

PHIL 181 - Lecture #8: Sartre

Introduction

Sartre is the first and only of the figures in this course to call himself an "Existentialist." While Sartre's philosophical work can be frustrating, occasionally intellectually careless, and sometimes almost as difficult to navigate as Heidegger, almost all will agree that he sets out a grand and important vision of human existence. His work is also full of psychological insights and stunning phenomenological analyses.

Background

Sartre is perhaps the best-known philosopher of the twentieth century. He received a traditional philosophical education in Paris, after which he taught at various French high schools (lycees). In 1933-34 he studied at the French Institute in Berlin where he learned Husserl and Heidegger. During World War II, he was a member of the French Resistance, and did spend time in a German prison in 1940. While in prison he taught Heidegger to the other prisoners. His most famous philosophical work was also published during the war, namely *Being and Nothingness* in 1943. It shows a strong influence of Heidegger, and concerns itself with many of the same projects that Heidegger had in *Being and Time*. "The Humanism of Existentialism," Sartre's most popular writing, was published in 1945, although it is the only publication which Sartre regretted and he repudiated many of the claims he had made.

As for his later works, Sartre worked on an ethics of authenticity in the late 1940s. This effort was abandoned, and the work he had done was posthumously published as *Notebooks for an Ethics*. He also attempted to graft a Hegel-informed Marxism onto Existentialism. This was published in 1960 as *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. His friend Raymond Aron called it an impossible union of Kierkegaard and Marx. It was mostly Kierkegaard with a little bit of Marx grafted on. Both of these projects have been deemed very problematic and neither is regarded to have worked out

It is not as if Sartre's later work was consistently panned, as he awarded the Nobel prize in literature for his fictional work. He refused both the award and the cash grant that came with it. He said that he didn't want to be seen as approving of the "bourgeois" values he associated with the prize. He thought that it turned authors into "living institutions" and statues.

Phenomenological Ontology

Like Heidegger, Sartre aims to give a phenomenological-descriptive account of being, avoiding any kind of explanatory metaphysics. Sartre takes up many things from

Heidegger including his anti-dualism and his idea of being-in-the-world. They also both thought that we endow objects with meaning through our interactions with them, and that value does not exist outside of human activity. But unlike Heidegger, Sartre is not interested in a critique of metaphysics. He rather gives it kind of Kantian dismissal, acknowledging that a such a noumenal realm, if it exists, is beyond our experience and pointless to talk about.

The defining idea of existentialism, if there is one, is this famous statement by Sartre: for human beings "*Existence precedes essence.*" Unlike a tool, or a stone, which wholly in-itself and defined by its essence (if a hammer loses its head and cannot hammer nails, it is no longer a hammer), human beings have no determinate essence or pregiven nature. We must create an essence ourselves through our actions.

A key idea in his philosophy is that of negation. Sartre states that being-in-itself is undifferentiated, and that any differentiation is the result of consciousness. When we question the world, this introduces the possibility of a negative answer. So, consciousness is responsible for the negation that makes distinctions possible ("All determination is negation" - Spinoza & Hegel). Nothingness is not an abstract idea for Sartre, he maintains that nothingness is a phenomenological reality; that we experience nothingness directly (e.g. we experience Pierre's absence). The reason consciousness can do this is because it is, at its core, a nothingness.

At this point, Sartre's fundamental categories of being should be introduced. One type of being is **in-itself** (*en-soi*): it is solid, passive, inert, and self-contained, as well as self-identical and re-identifiable (constant identity over time). This is the being of objects. The other main type of being is **for-itself** (*pour-soi*): it is fluid, dynamic, and changes over time (non-self-identical). It is the negation, the opposite, of the in-itself. Negation in this sense is a striving or becoming. This is the being only conscious things can have.

Human beings are a combination of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, and this is the ontological basis of our *ambiguity*. The in-itself is our facticity; it is the "givens" of our situation: language, environment, prior choices, physical bodies, etc. The for-itself is our transcendence, freedom, possibility. Consciousness is a gap between my in-itself and for-itself, because the for-itself can never be the same as the in-itself. I am always interpreting and thus transcending my facticity on the basis of my projects. My facticity is never available for identification because it is always transcended and viewed anew by the for-itself. This is not a substance dualism (mind-matter, Cartesian) ontology, but rather perhaps a spontaneity/inertia dualism.

Another important concept for Sartre is that of "The Other." Phenomenologically, I only become aware of my self through the "look" of the Other. When I look through the keyhole, I am only aware of the scene in front of me until I hear the footsteps. When I am made aware of my position, I feel shame. Shame is here an example of an

experience of oneself as an object for the Other as a subject, as I become aware simultaneously of my being-in-itself and the Other's being-for-itself. I am temporarily deprived of my being-for-itself. I feel dehumanized by the Other's look and objectified. But I will fight back, reasserting my being-for-itself by attempting to objectify the Other. Sartre sees this interaction as the pattern of human relationships generally, with people trying to assert their for-itself, their freedom, by objectifying others and subjugating their freedom. One can see that how this makes providing an ethics where people respect each other and live in harmony quite difficult.

The last crucial category that should be mentioned in this section is that of projects. Projects are important for Sartre, as people create their essences by carrying out their "projects." Projects are our life-defining plans, ones that are freely chosen. Through these projects we organize our self-understanding and our interpretation of the world.

Psychology

Sartre has a radical anti-mentalistic psychology, one that goes away from the internal realm of existence. Good examples of this are how Sartre views images and emotions. "Images" are not miniature pictures of perceptual objects in the mind, but a way of relating to items "in the world" in an imaginative manner by rendering them "present-absent." You acknowledge that the image is "there for you" while at the same time that it is not "really there." "Emotions" are not inner states but ways of relating to the world. They involve physical changes to ourselves, and Sartre calls them "magical" attempts to transform the world. For example, getting angry at striking out in baseball is an attempt to conjure up a solution to a problematic state by getting "worked up." Sartre thinks that we are responsible for our emotions just like our actions, because they are just another way that we choose to relate to the world.

Another main concept that affects psychology is our freedom. It is an inescapable result of our ontological nature. We are "condemned to be free." We are not an in-itself but the transcendence of our self, as we are always able to freely assume a variety of interpretive stances towards our facticity. Because of this freedom, we are responsible for our actions and thoughts, our prereflective consciousness (emotions), and even our "world." Our "world" being the interpretation, meaning, and value of things in our world that result from our life-orienting choice or project. There is absolutely nothing about my condition determines who I will be, e.g., though short, thin, and frightened, I still choose whether to be a coward or not through my action. I can always transform my condition through my actions. I interpret my facticity on the basis of what kind of person I choose to be.

Inextricable linked with freedom is the concept of anguish. Anguish results from awareness of many options, none of which is determined in advance. For example, if I am on a high precipice, I can act to protect myself, or I can be cavalier, or I can even

throw myself over the edge. This frightening awareness of my own power and responsibility is what leads to one feeling anguished.

With the use of these concepts, Sartre aims to provide an existential psychoanalysis. It is an attempt to uncover from one's actions the original choice or fundamental project that structures one's life. Abstractly speaking, the fundamental project is always the (impossible) synthesis of consciousness and being, to become God, that is, to be a complete (in-itself), free (for-itself) being. But the for-itself, being nothing, can never be an in-itself as it always knows that it can transcend any choice of in-itself. The result that Sartre draws from this is that people should repudiate the "the spirit of seriousness." The spirit of seriousness is an attitude that regards values as transcendent givens and attributes the value of things to their material constitution. But the alternative attitude to take is not given by Sartre, and hence left open.

"Bad Faith" and Authenticity

One of the most well-known concepts of Sartre's work is that of bad faith. Bad faith is the result of a strong tendency in the tensional structure of human existence. We exist in a metastable state between the tension of our facticity and past choices and our constant freedom to transcend them. Bad faith can result from a denial from either side of those tensions; by denying one's freedom of action or interpretation or denying some aspect of one's facticity. Whatever the case, it is always a case of self-deception. By making excuses or explaining away past actions, by denying one's in-itself, one is deceiving oneself and one is in bad faith. On the other hand, sincerity is also a kind of bad faith for Sartre. By affirming one's being-in-itself as one's total identity, by making oneself a *thing* of a certain kind, one is denying one's for-itself and one's transcendence. One can see that bad faith is a very difficult thing to avoid for human beings. As stated before, it is the result of our desire to achieve the completeness of being-in-itself while maintaining the freedom of being-for-itself. This desire for completed being-for-itself or the "in-and-for-itself" is what Sartre calls "the desire to be God." As also previously stated, this is an impossible task. We are always oscillating between understanding ourselves as in-itself and for-itself.

The way to avoid bad faith for Sartre is to live in an *authentic* manner. But there is little clue in *Being and Nothingness* on how to avoid bad faith and live authentically. It does require a full awareness of the tension between one's being in-itself and for-itself. One must not only own up to one's past actions and choices, but also see that oneself is free to choose among many possibilities and that one is not defined by those past actions. Other than these statements there is not much guidance on how to live authentically.

Close Textual Discussion - Passages and Main Points

Passage: it concerns the famous of example of the absence of Pierre and its cause and phenomenological character. It is on pages 315-6 “But if we wish to decide with certainty ... which is conditioned and supported by non-being.”

- It should be noted that Sartre is relying here on an analogy to Gestalt psychology and its distinction between background and foreground (the example in class is that of the vase/kissing couple).
- Q: Is Pierre’s absence part of the experience or an abstract reflection on the experience?
- Yes, it is part of the experience. He feels the absence of Pierre in going around the cafe, it is the absence of Pierre that occupies the foreground as he searches, while the rest of the cafe provides the background.
- Not only is it part of the experience, but Sartre is responsible for Pierre’s absence. It is his expectation that Pierre will be there that results in him noticing that Pierre is absent, and he is responsible for that expectation.
- Pierre’s absence is not just a feature of Sartre’s “Cartesian” subjectivity, however. Pierre is not absent because Sartre desires or believes it to be so. Sartre does not change where Pierre is with his mind. But the situation relative to Sartre and his projects means that the being of the café includes Pierre’s absence.
- To reiterate, this is not a case of psychological analysis, but rather phenomenological ontology. Phenomenological investigation of the life-world leads Sartre to conclude that Pierre’s absence is really existent in the life-world; nothingness is a way of being, not just a feature of negative judgment.

Passage: the example of the flirting woman as being in bad faith. It is on pages 332-3: “Take the example of the woman ... he can find himself abruptly faced with the other.”

- Q: Why is she in bad faith?
- She refuses to make the decision and ignores the sexual dimension of the situation.
- She is denying her responsibility for where she is at, for her interpretation and ignorance of some of the facts of the situation. She wants to delay making a choice, and does not acknowledge that this is in fact a choice.
- She objectifies herself and denies her facticity, in that she regards her own hand as not part of her and under her control as well as her whole body and she is only considering herself in intellectual terms. She is denying part of her in-itself.
- There was lots of discussion over what exactly bad faith is. It is pointed out that the monk or religious ascetic is not necessarily in bad faith like the woman in the example, because while they do not follow their sexual desires like the woman, they do not ignore that they have the desires. They recognized that they have the desires and *choose* to interpret them as temptations to be avoided.
- It is important to remember that one cannot choose consciously that one will be in bad faith, because knowing you are in bad faith would defeat the purpose of being in bad faith. It is rather a sneaky phenomenon that it not explicitly chosen and usually not explicitly recognized. Nevertheless, it is something one can come to recognize,

and it is a result of the projects one chooses, and in these senses bad faith is a project one is responsible for.

Passage: on Others and how they affect us. It is on pages 348-352 as Chapter 7: The Existence of Others.

- He becomes an object for himself when he realizes that the Other is looking at him. He was not aware of himself before, but with the presence of the other he is now aware of being a certain kind of object (an object to be ashamed of, proud of, etc.).
- Q: Why does Sartre say that one is “stripped” of their transcendence?
- He sees himself through the Other’s eyes, he loses his freedom by seeing himself as only an object. He also becomes aware of the Other *as a subject* for whom he is an object. It is an ingenious phenomenological proof of the existence of other “minds” or selves.
- It is not just about being looked at or being aware of other people’s presences because a teacher is aware of the gaze of many people, but is not viewing herself/himself as objectified like the person staring through the keyhole. It also has to do with the nature of the attention paid by other people as well as with the action that is being taken by the individual in question.