

Sartre's "Nausea" as a literary reflection of existential philosophical structures

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Sartre's novel *Nausea* is often interpreted as a portrayal of anti-humanism. However, this contradicts his *Existentialism is a Humanism*, in which Sartre clearly identifies himself as a proponent of humanistic philosophy. Some interpreters regard this contradiction as a revision of Sartre's philosophy. The young Sartre was anti-humanist during his wild phase, while the older Sartre, now calm and wise, had transformed himself into a humanist.

The aim of this essay is to prove that this interpretation is incorrect. *Nausea* is not an expression of anti-humanism, but, correctly interpreted, is a literary reflection of existential philosophical structures and, in this respect, a representation of Sartre's humanism. It should be assumed that Sartre's humanism is simply another word for his existentialist philosophy, expanded to include a few moral principles.

Sartre defines the word "humanism" in such a way that it corresponds both with existentialist axioms and with his moral principles. It must be borne in mind that Sartre's moral principles cannot be derived from existentialist axioms, but are additional, in some cases pre-theoretical, moral determinations.

It should also be noted that the relationship between existentialist axioms and moral principles is ambivalent. Let us take an existentialist axiom: "Man is condemned to freedom." In other words, he is condemned to choose. He must define himself; he must invent his morality in abandonment, and he is responsible for this choice.

Sartre, too, must choose, and he chooses, for example, the revolutionary principle of Marxism as a guiding principle for his actions. This *concrete choice* is not forced; otherwise, it would not be a choice; nor does it contradict existentialist axiomatics, as is sometimes claimed. For these axiomatics require a choice, but the concrete form of this choice is entrusted to human freedom

. In this sense, there is no contradiction between existentialism and the aforementioned moral principle of Marxism.

As just indicated, Sartre's pre-theoretical moral determinations include the categorical imperative of Marxism:

Karl Marx reinterprets the categorical imperative from an individual maxim for action to a revolutionary principle.[27] For him, the critique of religion ends "with the doctrine that man is the highest being for man, that is, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, abandoned, despicable being".[28] He supplements this negative formulation with the positive demand to advocate for conditions "in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all".[29] (Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, quoted from Wikipedia, keyword: categorical imperative)

According to Marx's teachings, Sartre's guiding principle is to overturn all conditions in which human beings are degraded, enslaved, abandoned, and despised. In this respect, Marx and Sartre agree; they reject anti-human conditions in which people are oppressed. In this sense, both Marx and Sartre are humanists.

The difference between them lies in their diagnosis of the cause of these anti-human conditions: Marx sees this cause one-sidedly in his economic theory of class struggle. Sartre confirms the fundamental importance of the lack of goods and the associated threat of death to the human organism, but he takes the concept of alienation further than Marxist economism and relates it to human existence itself.

The problem of human existence is not only rooted in working life, but also, for example, in early childhood constitution. The Marxist reference to economics is correct insofar as economics is important for the distribution of goods. However, Marxist economism is incorrect because it marginalises more far-reaching existential problems. For this reason, the Marxist concept of alienation is different from the existentialist concept of alienation.

For Sartre, the cause of alienation lies in the difference between selfhood and otherness. The mere fact that the other exists, be it another person or matter as the other of consciousness, implies alienation.

Alienation thus arises from the interaction between selfhood and otherness, and it lies primarily in the fact that otherness often does not conform seamlessly to the intentions of selfhood. This existentialist alienation is unavoidable in the context of human reality. It is not just my intention that matters, but

the intentions of others, and it is no wonder that this multitude of intentions leads to conflict. It is naive of Marxism to assume that the mere elimination of capitalism could change anything about this fundamental problem of humanity. In this sense, Sartre writes:

History will always be alienated: there may be happy epochs, but even if the conflict of interests is less powerful, otherness remains; our actions are still stolen from us.

However, if we imagine an utopia where everyone treats others as ends, that is, takes the endeavours of others as ends, then we can imagine a HISTORY where otherness is reabsorbed by unity, even if it always remains ontic.

But no state, as a mediator between individuals, can realise this situation, since the state cannot treat individuals as free beings. What is needed is a moral determination on the part of the person to treat other persons as ends; the transition from pseudo-HISTORY to true history is therefore subject to this ahistorical determination on the part of all to realise morality. Historical revolution depends on moral conversion. (Sartre, Drafts for a Moral Philosophy)

In short: one must start with people. Without a moral conversion of people, a historical revolution is doomed to failure. The state or other formal structures cannot treat people as free beings. In this respect, the realm of freedom cannot lie in the state, as Hegel believes, nor in economic structures, as Marx and Engels assume. Rather, it is the relationship between people that must bring success.

This insight by Sartre reveals the connection between his existentialism and his "Marxism". The word "Marxism" is placed in quotation marks here as a precaution, because there are major differences between orthodox Marxism and Sartre's views.

If the relationship between people is sound, then ahistorical conversion may be possible. The word "ahistorical" here means that moral conversion cannot be reabsorbed by history and transformed into another anti-human situation.

History would then have come to an end. Only now can we speak of "human beings" or "humanity". The problem facing humanity is therefore to transform itself from a multiplicity into a unity and in doing so to develop an existentialist humanism. However, this unity should not create uniformity, but rather, through the principle of generosity and the continued existence of otherness, bring about unity in diversity.

The crucial point is that this moral conversion must be brought about by human beings themselves. It cannot be enforced, especially not by violence. Conversion is either completely peaceful, or it does not happen at all. A violently enforced conversion would be a contradiction in terms. The contribution of individuals in each era can only consist of attempting, through small improvements, to create a situation that will later – perhaps – make general moral conversion possible. One should at least try, says Sartre.

Another point is that universal moral conversion is a *utopia*. Past and present human reality, on the other hand, is a world of inauthenticity in which the simultaneous moral conversion of all human beings is highly unlikely. A world of inauthenticity is a world in which the slogan "Hell is other people" is correct.

Sartre's *Nausea* is a literary representation of this world of inauthenticity. However, the first-person narrator, Antoine Roquentin, lives in a phase of uncertainty in which familiar ideas begin to dissolve. At the end of the work, Roquentin formulates a new life plan for himself that is consistent with Sartre's existentialist humanism.

The novel thus corresponds to the depiction of an *individual moral conversion* in progress. We experience a deeply unsettled person who is about to break camp in Bouville and start his future in Paris.

Of course, this change of location is symbolic of Roquentin's current shift in perspective.

Roquentin's situation at the end of the novel is desperate. His former lover, Anny, from whom he had hoped for some relief from his loneliness, has left with a young, handsome Egyptian, leaving him alone at the station. His only "friend", the autodidact, has turned out to be a child molester. Roquentin is about to leave Bouville and move to Paris. But what will he do there? He has enough money to live on and can support himself if he is frugal. But what will he do in Paris, lonely and disoriented as he is?

Inspired by a piece of music that accompanies him throughout the novel and which he likes, he decides to create something that another person might like:

I leave, with a vague feeling inside me. I don't dare make a decision. If I knew I had talent... but I've never written anything like that – historical essays, certainly, and the like. A book. A novel. And people would read this novel and say, "It was written by Antoine Roquentin, a redhead who hung around in cafés." And they would think of my life as I think of the black woman's: as something precious, half legendary. A book. At first it would be a tedious, exhausting task, it would not prevent me from existing and feeling that I

exist. But then the moment would come when the book would be finished, behind me – and I believe a little of its clarity would fall on my past. Perhaps then, through this book, I could remember my life without aversion. Perhaps one day – when I think of this hour, this gloomy hour, when I stand with my back arched, waiting to board the train – perhaps then I would feel my heart beating faster and say to myself: "On this day, at this hour, it all began." And perhaps I would succeed – in the past, only in the past – in accepting myself. (Sartre, Nausea)

Roquentin has taken stock and can only think of his own life with reluctance. His self-esteem has reached rock bottom. But he finds new courage by daring to write a novel that might bring joy to someone else, just as he enjoyed this piece of music, whose composer and singer he now thinks of with affection. He, the lonely, self-centred and introverted man, is moved by a small piece of art to think lovingly of other people. Wouldn't it be nice if he could create something like that too?

In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre explains his existentialist humanism:

There is no other universe than a human one, the universe of human subjectivity. This connection between the transcendence that constitutes human beings ... and subjectivity, in the sense that human beings are not enclosed within themselves but are always present in their human universe, is what we call existentialist humanism. Humanism, because we remind humans that there is no other legislator than themselves and that they decide for themselves in their abandonment; and because we show that humans realise themselves as humans not by turning in on themselves, but by constantly seeking a goal outside themselves – such as this liberation or that concrete achievement. (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism)

The following characteristics of this type of humanism can be distinguished:

- The universe is a human universe
- It is the universe of human subjectivity
- Human beings are not enclosed within themselves, but are always present in their human universe
- There is no lawgiver other than man
- They decide for themselves in isolation
- Human beings realise themselves as human beings through the constant search for a goal outside themselves

These are the characteristics of existentialist humanism. Each individual component requires explanation and deserves its own essay. It is impossible to address all points in detail in this essay. Let us take the last point as an example:

- Man realises himself as a human being through the constant search for a goal outside himself.

What is Sartre trying to tell us? Sartre is, to a certain extent, a follower of Husserl's phenomenology. In particular, he supports Husserl's concept of *intentionality*. According to this concept, consciousness is always consciousness of something. There is always an object that consciousness bears witness to, and there is the witness of this object, namely consciousness.

However, Sartre differs from Husserl in his view of the *source* of consciousness. Husserl defines the *ego* as the source of consciousness and calls this ego the *transcendental ego*. According to Husserl, it is the condition of the possibility of consciousness.

In his book *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre assumes that this ego is a fiction and instead works with an ego as a transcendent construction of human consciousness. Sartre attributes selfhood to consciousness, but this selfhood is not an ego. It is merely a fundamental intuition that this is *my* experience of the world, so that one can say "I", but this "I" only refers to the subjectivity of the experience of the world. In this context, Sartre also speaks of "pre-reflective consciousness".

According to this view, the ego is not the source of consciousness, but rather the transcendent product of consciousness. Consciousness itself is merely a space of freedom in which the experience of the world takes place.

Humans therefore construct their own ego over the course of their lives. Sartre calls this process "personalisation". Humans develop a theory of their own selfhood, so to speak, by attributing certain characteristics to it: I am a humanist, I am a Christian, I am a communist, I am brave, I am cowardly, I am stupid, I hate my father, and so on. One then understands oneself as a thing that has certain characteristics. In this way, pre-reflective consciousness becomes reflective consciousness. The immediate and intuitive experience of the world becomes a conceptualised representation of this world and thus also a conceptual fixation of one's own existence.

In Sartre's view, such ego constructions may be insincere. For according to existentialist axioms, human beings are only one thing: freedom. Existence precedes essence. They are beings whose being is concerned with their being. They are a questioning of themselves. In short, they are a *lack of identity*. As soon as they make themselves into a fixed, unchanging substance, they alienate themselves from their true nature: freedom.

This is not to say anything against ego constructions. They are necessary for human beings to exist in the world. One should only remember that these ego constructions are the result of a choice, the result of one's own freedom. Sartre's criticism is therefore directed less against ego constructions themselves than against the spirit of seriousness that denies the underlying freedom.

The ego construct becomes insincere when it is interpreted as a given of the world: I am a Christian because God wants me to be a Christian. I am a communist because dialectical materialism leaves me no other choice. I am a humanist because one *must* love people. I will be an immortal writer because that is my destiny (Sartre). Providence has destined me to be the saviour of Germany (Hitler).

Such insincere ego constructs can develop into manifest neurosis and impair a person's life. For example, it is known that a fireman himself started a fire so that he could then extinguish it. His goal was to confirm his ego construct of a heroic fireman. There is also a known case of a nurse who provoked heart attacks in patients so that he could then act as a saviour in an emergency.

Sartre himself fell victim to such a neurotic ego construct. He saw himself as a writer whose goal was his own immortality as an artist. He did not see this as an expression of his freedom, which would have immediately relativised his own immortality, but as an obligation imposed by fate. This quest to be God ultimately led to his breakdown. He continued to write; what else could he do?

Existentialist humanism says that an action should not serve the purpose of working on one's own inflated ego but rather turning towards the true destiny of human beings: namely, working in the spirit of *generosity* to enlighten existence. As Sartre writes:

[...] that man realises himself humanly not by turning in on himself, but by constantly seeking a goal outside himself – such as this liberation or that concrete achievement.

Existentialist axioms suggest that a person's closed-mindedness towards the world tends to favour neurotic lifestyles. Roquentin obviously suffers from such a neurotic lifestyle. He is lonely and he is fine with that:

But I live alone, completely alone. I talk to no one, never; I get nothing, I give nothing. The autodidact doesn't count. There is Françoise, the landlady of the Rendezvous des Cheminots. But do I talk to her? Sometimes, after dinner, when she brings me a beer, I ask her, "Are you free tonight?" She never says no, and I follow her into one of the large rooms on the first floor,

which she rents out by the hour or by the day. I don't pay her: we both benefit from it. She enjoys it (she needs a man every day, and she has many others besides me), and I get rid of a certain melancholy whose cause I know only too well. But we hardly exchange a few words. Why should we? Each to their own; in her eyes, I remain first and foremost a customer of her café. (Sartre, Jean-Paul. Nausea (p. 17). Rowohlt E-Book. Kindle version.)

Roquentin has obviously closed himself off. He does not open up to other people; with the result that other people also close themselves off to him:

I get nothing, I give nothing.

So, he lives and works for himself. The purpose of his actions is his own ego, locked away in his inner world. This is Roquentin's situation at the beginning of the novel. The novel now shows the slow dissolution of this state of inauthenticity. At the end of the novel, Roquentin devises a new plan for his life.

He now sees himself in relation to two other people. The composer of the song, which he obviously likes so much that he begins to take an interest in this person. The assertion "I get nothing" proves to be false. He enjoys a song that was composed by another person and sung by a black woman in such a way that it touches his heart.

Roquentin develops a plan to also create something that could bring joy to *another* person. A composition is out of the question; he has no talent for that. But perhaps he could write a novel. And he likes the idea that an imaginary reader might enjoy it and take an interest in him.

Roquentin imagines that he gives something and receives something in return. This is an illustration of what Sartre calls "generosity." Roquentin is on the path to moral conversion. He begins to view others as the purpose of his actions and to include their purposes in his considerations. Roquentin works towards the unification of otherness.

At the heart of existentialist humanism is the concept of action. Action is always world related. The goal of action should be to illuminate being, but not one's own ego. When I write a novel, the goal should not be my immortality as an artist, but my desire to illuminate the world and allow other people to participate in this illumination.

It is like saving a child from drowning. I save the child for the purpose of saving the child, but not to be a good person. Similarly, I write a novel to illuminate the world, but not to be a good writer. I am happy when other people say I am a good writer, but that should not be the purpose of my work. I give the novel to the reader as a gift, and the reader decides how to respond to it.

A counterpoint to Roquentin is the autodidact. He claims to be a humanist and expresses himself accordingly. In reality, however, he is a loner, like Roquentin, but with the additional flaw of being ridiculous. This combination of a ridiculous loner who claims to be a humanist arouses Roquentin's aversion, not so much because of the autodidact's statements about his supposed humanism, but rather because of the contrast between the existence of a ridiculous loner and his feigned heroic humanism.

The autodidact's humanism is an insincere ego construct. He says he is a humanist because one *must* love people, and in doing so he assumes that it is the outside world that dictates this imperative. Roquentin, on the other hand, sees no need to love people, nor to hate them.

The insincerity of the autodidact can be recognised by the fact that his theoretical humanism has nothing to do with his practical life. He is a loner like Roquentin and, moreover, ridiculous. No one pays any attention to him, and he spends his life in the library with the aim of studying all the books available there in alphabetical order. How can such a ridiculous figure claim that one must love people?

Roquentin clearly senses that the autodidact is a person of his own kind, a declassed individual, and that his love of humanity is a construct gleaned from books. In view of the autodidact's insincerity, he is once again overcome by a feeling of disgust that accompanies him throughout the novel. It is an intuition of futility and lack of justification. Roquentin wonders what the source of this intuition could be.

The autodidact's humanism makes no sense because it is merely conceited and has no practical consequences. Roquentin also realises that the different types of humanism he has encountered in the course of his life all suffer from the fact that their practical consequences and theoretical claims are far apart.

What is the philosophical significance of the disgust that is repeatedly mentioned in the novel? According to Sartre's phenomenological ontology, human reality is characterised by three modes of being:

- Being-in-itself
- Being-for-itself
- Being-for-others

The thing-in-itself is existence independent of human beings, the basis of reality. The thing-for-itself is consciousness. As a witness to existence, it attests to the thing-in-itself. Existence-for-others corresponds to the otherness between selfhood and the other.

It is difficult to talk about the in-itself. For language is bound to consciousness, and the in-itself is independent of consciousness. Consequently, the linguistic representation of the in-itself must be problematic. In this sense, the novel

Disgust is also a literary reflection of linguistic-philosophical problems. What does language actually refer to? Is it capable of reflecting the world in itself?

The connection between the for-itself and the in-itself is deeper than language can reach. Although the in-itself is independent of the for-itself, the for-itself is not independent of the in-itself. The for-itself *is* the in-itself, but in such a way that it is not this in-itself. The for-itself testifies to the in-itself in such a way that it testifies to itself as not being this in-itself.

The for-itself is an *internal negation* of the in-itself. It is this in-itself in the mode of deficiency. This deficiency is primarily not a deficiency of knowledge, but a deficiency of being. This is the source of the insufficiency of language. Language serves to conceptualise being, however, the original relationship between human beings and being is intuition.

The problem can be clarified using the concept of identity. The principle of being-in-itself is identity. It is what it is. A is A. The principle of being-for-itself is the lack of identity. It is what it is not, and it is not what it is. This paradoxical formulation highlights the problems of language. If one wants to express the essence of identity, one must recognise that the use of language presupposes identity. For every single word must have an identity if it is not to dissolve into nothingness. Identity is therefore fundamental to language, so it is not surprising that language cannot grasp identity.

The for-itself is thus a *relationship of being* to the in-itself. Without the in-itself, the for-itself would be pure nothingness. In this sense, Sartre also speaks of the pure loneliness of the in-itself. The for-itself is a *decompression* of the in-itself; it is an illumination of being, but it is not being itself. It is a clearing of being through the nullification of being.

If one tries to grasp the being of the for-itself, one is referred to the being of the world. The being of consciousness is nothing other than the being of things. One cannot point to the for-itself and say, "Look, here is the for-itself," because the for-itself is only the illumination of being. It is being insofar as it has been illuminated. The for-itself is an individual adventure of the in-itself. It is the attempt of the in-itself to be a witness to itself by distancing itself from itself.

This is the source of the dominance of things in the novel *Nausea*. Through his experience of things, Roquentin experiences himself; for he is nothing other than his experience of things.

Over time, Roquentin develops an intuition for the pure loneliness of being and, at the same time, an intuition for the meaninglessness and unjustifiability of being. The intuition of being leads to an emotional reaction in him because he cannot cope with it rationally. It manifests itself as disgust with being and thus also as disgust with himself.

The crux of Sartre's argument is that being-in-itself is completely meaningless and without justification. Being-in-itself *is*, that's all that can be said. It is this fundamental contingency of being that Roquentin develops increasingly and which makes him recognise the insincerity of people who feel justified in their existence on the basis of an assumed relationship to being. For Sartre, this legitimisation of the illegitimate is a form of inauthenticity.

For from the standpoint of being, nothing is justified. Consequently, every kind of legitimisation is an invention of human freedom. The contingency of being is thus transferred to the contingency of every kind of justification.

Take, for example, the justification of political power relations. In the Middle Ages, the dignity of rulers was justified by the "divine right of kings". In an encyclopaedia, one finds the following:

*Divine right is understood to mean the divine establishment of sovereignty over subjects. Its roots lie on the one hand in the late Roman Christian empire and on the other in the pagan-magical concepts of rule of the Germanic peoples, such as blood charisma and royal salvation. The divine right of kings was fully developed with the adoption of the anointing of rulers by the Carolingians (Pippin the Younger, 751), the idea of the emperor crowned by God (Charlemagne 800) and the inclusion of the formula *dei gratia* ("by the grace of God") in the title of the ruler, which remained customary in many monarchies until their end. ([Divine right of kings – Historical Lexicon \(historisches-lexikon.li\)](http://www.historisches-lexikon.li))*

The ruler is justified here by the grace of God. For the atheist, this is of course a pretext, a feigned justification. In Sartre's philosophy, there is no God, only contingent being. Consequently, the justification of political power is also a mere invention of human freedom.

The bourgeois, however, acts as if the legitimacy of his power were anchored in being. Either he resorts to religion for justification, or he invents a new kind of justification: economic performance. He invents performance humanism.

In the chapter "A Sunday in Bouville," Sartre describes the performance humanism of the bourgeoisie by depicting the sharp distinction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but also the finer social hierarchies within the bourgeoisie. The whole of social life revolves around distinctions and classifications, around top and bottom:

A few months later, the wife of the mayor of Bouville had a vision: Saint Cecilia, her patron saint, addressed a warning to her. Was it still tolerable for the city's elite to attend mass every Sunday alongside the small shopkeepers in the churches of Saint-René and Saint-Claudien? Thanks to divine protection, Bouville now enjoyed an excellent

position in economic life – was it not right to build a church in praise of the Lord? (Sartre, Nausea)

No sooner said than done. The church was built. To do so, however, an entire district had to be cleared and rebuilt, to the detriment of the underdogs:

The wide but dirty and disreputable Rue Tournebride had to be completely renovated and its residents ruthlessly displaced behind Place Sainte-Cécile: thus, "le petit Prado" has become the meeting place of the elegant world and the city's dignitaries, especially on Sundays. One after another, beautiful shops have opened on this elite passage. They remain open on Easter Monday, throughout Christmas and every Sunday until noon. (Sartre, Nausea)

The divine right of kings of the Middle Ages is still effective as a pretext for power and privilege, although behind this fading fog, bourgeois meritocracy is already becoming visible. Rue Tournebride had to be completely rebuilt for the construction of the new church, and thus the elite neighbourhood was created, where business was conducted on Easter Monday, throughout Christmas and every Sunday. All in honour of Saint Cecilia.

This essay has presented several types of humanism:

- The insincere humanism of the autodidact
- The meritocratic humanism of the bourgeoisie
- The existentialist humanism of Sartre

The insincere humanism of the self-taught individual is to be rejected because it has nothing to do with the practical life of the self-taught individual. It is a theoretical construct based on reading, with no practical relevance. The meritocracy of the bourgeoisie is to be rejected because it draws a sharp line between groups of people: the elite and the economically disadvantaged.

Sartre's existentialist humanism, on the other hand, advocates a humanism of universal emancipation of humanity, in which two components must be distinguished: the struggle against the lack of goods and the pursuit of a universal moral conversion from inauthenticity to authenticity. In this sense, Sartre's *Nausea* is a literary reflection of existential philosophical structures and a representation of Sartre's humanism. The negative statements about humanism refer to deficient variants. It is therefore wrong to conclude that Sartre was anti-humanist.

To be continued.

