
Being-for-Others: Sartre's Ontology of Self, Other, and the Look

Dr. Narinder K. Sharma

Assistant Professor of English, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda

Paper Received on 08-05-2025, Accepted on 09-06-2025

Published on 10-06-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.2.497

Abstract

This paper examines Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of human existence by way of referring to the interrelated notions of being-in-itself, being-for-itself, and being-for-others. For this, the study draws primarily on Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* to explore how consciousness, when confronted with the presence of another, experiences a shift from autonomy to vulnerability. It is in this sense that the analysis delves into the transformative impact of the 'look' of the Other to reveal how subjectivity is destabilized/reframed through objectification, and by way of tracing the existential dynamics of shame, freedom, love, desire, and conflict, the paper foregrounds the paradox of selfhood in Sartrean philosophy where the self is both a creator of meaning and a being constituted through others. Notably, the study also takes into consideration, briefly though, Sartre's later reflections in *Notebooks for an Ethics*, where he talks about the possibility of ethical intersubjectivity. In doing so, the work highlights both the constraints and the latent promise within Sartre's existential model of human relations.

Keywords: Being-for-others; existentialism; the look; freedom; conflict; intersubjectivity.

No one grows up in a vacuum; one's life exists at multiple intersections with the lives of others. Rather, existence refers to 'being-in-the-world,' to use Heidegger's phrase. This world is not merely a world of things, but (here) "the existent lives in a constant interaction with other existents, or, to put the matter in another way, existence is being-[for]-others or being-with-one-another" (Macquire 102). Laing also affirms:

Only existential thought has attempted to match the original experience of oneself in relationship to others in one's world by a term that adequately reflects this totality. Thus, existentially, the concretum is seen as a man's

existence, his being-in-the-world... When we begin with the concept of man in relation to other men and from the beginning 'in' a world, we realize that man does not exist without his world" (20).

In this context, the paper assesses the conflictual dimension of human relationships vis-à-vis the dialectical understanding of the Sartrean 'being-for-itself' and 'being-for-others.' Before proceeding further, it is pertinent to amplify these ideas to further widen the critique of this paper.

Sartre's Ontology: Three Modes of Being

1. Being-in-itself: Facticity, Solidity, and Contingency

The Sartrean conception of being-in-itself signifying facticity/essence(s) comes as a counter-response to the Aristotelian concept of potentiality. Tellingly, in Aristotle's conception of potentiality, things hold the element of potential evolution to higher points of realization as compared to their essential nature. For example, a seed bears the potential of evolving into a tree. In this sense, this is the evolutionary aspect of a seed. However, contrary to the idea of potentiality, Sartre moves in the opposite direction and contends that everything manifests itself in actuality. Seen thus, the Aristotelian idea of potentiality turns out to be a self-contradictory position. Sartre holds that an object is nothing more than what it is in itself. However, in the Sartrean conceptualization, this notion of *being-in-itself* relates to objects/entities other than humans. It blends itself with itself, signifying utter positivity, density, and massiveness of being. On the contrary, *being-for-itself* (the being of human beings) signifies a free and knowing being placed in a huge, motionless, and deterministic universe of being-in-itself. Adding to the complexity of being-for-itself, Sartre takes an important philosophical position by contending that man is an amalgamation of 'in-itself and for-itself.' This induces the element of ambiguity that engulfs man's being. It introduces the existential composite of facticity and freedom. Resultantly, men are both physical objects—and hence being-in-itself—and self-consciousnesses—and hence being-for-itself. But at the same time, the synthesis of being-in-itself and being-for-itself also conceives humans as a different kind of being. Notably, it signifies a sort of dualism in Sartre's philosophical framework.

2. Being-for-itself: Consciousness, Freedom, and Negation

Sartre holds the view that consciousness always contains the consciousness of something, meaning thereby that it relates to the being-in-itself in a peculiar manner. Given the fact that the way objects present themselves to the consciousness, it is not

a passive entity. Further, Sartre conceives consciousness as a process of nihilation/negation of being-in-itself because it is marked with distinct potential for activity. For example, when I observe a car, I can consciously make out that I am not the car. Importantly, I can differentiate myself from the car by way of involving the process of nihilation/negation. However, it is not a complete nihilation/negation. What does it mean? It is worth considering that if every existing thing must have a being, how can man be a complete non-being? In this sense, it is ontologically necessary to conceive man as a being-in-itself. Many things related to the being-for-itself (man), viz., the bodily appearance, parents, historical situatedness, etc., are fixed. Nonetheless, being-for-itself is much more than certain fixities/facticity of his existence. Since man enjoys the ability to project himself to the future, he can't be reduced to being-in-itself only. Thus, man is certainly more than being-in-itself and hence is consciousness. It is worth considering that this aspect of being-for-itself unveils man's relationship with nothingness in a peculiar way. Since being-for-itself is a non-being, it must consist in nothing. It is a very important position in the Sartrean existential ontology. Sartre holds that being-for-itself causes nothing(ness) to enter into the world. Succinctly, the being-for-itself is both itself and not itself by being paradoxically present to itself in the mode of negation.

Most importantly, Sartre holds that man's freedom holds a mirror to the ontology of nothingness. Seen thus, man's freedom runs parallel to the notion of temporality—another characteristic feature of man's being. It is worth reiterating that being-for-itself projects itself to the future. Further, man makes himself through his choices, and therefore, he is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Earnshaw says, "Self in existentialism is an uncompleted project, a potential that each individual is solely responsible for realizing or unfolding" (19).

Sartre also proposes the inescapability of freedom. However, this inescapability proposes that we must make choices with responsibility. Since responsibility is an ontological element of the freedom structure, one cannot escape the anguish that the inescapability of freedom may entail for an individual. Anguish, therefore, is a condition for freedom and action. Seen thus, to exist authentically is therefore an existential challenge. This differentiates being-for-itself from being-in-itself.

3. Being-for-Others: The Look and Objectification

The third dimension of being is called the being-for-others. Cox supports the stance: "Every person is a being-for-itself, but according to Sartre, this is not all they are. There is another aspect of every person's being that is not for-itself but for-others" (23). On encountering other people, it brings forth a realization that we are not meeting mere things, which lack the ability to pose a reaction, but parallel subjects

who are also conscious agents like us. Macquire observes, “Even in the most fundamental ways of being, the human existent spills over, so to speak; he transcends the bounds of an individual existence and is intelligible only within a broader framework that we designate as being-[for]-others” (106). At this juncture, there is a need to elucidate how we understand others. Sartre says, “the Other is an indispensable mediator between myself and me... I recognize I am as the Other sees me... Nobody can be vulgar all alone” (222). Seen thus, the Other “constitutes me in a new type of being [by making me] his object... In it I recognize that, as the object of the Other, I am not only for the Other, that is, that I actually am just as the Other sees me” (Theunisson 222). Levy substantiates, “All human relations can be resolved into this sinister dialectic of looking-at and being looked-at, of objectifying and being objectified in turn” (39). It is a revelation of our (potential) *conflict-ridden relationship* with the Other(s).

Conflictual Relations: Sartre's Typology of Interpersonal Encounters

Sartre opines, “Everything that goes for me, goes for the Other. While I try to enslave the Other, he tries to enslave me... Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others” (364). Important denominations of the preceding point, along with contextual additions thereto, are condensed hereunder:

- a. Sartre postulates three kinds of relations with others in his seminal treatise *Being and Nothingness*:
 - i. The Other may be conceived as an object whom I appropriate for the purpose of using as an instrument.
 - ii. Secondly, the Other may be conceived as if taking a perspective on objects that I am looking at. Hence, it may induce an “internal haemorrhage” in my own perspective.
 - iii. Thirdly, the Other may be conceived as the one who *looks* at me, signifying a peculiar judgment. It may result in forcing me to experience my own objectness, whereby I may be disrobed of my subjectivity—momentarily, though—and experience myself as the object of another's judgment, signifying my being-for-others.
- b. Further, the consciousness's experience of the Other unfurls the idea that the primordial manner through which the Other relates to the consciousness is through the *look* and its subsequent reactions.
- c. The natural orientation of the consciousness is to assume a pre-reflective fundamental project, which is in bad faith. It is pertinent to add here that consciousness in its pre-reflective mode of being refers to the consciousness of the world, which lacks self-directedness and reflection.

- d. Relationships of a consciousness in bad faith lead to a subject/object duality whereby each consciousness yearns to objectify the Other (through the look or the returning look) to maintain its privileged subjective freedom. Importantly, the Other defines the way I cannot define myself and thus alters my being. In this way, the Other assumes the subject position since only a subject can objectify an *object*. It induces shame/pride-consciousness in the 'object.' Since the object is capable of returning the look so as to regain control of its existential situation, it intensifies as well as elucidates Garcin's dramatic declaration in Sartre's *No Exit* that 'Hell is other people.' Hence, we have conflict-ridden human relationships signifying alienation and distantiation.
- e. It is imperative to highlight that the experience of being-seen-by-another cannot be deduced from the structure of the being-for-itself, and hence the third ontological category is necessitated, i.e., being-for-others in addition to the other two ontological categories, viz., being-in-itself and being-for-itself. It is in this sense that individuals have their foundation outside themselves. On the contrary, the for-itself always yearns to be the foundation of itself. However, such a synthesis is not possible considering the presence of being-for-others, signifying our dependence on others. Hence, to be in control of the self, it is a prerequisite to control/objectify others, which results in the looking/looked at (subject/object) duality. It leads to the view that being-in-the-world represents a dichotomy; one is either the looker or the looked upon. This is the experiential structure of the Other, and it presents the self with a fundamental conflict.
- f. The conflict, as explained above, assumes sadistic and masochistic orientations for different people. Resultantly, we either become a master or a slave. The available options present to us two possibilities: 1) we may go on objectifying others incessantly; 2) we may control the subjectivity of the Other so that we are perceived the way we want to be. This is a picture of conflict, with special reference to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, entailing duality between the two possibilities and thus negating the scope of reciprocal intersubjectivity.
- g. The First Attitude towards Others: In Sartre's view, the first attitude towards others includes the masochistic, slave, looked-upon, and objectified paradigm. In this regard, it is important to consider the following corollaries of the first attitude towards others:
 - *Love*: Sartre holds that love is doomed to failure since it represents a project of trying to be seen as the most beloved object in the eyes of another or to make the Other look at us in a certain way to be judged as the most valuable object. In other words, it is an attempt to treat love as a controlling

phenomenon since, through love, we intend to control/condition the subjectivity of the Other. On the contrary, to love someone in such a way also means the negation of a free consciousness. In that case, love will not be satisfying.

- *Masochism*: After the failure of the love project, masochism is the next stage of existential experience. It implies that we may aim to have masochistic relations with others, and it also signifies converting our body into an object for the look of the Other. However, this position is also equally unstable since our perspective about ourselves cannot equal/condition the subjectivity of the Other towards us. In this way, masochism too fails as a project.
- h. The Second Attitude towards Others: This attitude relates to the consciousness that judges the others as the objects of its look and hence manifests the subject paradigm. It is worthwhile to consider the following corollaries of this attitude:
 - *Indifference*: It is an intriguing way of treating others, especially after the failure of love and masochism. Sartre opines:

“In this state of blindness, I concurrently ignore the Other’s absolute subjectivity as the foundation of my being-in-the-world and being-for-others. In a sense I am reassured; I am self-confident: that is, I am in no way conscious of the fact that the Other’s *Look* can fix my potentialities and my body” (Sartre 381, emphasis added).

Accordingly, it is an unstable position since it connotes bad faith by way of ignoring the ontological structure of our being, i.e., being-for-others.
 - *Desire*: Importantly, in the Sartrean framework, desire refers to the unsuccessful attempt to move beyond the looker-looked-upon dialectic, signifying a determination of the Other’s freedom. Despite the fact of its paradoxical nature, Sartre holds that desire and repulsion are ontologically fundamental modes of our being-for-others. Since the Other is desired to become an instrument of our use as an object, we are returned to the same looker-looked upon dialectic.
 - *Sadism*: Opposite to masochism, sadism also hosts indifference, desire, hate, etc. to varying proportions; the unifying center of which remains the desire to be the subject/looker. It is generated by the failure of desire. By inflicting pain, the sadist yearns that the brute facticity of the Other must creep into his/her consciousness. However, even this position is unstable since the individual upon whom the pain is inflicted may also look back and thus

objectify the subject in myriad ways. In case the sadist's victim is killed, the subject-object dialectic shall cease to continue.

- *Hatred*: It is an attempt to flee from the judgment of the Other by taking a hate initiative to judge others in a negative way. Hate presupposes that being looked at by another person connotes a suppression of my freedom as a free subjectivity. Hence, it assumes an attitude akin to a being. However, even the very notion of hate is doomed to fail because, for hating someone, we need to recognize the Other. Hence, the dialectic is likely to go on.

Conclusion

The preceding exploration of Sartre's ontology clarifies that human relations are often marked by tension, uncertainty, and conflict, and, in this sense, the presence of the Other challenges and reshapes our way of existing in the world. Thus, each encounter exposes our vulnerability by forcing us to see ourselves through the gaze of someone else, reducing us to objects in a dynamic we do not control. In this way, the search for recognition turns out to be a potent site of existential anguish as well as ethical consequence. Interestingly, Sartre does develop the idea of a more authentic way of relating in his later work, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, where he acknowledges a space for mutual recognition and a shared sense of subjectivity. The core insight is that our selfhood is not solitary but is actively shaped in relation to others. This relational structure, which is fraught with the risk of misunderstanding, domination, or shame, also holds the potential for genuine understanding if we accept the responsibilities of our freedom and the reality of the Other's freedom. Sartre's ontology, therefore, deepens our philosophical understanding of self and Other, and in doing so, we confront the challenge of coexisting authentically in a world where every gaze may either diminish or affirm who we are becoming.

References:

- Cox, Gary. Sartre and Fiction. Cornwall: Continuum Publishing House, 2009.
- Earnshaw, Steven. *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum Publishing Group, 2006.

Laing, R.D. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. London: Penguin Books, 1969.

Levy, Neil. *Sartre*. Oxford: One Word Publication, 2002.

Macquarrie, John. *Existentialism*. London: Penguin, 1973.

Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.

— — —. *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Trans. David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Theunisson, Michael. *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber*. Trans. Christopher Macaan. Baskerville: MIT Press, 1984.