

CONSCIOUSNESS AND NOTHINGNESS

The conception of Nothingness has occupied a central place in the stream of our contemporary thought. Many thinkers, since the time of Hegel, investigated into the nature and origin of Nothingness, and endeavoured to elucidate its role in human history. It is worthy to mention that the Western thinkers before Hegel were reluctant to deal with and accommodate it in their philosophical systems. Parmenides went further by denying the concept and believed that reality consisted of Being qua being. Aristotle agreed that Being could generate only being and there would be no logical ground for the deduction of Nothingness. However, the Aristotelian formula became a dominant metaphysical principle till the time of Hegel, who deduced the conception of Nothingness from Being and kept it as the first antithesis in the first triad of the Doctrine of Being. No doubt, this bold attempt is a great achievement and has given birth to a new philosophical thinking, but we should make an inquiry into validity of the deduction of Nothingness from Being in Hegel's logic.

Being is an undeduced logical beginning as all things whether material or non-material presuppose Being, whereas Being itself does not presuppose another being. Such kind of Being is pure because it is indeterminate and has no qualification, the most abstract and the poorest conception in the hierarchy of the dialectic progression of the categories. Being is not any particular being like the being of this table or of that chair, it is Being in general and indefinable since it contains no determination. Our knowledge of it does not go beyond that it 'is'. It exhibits itself as pure 'isness', and as an indeterminate immediacy, logically prior to all categories in Hegel's Dialectic. And since it has not passed over into another (its opposition), is self-identical. But the moment it produces its opposite then the application of the abstract law of identity to it would become inappropriate, simply because it is

does not remain the same and it goes through change.

At this stage, Being has no determination except 'isness', it is mere emptiness and absolutely negative, or rather equivalent to nothingness.² With this movement of passing into nothingness, the negating power emerges and gives life to the dialectic evolution.

Unlike Aristotle, Hegel makes Being a birth place for Nothingness, and finally both concepts constitute oppositions that can be regarded as two different, we can easily claim that A is not A because Being is equivalent to Nothingness. It should be also remembered that the difference between them is not like the difference between light and darkness, because they are two abstract categories while light and darkness are determined and possess qualities.

We must note carefully that Being which is supposed to be absolutely abstract, is determined at least by 'isness'. If Nothingness is the negation of Being, then it should become the negation of 'isness' and not its equivalent. This permits us to describe Being as 'isness' and Nothingness as 'not-isness', otherwise the latter can not become the negation for the former.

It is true that Being can not be described the way a particular being is described. A particular being is something with multiple universal determinations, whereas Being (Pure Being) does not have any, except 'isness'. In consequence, Nothingness becomes the opposite of Being when it negates it, and not because both of them are empty abstractions. Their sameness or identity brings a futile result in passing over into each other if their difference is not over emphasised. The possibility of the deduction of the third category namely, Becoming, relies totally on the determination of Being and not on its emptiness. Furthermore, Pure Being is not absolutely empty, it is 'isness', then it is positive. How does a positive being generate Nothingness?

Throughout the process of the deduction of the categories, Hegel deals with the answer of this question. The opposites of each triad are derived from each other and involve each other. But still it is not clear how Nothingness is the product of Being. The proper answer is provided in Sartre's ontology which is the rejection of Hegel's interpretation of Nothingness as a component part of Pure Being. What Sartre has developed is that Being is massif, full positivity, does not contain

negation,³ and such kind of Being can not generate Nothingness. Hence, Nothingness is not a counterpart of Being which is passive, massif and full, but produced by an active, empty being which can experience its reality by intuition.

"It follows therefore that there must exist a Being (this can not be in-itself) of which the property is to nihilate Nothingness, to sustain it perpetually in its very existence, a being which nothingness comes to things."⁴

The Being by which Nothingness is made-to-be and brought into the heart of Being is an active being with the power of negation. Active in the sense that it is not full positivity, not filled but going to fill itself, and that kind of Being is Consciousness (Being-for-itself). Sartre outlined this approach to consciousness for the first time in his work on *Imagination* in 1936, and later in 1943 he gave full description of his theory in *Being and Nothingness*. Imagination, for Sartre, as one of the activities of consciousness constitutes double nihilation. The nihilation of the real object by producing an unreal one, and the nihilation of the unreal object as something real. From one side, the imagined object is unreal, the world does not present it as an actual one. On the other, the imagined object is produced by consciousness as something which does not exist anywhere in the external world.⁵

Consciousness is not the Cartesian self-substance, but a fragile and translucent being without a ready made essence or nature. It is an emptiness striving restlessly to make an essence for itself. Nothingness is thus, originated in the ontological structure of consciousness, because consciousness is not full, and lacks all possibilities. Nothingness can be traced out in the intentionality of consciousness and its transcendence towards the external reality. It is brought into the world due to that lack and that act, "Nothingness is not, but it is made-to-be."⁶ Intentionality is an indication to that lack and the emptiness in consciousness which makes consciousness relational, transcendent and making itself rich with content. That relation between consciousness and its object is necessary because every consciousness is consciousness of something. Hence, if there is nothingness, consciousness should be aware of it. But the problem which arises here is that, how can consciousness be aware of Nothingness?

Sartre reminds us the significance of the question for the discovery of Nothingness, as we know, man is the only being who is in a position to ask questions about himself and about Being. By doing that he detaches himself from Being and places himself in a neutral state between the possibility of knowing and not-knowing, between Being and non-Being. He investigates the being of a kind of being or its way of being which is not known yet. At the same time man does not know whether the answer of the question is positive or negative, whether that kind of being reveals itself to consciousness or not. What Sartre tries to say is that a negative answer is in our expectation. The revelation of the non-being of being is equally possible as the being of it. Every question is pregnant with the element of negation.⁷ If the answer is negative, our interrogative attitude presents a double nihilation; first, the non-being of knowing that being, second, the non-being of that being for consciousness.⁸

In order to understand Sartre's interpretation of Nothingness and its apprehension by intuition, we restate the example of finding Pierre in the Cafe. I have an appointment with him, expect him to be there. When I enter the Cafe, I see that he is not there. I experience the non-being of my friend at the Cafe. The object of my intuition is the non-being of his being at that moment, and that non-being was in my expectation,

"This figure which slips constantly between my look and the solid, real objects of the Cafe is precisely a perpetual disappearance; it is Pierre raising himself as nothing on the ground of the nihilation of the Cafe. So that what is offered to intuition is a flickering of nothingness; it is the nothingness of the ground, the nihilation of which summons and demands the disappearance of the figure, and it is the figure-the nothingness which slips as a nothing to the surface of the ground. It serves as foundation for the judgment-*'Pierre is not here.'*" It is in fact the intuitive apprehension of a double nihilation.⁹

This example does not explain the origin of Nothingness only, but also how Nothingness becomes a ground for negation. Before I proceed to discuss Sartre's view on Negation, I would like to talk about the source and the role of Negation in Hegel's philosophy. Dialectic logic considers Negation to be the essentiality of every antithesis. It appears for the first time as a category in the sphere of Determinate Being.¹⁰ The legitimacy of its deduction relies on the determination of Being,

and that exhibits the influence of Spinoza on Hegel, particularly in saying that 'Omnis determination est negatio'. Whatever determination is attributed to Being that involves the negation of some other determination which is not in Being. For example when we say, 'The cat is black', it indicates that the cat is only black and it is not white. Every determination carries the seeds of negation in itself.

The role of Negation in Dialectic is not confined to any specific stage of logic, rather it emerges as a propelling force in every movement. Hegel, in the *Phenomenology of Mind*, depicts successfully the role which is played by Negation in human history, through which consciousness modifies Being into the desired world. In the historical process of consciousness, Being is negated and transcended. Such negating characteristics of consciousness dominated the core of Hegel's anthropology. It seems that even Hegel describes consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, it should be underlined because it is the name of a book, as Nothingness and the source of Negation, because consciousness has temporal determination, it is incomplete and strives to complete itself in history,

"Time therefore appears as Spirit's destiny and necessity, where Spirit is not yet complete within itself; it is the necessity compelling Spirit to enrich the share self-consciousness has in consciousness, to put into motion the immediacy of the inherent nature (which is the form in which the substance is present in consciousness); or, conversely, to realize and make manifest what is inherent, regarded as inward and immanent, to make manifest that which is at first within i.e., to vindicate it for Spirit's certainty of Self."¹¹

Hegel's conceptions of negativity and temporality of consciousness has left a great impact on Sartre or it is what exactly Sartre tries to say. But Sartre confines Negation to consciousness because consciousness is the only being characterised by Nothingness. Accordingly, Negation becomes an intentional act of consciousness towards Being as well as towards itself. Being as full positivity knows no otherness and can not negate anything.¹² A geological destruction (like a storm) does not do anything to Being, and it does not destroy it, but modifies only the distribution of its masses, "there is no less after the storm than before."¹³ The storm is destructive in its relation to consciousness as it destroys human existence,

"In order for destructibility to exist, man must determine himself in the face of this possibility of non-being, either positively or negatively: he must either take the necessary measures to realize it (destruction proper) or, by a negation of non-being to maintain it always on the level of simple possibility (by preventive measures)."¹⁴

Sartre unlike Kant believes that Negation is a pre-judicative attitude,¹⁵ and it is not necessary to be the quality of a judgement. We can experience it before making a judgement and express it in a look or a gesture. He argues also that Nothingness is logically prior to Negation. Following Hegel Sartre defines human history as a constant negation to transcend the given reality. Through the process of Negation man can change and modify Being as well as himself. But when Negation is directed towards consciousness and becomes internal negation, then leads to self-deception (Bad Faith). In bad faith consciousness denies its own reality and puts itself at the level of a non-conscious being, viz. being-in-itself or being for other.

Although internal negation involves bad faith, and denies individual reality but it is different from telling lies to the others. A lair knows the truth and hides it out from the others, whereas in bad faith there is no distinction between the lair and the others. It is that state where the lair and the others are united and are one. The person tells lies to himself intentionally. How can man deceive himself? and why?

Consciousness, as it is characterised by Nothingness, is a self-productive activity against the facticity of Being. That activity is a constant progression and does not recognise stagnation except in the projects which were accomplished in past and they no longer exist. In addition to that since man has a physical presence in the world he enjoys the facticity of Being. Consciousness can not escape from Being and its facticity, but it can transcend it and proceed towards future possibilities. Facticity and transcendence are two different elements in the ontological structure of human existence, when they are mixed up together, and considered to be indetical, pave the road for the emergence of bad faith. In clarifying that, Sartre has given the title of Jacques Chardonne's work, "Love is More than Love," as an example for bad faith. The title takes the sexual love between two lovers as some thing more than that and transcendent like Platonic love. However,

the identification of these two elements is not the only kind of bad faith. Sartre indicates two more kinds which happen not only at the level of literary ambitions and confusion between facticity and transcendence, but in the daily life of a common man. The first kind considers consciousness to be an object, a thing like all particular objects around us. And in the second kind, consciousness is for-others.¹⁶

In the first case, consciousness (Being-for-self) becomes an inert object like a lifeless entity in the world. The best example of this kind of bad faith is that of a woman who goes out with a man, she knows his intentions when he holds her hand, but she does not notice it, and keeps her hand between the hands of the man, neither consenting nor resisting,¹⁷ her hand has become a thing. In the second case bad faith is like Heidegger's conception of 'Verfallensein' or 'das Mann', when inauthenticity invades human existence and individuality becomes a loose term. Under such circumstances the individual behaves the way it is appreciated by the others. The waiter is supposed to behave like a waiter because that is what people want from him, but from inside he himself is not a waiter.

"All his behavior seems to be as game. He applies himself to chaining movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself".¹⁸

Bad faith is not an unescapable condition, rather it is intentional and adopted by consciousness in order to avoid anguish and responsibility. When man is afraid of responsibility and freedom, he attempts to degrade his ontological position in the world by denying freedom and making himself a passive being and behave according to the wishes of the others.

Finally, Negation can play its role positively as well as negatively in the dialectic of consciousness. It is that power which can cure and destroy. Either man lives the way he wants and creates his own history authentically, or turns his own being into in-itself, and being for-others. Authenticity is the affirmation of human freedom, and inauthenticity is the denial of that freedom. In the first case man struggles to fill the

gap within himself by the power of negativity, and in the second case he denies the reality of that power.

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