

Comparing and Contrasting Being, Non-being and Nothingness

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Abstract: Being is a broad concept that covers subjective and objective features of reality and existence. The history of its philosophy goes back to pre-Socratics when they attempted to evolve a classification of beings. Since then the notion of being has had various meaning in the Middle Ages, Age of reason or the transcendental view. This paper mainly focuses on existentialists view on being, non-being and nothingness.

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Introduction

Many of Existentialist philosophers and continental philosophers such as Sartre, Hegel and Heidegger have written on the concept of being. For Hegel the concept of being refers to both the being of objects (being in itself) and the being of people (Geist). Being-in-itself is the self-contained and fully realized being of objects. As Hegel believes being stripped of all predicates is simply nothing, he is not hopeful for delineating a "meaning" of being.

Husserl's phenomenology like Hegel attempts to overcome the traditional metaphysical dualism between subject and object, in its search of a new foundation for human knowledge, not on an ideal world but on a world based on human experience. Heidegger asks the ancient question "What is man?" and refuses the traditional philosophical answers because he says they aim to reduce all philosophical problems to the essence of man.

On the other hand, Heidegger believed that since Plato the concept of "being" has been misunderstood by Western philosophy because the concept of being has focused on entities and their properties; For example, Aristotle categorized beings into ten classes, one category of substance that exist independently (referring to man and tree) and nine categories existing dependent to or within something else (like time and place). In contrast to all ancient definitions of being, Heidegger attempts to focus on how to expressively ask the question of the meaning of being. It is paradoxical that he refers to the meaning of being as the greatest because it includes everything that is, and the least as no particular thing can be said of it. *Being and Time* is Heidegger's major work that is devoted to the expression of Dasein ("there/here-being") referring to the experience of being that is peculiar to human beings. The being of Dasein is characterized by the fundamental structure: being-in-the-world. Heidegger argues that "Dasein always

understands itself in terms of its existence- in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not to be itself. For him, Dasein has either chosen these possibilities itself, or got itself into them, or grown up in them already." (52)

Sartre is influenced by Heidegger's philosophy- despite his some misunderstandings. His major work *Being and Nothingness* is divided into four parts dealing with a) phenomenological ontology, b) a focus on Self and the category of For-itself and its connection with In-itself. c) a focus on human relations, or Being-for-others, and d) the topics Having, Doing and Being.

Rose states that "the true doctrine of Sartrean philosophy" is that man as a being "is absolutely and unconditionally free and that determinism is false." (2) For liberationists, the human being is free because he is able to choose his own values and projects even if he resists this freedom it is again a kind of choosing. Rose adds that "Human beings and objects are just different types of things; humans are able to determine their own actions through an act of volition which is uncaused." (3) For existentialists one of the main characteristics of man as a being is accepting his freedom of choice and its further consequences.

Macann claims that for Sartre "Being no longer features as an 'over and beyond' of what appears but as that infinite multiplicity of appearances which, together, go to make up the reality of the object- the object seen from all possible points of view. In other words, being and the appearing now appear to be one and the same- and yet not altogether so." (112) For Sartre many relationships are created by how that person makes them feel about themselves by how they look at them. He is against the fact that people identify themselves with "the look" of the other instead of experiencing their subjectivity. He detects a state of emotional alienation. For him, the person must control the other to keep his own being. Therefore, the

purpose of either participant is not to exist, but to maintain the other participant's looking at them. For Sartre this system is often mistakenly called love, but in fact it is a kind of emotional alienation and a denial of freedom through conflict with the other. In his book, beings are enslaved by "the look" they have to bear and miss their freedom.

As described, there has been long debate on true definition of being. Some ancient philosophers has denied if the concept of being has any meaning at all because they only define an object's existence by its relation to other objects, and actions it carries out. Therefore, being and nothingness are closely related.

Hartnack writes that Hegel was one of the followers of Heraclitus who identified the nature of the infinite that led to Hegel's understanding of the inherent contradictoriness and negativity of reality. (16) For Hegel reality is becoming or process, and that being and nothingness are mere empty abstractions. Hartnack quotes for Hegel "... there is no proposition of Heraclitus which I have not adopted in my logic." (17) Hegel cites Heraclitus's translated fragment in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* and is very impressed by his "Being is not more than Non-being", which he interprets to mean "Sein und Nichts sei dasselbe- Being and non-being are the same". For Hegel concepts such as pure being and pure non-being or nothingness are mere abstractions from the reality of becoming.

In Adorno, Hegel discovered a form of modern consciousness of emptiness, or as he calls it, "nothingness". (199) Morton claims that "for Hegel, nothingness is a state of pure negation, devoid of positive determinations. It is, therefore, a dialectical dead end, or rather, a horrifyingly stillborn, stunted false start". Morton maintains that staying with this nothingness is not a negative state; rather it is "a premature retirement of Spirit in a pasture like a night in which all cows are black". (2) The concept of nothing or zero is significant in the history of the West as it says zero is like nothing by itself but beside other numbers it is a cornerstone of capitalism.

"Non-being" is the other philosophic notion that denotes either absence of something, or all things non-existent in reality, or non-existent reality. For Hegel the notion of non-being exists only on the surface of being (-in-itself). One reason Heidegger feels obliged to confront the problem of being and non-being is that Dasein. Nonbeing, in Heidegger, is the gateway to being. Stephney quotes Heidegger that "anxiety renders manifest Non-being." (327) He also states that "it is precisely this confrontation with nonbeing that allows Dasein to realize the awesome fact that beings exist: In the bright night of non-being of anxiety, there occurs for the first time the pristine openness of beings as such: that they are beings and not non-being." (328)

Sartre also claims "It is evident that non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation." (7) The form of manifestation for being is something and the non-being manifests itself in the form of nothing.

As stated above, Sartre defines two kinds of being: one kind is the physical existence of things such as a tree, and the other kind is consciousness. Solomon quotes from Sartre that this second kind of being is nothing, since consciousness cannot be an object of consciousness and can possess no essence. (286) Sartre's equating nothingness with being leads to creation from nothing.

For Heidegger a more reliable analysis of being would consider "that on the basis of which beings are already understood," besides, it refers to how things become intelligible to human beings, by virtue of being part of an ontological world – i.e., a pre-interpreted and holistically structured background of meaning. This understanding is said to be first disclosed to human beings through their practical encounters with things and other people, as well as through language. Therefore, for Heidegger being is shown to be intimately linked with temporality; the relationship between them is investigated by means of an analysis of human existence. He has raised explicitly the question concerning the "sense of being," and believes that the crisis of Western civilization has traces in that everyone has "forgetfulness of being." For Heidegger being is surrounded on all sides by nothingness, like a ball suspended in a void. So every being is said to be surrounded by little "pockets" of nothingness; in other words, nothingness is within being, for example, distance. (54–55) Thus, Heidegger argued that nothing is what shapes being generally. This reveals the most fundamental, transcendent reality, beyond all notions of what-is slipping over into what-is-not. Even in the historical tradition, according to Heidegger, nothing is shown to be the concomitant rather than the opposite of being.

Nothingness for Sartre is different, so some examples are used to clarify his notion. Sartre offers the idea of wallet to clarify the notion of nothingness; he say when you look into your wallet expecting to find a certain amount of money, and finding that you have much less than expected. For instance, you expect to have 1500 francs but finding only 1300 francs. Here Sartre insists that it is also correctly described if we emphasize on seeing the absence of the expected 1500 (or 200). For Sartre you experience the absence of some cash. (10) Then he goes on and gives another example of absence of Pierre from the café; it is described that they have an appointment with Pierre who is very punctual but due to a half hour delay he is gone. The full being of café is described with its patrons, its tables, its booths, its mirrors, its

light, its smoky atmosphere, and the sounds of voices, rattling saucers, and footsteps “ I look at the room, the patrons, and I say, He is not here” (11). Sartre emphasizes that the absence of Pierre is not just the case and it is correct to say that the experiencing of the absence of Pierre in the café is the matter. This is why Sartre claims nothingness to be the opposite of being in-itself: the nothingness we experience is dependent on our awareness. However, nothingness is an inseparable part of the world we experience. Sartre says “Nothingness can be nihilated only on the foundation of being; if nothingness can be given, it is neither before or after being, nor in a general way outside of being. Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being - like a worm.” (21) The absence of Pierre represents one kind of nothingness in the world, which Sartre sometimes calls a nonbeing – the absence of a specific thing.

Sartre asserts that we live within an overall condition of nothingness (*no thing-ness*) therefore we have free consciousness. Paradoxically, we live within our being in the physical world and have to constantly make choices. For existentialists, choice and subjectivity represent the limitations of freedom. Darnell states that for Sartre “original freedom is consciousness, which is putting ee (one's) past out of play by secreting (one's) own nothingness” (15) In order to escape the responsibility of their deeds, they define some excuses such as necessity, destiny, faith, fate, determinism, etc. Our choices are bound to physical world with all their deficits, so some actions are always required. These apparent limitations lead to failed dreams of completion. Sartre says that we are unable to bridge the void between the being and the nothingness that coincide in our self. In order to escape all quests, we should try to fulfill them but there will be failure. The solution that Sartre offers is that we should force order onto nothingness and describe failure in terms of bad faith and false

consciousness. He argues that any person of a serious nature struggles between either the conscious desire for peaceful self-fulfillment through physical actions and social roles or the more pure and raging spontaneity of no thing consciousness. It means we believe that we live within a world that we have planned for or attempt to be free and be in quest of new paths.

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