EXISTENTIALISM IS NOT A HUMANISM: NOTHINGNESS AND THE NON-HUMANIST PHILOSOPHY OF THE EARLY SARTRE

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This article challenges the view, originating in Heidegger's Letter on Humanism, according to which Sartre's thought remains wedded to a substantial, "humanist," conception of the subject. Beginning with an account of Heidegger's critique in the Letter, I examine the idea that humanism posits the human as a mode of entity in the world, thus precluding an originary enquiry into its nature. Next, I show how Heidegger is wrong to attribute such a view to Sartre. Turning to The Transcendence of the Ego, we see how Sartrian phenomenology reveals human beings as essentially worldly. Further, this engagement with Sartre allows us to see how we can reject humanism while maintaining a distinct meaning for the human. Specifically, interpreting Being and Nothingness makes clear how, when the human is conceptualized as the modification of world that is nothingness, it can have a distinctive being without existing as humanism's subject-entity.

Cet article met à l'épreuve l'idée qui prend son origine dans la Lettre sur l'humanisme de Heidegger selon laquelle la pensée de Sartre demeure attachée à une conception substantielle, « humaniste », du sujet. En commençant par un examen de la critique heideggérienne dans la Lettre, je considère l'idée qui veut que l'humanisme pose l'être humain comme un mode d'étant dans le monde et rende ainsi impossible un questionnement de sa nature. Ensuite, je montre comment Heidegger a tort d'attribuer une telle perspective à Sartre. Si l'on se tourne vers La transcendance de l'ego, on voit que la phénoménologie sartrienne révèle l'être humain comme essentiellement mondain. De plus, cet engagement avec la pensée sartrienne nous permet de voir comment on peut rejeter l'humanisme tout en maintenant un sens distinct pour l'être humain. Plus spécifiquement, une relecture de L'Étre et le néant clarifie comment une conceptualisation de l'être humain comme la modification du monde qu'est le néant permet d'attribuer à l'être humain un être distinct sans pour autant en faire l'étant-sujet de l'humanisme.
1. Introduction

Levi-Strauss once said of Sartre’s philosophy that it was “Métaphysique pour midinette,” that is, “metaphysics for shop-girls.”1 And while most would demur from the extremity of such a remark, it nonetheless captures something about the way Sartre is, and has been, perceived within the history of twentieth-century thought. In short, it reflects a sense that his philosophy is somehow naïve or romantic, lacking in philosophical depth. It reflects the sense that with talk of things like angst and alienation, Sartre should be of more interest to dilettantes and students than to serious philosophers. He is also seen, as Fox observes, as a “philosopher of a world that has passed.”2 Thus, even if Sartre was popular or relevant in his own time, this thought goes, his concerns, and overall project, are now outmoded or passé. And the kernel of this claim, from a philosophic perspective, can be summed up with the term “humanism.” In short, underscoring the perception that he is outmoded and unworthy of serious study, especially for post-structuralists, is the idea that Sartre is synonymous with the notion of a substantial and isolatable conception of the human subject—that is, humanism.

But is this a fair claim? This article presents an argument that despite the deeply ingrained nature of this assumption, the identification of Sartre with humanism, and the subsequent dismissal of his philosophy, is not justified. In fact, not only is Sartre’s thought not humanist, it actually helps clarify, and provide an answer to, a problem facing all efforts to overcome humanism. That is to say, Sartre helps address the problem of maintaining a distinct conception of the human while rejecting the humanist subject. However, before exploring the question of what can replace the humanist subject we must first ask why it is that Sartre has been characterized as humanist to begin with and why this perception of his thought has become so entrenched. For in addressing this contextual question we will then be able to see how the literature has failed to challenge a key assumption behind the association of Sartre with humanism. In so doing, we will then be able to provide motivation for our reassessment of Sartre’s relation to humanism.

Consequently, this essay begins by examining the historical context surrounding the issue of Sartre and humanism. In particular, by turning to Heidegger and Derrida, we will explore where the idea of Sartre as humanist originated and how it became established. To that

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end, I will provide a brief survey of the literature on this topic, showing how it does not properly address the question of whether Heidegger’s initial claim regarding Sartre and humanism is accurate. To take up this question, and to demonstrate that Sartre’s thought is not humanist, we will look in more detail at Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* and explore more precisely what humanism means for Heidegger, what exactly is wrong with it, and why, philosophically, he might identify Sartre with such a position. Next, by turning to *Transcendence of the Ego*, we will see how Sartrean phenomenology not only entails a rejection of the humanist subject, but helps clarify a problem that arises when we try to escape it. Indeed, by applying this non-humanist reading to *Being and Nothingness*, we can understand how Sartre can maintain a distinct non-humanist sense for the human by conceptualizing human being as the modification of world that is non-being.

2. Sartre and Humanism

So, let us start with our first point: how has the perception of Sartre’s philosophy as outmoded or naïve arisen? And why then has the significance of his thought been so routinely dismissed? The answer from a historical perspective centres on the confluence of two factors: Sartre’s 1945 lecture, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, and Heidegger’s interpretation of Sartre, based on this lecture, in the *Letter on Humanism*. For, to start with, the lecture, aimed at a non-academic audience, necessarily presented a simplified version of Sartre’s thought. As a consequence, making his philosophy accessible, Sartre reduces the complex phenomenological ontology of *Being and Nothingness* to slogans such as “existence precedes essence.” And it was unsurprising that Heidegger would want to dissociate his own philosophy from this.

Connected to this point, Sartre gave the lecture in response to the criticism he and “Existentialism” received in post-war France. Particularly, Existentialism was, as Sartre says, “blamed for encouraging people to remain in a state of quietism and despair.” And it did so because of its allegedly nihilistic implications. Accordingly, he re-

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4 Sartre attempts to identify Heidegger with existentialism in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. (Ibid.)

5 Ibid., 17.
sponded by attempting to present this mode of thought as potentially affirmative and “humanist.” That is, he attempted to present his thought as humanist in the sense of finding, and celebrating, the value in human life. However, this emphasis did the philosophical aspect of his discussion few favours. This was not just because it encouraged confusion regarding the difference between a more philosophical sense of humanism, and an everyday “ethical” meaning as Sartre was employing it. But it also led Sartre to unduly stress his existentialism as a “philosophy of the human” and downplay the import of our relation to the world, or Being. This was a problem because it was upon this text that Heidegger based his analysis of Sartre in the *Letter on Humanism*. Given the emphasis there on “the human,” and given that Sartre does not make clear the distinction between the two senses of humanism, it was easy for Heidegger, based solely on this lecture, to view Sartre not only as limited, but as limited for being humanist. And this meant, in provisional terms, not asking after “the relation of Being to the essence of man,” but only being concerned with an isolatable field of the human.

However, if it is apparent why Heidegger associated Sartre with humanism, it might seem more puzzling how this view, and the dismissal of Sartre, became so widely accepted. After all, could not subsequent philosophers simply read *Being and Nothingness*, which Heidegger had not, thereby correcting the oversight in which his view is rooted? Theoretically “yes,” but there are a number of contextual reasons why Heidegger’s view prevailed. The most general of these was Heidegger’s influence on post-war French philo-

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6 This meaning is that human life is valuable and that for man “there is no legislator other than himself.” (*Ibid.*, 53) Note, however, that this meaning does not rule out the first philosophical sense of “humanism” having an ethical dimension or ethical implications. Rather, we just intend to suggest that there exists a predominantly “ethical” sense of humanism, which is how the term is more commonly used, and to which Sartre was appealing in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. We will return to the connection between the “philosophical” sense and ethics when we look in more detail at the *Letter on Humanism*.


8 Bernasconi claims that Heidegger had read *Being and Nothingness* the year before writing the letter in 1946. Robert Bernasconi, “Heidegger and Sartre: Historicity, Destiny and Politics,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, (ed.) F. Raffoul and E. S. Nelson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 369. Yet, whether or not this is correct, Heidegger simply does not engage with that text in the *Letter*. In fact, there are only three actual citations from Sartre in the *Letter* and all are to *Existentialism is a Humanism*. 
Sophistical culture. For, as Rockmore has pointed out, “in the period after the Second World War, Heidegger became the master thinker of French philosophy.” As such, even amongst those who knew that Heidegger’s criticisms in the Letter were based solely upon Existentialism is a Humanism, there remained a sense that he must still be right about Sartre. Moreover, there was little desire to address this oversight. On the contrary, as Martinot has suggested, “It has been an unspoken goal of the post-structuralist project to render Sartre history.” That is, there was an emerging group of thinkers who sought to replace the predominance of Sartrean Existentialism with their own non-phenomenological types of philosophy. And this movement was given both expression and impetus by Derrida’s 1968 talk “The Ends of Man.” Picking up on the fact that Sartre used Corbin’s translation of Dasein, from Being and Time, as “human-reality,” Derrida asserts that this indicates Sartre’s commitment to an isolatable domain of the human. For, as he says, “To the extent that it describes the structures of human-reality, phenomenological ontology is a philosophical anthropology.” In short, conveniently allowing them to assert and distinguish their own positions at the time, post-structuralist thinkers had little motivation to challenge the problematic assumptions behind Heidegger’s dismissal of Sartre in the Letter.

Yet where does this leave us? If we have addressed how the perception of Sartre’s thought as humanist originated and became established, can we now say a reassessment of Sartre’s relationship to humanism has been shown to be necessary? The answer is “no.” For we must still ask whether the present literature has rectified the discussed oversight and whether Heidegger’s critique of Sartre is accurate. A significant portion of the literature on the Letter takes for granted both what exactly Heidegger’s critique of humanism is and that Sartre is tied to it. Bernasconi is symptomatic of this attitude, for he says that “Sartre was still using the terms existence and essence according to their metaphysical meaning and that by merely revers-

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11 See Fox, The New Sartre, for a discussion of the relationship between Sartre’s philosophy and poststructuralism.
13 Ibid., 115–16.
ing the terms he remained within Western metaphysics.”

This is indeed what Heidegger claims, but Bernasconi does not really elaborate why Sartre is bound to using the terms in their “metaphysical” sense or what it would mean to use existence and essence “non-metaphysically.” Likewise, Mitchell states that “To address (the) question concerning humanism thus requires thinking further into the essence of the human, that is, ek-sistence.” Yet again, it is not made clear why humanism, let alone Sartre, is unable to conceive human being in relation to this ecstatic “standing out” that Heidegger says characterizes the human essence. In short then, it is assumed that the meaning of humanism and what is wrong with it is self-evident. This assumption prevents a serious assessment of whether the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* is really humanist, making it possible to pass too quickly onto other themes. So for instance, Bernasconi and Hodge move swiftly from humanism itself onto discussing the role of politics and history in the *Letter*. Similarly, for Mitchell it is language, and its objectifying tendencies, that takes precedence.

Moreover, even where this is not quite the case, the literature still contains essential lacunas. Even where commentators do engage more substantively with the philosophical problem of humanism, they accept Heidegger’s assumptions regarding it. In particular, they do not acknowledge the problem that follows from a critique of humanism and overlook its possible solution by Sartre. Rae and

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14 Bernasconi, “Heidegger and Sartre,” 369–70.
16 There is a similar problem with Hodge. She alludes to “the anthropological assumptions, sometimes referred to as ‘humanism’, at work in the European philosophical tradition.” Joanna Hodge, “Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Critique of Humanism,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1991) 75–79, here 76. Yet, once more, she is unable to articulate what is so problematic about these ‘assumptions.’
Dastur are more typical in this regard. Rae suggests that the problem with humanism is that it is “underpinned by a binary logic that forestalls any thinking of being.” Elaborating, he states this means that while “humanism tends to think of the human’s essence as ‘something’ that resides within the human,” for Heidegger, “the essence of the human being lies in its unique relation to being.” And indeed this is a deeper analysis of what Heidegger sees as humanism’s limitation. However, Rae does not dwell upon what remains problematic about such a destruction of the human as a distinct “something,” nor does he consider why Sartre’s thought could prove productive in this light. Rather, like Dastur, who says that “One can wonder if Sartre really succeeds in getting out from the traditional opposition of subject and object,” Rae follows Heidegger in uncritically assuming that Sartre “simply re-instantiates the logic of binary oppositions.” That is to say, he ignores Sartre’s efforts to avoid precisely this opposition of consciousness and world as well as Sartre’s efforts to think through the consequences of this opposition.

To sum up, the secondary literature perpetuates the assumption that Sartre’s interest in human being and “consciousness” makes his

19 Exceptions to this might be found in the case of Krell and Skocz, though neither directly addresses the question with which we are concerned. See David Farell Krell “Introduction,” Heidegger: Basic Writings, (ed.) D. F. Krell, (tr.) F. A. Capuzzi and J. G. Gray (London: Routledge, 1978) and Dennis Skocz, “Postscripts to the ‘Letter on Humanism’: Heidegger, Sartre, and Being-Human,” in French Interpretations of Heidegger, (ed.) David Pettigrew and François Raffoul (New York: State University of New York, 2008), 73–89. Krell is more critical of Heidegger in his short introduction to LH, though he nonetheless does not question the latter’s identification of Sartrean existentialism with humanism. Skocz meanwhile claims that both Sartre and Heidegger still remain within humanism because of their respective approaches to history. Mention can also be made here of Martinot (“Sartre’s Being”), who shows a certain degree of sympathy for Sartre, and claims the idea of the Sartre-Heidegger debate is a fabrication. He does not show, however, how Sartre develops a clear alternative to humanism. Likewise, Gardner is also relatively unique in acknowledging that Sartre’s ontology has been overlooked and should be taken seriously. That said, his discussion of this topic does not engage with the question of humanism in LH or Heidegger’s critique of humanism there. See Sebastian Gardner, “Sartre, Schelling and Onto-Theology,” Religious Studies, vol. 42, no. 3 (2006): 247–71.


21 Ibid., 33.


23 Rae, “Re-Thinking the Human,” 33.
philosophy humanist, overlooking the question of whether Heidegger’s critique of Sartre in the Letter is accurate. We must now show that Sartre in fact is not humanist and how he clarifies a problem regarding efforts to overcome it. To that end, we will begin by turning to the Letter itself. Only by examining the meaning of humanism more closely can we assess whether the Heideggerian critique of Sartre is fair.

3. Ontology, Humanism and Phenomenology

What is “humanism” and what are its limitations? Looking at the Letter, Heidegger’s answer to both questions is based on the idea that humanism exists as a certain kind of “science” of the human. In other words, the limitation of humanism derives from the notion implied by the idea of “the humanities”: that it exists as a complementary science, doing for the human being, what the natural sciences do for the material world. For, “humanism,” like science in relation to the physical, assumes “the human” is an isolatable field about which it is possible to conduct a neutral, originary inquiry. For Heidegger, the problem with such an approach is evident: in assuming that it is possible to have an isolated, originary inquiry into the human being, humanism already makes a certain ontological assumption about its object. That is, humanism makes an assumption about “the relation of Being to the essence of man” (LH, 153) insofar as it positions the human being as an isolatable object of knowledge. For humanism does not ask whether the human stands in a unique relation to Being, which cannot be “known” in this way, or whether it must fundamentally be caught up with being. It cannot do so since this would mean abandoning the idea of the human as an isolatable theoretical field. Rather, it presumes by virtue of its method that we “locate man within being as one being among others” (LH, 154), a being that, even if possessed of “unique” qualities, is ontologically equivalent to other beings. And this means, as Heidegger had argued in Being and Time, that we take the human “as an instance or special case of some genus of entities [of] as things that are present-at-hand.”

No matter how subtle or un-prejudiced humanism believes its inquiries to be, it can never escape the characterization of the human being in terms of “presence.” Likewise, no matter how “different” from other entities the human is seen to be, humanism’s

method ends up construing it as “another entity in the world.” For Heidegger, humanism ends up construing our being in terms of an “is” to which it is possible to ascribe properties or attributes like “subjectivity” and “reason.”

To address our previous question, we can say that the problem with humanism in this way is that it fails to, as Heidegger puts it, “think the essence of man more primordially.” (LH, 168) As such, it does not consider whether the human might be ultimately more than a variation on Descartes’s “thing that thinks.”25 Moreover, this leads into what we might call an “ethical” criticism of humanism. For, in thus viewing human being as “one being among others” (LH, 154), humanism does not accord to the human its true value and distinctiveness. Or, as Heidegger says, “the highest determinations of the essence of man in humanism still do not realize the proper dignity of man.” (LH, 159) That is, even the most considered humanist philosophy always ends up ignoring and demeaning what makes the human special. And in this sense humanism, ironically by isolating “the human,” ends up contradicting its aim of placing the highest value on the human being.

Yet why does Heidegger consider Sartrean phenomenology to be the latest mode of such “humanism”? The answer lies in a reflection on, again considering Descartes, what is meant by “more” than a thinking subject. For as Heidegger makes clear, though

the essence of man consists in his being more than merely human, if this is represented as “being a rational creature.” “More” must not be understood here additively, as if the traditional definition of man were indeed to remain basic, only elaborated by means of an existentiel postscript. (LH, 166)

In other words, Heidegger sees the danger that a certain kind of phenomenology simply “adds to” the humanist understanding of the human being without fundamentally challenging it. Specifically, existentialist phenomenology’s emphasis on concrete existence simply means, as Crowell puts it, “emphasizing the contingent psychological and situational factors in human life, in contrast to the life of a purely rational agent.”26 In this way, for Heidegger, a certain

kind of existentialist phenomenology fails to get beyond the humanist project. Rather, its focus on “existence,” with its emphasis on the personal dimension to subjectivity, simply completes that project.

4. Absence of the Substantial Self

In any case, we must now show how Sartre’s thought does not fall prey to this way of understanding the human. Before looking at Transcendence of the Ego directly, we can do this by first noting, against Heidegger, that Sartrean phenomenology is concerned with Being and ontology. For, as he says toward the end of Being and Nothingness, “My ultimate and initial project...is...always the outline of a solution of the problem of being...” However, such an ontology does not proceed by an abstraction from human existence. It avoids, in other words, Pattison’s distinction between “universal ontology” and “the concrete and immediate situation of individual existence.” That Sartre proceeds by deriving an ontology precisely from our concrete experience is significant because it is only as phenomenological ontology that his philosophy can avoid the charge of humanism.

But how does it do this? And isn’t an “ontology” beginning with human experience a contradiction that returns us to the very humanism we were trying to escape? Addressing the second question, the answer is “no.” And this is because what we start with is not “the human” as an object of knowledge, but with the first person phenomenological experience of living individuals. In fact, it is the very conflation of these two terms which prevents a proper appreciation of the latter. That is, as Levy points out, “we misunderstand our own being in the world and take ourselves for disinterested spectators.” Furthermore, an authentic recovery of our experience as it is actually lived is ontological insofar as, unlike humanism, it precedes any assumptions about what Being or human being is. For, as Heidegger himself says, “the term ‘phenomenology’ expresses a maxim which can be formulated as ‘To the things themselves!’ It is opposed to all free-floating constructions and accidental findings.” (BT, 50) And this means that true phenomenology can open the way for a genuine inquiry into Being. That is, because phenomenology recovers an

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27 Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, (tr.) H. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1958), 463. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as BN.
28 George Pattison, The Philosophy of Kierkegaard (Chesham: Acumen, 2005), 86.
experience prior to existing ontological assumptions, it can serve as the basis for an unprejudiced exploration of the human being’s “relation to Being.”

However, that is not of course to say that recovering such an experience is necessarily easy. Nor is it something we ordinarily do when we believe we are recalling or describing some episode. For as Husserl had pointed out, awareness of our own experience is systematically distorted by ingrained commonsensical assumptions about the way the world is. And this has at its heart the problem that we project the nature of reflective experience onto all experience. That is, since explicit recalling involves reflection, we usually interpret any experience through the lens of the subject-object paradigm of the reflective mode. Nevertheless, this difficulty is not intractable. And how we are to overcome it is indicated by Sartre, in Transcendence of the Ego:

Obviously, we need to resort to concrete experience, and this may seem impossible, since an experience of this kind is by definition reflective, in other words endowed with an I. But all unreflected consciousness, being a non-thetic consciousness of itself, leaves behind it a non-thetic memory that can be consulted. All that is required for this is to try to reconstitute the complete moment in which this unreflected consciousness appeared [and this is, by definition, always possible]. For instance, I was just now absorbed in my reading...

In other words, there is a domain of pre-reflective experience, “unreflected consciousness,” that is prior to reflective “stepping back” from the world and the theory it gives rise to. This mode of experience is free from prior ontological assumptions, and it can thus serve as the basis for unbiased phenomenological ontology. Sartre suggests that it is possible to recover the nature of such experience without this necessarily being distorted by reflection. For it is as if originary experience leaves behind a trace, “a non-thetic memory,” which lingers in subsequent consciousness like ripples on water. And this means that with sufficient effort, and by holding in check our tendency to interpret the experience, we can discern its contours. In short, with sensitivity to certain moments of present consciousness, we can recover the pre-reflective without a reflective re-constructive “leap” into a past consciousness.

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An analysis of the pre-reflective shows how Sartrean phenomenology is incompatible with humanism, and it discloses the problem created when we reject this mode of thinking. Sartre discovers in that new domain that a substantial self or “I” is absent. He writes: “When I run after a tram, when I look at the time, when I become absorbed in the contemplation of a portrait, there is no I.” (TE, 13) In other words, when we look with sufficient honesty to pre-reflective experience we find there is no independent subject present. Whilst our attachment to the self of the reflective mode makes us want to avoid seeing this, we do not find, as Gardner puts it, “something substantial lying behind and supporting the stream of our consciousness.” Rather, all we uncover is “consciousness of the tram-needing-to-be-caught.” (TE, 13) In short, all we find is the consciousness of transcendent objects, consciousness of the world. And it is thus clear what implications this has for the humanist idea of the subject. For if, as Sartre says, “there is no consciousness which is not a positing of a transcendent object” (BN, xxvii), then there is on a fundamental level no distinct or substantial domain of the subject either. That is, if pre-reflective experience of our “self” reveals only this relation to the world, then the subject-entity of humanism no longer holds. And this means that, by endorsing such a claim, Sartrean phenomenology cannot be humanist.

Nevertheless, it is also clear that this generates a new concern. Specifically, if by appealing to the pre-reflective, humanism’s conception of the human is called into question, we are faced with a problem of what “the human” can mean at all. For if Sartre’s phenomenology has revealed that there is only intentional consciousness of objects then how do we distinguish consciousness at all? In other words, if there is nothing other than intentional positing of the world then don’t we risk simply reducing human being to “world”? We can begin to address this question by focusing on the character of intentional positing. The description of pre-reflective experience reveals that this is not merely a passive reflection of the world but an activity, or “bringing forth,” in relation to it. As Barnes has observed,

31 It is also possible to frame this point about Sartre’s method, and how we are able to effectively access or describe our experience, in terms of the distinction between “pure” and “impure” reflection made in TE, 23–24. Pure reflection only attends to what is given in “instantaneous” consciousness, and hence can be seen as “honest.” In contrast, impure reflection makes assumptions that go beyond what is immediately given and hence can be regarded as dishonest or self-deceiving.

32 Sebastian Gardner, Sartre’s “Being and Nothingness” (New York: Continuum, 2009), 15.
“consciousness is real as activity.”\textsuperscript{33} This means that even if, as Sartre says, “consciousness has no ‘content’” (BN, xxvii), it is distinguished by this active relation. In other words, even if we exist as nothing other than positing of the world, we nonetheless are distinguished by our very “positing relation” to it. While there is no isolated domain of the human, we still “stand out” as the activity of that positing. And this means that it is possible to talk about human being as exclusively worldly without dissolving it into that world altogether.

5. The Meaning of the Human as Relation: Negation

Yet there remains a further difficulty: if this notion of “active relation” points the way toward a solution to the problem of a non-humanist conception of the human, it also raises questions regarding its own intelligibility. That is, if the idea that “consciousness is a relation”\textsuperscript{34} allows us to get beyond humanism, this still leaves the question of what it means to say that the human is a relation to the world, rather than just having one. For, if Sartre cannot explain how the human as relation can be rendered explicable, he cannot meaningfully provide an alternative to humanism’s subject-entity. And if he cannot do this, then we cannot say he has properly overcome humanism or that he has ultimately escaped from Heidegger’s criticism in the \textit{Letter}.

We can make sense of this notion of the human as not merely having a relation to the world, but of being that relation, through the idea of “negation.” In our practical, “absorbed,” dealings with the world, we find that it is the activity of negating that marks out a distinction from the world as its ground. Here we find the experiential manifestation of human being as both nothing other than world yet standing out from it. However, it is also apparent that this can represent only the beginning of our enquiry on this point. For if an account of real negation might show us how the human as relation is theoretically intelligible, “non-being” can point the way toward a non-humanist conception of human being only once it itself has been rendered intelligible. And we can achieve this only by first addressing some theoretical criticisms of the notion.


\textsuperscript{34} Gardner, Sartre’s “Being and Nothingness,” 45.
The most fundamental criticism of non-being is that it does not refer to anything “real.” This objection can be summed up in the idea that “negation is only a quality of judgement.” (BN, 7) On this view, non-being, as when we discover a door to be not locked, is merely the subjective projection of a certain concept. As Sartre notes, this means that “Negation, the result of concrete psychic operations, is supported in existence by these very operations and is incapable of existing by itself.” (BN, 6) So, for instance, when we look in our wallets expecting to find twenty pounds and find only ten, we do not really discover the non-being of the twenty, but just the being of the ten. And this means that where negation comes into being it is merely as a post-hoc judgement existing by the contrast between what was expected and what was found, and thus having no real basis in the world. On this view, negation, like the Stoics' "lecton" or Husserl’s noema (BN, 7), has only a purely nominal or conceptual existence; it exists solely as a way of organizing or assessing our ideas. If true, this would then mean that “negation” could not serve as the basis for understanding the human as a relation to world: being only a concept, it could not exist in any real relation to that world.

For Sartre, the answer to this objection is twofold. First, Sartre rejects the idea that “ordinary experience reduced to itself does not seem to disclose to us any non-being.” (BN, 7) Put another way, he seeks to show that we do in fact encounter real non-being in pre-reflective experience; that it is not merely a concept projected onto it. Second, Sartre uses this description of a concrete encounter with objective non-being to demonstrate how even though “non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation” (BN, 7), it is still in one sense part of the objective world. In short, he attempts to overcome this objection by showing both that non-being is real and how such real existence is possible.

To demonstrate both these points, Sartre turns to a concrete situation where we encounter real non-being: the experience of “absence.” Specifically, he describes the situation whereby a friend we had agreed to meet in a café at a particular time, Pierre, does not show.35 Entering the café, and looking around, investigating the bar, the chairs, the side-booths, we realize he is not there. The question

35 Joseph Catalano, like many other Sartre commentators, ignores this famous example in his exegesis of chapter 1 section 2. See Joseph S. Catalano, A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's “Being and Nothingness” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974). Klaus Hartmann offers only an inadequate and short discussion of Pierre’s absence. See Klaus Hartmann, Sartre’s Ontology (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966),
is, how do we interpret Pierre’s absence? For common-sense would indicate that we do not really “experience” any non-being, or indeed any actual absence, at all. In other words, despite Sartre’s hopes about uncovering real non-being, common sense would say there is no discernible “absence” actually seen anywhere. Rather, as Sartre himself acknowledges, even with Pierre’s non-appearance at the allotted time, “we seem to have found fullness everywhere” (BN, 9), for we never encounter a Pierre shaped “nothing” anywhere in the café, or in the places where he might have been, but only the full, positive, being of tables, other customers, or of empty space. That is, as Daigle puts it, “in-itself, there is only a fullness of being to be found in the café.” And it follows from this that Pierre’s so-called “absence” can only be a manner of speaking. To say “Pierre is absent,” as such, can really just be shorthand for the conceptual inference, “Pierre is somewhere else.” And further, anything else we might be tempted to associate with “absence” refers merely to entirely subjective, emotional responses. So, for instance, claims like “I was keenly aware of his absence that day” refer simply to a subsequent subjective feeling.

To understand Sartre’s own interpretation of this situation, it is necessary first to explore the nature of what he calls “figure and ground.” (BN, 9) For Sartre, we never straightforwardly just see a series of clearly differentiated, static, “objects” in their fullness. Rather, what we “see” in the café initially is in fact an undifferentiated totality. That is, we see a sort of amorphous backdrop organized in relation to the potential emergence of Pierre as “figure.” Instead of distinct cups, chairs, and people, what we apprehend is an indistinct “ground” organized as not being the figure, as “the object of a purely marginal attention.” (BN, 10) Furthermore, the nature of the “ground” is dependent on the status of “the figure” in relation to which it is marginal. What we mean is that how the ground is given to us will depend on whether the figure, the focus of our attention, is still being searched for, found as present, or found to be absent. So we see that when searching for Pierre we find the figure-ground relation given in a particular way. And this relation can be defined in terms of “indeterminacy” and “movement.” As Sartre explains: “Each element of the setting, a person, a table, a chair, attempts to isolate itself, to lift itself upon the ground constituted by the totality of the other objects, only to fall back once more into the undifferentiation

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36 Christine Daigle, Jean-Paul Sartre (London: Routledge, 2010), 34.
37 See Mary Warnock, Existentialism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 93, for the idea of non-being as an “emotional response.”
of this ground.” (BN, 9–10) Insofar as I am searching for Pierre, what is figure and what is ground is indeterminate. That is, because the figure has not yet emerged, aspects of the potential “ground” fleetingly raise themselves as potentially being Pierre before returning to the marginal totality of the ground. So, when I spot a figure near the bar, he becomes a possible distinct focus of attention only to collapse again into the undifferentiated ground.

Nevertheless, this figure-ground relation, defined in its indeterminacy by a “movement” towards a still indeterminate figure, would be transformed if we were then to discover Pierre. As Sartre says, “if I should finally discover Pierre my intuition would be filled by a solid element, I should be suddenly arrested by his face and the whole café would organize itself around him as a discrete presence.” (BN, 10) In other words, in terms of figure and ground, both movement and indeterminacy would disappear: the ground, losing its dynamic, self-collapsing quality would be organized as a definite and static, albeit marginal, presence now standing in clear relation to Pierre as figure. So how is the figure-ground relation transformed when Pierre is not found? Just as Pierre’s presence as figure organizes the rest of the café as a fixed, present, ground, his absence fixes the rest of the café on the basis of that absence. As Sartre says, “his absence fixes the café in its evanescence.” (Ibid.) What this means is that the café is indeed “fixed,” it is no longer in the flow of indeterminacy, but it is fixed in relation to a figure which is not there. As Gardner puts it, “Pierre’s absence...‘fixes the café,’ which ‘carries’ and ‘presents’ the demanded figure of Pierre.”38 And this means that the ground which is fixed now carries with it everywhere reference to the “evanescent” collapse between figure and ground. As Sartre emphasizes, “this figure which slips constantly between my look and the solid real objects of the café is precisely a perpetual disappearance.” (Ibid.) In other words, the disintegration that determined something as “not Pierre” is now fixed and given in relation to the entire café. As such, “what is offered to intuition is a flickering of nothingness.” (Ibid.) The collapse only fleetingly perceived when searching for Pierre is now clearly intuited in the shimmering un-fullness, incompleteness, of the café.

With an understanding of figure and ground, Sartre’s phenomenological description of the café undermines the naive assumption that “the café is a fullness of being” (BN, 10). More importantly, it undermines the idea that all we ever apprehend there are a series of fully present objects. Admittedly, that is not to say that we straightfor-
wardly “see” Pierre’s absence either, if by this it is meant “that I discover his absence in some precise spot in the establishment.” (Ibid.) But what Sartre shows is that absence is nonetheless given. In other words, against the common sense interpretation, our analysis has shown that absence is real, and is uncovered in the café as a whole.

6. Conclusion: Transformation as a Means to Understanding Non-Being

Where does all this leave us? How does this help us understand how real non-being is intelligible and hence how the human as relation, with non-being as the basis of that relation, can be rendered explicable? To answer this question, we must show how is the experience of non-being is not merely subjective but is part of “the structure of the real.” (BN, 7) We must show, against McCulloch, that our experience of non-being refers to more than just “the way things seem to be”?

We can start by reconsidering Pierre in the café. For it is apparent that the non-being experienced with his absence is not experienced by simply anyone. As Sartre says, “Pierre’s absence supposes an original relation between me and this café; there is an infinity of people who are without any relation with this café for want of a real expectation which establishes their absence.” (BN, 10) In other words, we only experience Pierre’s absence as a “real” aspect of the café because we were initially expecting him. In contrast, for someone without this expectation, no particular non-being in the café would be intuited. However, for Sartre at least, this fact is not as problematic as it might appear. That is, the “individual” nature of this experience does not mean that the non-being disclosed lacks a certain type of objectivity, nor does its dependence on a contingent expectation mean that it is “reduced to pure subjectivity.” (BN, 7) To understand why, it is necessary to consider the purpose of Sartre’s account of the experienced absence, which, as a significant existentiell state, points towards a more fundamental ontological or “existential” condition of being-in-the-world. As such, when Sartre says that “Pierre absent haunts this café and is the condition of its self-

39 Gregory McCulloch, Using Sartre (London: Routledge, 1994), 7. McCulloch interprets Sartre as suggesting that non-being is only “real” in the sense that it figures in experience as a psychological or subjective reality.

40 See also Warnock, Existentialism, 95, for a discussion of the difference between “real” and “arbitrary” absence.
nihilating organization as ground" (*ibid.*), his point is not that Pierre’s specific absence is a condition for any experience of the café. On the contrary, he is saying that non-being *in general*, linked to human expectation, is a condition for that experience, and for the possibility of negation. In other words, as Sartre puts it, “the necessary condition for our saying *not* is that non-being be a perpetual presence in us and outside of us, that nothingness haunt being.” (BN, 11) Although based on an individual experience, this description reveals a necessary condition of experience in general. That is, while non-being is only *explicitly revealed* to human beings in instances like absence, these states disclose a more general feature of any being-in-the-world.

However, if “non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation” (BN, 7), and could not exist independently of the human, isn’t it still ultimately just subjective? Sartre answers in the negative. What is important in this example is that we do not merely passively experience Being; rather we transform and modify it. And what we transform is what would otherwise be the inert and undifferentiated in-itself. For as Sartre says of being, “in order for it to parcel itself into differentiated complexes which refer to one another and can be used it is necessary that negation rise up.” (BN, 24) In other words, it is necessary that negation is imposed by human being on Being so that it can be differentiated and recognisable as a world. This answers our question regarding objectivity, for if non-being is a “limiting cutting into Being by a being” (BN, 8), then it can both be dependent on the human and a real part of the world. In other words, if this transformation which is non-being is a real change “carved into” the structure of being itself, rather than projected onto it, then we need not see it as strictly subjective.

Moreover, in concrete terms, this “modification” of being is created by the human standing in a perpetual relationship of questioning to being. As Sartre says, “in posing a question a certain negative element is introduced into the world. We see nothingness making the world iridescent, casting a shimmer over things.” (BN, 23) Put another way, it is the possibility of determining and questioning the meaning of being, through the relationship to our own possibilities and projects, that brings this transforming nothingness into the world. And this is a process Sartre calls “nihilation.” In order to effectuate this relation of implicit possibility and questioning, the human being enacts a break in being whereby it is not bound to any definite meaning in being. Or, as Sartre says, “insofar as the questioner must be able to effect in relation to the questioned a kind of
nihilating withdrawal, he is not subject to the causal order of the world; he detaches himself from Being." (*Ibid.*

Further, human being can accomplish this break or nihilation only on another condition. As Sartre explains, “human reality can detach itself from the world- in questioning...only if by nature it has the possibility of self-detachment.” (BN, 25) By this, Sartre means that in order to modify being through this break, the human must be a flight from anything which gives it substantial being itself. It is only through this movement away from its past self that the for-itself realizes itself as possibility, and hence as capable of bringing meaningful indeterminacy to things. Accordingly, we can say that the transformation of being which is the nihilation of world then is our flight from past self. And the flight from self which we are is the modification of being. It is this process therefore which allows us to see how the human being is this modifying relation brought to being. It is, in short, as Sartre says, “the rise of man in the midst of the being which ‘invests’ him (which) causes a world to be discovered.” (BN, 24) Even though this is concealed by the notion of world as independent of us, the world, in any meaningful sense, is constituted and discovered by human projects, questioning and possibilities, and by our own specific transformative relation to it.

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