

**Explain Sartre's distinction between being in-itself and being for-itself. Discuss how this relates to the human mind as nothingness, and to human freedom and responsibility.**

"We set out upon our pursuit of being, and it seemed to us that the series of our questions had led us to the heart of being. But behold, at the moment when we thought we were arriving at the goal, a glance cast on the question itself has revealed to us suddenly that we are encompassed with nothingness. The permanent possibility of non-being, outside us and within, conditions our questions about being".<sup>1</sup>

Sartrean philosophy is permeated by his concept of nothingness, which constitutes a thread linking his ideas of the being in-itself (the in-itself), the being for-itself (the for-itself), consciousness and freedom. It is impossible to comprehend these concepts without an understanding of nothingness which Sartre refers to in the sense of non-being.

What exactly do these peculiar Sartrean concepts mean and how are they related? For Sartre, the in-itself appears to represent a stagnation, something devoid of meaning or justification. It is a being that just is, a being of phenomenon or things, an object of consciousness. When de-humanised by the gaze of "the other", a conscious individual forfeits the ability to transcend itself and is objectified as the "in-itself". The in-itself is a distinct mode of being which eventually becomes re-united with the for-itself by a "synthetic connection".<sup>2</sup> The in-itself lacks consciousness and any sense of possibility, transcendence and anticipation. It can thus never become something else and is incapable of comprehending its existence or possibilities. Negation is alien to it. "This means that by itself, it cannot even be what it is not; we have seen indeed that it can encompass no negation. It is full positivity. It knows no otherness; it never posits itself as other-than-another-being".<sup>3</sup>

The "synthetic connection" referred to by Sartre is "...nothing other than the For-itself itself. The For-itself, in fact, is nothing but a pure nihilation of the In-Itself; it is like a hole of being in the heart of Being".<sup>4</sup> We can see how the concept of nothingness is at the core of Sartrean philosophy. It is only by the realisation of what is not, can something attain reality. "The for-itself has no reality save that of being the nihilation of being".<sup>5</sup>

Consciousness is the essential characteristic of the for-itself, the individual human being. It is a consciousness of a lack of being, a lack of coincidence with itself. The for-itself nihilates itself in order to bring out the possibility of non-being or nothingness, thus "The being by which nothingness

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1 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943), *Being and Nothingness*, trans Hazel. E. Barnes (Routledge 2003), p 29.

2 Ibid, p 636.

3 Ibid, p 22.

4 Ibid, p 637.

5 Id.

comes into the world must be its own nothingness”.<sup>6</sup> The nothingness thereby enables the for-itself to define itself, having complete freedom to create itself. It is “...perpetually determining itself not to be the in-itself”.<sup>7</sup> By questioning itself, detaching itself from being, the for-itself brings nothing into existence. By negation, it is able to transcend its particular facticity, the “givens” in its life. “The given is nothing other than the in-itself nihilated by the for-itself. And of the power of the For-Itself to transcend itself”.<sup>8</sup>

How exactly are consciousness and nothingness related? Consciousness is dependent for its existence upon its objects, it intends its objects. It is, however, separate from its objects and its actions which are outside of it and thus consciousness is empty. The in-itself is an object of consciousness. Because consciousness cannot be its object or its actions, it realises what it is not and this negation of its being (the in-itself) implies nothingness. Once the in-itself has been negated there is no object of consciousness and hence a nothingness arises. Consciousness can be viewed as the means by which nothingness comes into the world.

Sartre provides an example of the reality of nothingness in his illustration of the absence of his friend Pierre from a café.<sup>9</sup> Sartre describes the absence as an experience of a real nothingness, a perception of absence in a concrete form in a phenomenological sense. A conscious subject questions and doubts which signals a weakening of, and disengagement, from being, thereby causing a nothingness to arise in the world, in the absence of Pierre.

This break with being causes a cleavage to exist between past and present. A nothingness has arisen because nothing has slipped between past and present. What this means is that there is no prior determining state or motive that can influence the consciousness of the individual subject and in this sense it can be said that consciousness is empty, a nothingness. It is here that the link between nothingness and freedom becomes apparent. No prior determining characteristics are at play that define the nature of freedom, hence there is nothing to prevent the for-itself from exercising its freedom in a complete sense. “Freedom is the human being putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness”.<sup>10</sup>

It is precisely because consciousness is empty, a nothingness, that there are no causal states within consciousness thereby enabling the for-itself to have complete freedom to re-create itself. The for-itself exists beyond its causes and motives, “...these causes are already transcendent objects for my consciousness. They are outside it”.<sup>11</sup> The for-itself is thus free to choose nothingness and this

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6 Ibid, p 47.

7 Ibid, p 109.

8 Gardner, Sebastian (2009) *Sartre's Being and Nothingness* (Continuum International Publishing Group), p 159.

9 Above, n 1, p 50.

10 Ibid, p 52.

11 Ibid, p 461.

freedom precedes its choice. "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from 'human reality'".<sup>12</sup> Freedom is my existence and my mode of being and has no essence. The for-itself is negating its facticity in an attempt to reach a state that currently is not.

The Sartrean concept of freedom stresses the primacy of ontological freedom as opposed to freedom in the sense of the power to achieve a goal. This basically means that freedom consists in consciousness' ability to escape a present situation, irrespective of whether an actual escape has been effected. The choice of the for-itself co-incides with the upsurge of the for-itself, the choice being constantly renewed and thus not made at any particular time. The for-itself is "condemned to be free"<sup>13</sup>, in the sense it must always choose itself. "To say that the for-itself has to be what it is, to say that it is what it is not while not being what it is, to say that in its existence precedes and conditions essence...all this is to say one and the same thing: to be aware that man is free".<sup>14</sup>

The Sartrean theory of responsibility is essentially vicarious, in that the individual for-itself's sense of responsibility transcends to an awareness of, and consequent duty towards, world responsibility. As Gardner explains, "...because I am not the foundation of my being, and so must transcendently 'take up' the world on which I depend in order to discharge my obligation to be...because there is nothing else that might assume responsibility for the world, I am obliged to do so".<sup>15</sup>

This responsibility is the inevitable consequence of Sartre's condemnation of man to freedom, man who "carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being".<sup>16</sup> There is thus a direct correlation between the for-itself's choices and actions and its consequences for the world, an authorship which cannot avoid its ramifications. The for-itself's choices are thus choices for the world, he is the one "...by whom it happens that there is a world".<sup>17</sup>

It is therefore in anguish that the for-itself apprehends itself, precisely because it is not responsible for the foundation of its own being in the absence of a prior reality. Nothingness forces the for-itself to continually choose values for itself and for the rest of the world. It cannot shift the blame for its choices onto anything or anyone else. "...the peculiar character of human reality is that it is without excuse".<sup>18</sup>

The preceding evaluation has revealed the importance of the concept of nothingness to Sartrean existential thought. Nothingness reveals itself as the link

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12 Ibid, p 49.

13 Ibid, p 462.

14 Ibid, p 461.

15 Above, n 8, p 167.

16 Above, n 1, p 574.

17 Id.

18 Ibid, p 575.

between human consciousness, freedom and responsibility. Nothingness continues to haunt being and in this sense can be said to form a component of the real,<sup>19</sup> an actual perceptual experience. It appears somewhat of a paradox that in order to achieve transcendence and thus absolute freedom, that a nothingness, a lack, a defective for-itself plays such an important part. However, the concept of nothingness is indispensable to existential philosophy. It enables an understanding of the claim that no objective a priori values exist and that man's freedom, choice, and transcendence are the sole source of values. For if nothing defines existence, nothing hampers the individual in the creation of values both in an individual sense and for mankind as a whole.

### **Bibliography**

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19 Ibid, p 36.