

Sartre vs. Nietzsche: Will To Power, Platonism, and Pessimism

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Introduction

Although Sartre and Nietzsche have been grouped together as atheistic existentialists, the idea that there are significant parallels between them is by no means common. While Sartre has frequently been portrayed as a derivative and syncretic thinker, it is the ideas of Descartes, Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger which he discusses, develops, and criticizes in *Being and Nothingness*. While major continental thinkers like Heidegger, Jaspers, Deleuze, and Derrida each wrote a book about Nietzsche and were greatly influenced by his thought, Sartre virtually ignores Nietzsche and refers to him only twice in *Being and Nothingness*. However, the question of influence is one thing and that of intellectual parallels is another. In the history of ideas it is not uncommon for thinkers to independently arrive at the similar positions - especially if they are addressing similar problems and living in similar times. Unfortunately, when a philosopher like Sartre neglects the thought of a predecessor working in the same domain, he may unknowingly follow some of the very same paths and he runs the risk of stumbling into pitfalls that his predecessor shows us how to avoid.

To begin with, there are some obvious general parallels between Nietzsche and Sartre which few commentators would wish to dispute. Both are vehement atheists who resolutely face up to the fact that the cosmos has no inherent meaning or purpose. Unlike several other thinkers, they do not even try to replace the dead God of Christian theology with talk of Absolute Spirit or Being. In one of only two brief references to Nietzsche in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre upholds his rejection of "the illusion of worlds-behind-the-scene;" that is, the notion that there is a Platonic true world of noumenal being which stands behind becoming and reduces phenomena to the status of mere illusion or appearance.¹ Both thinkers also insist that it is human beings who create moral values and attempt to give meaning to life. Sartre speaks ironically of the "serious" men who think that values have an absolute objective existence, while Nietzsche regards people who passively accept the values they have been taught as sheep-like members of the herd.

When we attempt a deeper explanation of the ultimate source of values, the relationship between Sartre and Nietzsche becomes more problematic. Nietzsche says that out of a nation (or person's) tablet of good and evil speaks "the voice of their will to power".² For Sartre, the values that we adopt or posit are part of our fundamental project, which is to achieve justified being and become in-itself-for-itself. It appears, therefore, that both thinkers regard man as an essentially Faustian striver, and that it would not be unfair to group Sartre with Nietzsche as a proponent of "will to power".

Clearly, Sartre would object to such a Nietzschean characterization of his existential psychoanalysis. In *Being and Nothingness* he rejects all theories which attempt to explain individual behaviour in terms of general substantive drives, and he is particularly critical of such notions as the libido and the will to power. Sartre insists that these are not irreducible psycho-biological entities, but original projects like any other which the individual can negate

through his or her freedom. He denies that striving for power is a general characteristic of human beings, denies the existence of any opaque and permanent will-entity within consciousness, and even denies that human beings have any fixed nature or essence.

Similarities: Sartre as a Proponent of 'Will to Power'

However, Sartre's criticisms of the will to power are only applicable to popular misunderstandings of Nietzsche's thought. Like the for-itself, Nietzsche's "will" should not be regarded as a substantive entity. Although it is derived from the metaphysical theories of Schopenhauer and is sometimes spoken of in ways which invite ontologizing, Nietzsche's conception of the will is predominantly adjectival and phenomenological. Its status is similar to that of Sartre's for-itself, which should not be considered a metaphysical entity even though it is a remote descendent of the "thinking substance" of Descartes. Thus, in *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche criticizes the unjustified metaphysical assumptions which are bound up with the Cartesian "I think" and the Schopenhauerian "I will".³ He says that "willing seems to me to be above all something complicated, something that is a unity only as a word".⁴ Although there are passages in the writings of both Sartre and Nietzsche which can be interpreted metaphysically if taken out of context, it is better to regard "nothingness" and "will" as alternate adjectival descriptions of our being.

Although Nietzsche's use of the word "power" invites misunderstanding, he clearly uses the term in a broad sense and has a sophisticated conception of power. Most certainly, he is not claiming that everyone really wants political power or dominion over other people. Nietzsche describes philosophy as "the most spiritual will to power,"⁵ and regards the artist as a higher embodiment of the will to power than either the politician or the conqueror. Through his theory Nietzsche can account for a wide variety of human behaviour without being reductionist. Thus, a follower may subordinate himself to a leader or group to feel empowered, and even the perverse or negative behaviour of the ascetic priest or resentful moralist can be accounted for in terms of the will to power.

Nietzsche speaks of "power" in reaction to the 19th century moral theorists who insisted that men strive for utility or pleasure. The connotations of "power" are broader and richer, suggesting that a human being is more than a calculative "economic man" whose desires could be satisfied with the utopian comforts of a *Brave New World*. Nietzsche's meaning could also be brought out by speaking of a will to self-realization, (one of his favourite mottoes was "Become what you are!") or by thinking of "power" as a psychic energy or potentiality whose possession "empowers" us to aspire, strive, and create.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre presents himself as the discoverer of the full scope of human freedom, contrasting his seemingly open and indeterminate conception of human possibility with a psychological and philosophical tradition that limits human nature by positing "opaque" drives and goals and insisting on their universality. Such an image of Sartre is widely held, although his insistence that consciousness strives to become in-itself-for-itself gives his view of man a greater determinacy than a cursory glance at some of his philosophical rhetoric and literary works would suggest. For this reason, Sartre can profitably be related to other theorists who argue that man is motivated by a unitary force or strives for a single goal.

When evaluating such theories, the really essential distinction is between those which are open, inclusive and empirically indeterminate, and those which are narrow and reductionist. This could be illustrated by comparing the narrow utilitarianism of Bentham to Mill's broader development of the theory, or by contrasting Freud and Jung's conception of the libido. While Freud was resolutely reductionist and insisted that "the name of libido is properly reserved for the instinctual forces of sexual life," Jung broadened the term to refer to all manifestations of

instinctual psychic energy. Thus, Sartre appears revolutionary when he contrasts himself with Freud although he cannot legitimately claim that his view of man is more open or less reductionist than that of Nietzsche.

Most likely, Sartre and many of his commentators would take issue with the above conclusion, and from a certain perspective their criticisms are justified. Unlike Nietzsche, Sartre is intent on upholding man's absolute freedom, rejecting the influence of instinct, denying the existence of unconscious psychic forces, and portraying consciousness as a nothingness which has no essence. In comparison even with other non-reductionist views of man, then, it would seem that the radical nature of Sartre's thought is unmatched.

However, in a more fundamental respect Sartre's ontology limits human possibility by (1) declaring that consciousness is a lack which is doomed to vainly strive for fulfilment and justification, and by (2) accepting important parts of the Platonic view of becoming as ontologically given rather than merely as aspects of his own original project. It is in this way that Sartre's philosophy becomes shipwrecked on reefs which Nietzsche manages to avoid.

For Sartre, "the for-itself is defined ontologically as a lack of being," and "freedom is really synonymous with lack".⁶ Along with Plato he equates desire with a lack of being, but in contrast with Hegel he arrives at the pessimistic conclusion that "human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state".⁷ In other words, the human condition is basically Sisyphean, for man is condemned to strive to fill his inner emptiness but is incapable of achieving justified being. This desire to become in-itself-for-itself, which Sartre also refers to as the project of being God, is said to define man and come "close to being the same as a human `nature' or an `essence'".⁸ Sartre tries to reconcile this universal project with freedom by claiming that our wish to be in-itself-for-itself determines only the meaning of human desire but does not constitute it empirically. However such freedom is tainted, for no matter what we do empirically we cannot avoid futile striving nor achieve an authentic sense of satisfaction, plenitude, joy, or fulfilment.

In Part Four of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes how consciousness attempts to make up for its lack of being by striving to appropriate and possess the world. With a somewhat reductionistic vehemence, he explains a variety of human behaviour in terms of the insatiable desire to consume, acquire, dominate, violate, and destroy. Sartre says that knowledge and discovery are appropriative enjoyments, and he characterizes the scientist as a sort of intellectual peeping Tom who wants to strip away the veils of nature and deflower her with his Look.⁹ Similarly, He says that the artist wants to produce substantive being which exists *through him*, and that the skier seeks to possess the field of snow and conquer the slope. Thus art, science, and play are all activities of appropriation, which either wholly or in part seek to possess the absolute being of the in-itself.¹⁰ Destruction is also an appropriative behaviour. Sartre says that "a gift is a primitive form of destruction," describes giving as "a keen, brief enjoyment, almost sexual," and declares that "to give is to enslave".¹¹ He even interprets smoking as "the symbolic equivalent of destructively appropriating the entire world".¹²

Aside from the sweeping and somewhat one-sided nature of Sartre's claims, the most striking aspect of this section is the negativity of its account of human beings. Not only are we condemned to dissatisfaction, but some of our noblest endeavours are unmasked as pointless appropriation and destruction. One is reminded not of Nietzsche's will to power, but of Heidegger's scathing criticism of the "will to power" (interpreted popularly) as the underlying metaphysics of our era which embodies all that is most despicable about modernity. For Heidegger, it is such an insatiable will which is embodied in our quest to subjugate nature, mechanize the world, and enjoy ever-increasing material progress.

However, while Sartre speaks of consciousness as nothingness or a lack - a sort of black hole in being which can never be filled - Nietzsche associates man's being with positivity and plenitude. His preferred metaphor for the human essence is the will - an active image which

allows striving and creativity to be reconciled with plenitude. It enables him to see activity and desire as a positive aspect of our nature, rather than a somewhat desperate attempt to fill the hole at the heart of our being. For Nietzsche, all that proceeds from weakness, sickness, inferiority, or lack is considered reactive and resentful, while that which proceeds from health, strength, or plenitude is characterized in positive terms. For instance, at the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he likens Zarathustra to a full cup wanting to overflow and to the sun which gives its light out of plenitude and superabundance.¹³ Later, he contrasts the generosity of the gift-giving virtue with the all-too-poor and hungry selfishness of the sick, which greedily "sizes up those who have much to eat" and always "sneaks around the table of those who give".¹⁴

Differences: Sartre's Failure to Overcome Platonism and Affirm the World

An even sharper contrast can be drawn between Nietzsche and Sartre's attitudes towards Platonism. While both reject the transcendent realm of perfect forms, Sartre fails to realize that a denial of the truth-value of Platonic metaphysics without a corresponding rejection of Platonic aspirations and attitudes can only lead to pessimism and resentment against being. The inadequacy and incompleteness of Sartre's break with Platonism can be brought out by examining it in terms of William James' conception of the common nucleus of religion. James says that the religious attitude fundamentally involves (1) "an uneasiness," or the "sense that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand," and (2) "its solution".¹⁵ Sartre vehemently rejects all religious and metaphysical "solutions," but he accepts the notion that there is an essential wrongness or lack in being. Not only does he regard consciousness as a lack, but in *Nausea*, Sartre condemns the wrongness of nature and other people in terms which are both Platonic and resentful.

Just as Plato admired the mathematical orderliness of music and looked down upon nature as a fluctuating and imperfect copy of the forms, the central contrast of *Nausea* is between the sharp, precise, inflexible order of a jazz song, and the lack of order and purpose of a chestnut tree. Roquentin enjoys virtually his only moments of joy in the novel while listening to the jazz, but experiences his deepest nausea while sitting beneath the tree. He regards its root as a "black, knotty mass, entirely beastly,"¹⁶ speaks of the abundance of nature as "dismal, ailing, embarrassed at itself," and asks "what good are so many duplications of trees?".¹⁷ Nothing could be a more striking blasphemy against nature. Trees are one of the most venerable and life-giving of all organic beings, providing us with oxygen and shade. Many ancient peoples regarded trees as sacred, and enlightenment (from the insight of the Buddha to Newton's discovery of gravitation) is often pictured as coming while sitting under a tree. Roquentin too, experiences a sort of negative epiphany while he is beneath the chestnut tree. He concludes that "every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance".¹⁸ In contrast to the pointlessness of the tree and other existing organic beings, Sartre says that a perfect circle is not absurd because "it is clearly explained by the rotation of a straight segment around one of its extremities".¹⁹ In such a Platonic spirit, he reflects:

If you existed, you had to exist all the way, as far as mouldiness, bloatedness, obscenity were concerned. In another world, circles, bars of music keep their pure and rigid lines.²⁰

In *Nausea*, Sartre reveals a contempt for human beings which surpasses his contempt for nature and even rivals the misanthropy of Schopenhauer. He particularly despises the organic, biological aspect of our nature. He speaks of living creatures as "flabby masses which move spontaneously,"²¹ and seems to have a particular aversion for fleshy, overweight people. He mocks at "the fat, pale crowd,"²² describes a bourgeois worthy in the Bouville gallery as "defenseless, bloated, slobbering, vaguely obscene,"²³ and recalls a "terrible heat wave which turned men into pools of melting fat".²⁴ Sartre also feels that people are somehow diminished

while eating. Roquentin is glad when the Self-Taught Man is served his dinner for "his soul leaves his eyes, and he docilely begins to eat".²⁵ Hugo thinks that Olga offers him food because "it keeps the other person at a distance," and "when a man is eating, he seems harmless".²⁶ Sartre also takes a negative view of sensuality. Roquentin says of young lovers in a cafe that they make him a little sick, and his account of sex with the patronne includes the fact that "she disgusts me a little" and that his arm went to sleep while playing "distractedly with her sex under the cover".²⁷ Perhaps his attitude toward sensuality is most uncharitably manifested when he thinks of a woman he had seen dining, remembers her as "fat, hot, sensual, absurd, with red ears," and imagines her now somewhere - in the midst of smells? - this soft throat rubbing up luxuriously against smooth stuffs, nestling in lace, and the woman picturing her bosom under her blouse, thinking "My titties, my lovely fruits."²⁸

Indeed, throughout *Nausea* the narrator's attitude toward people is uncharitable, judgemental, and resentful. Like the somewhat hostile Other of *Being and Nothingness*, Roquentin transcends and objectifies other people with his Look. He sits in cafes observing and passing judgement on people, and seems to particularly enjoy dehumanizing others by focusing on their unattractive physical features. He sees one fellow as a moustache beneath "enormous nostrils that could pump air for a whole family and that eat up half his face," while another person is described as "a young man with a face like a dog".²⁹ He treats the Self-Taught Man (whom Sartre uses to caricature humanism) coldly and condescendingly and does not even deem him worthy of a proper name. His attitude toward the eminent bourgeois portrayed in the Bouville gallery is an almost classic example of *ressentiment*. While looking at their portraits, he felt that their "judgement went through (him) like a sword and questioned (his) very right to exist".³⁰ Like Hugo in *Dirty Hands*, he senses the emptiness of his own existence and feels inadequate and abnormal before the Look of purposeful and self-confident others who unreflectively feel that they have a right to exist. However, he manages to transcend their looks by concentrating on their bodily weaknesses and all-too-human faults. Thus, he overcomes one dead worthy by focusing on his "thin mouth of a dead snake"³¹ and pale, round, flabby checks, and he puts a reactionary politician in his place by recalling that the man was only five feet tall, had a squeaking voice, was accused of putting rubber lifts in his shoes, and had a wife who looked like a horse.³² Roquentin hates the bourgeois, but for him virtually all the people of Bouville are bourgeois: Idiots. It is repugnant to me to think that I am going to see their thick, self-satisfied faces. They make laws, they write popular novels, they get married, they are fools enough to have children.³³

Although Sartre is more insightful than the unreflective and self-satisfied "normal" people whom he judges so uncharitably, he seems unaware that his own thought fails to escape the ancient reefs of Platonism and metaphysical pessimism. Even the upbeat ending of *Nausea* is somewhat tentative and half-hearted, and does not question or overturn any of the ontological views expressed earlier in the book.

On the other hand, although Nietzsche shares many of the same philosophical premises as Sartre, his view of life and nature is much less bleak because he thoroughly rejects the Platonic world-view and all metaphysical forms of pessimism. First, throughout his writings Nietzsche vehemently opposes the Platonic prejudice that puts being above becoming, idealizes rationality and purpose, and despises the disorderly flux of nature and the organic and animalistic aspects of the body. He admires Heraclitus rather than Parmenides, denies that there is any "eternal spider or spider web of reason," and declares "over all things stand the heaven Accident, the heaven Innocence, the heaven Chance, the heaven Prankishness".³⁴ Unlike Sartre, he had a high regard for the vital, superabundant, and non-rational aspect of nature, and loved music for its ability to express emotional depths and Dionysian ecstasy rather than as an embodiment of reason, order, or precision.

In response to Schopenhauer and several religious traditions, Nietzsche refutes

metaphysical pessimism. He denies that life or nature is essentially lacking or evil, or that any negative evaluation of being as a whole could possess truth-value. This is in keeping with his skeptical position, which denies that the thing-in-itself is knowable and insists that all philosophical systems reflect the subjectivity of their author and are "a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir".³⁵ If Nietzsche were to speak in the language of *Being and Nothingness*, he would insist that the desire to achieve the complete and justified being of the in-itself-for-itself is simply Sartre's original project, not an ontological given which condemns every person to unhappy consciousness.

One of the central themes of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is the overcoming of pessimism and despair through the will. Zarathustra says that "my will always comes to me as my liberator and joy-bringer. Willing liberates: that is the true teaching of will and liberty".³⁶ At the end of 'The Tomb Song,' he turns to his will to overcome despair, referring to it as something invulnerable and unburiable which can redeem his youth and shatter tombs.³⁷ Although the will to power is often associated with striving for the overman (not to mention those who wrongly link it with domination and conquest), it is also essential to such Nietzschean themes as *amor fati*, eternal recurrence, and the affirmation of life. In order to affirm his existence, Zarathustra says that he must redeem the past by transforming "the will's ill will against time and its 'it was'" into a creative "But thus I will it; thus shall I will it".³⁸ It is out of such reflections that the project of embracing eternal recurrence emerges.

In keeping with his desire to affirm life, Nietzsche's attitude toward other people is more charitable and less negative than that of Roquentin and many of Sartre's other literary heroes. Admittedly, Nietzsche makes many nasty remarks about historical figures, but these are often balanced by corresponding positive observations, and most of his polemical fury is directed against ideas, dogmas, and institutions rather than individuals. For instance, Zarathustra says of priests that "though they are my enemies, pass by them silently with sleeping swords. Among them too there are heroes".³⁹ While some of his comments on the rabble are comparable to Sartre's comments on the bourgeois, Zarathustra also criticizes his "ape" who sits outside a great city and vengefully denounces its inhabitants, for "where one can no longer love, there one should *pass by*".⁴⁰

Conclusion

Of those modern thinkers who resolutely face the fact that God is dead and the universe contains no inherent meaning or purpose, Sartre and Nietzsche are among the most important. However, although they begin from somewhat similar premises, Sartre is both a less radical and less life-affirming thinker than Nietzsche. It is particularly ironic that he puts so much emphasis on freedom, and yet refuses to grant consciousness the power to overcome its insatiable yearning to be in-itself-for-itself, and fails to question his own Platonic prejudices against nature and becoming.

Endnotes

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square, 1956), p. 4. [[Back to text](#)]

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Viking, 1954), I:15. [[Back to text](#)]

- ³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), p. 16. [[Back to text](#)]
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 19. [[Back to text](#)]
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 9. [[Back to text](#)]
- ⁶ *Being and Nothingness*, p. 722. [[Back to text](#)]
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 140. [[Back to text](#)]
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 724. [[Back to text](#)]
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 738. [[Back to text](#)]
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 747. [[Back to text](#)]
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 758. [[Back to text](#)]
- ¹² Ibid., p. 761. [[Back to text](#)]
- ¹³ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue:1. [[Back to text](#)]
- ¹⁴ Ibid., I:22. [[Back to text](#)]
- ¹⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1982), p. 508. [[Back to text](#)]
- ¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 127. [[Back to text](#)]
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 133. [[Back to text](#)]
- ¹⁸ Ibid. [[Back to text](#)]
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 129. [[Back to text](#)]
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 128. [[Back to text](#)]
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 24. [[Back to text](#)]
- ²² Ibid., p. 45. [[Back to text](#)]
- ²³ Ibid., p. 89. [[Back to text](#)]
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 177. [[Back to text](#)]
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 106. [[Back to text](#)]
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 132. [[Back to text](#)]

- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 59. [[Back to text](#)]
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 134. [[Back to text](#)]
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 20. [[Back to text](#)]
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 84. [[Back to text](#)]
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 89. [[Back to text](#)]
- ³² Ibid., p. 93. [[Back to text](#)]
- ³³ Ibid., p. 158. [[Back to text](#)]
- ³⁴ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III:4. [[Back to text](#)]
- ³⁵ *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 6. [[Back to text](#)]
- ³⁶ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II:2. [[Back to text](#)]
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 158. [[Back to text](#)]
- ³⁸ Ibid. [[Back to text](#)]
- ³⁹ Ibid. [[Back to text](#)]
- ⁴⁰ Ibid. [[Back to text](#)]

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