

## ***Sartre: Nothingness and Bad Faith***

### **Primary Sources:**

Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 328-348 (Handout)

### **Background:**

In his seminal work *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre considers (as Heidegger did before him) the question of being (“What is being? What is existence?”), particular the Being (or existence) of humans, which he calls being-in-itself. He notes that this line of questioning is not usually a concern for people. Following Heidegger, Sartre recognizes that people generally are absorbed in their everyday activities, not asking such questions. For instance (using Sartre’s example), when Sartre counts his remaining cigarettes, he is only conscious of the cigarettes – he only has a tacit, background sense of his activity of counting. However, when people become reflective and their own existence becomes a focus of questioning, then **human consciousness requires a space in which the “not” can arise**. This occurs in two ways:

- (1) a *negative* reply might be the only correct answer, e.g., “a human being is *not* an *X*” for some *X* or even any possible *X* you might suggest, and
- (2) the answer will be “a human being is this” and therefore, “a human being is *not* that”.

Negation and nothingness is always involved in the process of questioning and answering. Thus human consciousness requires these concepts in order to be able to differentiate things in the world. Hence, all human experience is involves negation and nothingness, according to Sartre. This leads him to conclude that all distinctions come from how consciousness applies negation and nothingness based on human projects and concerns. Interestingly, these distinctions are not found in the world itself.

Sartre gives an example of going to a café to meet his friend, Peirre. When arriving at the café, he is unable to find Peirre. Certainly there is not “nothing” in the café – it is full of patrons, tables, etc... – but there is *no* Peirre. The world itself cannot account for this nothingness, it only comes from the concern Sartre has at Peirre’s absence. Furthermore, without consciousness (and its application of nothingness) there would be no experience of destruction. Earthquakes and storms merely modify the distribution of masses and bodies – there is no less after the storm than before. Instead, it takes consciousness, of say a concerned farmer, to recognize that a field of wheat is *no* longer present after the storm. Or it takes the consciousness of a concerned rancher to recognize that his cattle are *no* longer alive. Even the distinction between the sexes is based on consciousness. The existence of males depends on conscious beings thinking that males are *not* female. Otherwise the distinction is meaningless or irrelevant.

Given this, Sartre finally posits that consciousness at its very core is itself a nothingness. First of all, it is impossible to say what consciousness *is* exactly. It is much easier to say what it *is not* (e.g., it is *not* an object like any other object in the world). And secondly, given our ability to transcend our facticity through our possibilities (recall this from our discussion of Heidegger), “you *are not* what you *are*” (i.e., you are not merely your facticity, since you can transcend it through future action) and “you *are* what you *are not*” (i.e., you have possibilities, but you are not yet these). Hence humans are the sum of these dual negations.

For the readings on bad faith, you will see how individuals can take negative attitudes on themselves by believing they are something that they actually are *not*. This is bad faith.

**Questions:**

- What is bad faith? How is it a negation?
- What are Sartre's examples of bad faith? How do they exemplify bad faith?