Sartre: How Do We Get from Nothingness to Freedom?

Introduction:

There seems to me to be a problem with the interpretation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s use of the words “being” and “nothingness” in his philosophy. Is his idea of being the same as that of Heidegger? While I’m quite sure of the metaphysical aspects of the argument, I’m not sure whether within those aspects Sartre equates nothingness with freedom, or whether the freedom (of action) arises from the nothingness.

This short essay of a solution of the problem.

The Argument:

It seems to me significant that Sartre wrote his novel Nausea in 1938 before he had read Heidegger’s Being and Time (1941) and before he wrote Being and Nothingness(1943). He did, however, study Husserl, and formed his views on the importance of latter’s phenomenology much earlier (1933/4). I suggest the clue to understanding the concepts might lie in a chronological reading of how his ideas developed.

In Nausea, the hero, Roquentin, is fed up with life – it bores him. He has travelled the world, experienced the sights, sounds and sensual experiences that are to be had. He returns to a boring northern French town, based on pre-war Le Havre, to consider his position. Put prosaically, he is facing a career change. He wants to give up his former loose living, free wheeling existence, but doesn’t know what to do instead. Gradually this drives him to such a state that even the mere appearance of simple physical things like tree roots and other people make his feel physically sick. He has difficulty trying to think his way out of this state, but at the end of the book he starts to realise that a jazz record he keeps hearing in a bar makes him feel happy. He starts to wonder at the creativity of the song writer and the musicians, and to consider the possibility of trying to do some creative thinking himself based on the skills and knowledge that he has in his own field (he is a historian).

Roquentin is frightened by his own freedom; afraid of committing himself to a choice. If he chooses one thing, he leaves another unchosen. There are some things he can’t do because he is not equipped to do them. There are others that don’t interest him because he is not familiar with them. Making a choice is not as simple as listing the pros and cons and balancing them off. It needs to accord with one’s whole experience – facticity, in the parlance of existentialists. The factical clutter he has built up by way of intentional contact with objects in the world is restricting his freedom to act, and yet that very facticity is the only thing that he has to go in to make decisions. There is dreadful freedom on the one side and facticity on the other; nothing in between to help.

This is the nothingness – the space between alternatives not taken and factical experience – which Sartre may be referring to in Being and Nothingness. This nothingness has no physical reality, no physiological concomitants. It is purely metaphysical (existential), and not related to anything concrete (essential). The experience we have of it is through living (our existence) not through investigating what material activity might explain it (essentialism), and we experience it first through being alive and living – so its existence precedes its essence.

Sartre takes the idea of objects outside our being having only an intentional connection to us from Husserl, and the idea of facticity and learning from interaction with the ready-to-hand from Heidegger. Heidegger’s Dasein is not corporeal or essential – it consists of ready-to-hand experience, states of mind, guilt about the past, a consciousness of the finite nature of the future, and in particular a sense of falling through the present – all existential properties. Sartre would therefore find his reading of Heidegger in tune with what he what he had been trying to say about the human condition in Nausea, so when he come to write Being and Nothingness he could present the argument the other way round.

It goes something like this:

Consciousness is nothing in the sense that we consist only of a space surrounded by objects which we know from their intentionalities. We are what we do with these objects, and when we have to make choices we have nothing else to turn to but the factical and somewhat random experience we have of them. We are therefore not inclined to act in any particular way except that which facticity tells us, which is really just a matter of contingency or chance. Nothing helps us across the gap, or to make the decision, because there is nothing there. So no wonder we are afraid of freedom, and tend to act inauthentically (go with the crowd).

We are loose in the world, buffeted by events and our past.