Metaphysical Questions in Sartre's Phenomenological Ontology

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Since Kant, modern philosophy has reacted critically and most often dismissively to any theories or inquiries deemed "metaphysical." The *Critique of Pure Reason* shows that although human beings naturally seek knowledge of things that are beyond the limits of all possible experience (i.e., *metaphysical* knowledge), the categories by means of which we are capable of knowledge are all restricted in their legitimate application to objects of possible experience. Thus, Kant rules out any human capacity for metaphysical knowledge on *epistemological* grounds—grounds having to do with the way knowledge-claims are legitimated. It is, therefore, surprising to find Sartre raising at least two questions in the Conclusion of *Being and Nothingness*[1] that he himself labels metaphysical but nevertheless legitimate. While Sartre admits that these metaphysical questions can find no answer within his own work, he seems to authorize a field of metaphysical inquiry whose proper work is to answer just such questions.

The two metaphysical questions I refer to are, first, "Why does the for-itself arise in terms of Being?" (788), and second, to paraphrase, 'What, if anything, can be said about being in general, or must we admit that being is fundamentally dual?' (cf. 790) Sartre's analysis in *Being and Nothingness* makes clear that being in general *is* dual: the being of consciousness is being for itself (abbreviated as "the for-itself"), while the being of the objects of consciousness is being in itself ("the in-itself" for short). The two questions Sartre calls metaphysical but legitimate ask about the origin of the for-itself and about whether the "being" that occurs in the expression "being for itself" has anything in common with the "being" in the expression "being in itself." The questions are metaphysical because their answers lie beyond any possible experience: we experience being as dual, and consciousness could not have been conscious *before* its origin in order to have experienced it. Why the questions, despite their

metaphysical character, are legitimate for Sartre—and important to him—is the theme of my paper.

One potential confusion that can be cleared away at the start is how Sartre's philosophical project differs radically from Kant's. As I have already noted, Kant rules out metaphysical knowledge on epistemological grounds. Sartre's central question and primary method in *Being and Nothingness* are not epistemological but *ontological*; he subtitles the book, "An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology." It is ontological because its work is to elucidate structures of being (Greek *ontos*). It is phenomenological because its method is to *describe* structures of being that appear to consciousness, so that his readers can verify the truth of Sartre's descriptions in our own conscious experience. While Kant maintains that phenomena (appearances) *conceal* "things in themselves," Sartre interprets phenomena not as concealing but as *revealing* structures of being. Since Sartre does not describe consciousness as distinct from being but as a form of being, all questions of knowledge are transformed in his philosophy from epistemological questions into ontological ones, i.e., questions of the relation of one form of being to another. This includes at least the two aforementioned questions of metaphysical knowledge. Granted, they cannot be answered within a phenomenological inquiry; there neither is nor can be conscious experience that would allow a phenomenologist to adjudicate these questions by describing that experience. This is what makes the questions metaphysical. But Sartre's point will be that these questions arise inevitably in the course of a phenomenological ontologist's attempt to describe the structures of experience, so that he must consider them legitimate questions and take an interest in them even though his methods can provide him no answer.

After this orientation, I proceed to devote most of my paper to a consideration of the first of the two questions Sartre labels metaphysical but legitimate: the question of the origin of the for-itself. In his attempt to avoid both idealism and realism, Sartre converts epistemology into ontology and distinguishes his position from Kant's by recognizing but reversing Husserl's intentionality principle. He also sets himself off from Descartes through the notion of prereflective awareness, which renders knowledge as an ontological relation between for-itself and in-itself and sets the stage for that first legitimate metaphysical question.

This first question must be distinguished from the similar question, Where does the for-itself come from?, because in it, the freedom of the for-itself is at stake. To clarify the metaphysical character

of this question, I argue in favor of calling metaphysics the search for a *teleology* of being that goes beyond the merely descriptive method of phenomenology. After raising certain critical questions about Sartre's position, I try to make sense of Sartre's second legitimate metaphysical question of a general theory of being by first expositing his notion of a detotalized totality and then delineating the role an absent God plays in his philosophy.

Finally, I attempt to show how our status as *engaged members* of the detotalized totality makes the second metaphysical question an important one for Sartre. This second question, like the first, interrogates the relation of consciousness to being as a *free* relation insofar as it touches on the possibility of efficacious action. In this way, I maintain, a legitimate metaphysics would be, for Sartre, ultimately directed against the bad faith that attempts to deny this freedom of action by reducing consciousness itself to mere facticity.

In the first section of the Conclusion of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre raises two questions that occur within the context of his ontology but cannot be answered within it; these questions must be left instead to metaphysics as its proper work. Sartre's first metaphysical question is "Why does the for-itself arise in terms of Being?" (788). Since this question comes up in the immediate context of Sartre's recapitulation of his solution for what he calls "the ontological problem of knowledge" (787), I will specify this problem and outline Sartre's solution to it at some length.

One of Sartre's philosophical goals is to avoid both realism and idealism in epistemology. These two theories are failed attempts to account for the relation of human consciousness to things by means of knowledge without resorting to a dualism of consciousness and object. Idealism claims that consciousness constitutes the full being of its object; knowledge here has primacy over being. Apart from the difficulties involved in granting consciousness any kind of constitutive power, Sartre is concerned that idealism neglects to secure for knowledge any ground in being (cf. Introduction, 10). Sartre's rejection of realism is more difficult to understand, not least because Sartre himself seems to argue for a kind of realism. What is clear is that for realists knowledge is produced by an action of the thing upon consciousness (26 & 238); I believe that Sartre's objection is not to the action itself but to the direction of the action. Through his analysis of the prereflective and immediate awareness that consciousness has of the being of the thing which appears to it, and through a recognition of the full import of Husserl's intentionality principle—that all consciousness is consciousness *of* something—Sartre has discovered that

it is not being that is present to consciousness but consciousness that is, prereflectively, present to being. Husserl's definition of intuition as "the presence of the thing (*Sache*) in person to consciousness" must be reversed: "intuition is the presence of consciousness to the thing" (240). The ontological problem of knowledge, then, is to find some ground of being for knowledge without supposing that being acts upon consciousness to produce knowledge.

Sartre lays the groundwork for solving this problem in the Introduction to *Being and Nothingness*. There, Sartre raises the question of how consciousness is related to the being of the phenomena, by which he does not mean a secret or noumenal being which the phenomena conceal. He means only an organized totality of appearances. This totality can never appear all at once in a single phenomenon. There is the continual possibility of the repetition of any given appearance. Further, the number of points of view one can take on an object is inexhaustible. So the being of the phenomena (i.e., their totality) is infinite and therefore transphenomenal. Sartre's term "being-in-itself" refers, as I understand it, precisely to this transphenomenal being of the phenomena. Now, human knowledge cannot grasp an infinity in knowledge, so it cannot relate itself on a reflective or cognitive level to being-in-itself. But if this transphenomenal being of the phenomena escapes human knowledge, it does not therefore escape human consciousness. There is a direct, prereflective awareness of being for Sartre that manifests itself as nausea or boredom in the face of things in the world. To say that there exists a being-in-itself that is the transphenomenal being of the phenomena is therefore no deductive cognitive claim for Sartre; it is, instead, a description of a prereflective and irreducible human experience.

The problem is not, however, to show the transphenomenal being of the phenomena; it is to assure the being of knowledge, which means first of all to assure the being of the consciousness that knows. Sartre cannot follow Descartes in the *cogito, ergo sum*. In beginning with knowledge, Descartes presupposes being and simply measures knowledge by knowledge. The being of consciousness thus escapes cognition in the same manner as the being of the phenomena does. What is required is, once again, a prereflective awareness, only this time of the being of consciousness rather than the being of the phenomena.

Sartre's claim is that consciousness can only exist with such a prereflective awareness of being conscious, and that this awareness of self is what underlies every experience of perception. To see a tree is to be conscious of myself as seeing the tree, and this non-thetic consciousness constitutes my thetic perception of the tree. This is the

prereflective *cogito* which Sartre reads as the precondition of Descartes' *cogito*. It, too, is an irreducible human experience, not a deductive certainty. It is the intuitive basis for Sartre's ontological category for consciousness, the category of "being-for-itself." I take it that he names the category as he does because consciousness is irreducibly and fundamentally present to itself. Combining the principle of intentionality and the prereflective *cogito*, we conclude that all consciousness is at the same time both a thetic consciousness of an object that transcends consciousness and a non-thetic self-consciousness. Since the relation between consciousness and the thing is a relation between two realms of being, the epistemological problem resolves itself into an ontological one. If Sartre often looks Kantian or Cartesian, it is this "ontological move" that distinguishes him irrevocably from both Descartes and Kant.

So the fundamental relation between being for-itself and in-itself is ontological, not epistemological. However, knowledge *does exhibit* the character of the for-itself as it exists in this fundamental ontological relation. Knowledge "is the very being of the for-itself in so far as this is presence to—; this is, in so far as the for-itself has to be its being by making itself not to be a certain being to which it is present" (242). The being of being-for-itself is therefore a negation in which it makes itself other than the particular being-in-itself that it perceives; it is a dependent and borrowed being that exists only in relation to—and as a relation to—the being-in-itself to which it is present. Roughly the first half of *Being and Nothingness* is a teasing-out of the nihilating, privative, and interrogative character of being-for-itself by which it makes itself other than being-in-itself. "Thus the *ontological* problem of knowledge is resolved by the affirmation of the ontological primacy of the in-itself over the for-itself" (787); the dependent and borrowed being of the for-itself assures this primacy.

It is in the immediate context of this solution of the ontological problem of knowledge that Sartre raises the metaphysical question, "Why does the for-itself arise in terms of being?" (788) It is easy to conflate this question with the question, "Where does the for-itself come from?" Sartre has already answered this latter question several times over by the time he raises the former one. Being-for-itself cannot be self-caused in the sense of causing its own being; the very notion of an *ens causa sui* is contradictory for Sartre, as we see from his claim that "if God exists, he is contingent" (128-9). The for-itself *is* the cause of itself in the sense that it causes its own nihilating manner of being, but we cannot call this self-determination a self-creation without making the absurd premise that consciousness

is prior to itself (cf. 16). Since there are only two categories of being, it would seem necessary by elimination that being-for-itself should, so to speak, "come from" being-in-itself. Indeed, when Sartre is comparing the for-itself to the Platonic "Other" in the Conclusion, he states this fact explicitly: "However, the other can not be other without emanating from being; in this respect it is relative to the in-itself" (787).

The sentence immediately following qualifies this account of origin, with a characteristically Sartrean concern to preserve the radical freedom of human consciousness: "But neither can it be other without *making itself other*; otherwise its otherness would become a given and therefore a *being* capable of being considered in-itself" (787, Sartre's emphases). Sartrean consciousness does possess *autonomy*, but there are at least two qualifications one must make to a Kantian sense of that term. First, freedom is not elevated to a noumenal realm but is instead the fundamental trademark of consciousness as it appears to itself (i.e., phenomenally). Second, Sartrean consciousness attempts to escape not its duty but the very freedom that is the condition of its choosing. Through bad faith, consciousness tries to annihilate its freedom by becoming an in-itself. Any account, therefore, of why the for-itself arises must show how this genesis can happen without the in-itself causing and thereby determining the for-itself and making it "unfree." This discussion of freedom also makes clear why the problem of the origin of the for-itself is an important one for Sartre despite being a metaphysical question: the freedom of the for-itself is at stake, along with the reliability of its non-thetic awareness of itself as a free being.

There is a small point of translation that looms large in this discussion of the origin of the for-itself. Two paragraphs before Sartre raises the metaphysical question, there is a sentence in Hazel Barnes' translation which reads, "As a nihilation [the for-itself] is made-to-be by the in-itself" (786). This sentence gives the impression that Sartre has already decided that the in-itself creates the for-itself, a seemingly impossible thesis within Sartre's system. Professor Barnes warns the reader early on (57n) that the expression "is made-to-be" is an interpretive translation of Sartre's neologism *est été*, but argues that later contexts will bear out the interpretation. The sentence presently under consideration in the Conclusion casts serious doubt on this translation since it would make the for-itself an inexplicable product of being-in-itself and would beg the metaphysical question of its origin. It seems to me that to translate *est été* literally as "is been" would be preferable, since the ambiguity of it allows the reader, exer-

cising the principle of charity, to suppose that Sartre is being consistent. My complaint here is surely not original; my point is only that this particular passage in Professor Barnes' translation presents a philosophical difficulty that is not present in Sartre's text. I take the "is been" of the phrase, "the for-itself *is been* the in-itself," to refer not to some action of the in itself productive of the for-itself but to the bare notion contained in Sartre's statement that "The in-itself is what the for-itself was before" (198). If there is more to it than that, it is that the for-itself is acting now, in every moment, to place the in-itself in its past. It is the for-itself, not the in-itself, that acts. And I assume this is also why Sartre cannot write "has been" in place of "is been": the action of placing the in-itself behind it as its past is not a completed action but a continuous one.

What does Sartre mean by calling the question of the origin of the for-itself "metaphysical"? Sartre writes, "To this question ontology cannot reply, for the problem here is to explain an event, not to describe the structures of a being" (788). Evidently metaphysics is a matter of explanations, especially explanations of the origins and causes of beings. The word "why" is essentially connected with metaphysics; one might even say (although Sartre does not) that metaphysics is the search for a teleology of being, a raising of the question, Toward what end or purpose (Greek *telos*) does the for-itself arise? Certainly, Sartre's ontology rules out a *causal* explanation of the origin of the for-itself from the in-itself, but there is good reason for thinking of the question of this origin as a *teleological* one. The capacity to set ends or to have purposes is freedom, the very capacity that sets the for-itself off from the in-itself. To call the metaphysical inquiry into the for-itself's origin *teleological* is, therefore, to recognize that this inquiry is one undertaken by the for-itself into its own prehistory. It is in harmony with Sartre's larger account in the sense that it counteracts the tendency of bad faith to claim that the for-itself is in some sense necessitated and therefore not free. At the same time, Sartre's insistence that the prehistory of the for-itself connects it ultimately with the in-itself preserves Sartre's description of the being of the for-itself as derivative and negative.

The common complaint against metaphysics is that it is not clear how human consciousness can have access to anything so grand as a teleology of being, or even an explanation of the origin of consciousness. Although one might be able to defend criteria for judging a metaphysics more or less plausible, metaphysics as a whole seems to lack the wherewithal to make any claims to certainty. Ontology, on the other hand, proposes to restrict itself to rigorous description of

"what is," and in this sense is a phenomenological discipline. The subtitle of *Being and Nothingness* reads: "An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology." Sartre gives no detailed indications of the methods of his ontology, but it is reasonably clear from the constant presence of the word "description" in his discourse that he believes that as a rule he is doing nothing more than elucidating the structures of phenomena.

In the opening pages of his *Psychology of Imagination*,[2] where the method is also phenomenological, although its execution is somewhat different, Sartre makes the claim that, on the level of description, philosophy has certainty, while explanatory hypotheses beyond the descriptive are merely probable. While in this earlier work, Sartre explicitly divides the contents into "The-Certain, The Probable," etc., the line between description and explanation in *Being and Nothingness* is difficult if not impossible to draw. What is clear is that Sartre's ontological investigation is, on the whole, inspired and determined by the phenomenon of the being of the in-itself and the self-awareness of the prereflective *cogito* as I have described them in relation to the problem of knowledge. "Let each one refer to his own experience" (358) is Sartre's characteristic appeal to his readers to look for the certainty of his ontology in the intuitive and phenomenal verification provided by our own conscious lives. Metaphysics as explanation is presumably in principle beyond any such intuitive verification.

The Conclusion is not in fact the first passage where Sartre discusses metaphysical questions; there are two earlier passages that warrant the attention of anyone trying to clarify Sartre's meaning of the term. In one of these earlier passages, Sartre discusses birth, in the other, the existence of other persons. In the Conclusion, Sartre makes the analogy that "metaphysics is to ontology as history is to sociology" (788); the metaphysical question about birth exemplifies this comparison of metaphysics with history: "How was there an in-itself *before* the birth of the for-itself? How was the for-itself born from *this* in-itself rather than from another?" (198-99). These are questions about the history of the for-itself and its historic relations to the in-itself. The *ontological* problem of birth is how a consciousness without a past can be "suddenly imprisoned" (198) in an embryo. Given (as Sartre argues elsewhere) that pastness is one of the necessary structures of the for-itself, how can there be a birth of consciousness? But the for-itself does not arise without a past; it exists even in birth only as a relation to the in-itself that is its past. "The In-itself is what the For-itself was *before*" (198). Even this relation of

"before" is a qualification that the for-itself as having been born brings to the in-itself, and it is only in light of this prior conferring of temporality upon the in-itself that the for-itself can turn back and locate its birth in time. In other words, human consciousness cannot discover or investigate its history—even the event of its birth—except as already having constituted that history *qua* past by its own immediate self-given structure of pastness. And, most intriguing, once the for-itself has brought it about to be that there is a past, its birth is not then constituted as the backwards limit of its history. "For finally this foetus was me; it represents the factual limit for my memory but not the theoretical limit of my past" (198). This makes the question, "Why does the for-itself arise in terms of being?" more intelligible; the for-itself does not come to be *ex nihilo* but has a prehistory in the in-itself. This prehistory is inaccessible to, but conceivable for, phenomenological ontology because, while there can be no immediate presentation of it to consciousness, the for-itself's immediate structure of pastness points backwards to a continuity with the in-itself in which such a prehistory might occur.

Recognizing that temporality comes into the world only with the advent of the for-itself rules out the metaphysical question about birth. Before the for-itself, there was no "before": the question is meaningless. The question, Why does the for-itself arise from this in-itself rather than another? is likewise meaningless: "this" and "that" as determinations of the world only come to the in-itself through the upsurge of the for-itself. Recalling Spinoza's principle *Omnis determinatio est negatio* and Sartre's description of the in-itself as full positivity, it is clear that only through the nihilating power of consciousness as already born can there be a "this" and a "that." Here, as elsewhere, metaphysical questions end by encountering a fundamental contingency, a "So it is" (cf. 399).

This same fundamental contingency occurs in the problem of the existence of other persons. The for-itself and the other do seem to exist in a reciprocal totality, each supporting the being of the other by a denied identity: "In this sense everything happens as if the other and myself indicated the vain effort of a totality of for-itself to reapprehend itself and to envelop what it *has to be* in the pure and simple mode of the in-itself" (397). This totality, however, since it involves a duality of engaged consciousnesses, could only be constituted as a totality by some third witnessing party such as "a directing power of the *mind*" (399). This third party would require an external negation in order to found itself as other than the totality. Sartre argues that this "otherness" to the totality is in principle inconceivable even

in the mind of God; there is no "outside" to this totality from which a consciousness not engaged in it could apprehend it. The question, "Why are there others?" is, therefore, another metaphysical question that ontology can rule out as meaningless.

Sartre mentions two more spurious metaphysical questions in the Conclusion in connection with the origin of the for-itself. The question, "Why is being-in-itself other?" (cf. 788) is absurd because it mistakenly presupposes the ontological priority of the for-itself over the in-itself. The question, "Why is it that *there is* being?" receives an answer within ontology. The expression "there is" refers to the presence of the for-itself to being-in-itself; this presence is an immediate structure of the for-itself, revealed through the phenomenon of being, and thus allows for no metaphysical interrogation.

Sartre gives yet another reason why the question of the origin of the for-itself is legitimate while most other metaphysical questions are not: since the for-itself constitutes itself as an interrogation of being, it has the right to question its own being (cf. 788). I wonder about this, for two reasons. First, it is not clear that the interrogative stance that being-for-itself takes toward being-in-itself implies that a reflexive interrogation is legitimate or possible. Sartre seems to be arguing more rhetorically than philosophically at this moment. Second, and this is the more serious difficulty, this metaphysical interrogation seems to me to run a heavy risk of being an exercise in bad faith. Sartre notes that the ontological evidence points toward but cannot demonstrate the conclusion that the in-itself produces the for-itself in an attempt to be its own self-cause. To raise the question, Why does the for-itself arise from the in-itself? looks like a final desperate attempt on the part of the for-itself to gain assurance—beyond all possibility of assurance—that not only its being but its manner of being are caused by the being which it is not. Is this attempt to view itself as a caused being rather than a causing being not what Sartre has named bad faith—namely the wish of the for-itself to deny its freedom and to assimilate itself thereby into being-in-itself?

Further, Sartre's remarks to the effect that the question of the origin of the for-itself cannot receive an answer within ontology are surprising and confusing in the light of the fact that more than once in this ostensibly ontological study, Sartre has stated an answer to the question. The following conclusions appear, for example, in "The Facticity of the For-Itself," accompanied by no disclaimer about the limits of ontology: "For us, on the other hand, the appearance of the for-itself or absolute event refers indeed to the effort of an in-itself to found itself; it corresponds to an attempt on the part of being to

remove contingency from its being. ... The for-itself corresponds then to an expanding de-structuring of the in-itself, and the in-itself is nihilated and absorbed in its attempts to found itself" (133). What are these, if not metaphysical claims of the very type Sartre refers to in his Conclusion? This raises the question, too, how much of Sartre's system would remain if he were to operate on the level of pure ontology, obeying his own edicts against metaphysical speculation.

Sartre also assigns the problem of motion to metaphysics to solve, and I will not attempt here to do justice to this problem; to do that would require an extensive analysis of Sartre's earlier comments on motion in the section on Transcendence (Part II, Ch. 3, Sec 4, B: "The Present"). Sartre's suggestion in the Conclusion is that motion may be a "malady" of being. Since "malady" is a passive notion, it might allow metaphysics to propose a solution in which being-in-itself causes the for-itself to arise without determining its manner of being. On the other hand, the metaphysician would have to make a case that being-in-itself could be susceptible to "maladies." Sartre also writes that the for-itself is an "adventure" (*l'événement*) of the in-itself (e.g., 295), a concept that is perhaps as passive as it is active, since in an adventure, things are constantly happening ("adventing," so to speak) beyond my control.

The second metaphysical question Sartre raises in the Conclusion of *Being and Nothingness* has to do with the unity of being or the character of being in general. Sartre has scattered references to the possibility of formulating a general theory of being that would complete his ontology throughout the text (see 26, 30, 295, 472, 555-6, 596, 724), but this is the first time Sartre explains in any detail what being in general might mean within his two-category ontology. Conceptually, making a theory of being in general would mean either specifying what the "being" of being-in-itself has in common with the "being" of "being-for-itself", or else admitting that being is fundamentally dual. "What is there in common," Sartre asks, "between the being which is what it is, and the being which is what it is not and which is not what it is?" (790) As in the case of the first metaphysical question, one must ask why this is a legitimate question for Sartre to raise, and why it is an important question for him.

A ready-made notion of being in general presents itself to Sartre from ancient Greek philosophy: a totality (*to holon*) made up of cosmic reality (*to pan*) plus the infinite void that surrounds and limits it. This would seem at first to be precisely the notion Sartre has of the relation between being-in-itself and the being-for-itself that is its nihilation. But Sartre argues that the two categories of being cannot

exist in this kind of totality. Being-for-itself does depend for its being on being-in-itself, but it is not a case of mutual and reciprocal ontological interdependence. Being-in-itself *does* depend for its appearing upon being-for-itself, but this appearing must have a non-dependent ground of being. This is the ontological significance of Sartre's separation of the phenomenon of being from the being of the phenomenon (he does this in the Introduction), and it is by means of this notion of the being of the phenomenon that Sartre denies idealism and escapes phenomenalism. Sartre's solution to the ontological problem of knowledge is thus itself an implicit denial of a reciprocally interdependent totality of being, affirming as it does the ontological primacy of one category of being over the other.

Even though Sartre rejects the notion of being in general in the sense of *to holon*, he maintains that we have an awareness of being as totality in the form of "a pre-ontological comprehension of the *ens causa sui*" (792), the God who is absent, nonexistent, and the concept of whose existence is self-contradictory. Sartre does not explain where or by what means this comprehension of God comes to human consciousness; he simply asserts that it does come, then proceeds to declare that reflection demonstrates the absurdity of the concept (cf. 128-9). An *ens causa sui*, in which there would be a reciprocal interdependence of being-for-itself and being-in-itself, would fall away into nothingness because it would have no absolute foundation for its being. In the light of this naive conception proved absurd, being in general appears as a detotalized totality: "Everything happens as if the world, man, and man-in-the world succeeded in realizing only a missing god. Everything happens, therefore, as if the in-itself and the for-itself were presented in a state of disintegration in relation to an ideal synthesis" (792). Here, as in the problem of the existence of others, ontology ends in an "as if;" the ontologist can *propose* that being has as its meaning the impossible God who escapes it (788), but to *affirm* that being does in fact have that meaning would be a metaphysical assertion. If metaphysics in the case of the first metaphysical question appears as the exploration of the *factual* prehistory of being, in this second question it becomes the attempt to elucidate the *ideal* prehistory of being. One might also speak of it as the attempt to establish a teleology of being, in which being is *directed toward* an absent God. Here metaphysics must decide whether being in general has as its meaning the being that it cannot be, or whether the dual nature of being is an irreducible and meaningless fact.

How is this question of the detotalized totality a legitimate one for Sartre to raise within his ontology? In the case of the metaphysical

question "Why are there others?" the conception of a detotalized totality as the meaning of other persons lost its meaning by the observation that a witness, disengaged from this totality, would be required to make it comprehensible. The present case is similar: human consciousness *is engaged* in this detotalized totality (if it exists). But, dissimilarly, the for-itself can here be exhaustively conscious of the detotalized totality through its power to look both ways. Human consciousness is both consciousness of being and self-consciousness, but being-in-itself does not reciprocate this act of consciousness. In other words, the prereflective *cogito* and the prereflective awareness of being in nausea and boredom, together constitute a comprehension of the possibility of being as a detotalized totality.

There is nothing more peculiar about Sartre's philosophy or perhaps more characteristic of it than the role God plays in it. I am reminded of Sartre's account early in *Being and Nothingness* of looking for his friend Pierre in a café but finding that he is not there. The absence of Pierre has a meaning because Sartre goes to the café with the expectation of finding him there. The nihilating function of consciousness recognizes Pierre as present-as-absent: Pierre is the being who is not in the café but rather elsewhere. The role of God in Sartre's philosophy is this case of Pierre taken to its extreme. Sartre approaches being with pre-ontological comprehension—a naive expectation—that he will find God in this being. What he discovers instead is that God is present-as-absent. Nihilating consciousness recognizes God as the being who is not real but is instead ideal, neither here nor elsewhere. Sartre is brought finally to the brink of saying that God's absence is the very meaning of the presence in being of the nihilating consciousness which haunts it.

On the final question, why this second metaphysical interrogation is important for Sartre, I believe that it, like the first, has to do with the freedom of human consciousness in relation to the being of things. Sartre is certain that human consciousness is free in the sense that it determines its own manner of being and makes its own choices. This is the freedom of self-determination, and in this way the for-itself can indeed be said to be *causa sui*. But another aspect of freedom is power—not a power over other conscious beings that would take away their freedom but a power over things in the world that would assure that free choices are efficacious in the sense that they make some real modification in being. Thus along with this second metaphysical question Sartre assigns to metaphysics the problem of action: how can human action be transcendentally efficacious? If metaphysics could demonstrate this transcendent efficacy, it would

powerfully allay the residual fear—or, from the point of view of bad faith, it would remove the consoling possibility—that things have power over consciousness.

The upshot of my investigation, then, is that Sartre allows for at least a limited inquiry into metaphysical knowledge of a kind that Kant has ruled out and that has come to be almost universally maligned in modern philosophy. *Being and Nothingness* specifies only two questions that would belong to this legitimate metaphysics: Why does the for-itself arise in terms of being? and, Is there a unity of being across the duality of in-itself and for-itself? Further, Sartre gives no clues as to the appropriate methods of this metaphysics; presumably he leaves this to others as well. Sartre's interest in these questions turns in the end on the possibility of action, which bad faith would want to deny but which Sartre, in his fundamental commitment to radical human freedom, must maintain.

The balance of evidence appears to suggest the following conclusions: First, at least these two metaphysical questions result legitimately from Sartre's phenomenological ontology, since they arise naturally within it and inquire into the prehistory of structures of being that *are* immediately present for descriptive analysis. Second, the legitimacy of this metaphysical questioning rests squarely on the demand of maintaining freedom, which is not just a systematic need for Sartre but an existential need, i.e., a need that rests on the most fundamental character of the for-itself. Third, the metaphysics that would attempt to answer such questions would be analogous to a prehistory of the for-itself. This prehistory is itself not immediately present for phenomenological description, but the structures of pastness and the activity of placing the in-itself in its past are self-constitutive for the for-itself. These structures are, if not immediately present to consciousness, the direct results of a phenomenological inquiry. Metaphysics would thus reflect hypothetically on why the for-itself chooses the in-itself or a particular in-itself as that which it places in its past. The rule metaphysics would use for this reflection would be the rule of freedom vs. bad faith; it would seek to account for the origin of the for-itself without denying its constitutive character as free. Although the origin of the for-itself is not present to consciousness in such a way that it could count as knowledge, the *freedom* of the for-itself *is* present to consciousness as its constitutive character. The rule of freedom is thus available to metaphysics as the ultimate basis for its inquiries.

No doubt, many readers will be uncomfortable with the idea that my interpretation brings Sartre in one way rather close to Kant, in

his allowing for a *practical* metaphysics in which freedom plays a regulative role for our reflection on being. However, it should be sufficiently clear just how different a practical metaphysics would be for Sartre from Kant's, even if we allow the same term to be applied to both. First, I have noted that Sartre's transformation of all epistemological questions into ontological ones sets his entire investigation off in sharp contrast to Kant's. Second, Sartre's notion of freedom as distinct from bad faith (the radical flight from selfhood and from one's own freedom), over against Kant's notion of freedom as distinct from the flight from one's duty according to the moral law, means that a metaphysics oriented around the notion of freedom will be correspondingly different for Kant and for Sartre. Notwithstanding my criticisms of Sartre's failure to adequately defend the for-itself's capacity to reflexively investigate itself, and the fact that he seems to answer certain metaphysical questions within his allegedly purely phenomenological ontology, it seems to me that Sartre's defense of a particular form of metaphysical inquiry is convincing *on practical grounds*, viz., on the grounds that the character of human existence as the for-itself requires the notions of freedom and action, which cannot be accounted for in a merely phenomenological inquiry but only in a metaphysical one.

In the end, the more important question may be not whether Sartre is right to declare some metaphysical inquiries to be legitimate but whether he is right to have restricted his method in *Being and Nothingness* to phenomenological ontology. In other words, my investigation leaves the residual doubt behind whether an inquiry into being (an *ontology*) can be complete using strictly descriptive means. What I believe I have shown is that the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* is himself uncomfortable with the idea of limiting ontology to a phenomenological method without being able to offer a more expansive method that would satisfy the demands of his own free consciousness.[3]

Notes

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Psychology of Imagination*. New York : Philosophical Library, 1948.
3. I am grateful to Thomas Flynn, Elizabeth Morelli, Xavier Monasterio and the editors and reviewers of SSI for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.