

Evaluation of sartre's stance on being and nothingness



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Explain Sartre's modes of being, i. e. the existential terms being-for-itself, being-in-itself, and being-for-others. What role does Sartre claim "The Look" plays in our relations with others?

Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* is characterised as 'an essay in phenomenological ontology'. 'Ontology' refers to the study of being, while 'phenomenological' means of or relating to perceptual consciousness, meaning that essentially, it is a study of the consciousness of being. It is guided by Sartre's theory of reality which involves the distinction between the unconscious being or 'being-in-itself', and the conscious being or 'being-for-itself' (Sartre, 1993; Spade, 1996). He later goes on to introduce a third component, 'being-for-others'. In this essay, I will examine Sartre's modes of being, including *being-for-itself*, *being-in-itself* and *being-for-others* in relation to freedom, consciousness and bad faith, and explore the role that "The Look" plays in our relations with others.

In order to understand Sartre's stance in *Being and Nothingness*, it is important to understand the essentialist concept of 'essence'. 'Essence' is defined as a set of pre-determined core properties that are necessary, or essential for a thing to be what it is (New World Encyclopedia contributors, 2017). If those properties were missing, the thing would be a different thing. For example, wheels are essential properties of a bike because they give it its purpose and function. Many essentialists have extended this concept to human beings, suggesting that we are substances with fixed properties and purposes in life, which is often attributed to a higher power (Crowell, 2017). Sartre refutes the notion that a higher power made the universe, our world, or us, for any particular purpose, rather than rejecting the existence of a

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higher power all together. He proposes that existence proceeds essence and therefore, humans have no pre-determined purpose, but rather, an abundance of freedom (Sartre, 1966).

Sartre views freedom as synonymous with human consciousness or the first mode of being, 'being-for-itself' (Spade, 1996). 'Being-for-itself' is the being of conscious entities (human beings) and is characterised by its consciousness of its own consciousness, as well as a lack of identity with itself or nothingness (Onof, n. d.). The second mode of being is being-in-itself, which refers to the unconscious being and is characterised by being concrete, unaware of itself, lacking the ability to change and existing without justification in relation to other things (Sartre, 1966). Examples of things that are in-itself include rocks, water and plates. For the for-itself, their identity lies not in relation to things within, like the in-itself, but in relation to something else. This consciousness of other objects results in self-consciousness, where the for-self is conscious of itself not being the object. This desire or project for being gives for-itself a radical freedom to make itself from nothingness. However, this abundance of freedom is daunting to the for-itself, causing it to have a tendency to escape its freedom by striving to become an in-itself or an absolute, even though this is ultimately not achievable (Catalano, 1985). The act of trying to escape this freedom is viewed by Sartre as 'bad faith' (Sartre, 1993). This is apparent when considering the social roles that people adopt in their every-day lives, such as 'teacher', 'mother', and 'husband'. People often adopt these roles as essences of being, rather than functional personas, which is an example of the person rejecting the task of determining what these roles are not, and

ultimately, acting in bad faith. To act in good faith, is to continually confront the responsibility of freedom by engaging authentically in/with the world (Sartre, 1966).

Sartre later introduced a third component to the equation, 'being-for-others' which refers to the human version of 'being-in-itself'. 'Being-for-others' refers to the act of being reduced to an object for others and is in constant tension with 'being-for-itself' (Sartre, 1966). The 'other' has the ability to steal the world of the person who's being looked at away from them, displacing them as the centre of their own universe (Dolezal, 2012). 'Being-for-others' is viewed by Sartre as a negative mode of being as it involves the self being reduced by the other to an object-state to be judged. This process is described by Sartre as 'one makes the other be, and at the same time apprehends the other in situation as who one has to not be' (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*: 296). 'Being-for-others' causes the self to project an embellished version of themselves in the presence of others to avoid being judged negatively. This is evident in social networking such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, where people present an 'edited' or 'selected highlights' version of themselves to validate themselves and avoid negative judgement.

"The Look" is a central concept in Sartre's phenomenology and involves the process of a consciousness recognising that it exists not only as the center of its own being gazing outward, but also as an object in the world of others (Dolezal, 2012; Sartre, 1966). In other words, we can only become aware of ourselves when confronted with the gaze of another. This involves self-reflective consciousness, where one is not only conscious of the world, but <https://assignbuster.com/evaluation-of-sartres-stance-on-being-and-nothingness/>

aware of itself and its relation to others by having its consciousness turned inwards towards itself (Dolezal, 2012). Sartre uses the 'keyhole' example to illustrate how 'The Look' influences his various modes of being. In this analogy, Sartre relates one's experience of the world with the act of looking through a keyhole. Most of the time, we survey the world as if we are invisible, with the mentality that "I am the one who looks, and others are the ones that I look at". However, in the instance that we are caught 'peeping' by the look of another, we

momentarily become an object for them which causes us to 'see myself (ourselves) because someone sees me (us)' (Sartre, Being and Nothingness: 284). This causes us to become visible or accountable for/reflect on our actions, by experiencing feelings of shame (or pride). The experience of being looked at by the other involves a fundamental alienation of the self's world which is described by Sartre as 'a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralising of the world which undermines the centralisation which I am simultaneously effecting' (Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 279). The look of the other is objectifying in the sense that it steals our inherent freedom, causing us to deprive ourselves of our existence as being-for-itself, and instead falsely self-identify as a being-in-itself (Dolezal, 2012). This is because we perceive ourselves being perceived and objectify ourselves in the same way that we are being objectified. For example, if the other views you fishing in a lake, he or she views you simply as a fisherman, and if you are aware of their gaze, you too will objectify yourself in the same way. Sartre states that we live with the permanent possibility of being seen and that 'man' is the other who is able to see us, which affirms our status as '

being-for-others' (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 396). Sartre concludes that the experience of being looked at and the permanent possibility of being seen is simultaneously a source of terror as well as a source of hope, as the subject needs the other's gaze to confirm its existence in the world (Sartre, 1993).

In conclusion, I have examined Sartre's modes of being, including 'being-in-itself', 'being-for-itself', and 'being-for-others in the light of consciousness, freedom, and bad faith, and explored the role that 'The Look' plays in relation to others and our modes of being. I have arrived at the conclusion that although 'the look' is daunting because it objectifies and alienates oneself, it is necessary to confirm one's existence in the world.

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