DEVELOPING CONSCIENCE AND EMPATHY FROM \textit{BEING AND NOTHINGNESS}

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INTRODUCTION

This project was born out of the desire to use the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre to construct an anti-totalitarian political theory. Sartre’s stress on humanity’s radical freedom and his discussions of our fundamental but futile attempts to objectify each other seem like fertile ground for both an explanation of totalitarianism and a philosophical means for combating our inclinations toward it. However, such a project would be an enormous undertaking—and well outside of the time and space permitted for this work. The scope of the project was narrowed to the possibility of extrapolating an ethical theory out of a single work of Sartre’s: Being and Nothingness. The revised goal was to see if Being and Nothingness might contain the seeds for an ethics that might, in the future, be incorporated into a political theory. This, too, proved to be too large a project to accomplish in this context, and so further modifications were made. The finished product, then, is the attempt to produce a possible groundwork for the extrapolation of an ethical theory out of Being and Nothingness, focusing specifically on the possibility of a latent theory of conscience and empathy in the work. The goal of this project is therefore not to score a touchdown, but to move the ball a few yards down the field.

There are two easily understood and commonly discussed problems with any ethical examination of Sartre’s work. First, though Sartre promised to write an ethical companion to Being and Nothingness, he never did—and, further, his later discussions of ethics in the context of his ontology seen to modify (or, perhaps, abandon) that ontology. Second, it may be simply impossible to founded an ethics on a philosophy in which values...
are freely chosen and without a firm, objective foundation. For Sartre, there appears to be no objective difference between, for example, dedicating your life to missionary work in Africa and drinking yourself to oblivion every night in front of the television. Within the context of Sartre’s philosophy, it would be difficult to objectively claim that one is better than the other. Further, Sartre himself (and others) tried to advance the notion that an ethics might be found by treating freedom as the highest value, and by willing freedom universally. This, too, is problematic, however, as no adequate explanation is given as to why this is the case. However, there is another significant problem with Sartre’s ontology that seems to have been overlooked. In Sartre’s ontology (as it appears in *Being and Nothingness*) there appears to be a considerable hole in his description of human beings’ interaction with others and how such interactions relate to moral values. It seems as though Sartre’s description leaves us with no means of making moral judgments about ourselves that are not directly from other people that we encounter, and leaves us with no means of making moral judgments about our actions as we are doing them, or interrupting those actions without direct intervention from another person. It is the primary goal of this paper to fix this hole with a theory of conscience and empathy—and to simultaneously show that these theories do not fundamentally clash with the rest of the ontology. The secondary goal is to show that this may point us in the direction of an ethical theory that, perhaps, might avoid the pitfalls of having to argue that freedom is the highest value and must be willed universally.

I will begin with a summary and explication of the relevant aspects of the ontology found in *Being and Nothingness*. After some general comments about possible
difficulties with the text and Sartre’s phenomenological method, the major topics I will discuss are as follows: I will discuss the relationship between consciousness and being, and how this relationship leads Sartre to propose two ontological categories: being-in-itself and being-for-itself. After explaining the two categories and how they relate to each other, I will examine the critical aspects of Sartre’s philosophy relating to being-for-itself: bad faith, value, action, and Sartre’s notion of the project. Then I will deal with the problem of the existence of the Other in Sartre’s ontology, and Sartre’s own ethical conclusions and speculations. From there I shall attempt to break new ground. After re-examining some aspects of the ontology, I will try to construct a theory of conscience that remains true to the rules of the ontology, and, hopefully, addresses some of the problems that arise in Sartre’s description of our interactions with other people. Finally, I will further speculate on how it may be possible for a form of empathy to arise within this context.

Caveats

There are two things that must be understood before any venture into the ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. The first is that Sartre will, if given two possible but divergent roads to travel, inevitably trek through the wilderness between them. Throughout *Being and Nothingness* he shows a committed (and sometimes contradictory and frustrating) fondness for the middle ground between any opposing ideas. The lines between these ideas are not so distinct for Sartre, and he will oscillate between seemingly mutually exclusive positions freely. Is Sartre an idealist or a realist? As we shall see, he is both and neither. Is freedom relative or absolute? It will appear at
times as though it is the former and at times the latter. Blurring these lines and forging more subtle positions is part of the charm and difficulty of *Being and Nothingness*, but Sartre does appear to be firmly dedicated to eating his cake and having it, too. This is something that must be accepted prior to any examination of the work lest one get tangled in his many seeming-contradictions.

The second difficulty present in *Being and Nothingness* is possibly responsible for the first: Sartre’s ontology does attempt to be systematic, but as a phenomenologist he explicates it not through argumentation but (most of the time) through description and endeavoring to show how his contentions harmonize with experience. Further, the various aspects of the system are simultaneous or mutually interdependent—there is no firm A to be followed by B, C, D, and so on. Each aspect of the ontology relates to the others in such a way that it is difficult even for Sartre to explain in a linear fashion. This leads to repetition, addendums, clarifications, foreshadowings, references to previous and later sections, and, as mentioned, a fair amount of apparent contradictions. Sartre’s ontology is, to be blunt, a Gordian knot that even he could not untangle without multiple swings. But this is the nature of complex systems: if one attempts to map it out, one has to choose where to begin. For better or worse, this particular untangling begins with consciousness.

**Consciousness and Being**

Consciousness is typically thought of as synonymous with mind: it resides somewhere in my head and makes me *me*. If there is thinking, consciousness is what thinks—it is behind all thoughts and states of mind. If I am conscious, I am awake and
ready for the world to interact with me. But Sartre’s understanding of consciousness is quite different from this common understanding.

Sartre builds upon Edmund Husserl’s notion that consciousness is intentional. That is, consciousness “is consciousness of something.”¹ To say that consciousness is intentional is to say that it always directs itself toward an object of thought. There is never a moment in which consciousness is not wrapped up in something else. For Sartre, consciousness is this being wrapped up in something else. If I were to wake up after fainting, for example, I would not simply regain consciousness. Rather, I would regain consciousness of. I would regain consciousness of being on the ground, of the sensory feeling of the ground, of someone looking down at me, of that person saying my name concern, of the pain in my head where I hit the asphalt, and so on. As my attention goes from one aspect of my experience to another, so goes my consciousness— that is to say, consciousness is this awareness. Even after what we might call a “hard reset” such as fainting or being knocked unconscious, consciousness does not restart as a passive state awaiting input. To be conscious is to have an object of consciousness—or, as Sartre states, the being of consciousness is the consciousness of being. Consciousness is not the me in my head that is aware of this and that or is daydreaming on the bus. Consciousness is nothing other than the act of awareness of some object.

At this point, Sartre breaks from Husserl. For Sartre, the intentionality of consciousness has interesting implications in terms of being—both its own being and the

being of objects external to consciousness. Sartre contends that if consciousness is always of something, then “transcendence is the constitutive structure of consciousness, that is, that consciousness is born supported by a being which is not itself.”

If consciousness is nothing other than the act of being aware of something, then the being of consciousness is necessarily dependent on that something of which it is aware. In other words, I need something to be conscious of in order to be conscious. And whatever that object is, it has to exist before the act of consciousness occurs: “To say that consciousness is consciousness of something is to say that it must produce itself as a revealed-revelation of a being which is not it and which gives itself as already existing when consciousness reveals it.”

Consciousness necessarily implies the existence of something other than, prior to, and independent of consciousness to stand as the object of consciousness. Without an object, there can be no consciousness.

Thus, for Sartre, if consciousness is intentional, objects must exist outside of consciousness.

After positing the existence of objects external to consciousness, Sartre tackles what he sees as a problem with prior treatments of the being of external objects (or what might be called being in general). He notes that being has often been erroneously considered to have an occult dimension—that is, that being somehow hides or is hidden. Sartre cites the unfortunate dualism in philosophy between “being” and “appearance”: that behind or within, for example, a particular pencil (the appearance of this pencil) lies hidden the greater essence of that pencil, all pencils, and/or Being itself. This dualism,

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2 BN, 23
3 BN, 24
4 Sartre refers to this as his own “ontological proof.”
Sartre writes, “is no longer entitled to any legal status within philosophy.” For decades prior to *Being and Nothingness* philosophy had been tasking itself with the elimination of this dualism—particularly, as Sartre notes, in the phenomenologies of Husserl and Martin Heidegger. In Sartre’s interpretation of such thought, the being of an object is the appearance: my pencil is as it appears to me. It does not hide an essence of “pencilness” or otherwise indicate a Platonic Form of “pencil” in some other realm. My pencil, as it appears to me, is what it is. However, no pencil (or any other object) can ever appear to me completely. I, in my limited capacity, cannot see all of it at once. No matter how fast I turn my pencil in my hands half of it is always facing away from me. Thus, if such a thing as “essence” exists, Sartre claims that it must be the sum of these limited appearances or points of view: “The essence of an [object] is no longer a property sunk in the cavity of this [object]; it is the manifest law which presides over the succession of appearances; it is the principle of the series.” As I try to see all of my pencil at once, I get an intuition of what the whole pencil is, though I cannot immediately experience it in its entirety. This “essence” is not hidden. It is, rather, manifested and alluded to in all of those limited snapshots of which I am capable. They all speak to the fact that there is more pencil to my pencil than I can experience at one time.

Furthermore, the potential or possible viewpoints of an object are limitless. I cannot really look at my pencil the exact same way twice. Constant changes in the environment (the light striking it, for example) and constant changes in my (physiologically and psychologically) ensure that. Sartre writes, “the [object] in fact can

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5 BN, 4
6 BN, 5
not be reduced to a finite series of manifestations since each one of them is a relation to a subject constantly changing.”⁷ But, while my current view of my pencil is finite (limited, incomplete, perspectival), it suggests an infinite stream of possible angles and viewpoints. In order for me to understand what my pencil is, these finite appearances must be transcended in the direction of the infinite series. That is, in order to know what my pencil is, I have to move past this or that or these particular viewpoints of it—the finite, subjective appearances—toward the objective, infinite “principle of the series.”⁸ The ability of consciousness to transcend the appearance (or phenomenon) is, ultimately, how we are able to “know” things—this transcending is how I come to know the meaning of “pencil.”

This may not seem so dissimilar to talk of forms or essences by previous philosophers, but Sartre is careful to state that these essences are not separable from the objects themselves. There is no hidden realm in which these essences roam, nor is there a special, grand Being in which all of these essences participate. The essence of my pencil is supported by this pencil. It is its possible viewing angles extended infinitely. It is an extrapolation based on the existence of this pencil, not a separate or privileged being in and of itself. “Since there is nothing behind the appearance,” Sartre writes, “and since it indicates only itself (and the total series of appearances), it cannot be supported by any being other than its own.”⁹ Unlike consciousness, which is dependent on the being of its object, the being of objects is completely in the objects. There is just my pencil.

⁷ BN, 5
⁸ BN, 6
⁹ BN, 6-7
appearing to me. There is no metaphysical voodoo occurring when I examine it—no hidden Being and no secret realms to be opened or indicated or otherwise gestured to by the mere comprehension of the object.

We should note, however, that when I look at my pencil there is something hidden from me, but it is not being. What is hidden, as mentioned, are the aspects of the pencil that are not at this moment appearing to me: whatever parts of it that I cannot see, its past, its future, etc. In the moment that I observe the pencil I am unaware of these aspects of it. These hidden aspects are, therefore, not in my mind at this time and, according to Sartre, they thus cannot be products of my mind. The fact that I cannot be aware of the entire pencil at once strongly suggests that it actually exists independently of my awareness of it. These potential viewpoints are infinite and thus incapable of being perceived and/or catalogued in their entirety. This creates two problems. First, it is unlikely that this infinite amount of data can be stored within consciousness. Second, if our minds constitute the object in this way, then we would have to be aware of those unseen or unexperienced aspects of the pencil—and this is clearly not the case. For Sartre, then, experience shows that my pencil appears to exist outside and independent of my consciousness because there is always more to it than what I can experience and that both its being and my consciousness transcend its appearance or phenomenon.

This may cause us to question whether Sartre is a realist (arguing that the external world and its objects exist and modify or affect consciousness) or an idealist (arguing that consciousness constructs the world and the objects in it). His insistence on the existence of a world prior to consciousness suggests that Sartre is a realist, but his acceptance of the
intentionality of consciousness does not allow for an external world to modify consciousness in any way. This constant “outward direction” of consciousness and the fact that he ultimately argues that consciousness is what assigns meaning and significance to the world seems to put him in the idealist camp—but the fact that he states that the being of the object of consciousness is independent of and prior to consciousness means that he cannot pitch his tent there. Sartre is seeking a middle ground between realism and idealism, and his introductory exploration of being in general presents three key aspects of being: (1) the being of objects and the external world; (2) the world that is created by consciousness assigning meaning and significance to that being; and (3) the being of the consciousness which does that assigning.

All of the above discussion leads Sartre to the notion that the being of objects must be radically different from the being of consciousness. The being of an object is complete and dependent only on itself, whereas the being of consciousness appears to depend on the being of its object in order to be. This leads Sartre to posit two different kinds of being. There is being-in-itself, which is associated with the being of objects—the kind of being that appears to be independent of consciousness—and there is being-for-itself, which is associated with what Sartre calls human reality. Being-for-itself is the being of a conscious human being—or, in Sartrean language, an eruption of nothingness within being-in-itself.

**Being-in-Itself**

One of Sartre’s two ontological categories is being-in-itself. It is, in general, deceptively simple: it is the being of objects—that is, of all things that appear external to
and independent of consciousness. It is self-sufficient, and its being is in itself. We may be tempted, at this point, to say that being-in-itself can be understood by examples. It may seem as though being-in-itself could be understood in the same way that we can comprehend the “essence” or meaning of an individual object. If I can understand the meaning of my pencil through several individual instantiations, is it possible for me to understand being-in-itself through several instances of beings? That is, if every object that I encounter is being-in-itself, then can I somehow abstract the being common to all of these beings? Sartre contends that it is impossible to do so. While being-in-itself is, ultimately, the being of things like my pencil and my car, these are not individual examples of being-in-itself. Instead, Sartre describes this region of being as “simply the condition of all revelation. It is being-for-revealing and not revealed being.” It is the background or foundation that supports all appearances and it is not accessible through particular appearances or individual beings. Being-in-itself is always just out of reach, and any time we attempt to discuss being we get stuck talking about beings in particular. This is not to say that, as we have already refuted, there is a Being that all individual beings participate in or that it is somehow hidden behind individual beings. Instead, Sartre argues that being is “coextensive” with particular beings and consistently exceeds consciousness’ attempts to grasp it. The problem is that consciousness “can always pass beyond the existent, not toward its being, but toward the meaning of this being.”

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10 BN, 8
11 BN, 9
12 BN, 25
Perhaps the best way to understand the concept of being-in-itself is by a thought experiment. First, let us imagine a universe in which conscious beings never existed. We leave everything else exactly as it is. In the grand cosmological scheme of things we have not changed much in deleting one tiny variable in the cosmic equation. It may seem, at this point, that only our little deletion has taken place, and that the rest of the universe is unaffected. Certainly everything else that was not made by humans would still exist: we may lose the Pyramids and the Empire State building, but not trees, rivers, Yosemite, oceans, Earth, the Sun, etc. According to Sartre’s ontology, however, this is incorrect. All of these things are the result of human consciousness assigning meaning to different areas of matter and, in a sense, are man-made. In this alternate universe there was no consciousness to make, for instance, the Yosemite Valley—to demarcate this area of land and name it as such. But the effect is even deeper. What is this tree if no consciousness is there to call it a “tree” or to separate that particular region of being from the rest of everything that exists—to make a boundary between the stuff that is “tree” and the stuff that is “earth” and “grass” and “air,” etc? In a universe untouched by consciousness we are left with exactly that. The universe has been reduced to “stuff:” an expanse of naked, undifferentiated, meaningless material, ad infinitum. No galaxies, no stars, no planets, not even molecules or atoms, and not even space, because space is, after all, only from a conscious, human perspective. From a conscious perspective this areas of stuff might be a tree, and this area part of the Sun or Jupiter or a fencepost, and these objects are so far apart from me and each other. But without consciousness
differentiating objects and assigning them meaning relative to itself and its purposes, everything is just *stuff*.

This undifferentiated mass would be the most pure example of being-in-itself, prior to any human perspective. While being-in-itself is the being of objects, we would have to get past these differentiated things to get an idea of what being-in-itself is. It may be rhetorically convenient to discuss being-in-itself in terms of this object or that object, but this does not get at the heart of the matter. My pencil, for instance, is an object and, as such, its being is in-itself. If I throw my pencil into an incinerator, the pencil ceases to be. But this is not the case for being-in-itself. My pencil, as an object, is the result of my conscious interaction with this stuff, and it is destroyed in the incinerator. But the *stuff* is merely shuffled around or reconfigured. It only makes a difference to consciousness if this area of stuff is a pencil or a pile of ashes. Being-in-itself cannot be destroyed: “In order for destruction to exist, there must first be a relation of man to being—*i.e.*, a transcendence; and within the limits of this relation, it is necessary that man apprehend one being as destructible. This supposes a limiting cutting into being be a being, which…is already a process of nihilation.”¹³ Being-in-itself simply *is*. It does not change. The change we see in objects is relative to us and our situation. Objects, therefore, cannot serve as individual examples of being-in-itself. While being-in-itself is the being of non-conscious matter, it is the *background condition* for objects to appear. It is that which allows *stuff* to become the universe and everything in it.

¹³ *BN*, 39
However, this is clearly not how we as conscious beings see the universe. We do not and cannot have an impartial perspective of the universe as a solid brick of meaningless stuff. It is impossible to comprehend it as such. I sit at this desk and hold this pencil; this house is my house, and not the one across the street. This area of stuff is my dog, and that area is a tree that I used to climb as a child, and so on. We have carved the universe into different objects and assigned them different meanings. The question arises of how consciousness is capable of doing this, however, and what this ability means in the larger scheme of Sartre’s ontology. In any case, in exploring being-in-itself Sartre is led to the conclusion that there must be some other kind of being that somehow affects being-in-itself.

**Being-for-Itself**

Sartre’s other ontological category is being-for-itself. Sartre does not explain when or how consciousness comes about, but the end result is exemplified by the conscious being. As we shall see, Sartre relates consciousness with a kind of nothingness—describing it as a gap, a breach, or an eruption of nothingness within being. Through consciousness even more nothingness comes into being in the form of the differentiations and negations in which consciousness is always engaged.

Thus far we have discussed consciousness’ capacity to carve a “world” out of undifferentiated stuff and that this created world stands in between consciousness and the incomprehensible completeness and undifferentiatedness of being-in-itself. This process is automatic: I cannot experience or know or conceptualize the undifferentiated stuff of being-in-itself because to be conscious is to differentiate, and to differentiate is to create a
world for myself—a complex of objects and meanings that is oriented toward me and my ends. Because it is my consciousness that creates the world, it is necessarily my world, and all of its content exists for me. This differentiation occurs in two basic ways. The primary differentiation is between consciousness and the object of consciousness. In this differentiation I understand that this object is not me. The secondary differentiation is between an object and another object: I understand that this object is not that object. Let us again return to my pencil. As mentioned previously, I cannot be conscious of the entirety of my pencil at once, implying that my pencil is not me. Further, not only is my pencil what it is and not me, it is also not what it is not—that is, it is not another pencil, my desk, or anything else. It is what it is and not what it is not. This is how we primarily experience everything: as not me and not other objects. This “not” that is the basis of all conscious activity means that these basic differentiations are in fact, for Sartre, negations.

But where do these negations come from? Why is this area of stuff special and different from that area of stuff? The easy answer is that this pencil not being me and not being any other pencil or object is simply a negative judgment that I make—that is, that negation is nothing more than a convenient psychological instrument. However, Sartre contends that such negative judgments (and all other negations and differentiations) are only possible because actual nothingness can be introduced into being. That is, nothingness is not merely a psychological concept that we employ when we wish to say that something is not—not here, not me, not this or that. Negation (and its accompanying differentiation, creation of a world, and other acts of consciousness) is possible because
there is a being that is infected with nothingness, and in turn affects the rest of being with nothingness. 14 This being is the human being.

Before we continue, let us examine how Sartre shows that the strange concept of a “concrete nothing” can actually exist in the world. Sartre believes that there are situations in which we directly experience nothingness qua nothingness and that this experience of nothingness is prior to any kind of negative judgment that might be made in a situation. Sartre uses following example: Let us say that I am looking for my friend, Pierre, in a busy café. The “café is a fullness of being,” 15 that is, it is full of objects, full of phenomena that are appearing to me. There are tables, chairs, windows, waiters, customers, sounds, smells, etc. I am, however, looking for a specific being in all of this bustle: Pierre. As I look for him, I focus my attention on various objects in the café. The objects that I am not focusing on, at the moment, create a background, and whatever I do focus on stands out against it. As I sweep the café with my eyes and my attention, each object pops up and then recedes back into the background of my peripheral attention as I see that it is not Pierre. The chairs and tables are obviously not Pierre, but I also focus on people—scanning them to see if they are Pierre. Eventually I realize that Pierre is not in the café. If he were, he would pop into the foreground. When he is not there, what occurs is not simply that his presence does not appear. Rather, if I go to the café expecting to see Pierre and we find him to be not there, his absence is what appears to me. The lack of Pierre is what pops into the foreground. It is not the case that my attention does not rest on Pierre. It is that my attention rests on his absence. The

14 BN, 56. Nothingness exists and is “coiled in the heart of being—like a worm.”
15 BN, 41
presence of Pierre’s absence becomes the object of my consciousness. As Sartre describes it, I experience for a brief moment an actual nothingness that allows me to make the judgment that Pierre is not there. Pierre’s absence is real—as real as the presence of any person who actually is in the café at that time or any of the tables and chairs. “I myself expected to see Pierre,” Sartre writes, “and my expectation has caused the absence of Pierre to happen as a real event concerning this café. It is an objective fact that I have discovered his absence.” I do not simply think “Pierre is not here,” as a negation of the sentence “Pierre is here,” but actually experience his absence as a present object of consciousness. The whole of the café shifts in relation to his absence—he is not in any corner of the room, and he is not any of the people there.

But these actual nothings that exist in the world—these “little pools of non-being,”—come about even in more mundane aspects of human reality, such as the concept of distance. If we imagine two points at a certain distance from each other, we can easily imagine a line segment between them, measure its length, and call that measurement the distance between them. But this, according to Sartre, is not really how we immediately intuit distance. That is the measurement of the length of the distance and not the distance itself. The concept of distance is itself fundamentally negative as whatever imagined, measurable line segment “disappears as a full, concrete object; it is

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16 BN, 42: What Sartre calls a “flickering of nothingness.”
17 BN, 42
18 BN, 53
apprehended in terms of two points as the emptiness, the negativity which separates them.”

Perhaps a more visceral example of the experience of the presence of absence—and an example that does not require a foundational expectation like Sartre’s café—is when we miss someone. Let us suppose that a close friend of mine has died. I am going about my day when something occurs that reminds me of that person, causing me to miss her. It is not enough to say that such an experience is to understand that the person is not here as the opposite of being here. I feel the hole where that person once was, and I feel the effects of that person’s absence on the world around me. In this mood of missing the objects on my shelf, perhaps, become reoriented—pictures of her, things she gave me, trinkets that remind me of her. They become laden with new meanings and new purposes in light of the missing person’s absence. I feel the presence of her absence, or the real nothingness where she used to exist. For Sartre (and for those who grieve) this nothingness is very real.

In these ways, and in other interactions with the world, we experience the phenomenon of nothingness. But all of these experiences of nothingness are only possible via consciousness—that is, from consciousness’ fundamental actions of negation as differentiation. It is through consciousness that nothingness comes into being. Sartre contends that consciousness is able to introduce nothingness into the world because it itself is a kind of nothing: consciousness is not a thing.

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19 BN, 54
Let us reexamine this problem in light of the intentionality of consciousness. Consciousness cannot “be” if there is not an object of consciousness. For Sartre, this means that the being of consciousness is in question: “consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself.”

The fact that I am conscious right now necessarily implies that there is an external world for me to be conscious of—but because consciousness appears to depend on this external world, the being of consciousness becomes questionable. What kind of being borrows its being from another, separate being?

Before addressing this question, however, Sartre segues into the notion of the question in general. This aspect of consciousness leads Sartre to discuss questions in general. Questioning, as a human attitude, is intentional just like consciousness. If we are questioning, we are inherently questioning something or about something. Further, questioning implies a certain distance between the questioner and that which is being questioned. An important aspect of this distance is the possibility of a negative response.

Let us say that I encounter some strange device that I cannot quite figure out. I examine it, and in doing so pose several questions; e.g., “Is this a button?” I ask by pushing some button-like protrusion. By not being able to be pressed, it responds in the negative. This is yet another way in which nothingness is introduced into my world. What is that protrusion on the strange device? My examination shows it to be not a button. As Sartre writes: “There exists for the questioner the permanent objective possibility of a negative

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20 BN, 24
21 BN, 35
reply."\textsuperscript{22} Anything that is in question could potentially come back as a negative or non-being. Further, “the questioner does not know whether the reply will be affirmative or negative,”\textsuperscript{23} indicating a kind of internal non-being for the questioner. Also, the question brings up the concept of the truth: “By the very question, the questioner…expects an objective reply, such that we can say of it ‘It is this and not otherwise.’”\textsuperscript{24} The truth, in this sense, brings in another non-being. If this answer is the true one, then all other answers are not. Thus, Sartre concludes, questioning shows that we are “encompassed with nothingness. The permanent possibility of non-being, outside and within, conditions our questions…Furthermore, it is non-being which is going to limit the reply.”\textsuperscript{25} There is nothingness outside of the questioner in terms of his uncovering what the device is not, there is nothingness within the questioner in terms of his not knowing the answer, and there is a nothingness inherent in the true answer, as it will not be any other answer.

We appear to be stuck, then. The very being of consciousness is in question because it relies on external being, and the very act of questioning seems to point to nothingness seeping in every crack of our interactions with our external world. Every conscious action, for Sartre, implies non-being, and at this point we cannot even pin down the being of consciousness itself. We are in the strange situation of requiring “a being by which nothingness comes into things.”\textsuperscript{26} This being is, for Sartre, human beings, or what he calls human reality. All of these concrete nothings that come into the world

\textsuperscript{22} BN, 36
\textsuperscript{23} BN, 36
\textsuperscript{24} BN, 36
\textsuperscript{25} BN, 36
\textsuperscript{26} BN, 57
do so by human beings’ conscious interactions with the world. We are that being by which nothing comes into being because in any act of consciousness (but in questioning most explicitly) we hold being at arm’s length in order to examine it, just as I examined that mysterious device or my pencil. There is a separation between consciousness and the object of consciousness just as there is a separation between the questioner and the object in question. In questioning any aspect of being, a human being detaches herself from being in order to achieve that distance. Sartre summarizes the entire process:

Thus in posing a question, a certain negative element is introduced into the world…But at the same time the question emanates from a questioner who, in order to motivate himself in his being as one who questions, disengages himself from being. This disengagement is then by definition a human process. Man presents himself at least in this instance as a being who causes Nothingness to arise in the world, inasmuch as he himself is affected with non-being to this end.\(^{27}\)

This disengagement, detachment, or dissociation is not only a capability of human beings but an incessant activity. Just by being conscious—by the negations that are inherent in being conscious of an object—we hold being at arm’s length. But even this is not really what Sartre ultimately intends by relating consciousness with nothingness: consciousness does not detach itself from being, nor is it enough to say that it exists as already detached from being. Rather, consciousness is this detachment. It is this distance. There are not three things to be considered here: a consciousness, being, and the distance between the two things. There is just being and the breach within being that allows negation, differentiation, and every other little nothing to come into being. This breach is consciousness. For Sartre, consciousness is not a thing. It is radically different and

\(^{27}\) BN, 58
totally distinct from any thing. It is not a being-in-itself but associated with a completely new region of being: being-for-itself.

Because consciousness is not a thing, it is not subject to the causal order in the way that objects are: “it is essential that the questioner have the permanent possibility of dissociating himself from the causal series which constitutes being and which can produce only being.”28 Objects in the world are subject to the causal order—they can be placed into a series of cause and effect reactions. A billiard ball falls into a pocket on a pool table because it was struck in such a way by the cue ball, which in turn was struck in such a way by the pool cue. But consciousness stands apart from the world. It cannot be affected by anything and cannot be caused by anything. What caused me to strike the cue ball in this way? Nothing. Certainly, one might argue, my desire to cause the billiard ball to fall into a certain pocket (my goal or end in this situation) is what caused my action. But I could have chosen to do otherwise despite my desired ends. I can always choose to do otherwise—that is, to say “no.”

The inability of consciousness to be causally determined like objects means that the for-itself is fundamentally free. Sartre is careful to point out that the freedom of the for-itself is not a property or capacity that it has, but is the very being of the for-itself: “What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of ‘human reality.’ Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being-free.”29 The for-itself exists as an embodied consciousness—a consciousness which is untouchable by the causal order of things. My

28 BN, 58
29 BN, 60
body, of course, can be struck with a pool cue just like a billiard ball, and that strike might cause my body to move in a certain direction like a billiard ball “insofar as I am also an object in the world, subject to [physical laws].”

But unlike a billiard ball, I can resist. I can act. What I do in response to being hit by a pool cue is freely chosen. The billiard ball is completely constrained by the causal order: it is struck, it moves, it strikes another ball, it rolls to a stop. It cannot do otherwise. I, on the other hand, can do (or not do) any number of things. I can ignore the strike, walk away, or confront my assailant. I could do something completely unrelated in response, such as burst into song. The fact that I am struck by a pool cue, though it may bruise my body, does not determine what I choose to do next.

We will discuss freedom in greater depth later, but an important aspect to understand at this point is that because we are free, we are also responsible. If nothing external can cause me to act in a certain way, then I am totally responsible for everything that I do because I choose to do so. I have no excuse. I cannot point to any factor other than myself and say that it caused or determined my action or inaction. There are times when we become directly aware of this responsibility—and therefore our freedom—which, for Sartre, leads to anguish. To borrow another of Sartre’s vivid examples, let us suppose that I am walking along a path that, further up the road, edges narrowly along a precipice. I understand that this precipice might mean death or injury if I am not careful—that is, “I conceive of a certain number of causes, originating in universal determinism, which can transform that threat of death into reality: I can slip on a stone

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30 BN, 66
and fall into the abyss; [etc.].”

I understand that my consciousness manifests itself bodily, and that many things could happen to that body that would cause me to fall. I become afraid because I know that I can get hurt or be destroyed—I am afraid of slipping and falling in any number of accidental ways. So I decide to be careful when walking along the edge: I walk slowly, pay attention to the rocks underfoot, and I put as much space as I can between me and the ledge. “These conducts are my possibilities,” Sartre writes. “I escape fear by the very fact that I am placing myself on a plane where my own possibilities are substituted for the transcendent probabilities where human action had no place.”

Because I have chosen to be careful, I could always choose not to be careful. I could choose to “not pay attention to the stones in the road, to run, to think of something else”—or I could even choose to gracefully swan dive over the edge. It should be noted that, like Heidegger, Sartre distinguishes between anguish (for Heidegger, angst or dread) and fear. Fear has an object: I am afraid of spiders, or clowns, or that mean dog down the street, or that I will slip and fall on the precipice or deliberately throw myself off. Anguish has no object. It is a state that a person falls into when she realizes that the future is totally undetermined and open ended: “But I am in anguish precisely because any conduct on my part is only possible[.]” There is not a determined chain of causes and effects that can make any of my behaviors a definitive outcome like sinking a billiard ball. Anguish is like fear, or horror, in that it is very unpleasant and perhaps paralyzing,

31 BN, 66
32 BN, 67
33 BN, 67
34 BN, 68
but unlike fear there is no object that we can point to in the universe that is the cause—there is not something that can be removed and relieve the feeling of anguish. It is the ever-present but rarely-realized open-ended question that is “how do I respond?” How do I respond to this or that, to everything, to being alive and conscious, and that none of these responses is necessary or determined. In the case of the precipice, Sartre writes that “[i]n one sense that horror calls for prudent conduct, and it is in itself a pre-outline of that conduct; in another sense, it posits the final developments of that conduct only as possible, precisely because I do not apprehend it as the cause of these final developments but as need, appeal, etc.” I am free to do anything, to react in any way to the ledge. This is a grim realization, and I am free to react to anguish, too, in any way. However, we most often react to anguish—to our freedom—by running away from it and trying to deny it. Sartre calls this bad faith.

Bad Faith

Thus far we have talked about two kinds of negation: the primary negation that occurs in consciousness of something (I am not that), and the secondary negation that occurs when we further differentiate external objects (this is not that). But Sartre also claims that there are various ways in which we direct negation inwards. He pays special attention to one of these negations. He describes it as a “determined attitude which is essential to human reality and which is such that consciousness instead of directing negation outward turns toward itself.” Sartre calls this attitude bad faith, and, as we

35 BN, 68
36 BN, 87
shall see, in this attitude consciousness attempts to solidify or objectify itself by treating itself as if it were in-itself—that is, as if it were an object. It tries to determine itself, to make itself determinate as something that is subject to the causal order instead of absolute freedom. Bad faith, then, is a lie we have told ourselves that we believe.

How is this possible? Sartre distinguishes between a typical lie (that is, a lie told to another person) and bad faith as a lie told to ourselves. A typical lie is also a form of negation, but, in Sartre's words, it is cynical while bad faith is not: "The ideal description of the liar would be a cynical consciousness, affirming the truth within himself, denying it in his words, and denying that negation as such."\(^{37}\) If I were to lie to another person, I must first know the truth (or what I think to be the truth—Sartre does not believe we lie in ignorance). I then hide that truth by saying that it is not, and then hide that negation—that is, I, in lying, inherently try to hide the fact that I am lying. I know that I am lying. I lie intentionally, and the person I am lying to believes the lie. But in bad faith this means I am aware of the fact that I am lying to myself, and I believe that lie nonetheless. "What changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth…yet I must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it[.]"\(^{38}\) How can I possibly believe the lie when I know that I am intentionally lying?

To answer this question, we must examine the faith aspect of bad faith and the difference between bad faith and good faith. Both bad faith and good faith are kinds of belief. In good faith I am confronted with evidence and decide what to believe based on that evidence. I notice that Clark Kent is never in the same place as Superman, that Kent

\(^{37}\) BN, 87  
\(^{38}\) BN, 89
hurriedly exits whenever he sees crime or calamity, and that the two men bear a striking resemblance to each other with extremely minor differences. If I were to base my belief that Clark Kent and Superman are the same man based on this evidence, then I am in good faith. I freely choose my belief based on evidence that I have freely chosen to interpret as “evidence,” and I have faith that the evidence is sufficient. In bad faith, however, I have already decided what I want to believe, and interpret or ignore evidence in order to conform to those pre-selected beliefs. Let us suppose that Lois Lane does not want to believe that Superman and Clark Kent are the same man because of the effect such a belief would have on her relationship with both men. She has chosen her belief—that Clark Kent is not Superman—and ignores or dismisses all the evidence to the contrary based on that belief. “Bad faith,” Sartre writes, “apprehends evidence but it is resigned in advance to not being fulfilled by this evidence, to not being persuaded and transformed into good faith.”

However, good faith is not without its problems—it is “faith,” after all. Good faith is never complete because one can never fully believe what one believes, as belief is not knowledge. To say that I believe Clark Kent is Superman is basically the same as saying that I do not know that Clark Kent is Superman, or, to ask, “Is Clark Kent Superman?” To become aware of the fact that we believe something is to automatically call it into question: “To believe is to know that one believes, and to know that one believes is no longer to believe…Thus belief is a being which questions its own being,

39 BN, 113
The intent of good faith—that is, to fully believe something—is impossible. By reflecting on my belief that Clark Kent is Superman, on my conscious act of believing that fact, I have turned my belief into an object to examine, holding it at arm’s length, and I am thus not identified with it. The act of believing in good faith is not complete. It is not being-in-itself. It is because complete good faith is impossible that bad faith is possible. It is because belief can never be fully certain—because belief is essentially a choice—that we can choose to believe based on good evidence or based on no evidence at all, and we have “faith” that we have sufficient evidence to believe.

Thus far we have described bad faith as a form of confirmation bias: in bad faith we have chosen what to believe before we consider the evidence, and we filter that evidence through the already chosen belief. But bad faith is much more than this. For Sartre, bad faith is a flight from our freedom. In bad faith we flee from our freedom to choose by acting as though our beliefs and our selves are certain, determinate things and not freely chosen. The basic lie of bad faith is “I am not free.”

In order to describe and explain how bad faith is possible and why we fall into it, Sartre gives several examples or what he calls “patterns of bad faith.” The first example is that of a woman on a first date. She knows that the man she is seeing is interested in her sexually, and that the evening may lead to the consummation of those desires. However, she does not know if that is what she wants, and she wants to avoid having to make a decision on the subject. Thus, as the night goes on, she chooses to

\[^{40} BN, 114\]
\[^{41} BN, 96\]
interpret all of his advances, innuendoes, or actions that otherwise indicate his sexual attraction to her as not those things. Instead, she reduces them to whatever he is literally saying or doing—that is, stripping his words and actions of any distressing figurative (i.e., flirtatious, sexual) meaning. If the man takes the woman’s hand at some point, she chooses to leave her hand in his without acknowledgement. She does not take her hand away, nor does she take his because either response would be an answer to his unspoken question. Instead, she lets her hand sit there, in his, like the proverbial dead fish. She retreats entirely in her consciousness, understanding that she is not her hand in his, or her body in his embrace, or her physical desire for him. She lies to herself in this fashion, acting as if there is not a decision to be made. She denies that anything said or done by herself or her companion transcends or can transcend the literal. She reduces everything about the situation—even her hand in his—to being-in-itself.

Sartre uses this example to show that human beings have two aspects: facticity and transcendence. My facticity is various facts (historical, temporal, geographical, etc.) about me: I am five foot six inches tall, I have brown hair and hazel eyes, and that when I was eight I seriously considered stealing a candy bar from the corner store. It is also whatever is happening to me: I am being mugged, my parents are divorcing, I am developing cancer, etc. Transcendence is the fact that, as for-itself, I am not any one of these things or all of them taken together. At any moment I can, as we shall see, verify, enhance or diminish the meanings and values of these facts. That I can examine these facts as things at a distance, as objects of consciousness, suggests that I am not identical with them.
Sartre also notes that it is impossible to avoid bad faith through its supposed opposite, sincerity. In fact, sincerity is “precisely a phenomenon of bad faith.”\(^{42}\) Here sincerity means more than a mere honesty, but instead an attempt to fully be what one supposedly is. Let us imagine a criminal who has been caught by the police. Anyone who has seen a typical television detective show knows that cops invariably want a confession. And we as a society want a confession. We don’t want the criminal to simply confess to the crime, but to being a criminal. We want him to be sincere, to accept that he is a criminal and that society may punish him. But he is not a criminal—not in the way that my pencil is a pencil. We want him to say that he is a criminal in order that he might be rehabilitated and no longer be a criminal. This is paradoxical: “The critic demands of the guilty one that he constitute himself as a thing, precisely in order no longer to treat him as a thing.”\(^{43}\) At the same time that we attempt to construe this person’s behavior as determined, we acknowledge that he freely chose his behavior and can choose to change his behavior. This is also true when we try to be sincere with ourselves: “The man who confesses that he is evil has exchanged his disturbing ‘freedom-[to do]-evil for an inanimate character of evil[.]”\(^{44}\) But at the same time he recognizes that his confession of his evil nature to himself means that he cannot be entirely evil, as his confession is meritorious. Thus, in confessing to himself that he is evil, he distances himself from that evil nature in the same action. This leads Sartre to conclude that “the essential structure of sincerity does not differ from that of bad faith

\(^{42}\) BN, 107
\(^{43}\) BN, 108
\(^{44}\) BN, 109
since the sincere man constitutes himself as what he is in order not to be it.” Just as bad faith is an escape from freedom, so is sincerity.

Similarly, Sartre invites us to imagine a waiter in a café. First, let us imagine him as a real professional waiter. He carries the tray with a practiced precariousness, just barely keeping everything balanced. His movements are exaggerated, his expression plaster-thin, his attitude artificial. We get the impression that he is, in effect, “playing at being a waiter in a café.” He is not really like that at home, or in the kitchen, or on a smoke break with the other wait staff. But when he is on the clock and on the floor, he is also on stage performing the role of waiter. But what about, let’s say, another waiter—one who is not an old hand, but a college student working nights. For Sartre, he plays at being a waiter, also. In order to keep his job he must act like a waiter. One could easily imagine his life outside of his job: perhaps he and his girlfriend had a fight, or he is unable to make the rent this month, or he has won the lottery and will leave after his shift and never come back. All of these things may be on his mind. In fact, his mood may be anything at all. Perhaps he hates everyone who comes in, but the role of a waiter requires smiles, politeness, and deference. Neither waiter is ever completely a waiter. Not only do both have lives outside of waiting tables, but either could at any moment drop his tray and quit his job. There is literally nothing to stop either from doing so. However, both feel an obligation to sincerely be what he is (i.e. a waiter) though he is not what he is: “What I attempt to realize is a being-in-itself of the café waiter, as if it were not just in

45 BN, 109
46 BN, 102. I have changed the emphasis. The original phrase reads, “playing at being a waiter in a café.”
my power to confer their value and their urgency upon my duties and the rights of my position, as if it were not my free choice to get up each morning at five o’clock or to remain in bed, even though it meant getting fired.”47 None of us are what we are in any of the roles that we play. Whereas a chair is fully a chair, the man who is a waiter can only be a waiter coincidentally, not essentially, and by continually choosing to play at it. As Sartre repeatedly points out in his paradoxical claim that human reality is what it is not and is not what it is: the waiter can only (choose to) be a waiter because he is not completely a waiter—even when he is doing waiter-ly activities. His freedom always transcends his actions. He is not what he is (a waiter), but is what he is not (his freedom to do or be anything else or nothing at all).

The motivation behind both waiters’ attempts to be something—behind any of our attempts to be anything—is that the roles that we inhabit are an easier means of living. The college student thinks of himself as a waiter while he is on the clock because “waiter” is an advantageous prepackaged collection of values, meanings, goals, and responsibilities (deference, politeness, smiling, hospitality, getting tips, etc.). When he is a student he assumes a different role, and when he is with his friends another. He is not any one of these roles: he is not a “waiter,” “student,” “roommate,” and so on. Nor is he the sum of all of them. However, if he did not, to some degree, identify with his role as a waiter or anything else, then he would have to face the austere truth that he is free to drop his tray and quit, or stop going to class, or in any other way reject those roles and choose to do something else. And so he (and everyone else) jumps from role to role in his

47 BN, 103
various situations, eased by the presence of pre-existing parameters for him to inhabit instead of constantly facing the incomprehensibility of his radical freedom.

Sartre takes the notion of free choice even further by claiming that even our emotions are freely chosen. For example, in sadness we cannot be said to be sad. Rather, according to Sartre, “[c]onsciousness…affects itself with sadness[.]”\(^{48}\) We make ourselves sad. We \textit{choose} to be sad at each instance, and continue the activity and posture of being sad. Sartre gives the example of a sad person who, in his sadness, affects all the right signs of being sad: he mopes and slouches, etc. For Sartre, sadness is nothing other than this posturing. But as soon as someone that he might like to woo unexpectedly visits him, he immediately affects a cheerful demeanor. “What,” Sartre writes, “will remain of my sadness except that I obligingly promise it an appointment for later after the departure of the visitor?”\(^{49}\) Further, Sartre points out that most of us have experienced distraction from our feelings. If we really were sad in the sense of in-itself facticity, then how could we forget to continue being sad if something urgent comes up or something pleasant interrupts our doldrums?

Two aspects of bad faith must be noted before we continue. First, Sartre maintains (in a footnote) that it is “indifferent” whether one is in bad faith or good faith.\(^{50}\) This is to say that it is not necessarily “bad” to be in bad faith and “good” to be in good faith, and that each mode slides into the other. Each of the attempts to escape bad faith that Sartre mentions are doomed to failure, just as the sincere criminal is in bad faith by

\(^{48}\) \textit{BN}, 104
\(^{49}\) \textit{BN}, 104
\(^{50}\) \textit{BN}, 116, note 9
attempting to be sincere. Despite this, however, Sartre does claim that there may be a means of escaping bad faith in some fashion. He does not elaborate on this, but we shall return to this possibility later.

Second, remember that Sartre refers to bad faith as an attitude that is essential to human reality. Besides being easy and comforting, bad faith is essential because we need to operate in such a fashion in order to function in the world. How would a person live in and interact with the world and other people if she had not even the most basic of obligations, responsibilities, or values? How can one live day-to-day life as a “lack,” as a breach within being, constantly aware of his infinite, groundless choices and the anguish that comes with such awareness? We have to try to be something, if only to feed, clothe, and shelter ourselves. To understand how we try to become something, we must turn to Sartre’s notion of value.

Value

In order to explain value, however, we must return to the structural characteristics of the for-itself. Whereas the in-itself is full and complete, the for-itself is incomplete. Consciousness is aware of itself as this nothingness within the for-itself because it “is perpetually determining itself not to be the in-itself. This means that it can establish itself only in terms of the in-itself and against the in-itself.”51 In other words, consciousness always has being as its object, and in doing so differentiates itself as not-being, and therefore reveals itself as nothing. In this sense, according to Sartre, we can begin to see a third aspect of consciousness: consciousness is (1) a nothingness, which means that it

51 BN, 134
is (2) absolute freedom and (3) a lack of being. This nothingness that is consciousness is not just a mere gap within being. It is not a stable, contained nothingness (like the “nothingness” or air inside of a balloon) because a lack is necessarily a lack of something. Perhaps it may be better understood as a vacuum within the heart of being—an unstable empty space that must be filled, like a hole dug in sand. If nature abhors a vacuum, the vacuum of consciousness in the for-itself is no exception.

Sartre proposes a “trinity” to explain the concept of a lack: “that which is missing or the ‘lacking,’ that which misses what is lacking or ‘the existing,’ and a totality which has been broken by the lacking and which would be restored by the synthesis of ‘the lacking’ and ‘the existing’—this is ‘the lacked.’”

Let us turn to an example. Imagine that you are walking along the side of the road and you come across an abandoned car in a ditch. The car’s hood is open and you can see that the engine is completely missing. There is just an empty space where the engine is supposed to be—you could even climb in and stand there. There are three things at play in this situation. First, there is the physical car before you. Clearly, it cannot be driven because it is missing an engine. Second, there is the engine that is missing—or, the lack of the engine. Third, there is another non-present entity: the entire car, engine and all. You are able to realize that the car is lacking an engine because you are capable of transcending the engineless car actually physically in front of you towards the totality of the complete car which is not. Only then can you say that the car is lacking an engine. To say that one thing lacks something else is to already refer to the totality of the thing that lacks (the car missing an

52 BN, 135
engine) and the thing lacked (the engine). The concept of lacking, then, is only possible through conscious interactions with the world. A car without an engine does not lack an engine until a conscious human being interprets it as such. Otherwise it just is what it is.

Just as Sartre held that consciousness was capable of introducing nothing into the world because is itself nothing, he contends that consciousness is capable of forming the concept of lacking because it is itself a lack. According to Sartre, what “the for-itself lacks is the self—or itself as in-itself.”53 The for-itself is similar to our broken-down car. If we were to open the for-itself’s hood, we would immediately notice a hole where a self should be. As discussed previously, Sartre’s ontology does not allow for a pre-existing or naturally existing self or ego that is the source of all of my actions or states of mind. But, just as I can see past the actual broken-down car to the totality of the fixed car, I can transcend my incompleteness as a for-itself bearing this nothingness to what would be a complete being. This ideal, complete being, however, is not in-itself. I do not have the innate desire to be complete in the same sense that a table is complete. Rather, according to Sartre, the ideal is to be the synthesis of his two ontological categories: I want to be in-itself-for-itself. I want to retain my consciousness, but also fill up the gap that consciousness is with a complete, hard-and-fast self that, as such, has the characteristics of the in-itself. Clearly, this is a contradictory and fruitless endeavor—but it is, for Sartre, what the for-itself desires. The in-itself and for-itself can never be reconciled, as the in-itself is completely full and has no room for the nothingness of consciousness. If

53 BN, 138
the in-itself becomes conscious (which, at some point, must have occurred), it becomes for-itself, and the quest to fill that emptiness begins.

This, as we have previously mentioned, is where bad faith comes into play. My nothingness/freedom/lack is intolerable: “The being of human reality is suffering because it rises in being as perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, precisely because it could not attain the in-itself without losing itself as for-itself. Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state.”54 I flee from this “unhappiness” towards being. I attempt to fill that space under my hood by trying to construct a self. If someone were to ask me, “Who are you?”, I would not reflexively respond that I am nothingness in a desperate but doomed endeavor to coincide with being. Rather, I would say that I am “a student,” or “a waiter,” or, in certain situations, “an astronaut.” In other words, as a for-itself I am constantly engaged in the attempt to make myself, and I do so by attempting to be different things. I try to find the being that I fundamentally lack in these roles with their complex, pre-packaged meanings, significations, and values. For instance, when I buy a coat, I am not buying just a coat. I am buying this coat because I think it will make me look like Steve McQueen, and thus attribute to me all of his admirable qualities. We never simply buy things, we buy what we think the things represent. It is the job of the advertiser to connect the product with the way of life—to appeal to this desire, this need to make ourselves. I will never be Steve McQueen—in fact, Steve McQueen could never

54 BN, 140
be Steve McQueen in terms of actually *being* all of the qualities I attribute to him. In the end, both of us remain our own nothings fruitlessly striving towards being.

This leads to Sartre’s contention that “we can ascertain more exactly what is the being of the self: it is value.” This thing that the for-itself lacks is value, and when we strive for a self, we strive for values, because value “is the self in so far as the self haunts the heart of the for-itself as that for which the for-itself *is.*” In other words, the question “Who are you?” can be better understood as “Who do you want to be?” I answer that “I want to be Steve McQueen,” which is better understood as “I want to be all of these things that Steve McQueen is.” I *lack* these things, and therefore I *desire* them—that is, I *value* them. Sartre then wades into a dilemma: are values “real” or not? That is, do values exist only insofar as I value them, or do they exist outside of me “in the world?” As usual, Sartre intends to have it both ways, claiming that value “is affected with the double character…of both being unconditionally and not being.” For example, I want to be like Steve McQueen because he is *cool.* “Coolness,” then, is the relevant value. Sartre admits that values can be apprehended in the same sense that red can be apprehended by seeing several red objects. Likewise, I can apprehend Steve McQueen’s “coolness” as the essence of all of his “cool” actions. In this sense, value “is beyond being” because the value is an *abstraction*—it never really exists in the same way an

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55 BN, 143  
56 BN, 144  
57 BN, 143  
58 BN, 143
object exists. But, Sartre writes, “if we are not to be taken in by fine words, we must recognize that this being which is beyond being possesses being in some way at least.”

This means that values are somewhere between subjective and objective, at least in Sartre’s use of the terms: values are “in the world” in that both I and others can recognize them (e.g., most of us can recognize that Steve McQueen is “cool”), but they are subjective in how we choose to desire them. The whole complex of freedom, value, and self comes together, for Sartre, as follows:

In a word the self, the for-itself, and their inter-relation stand within the limits of an unconditioned freedom—in the sense that nothing makes value exist—unless it is that freedom which by the same stroke makes me myself exist—and also within the limits of a concrete facticity—since as the foundation of its nothingness, the for-itself can not be the foundation of its being.

This is to say that my choices in how to make myself (in terms of the values that I choose to incorporate or strive towards) are absolutely free in the sense that this nothingness (in the form of the lack) is what causes values to appear, but it is also within the limits of my facticity or situation, as I do not choose what happens to me, but I may choose how to interpret or stress or downplay what happens to me.

Equally important is the notion that though values are freely chosen, we cannot choose not to value. Just as we cannot choose freedom because consciousness is freedom, we cannot choose whether or not to value because consciousness is inherently a lack. “Value,” Sartre writes, “in its original upsurge is not posited by the for-itself; it is consubstantial with it—to such a degree that there is no consciousness which is not

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59 BN, 144
60 BN, 145
haunted by its value and that human-reality in the broad sense includes both the for-itself and value.”

Value is consubstantial with consciousness because to be conscious is to value. But note that value is not posited. Values are not the conclusion of deliberations—that is, they are not “known” but are lived. When I buy my coat I am not aware of all the values that I am attempting to collect in doing so. It is only in reflection that I can uncover the values that ride silently on my actions like hitchhikers.

**Action and the Project**

Let us again return to the intentionality of consciousness. Because consciousness is intentional—because all acts of consciousness have some object, end, or goal—then this means that action becomes paramount. For Sartre, to be is to do. “[H]uman reality,” he writes, “does not exist in order to act later; but for human reality, to be is to act, and to cease to act is to cease to be.” When we are conscious we are always engaged in some activity. Even if we attempt to do absolutely nothing by conventional standards, we are still doing something. A man who sits motionless in a chair is still doing nothing. To truly stop him from doing we would have to kill him, at which point he would cease to be.

Like consciousness, Sartre contends, “an action is on principle intentional.” Every action we undertake has some goal or end—we never do anything without an objective in mind. These objectives are another example of concrete nothings in the world (in my world). The goal of an action, as an outcome, does not exist—at least, not

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61 *BN*, 145
62 *BN*, 613
63 *BN*, 560
yet. That is why a person does whatever he is doing. If I want to lose weight, I must first look in the mirror and see myself as I am. Bits and pieces of me extend in undesirable ways in undesirable areas. I then imagine myself as I am not: lean, muscular, and considerably happier than I actually am at this moment. I am capable of imagining what is not. “This means,” Sartre writes, “that from the first conception of the act, consciousness has been able to withdraw itself from the full world…and to leave the level of being in order to approach directly that of non-being.” In order for me to take action—to exercise and steel myself in the presence of doughnuts and beer—I must first be able to detach myself from the way things are and posit a way in which they are not. Otherwise, how could I act? What would I act toward?

This shows that all action is motivated by a lack. As discussed previously, we are consistently spurred on by whatever is missing: “How can anyone fail to see that all these considerations are negative; that is, that they aim at what is not, not at what is.” We tend to think that our current circumstances are what move us to act. Why do I have to lose weight? I might answer with any number of actually existing conditions or facts: I have to lose weight because I have to catch my breath after tying my shoes or because I no longer fit into my clothes. But if I cannot imagine myself as I am not, these facts could not cause me to take action. “No factual state of affairs whatever it may be…is capable by itself of motivating an act whatsoever. For an act is a projection of the for itself toward what is not, and what is can in no way determine by itself what is not.”

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64 BN, 560
65 BN, 560
66 BN, 562
is not my girth itself that pushes me to run around the block a few times, but that image of the thin me and the value that I place on it, even though that thin me does not yet exist.

But what about situations that are not in our control and that we might consider unbearable? Certainly there are some circumstances that force action upon us. But Sartre holds otherwise. He invites us to imagine a factory worker in what we might consider to be unbearable conditions. These “unbearable conditions” however are only unbearable if the worker can imagine them as being better. Let us say that this worker is a miner who was born underground, has never seen the light of day or known what it is like to have good food, enough sleep, or even a moment of leisure. If these conditions are all that he has ever known, then how could he find them to be unbearable? This is what his world is in its entirety. “[His] misfortunes do not appear…’habitual’ but rather natural; they are not seen in a clear light, and consequently they are integrated by the worker into his being.”67 He could not possibly find these conditions unbearable, nor could he really “bear” them. They simply are his life and his world. If he were ever to set foot outside of the mines and spend a day blissfully loafing in the sunshine, he might consider his old world unbearable because he is now capable of imagining a life in the sun. “For,” as Sartre writes, “it is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls on our troubles and our suffering that we decide that these are unbearable.”68 In this sense we cannot ever say that our nearly-feral mine-slave suffers. He does not know any better—he does not know and cannot imagine that it could ever be possible for the world to be any different. And if he ever should know better, he would

67 BN, 561-2
68 BN, 561
have to decide that he could no longer bear the darkness and constant toil of the mines. After all, he lived there for his entire life, bearing the conditions without ever knowing he was bearing anything. The upshot of this grim scenario is again that conscious beings are free because our pasts do not determine us: “This implies for consciousness the permanent possibility of effecting a rupture with its own past...so as to be able to consider it in the light of a non-being and so as to be able to confer on it the meaning which it has in terms of the project of a meaning which it does not have.” While we cannot change the choices we have made in the past, we can ignore, interpret, or assign significance to it in any way we want to in order to suit our ends—our project.

Human beings project. The intentionality of all actions means that there are always ends, goals, objectives—we always have projects. We tend to think that our actions have justifications in the form of reasons and motives, the former being the objective circumstances that move us to act, and the latter being the subjective “complex of desires, emotions, and passions which impel [one] to accomplish a certain act.” But in light of what we have discussed previously, Sartre contends that it is the desired and imagined end that enables us to act, and that end allows us to select reasons and motives: “it is the complex of my projects which turns back in order to confer upon the motive its structure as a motive...Reasons and motives have meaning only inside a projected complex which is precisely a complex of non-existents.” If you were to ask me why I lost weight, I might respond with a reason (there are numerous health problems

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69 BN, 563
70 BN, 576
71 BN, 564
associated with being overweight) or a motive (I was unhappy being overweight). But what Sartre wants us to realize is that these are both ways of saying that I wanted to be that fit version of me that I imagined. As part of the various projects I am currently engaged in I value being fit, which causes me to infer a negative value on being overweight. The associated health problems then become worrisome, and I become unhappy. If, however, my project involved living for immediate pleasures and dying young, I might not even notice the extra pounds, let alone choose to worry about them.

We should explain here what, exactly, Sartre means by “complex of projects.” For Sartre, projects nest inside each other—there are larger projects and smaller projects, and the larger ones contain or inform the smaller ones. In this sense, perhaps it is better to think of projects as choices—that is, choices of what to do and how to do it. If, for instance, I have chosen to go to a museum in Cleveland, this choice will then inform other choices I make along the way: I choose to take my car instead of walk, I choose to take this or that road, take this or that exit, park in a certain place, have lunch somewhere near the museum, etc. All of these choices are contained, in a sense, within the first choice to go to the museum. If we follow the chain of choices all the way back, then, we see that each person has an initial or fundamental project that conditions or narrows the scope of the other projects one has further down the line. This fundamental project is completely freely chosen, as there is nothing standing behind it—quite literally, as the fundamental project comes directly from the nothingness of consciousness. My fundamental project is tied directly to the notion of consciousness as a lack: my initial choice as a for-itself is the choice of how I am going to go about filling up that empty
space. As mentioned in the previous section, this decision comes in the form of me deciding who I am going to be and how I am going to make myself. This is the largest decision that we make, and it forms the greater project that encompasses and colors all of my other sub-projects that come up later in my life. But this is not to say that my other choices and their associated projects are fully determined by the fundamental project. I am totally free, at any point, to make a decision that goes against my fundamental project—but why would I? If I want to go to Cleveland, why would I purposefully take the wrong exit? Once we have chosen our fundamental project we have little reason to change it or act against it, even if we are free to do so at any time. Further, as values and projects are intertwined, I am equally “unaware” of both. I am not fully aware of the fact that each decision I make is in service of taking me to that art museum. I simply do these actions. I do not actively think that “I am getting into my car to drive to Cleveland to go to the art museum,” much less “I am going to the art museum in Cleveland because I have chosen, as part of my attempts to make myself, to live a life that values fine art.”

Values and projects, as mentioned, sit quietly on top of all of our actions—and it is only in reflection that we can become fully aware of them.

To further illustrate the notion of projects, Sartre uses the example of going hiking with some friends. His friends are all people who love nature and the outdoors, while he is just tagging along (perhaps to impress a woman). After a long day of hiking they are very close to their campsite when Sartre’s fatigue becomes too much, and he sprawls out on the trail completely exhausted. His friends continue on without him, even though they are very tired, too. Is Sartre, as he initially suggests, a “sissy” for not completing the
hike? Of course not. He chose to succumb to fatigue. It did not overwhelm him. He did not feel like it was worth enduring, as it was not part of his project to overcome fatigue and conquer the landscape, or become closer to nature like his friends. His friends not only endure their fatigue, but they enjoy it. “[M]y companion’s fatigue,” Sartre writes, “is lived in a vaster project of a trusting abandon to nature…and at the same time the project of sweet mastery and appropriation. It is only in and through this project that the fatigue will be able to be understood and that it will have meaning for him.”72 Because Sartre and his friends have different ends—different projects—their fatigue means different things to them. Fatigue may be something that happens to our physical bodies, but we choose how we interpret it based on our unarticulated goals or projects. If, after Sartre’s friends have left him sprawled in the wilderness, a bear should wander into his vicinity he would probably be able to catch up with them. Conquering or feeling at one with nature is not worth the fatigue, but his life may be. We are again free to choose—not necessarily what happens to us (we cannot control bears) but how we interpret or apply significance to those facts or events. Sartre summarizes the entire process thusly:

We choose the world, not in its contexture as in-itself, but in its meaning, by choosing ourselves. Though the internal negation by denying that we are the world, we make the world appear as world, and this internal negation can exist only if it is at the same time a projection toward a possible. It is the very way in which I entrust myself to the inanimate, in which I abandon myself to my body (or, on the other hand, the way in which I resist either one of these) which causes the appearance of both my body and the inanimate world with their respective value.73

72 BN, 587
73 BN, 596
Consciousness creates a world by differentiating (negating) the inanimate, and does so in the context of some purpose, goal, end, or project. In doing so, we choose how we wish to live and what is important to us, and we choose how we wish to exist through our bodies and how we interpret the physical world around us.

But we still may be unconvinced. What about obstacles? What about the real barriers between us and our ends? Aren’t there real circumstances that cannot be interpreted away? For instance, what if Sartre is not equally fit as his companions on his hiking trip? What if years of smoking and a philosophical (read: sedentary) lifestyle cause his fatigue to become a wall that cannot be overcome? Certainly this is an actual limit on his freedom. But Sartre persists: “The given in-itself as resisting or as co-operating is revealed only in the light of the projecting freedom.”

My freedom to act or to succeed in my actions may be limited by my situation—the various factical conditions I find myself in—but these obstacles only appear as obstacles because I have freely chosen a goal (e.g., going on a long hike) that is outside of my reach. I may never succeed in my goals, but simply having those goals shapes my actions and the world around me—and those goals are always freely chosen. Only then do the objects and circumstances I encounter in my life become either help or hindrances. Here again Sartre is walking a fine line between absolute and relative freedom. He insists that our freedom is still radical and absolute, but also it can be always and only within a situation: “Thus we begin to catch a glimpse of the paradox of freedom: there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom. Human-reality everywhere

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74 BN, 627
encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human reality is.[75]

Obstacles, hindrances, and solid, insurmountable walls do exist between me and my projects, but these exist to me only because I freely chose those ends in the first place. In other words, if I encounter a traffic jam on my way to Cleveland, I see it only as an obstacle because I have decided to go to Cleveland in the first place. If my chosen desire were to listen to the radio and watch road construction, the traffic jam would not be an obstacle at all.

The end result of all this is something that Sartre returns to time and time again throughout Being and Nothingness: that we are responsible. We are responsible for our actions, our worlds, and who we create ourselves to be. “I am abandoned in the world,” Sartre writes, “...I find myself suddenly alone and without help, involved 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. For I am responsible for my very desire of fleeing responsibilities.”[76] Our ontological freedom and the resulting responsibility cause anguish when we occasionally realize them. They push us into the ease and comfort of bad faith—the flight from freedom and responsibility towards the determined nature of the in-itself (e.g., the pre-packaged meanings and values inherent in being a “waiter”).

As said, even our fundamental projects and values are baseless and subject to change at any moment: “The anguish which, when this possibility is revealed, manifests our freedom to our consciousness is witness of this perpetual modifiability of our initial

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[75] BN, 629
[76] BN, 710
project…we are perpetually engaged in our choice and perpetually conscious of the fact that we ourselves can abruptly invert this choice[.]” While our fundamental projects (the complex our most deeply held goals and values) seem to have the most inertia and weight in determining who we are as a person, we can change them at any moment and undergo what Sartre calls a “radical conversion.” However, a radical conversion—in which one completely changes his or her fundamental project—would only be under extreme circumstances. As we have said, not only are we typically unaware (to varying degrees) of our projects and values, we also encounter few situations in which we would have any reason to change them.

The Other and the Look

Now that we have explicated the relevant aspects of Sartre’s description of the individual, we must turn to the problem of the Other. Sartre briefly addresses the Other when discussing bad faith: he reminds us that, to the Other, my consciousness appears as an absent thing: “my consciousness appears originally to the other as an absence. It is the object always present as the meaning of all my attitudes and all my conduct—and always absent, for it gives itself to the intuition of another as a perpetual question[.]” To borrow Sartre’s example, when my friend looks at me I see his face turned toward me and his eyes are locked onto me—and these are physical facts in the world. But this is where the certainty of things ends: I know that my friend is looking at me. But what does my friend’s look mean? What lies behind it? However much I might say that I “know”

77 BN, 598
78 BN, 105
my friend, the truth of the matter is that I can never access what is behind his eyes and I cannot know what meanings and values he is placing upon his experiences—one of which is me. I might string together all of his past actions and statements to create personality that is my friend, but this is my construction. I might remark, when he does something, “Oh, yes, that is just like Pierre.” But I do not know Pierre or what he is “just like.” I can never know what his look means, and I cannot know for certain what he thinks of me. “And this,” Sartre writes, “is what makes me uncomfortable.”

A basic aspect of human reality is that the presence of another person—if it does not necessarily bring about discomfort—at the very least changes our behavior. We act differently when we are alone from when we are with another person or group of people. But why? Why does this immediate and reflexive change take place when another person strolls into my room and not when a new object enters, like when I buy a new lamp or the cat decides to pay me a visit at my desk? Sartre’s next task is to describe what occurs under the look of another human being. The appearance of another person is problematic because it raises the question of whether we originally or fundamentally see other people as objects or subjects—that is, objects that are also subjects like me.

The fact that we see the Other as a kind of object is obvious enough: when I see another person, I see his or her body, and I see that body occupying space in three dimensions and interacting with the environment in various ways. But the experience is fundamentally different from when I encounter other objects. I do not change my behavior for objects—as said before, I do not become self-conscious when I buy a new

79 BN, 105
piece of office furniture, and I do not try to impress or make small talk with it. In this sense, Sartre claims, it is clear that the Other does not originally appear to us as an object, but as another subject. There is something fundamentally and immediately different in any encounter with another human being. It is not that I first see the Other as an object and then infer by its behavior that it is like me: it looks like me, it walks like me, and it talks like me, therefore it must be conscious, like me. And yet I do not suspect that these other me-like creatures that I encounter are a different species, or non-conscious, or incredibly lifelike robots programmed to mimic my own behavior. Rather, Sartre claims that I immediately and simultaneously see the Other as an object and intuit that the Other is conscious and is a subject, just as I am.

Sartre then details what happens when another person wanders into sight: I am idly walking in a park without a single soul in my vision. This world is my world, and everything in it is for me, imbued with my meanings and values as I choose what to focus on. Everything is oriented towards me and relative to my position and my needs and wants. That fountain is twenty yards away from me, that stick is a possible walking stick, and other ways of assigning value and significance to everything around me. I am, for the most part, not self-conscious—not really aware of how I appear or even that I appear to anything, but totally absorbed in my activity. But then, from behind a hedge, strolls another person.

And here everything changes. The world is no longer for me as it was before. I am immediately aware that my world is intersecting with another’s. Just as things were a certain distance from me moments ago, now they are also a certain distance from him.
Just as all the things in the world were appearing to me and for me, they are now appearing to and for him. My relationship with the world, and the relations between things in that world that were relative to me, begin to disintegrate and reorder themselves around this interloper: the appearance of the Other affects “a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting.”

Or, to put it more poetically: “Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me…it appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole.”

Prior to his appearance, I was the center of the universe, and now I am unbalanced by the appearance of something that I immediately intuit as a second center of the universe. He is making his world out of the parts of mine: I know that, and I begin to see the world in this way, but I cannot see his world. The things around me remain, but they are, in a sense, running away from me. This flight of the world away from me and towards another object does not occur when a squirrel scampers into my sight.

But there is more to the appearance of the Other than the mere fact that objects may appear to him as they appear to me. The fact that I see the Other in the world carries with it the possibility that he may see me. If I am seeing this other person as a subject that can perceive other objects and also as an object that can be seen, it immediately suggests that he can see me as those things as well. When the Other looks at me, or when I am made aware of the fact that I can be seen by such things as the sound of a footstep behind me, I become aware of myself: “What I apprehend immediately when I hear the

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80 BN, 343
81 BN, 343
branches crackling behind me is not that there is someone there; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt...in short, that I am seen.” When we are startled out of our unreflective activity by some signal of an unexpected other person, our immediate response is not a mere awareness of another person, but a sense of vulnerability and an awareness of ourselves. The interruption abruptly shifts our attention from whatever object or project consciousness was aware of to an awareness of ourselves as a thing in the world that can be apprehended and judged by other subjects.

Sartre explains what this means using an example we will return to often: in this case, I am a jealous man in a dark hallway, spying through a keyhole at some lurid spectacle in the room behind the door. While doing this I am totally wrapped up in what I am observing: “I am alone and...there is no self to inhabit my consciousness...I am my acts.” All of my attention is directed outwards toward whatever is taking place in the next room, all of my actions are in service of my goal, and all of the objects that I focus on (such as the keyhole) are seen as instruments relative to that goal. I am not knowing what I am doing or reflecting on what I am doing. I am simply doing.

But then I hear approaching footsteps, and suddenly I become aware of myself and what I must look like to someone stumbling upon the scene. Suddenly I become aware of a self that was not there before—the self that could be potentially observed by the Other as a voyeur. What Sartre wants to highlight in this situation is, firstly, that the Other is not an object here. My attention is not aimed at the Other, but at this (my)self.

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82 BN, 347. It will be important, later, to note that this apprehension occurs even if we are mistaken about the actual presence of the Other.

83 BN, 347
However, it is a self for the Other. The object of my consciousness is the startled question, “Oh God, what does this look like?” What will this approaching person see me as? What self will this other consciousness construct me as? I cannot know, and so this self that is me (in the eyes of the Other) but is not me (for me) eludes me. In the Other’s look, I catch a fleeting glimpse of myself.

And thus I feel shame. I recognize that even though I am not the voyeur—that crystallized, hardened, determined thing—the voyeur that the Other sees is me. In feeling shame an important realization is made: this Other is free to interpret me and my actions as he sees fit. I can sputter and stammer and attempt to explain or excuse or lie about what I am doing, but I have no control over his interpretation, nor will I ever know what that interpretation is. He is perfectly free to lock me down: “You are a voyeur.” In this, Sartre writes, the Other is “the limit of my freedom”\textsuperscript{84}: I have no sovereignty or jurisdiction over him, and in a way I am subject to his judgment whether I want to be or not. Again, I am not a voyeur because I am not anything, according to Sartre, but I recognize that the peeping tom that the Other sees me as—the voyeur that I catch a glimpse of in his looking at me is me. I could and most likely will be interpreted by the Other as a voyeur. And I am ashamed of it. The Other has made a nature for me—a nature that is not me and that I do not have—but it exists out there and I recognize it.

“Shame,” Sartre writes, “…is the apprehension of myself as a nature although that very nature escapes me and is unknowable as such…it is not that I perceive myself losing my freedom in order to become a thing, but my nature is—over there, outside my lived

\textsuperscript{84} BN, 351
freedom—as a given attribute of this being which I am for the Other.\textsuperscript{85} I am still absolutely free, but there is a region to which my freedom does not extend, and though I am not this thing that he sees me as, I recognize that it is attached to me or associated with me.

Though Sartre’s example is morally charged—the voyeur feels shame, presumably because what he is doing is wrong—it is important to note that the shame we feel in the gaze of the other is not moral shame but ontological shame. We do not have to be doing anything wrong in order to feel it. It is the feeling we have when we realize that we cannot control how others see us, and yet we are constantly present to them and totally open to their judgments. We are, in a sense, “pinned down” by them and made into objects. The freedom of the Other is the only real possible check on my freedom, and I feel that as a kind of shame because I am seen.

Thus the experience of the Other as a subject is, for Sartre, fraught with anxiety. The Other’s freedom impinges on my own, and a world which was once mine suddenly reconfigures itself to be for him, and I myself, under the Other’s Look, become an object for him as well. Therefore, according to Sartre, we are perpetually in a state what might be described as ontological conflict with the Other. We attempt to deal with the freedom of the Other in two basic attitudes. First, there is love (and masochism), in which one attempts to seduce or appropriate the freedom of the Other by becoming an object for the Other, and thereby winning his devotion. Second, there is hate (including indifference and sadism). In this range of attitudes, one attempts to deal with the Other’s freedom by
directly attempting to turn him into an object. These attitudes, however, are futile: “my constant concern is to contain the Other within his objectivity, and my relations with the Other-as-object are essentially made up of ruses designed to make him remain an object. But one look on the part of the Other is sufficient to make all these schemes collapse[…].”

Thus I get caught in another self-defeating loop: I try to see the Other as a mere object, but the Look reveals him to be a subject. And yet, as the interiority of the Other is not accessible to me, I fall back on his objective, exterior qualities (i.e., his being-for-others). This leads again to the Other-as-object, which collapses again. “Only the dead can be perpetually objects without ever becoming subjects” Sartre writes, “for to die is not to lose one’s objectivity in the midst of the world…But to die is to lose all possibility of revealing oneself as subject to an Other.”

Thus any encounter with the Other is going to oscillate between experiencing the Other as an object in world like a tree or a table, and experiencing the Other as a fellow subject. Neither of these viewpoints is stable, and therefore they continually collapse into each other. However, these two stances that I take on the nature of the Other are not equally valid. Though my experience of the Other-as-subject can never be complete because I only have access to his objective qualities, my attempts to experience the Other as an object inherently refer the fact that the Other is a fellow subject: the very reason that I futilely attempt to objectify the Other is because I am afraid of his subjectivity. When Sartre claims that only the dead can be purely objects, he further implies that the

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86 I will return to hate (specifically sadism and indifference) in greater detail later.
87 BN, 394
88 BN, 394
subjectivity of the Other is inescapable and inevitable. I can try to resist the Other’s subjectivity, but even in resisting I acknowledge it, and such resistance is destroyed whenever I encounter his Look. I am simply unable to permanently or completely ignore or reject the fact that the Other is like me.

Sartre’s Ethical Conclusions

In the second section of Sartre’s conclusion to Being and Nothingness he most directly explores the possible ethical implications of the preceding work. He is careful to note immediately, however, that one cannot derive an ethical theory directly from an ontology: “Ontology itself cannot formulate ethical precepts. It is concerned solely with what is, and we can not possibly derive imperatives from ontology’s indicatives.” That is to say that describing the way that things are cannot tell us what we ought to do. However, he claims that this ontology does “allow us to catch a glimpse of what sort of ethics will assume its responsibilities when confronted with a human reality in situation.” In examining this ontology we can, he claims, see what kind of ethics would most likely arise within that ontology. This is because we have discovered the nature of values: that is, because they are subjective and freely chosen and not objective and external, values find their genesis in the for-itself. Every human action indicates some value held by the actor, and these values can be revealed by what Sartre calls existential psychoanalysis.

89 BN, 795
90 BN, 795
While existential psychoanalysis has the immediate effect of “releasing to us the ethical meaning of various human projects”\(^{91}\) by showing what values lie at the heart of human actions, its long term goal is to dispel what Sartre calls the “spirit of seriousness.” This seriousness, according to Sartre, has two undesirable effects: first, when I am “serious” I forget that I am the source of values, believing rather that they are in some sense external to me and objective. Secondly, seriousness mistakes the “symbolic” value of things for actual, intrinsic, or material value. He uses the example of a loaf of bread, which is valuable to me because it helps sustain my life. It is not the bread itself that is valuable, but the nutritional aspect of it in tandem with the way my body works and the fact that I value my life. We might also use the example of money: money has instrumental value in that it allows a person to purchase goods and services, but very often that instrumental value is confused with intrinsic value, and we begin to desire money as if it had value in and of itself. The spirit of seriousness is closely connected with bad faith: “Man pursues being blindly by hiding from himself the free project which is this pursuit. He makes himself such that he is \(\textit{waited for}\) by all the tasks placed along his way. Objects are mute demands, and he is nothing in himself but the passive obedience to those demands.”\(^{92}\) We experience life as a series of demands or obligations that we are required to fulfill—much like the waiter \textit{must} get up at 5 A.M. to go to work and \textit{must} go through the motions in order to get his paycheck. In the spirit of seriousness we ignore our freedom—our free choice of that pursuit and how we choose to pursue it—in favor of believing in objective values or fate or destiny and the like. When we are

\(^{91}\) \textit{BN, 796}
\(^{92}\) \textit{BN, 796}
serious we do not see ourselves as freely choosing our actions, but as having tasks laid out before us which we have no choice but to obey.

Thus, according to Sartre, existential psychoanalysis attempts to reveal to us that our projects are all in pursuit of being—to combine the freedom that is the for-itself with the determinateness (and therefore comfort) of the in-itself—and that the things we do and the objects that we collect have symbolic value rather than intrinsic value. This may lead to further despair, however, as the futility inherent in all of our activities may lead to the realization that all human endeavors are basically the same: “…all are on principle doomed to failure. Thus it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is the leader of nations.”93 There is nothing that makes one objectively better than the other. But what happens when existential psychoanalysis shows us that we are the source of values, when it “reveal[s] to the moral agent that he is the being by whom values exist”?94 What happens if our freedom is revealed to us, and, perhaps, we in turn give up the fruitless pursuit of being? Can we replace the desire to become the synthesis of in-itself and for-itself and instead embrace freedom as the highest value?

The result, according to Sartre, would truly be the definition of being-for-itself: something that is what it is not and not what it is. If we were to embrace our freedom and replace bad faith with a new fundamental attitude, we would constantly be holding ourselves at arm’s length. Sartre ends this discussion—and Being and Nothingness—by asking if this would be the end of the situation, or if we would remain in situations but more directly bear our responsibility as radically free and recognized as such. “[C]an one

93 BN, 797
94 BN, 797
live this new aspect of being? Sartre asks. The answers to these questions, he claims, can only be found by venturing into an ethics associated with this ontology. He then promises to do so in a further volume—one which he never wrote.

Thus the last few pages of Being and Nothingness essentially contain a broken promise—not only in the literal sense Sartre’s unfulfilled project of exploring the ethical dimension of his ontology in a work to be entitled Man, but also in his assurance that this ontology has an ethical dimension. He assures the reader that because the ontology deals inherently with values, it can reveal to us the moral or ethical meaning of our actions, but then he abruptly veers off into a digression of how this may be done by existential psychoanalysis and an invective against the spirit of seriousness. By the time he is done explaining how and to what end existential psychoanalysis may reveal to us the values that underlie our actions, we are deep in the woods—far out of sight of the ethics that he assured us could be found at the end of the road. He literally leaves us with several questions about how one could live while embracing and confronting one’s freedom, and whether or not this would be the end of bad faith and/or the notion of my situation—but where is this ethical component? Certainly Sartre’s ontology does have some implications for values and value judgments, but he does not successfully get us out of the quandary that he himself proposes: under this ontology, what is the difference if I get drunk alone in front of the television or become President of the United States? If all values are subjective, freely chosen, and without objective foundation (i.e., absurd), then how could we possibly have even the cornerstone for foundation for an ethics?

95 BN, 798
The closest that we get to an answer is that Sartre entertains the notion that freedom may be the highest value because, he claims, humanity is freedom, and freedom is the source of all values. There is a problem here as well: just as Sartre addresses the is/ought distinction at the beginning of the conclusion by declaring that one cannot legitimately derive an ethics (what ought to be) from an ontology (what is), he seems to commit that same error here. Just because humanity is freedom and freedom is the source of all values does not mean that freedom ought to be valued above all things. As a matter of fact, he spends much of the previous work detailing how repellent we find our freedom, thus why ought we face it and embrace it? If we naturally flee from freedom and its accompanying anguish, why not do so? Why not revel in our bad faith and enjoy its ease and comfort? Thus we are left with two considerable obstacles to the formation of any sort of ethics based on Sartre’s theory: there appears to be no way of judging that one course of action is better than another, and his reasons for suggesting freedom as the highest value appear to be flawed or insufficient.

This conclusion may not sit well. It appears as though we should abandon this project—as Sartre himself did in never again turning an ethical eye towards this precise ontology—but the promise of an ethical component remains. Being and Nothingness seems to be charged with moral potential. Throughout the work Sartre deals with notions of ontological freedom and responsibility, and the terms he coins carry significant moral baggage (e.g., good faith and bad faith, the ontological shame revealed in the look of the other), and a large portion of it is dedicated to our relations with other people.
Freedom, Responsibility, and the Capacity for (Ethical) Deliberation

There are two fundamental aspects of Sartre’s ontology that I want to address in this new ethical light: that notion that humanity is inescapably free and responsible, and human beings’ ability to negate. A pre-supposition of any ethics is that the moral agent is responsible for her actions because she freely chooses to act the way that she does. The freedom to act and the coextensive responsibility of the actor is one of the main themes of Sartre’s ontology. Remember that freedom, for Sartre, is not simply what allows a human being to act freely, but what allows a human being to act at all. There is no question of free will and responsibility for Sartre, as humanity is freedom, and must be in order to engage in any action. Further, there are no situations in which an action is not completely freely chosen—even under coercion—and therefore there are no extenuating circumstances to limit a person’s responsibility for their actions. At this point, Sartre’s ontology appears to be very fruitful ground for an ethics.

If human beings are fundamentally free to choose their actions, then we must discuss how humanity is capable of deliberation—in this case, ethical deliberation. Again, Sartre’s ontology appears to be well-suited for such activity, as deliberation fits well into Sartre’s understanding of negation. As discussed previously, in every interaction with the world a human being negates: consciousness differentiates between itself and the world, between objects within the world, and any action taken is chosen over any other possible action. We may conveniently refer to negation as an ability or capacity that humanity has, but that implies that there are times when humanity is not
negating. Negation is something that humanity is always doing, and it is this constant activity that makes ethical deliberation possible.

When I am in a situation in which I must act, I ponder my options. For example, imagine that a man in a taxi is stopped at a traffic light. He has been convicted of a crime and sentenced to one year in prison. The taxi is taking him to the prison to report for the first day of his sentence. When the light turns green he can tell the driver to turn either right or left. If he turns left, the taxi can take him across the border to Mexico, thereby avoiding his punishment but banishing him from his home and family. If he turns right, he goes to prison and serves his time, commits no further crime and gets to return to his family after he is released. As the man sits at the red light ruminating, neither of these outcomes exist yet. However, he is certainly imagining either sipping cold beer on a sunny beach in Tijuana or meeting his enormous, tattooed cellmate. He is capable of imagining two situations which are not yet actual situations, and positing things one way and then another. Even before any ethical considerations come into play, he is capable of deliberating between these two non-beings or non-events. If he were only capable of dealing with what is (and not also what is not) then he would be incapable of any deliberation, much less ethical deliberation.

Negation allows us to see multiple options ahead of us or options we could have taken behind us. In the case of deliberation between various choices confronting us, it allows us to rank various not-presently-existing outcomes by whatever criteria we choose. In terms of hindsight, negation allows us to see how we could have acted differently, as possibly see how one course of action might have led to a better outcome
based (again) on whatever criteria we have freely chosen. In other words, negation allows us to make judgments about whatever we encounter or have encountered. These judgments can obviously be broken down into several categories, such as utility—e.g., “this hammer is a good hammer, and better than that hammer.” If we are discussing ethics, though, clearly we are interested in moral judgments. In *Being and Nothingness*, however, Sartre’s description of moral judgments requires some clarification.

**The Other, the Look, and Moral Judgments**

Now that we have discussed how Sartre’s philosophy ensures that we are capable of ethical deliberations and judgments, let us turn to how these judgments might be attached to a person and his actions by both himself and others. Let us return, for a moment, to Sartre’s discussion of the Other and the Look. As examined previously, Sartre addresses the problem posed by the Other—that is, whether or not (or in what capacity) other people exist. He “proves” the existence of the Other by describing how the Other appears and the effect that it has on whoever encounters is. First, the existence of the Other is not something that can be derived from my own existence—that is, the Other does not in some way come from me. Rather, according to Sartre, when I encounter the Other I am automatically aware that this encounter is unlike all of my other experiences with objects. This object—the Other—is different from all other objects in that I “know” immediately that it is not quite an object. It *Looks* at me, and when it does I become an object for it. I am suddenly aware of the fact that I am an object for this

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96 Here “Look” is used to indicate the specific phenomena of the look of the Other and all that it entails—i.e., objectification and ontological shame.
strange thing. It is in this experience that I “know” that the Other is another
consciousness or for-itself. If I am an object for the Other, than the Other must be a
subject, and thus a for-itself. However, according to Sartre I do not figure this out
through any kind of process of inference, but it is thrust upon me immediately as soon as
the Other steps into my field of vision.

For Sartre, the Other causes me to feel shame. This concept of shame becomes
somewhat troublesome because it is not, in this sense, a moral phenomenon—even
though Sartre’s examples happen to be fraught with moral implications. For clarity we
shall distinguish between this ontological shame (the feeling of “I am seen”), and the
more commonly understood moral shame. Ontological shame is the feeling of being seen
by another subject or for-itself. It is sort of self-awareness: we become not only
immediately aware of ourselves as bodies that can be seen and judged, but ontological
shame also comes with an implicit view of ourselves as the Other might see us. The
encounter with the Other is disturbing not only because of our sudden self-awareness that
breaks through our everydayness or unreflective action, but also because we see
ourselves as something that we are not: an object. In the Look of the Other we see an
aspect of ourselves which we only (and frustratingly) partially identify with. The voyeur
at the keyhole might protest to the Other that he is not merely a voyeur—that is, he is not
an object to be strictly and completely identified with any of his actions at any moment.
Or, if he were just tying his shoe in front of the door and not actually peeping, he might
understand immediately how the whole scenario might appear and stammer “This isn’t
what it looks like!” This aspect of the Look prompts Sartre to write, famously, in No Exit
that “Hell is other people”: the Look of the Other locks us down, solidifies and judges us, and we have almost no control over what the Other might think of us.

Despite the distinction we have made between ontological shame and moral shame, it becomes clear that the two concepts are closely connected. The only way that we can experience moral shame is if we first experience ontological shame. Let us return to the man at the keyhole—an example in which, conveniently, someone is engaged in morally shameful behavior. For Sartre, the man at the keyhole has no self-awareness prior to his shock at hearing the footstep. He is totally absorbed in whatever he is trying to see on the other side of the door. “This means first of all,” Sartre writes, taking on the role of the man at the keyhole, “that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them. They are in no way known; I am my acts[.]

The man is concerned only with his actions and his objective—he does not exist for himself as a body or as a person doing these actions, but he exists in these actions. There is not yet any reason for him to be aware of himself because all of his attention is in the direction of his goal. In this pre-Other situation, Sartre contends, “[I am] unable to know myself, but my very being escapes—although I am that very escape from my being—and I am absolutely nothing. There is nothing there but a pure nothingness encircling a certain objective ensemble[.]

As a being-for-itself, the man is constantly transcending whatever it is that he is actually presently doing towards whatever his object is—what he is looking at, what his goal is, etc. It is only when he hears the footstep that the man at the keyhole is suddenly and uncontrollably

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97 BN, 347
98 BN, 349
made to be self-aware. When looked at we are made to see ourselves, and ontological shame is “the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging.” Only then—only once he is made aware of himself—can our voyeuristic friend feel morally ashamed. He is first ontologically ashamed before the Other in that he feels himself being an object for another subject—just as he would if the Other had encountered him eating jelly beans instead of looking through the keyhole. Moral shame comes in when the Other first sees me and makes me feel seen, and then when I see that he sees me doing something that he could judge as something I ought not to be doing.

This leads us to new puzzles, however. What happens if no one comes along and the man at the keyhole does not get caught? If we stick closely to the example as it is written, nothing will happen. The man will continue to un-self-consciously peer through the keyhole until he achieves whatever goal he intends or until something else intervenes. No judgment will be passed on his behavior—no moral qualification—because there is no Other present to attach any other value to what he is doing. He will not experience moral shame because, in the absence of the Other, he will not experience the prerequisite ontological shame. We cannot, for Sartre, see ourselves as objects directly. We need the Other in order to experience this aspect of our being. Moral behavior is only in the context of interpersonal relations, as illustrated in Sartre’s discussion of making a vulgar gesture: “I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture. This gesture clings to me; I neither judge it nor blame it. I simply live it…There is no standard here, no table of

99 BN, 350
correlation. Moreover the very notion of vulgarity implies an inter-monad relation. Nobody can be vulgar all alone!”

If any moral or ethical value is attached to any of my actions, it is necessarily within an already existing social context. Sartre contends that even if we could be aware of our being-for-others without or prior to our primordial encounter with the Other, “still my vulgarity and my awkwardness could not lodge there potentially; for they are meanings and as such they surpass the body and at the same time refer to a witness capable of understanding them and to the totality of human reality.”

Nothing is vulgar or awkward or anything else without another person there to witness it and deem it so. The “Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other…I am unable to bring about any relation between what I am in the intimacy of the For-Itself, without distance, without recoil, without perspective, and this unjustifiable being-in-itself which I am for the Other.”

How can we see or judge ourselves without first learning that we can be seen and judged?

Through the Look of the Other, then, we get the first half of the ethical puzzle. The Other judges me based on what it can perceive of me: my body, my actions, my words. It reflects for me, in Sartre’s language, my objectivity: “My being-for-others is a fall through absolute emptiness toward objectivity.” Being-for-others is “objective” because the “me” that is reflected back to me is not a product of my subjectivity but something that is in the world and does not come from me. However, it is a product of the Other’s subjectivity: The Other “constitute[s] me as an object [not] for myself but for...”

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100 BN, 302
101 BN, 303
102 BN, 302
103 BN, 367
This quasi-objective quality of our being-for-others is what we find so Hellish: I recognize immediately that it is subjective for the Other and a product of the Other’s freedom and subjectivity, but because it is in the world and not a product of my subjectivity, it comes across as objective.

By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other. Yet this object which has appeared to the Other is not an empty image in the mind of another. Such an image, in fact, would be imputable whole to the Other and so could not ‘touch’ me. I could feel irritation, or anger before it as before a bad portrait of myself which gives to my expression an ugliness or baseness which I do not have, but I could not be touched to the quick. Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me.\textsuperscript{105}

If the Other perceives me as a voyeur, he perceives me as an object that has the qualities of a voyeur in the same way that he (or I) may perceive a refrigerator to be an object that has the qualities of a refrigerator. That is, he perceives me with all the attendant “objective” and hard-and-fast negative or un-moral meanings and values that “voyeur” already has.

We now have some criteria for the point at which a situation may become ethically charged. A situation must directly or indirectly involve other people for ethical considerations to come into play and there must be another person to attach moral values to an action or person. However, here we find a considerable obstacle to the formulation of an ethics. If we were to leave things as they stand now, all moral value judgments about myself or my behavior would come from someone else and would only exist in his presence. If I were at the keyhole, I could never consider my actions to be good, bad, or

\textsuperscript{104} BN, 367
\textsuperscript{105} BN, 302
anything else unless someone were to stumble across me in the act, and the values thereby attached to my actions would be determined solely by that person. I could not protest to the Other that I am actually a good person because I would be unable to directly attach “goodness” to myself or my actions, by myself. Further, without the Other I could not even become aware of myself or my actions in order to judge them.

But this is simply not how we experience such situations. The issue, at this point, is not that values (including moral values) are freely chosen, but that it appears as though moral values are imposed. However, it is an everyday experience to pass judgment on ourselves when not under the immediate gaze of the Other. It is perfectly possible that the man at the keyhole could—without the mistaken or actual presence of the Other—stop, consider his behavior, find it to be unethical, and leave. That is, we are missing the possibility for the intervention of a conscience. The omission of the experience of conscience is somewhat glaring, especially considering the fact that the goal of phenomenology is to harmonize with experience. However, it appears as though all of the structures required for a conscience are present in Sartre’s ontology.

Conscience

Recall that the Other’s actual physical presence is not necessary for the Look to take place. Sartre describes what would happen if the man at the keyhole discovered that he was mistaken about hearing a footstep, and therefore mistaken about the presence of the Other: “Here I am bent over the keyhole; suddenly I hear a footstep. I shudder as a wave of shame sweeps over me. Somebody has seen me. I straighten up. My eyes run
over the deserted corridor. I was a false alarm. I breathe a sigh of relief.” If I think that I am the object of a Look, thereby making me aware of (and generating for me) my being-for-others, what happens if I am wrong and there was no person seeing me, and therefore no Look? Is that ontological shame somehow mistaken? Does my being-for-others dissipate in my sigh of relief? Sartre claims that this is not the case, pointing out that sometimes false alarms like this can make us so aware of ourselves and how we appear that we stop whatever we may be doing anyway. “Far from disappearing with my first alarm, the Other is present everywhere, below me, above me, in the neighboring rooms, and I continue to feel profoundly my being-for-others.” The point here is that the critical aspect of the Look is not the actual presence of the Other. It is the possible presence of the Other, or even the presence of his absence, as for Sartre even absence is something that is revealed to us—just as I experience the absence of my friend when I go to meet him in the café. When I whirl around to see no one in the darkened hall behind me, the damage is already done: I do not see no one, but the absence of someone. The Other, therefore, is still present as a possibility—a possibility that I am reminded of when I hear the footstep, even if it was not really a footstep. “Being-for-others,” Sartre writes, “is a constant fact of my human reality, and I grasp it with its factual necessity in every thought, however slight, which I form concerning myself…The Other is present to me everywhere as the one through whom I become an object.” As hinted at in the previous section, there needs to be an initial or primordial encounter with the Other.

106 BN, 369
107 BN, 370
108 BN, 373
After that we “know” that the Other exists, that we can be seen, and we carry this with us. This is why the creak of a floorboard, the snapping of a twig, or the rustling of a curtain can set off klaxons for us: these things come to symbolize or refer the possible or imagined presence of the Other.

The fact that the Other need not be present to bring about ontological shame is what opens Sartre’s ontology to the possibility of a theory of conscience. But first, let us examine what we typically mean by conscience or the experience of conscience. First, note that conscience appears to act in two ways: retrospectively and spontaneously. This is to say, simply, that conscience can judge not only the things that I have already done (retrospectively), but also has the capacity to interrupt what I am doing or about to do (spontaneously). Further, while there are many different ways of describing the experience of having a conscience, when we talk about it we nearly always speak metaphorically. My conscience is a little disembodied voice inside my head, Pinocchio’s talking cricket, the angel on my shoulder, the voice of an important person or loved one that is not present, etc. These metaphors share a theme: conscience is described as something other than ourselves. We experience conscience as an independent, intervening thing. It interrupts us and passes judgment on our thoughts and actions (past, present, and future) and may ultimately lead us to act in certain ways. In doing so it makes us see ourselves and question how we might look to others. In other words, the experience of conscience is very much like the encounter with the Other. We experience conscience as something external, beyond our control, and spontaneously generated.
For example, let us suppose that I find a wallet on the ground outside of my apartment complex. It has some cash in it and no one is around. I have many options, including leaving the wallet, taking the wallet and keeping it, taking the wallet and turning it in to the lost and found, or taking the wallet, helping myself to the cash, and then turning it into the lost and found. My initial inclination is to go with the last option. However, conscience stays my hand. I experience my conscience as actually intervening and stopping me from doing what I am inclined to do. In this instance I am not consulting conscience. I do not deliberately conjure or imagine another person and ask them what to do. Rather, conscience comes to me unbidden—this seemingly other thing that demands that I not take the money. It feels like someone has caught me in the act, and I feel shame both ontologically and morally. I feel as though I am seen even though no one is there. I feel judged. But this Other that has Looked at me and given me pause is me. There is everyday precedent for this type of mental phenomenon, in that it is something akin to the paradox of other people in dreams: we talk to them, they seem fully Other and inaccessible, and yet we wake up to find that they were products of our own minds. Conscience, in being something which we do not actively call upon or seemingly have access to, and that can act as a limit on our own freedom, again seems quite like the Other and the effect of the Other’s Look.

It seems as though conscience is the internalization of the Look of the Other. This fits in well with Sartre’s aforementioned comments about the effect that the primordial encounter with the Other has on a human being. Again, after that first encounter the Other remains a constant possibility—we have learned that there are other subjects in the
world, and that they can and will see us and judge us. The Other could be around any corner or stumble across me at any moment in the middle of God-knows-what. Further, every thought I have of myself becomes laced with my being-for-others, as post-encounter I have a whole new aspect of my being to contend with—a being which can have any number of values attached to it: “He who has once been for-others is contaminated in his being for the rest of his days even if the Other should be entirely suppressed; he will never cease to apprehend his dimension of being-for-others as a permanent possibility of his being.”109 This experience is a bell that cannot be unrung. It should not be surprising that we may not need the actual presence of the Other or any external physical reminder of the Other, but may develop an internal mechanism to police ourselves.

It also makes sense why conscience would always have to come to me in the guise of the Other, as, for Sartre, it is impossible for us do the work of conscience directly through mere unmediated self-reflection: “It is certain that my shame is not reflective, for the presence of another in my consciousness, even as a catalyst, is incompatible with the reflective attitude; in the field of my reflection I can never meet with anything but the consciousness which is mine.”110 Again, I require the encounter with the Other in order to feel ontological shame, which is required for moral shame. Even if I am causing myself to feel ontological shame in order to morally shame myself, I cannot take a shortcut or cut out this middleman. This is how the process works both externally and internally. If the Other is not present, I provide one. I cannot make my being-for-others

109 BN, 534
110 BN, 302
exist for me because, by name and definition, it is for others. If I attempted to see and judge myself in the same way that the Other Looks at me (i.e., directly, as I see and judge him) I attempt to compare apples and oranges: as Sartre says, “the comparison is impossible[.]” My being-for-myself and my being-for-others are entirely different modes of being: “Even if I could see myself clearly and distinctly as an object, what I should see would not be the adequate representation of what I am in myself and for myself…but the apprehension of my being-outside-myself, for the Other; that is, the objective apprehension of my being-other, which is radically different from my being-for-myself[.]” And, as we have discussed moral values can only be related to my being-for-others. If I attempt to judge myself, then, I am limited to that aspect of my being. But

I can not be an object for myself, for I am what I am; thrown back on its own resources, the reflective effort toward a dissociation results in failure; I am always reapprehended by myself. And when I naively assume that it is possible for me to be an objective being without being responsible for it, I thereby implicitly suppose the Other’s existence; for how could I be an object if not for a subject?

The attempt to look at myself directly will fail. I cannot experience whatever I should find as “objective” because I am implicitly aware that the experience is subjective, and what I find when I examine myself is completely different (subjective, being-for-myself) from what Others see when they examine me (objective, being-for-others). If I try to point to my being-for-others and say “I am not ‘responsible for’ this,” i.e., “This did not come from me,” then I have to implicitly fall back on the Other as the source of it. To

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111 BN, 302
112 BN, 365
113 BN, 361. Emphasis added.
say to myself “What I am doing right now is wrong/right/anything in between” is to implicitly say to myself “What I am doing right now would be construed by someone else to be wrong/right/anything in between.”

Despite the similarity between the Look of conscience and the Look of the Other—and the fact that the former must be born from the latter—there is a significant difference between the two besides the fact that the Look of conscience is entirely internal. The Other—the actual Other who encounters me in the world and reduces me to an object—has access only to my body and my actions as objects. As mentioned above, the frustrating and Hellish aspect of the Other is that he does not have complete access to me in order to judge me, and I do not fully identify with the way that the Other sees me, or the way the Other says that he sees me. My conscience, however, is not really an Other. It is me, and in being me it has access to more information than the actual Other. Conscience not only sees me as the Other sees me (at least as far as I can imagine how I would look to an Other), but conscience also, in being me, has access to my thoughts and motivations for whatever I may be doing. Conscience combines aspects of both the Other and consciousness: it comes unbidden to me, it sees me and my actions, it is inaccessible and subjects me to the Look, and yet it also “sees” the internal aspects of myself that the Other does not and cannot have access to. In other words, conscience has domain over both the for-itself’s exteriority and interiority. My own thoughts and motivations can now be “seen” as objects and can have values attached to them, thereby
making them fair game for ethical consideration. I can have “dirty” thoughts, or right or wrong motives for an action.  

There are two very troubling aspects of conscience, however, which become apparent when Sartre discusses conscience directly. Sartre only explicitly mentions the notion of a moral conscience at one point in Being and Nothingness, in what appears to be a throwaway comment that the concept is problematic:

Here is the source of a good part of the troubles of the moral consciousness, in particular despair at not being able truly to condemn oneself, at not being able to realize oneself as guilty, at feeling perpetually a gap between the expressed meaning of the words: “I am guilty, I have sinned,” etc., and the real apprehension of the situation. In short, this is the origin of all the anguish of a “bad conscience,” that is, the consciousness of bad faith which has for its ideal a self-judgment—i.e., taking toward oneself the point of view of the Other.

First, we should note that Sartre only addresses retrospective conscience—the realization that something you have done is wrong—and not spontaneous conscience—the aspect of conscience that is capable of interrupting actions that are in progress. We can only speculate as to why the spontaneous aspect of conscience is not mentioned here, and, indeed, why conscience is not mentioned anywhere else in Being and Nothingness.

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114 However, as discussed previously it seems that, for Sartre, only actions that affect other people in a social context can be seen as moral or immoral. I would simply like to point out how it might come about that thoughts and motivations may become ethical fodder. An in depth discussion of this, however, is not within the scope of this project.  
115 BN, 676. We should highlight Hazel Barnes’ footnote on the issue, which reads “There is no distinction in French between ‘conscience’ and ‘consciousness,’ both of which are expressed by the word conscience. That is, I believe, the only passage in Being and Nothingness in which Sartre intends to emphasize the idea of a ‘conscience’ (English sense) which, of course, has no place in his philosophy.” However, in the 1986 paperback edition of Being and Nothingness, the comment that moral conscience has no place in Sartre’s philosophy has been deleted.
Secondly, we must note that Sartre relates conscience to bad faith. This is reasonable in light of our description of conscience: when I experience conscience, I act as though it actually is external, objective, and spontaneously generated even though it is not, and even though on some level I know that it is not. If conscience, then, is a lie to ourselves that we believe, it must be in bad faith. Conscience attempts to take on the perspective of the Other—something that is not “truly” (ontologically) possible—and yet we attempt it nonetheless. I am aware that my conscience is not objective and external, and that it is a disguised aspect of myself, and yet I choose to accept it as objective. But even though this is clearly the case, I argue that this does not denigrate conscience in any way. Bad faith, as we have explained, is unavoidable and does not, for Sartre, carry any moral stigma in and of itself. It is not “immoral” to be in bad faith, and we could not function outside of it. Further, just as a person directly confronting his radical freedom at every moment would most likely be paralyzed by anguish and the sheer magnitude of his choices and his emptiness, a person without either form of conscience would not be able to function in a social context. As stated previously, within the system laid out in Being and Nothingness, this experience that we have been calling conscience would be the only way for a person to stop himself without immediate external intervention, to question the nature of his behavior in the absence of the Other, or to judge that behavior retroactively without the Other’s direct input. A person without this capacity (that is, not with an underdeveloped conscience but literally without one) would be both ontologically and morally shameless. This notion fits in well with our common understanding of the

\[116 BN, 116, note 9\]
psychopath: a person without conscience, without shame, and unable to examine his behavior as if from the outside, as if an object for another subject.

Note also that Sartre claims that in conscience we constantly feel the “gap” between our estimations and the situation, and that this causes “anguish.” My conscience, then, is intimately tied to an awareness of my freedom. This becomes more clear if we attempt a further phenomenology of conscience. First, let us examine retrospective conscience, as that seems to be a less complicated phenomenon. Suppose that I said something awful to a close friend of mine during a heated argument. Later on, when my anger has receded, my conscience comes into play. What, exactly, is its message? If I told my friend that he was stupid, conscience does not correct that in proposing an alternative. Rather, it gives me the sense that I should not have said that. If I stole something, it tells me that I shouldn’t have. If I hurt someone, it tells me that I shouldn’t have. The first, seemingly automatic response of retrospective conscience seems to be “You shouldn’t have done that.” Then, if the situation warrants it, I may be given an alternative. If I hit a parked car and drove away, for instance, conscience might harass me later about not leaving a note. This example—and others like it in which there is a clear socially or culturally prescribed alternative—is a bit more vague than the others. However, I think it’s reasonable to propose that the initial response is not “You should have left a note,” but “You should not have driven away,” with the possible addendum of “without leaving a note.” These are different messages, as one gives me a direct imperative while the other is a negative judgment of an action that I have already done.
The experience of spontaneous conscience is similar. Let us update Sartre’s keyhole example: suppose I am suspicious of my girlfriend. Instead of peering through a keyhole, let us say that she has left her email account open on my computer. I am tempted to look through her mail to see if there is any evidence confirming my suspicions. But as I am about to click, conscience shames me. I feel seen, I feel judged, and I stop what I am doing. In such spontaneous cases, the message of conscience is “You should not be doing this,” or, if it manages to stop me just before I begin the action, “You shouldn’t do this.” Perhaps after this initial, interrupting experience I may be moved to take up the action of confronting my girlfriend about my suspicions or even confessing my attempted spying. But, again, the primary response is a negative judgment of an action that is actually undertaken: “You should not have done/be doing this particular action.”

In this light, the relation between conscience and freedom can be seen clearly. Implicit in the experience of conscience is the notion that I can do other than what I have done, am currently doing, or on the verge of doing. In other words, conscience implicitly reminds me of my freedom. Conscience may be a lie in the sense that it comes to me under false pretenses, but it is a lie that nonetheless reveals the truth. Even if the end result of an experience of conscience is an imperative such as “You should have left a note,” it still implicitly reminds me that I am free to choose: I could have chosen to leave a note, but I did not. And even if it were imperative for me to leave a note, I still actually chose not to. Conscience’s small lie tells a much larger truth: we are free to choose our actions and thus are completely responsible for them.
The relationship between conscience and freedom may require us to revisit the last pages of *Being and Nothingness*. Recall that in these pages Sartre speculates that there may be an ethical component to his ontology, and that it would somehow involve (1) replacing bad faith as a fundamental attitude, and (2) freedom in terms of constantly holding ourselves at arm’s length. In exploring conscience, we have discovered something similar to this notion. Sartre states explicitly that all of our attempts at sincerity, good faith, and authenticity are undermined by bad faith—but perhaps, through developing the capacity of conscience, bad faith can also undermine itself. And, through the activity of conscience as a means of not only judging ourselves and our actions but also implicitly reminding us of our freedom and responsibility, the ideal of better recognizing and bearing that burden directly may be reached. However, further speculation on this possibility is unfortunately outside the scope of this particular endeavor.

**Empathy**

Thus far we have examined how human beings (as for-itselfs) are capable of moral deliberations and, in examining how Sartre’s ontology is amenable to a theory of conscience, explored a means by which moral judgments and values may be attached to myself and my actions by Others, and then how I may make such judgments and attach such values to myself. But what informs conscience? That is, where does the content of my conscience come from? On what basis does it judge my actions? It is clear that, to some degree, conscience is deeply socially and culturally conditioned. Very early in life the presence of the Other, the Look, and ontological shame become the internalized
mechanism of conscience, and in childhood I begin to internalize the moral judgments that Others I have encountered have attached to my actions. As I mature, I encounter new Others and new situations, and therefore new types of judgments and values. During this process I encounter similar judgments in similar situations, and I become aware of what most of the people I encounter consider to be morally right and morally wrong. This is why we try to teach children what is “right” and “wrong” from an early age—in order for the tenets of our society and culture become engrained in their minds so that they might police themselves. This also explains the wide range of mores and taboos across different cultures—the content of each individual’s conscience depends on the judgments and values that they have encountered. What is “wrong” in one culture may not be in another.

But the mere social conditioning of conscience seems inadequate, especially in light of the Sartrean framework we have thus far been exploring. First, there is no reason for me to accept my culture’s mores and values. I am free to reject them at any time, regardless of whether they come from the Other or my conditioned conscience. We do this often, and to varying degrees—from hurting another person’s feelings with an angry word all the way to criminal behavior. Though, as said previously, even in rejecting my conscience’s demands I am implicitly acknowledging my freedom, there still is conscience’s moral weight or power to contend with. There are times when it is easy to overcome conscience, and there are times when it is harder. My conscience bothers me less for stealing cable from a faceless corporation than it would if I were to hurt a real, flesh-and-blood person. I rarely even consider my stolen cable in a moral light, but to see
a person hurt—to see the tears in her eyes and a crack in her voice, to see her pain at my actions played out in her face and words—it is difficult. It hurts to hurt people and to see them suffer. Is this the result of mere inference?

In order for this to become more clear, we must venture into the darker territory of moral judgment and values. At the more evil end of the spectrum, the idea that the content of conscience is purely socially/culturally constructed begins to break down. If we put aside minor and even severe wrongs and shine a light on the worst possible acts, the question emerges of whether we abstain from these acts merely because our experiences with Others have told us that such acts are wrong. There seems to be a line between, for instance, a man who kills his wife in the heat of an argument, a man who plans for months to kill his wife, and a man who, over the course of several days, tortures his wife to death. The first two are clearly wrong. The third is also wrong, but seems almost to be in an entirely different category. It is as if there are right and wrong acts, and then acts that are ineffable in the purity of their moral bankruptcy. When hearing of particularly brutal acts we do not have an intellectual reaction leading to an understanding that such acts are wrong. Our reaction is visceral. Our stomachs turn and we may wonder how a person is capable of such things.

And yet, according to Sartre, as a for-itself I am capable of anything. There is literally nothing stopping me from becoming the next Jeffrey Dahmer. I could, at any moment, choose to hold my roommate down and introduce a power drill to his face. But this is not my experience. Even if I were somehow forced to do so by another person, or if my roommate attacked me in a sudden homicidal rage, I am not sure that I could do
something so savage to another human being. I can imagine punching someone, or
shooting him, or even stabbing him, but the further one goes into such things, the more
difficult it becomes. There is something very real that appears to make it impossible for
me to dispatch my friend in such a way, and it is not that at some point my mother told
me that power drilling someone’s face is wrong. Clearly, then, we must accept the notion
that conscience is not wholly socially constructed, and that there appears to be something
else in play, at least when we cross that line into the more brutal regions of human
behavior. Does this seemingly “universal” or “natural” disinclination towards the worst
possible acts clash with Sartre’s ontology and descriptions of human interaction? Or, like
the mechanism of conscience, is there room for it in a world where values are freely
chosen and existence precedes essence?

Let us return to the encounter with the Other, as that is the point at which moral
considerations first appear. As we have discussed previously, a significant aspect of
Sartre’s ontology is his contention that the relation between myself and the Other is
instantaneous and internal—that is, that I do not “figure out” that the Other is a subject or
for-itself by observing its behavior and concluding that it is, in all likelihood, conscious
and free like me. Rather, when the Other appears I immediately feel the effect that he has
on me and my world. The objects around me stop being for me and start to be for him,
and I, too, become an object for him in the form of my being-for-others. This effect is
something experienced, not something that I conclude, interpret, or conceptualize. The
awareness that this object is a conscious and free human being is something that happens
to me, not a conclusion that I draw from a series of observations of premises. I do not
choose to be aware of the Other as a fellow for-itself, consciousness, or freedom, nor do I have any control over it.

With this in mind, let us return yet again to the concept of the Look—yet another aspect of the encounter with the Other that I do not choose nor have any control over. Because the Look immediately destroys my attempts to resist and objectify the Other, it is safe to claim that the Look itself is even more impervious to my tampering than the subjectivity of the Other. I can at least try to reject or deny the Other-as-subject, but it appears to be impossible to do so for the Look. The Other Looks at me, and I feel ontological shame. This Look, as discussed, immediately brings about a feeling of “I-am-seen-ness.” I become aware of myself as an object in the world—my being-for-others—an object that can be judged by another freedom, consciousness, subject, for-itself, etc. My perspective, therefore, suddenly shifts. As Sartre describes in his example of the man at the keyhole, I become aware of myself and my physical position—that I am crouched here at the keyhole peering through it. But this awareness is not relative to myself. I do not become aware of my being-for-others crouching here from my own point of view. Rather, it is relative to him, to the Other. I see myself crouched here through his eyes, in a sense. This is how ontological shame prefigures moral shame—this experience of the shift in perspective leads us to question and speculate on how we appear to the Other.

In the phenomenon of the Look, then, there are two as-yet undiscussed aspects—one of which is something that happens to us and that we have no control over, and the other which we do, to varying degrees. The first is what we will call ontological
**empathy.** Like ontological shame, ontological empathy carries with it no initial moral or emotional baggage. It is merely the phenomenon that we have just been discussing: the immediate awareness of the Other as a subject, a for-itself, a free consciousness. And, just as ontological shame is the prerequisite for moral shame, ontological empathy is the prerequisite for **moral empathy.** The sudden insight that is ontological empathy is inherently part of the Look, which in turn is inherently part of experience of the Other as a fellow subject. Here ontological empathy ends and moral empathy begins. From this standpoint I begin to speculate as to how the Other might see me (that is, judge me). It is at this point that I things are no longer simply happening to me beyond my control. Now it is up to me to figure out how my self and my actions appear to this person. Because ontological empathy gave me the awareness of the Other as a fellow for-itself, as it were, I can now imagine or project all sorts of things into that space: feelings, values, etc. In moral empathy I begin to infer that just as I am vulnerable before the Other, he is vulnerable before me. Just as my body and psyche can be hurt, so can his. But, again, moral empathy is something that the for-itself can choose to engage in or repress or ignore.

This empathic aspect of the Look is not as clear in Sartre’s example, as the Other that approaches me at the keyhole is a more disinterested party. I am most concerned with how I look to him, and the values that he may attach to my being for Others. Catching me peering through the keyhole will cause him to judge me, but it will not cause him any harm or distress. But what if the situation were shuffled a bit, and instead of me at the keyhole it is the Other, and I am the one in the room with the object of his
affections. Once he is satisfied that there is something untoward going on, he bursts in and Looks at me. I feel the ontological shame of being seen. I feel ontological empathy in the awareness of him as another consciousness, and just as I am capable of feeling moral shame by contemplating how the Other might attach various moral values to my behavior, I am capable of moral empathy by contemplating how these actions have affected him. I have hurt him, as I would be hurt in his situation. I have the capacity to speculate on this because I am capable of projecting or imagining myself in his situation after the primary experience of ontological empathy. I first have to be aware that the Other is a for-itself before I can make the inference that he must have an internal structure similar to mine—in this case, pains both physical and emotional. I first have to be aware that the Other is a special kind of object, quite unlike my pencil—I do not worry that I have injured my pencil if I throw it across the room, nor am I concerned that I may have hurt its feelings if I were to yell at it.

Sartre does, at one point, directly claim that we are capable of such moral empathy. He characterizes the experience, however, as being able to “realize affectively within us certain emotions without feeling them concretely.” He gives the example of hearing a story about a friend who has had some misfortune. Let us say that a mutual friend has informed me that my friend Pierre’s beloved wife has died suddenly. I am capable of imagining myself in Pierre’s place, and I am capable of understanding how he must feel. But, Sartre is careful to note, I do not actually know Pierre’s grief, and I do not actually feel Pierre’s suffering. This is not, however, as unfeeling as it initially

117 BN, 435
seems. Sartre contends that “we direct ourselves toward pain and shame, we strain toward them, consciousness transcends itself—but emptily. Grief is there, objective and transcendent, but it lacks concrete existence…what separates them from real shame, for example, is the absence of the quality of being lived.”¹¹⁸ I know these feelings and what they mean, and I am capable of transcending myself towards the idea (or, as Sartre refers to them, the image) of them, but I am not living them as Pierre is living them. They are not a part of my facticity and my situation. This does not mean that moral empathy is impossible or meaningless, but rather that the emotions and pains I experience in understanding the experiences of others are not the same as the emotions and pains that I experience in my own life. I may wince or flinch when I see someone accidentally hit her thumb with a hammer, but I do not feel that pain as that person feels it. I know that pain because I have hit my thumb with a hammer before, or I can imagine it because I have done something similar, but that remembered or imagined pain is different from the actual, lived pain of the person I am empathizing with.

We have thus reached a point where the general mechanics of an ethics have become somewhat clear, at least in terms of the individual: moral judgments are attached to myself and my actions by both the Other and myself. When I judge myself, however, I do so through the intermediary of a conscience which must take the guise of the Other. The content of conscience—the rubric by which it makes its judgments—is a combination of (1) the values I have absorbed through my culture and society and (2) my capacity to empathize with the Other after I am made aware of his status as fellow human.

¹¹⁸ BN, 435-6
being and not simply another object in the world. But the only firm ethical notion that we have thus far encountered is the fact that only behavior in a social context—that is, behavior that somehow affects other people—can be considered in an ethical or moral light. However, in discussing ontological empathy and moral empathy we alluded to acts that appear to be unqualifiedly considered wrong, and appear to be inherently difficult for human beings to do. How does such a phenomenon fit into the rest of the framework?

It should be noted that while (just like conscience) moral empathy can be suppressed, ontological empathy will always rear its head. There are often times where, in interacting with other people, I may not be fully engaging my moral empathy with them. There are times where I may act in a way that may harm another, and in doing so ignore or reject the recognition of the pain that I have caused. Despite the fact that we are fundamentally aware of the Other’s humanity when we encounter him, there are instances in which we talk about not really seeing the other person as a human being. Sartre refers to this attitude towards other people as indifference. He characterizes it as a “state of blindness [in which] I concurrently ignore the Other’s absolute subjectivity as the foundation of my…being-for-others[.]”\(^{119}\) According to Sartre, when I am indifferent to other people I see them as their functions. For instance, if I were to return to our example café in an everyday situation, would I really be fully conscious of the waiter as a fully real, conscious, free human being? Most likely, I would simply see him in terms of his function in that context, i.e., to bring me my order. Though Sartre acknowledges that this attitude can be a person’s main mode of interaction with Others, it is not absolute:

\(^{119}\) BN, 496
“This state of blindness can be maintained for a long time…it can be extended—with relapses—over several years…save for brief and terrifying flashes of illumination[.]”\textsuperscript{120} Indifference, then, does not fully objectify the Other. Further, Sartre contends that “although the blindness toward the Other does in appearance release me from the fear of being in danger in the Other’s freedom, it includes despite all an implicit comprehension of this freedom.”\textsuperscript{121} Indifference is in bad faith. I am still to some degree aware of the Other as a human being, but I am ignoring it—and in ignoring the Other’s humanity I am implicitly acknowledging it. Therefore, even if I am in a state of indifference toward the waiter, for instance, that does not mean that I am free from ontological empathy. It does not mean that truly and fully objectify him: I could not jam my fork into his eye as easily as I could stab a piece of cake. I could not brutally murder him for getting my order wrong.

Sartre does, however, talk about torture in \textit{Being and Nothingness}. He does so in discussing another attitude towards the Other—that of sadism. Sadism is another attempt to deal with the freedom of the Other, but the sadist attempts to capture the Other’s freedom by trapping it in the Other’s body: “Thus the sadist’s effort is to ensnare the Other in his flesh by means of violence and pain, by appropriating the Other’s body in such a way that he treats it as flesh[.]”\textsuperscript{122} The sadist causes the Other physical pain in order to fully dominate his freedom—to cause the Other so much pain that it becomes unendurable, and the Other gives in and humiliates or debases himself.

\textsuperscript{120} BN, 496
\textsuperscript{121} BN, 497
\textsuperscript{122} BN, 522
The sadist’s torture is, then, a sort of objectification in that he forces the Other to exist as his body, as his flesh. But the goal of the sadist is not to turn the Other into an object, but to dominate the Other’s freedom. The sadist’s efforts are also doomed to failure: “But this appropriation surpasses the body which it appropriates, for its purpose is to possess the body only in so far as the Other’s freedom has been ensnared within it.” The only way to truly objectify the Other is to kill him, and this is not what the sadist wants. Rather, the sadist wants to hurt the Other enough to feel as though in control of his freedom, to get him to freely submit. This, too, points to the inevitable failure of sadism, because it is up to the Other to decide when to give in: “In fact no matter what pressure is exerted on the victim, the abjuration remains free…He has determined the moment at which the pain becomes unbearable.”

Sadism, then, is also not free from ontological empathy and the implicit awareness of the Other as another human being. Sartre’s example of torture, however, poses a problem. So far we have been implying that it is the awareness of the Other as another human being which makes it difficult to do horrendous things to him, which we would assume would include torture. If one is capable of torturing another human being while aware of his humanity, then it would seem to rob ontological empathy of some of its weight. There are a few things that may be worth noting, however. Sartre is not explicit in his discussion of the torture used by the sadist—he only mentions causing pain and references to restraints. Perhaps there are acts of torture, then, that we might not consider as crossing that line into the “inhuman.” Further, Sartre’s entire discussion of

123 BN, 522
124 BN, 523
these fundamental attitudes towards the Other is explicitly sexual in nature. It is not unreasonable to consider the possibility that in discussing sadism Sartre intends sexual sadism, i.e. as an erotic activity. If this is the case, then the acts of the sadist can be classified as merely deviant and not inhuman.

The point in exploring these disturbing scenarios is to show that there are certain actions that are universally considered to be unqualifiedly and inexcusably wrong—so much so that we consider them to be inhuman. There is something in human experience that seems to restrain these actions in what we might call normal people. This is not, however, to say that these actions are impossible for normal human beings. Rather, we acknowledge that they are difficult, brought about by extreme situations, and are psychologically traumatic to the actor due to the implicit awareness of the victim as another human being. This is to be contrasted with the psychopath—the person who is easily capable of these actions and shows no remorse—not because he merely lacks moral empathy because he does not have ontological empathy. A psychopath is not aware of the Other as a subject, a for-itself, or as a conscious human being in the same way that he understands himself to be one. He is only aware of the Other as an object.

The psychopath, then, could whittle a person as easily as a twig. This is what we allude to when we say that the psychopath’s actions are inhuman—in lacking ontological empathy, the psychopath is ontologically distinct.

If ontological empathy exists as an innate restraint on certain types of behavior, however, would it constitute an essential quality of human nature? If so this would clash entirely with Sartre’s ontology, which can be boiled down to the notion that “existence
precedes essence”—i.e., that human beings, as radically free, do not have an essential human nature. As Sartre contends, human beings make their own “natures.” However, this does not mean that my nature or character is entirely my creation. Though I, in a sense, “choose” my fundamental project, which in turn influences how I will choose to interpret, accept, or reject my facticity and situation, which in turn constitutes a self in retrospect, Sartre’s inclusion of being-for-others as another aspect of my being allows for some aspects of myself to be out of my hands. As Sartre writes,

It should be noted in fact that character has distinct existence only in the capacity of an object of knowledge for the Other. Consciousness does not know its own character—unless in determining itself reflectively from the standpoint of another’s point of view...This is why pure introspective self-description does not give us character.125

There is precedent, then, in Sartre for the character or nature of the for-itself to be not entirely self-constructed—at least in terms of some aspects of its being.

If there are aspects of our created human essence or nature that are created in our encounters with Others, one might argue that the restraint caused my ontological empathy is not an essential characteristic of human beings, but merely an accidental or coincidental one. This is to say that human beings are not born with the restraining effect of ontological empathy, but rather it occurs (like ontological and moral shame) only after the encounter with the Other. The capacity to feel ontological shame is not considered to be an essential human characteristic for this same reason. It simply happens to be that encountering the Other is part of all of our facticities or situations, and therefore most people carry with them both ontological shame and empathy as the foundations of their

125 BN, 457
moral counterparts. Therefore, ontological shame and empathy cannot be said to be “essential” characteristics of the for-itself, and thus do not violate Sartre’s maxim that existence precedes essence.

Thus it appears as though we may have reached a possible starting point for an ethics in Being and Nothingness—not through arguing that there is a hierarchy of values or a foundational value, but identifying the mechanics by which moral judgments can be made, attached to people and their actions, the origins of the rubrics from which these mechanisms operate, and possibly accounting for why certain things appear to be unqualifiedly considered morally wrong. Of course, we are left with possibly more questions than we began: the nature of ontological empathy and its connection to the restraint on particularly brutal actions is based largely on the fact that psychopaths appear to lack both this restraint and ontological empathy—a supposition which requires much further exploration. Further, the line between acts which are considered to be merely “wrong” and acts which are considered to be “inhuman” is vague and relies mostly on an appeal to common sense. This is not necessarily a fatal flaw in phenomenology, but does pose problems in terms of ethical theory. Unfortunately, these issues must be addressed in later, more in-depth work.
CONCLUSION

I began by summarizing and explicating the major and relevant aspects of Being and Nothingness: Sartre’s ontological categories of being-in-itself and being-for-itself; the fundamental attitude of bad faith; the relationship between the for-itself, value, and action; and Sartre’s attempt to deal with the problem of the Other. I then examined Sartre’s own ethical conclusions at the end of Being and Nothingness and found an unfulfilled promise of an existentialist ethics. In an attempt to push forward, I reexamined aspects of Sartre’s description of the relationship between the for-itself, the Other, and moral values. I noted that Sartre’s phenomenological account of these interactions lacks a common human experience—that of conscience. I then illustrated how a theory of conscience could not only harmonize well with the rest of Sartre’s ontology, but also shine new light on other aspects of it, such as his ethical conclusions. It is possible that a Sartrean conscience may be informed by a combination of social/cultural factors and the experience of empathy. In dividing empathy into ontological and moral types, I put forth a possible explanation for why some actions are considered to be unqualifiedly wrong, and, to some extent, “inhuman.” I concluded by suggesting that this complex of conscience and empathy may be a cornerstone for more firm foundation of an existential, Sartrean ethics.

But where does one go from here? A Sartrean ethics may center on the development of conscience—that is, that developing a moral conscience is good.
However, this brings several problems, as our consciences remain partially relative to our societies and cultures. Further, it seems unlikely that a positive imperative will ever come out of the ontology of *Being and Nothingness*, especially in light of conscience being primarily a negative experience (“You shouldn’t have done that” vs. “You should have done this”). Instead looking to the development of conscience as a positive moral duty, then, perhaps we might claim that the deadening or lessening of empathy is wrong. This may be the better road to travel, as it is clear to see how a loss of empathy might lead to those actions that are considered inhuman. If it is possible to morally stigmatize the suspension of ontological empathy, we may be able to extrapolate a restriction on actions that lessen our moral empathy as well, due to the fact that the two are so closely related.

Again, this would lead us not to a list of positive moral imperatives or duties, but hopefully more than restrictions against actions that we already consider to be unqualifiedly wrong and to which we already have a strong disinclination. In further examining *why* these inhuman acts are considered to be unqualifiedly wrong, we may be able to tease out some restrictions—i.e., “thou shalt nots”—that might be used to govern our more complicated behavior. The crown jewel goal of such an endeavor, then, would be to find an existentialist justification for a negative formulation of the golden rule: “do not do unto others as you would not have done to you.” Given what we have uncovered in this exploration, I strongly believe that this is the best possible route for an existentialist, Sartrean ethics.
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