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FROM ARISTOTELIANISM TO EXISTENTIALISM: THE PROBLEM OF BEING

Stanley Sfekas

Being has been the central and dominating concept of twenty-five hundred years of Western philosophy. Ontology is the branch of metaphysics that concerns itself with the nature of being. In this sense it is at the core of metaphysics and is the central problem of philosophy. As Aristotle has put it, "That which now and always has been asked and now and always perplexes us is the question: 'what is being?'" Aristotle did not use the word ontology, but called the study of being, "First Philosophy". The special sciences study being "in some way", *το ον πως*, whereas "first philosophy" studies being *as* being, being *qua* being, being as it is in itself; *το ον η ον*, or as Plato had put it before him, the being *of* being, *το όντως ον*. First philosophy, therefore, is a science which is prior to all the other sciences and is therefore termed the science of sciences, *επιστήμη επιστημών*.

The purpose of first philosophy, then, is to examine what there is, *το τι εστιν*. The whatness of a thing or its quiddity, its nature as a substance or essence, an *ουσία*, was examined. First philosophy becomes an examination of the world and sets out to describe the familiar. In this sense, Aristotle's ontology has been called descriptive metaphysics as opposed to speculative metaphysics, which sets out to interpret the features of ultimate reality.

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One may ask what the purpose is in describing the familiar. If it is familiar, then we are already to be acquainted with it, are we not? The answer is that an examination of the familiar may prove surprisingly novel; the familiar may reveal heretofore hidden dimensions of itself. Indeed, the etymology of the Greek word for truth, *αλήθεια*, is "unhiddenness". The truth is that which is not hidden, which is open to view and shines out, *φαίνειν*, and is therefore a phenomenon, something which is seen and experienced, a *φαίνεσθαι*, which derives from *φως*, light.

In this way, ontology was pursued by the phenomenological movement, by thinkers such as Brentano, Husserl, and Heidegger, who were seeking access to being, a radical level of experience, to the things themselves. What had been unproblematic for Aristotle, simply a description of the world around us, had become for modern philosophy an insoluble cluster of problems, a vexatious enigma consisting of the mind-body problem, the subject-object distinction, and the problem of solipsism.

The starting point of these difficulties is the philosophy of Descartes with its methodological skepticism and hyperbolic doubt. Searching for a solid foundation for a method of inquiry, a ground of certainty or *indubitandum*, Descartes found himself in a position where he could only demonstrate the certainty of his own consciousness, his "I think", the *cogito*. But how could he demonstrate the existence of his own body, of the physical world, and of other minds, if the only certainty was his thoughts. This cleavage between ego and world riddled modern philosophy until the challenge was met by phenomenological ontology.

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For Heidegger, the solution to the problem lies in re-examining the point of departure. Here, Heidegger is influenced by Husserl who like Descartes attempted to find certainty for philosophy and found it also in the *Cogito*, in the indubitable 'I think'. But at this point Husserl breaks with Descartes. Husserl denies that Descartes' *Cogito* established the certainty of a thinking substance, but only the certainty of consciousness. Moreover, says Husserl, consciousness is always of something, it is intentional, it is directed toward an object. The foundation on which knowledge rests is thus not the certainty of Descartes' thinking substance, which is separate from the objects in the world, whose existence and nature remains questionable. Husserl's foundation is consciousness and its intended objects; consciousness is not separate from the world but joined to it by intentionality.

Heidegger takes from Husserl's complex and formal philosophy the view of consciousness as intentional, a consciousness of something other than itself which it intends, to which it refers; and thus the conception of consciousness as relating to the world through its intentionality. For Heidegger, conscious existence is being-in-the – world; one does not begin from the standpoint of the ego but from the fundamental standpoint that man inhabits the world. Man finds himself 'thrown' into the world, finds himself in an already structured world with things ready to hand. An individual finds himself born in a specific historical and geographical milieu, dropped there as if from above. The investigation of being must begin anew, Heidegger states, for the great tragedy of Western man is what he calls the *Fall of Being*, which is of biblical

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proportions, like the fall of Adam. Ever since the Greeks, Western man has lost contact with the nature of being. The Greeks were closest to it, especially Parmenides, but the fundamental error in man's relation to being is a "turn' away from it to the notion of being as a thing, a reification of being. "Being is not a thing," Heidegger keeps reminding us.

Kant had said that the scandal of philosophy is that it has never succeeded in demonstrating the existence of an external world. The real scandal, Heidegger maintains, is that philosophers should continue to attempt such a demonstration, as if in answer to a genuine problem, instead of realizing that the problem only arises within an ontology that renders a solution to it impossible. As soon as we ask what it is that is demanding a proof of the external world, we see at once, according to Heidegger, that it is already a being-in-the-world. Only the impossible ontological presumption that questions about the external world could be asked by an isolated self enables the empiricist to suppose that the existence of the world could ever be a real problem.

When man sets out to study being, he notices that he is a being like all the other things out there. However, he is uniquely the one being for whom being is an issue. Man is the only being among the many beings that asks: "What is being?" In this sense, whereas man and the other things are all beings, all *ontic*, only man is a being which, in addition to being *ontic*, is ontological. To be ontological is to be concerned with the question of being—not just to be, but to be a being for whom being is an issue. The unique distinguishing feature of man is his existence which is characterized by his concern with being. The starting point of ontology,

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then, must be the features of man's existence, an investigation of the ontological before there can be an investigation of the *ontic*. For the features of existence must be understood in order to understand man's condition as a Being-in-the-world. Ontology therefore is necessarily an ontology of existence, a philosophy of existence.

This puts man squarely in the center of things after the great speculative Hegelian systems of philosophy had relegated man to the periphery. The centrality of existence becomes a theme for literature after the excesses of the Romantic period. Heidegger's seminal work *Being and Time* is about ontology of existence. And Sartre's work *Being and Nothingness* is a response to *Being and Time*.

Heidegger takes as his point of departure a passage from Plato's Sophist—a passage which he translates as follows: "For you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression 'being'. We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed." Heidegger agrees with Plato that everybody must in some sense know what he means when he says of something 'it is'. But philosophy, Plato says, has become perplexed about the meaning of Being. It is that perplexity which Heidegger hopes to understand and to resolve. Philosophy, he argues, must return to the problem of Being, a problem which Plato himself put fatally in the wrong light in so far as he identified Being with the Forms.

For Heidegger, man's existence is ontological. This is because man is a being that not only asks what is being and for whom being is an issue, but the being that is aware of Nonbeing. Man is a being that must die.

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Man is a being that knows that it must die. Therefore man is not only a being for whom being is an issue but for whom Nonbeing is an issue. And not only is existence of concern to man. But it is so because of the ever-present possibility of nonexistence. As Heidegger puts it, man is a "Being-towards- death". This means not only that man must die but that he can die at any time. That he must die is his finitude. That he can die at any time is his contingency.

Finitude and contingency taken together are the features of Being-toward-death. But man cannot stare death in the face. It is like staring into the sun. He will surely be struck blind. No, man averts his gaze. The truth causes dread and angst, what Kierkegaard called fear and trembling, and the sickness unto death. Anxiety is unfocussed fear, fear without a specific object that is the source of it. This metaphysical anxiety drives man into a modality of retreat from the truth which takes the form of triviality, of unthinkingness.

Man falls back on mechanical behavior and idle talk to allay his anxiety. This is inauthentic existence. But occasionally circumstances intrude upon this dynamic, a death of a significant other perhaps, or a life threatening illness may cause a person to confront himself, to confront the void. Authenticity would take the form of the individual's asking himself: "In view of the fact that I must die, and I can die at any time, what meaning can I give to my life?" That is to say, in view of the finitude of existence and its contingency, life can only have the meaning I myself give to it. Hence to ask what is the meaning of life is the wrong question. I can only ask what meaning I can give to it. Only then have I entered into authentic existence.

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At this point the question of ultimate reality is raised. Ultimate reality often refers to God. Heidegger calls his philosophy of existence: a temple without a shrine. The shrine is supplied by the individual if he chooses to posit it, if he chooses to make a leap to faith.

In that sense his ontology of existence leads to a pre-religious state which may or may not be taken further by the individual in his ultimate subjectivity, as Kierkegaard had put it. Jean-Paul Sartre chooses not to take it. “We have lived through Auschwitz, we are no longer naive” he says about religious belief. “No one lives there any more” is his literary echo to Nietzsche’s “God is dead.” But Sartre does take from Heidegger the basic distinction between the world of conscious being and the world of things; the concept of being thrown absurdly into existence; anguish and nothingness; the distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence; the distinction between facticity and transcendence; and the concept of man as making himself by having projects into the future.

Sartre takes the standpoint of phenomenology, which rejects the endeavor of speculative metaphysics to inquire into the nature of ultimate reality. It rejects as unattainable the ideal of philosophy which Hegel represents, the ideal of achieving a unified view of the world out of theory of knowledge, the natural and social sciences, history, politics, religion, and art. Phenomenology rejects all forms of empiricism as well. Phenomenology for Sartre is the modest study of phenomena, of appearances in relation to the structures of human consciousness through which they appear to us as they do. Sartre investigates being as it appears to human consciousness.

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Sartre agrees with Husserl's view of consciousness as intentional, as intending or referring to an object. Consciousness is always of an object, says Sartre. Consciousness points to what is other than itself, to the whole world of things which are outside it and confront it as the ugly root of the chestnut tree confronted Roquentin's consciousness, in Nausea.

In itself, says Sartre, consciousness is empty, nothing; it is a transparency, existing only as consciousness of some object. But Sartre agrees with Descartes that consciousness is always consciousness of itself; to be aware of an object is to be aware of being aware—or else I would be unconscious of being aware, and this would place consciousness in the power of the unconscious and of Freudian determinism, which rob consciousness of its freedom and responsibility.

Consciousness is thus the starting point of philosophy; consciousness is intentional; and transparent; a nothingness. How then does being appear to consciousness? There are two absolutely separate kinds of being, two regions of being which appear with within consciousness. There is the being of myself as consciousness and the being of that which is other than myself, separate from myself, the objects of which I am conscious. This opposing region of being, the being of the objects of consciousness, the being of existing things—a pebble, a chestnut tree.. The things which are the objects of consciousness we regard as independent of consciousness, as independently real. Things are subject to causal laws and are causally determined to be what they are. They simply exist solidly, massively as what they are, like the root of the

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chestnut tree. Sartre calls this region of being being-in-itself, or the in-itself, *en-soi.*

Conscious being Sartre calls "being for-itself", or the "for-itself", *pour-soi*. To be a conscious being is to be aware of a gap between my consciousness and its objects. It is to be in the world, and yet to be aware of not being one of the causally determined objects of the world. It is to be aware of a distance, emptiness, a gap that separates me from the region of things. Sartre then argues that there is such a thing as nothingness in the world and that it rises solely in relation to conscious being: it is only through conscious beings that nothingness enters the world. T o be a conscious being, to be a being for-itself is endlessly to bring nothingness into the world of being. What is Sartre up to?

Sartre is trying to shed light upon the human condition and to show the crucial differences which separate conscious being from the causal deterministic order of things. In contrast with being-in-itself, conscious being is the realm of being which has the power to separate itself from its objects, to distinguish itself from the realm of things, to question, to doubt, to entertain possibilities, to be aware of lacks. But all of these—separating, distinguishing, raising questions, having doubts, thinking of possibilities or deficiencies—introduce a negative element into the world. They involve what is not, or nothingness.

It is thus only in the distinctive capacities of a conscious being, a being for-itself, that you can think of what you lack, do not have, and what your possibilities are. Only as a possible being can you be dissatisfied with yourself, and desire not to be what you are now, and

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desire to be what you are not. This is the meaning of Sartre's starkly contrasting definitions of being in itself and being for itself:

Being in itself is what it is….the being of for-itself is defined, on the contrary, as being what it is not and not being what it is. In all of these capacities on your part—your awareness of lacks, possibilities, unsatisfied desires, expectations of the future—you have been conscious of what is NOT the case, what is NOT present, what is NOT actual. You have been negating what is. And so, says Sartre, you have brought negation into the world.

Sartre offers the now famous example of coming late to an appointment with Pierre in the café. To ask: is Pierre in the café? -- Will he have waited for me? -- is to open up the possibility of his NOT being there. It is again to introduce the notion of what is NOT the case, the notion of negation or nothingness. The café is full of being. But the massive solid being of the café is reduced to a mere background for the figure of Pierre that he seeks. The being of the café is made into nothing, it is negated, "nihilated" by the question: Where is Pierre? The judgment "Pierre is not here" introduces absence, the non-being of Pierre, nothingness, into the café. The necessary condition for our saying "not', says Sartre with poetic intensity, is that non-being be a perpetual presence in us and outside of us, that nothingness haunts being. Moreover, says Sartre, nothingness, negation, nihilation is the basis of all questioning and of all philosophical or scientific inquiry. In asking any question about the world, the questioner is detaching, dissociating himself from the causal series of nature, the world of things. Only conscious being has the capacity to withdraw from the

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bare existence of things in the causal order, the capacity not to be part of that order—and introduce a gap, a void, a nothingness between consciousness and the realm of things.

And so Sartre is able to make his dramatic conclusion that it is through man that nothingness comes into the world of being. Man presents himself says Sartre as a being who causes nothingness to arise in the world. “Man secretes his own nothingness.”

At the same time, this nothingness is human freedom. To be a conscious being is to be free—free in relation to any particular object of consciousness; free from the causally determined world of things, free to negate –we are always free to say no. There is no difference between the being of man and his being free. Consciousness is totally free, undetermined and thus spontaneous. Since I am totally free my past does not determine what I am now, and what I am now does not determine my future. I am totally free, and thus I experience anguish at the giddy prospect that I am therefore also totally responsible. Sartre’s ontology constitutes a contribution and an advance on the classical free will-determinism argument. The whole of Being and Nothingness can be seen as a cogent defense of freedom as the essential characteristic of human beings.

One might have expected existentialism, stressing as it does the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the individual, to have been much exercised about the problem of his final destiny. But this is not so. It is typical of this stance to see death as final. We have already seen the important part played by death in the thought of Heidegger and Sartre.

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For them it is death above all that constitutes human finitude, and its prominence in their thinking lends a somber tone to their philosophies.

It seems clear, however, that this question of the destiny of the individual is inseparable from the question about ultimate reality. If the universe is indeed absurd and godless, then there is no final destiny for the individual. But if the universe is a meaningful process in which God, Transcendence, or Being is realizing creative possibilities in finite beings, then it is reasonable to hope that whatever of value is thus realized will not finally be lost.