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# Sartre and Bergson: A Disagreement about Nothingness

*Sarah Richmond*

## Abstract

Henri Bergson's philosophy, which Sartre studied as a student, had a profound but largely neglected influence on his thinking. In this paper I focus on the new light that recognition of this influence throws on Sartre's central argument about the relationship between negation and nothingness in his *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre's argument is in part a response to Bergson's dismissive, eliminativist account of nothingness in *Creative Evolution* (1907): the objections to the concept of nothingness with which Sartre engages are precisely those raised by Bergson. Even if Sartre's account of nothingness in its entirety is found to be flawed, I argue that the points he makes specifically against Bergson are powerful.

My discussion concludes with a brief examination of the wider philosophical background to Sartre's and Bergson's discussion of nothingness: here I point to some important aspects of Sartre's early philosophy, including some features of his conception of nothingness, that may testify to Bergson's positive influence on his thought.

**Keywords:** nothingness; negation; being; Sartre; Bergson

## §1 Introduction

Sartre's remarkable capacity to absorb and transform the ideas of other philosophers has often been noticed. The standard presentation of his early philosophy, as inaugurating a distinctive 'existentialist' turn within the phenomenological tradition, implicitly acknowledges this capacity. However, the attention paid to these many influences on his thinking has been uneven, and the impact of Henri Bergson in particular has been underestimated, especially within the Anglophone literature.

Part of the reason for this must lie in the fact that Sartre himself, especially in his best-known philosophical writings of the period leading up to and including *Being and Nothingness* (hereafter *BN*), refers most frequently to Husserl, Hegel and Heidegger. The early phenomenological writings are presented as attempts to apply (a corrected version of) Husserl's method within the study of the emotions, imagination and the self, and, in *BN*, the

huge impact of Heidegger's ontological orientation is obvious. As the precursors in relation to whom Sartre most often explicitly contrasts his position in *BN* are these 'three Hs', it is perhaps not surprising that many commentators have allowed their historical understanding of Sartre's thinking to be correspondingly defined. (An example of a study explicitly restricted to the 'three Hs' is Schroeder's (1984) comparative account of Sartre's theory of intersubjectivity, entitled *Sartre and his Predecessors*.)

Nonetheless, although Sartre may refer to Bergson less often, he engages with his thinking repeatedly. In particular, the long chapter devoted to Bergson's theory of images in Sartre's first book about the imagination (Sartre, 1962, first published in 1936) shows the seriousness with which Sartre took him on as a rival in this area. Moreover, in an interview given in 1975, Sartre acknowledges the importance of Bergson in generating his interest in philosophy when he was a young man. In his last year at school, Sartre tells us, a new teacher took over the philosophy class and set the pupils an essay topic that required them to read Bergson. As Sartre later remembered it, Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* was the work that inspired his desire to study philosophy (Sartre, 1975: p. 6).

Another probable reason for the neglect of Bergson's influence is his current philosophical insignificance, especially outside France. French commentators, whose philosophical education includes Bergson, have shown a far greater awareness of his impact on Sartre. Francis Jeanson's early study of Sartre (first published in 1947) shows how many of Sartre's views were developed in opposition to Bergson's, and Descombes' later survey of twentieth-century French philosophy recognizes Bergson as an immensely important figure for the generation of French philosophers that included Sartre to overcome (Jeanson, 1980; Descombes, 1980). More recently still, Bernard-Henri Lévy devotes several pages in his study of Sartre to the neglected influence of Bergson, lists the numerous respects in which Sartre may be considered a 'Bergsonian', and suggests that a 'retrospective illusion' may have led commentators to attribute many key Sartrean ideas that might have been (at least in part) inspired by Bergson to the influence of Heidegger (Lévy, 2003: pp. 102–11).

In this paper I do not try to encompass the large topic, deserving book-length treatment, of Bergson's philosophical influence on Sartre overall. Instead, I propose to focus on one particular, but important, instance of Sartre's engagement with Bergson's thought, in a crucial section of *BN*. The section, entitled 'Negations', contains Sartre's much-cited example of waiting for Pierre in a café: its aim is to establish that negation has its origin in nothingness, rather than the other way round. Although Sartre mentions Bergson towards the end of the section (p. 11), he does not name him as the advocate of the position he is arguing against. Yet, I claim, Bergson is the implicit target of many of Sartre's points, and reading the passage with this in mind throws new light on it.

Chapter IV of Bergson's *Creative Evolution* (first published in 1907) is devoted in large part to a discussion of 'the idea of nothingness'. (In the original French this is 'l'idée du néant': Bergson and Sartre, then, both use the same term, *néant*. This needs to be noted, as the English translation of *Creative Evolution*, which often renders *le néant* as 'the nought', can mislead one into thinking that Bergson's terminology here is different from Sartre's.) Bergson aims to discredit the idea of nothingness as ill-founded and illusory, and describes at great length how this illusion arises. As far as I am aware, there is no explicit record that Sartre had read this chapter, but we do know – from a reference in Sartre's earlier brief discussion of nothingness in *The Imaginary* – that he knew of Bergson's 'analyses', as he puts it, of nothingness, and although he does not provide a bibliographical source, it seems safe to assume that Sartre meant the discussion in *Creative Evolution*.<sup>1</sup>

In reconstructing this debate between Bergson and Sartre, I have two main aims. First, by demonstrating the influence of Bergson on this famous passage in *BN*, to record a little-noticed influence within the history of philosophy. Second, to examine the arguments about nothingness that Sartre advances in this passage within this new light. Sartre's concept of nothingness is controversial, and many commentators, including sympathetic ones, have found fault with it. A common complaint (voiced as early as 1945 by A. J. Ayer) is that Sartre uses the term 'nothingness' in different senses at different places, moving surreptitiously – or by means of a pun – from its everyday meaning to an unacceptable reification of the notion, whereby 'nothingness' comes to refer, after all, to something (Ayer, 1945; Plantinga, 1958). I do not believe that Sartre can be adequately defended against this criticism (although of course it is always possible to claim – unsustainably, in my view – that the points in the text where Sartre incurs it are unimportant, and may be overlooked as moments of rhetorical excess).<sup>2</sup> But my concern in this paper is not to attempt a comprehensive defence of Sartre's account of nothingness but, rather, to examine the points he develops against Bergson's reductive account of it. Even if Sartre's concept of nothingness and the use he tries to make of it are ultimately unsatisfactory, his resistance to Bergson is powerful.<sup>3</sup>

Sartre's far-reaching ambitions for the concept of nothingness require him to rescue it from Bergson's dismissive treatment: his motivation in this exchange is clear. Bergson's purpose in dismissing the concept is to remove a potential obstacle to acceptance of his own account of reality. Some examination of these respective philosophical and strategic contexts is required. I briefly examine this larger philosophical perspective at the end of the paper, where some important convergences of Sartre's thinking with Bergson's are noted (§4). First, though, a look at the details of Bergson's discussion of the idea of nothingness (§2), and the arguments with which Sartre replies to it (§3).

## §2 Bergson's Analysis of the Idea of Nothingness

In chapter IV of *Creative Evolution*, Bergson aims to expose two entrenched philosophical illusions that have, he suggests, impeded the correct understanding of reality. Both illusions are said to arise in the same way: the intellect borrows an outlook appropriate for practical matters and misapplies it to theoretical questions: 'we import into speculation a procedure made for practice' (Bergson, 1998: p. 273). The cost of this illicit transfer is high: we are misled by it into taking seriously theoretical questions that are deeply confused, such as 'Why is there order, and not disorder, in things?' and 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' (Bergson, 1998: pp. 274–6).

The illusion whose analysis dominates the chapter is 'The Idea of "Nothing"'. Bergson argues that philosophers have made illegitimate use of this idea, taking it from contexts in which it has a particular, relative meaning and using it, instead, in an absolute sense. According to Bergson, this move obscures the dependence of negative experience and judgement on positive or affirmative ones. Bergson's strategy is to examine, exhaustively, the various ways by which philosophers have represented the idea of nothingness to themselves, and to argue, against each in turn, that error is involved.

In the first place, Bergson argues that we cannot represent 'Nothing' by means of an *image*: if we try, we find that all we are in fact representing to ourselves is some particular 'suppression': for example, we may demonstrate to ourselves the suppression of a current sensation. But this, Bergson argues, is not the same as an experience of absolute annihilation, because '[a]t the very instant that my consciousness is extinguished, another consciousness lights up ... it had arisen the instant before in order to witness the extinction of the first' (Bergson, 1998: p. 278). Bergson seems to be suggesting here that the idea of 'consciousness-of-nothingness' involves a contradiction in terms, like that involved in experiencing one's own being dead.

Nor can we, Bergson continues, *conceive* of nothingness. In trying to do so, he claims, we commit a type of compositional fallacy, by illegitimately moving from the idea of the annihilation of some *particular* thing to the idea of nothingness (the annihilation of everything) *per se*. But every instance of 'particular' annihilation includes the existence of something *instead* of the annihilated object: our idea of something as non-existent or absent always implicitly includes the idea of the existence of what is there in its place (or, if no object has taken its place, of the *empty* place – 'limited by precise outlines' (Bergson, 1998: p. 281) – where it was formerly located). That is why the move from particular to general is invalid, because it fails to preserve the element of (existence-presupposing) *substitution* that is ineliminable from the particular case: 'An idea constructed by the mind is an idea

only if its pieces are capable of coexisting; it is reduced to a mere word if the elements that we bring together to compose it are driven away as fast as we assemble them' (Bergson, 1998: p. 280).

Bergson provides an interesting analysis of the experience of particular annihilation (or 'partial nothingness', as he also calls it (Bergson, 1998: p. 282)). He claims that a creature whose experience was limited to the present could never form the idea of absence: 'There is absence only for a being capable of remembering and expecting. He remembered an object, and perhaps expected to encounter it again; he finds another, and he expresses the disappointment of his expectation ... by saying that ... he encounters "nothing"' (Bergson, 1998: p. 281). The practical context in which these experiences arise leads Bergson to claim that part of the function of utterances that contain the words 'nought' or 'void' is to express the *feeling* (of disappointment, say) with which the subject reacts to the reality he apprehends. The idea of annihilation or partial nothingness involves the combination of these time-spanning elements of experience: 'The idea implies on the subjective side a preference, on the objective side a substitution, and is nothing else but a combination of, or rather an interference between, this feeling of preference and this idea of substitution' (Bergson, 1998: p. 282).

Bergson imagines an opponent accusing him of limiting, with these 'representations' of annihilation in terms of operations upon objects, the ways in which we can think about the non-existent. Perhaps, such an opponent might argue, with the aid of the 'pure understanding', we can think the non-existence of A *formally*, without needing to represent it in terms applicable to objects that exist in space and time. In reply, Bergson appeals first to Kant's famous criticism of the ontological argument, in which Kant denies that we can represent any object without representing it as existent: 'the representation of the existence of the object is inseparable from the representation of the object, and indeed is one with it' (Bergson, 1998: p. 285). From this it follows that to think of A's non-existence involves a step *beyond* thinking of it as existent. In fact, Bergson claims, the thought of A's non-existence is necessarily indirect: it amounts to thinking of A as having merely *possible* existence, rather than actual existence – and this requires, he says, that one think of actual existence as 'excluding' it.

Bergson then considers another claim that an opponent might make: that negation, understood as a function that can be applied to an idea, is symmetrical with affirmation: 'negation, like affirmation, would have the power of creating ideas, with this sole difference that they would be negative ideas'. Again, Bergson's disagreement rests on his claim that negation is less basic, and more complex, than affirmation. Here he introduces the interesting idea that negation has a social and pedagogical character, by virtue of its corrective or admonitory role:

The proposition, 'This table is not white', implies that you might believe it white, that you did believe it such, or that I was going to believe it such. I warn you or myself that this judgment is to be replaced by another (which, it is true, I leave undetermined). Thus, while affirmation bears directly on the thing, negation aims at the thing only indirectly, through an interposed affirmation.

(Bergson, 1998: p. 288)

In short, negation is 'an affirmation of the second degree'.<sup>4</sup> Negation, although complex in this way, is not 'a complete act of the mind' (Bergson, 1998: p. 287). It does not serve to record just how things *are*, but rather that they are not as they were (or might have been) *thought to be*, and this detour via how things were (or might have been) *represented* by someone leaves the nature of reality 'undetermined'.

Bergson suggests that one might be misled into believing negation and affirmation to be symmetrical by the fact that both are expressed in propositions that employ the 'artificially created' concepts of a language: within this conventional framework it may appear that negative judgements are no less directly descriptive of reality, and no less 'social', than affirmative ones. From this point of view, he concedes, the symmetry claim appears correct. Yet he insists that analysis at this level is superficial, 'the symmetry altogether external' (Bergson, 1998: p. 292); to appreciate this, one must consider how the intellect functions or would function in isolation from the contribution of language.

Suppose language fallen into disuse, society dissolved, every intellectual initiative, every faculty of self-reflection and self-judgement atrophied in man: the dampness of the ground will subsist none the less, capable of inscribing itself automatically in sensation and of sending a vague idea to the deadened intellect. The intellect will still affirm, in implicit terms.

(Bergson, 1998: p. 292)

This obviously problematic appeal to a supposedly primitive form of intellectual human life (where society is absent) is supposed to support, yet again, Bergson's claim that negation has no immediate grounding in reality, but involves a 'subjective' point of view that can be sustained only by beings with sophisticated faculties (of memory, for example), and that its use is primarily social. Bergson does not give a satisfactory explanation of the relevance of this appeal to a counterfactual 'pre-linguistic' human reality, but it is noteworthy again that he has a greater sense than Sartre that there may be a linguistic dimension to the understanding of negation that requires

its own level of analysis. (For Sartre, ‘language’ belongs to the domain of intersubjectivity: it falls within the topic of being-for-others, which is not treated until Part III of *BN*.)

### §3 Sartre’s Reply to Bergson

*BN* was not the first work in which Sartre, in developing his conception of nothingness, had felt the weight of Bergson’s thinking about the topic. In *The Imaginary* (Sartre, 2004, first published in 1940), Sartre argued that the intentional objects of the imaginative consciousness are non-existent: they are posited as *néants*, ‘nothingnesses’. In a passage towards the end of the book, Sartre suggests that we need to avoid committing ourselves to the idea that an ‘intuition of nothingness’ is possible, and defers to Bergson’s discussion of this matter.

There cannot be an intuition of nothingness, precisely because nothingness is nothing and because all consciousness – intuitive or not – is consciousness of something. Nothingness can be given only as an infrastructure of something. The experience of nothingness is not, strictly speaking, an indirect experience, but is an experience that is, on principle, given ‘with’ and ‘in’. Bergson’s analyses remain valid here: an attempt to conceive death or the nothingness of existence directly is by nature doomed to fail.

(Sartre, 2004: p. 187)

In this paragraph Sartre leans on Husserl’s ‘principle of intentionality’ – that all consciousness is consciousness of something – to *support* Bergson’s scepticism about the possibility of an ‘intuition of nothing’. Since such an intuition would conflict with Husserl’s principle, Sartre argues, it cannot be possible: the ‘something’ to which consciousness must always be intentionally related cannot be a nothing.

By *BN*, Sartre’s attitude towards Bergson has become more bullish. Although the section entitled ‘Negations’ does not state that the view under attack is Bergson’s, Sartre begins by setting out exactly Bergson’s objections to the idea of non-being, attributing them to an anonymous ‘someone’:

Furthermore ordinary experience reduced to itself does not seem to disclose any non-being to us. I think that there are fifteen hundred francs in my wallet, and I find only thirteen hundred; that does not mean, *someone will tell us*, that experience had discovered for me the non-being of fifteen hundred francs but simply that I have counted thirteen hundred-franc notes. Negation proper (we are told) is unthinkable; it could appear only on the level of an act of judgement

by which I should establish a comparison between the result anticipated and the result obtained.

(*BN*, p. 6; my italics)

As Sartre sums it up, this view makes two claims, both of which he wishes to discredit. First, that negative judgement is a 'subjective act' only, and does not correspond to a 'negative' reality: 'being-in-itself is full positivity and does not contain in itself any negation' (*BN*, p. 6). (However, although Sartre wishes to reject this 'subjectivist' reduction, his own view makes an apparent concession to it, which he acknowledges early on in the discussion: 'It is evident that non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation' (*BN*, p. 7). We will return to this concession, whose precise import is unclear.) Second, that there is no distinctive phenomenon denoted by the term 'nothingness' (*le néant*): 'ordinary experience reduced to itself does not seem to disclose any non-being to us' (*BN*, p. 6). But, this line of thought continues, if the term does not refer to anything directly 'disclosed' to us, we can understand it instead as referring to the abstract idea of a negative judgement, perhaps the form that such judgements share: 'A propositional function of the type, "X is not"' (*BN*, p. 6). An implication of this second claim, of course, is that our idea of nothingness is derived from the idea of negative judgement.

The purpose of Sartre's famous example of looking for Pierre in the café is to falsify this implication: Sartre believes that it illustrates a case in which a negative judgement is 'conditioned' by non-being, rather than the other way round (*BN*, p. 45). In suggesting that this example illustrates the possibility of an *intuition* of Pierre's absence, Sartre appears not only to be disagreeing with Bergson, but to reject the Bergsonian caution in relation to the idea of 'an intuition of nothing' that, in *The Imaginary*, he had respected:

At first sight it seems absurd to speak here of intuition since to be exact there could not be an intuition of nothing and since the absence of Pierre is this nothing. Popular consciousness, however, bears witness to this intuition. Do we not say, for example, 'I suddenly saw that he was not there.'

(*BN*, p. 9)<sup>5</sup>

Sartre's attitude here may seem puzzling. His earlier reason for following Bergson's caution about an 'intuition of nothing' was, we saw, connected with his belief in Husserl's principle of intentionality. But this principle is strongly reaffirmed in *BN*: indeed, it plays an important role in Sartre's Introduction to the book, in establishing the necessity of transphenomenal

being. How, then, can Sartre now allow that we can be intentionally related to ‘nothing’, rather than ‘something’?

In fact, Sartre finds a way of reconciling these ideas. His brilliant solution is to take on, from Gestalt psychology, an account of perception that emphasizes the structured, organized nature of the perceptual field. If, as Gestalt theory holds, all visual experience involves a ‘figure’ that stands out against a ‘ground’, Pierre’s *absence*, in this example, is the figure. Here the figure is a void: it stands out, against the ground of the café, as an anticipated but *missing* presence; it is like a promise of a presence that, before the searching eyes of his friend, continually fails to materialize. So Sartre can maintain the possibility of an ‘intuition of nothing’ without betraying Husserl’s principle: Pierre’s friend is intentionally related to ‘something’, to his *absence-in-this-café*. Sartre has found a way of admitting an experience of nothingness while respecting the constraint that he accepted in *The Imaginary*: that nothingness ‘can be given only as an infrastructure of something’.

Sartre’s account persuasively describes an important phenomenological difference, overlooked by Bergson. The experience of seeing that ‘Pierre is not here’ is *not* the same as the experience of seeing that ‘All these people are here’ – even if across the two cases the population of the café is identical. The second experience does not involve the flickering ‘figure’ that structures the former. Sartre’s account of this perceptual event is consistent with the more general account of our being-in-the-world advanced in *BN* (and influenced by Heidegger), according to which our apprehension of reality is always informed by our particular aims and preoccupations. Pierre’s absence is made salient – for his friend – by the expectation that he will be there.

Sartre’s thought experiment and the theory of perception that it deploys present a forceful challenge to Bergson’s scepticism about negative ‘intuition’. Moreover, Sartre’s alternative brings into view the connection between what a philosopher will think about the possibility of intuiting nothingness and their wider account of the relation between the perceiving subject and reality. At least for the purposes of his argument about nothingness, Bergson appears to hold that ‘objective’ reality appears in the same way to all human observers, in relation to which our differing ‘subjective’ expectations about it can be contrasted. (Recall Bergson’s claim, quoted earlier, that the idea of partial nothingness implies ‘on the subjective side a preference, on the objective side a substitution and is nothing else but ... an interference between this feeling of preference and this idea of substitution’ (Bergson, 1998: p. 282).) Sartre, instead, proposes a ‘theory-laden’ account of perception, such that our expectations about what we are going to see make a difference to what we in fact *do* see.

Whatever contrast between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ Sartre intends, it is not the *same* contrast as Bergson’s. And we can see Sartre’s repudiation

of Bergson's concept of objectivity as a reason for the concessive remark that we noted earlier: 'It is evident that non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation' (*BN*, p. 7). If the appearance of non-being – Pierre's absence – is always conditioned by human expectation, that is because *all* appearances are conditioned in that way. (Sartre does not put the point in this way because, I think, he wants at this stage to focus just on nothingness. But it would be compatible with a great deal else that he says to put it that way.)

So far, then, we have a powerful Sartrean case, resting on phenomenological considerations about the way in which we encounter the world, against Bergson's claim that it is impossible to have an 'intuition of nothing'. And this can be appreciated independently of the ontological ambitions with respect to 'nothingness', mentioned earlier, that lead Sartre to push beyond these insights, into claims that are far less tenable. Let us turn now to Sartre's response to the other problem he considers – the 1,500 francs – and his challenge to Bergson's claim that all negative judgements can be converted into affirmative ones.

We believed for a moment that the negation could arise from the comparison instituted between the result anticipated and the result obtained. But let us look at that comparison. Here is an original judgement, a concrete, positive psychic act which establishes a fact: 'There are 1300 francs in my wallet.' Then there is another which is [again, no more than] an establishing of fact and an affirmation: 'I expected to find 1500 francs.' There we have real and objective facts, psychic and positive events, affirmative judgements. Where are we to place negation?

(*BN*, p. 11)<sup>6</sup>

Sartre is claiming here that Bergson's 'conversion' into affirmative judgements does not work. It fails to record, as the negative judgement does, the negative 'fact': that there *are not* (as I had thought) 1,500 francs in my wallet. For that negative content to be recorded, something further would need to be added to the affirmative judgements. One might add, for example, 'the 1,300 francs are not what I expected' – but then one reintroduces negation. Or if one tries, instead, to avoid negative vocabulary, by emphasizing that 'there are *only* 1,300 francs', it looks as if one has simply got rid of *explicit* negative vocabulary ('not'), but not of the implicit negative meaning ('only' means 'no more than'). Sartre's rejection of the possibility of a genuine elimination of the negative meaning is reminiscent of Bertrand Russell's defence, twenty-five years earlier, of 'negative facts' in the period of his logical atomism.<sup>7</sup> Bergson's attempt to rewrite negative judgements as affirmative ones, Sartre suggests, either leaves some essential content out, or merely disguises it.<sup>8</sup>

Sartre's anti-Bergsonian line of thought is compelling, and casts strong doubt on what we might think of as Bergson's 'affirmativist' prejudice.<sup>9</sup> Sartre's defence of negative judgements against Bergson's reductionism, however, does not stop there. As mentioned earlier, he argues in addition that negative judgements, far from giving rise to a (pseudo-) concept of nothingness, are (except when they are false) *founded* on nothingness, or non-being.

It is with this line of thought – accounting for 'nothingness' at the ontological or metaphysical level – that Sartre, clearly and heavily influenced by Heidegger, runs into difficulty.<sup>10</sup> In vindicating Sartre's *phenomenological* account of the possibility of an intuition of nothingness, we did not need to dwell on the Heideggerean *ontological* claim into the service of which he presses the example: that is, that nothingness is at the origin of negative judgement, rather than the other way round. (Pierre's absence as 'intuited' by his friend is supposed in this way to precede, by grounding, the judgement that 'Pierre is not here.') The same ontological agenda is involved in the case of the 1,500 francs: Sartre believes that negative judgements must themselves be grounded – and they cannot be grounded, he thinks, on *being*. Thus he rejects a possible position according to which 'being' grounds all judgements about it – affirmative and negative ones – *equally*. Rather, Sartre insists, negation involves us in a different relationship to being from affirmation: 'negation is a *refusal* of existence', and 'negation ... must *tear us away* from this wall of positivity which encircles us' (*BN*, p. 11; my italics).

We encounter here the attempt to ontologize or substantivize nothingness about which critics have complained. Sartre moves beyond phenomenologically persuasive descriptions of 'negative' experience to advance further, paradoxical, claims about the *ground* of such experience. To a persuasive account of the 'haunted' café, experienced in terms of the flickering 'figure' that structures the perception of Pierre's expectant friend, Sartre adds, as it were, the existence of the *ghost* (in the shape of Pierre's non-being). And, in the case of the 1,500 francs, he moves from a claim about the irreducibility of the negative content in the judgement that 'the 1,500 francs are not in the wallet' to the claim that the basis of this judgement is the *1,500 francs (that are missing) in the wallet*.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, although Sartre uses the terms 'objective', 'subjective' and 'real' in his discussion, their meaning, within his philosophical framework, is obscure.<sup>12</sup> As has often been noted, Sartre's conception of being-in-itself (of being as it is, or would be, independently of human consciousness of it) is of no help here.<sup>13</sup> Being-in-itself, according to Sartre, lacks any determinacy, as it is wholly undifferentiated: 'Transition, becoming ... all that is forbidden on principle. For being is the being of becoming and due to this fact it is beyond becoming. It is what it is.... It knows no otherness' (*BN*, p. xlii). If objective reality is something about which humans are able to judge, it cannot be equated with being-in-itself, which is 'beyond affirmation'.<sup>14</sup> The

articulation of being arises only with its relationship to consciousness (being-for-itself), with the advent of a human world. But if human consciousness is the source of *all* determination, how are we to distinguish between subjective and objective apprehensions of reality? An obvious suggestion, supported by some aspects of the role Sartre attributes to the Other, is to equate objectivity with intersubjective agreement. But this would prevent Sartre from asserting, as he does, that the 'objective fact' of Pierre's absence in the café has a foundation in reality that judgements such as 'Wellington is not in the café' lack.

Sartre's claim that being owes its determinations to human consciousness also undercuts his claim that it is specifically *negation* that 'tear[s] us away from this wall of positivity': once we have reached the level at which *any* judgement about reality is made, we have already breached the 'wall of positivity', by articulating it. Contrary to the asymmetry that Sartre tries to establish, affirmative and negative judgements are on a par here.

Thus, while Sartre is right to suggest that the distinction made between subjective and objective elements in Bergson's account of nothingness is not the only option, his own treatment of the subjective/objective distinction leaves a shortfall.<sup>15</sup> In consequence, the connection that Sartre does wish to make between non-being and the human perspective – expressed in his concessive claim that 'non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation' (*BN*, p. 7) – is not, if we take it as a contribution to the question about non-being's *objectivity*, satisfactorily explained.<sup>16</sup>

These difficulties with Sartre's account have been pointed out by others, and I do not intend to discuss them further here. My aim has been to draw attention to the more neglected cogency of his case against Bergson. If his own account of nothingness is fraught with difficulty, Sartre has nonetheless provided some good reasons to reject Bergson's 'affirmativism'. Perhaps, like many philosophers, he was more gifted as a critic than as a creator.

#### §4 'Whence Comes it, and How can it be Understood, that Anything Exists?' (Bergson, 1998: p. 275)

This is a question that troubles Bergson, and that lies behind his reductive account of nothingness. In this section I step back from the detail of that account in order to consider the wider concern that motivates it. Bergson's attitude towards the problem of the origin of existence can then be compared with Sartre's. The comparison shows up some important aspects of Sartre's thinking where he appears to be following a Bergsonian precedent. If so (and here I only point out their convergence), the importance and extent of Sartre's debt to Bergson are confirmed. Even the paradoxical ontology that Sartre assigns to nothingness may owe something positive to Bergson's influence: Sartre disagrees with Bergson's treatment of nothingness, but seems nonetheless to have learned from it.

I will indicate, and briefly consider, three topics on which Sartre's thinking can be brought into relation with – and is perhaps informed by – the philosophical positions that constitute the background to Bergson's discussion of nothingness: (i) contingency, (ii) the legitimacy of metaphysical questions and (iii) the ontology of nothingness.

(i) Bergson makes it clear that the need to demystify the idea of nothingness arises at least in part from its contribution to another 'mystery' that has puzzled philosophers: the question about the origin of existence quoted in the title of this section. Because of the connection between the idea of nothingness and this metaphysical question, there is more at stake in the enquiry into the former than may at first appear:

Philosophers have paid little attention to the idea of the nought. And yet it is often the hidden spring, the invisible mover of philosophical thinking. From the first awakening of reflection, it is this that pushes to the fore, right under the eyes of consciousness, the torturing problems, the questions that we cannot gaze at without feeling giddy and bewildered.

(Bergson, 1998: p. 275)

In Bergson's view, the metaphysical question arises as a problem only if one presupposes the validity of the idea of nothingness. If one thinks it intelligible that there could 'be' nothingness, one will naturally want to know how being arises, how it manages to 'fill' the emptiness or void, how it makes its 'conquest over nought' (Bergson, 1998: p. 276). And if one accepts the legitimacy of *that* question, then some accounts of being will be ruled out. In particular, Bergson believes that his own philosophy of duration (*la durée*) will appear to be inadequate, insofar as it fails to establish (or even aspire to establish), that duration – a psychological reality – must *necessarily* exist. Bergson thinks that if one accepts the requirement that an adequate account of being must show how it can 'drive out' nothingness, one will need to rule out any non-necessary being. Only existents of some 'logical' type will do.<sup>17</sup>

If I ask myself why bodies or minds exist rather than nothing, I find no answer; but that a logical principle, such as  $A = A$ , should have the power of creating itself, triumphing over the nought throughout eternity, seems to me natural.

(Bergson, 1998: pp. 276–7)

For Bergson, then, an illusory belief in the idea of nothingness lends a spurious difficulty to a metaphysical question that, in turn, wreaks further

damage on our philosophical understanding by leading us to rule out, in the light of its requirements, the correct account of reality. (As mentioned earlier, it is a merit of Bergson's own account of reality that it can explain, in its own terms, how these illusions arise: by dint of the intellectual distortion that often arises when we import 'into speculation a procedure made for practice' (Bergson, 1998: p. 273).)

Bergson is concerned, then, to reject an entrenched perspective from which the assertion of the *contingency* of existence appears problematic. This concern anticipates Sartre's conviction, from his earliest philosophical writings, of the same contingency, and his (frequently hostile) repudiation of systems of thought – especially religious ones – that incorporate necessity and/or finality within their account of worldly existence. In some of Sartre's pre-*BN* works, contingency is even more central a theme than freedom. His novel *Nausea*, published in 1938, had the working title 'A Factum on Contingency', and the nausea that it describes is occasioned precisely by the realization of the brute, unjustifiable and contingent fact of being.<sup>18</sup>

In *BN*, Sartre declares that both types of being (being-for-itself and being-in-itself) whose concrete synthesis the book examines are contingent (and he continues to connect the apprehension of this fact with the experience of nausea).<sup>19</sup> However, Sartre rejects the traditional way of understanding contingency: the claim that being-in-itself is contingent should not be understood as equivalent to the claim that it 'might have been otherwise'. Rather, its contingency consists in the 'brute fact' that there *is* being-in-itself. Relative to any explanatory schema, it is *de trop* and cannot be derived from anything else.

Being-in-itself is never either possible or impossible. It is. This is what consciousness expresses in anthropomorphic terms by saying that being is superfluous ... that is, that consciousness absolutely cannot derive being from anything, either from another being, or from a possibility, or from a necessary law. Uncreated, without reason for being, without any connection with another being, being-in-itself is *de trop* for eternity.

(*BN*, p. xlii).

(ii) Like Bergson, Sartre believes that some metaphysical questions are illegitimate. In particular he argues, in the Introduction to *BN*, that questions about the origin of being-in-itself often wrongly presuppose the applicability of the concepts of 'activity' and 'passivity'. This false presupposition invalidates all 'creationist' hypotheses about the in-itself, whether they hypothesize either that God created it (which, Sartre says, would imply its passivity), or that it is self-created (and hence 'active'). The consequence of Sartre's restriction of the applicability of a great many concepts to the

domain of the for-itself is that very little *can* be said about the in-itself, considered in isolation: Sartre's affirmation of its contingency sits alongside, rather than in conflict with, a sense of its inexplicability.

In his Conclusion to *BN*, Sartre returns to the topic of the two 'types of being' in order to consider some 'metaphysical implications', and he picks up the line of thinking begun earlier: care is needed, he claims, to avoid asking invalid questions. Sartre rules out all 'why' questions about being-in-itself, arguing that all 'whys' presuppose the existence of the for-itself and can't, therefore, be applied to being-in-itself in isolation.

Sartre's argument for dismissing certain metaphysical questions as 'devoid of meaning' is similar in structure to Bergson's: both claim that the acceptability and intelligibility of some questions are context-dependent. While Bergson identifies an unjustified transition from a practical to a 'speculative' use of reason, Sartre sees in these questions an unacceptable attempt to remove them from the framework in which alone they make sense: 'all ... "Whys" in fact are *subsequent* to being and presuppose it' (*BN*, p. 619; my italics). Neither Bergson's 'nothingness' nor Sartre's 'why' can properly figure in questions about the origin of being.

(iii) As we have seen, although Sartre, like Bergson, dismisses some metaphysical questions as misconceived, he does not follow Bergson in dismissing the idea of nothingness. Even so, albeit by a different argumentative route, Sartre converges with Bergson in denying that there is any need to show how being manages a 'conquest' over nothingness. For Sartre, such a requirement distorts, by inverting, the relationship between being and nothingness: nothingness is *parasitical* on, and so cannot 'pre-exist', being.

Sartre's objections to the derivative status, in relation to judgement, that his opponents (including Bergson) assign to nothingness can cause one to lose sight of the fact that he believes that nothingness *is* secondary in relation to being. It is important to notice Sartre's adherence to these two doctrines, which pull him in opposite directions: on the one hand, the reality of nothingness, which can lead him into its reification; on the other, its *non-being*, which requires it, parasitically, to batten off being. This second doctrine reminds us why Sartre needs to *add* the term 'Nothingness' to 'Being' in the title of his book (nothingness is not a sub-class of being), but also raises the bewildering question of what has been added. Hence the familiar puzzle over whether Sartre counts as a dualist, if one term of the putative dualism does not even exist.

Sartre accuses Hegel of overlooking this essential asymmetry. For Sartre, Hegel's error is to portray nothingness (or non-being) as a counterpart, a symmetrical 'opposite', to being.<sup>20</sup> Rather, Sartre insists, being has priority over nothingness, both logically and metaphysically: nothingness consists only and always in the negation of some particular existent. (Sartre observes that language reflects this fact: 'language furnishes us with a nothingness of *things* and a nothingness of human beings' (*BN*, p. 15).)<sup>21</sup> Hegel wrongly

characterizes being and non-being as equally abstract ‘contraries’: ‘In a word, we must recall here against Hegel that being *is* and that nothingness *is not*’ (*BN*, p. 15).

Sartre’s disagreement with Bergson about nothingness is subtler and more complicated than may at first appear. This shows up in the fact that Bergson and Sartre are often classed *together* as anti-Hegelians with respect to nothingness. It may even be that, in addition to provoking his dissent, Sartre’s encounter with Bergson’s treatment of nothingness helped to propel him towards his firmly anti-Hegelian position. That mixture of appropriation and opposition would be in keeping with Sartre’s typical reaction to his philosophical predecessors.<sup>22</sup>

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### Notes

- 1 Bergson’s arguments about nothingness in *Creative Evolution* were also published separately, as a self-standing article, in the *Revue Philosophique* for 1906, which makes it still more likely that it was these that Sartre had come across – either within the book or in the philosophical journal.
- 2 The following passage provides an example of the use of the concept of nothing that critics have attacked (the italicized words in particular). Here Sartre puns on the word ‘nothing’, arguing that ‘it’ can make a difference to how things are, rendering determinism false.

If we consider the prior consciousness envisaged as motivation, we see ... evidently that nothing has just slipped in between that state and the present state. There has been no break in continuity.... Neither has there been an abrupt interpolation of an opaque element to separate prior from subsequent.... Nor is there a *weakening* of the motivating force of the prior consciousness; it remains what it is, it does not lose anything of its urgency. *What separates prior from subsequent is precisely nothing. This nothing is absolutely impassable, just because it is nothing; for in every obstacle to be cleared there is something positive which gives itself as about to be cleared.*

(*BN*, pp. 28–9; my italics)

- 3 In response to a question raised by an anonymous referee for this journal, and in case other readers have the same concern, I need to emphasize that I am isolating Sartre’s anti-Bergsonian claims and purposes in *BN* from other claims that he makes about nothingness, and other ends for which the concept is elaborated (the most important of which is, of course, to establish the existence of human freedom). I see nothing illegitimate in this separation, and am certainly not suggesting that Sartre would have been content to make only those anti-Bergsonian claims that I pick out for attention here. Were it to be alleged that this separation overlooks the unity of Sartre’s concept of nothingness, my reply would be to deny that the concept possesses any such indissoluble unity.
- 4 This reply to the opponent’s claim, although interesting, sidesteps the challenge: instead of considering whether negative *ideas* might be symmetrical with positive

ones, Bergson discusses what is involved in *utterances* of negative *judgements*. It is worth noting though that the ‘intersubjective’ dimension of negation is something that Sartre, in his discussion, largely ignores. Robert Stone (1981) criticizes Sartre for neglecting this dimension too, in his account of bad faith, but also draws attention to the fact that Sartre begins his discussion of that topic by noting the existence of ‘men (e.g. caretakers, overseers, gaolers,) whose social reality is uniquely that of the Not, who will live and die, having forever been only a Not upon the earth’ (*BN*, p. 47).

- 5 This rhetorical question appears to be a wholesale borrowing from Heidegger’s lecture ‘What is Metaphysics’, in which Heidegger approaches this question by asking: ‘What about this nothing? Is it an accident that we talk this way so automatically? Is it only a manner of speaking – and nothing besides?’ (Heidegger, 1929: p. 84). Heidegger’s attempt in that lecture to show that nothing (*Nichts*) is more fundamental than negation clearly inspired Sartre’s demonstration of the same conclusion. This may be a case of the type Lévy mentions: Heidegger’s obvious influence eclipses Bergson’s.
- 6 The square brackets indicate my revision of Barnes’ English translation, which is faulty at this point.
- 7 In his lectures on ‘The Philosophy of Logical Atomism’ Russell considered an ‘eliminativist’ proposal about the interpretation of negative propositions advanced by Demos that is very similar to Bergson’s, and rejects it: ‘the suggestion offered by Mr Demos is that when we assert “not-*p*” we are really asserting that there is some proposition *q* which is true and is incompatible with *p*.... I find it very difficult to believe that theory of falsehood. You will observe that in the first place there is this objection, that it makes incompatibility fundamental ... which is not so very much simpler than allowing negative facts’ (Russell, 1918: pp. 68–9).
- 8 Sartre makes exactly this point (although not explicitly against Bergson) a page before he introduces the 1,300 francs. Here he considers the reductive claim that a negative answer to the question ‘Is there any conduct which can reveal to me the relation of man with the world?’ does not reveal the non-being of such a conduct, but rather ‘that the conduct sought is a pure fiction’. Sartre denies that the reduction is genuine: ‘to call this conduct a pure fiction is to disguise the negation without removing it. “To be pure fiction” is equivalent here to “to be only a fiction”’ (*BN*, p. 5).
- 9 I borrow the term ‘affirmativist’ from Juliette Simont (1998: p. 35). Simont mentions a tradition, or school, of ‘affirmative’ thinkers in which philosophers have often placed Bergson: Leibniz–Spinoza–Nietzsche–Bergson–Deleuze. Of course the ‘affirmativism’ of these thinkers varies hugely, but Simont’s remark invites reflection on the many possible purposes and implications of an ‘affirmativist’ stance (and, equally, of the opposition to it).
- 10 As mentioned earlier, Sartre’s way of presenting the problem of nothingness, as well as many of his formulations, borrows heavily from Heidegger’s lecture ‘What is Metaphysics?’. He plays down his debt to Heidegger, and plays up his differences, by only referring to that lecture in the later section of his chapter (IV) in which he states points of *disagreement* with Heidegger’s conception of nothingness.
- 11 See Buchdahl (1961) for helpful discussion of these issues. (It is pointed out, for example, that it would be wrong to construe someone’s claim that he hasn’t had any food for days as the claim that he has been nourished by negative food (p. 173).)
- 12 Some examples of Sartre’s use of this vocabulary are: his support for the claim that nothingness is ‘the structure of the real’, his denial that non-beings should

- be 'reduced to pure subjectivity' (both at *BN*, p. 7) and his description of the discovery of Pierre's absence as 'an objective fact' (*BN*, p. 10).
- 13 Pettit (1968) gives an illuminating account of these difficulties, and notes that 'the problem of the objective basis for the human world of change and variety ... silently disturbs all Sartre's work' (p. 181).
  - 14 Sartre confusingly sometimes writes 'being' when (as the context usually makes clear) he ought to put 'being-in-itself'. It is clear that in claiming that 'Being is equally beyond negation as beyond affirmation' (*BN*, p. xli), he means being-in-itself.
  - 15 Wahl's (1946) hostile response to Sartre's account of nothingness makes much of the unsatisfactory definitions of the terms 'subjective' and 'objective'.
  - 16 In the amplifying remarks that immediately follow this claim Sartre fails to clarify whether, by 'human expectation', he means the expectation of an individual, a wider community or humanity in general. He goes on to illustrate the point with the example of the 'negative' phenomenon of destruction. This, Sartre tells us, is relative to human consciousness because it is from that viewpoint that the preservation of towns, buildings and so on *matters*. (In the absence of these human interests, one might see an earthquake, say, merely as a redistribution of matter.) But if human consciousness is the source of all differentiation in 'being', it seems that there is nothing especially subjective or 'human' about phenomena such as destruction: earthquakes, houses, towns are all on the same footing. Or if they are not, Sartre needs to show why not, by introducing some more distinctions to explain how *within* an articulated and anthropocentric world, negative phenomena are more dependent on a human perspective than others. See Caws, 1984: pp. 68–9 for discussion of this point.
  - 17 Here Bergson is surely over-reacting. After all, the question whose intelligibility he rejects is not asking why there *must* be existence, but why there *is* existence. So perhaps an answer that explained the origin of some contingent existence would suffice.
  - 18 Even earlier, Sartre's posthumously published 'Carnet Dupuis', a notebook whose jottings date from 1930–1, shows his preoccupation with the topic.
  - 19 'Being will be disclosed to us by some kind of immediate access – boredom, nausea, etc.' (*BN*, p. xxiv).
  - 20 In his discussion of Hegel, as elsewhere, Sartre shifts between the terms 'nothingness' and 'non-being', presumably to respect Hegel's preference for the latter term. But for Sartre's purposes, the terms are interchangeable.
  - 21 Unfortunately, this point cannot successfully be made in English: in French, but not in English, there are different constructions ('ne ... rien' and 'ne ... personne') for 'things' and for 'people'. Hazel Barnes comments frostily that 'Sartre here has conveniently based his ontology on the exigencies of a purely French syntax' (Translator's Note, *BN*, p. 15).
  - 22 Thanks to: the Department of Philosophy at University College London for the period of sabbatical leave during which this paper was written; Bruce Baugh and Vincent de Coorebyter for helpful orientation; and, especially, Sebastian Gardner for his numerous illuminating emails about Sartre.

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