the second transcendence of consciousness.

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- This means that, starting with the phenomenon (that which is our conscious experience), there are two types of reality which lie beyond it, and are thus trans-phenomenal.
 - On the one hand, there is the being of the object of consciousness, and on the other, being of consciousness itself.
 - These define two types of being:
 - (i) the in-itself, and
 - (ii) the for-itself.
 - What differentiates them? : to bring out that which keeps them apart, involves understanding the phenomenology of **nothingness**.
 - This reveals consciousness as essentially characterisable through its power of negation, a power which plays a key role in our existential condition.

The Being of the Phenomenon and Consciousness

- In *Being and Time*, Heidegger presents the **phenomenon** as involving both a **covering** and a **disclosing** of being.
- For **Sartre**, the **phenomenon reveals**, rather than conceals, reality.
- What is the status of this reality?
- Sartre does not subscribe the phenomenalist option of viewing the world as a construct based upon the series of appearances.
- He points out that the being of the phenomenon is not like its essence;
- i.e. is not something which is apprehended on the basis of this series.

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- In this way, Sartre moves away from Husserl's conception of the essence as that which underpins the unity of the appearances of an object, to a Heideggerian notion of the being of the phenomenon as providing this grounding.
 - Just as the **being of the phenomenon** transcends the **phenomenon of being**
 - **Consciousness** also transcends the **being of the phenomenon**.
 - Sartre thus establishes that if there is perceiving, there must be a consciousness doing the perceiving.

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- How are **these two** transphenomenal forms of being related?
 - As opposed to a conceptualising consciousness in a relation of knowledge to an object, as in Husserl and the epistemological tradition he inherits, **Sartre introduces a relation of being: consciousness (in a pre-reflective form) is directly related to the being of the phenomenon.**
 - This is Sartre's version of Heidegger's ontological relation of being-in-the-world.

'Being' in Sartre and Heidegger

- Sartre's account of Being differs from Heidegger's account of Being in two essential respects:
- (i) First, it is **not a practical relation**, and thus distinct from a relation to the **ready-to-hand**. Rather, it is simply given by consciousness.
- (ii) Second, it does not lead to any further question of Being. For Sartre, all there is to being is given in the transphenomenality of existing objects. But **Heidegger** holds that there is a further issue of the **'Being of all beings'** as for Heidegger.

Two Types of Being: 'for-itself' and 'in-itself'

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- As we have seen, both **consciousness** and the **being of the phenomenon** transcend the **phenomenon of being**.
 - As a result, there are two types of being (which Sartre, using Hegel's terminology,) calls the **(i) for-itself** ('pour-soi'), and **(ii) the in-itself** ('en-soi').
 - Sartre presents the in-itself as existing without justification independently of the for-itself and thus constituting an absolute 'plenitude'. It exists in a fully determinate and non-relational way. This fully characterizes its transcendence of the conscious experience.

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- In contrast with the in-itself, the for-itself is mainly characterised by a lack of identity with itself.
 - This is a consequence of the following. Consciousness is always 'of something', and therefore defined in relation to something else.
 - It has no nature beyond this and is thus completely translucent. Insofar as the for-itself always transcends the particular conscious experience (because of the spontaneity of consciousness), any attempt to grasp it within a conscious experience is doomed to failure.

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- Indeed, as we have already seen in the distinction between pre-reflective and reflective consciousness, a conscious grasp of the first (pre-reflective) transforms it.
 - This means that it is not possible to identify the for-itself, since the most basic form of identification, i.e. with itself, fails.
 - This picture is clearly one in which the problematic region of being is that of the for-itself, and that is what *Being and Nothingness* focuses upon.

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- Indeed, insofar Sartre has rejected the notion of a grounding of all beings in Being, one may ask how something like a relation of being between consciousness and the world is possible.
 - This issue translates in terms of understanding the meaning of the totality formed by the for-itself and the in-itself and its division into these two regions of being.
 - By addressing this latter issue, Sartre finds the key concept that enables him to investigate the nature of the for-itself.

Nothingness

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- One of the most original contributions of Sartre's metaphysics lies in his analysis of the notion of nothingness and the claim that it plays a central role at the heart of being.
 - Sartre discusses the example of entering a café to meet Pierre and discovering his absence from his usual place. Sartre talks of this absence as 'haunting' the café. Importantly, this is not just a psychological state, because a 'nothingness' is really experienced. The nothingness in question is also not simply the result of applying a logical operator, negation, to a proposition. For it is not the same to say that there is no rhinoceros in the café, and to say that Pierre is not there. The first is a purely logical construction that reveals nothing about the world, while the second does. Sartre says it points to an objective fact.

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- However, this objective fact is not simply given independently of human beings. Rather, it is produced by consciousness.
 - Thus Sartre considers the phenomenon of destruction.
 - When an earthquake brings about a landslide, it modifies the terrain. If, however, a town is thereby annihilated, the earthquake is viewed as having destroyed it.
 - For Sartre, there is only destruction insofar as humans have identified the town as 'fragile'.

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- This means that it is the very negation involved in characterising something as destructible which makes destruction possible. How is such a negation possible?
 - The answer lies in the claim that the power of negation is an intrinsic feature of the intentionality of consciousness.
 - To further identify this power of negation, let us look at Sartre's treatment of the phenomenon of questioning. When I question something, I posit the possibility of a negative reply. For Sartre, this means that I operate a nihilation of that which is given: the latter is thus 'fluctuating between being and nothingness'

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- Sartre then notes that this requires that the questioner be able to detach himself from the causal series of being.
 - And, by nihilating the given, he detaches himself from any deterministic constraints. And Sartre says that 'the name (...) [of] this possibility which every human being has to secrete a nothingness which isolates it (...) is freedom'.
 - Our power to negate is thus the clue which reveals our nature as free. Below, we shall return to the nature of Sartre's notion of freedom.