SARTREAN LOGIC AND

THE GOD-PROJECT

The key to Sartre's conception of the God-project is to be found in his ontology, and specifically in his reaction to traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic logic, which he ultimately overturns. In keeping with this logic, a pair of contradictory terms cannot jointly be true or false. Thus, if being is posited as a universal, non-being must of necessity be an error. Although certain ancients, including Heraclitus and the negative theologians, implicitly challenged this logic, it was not until the nineteenth century that philosophers began to systematize the structures of ontological contradiction. For Hegel, contradiction was the moving principle of the world, and as a result, being was not static but in a process of becoming. Sartre also envisions a being-in-becoming. In contrast to Hegel, however, he maintains that the synthesis of being and nothingness always short-circuits.

According to Sartrean ontology, though being and nothingness are logical contradictories, both are true modes of being. Sartre chooses to posit them as contradictories rather than contraries because contraries need not jointly exhaust a universe of discourse. Contraries are thus inadequate to the task of elucidating a fundamental ontology. Moreover, while a contrary is an external negation of a universal, a contradictory is an internal negation, which Sartre identifies with the nothingness of consciousness itself.

The following square of ontological opposition will help clarify Sartrean logic.

A. all being is   E. no being is
I. some being is   O. some being is not

In this scheme, the proposition "A" refers to the being of the In-itself and the proposition "O" to the being of the For-itself. Logically speaking, the "A" precedes and is the condition of the "O" insofar as the latter is a negation of the

former. It should be noted, however, that while the "A" takes logical precedence over the "O," the "O," as the lived-experience of consciousness, has an existential priority over the "A." For this reason it is possible to speak of Sartre as an "existential logician."

Whereas in the Aristotelian-Thomistic system, the "E" and the "O" are both false, in the Sartrean system, the "E" is false but the "O" is true. The internal negation of the For-itself ("O") is simultaneously an affirmation of the In-itself ("A") as world. The "I" is subsequently affirmed when the For-itself passes from a pre-reflective consciousness of being to a reflective consciousness of "this" or "that." In contrast to the "A," the "I" results from an external negation through which "some being" is distinguished from the being that it is not. As with the "O," the "A" is logically prior to the "I." This is precisely what Sartre calls the "transphenomenality of being."

The relationship that Sartre establishes between the "A" and the "I" confirms the Aristotelian-Thomistic principle that while the subalternate particular is implied by the universal, the universal cannot perforce be derived from the subaltern. Thus, though consciousness experiences an apodictic certainty of its own non-being, the existence of universal nothingness ("E") cannot logically be derived from consciousness. Were it possible to do so, then being would vanish and the entire logical edifice would collapse. Surprisingly enough, this is precisely what occurs in certain religious systems, such as that of the mystics.

Notwithstanding, the "E" can, in keeping with the Sartrean system, exist as an imaginary being. It is posited by the "O" not through an internal but an external negation of the "A." In contrast to the external negation which gives rise to the "I," this particular negation does not negate one being with reference to another ("this" as opposed to "that"); rather, it negates "all being" with reference to itself. This operation, insofar as it juxtaposes nothing with nothing, is nullified, and in reality being remains intact. Nevertheless, through an act of bad faith, consciousness denies the failure of its negation, and from the quasi-nothingness of the world it attempts to endow itself with the being that it lacks. In this context, the "E" might be called the imaginary In-itself of consciousness. It might also, in certain circumstances, be described as the "substance" of God.

The atheism of Sartre is formulated in terms of this basic logical system. Were the divinity to exist in reality, it would be the synthesis of the propositions "A" and "O," that is, of being and nothingness. Such a synthesis "haunts"

pre-reflective consciousness as the totality that it forever strives to become. A pseudo-being, it is not an object of pre-reflective consciousness but rather its ultimate possibility. "Cet être," Sartre states, "surgit en même temps qu'elle [la conscience], à la fois dans son coeur et hors d'elle, il est la transcendance absolue dans l'immanence absolue, il n'y a priorité ni de lui sur la conscience ni de la conscience sur lui: ils *font couple*" (*Etre* 134). This statement is crucial to an understanding of much religious ontology. It contains, in secular terms, the key to the paradox of a God who is absolutely transcendent and yet who is experienced at the heart of human interiority.

The Sartrean dyad of the human and the divine is not the For-itself and the In-Itself but instead the For-itself and "itself" as the synthesis of the For-itself and the In-itself. This synthesis, however, is unrealizable to the extent that the For-itself, despite its negations, is unable to appropriate the being of the In-itself. Its In-itself, as the contrary of being, remains imaginary, as does the God that it ultimately hopes to become.

Nonetheless, one might justifiably wonder why the synthesis of being and nothingness is impossible. Sartre, to be sure, argues that the In-itself and the For-itself are contradictory terms. Yet in contrast to Aristotelian-Thomistic ontology, they are both true dimensions of being. Were it not for the presence of a certain footnote in *L'Etre et le néant*, we might be tempted to use the anti-scholastic logic of Sartre to undertake an articulation of the synthesis of being and nothingness that he insists is impossible. The note, however, which merits citing in its entirety, clarifies the problem:

> On sera tenté peut-être de traduire la trinité envisagée en termes hégéliens et de faire de l'en-soi la thèse, du pour-soi l'antithèse et de l'en-soi-pour-soi ou Valeur la synthese. Mais il faut observer ici que, si le Pour-soi *manque* de l'En-soi, l'En-soi ne manque pas du Pour-soi. Il n'y a donc pas réciprocité dans l'opposition. En un mot, le Pour-soi demeure inessentiel et contingent par rapport à l'En-soi et c'est cette inessentialité que nous appelions plus haut sa facticité. En outre, la synthèse ou Valeur serait bien un retour à la thèse, donc un retour sur soi, mais comme elle est totalité irréalisable, le Pour-soi n'est pas un moment qui puisse être dépassé. Comme tel, sa nature le rapproche beaucoup plus des réalitiés 'ambiguës' de Kierkegaard. En outre, nous trouvons ici un double jeu d'oppositions unilatérales: le Pour-soi, en un sens, manque de l'En-soi, qui ne manque pas de lui; mais en un autre, il manque de son possible (ou Pour-soi manquant) qui ne manque pas non plus de lui. (138).

A synthesis of being and nothingness is therefore impossible because of the radical alterity of the two terms. Clearly, the In-itself does not affect the

For-itself, either internally or externally. The For-itself, on the other hand, as the internal negation of the In-itself, makes a world appear on the ground of being. Yet this world is precisely an appearance that disappears with the For-itself. Thus, though the For-itself is ontologically bound to the In-itself, its action is unable to affect the In-itself in its being. It is in this context that Sartre states: "La négation ne saurait atteindre le noyau d'être de l'être qui est plénitude absolue et entière positivité" (*Etre* 50). The only effect that the For-itself produces is an appearance which ultimately vanishes with its death.

This state of affairs has led certain critics to conclude that the ontology of Sartre is a dualism. He himself would maintain that his system is monistic, specifically because the For-itself is a dependent being that is "born," according to the ontological proof, "*portée sur* un être qui n'est pas elle" (*Etre* 28). Non-being does not issue from being, which is full positivity, nor is its "birth" the synthesis of a previous dialectical opposition. Rather, it is an unparalleled occurrence, similar in its unicity (although ontologically the reverse) to the divine creation *ex nihilo*. For Sartre, however, the question of the "whence" of nothingness is a moot one that metaphysicians and others have attempted to address but that he, as a phenomenologist, chooses to let drop.

Sartrean ontology, it might be said, is a monism of both being and nothingness. Were it not monistic, then it would ultimately disintegrate into the idealistic ontology intuited by the mystics and exponents of negative theology. In Sartre, nothingness is inextricably intertwined with being, but it can never transcend its mode of non-being. In the negative theologians, on the other hand, nothingness can be disengaged from being. Such a disengagement for Sartre would be the consequence of an act of derealization through which consciousness attempts to hypostatize its nothingness and endow itself with the being that it lacks. This derealization would be a flight from the original intuition of freedom and an act of profound bad faith. In strictly ontological terms, therefore, Sartre's atheism can be viewed as a refusal to grant nothingness a status of being independent of the In-itself.

Sartre rejects God not only in general philosophical terms but also in the context of the Christian Trinity. According to the Hegelian conception of the Trinity, indicated by Sartre in the aforementioned footnote from *L'Etre et le néant*, the Father and Son, as thesis and antithesis, would be integrated into a synthesis which is the Holy Spirit. In analyzing this triad, John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart adds the following crucial point: "In so far as they [the Father and

the Son] are taken to be correlative with the Holy Ghost, as on the same level with the latter, the Father and the Son are simply abstractions which the thinker makes from the concrete reality of the Holy Ghost" (204). Thus, because "the result of the dialectic is never a triad but a 'single truth'" (Thatcher 93), the Hegelian God is not triune but, in fact, the Holy Spirit itself.

Were the Persons of the Trinity applied to the Sartrean God, then the In-itself, as thesis, would be God the Father, and the For-itself, as antithesis, would be God the Son. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, would be the synthesis of these two beings—the divine monad that haunts consciousness from the moment of its original upsurge. In order to achieve this synthesis, consciousness, as a Christ figure, is prepared to sacrifice its own ontological status in the world. Through the selfsame reversal that appears in much mystical theology, it simultaneously negates the world as being and itself as non-being. The goal is to endow the In-itself with the fluidity of the For-itself and the For-itself with the density of the In-itself. Because of the alterity of the terms, however, the In-itself-For-itself remains imaginary, and hence the ever unrealizable ideal of all human endeavor. It is in this context that Sartre concludes *L'Etre et le néant*: "Ainsi la passion de l'homme est-elle inverse de celle du Christ, car l'homme se perd en tant qu'homme pour que Dieu naisse. Mais l'idée de Dieu est contradictoire et nous nous perdons en vain; l'homme est une passion inutile" (708).

Sartre, however, describes the Holy Spirit not only as the impossible In-itself but as the other. In the famous passage of *Les Mots*, where he reveals his inability as a child to believe in God the Father, he states: "Mais l'Autre restait, l'Invisible, le Saint-Esprit" (210). This Holy Spirit, as Sartre would clarify, is what survived of God in the secular culture of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. It was not so much a Person, in the theological sense, as the absolute ideal through which consciousness articulated its existence.

Notwithstanding, the Sartrean Holy Spirit is also a projection of the human other. In an effort to grasp the "Us-object," that is, the whole of human subjectivity as an objective being in the world, consciousness posits an "être-regardant qui ne peut jamais être regardé" (*Etre* 495). Such a being would be capable of constituting humanity in its totality. Yet like the In-itself-For-itself, it remains a limiting-concept. Even if it existed, it would unite human beings externally in a relationship of alterity. Ultimately, this means that there is no

ontological union with the other. Just as consciousness is alienated from being, so too is it alienated from all other consciousnesses.

The logic of this social alienation is to be found in the theory of being-for-others propounded in *L'Etre et le néant* and refined in the *Critique*. According to Sartre, the other is revealed to consciousness through an alienating look which objectifies it and reduces it to the status of a thing. Though consciousness aspires to the In-itself of things, it does so not in the hope of becoming a thing itself but of achieving the ideal synthesis of the In-itself-For-itself. In order to overcome the threat posed by the other, therefore, consciousness initiates a similar project of reification. It is for this reason that Sartre formulated the now classic dictum that the essence of human relations is not a *Mitsein* but a conflict.

Because consciousness can experience itself as a thing in the presence of the other, it is apodictically certain that the other exists as a For-itself. It could be argued, however, that the other is not known interiorly by consciousness but is rather the logical consequence of its own exteriority under the look. Were consciousness to interiorize the subjectivity of the other, then it might, in keeping with the Sartrean system, identify the ontological project of the other, and all that this project entails in the world, as its own. In the *Critique*, Sartre does allow for such a reciprocity of human action in the moment of revolution, when individuals attempt to transcend their mutual alienation. Yet he does not recognize it in the personal relationships of parents and children, lovers, and friends. For all intents and purposes, then, any concrete human bonding remains absent from his thought.

Nevertheless, a *Mitsein* is recognized not only by various existentialists but by numerous religious exponents who project it, like the limiting-concept of the Sartrean "Us-object," to the infinite. The Church, for example, as the mystical body of Christ, or the Mass, as the communion of the faithful, is a *Mitsein* that is taken to be God. A *Mitsein*, moreover, is the foundation of Christian ethics as expressed in the seven corporal works of mercy ("For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat" Matt. 25:25). It might even be said that the Holy Spirit is a *Mitsein* to the extent that it is believed to manifest itself among those who meet in Christ's name.

Whereas the absolute other described by Sartre is a projection of the real other, the *Mitsein* of the religious would be an extrapolation of an imaginary other. Following Sartrean logic, this imaginary other would be posited by

consciousness in an attempt either to appease the real other or to establish with certain others a complicity in the context of group or class exploitation. For Sartre this complicity would account for the myth of "brotherly love" in what are fundamentally unethical societies.

Although Sartre defines God as an impossibility, he does not posit an *a priori* atheism since, like belief, atheism is in the final analysis a choice of consciousness. Indeed, atheists are those who have "chosen" once and for all that God does not exist. While they are in "good faith," believers are in "bad faith" to the extent that their choice is founded on a desire to escape the anguish of freedom. (Agnostics, it might be said, are in bad faith insofar as they choose not to choose.) Through religion, Sartre concludes, humans ultimately attempt to create the apparatus for transforming their own nothingness into the totality of being. The effort, as he insists, is nevertheless doomed to failure.

The theological upshot of Sartrean ontology is that God cannot be made to exist by human fiat. What for centuries humans have thought to have learned, either through reason or faith, about a transcendent divinity, is in fact the truth of their own reality. It might be said that for Sartre human beings are God, not in a supernatural sense, but precisely to the extent that everything regarding the being of God is a corollary of human action.

While the philosophical atheism of Sartre is undeniable, the question of personal belief is more problematical. Sartre was aware of this belief that "dares not speak its name," and discussed it on various occasions. At the end of *Les Mots*, after recalling the heroes of his childhood literature, he writes: "Je ne relève que d'eux qui ne relèvent que de Dieu et je ne crois pas en Dieu. Allez vous y reconnaître. Pour ma part, je ne m'y reconnais pas et je me demande parfois si je ne joue pas à qui perd gagne et ne m'applique à piétiner mes espoirs d'autrefois pour que tout me soit rendu au centuple. En ce cas je serais Philoctète: magnifique et puant, cet infirme a donné jusqu'à son arc sans condition: mais, souterrainement, on peut être sûr qu'il attend sa récompense" (213). In the game of loser wins, Sartre could be seen as the most extreme sort of negative theologian. Not only does he deny the existence of God, as do such believers as Tillich, but he is even indifferent to the matter. This indifference, however, was achieved only after a lifetime of bold reflection. It is in fact the final triumph over the spirit of seriousness. Whether winner or loser, Sartre chooses to view his life in the context of a game. It is his freedom that allows him to do so. It is freedom, moreover, that is ultimately vindicated. He thus

concludes the aforementioned statement with the following words: "Laissons cela" (213).

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