

The Relationship between Man and Being in Heidegger and Sartre

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The subject of this series of essays is the concept of humanism in Heidegger and Sartre. In his 'Letter on Humanism', Heidegger makes several accusations against Sartre. Here are some of these objections:

- Sartre had wrongly classified Heidegger as an existentialist.
- Sartre interprets the word 'existence' in the scholastic sense as 'reality' and thus misses the meaning of the word 'Ek-sistence'. Sartre has thereby misunderstood him (Heidegger).
- With his existentialism, Sartre fails to grasp the historical dimension of Marxism and is therefore unable to engage in a fruitful dialogue with Marxism and Heidegger's philosophy of existence.
- Sartre advocates a humanism based on the concept of the autonomous subject and thus fails to recognise the dignity of the human being as the shepherd of being.

In the previous essay, it was shown that the accusation that Sartre interprets the word 'existence' in the scholastic sense as reality is unfounded. The truth is that Sartre uses 'existence' in the sense of 'subjectivity', whereby it is crucial that one cannot transcend this subjectivity.

In other words: regardless of whether human beings are determined or not, they cannot prevent being condemned to freedom. The reason for this is the dialectic of knowledge and non-knowledge that underlies human existence, such that human beings are compelled to make their choices on the basis of only partial knowledge, which is interspersed with non-knowledge.

A typical example is the situation faced by Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer during the Peasants' Wars. They had to choose whether to support the peasants or the princes. Luther chose the princes, Müntzer the peasants. It was a free choice because the respective state of limbo between knowledge and ignorance condemned both of them to choose without a sufficient basis of knowledge.

Such a sufficient basis of knowledge would be tantamount to an 'objective eye of the world', that is, a divine consciousness capable of discerning the meaning of history and predicting the consequences of one's own actions with certainty. But both Luther and Müntzer were human beings, not gods, and so the 'conditio humana' applies to them too, which states that existence precedes essence. 'Existence precedes essence' is synonymous with the statement that one is 'condemned to freedom'. In other words: one cannot 'transcend subjectivity'.

Human nature is then realised as a consequence of the actions for which one must take responsibility. The concept of responsibility is thus closely linked to the dialectic of knowledge and non-knowledge.

All this has nothing to do with the scholastic concept of reality. Heidegger's criticism is therefore unjustified. By the word 'existence', Sartre does not refer to the reality of the human being, but to a specific aspect of the 'conditio humana', namely the fact that one cannot transcend subjectivity.

One can gain a clearer understanding of the nature and structure of the 'conditio humana' by, for example, reflecting on the Oedipus myth. Oedipus operates on the level of human reality and, on this level, is condemned to freedom like all human beings. He must make a choice, and in doing so he acts as a human being.

According to the myth, however, there is a second level: that of the Fates. The Fates pull the strings in the background, so that – viewed from this level – Oedipus's free action appears to be an illusion. In the end, the outcome of Oedipus's actions is determined by fate. The myth reveals the limits of human knowledge and the dialectic of knowing and not knowing.

How does Sartre's existentialism relate to the structure of this myth? In 'On Humanism', Heidegger quotes or paraphrases Sartre as follows:

...strictly speaking, we find ourselves on a level where, in principle, there are only human beings. (Heidegger, On Humanism, p. 25; translation from the French: Alfred Dandyk)

In other words: Sartre's existentialism assumes that one is situated on a plane where there are only humans as agents of action. From a practical perspective, this is the only relevant plane. However, the myth states that there is also the plane of the goddesses and that this is ultimately decisive for the outcome. Is there a contradiction here between the myth and Sartre's existentialism?

For the existentialist, the realm of fate is irrelevant because it does not alter human practice, insofar as this concerns the actions of the actors. Oedipus knows nothing of the realm of the goddesses and acts as if he were free. He is even condemned to freedom, whether he likes it or not. That is to say, whilst the goddesses may determine the *outcome* of the actions, they cannot alter the fact that Oedipus is condemned to freedom in terms of his activities. They cannot change the fact that Oedipus must choose.

If the goddesses are indeed pulling the strings on another level, this does not alter the structure of Oedipus's actions. The negative outcome does not change the fact that he is the actor. On his own level, he is a human being with a sense of freedom; on the level of fate, he is a puppet on the strings of the goddesses.

The success of a free act is therefore irrelevant to the freedom of that act. There are many reasons why it might fail. It may be down to fate, to God, to the laws of nature, to

social conditions, to the unconscious, to one's own inadequacy, and so on and so forth. The act itself, the choice, remains unaffected by these factors.

Raskolnikov had the choice to murder the moneylender or not to murder her. His aim was to do good with the stolen money, for example to provide his sister with a better life. Instead, tormented by pangs of conscience, he turned himself in to the public prosecutor. It is clear that the success of the action is irrelevant to the structure of the action.

Sartre, too, on the basis of historical materialism, assumes that matter worked upon by humans can exert an effect that does not correspond to the intentions behind the actions. One example is the millennia-long deforestation of the forests in China, resulting in recurring floods. Sartre refers to this effect as 'antidialectics'. The relationship between dialectic and anti-dialectic mirrors the relationship between knowledge and non-knowledge. Failure, therefore, is as much a part of the structure of the plot as success, and does not contradict it. In this respect, the Oedipus myth is compatible with Sartre's existentialism.

What is important in these considerations is the realisation that the apparent contradiction between the human level and the level of fate arises solely from viewing the matter from the standpoint of an omniscient narrator. For Sartre, however, this is an inadmissible level of understanding.

The omniscient narrator is not a human being, but evidently a superhuman entity. As soon as one removes the superhuman narrator, only the human level remains and that of the Fates disappears. This leads to the important insight that human reality should, for all practical purposes, be judged solely from the human perspective. This is precisely what Sartre means when he states that one cannot transcend subjectivity.

Heidegger now distances himself from Sartre by rephrasing the above sentence in his own terms:

...strictly speaking, we find ourselves on a level where, in principle, there is only Being. (Heidegger, On Humanism, p. 25; translation from the French: Alfred Dandyk)

Heidegger thus sees the emphasis placed on the terms 'human' and 'Being' as the decisive difference between his 'Ek-sistence' and Sartre's 'existence'. Heidegger emphasises that, for him, 'the plane' and 'Being' are one and the same. In contrast, he seems to view Sartre as a proponent of the theory of the 'autonomous subject'. Is this distinction understandable?

The crux of the matter is, of course, the relationship between man and Being. How should this relationship be assessed? The two fundamental concepts of Heidegger's philosophy, man and Being, are evidently linked in a close partnership. One might even speak of a loving relationship. There are a number of formulations in Heidegger's work that aptly express this partnership:

- Man is a shepherd of Being
- Language is the house of Being
- Thinking and Being are one and the same

The partnership between man and Being is reflected in the words 'guard', 'language' and 'thinking'. Despite this close partnership, one must assume, in Heidegger's philosophy, a clear dominance of Being. Man's destiny is a fate of Being, and man's task lies in the 'resolve' to open oneself to the renewed claim of Being. To put it in military terms: Being commands, man obeys. Otherwise, man fails in his mission.

In other words: Being thinks and speaks, and authentic human thinking consists in perceiving the language of Being as 'the illuminating-concealing revelation of Being'. Heidegger believes he can discern a particularly successful realisation of this language of Being in Hölderlin's poetry.

Undoubtedly, one cannot simply transfer Heidegger's ideas to Sartre. In this respect, Heidegger's distancing is understandable from the outset. Nevertheless, one should not neglect the affinities.

How is the relationship between Being and man to be understood in Sartre? Sartre distinguishes between 'Being-in-itself', 'Being-for-itself' and 'Being-for-others'. In this respect, one can speak of a 'decentring of Being' in Sartre. The three-dimensional structure of the concept of Being in Sartre alone suggests that it will not be easy to elucidate the relationship between man and Being in existentialism. It will be correspondingly difficult to pinpoint the affinities and differences between Heidegger and Sartre. These difficulties are compounded because Heidegger leaves the concept of being undefined from the outset, whilst Sartre employs a three-dimensional concept of being, meticulously analysing each of these dimensions of being. We are dealing with an asymmetry that makes comparison difficult.

There is, however, an important commonality between Heidegger and Sartre regarding the relationship of 'human existence'. For Heidegger, the authentic relationship is a form of intuitive care. It is expressed above all in language and art. In any case, it is not a cognitive relationship, but a relationship of being that manifests itself more in moods than in propositions. This is reflected, among other things, in Heidegger's concept of truth as 'unconcealment', which refers less to cognition than to the condition of the possibility of cognition in the sense of openness to the claim of being.

Like Heidegger, Sartre assumes a relationship of being between man and Being. For him, too, it is primarily not a cognitive relationship, but rather a direct and attuned intuition. The care with which Sartre describes this relationship of being is evident above all in the subtlety of his conceptualisations. Thus, he distinguishes between the 'phenomenon of being' and the being of the phenomenon:

The phenomenon is that which manifests itself, and Being manifests itself to everyone in some way, since we can speak of it and have a certain understanding of it. Thus, there must be a phenomenon of Being, an appearance of Being that is describable as such.

Being will be revealed to us through some means of immediate access—boredom, disgust, etc.—and ontology will be the description of the phenomenon of being as it manifests itself, that is, without mediation. (Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 14)

By definition, a phenomenon is that which manifests itself as an appearance. Being manifests itself to all human beings in some way. For example, in language, when we use the word 'is'. Human beings also have an intuition that something 'is' or 'is not' in reality. We say 'There is a tree' or 'There is no cinema here'. In this regard, Sartre, like Heidegger, assumes a close relationship between language and Being. Language therefore always has an ontic-ontological aspect.

Human access to Being via the phenomenon of Being is immediate and occurs through the human mood in relation to Being. Such moods include, for example, boredom or revulsion. Boredom goes hand in hand with a feeling of meaninglessness; in the case of revulsion, one feels repelled by Being, for example through the shock of looking at a corpse. Of course, there are also positive relationships between humans and Being. Hölderlin, for example, sees in the love of beauty and harmony a fundamental relationship to Being.

These are all examples of the human being's intuitive access to Being. A key point in Sartre's philosophy is the distinction between the phenomenon of Being and the Being of the phenomenon, that is, the concept of Being-in-itself. This distinction already indicates his departure from Heidegger: Sartre identifies aspects of Being in such a way that a concrete conception of what is meant is possible. Heidegger, by contrast, remains rather in the realm of the indeterminate.

With the concept of 'being-in-itself', which is independent of human beings and whose principle is identity, Sartre has made a metaphysical decision. He clearly defines what he understands by being independent of human beings. It is the ontological counterpart of the principle of identity. Being-in-itself is what it is. 'A is A' is the logical variant of this principle.

In doing so, Sartre has definitively settled the question of being, 'What is Being?', and places himself among the ranks of metaphysicians. He thus belongs to the group of philosophers criticised by Heidegger, since the latter strives for the destruction of metaphysics. In this sense, too, Heidegger's distancing from Sartre is understandable.

A further difference between Heidegger and Sartre lies in the meaninglessness of being-in-itself in Sartre, whereas for Heidegger, meaning is a destiny of being. Accordingly, meaning comes into being only through human beings in Sartre, whereas for Heidegger the source of meaning is being.

In this respect, one must indeed speak in a certain sense of an 'autonomous subject' in Sartre. For obviously, the creation of meaning by human beings does not rest on a claim of Being, as Heidegger asserts, but on a self-invention of the human being. Being does not speak. The human being exists in abandonment. Sartre even sees in this fact the foundation for his kind of humanism: he writes on this:

Humanism, because we remind man that there is no lawgiver other than himself and that, in his abandonment, he decides for himself;... (Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism, p. 176)

There is therefore no lawgiver other than man. In my view, this is a clear contradiction to Heidegger, for whom legislation evidently corresponds to the 'illuminating-concealing disclosure of Being'. For Heidegger, legislation is surely to be equated with the giving of meaning and thus also with the disclosure of Being.

Despite these clear contrasts between Heidegger and Sartre, one should not overlook the affinities between them. And it is precisely these affinities that make the contrasts seem somewhat blurred after all. One reason for this is the definition of the word 'existence' as the impossibility of transcending one's own subjectivity.

It has already been noted that the existence or non-existence of God is irrelevant to Sartre's concept of freedom. For even if God does exist and speaks to Abraham, it is still Abraham who must decide whether he hears the voice of God or is succumbing to an illusion. If one now substitutes the word 'God' for the word 'Being' in Heidegger, one arrives precisely at Abraham's situation. For him, however, the principle of the impossibility of transcending one's own subjectivity applies. Consequently, the person who is in the process of hearing the 'illuminating-concealing message of Being' must decide for themselves whether they wish to acknowledge this message of Being or not.

There is no other way to explain why people today exist in a state of forgetfulness of Being. Either Being has failed to provide this 'illuminating - concealing revelation', or key individuals have failed to acknowledge this revelation. Consequently, it does depend on the individual after all, and not merely on Being. Seen in this light, there is no contradiction between Heidegger and Sartre, and it is just as obvious that the words 'Existenz' and 'Existence' are more closely related than Heidegger supposed.

This is an age-old problem. From a religious perspective, there is the original relationship between man and God in Paradise, which corresponds to absolute harmony. After the Fall, the situation changed fundamentally. Harmony is broken; man is condemned to freedom, and it is up to him to choose how he wishes to deal with the broken relationship with God. Whether one has definitively resolved the question of being, as Christians have, or whether one remains open to the renewed claim of being, this changes nothing of the basic structure of the 'conditio humana': humanity is condemned to freedom; existence precedes essence; one cannot transcend subjectivity.

If one cannot transcend subjectivity, it follows that, at the level of human reality, one cannot transcend humanity. It therefore makes no sense to judge human reality from the standpoint of a superhuman, whether this superhuman is called 'God', 'fate', 'natural law' or anything else. Sartre's existentialism is thus a philosophy opposed to the 'objective world-view'. However, this standpoint also requires further explanation.

Although being-in-itself is independent of being-for-itself, being-for-itself is dependent on being-in-itself. This is a crucial point regarding the relationship between man and

Being in Sartre. Man is an ecstatic unity of his three dimensions of being; he is therefore both in-itself and for-itself. Man is a being of ambivalence. If one wishes to elucidate the relationship between man and Being in Sartre, one must examine the relationship between 'in-itself' and 'for-itself'.

Sartre defines the relationship of 'in-itself' to 'for-itself' as a metaphysical, because this relationship cannot be elucidated at the level of ontology. If one substitutes the word 'consciousness' for 'for-itself', one arrives at the statement that the relationship between Being and consciousness can only be described but not explained. It therefore remains unclear how consciousness and Being – viewed from the perspective of their genesis – are connected.

From a metaphysical perspective, Sartre's argument is as follows: the In-itself is Being independent of man. Its principle is identity. The In-itself is what it is. A is A. In this realm of Being, there are no differences. The 'in-itself' is darkness. The 'for-itself' is a clearing of the 'in-itself' through the negation of the 'in-itself'. This inexplicable act corresponds to the 'in-itself's' attempt to transform its unfounded existence into a self-founded existence. The aforementioned ontological act leads from the darkness of the 'in-itself' to the illumination of the 'in-itself'.

It should be noted that this is an ontological act of being-in-itself, which cannot be explained. As a result of this ontological act, a precarious realm of being emerges, known as 'for-itself', which corresponds to a mixture of being and non-being. The principle of this realm is identity in difference. There are so-called 'negativities' here, for example differences. Human beings, as inhabitants of this realm, correspond to a dialectic of 'for-itself' and 'in-itself', which Sartre examines meticulously in his 'Existential Psychoanalysis'.

As 'for-itself', the human being is a lack of being; more precisely, a lack of being-in-itself or a lack of identity. The basic structure of the 'for-itself' is temporality— —that is, the ecstatic unity of the three temporal dimensions. As a lack of identity, the human being is a striving for identity. The means of this striving is the future project of the self. Through this project, human beings strive to be what they are, whilst the starting point of the project consists in not being what one is and in being what one is not. The personalisation of human beings consists in the construction of an identity-forming ego by means of so-called 'complicit reflection'.

The actual goal of personalisation is the self-justification of the human being in the sense of a 'causa sui'. The self-justification of the human being is evidently a parallel action to the self-justification of being-in-itself. The human being is therefore the striving 'to be God', the word 'God' understood in the sense of 'causa sui'.

This striving is inevitable and unfulfillable. The actual problem of human existence lies in this ambivalence: the striving for 'being-in-and-for-itself' is inevitable and unfulfillable. The task of the authentic human being is to find a 'modus vivendi' that makes this ambivalence livable.

Clearly, Sartre's approach to clarifying the relationship between man and being is multifaceted and intricate. It contains a series of breaks that are difficult to reconcile. It should be borne in mind that the third dimension of being, 'being-for-others', has not yet been discussed at all in this essay.

The complexity of the relationship to being in Sartre's work can be demonstrated, for example, by his egology. In opposition to Husserl, Sartre rejects the concept of the 'transcendental ego' as the source of consciousness. For him, consciousness is rather an egoless transcendental field. The process of personalisation involves constructing a 'transcendent ego' through 'complicit reflection'. In this way, the individual attempts to make their ego an accomplice of the external world. However, this 'transcendent ego' can be deconstructed at any time by means of the freedom of the 'transcendental field', thereby giving rise to a new perspective. Herein lies the efficacy of freedom.

The construction of the 'transcendent ego' can take place in two distinct modes: the mode of insincerity or the mode of authenticity. In the mode of insincerity, the external world is regarded as the source of the ego; hence the term 'complicit reflection'. This is the 'spirit of earnestness'. In it, freedom is denied. In the mode of authenticity, the individual recognises freedom as the source of their self-creation. 'Complicit reflection' then gives way to 'pure reflection', in which freedom comes to the fore and complicity recedes into the background.

Sartre's "existentialist humanism" has the authentic human being as its goal. This humanism culminates in Sartre's concept of "authentic freedom". The authentic human being therefore avoids the 'spirit of seriousness' and seeks to realise the spirit of freedom. This is intended above all to lead to actions whose aim is less to inflate one's own ego, but rather to work in solidarity with others towards the *illumination of being*:

*There is no universe other than a human one, the universe of human subjectivity. This connection between the transcendence that defines human beings – not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense of going beyond – and subjectivity, in the sense that the human being is not enclosed within themselves but is always present within a human universe: this is what we call existentialist humanism...that human beings realise themselves as human beings not by turning in on themselves, but through the constant search for a goal outside themselves – such as this liberation or that concrete achievement.
(Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism, pp. 175–176)*

This text shows that the term 'existentialist humanism' can easily be misunderstood. It links human subjectivity with human transcendence. However, the word 'transcendence' is not meant to imply that it is possible for a human being to transform themselves into a superhuman, for example, to become God or a machine. Nor is the word 'transcendence' meant to imply that there is an agent other than the human being. For it has already been established that one cannot transcend subjectivity in this sense.

Transcendence is rather meant to signify that one should not shut oneself away within one's own subjectivity, nor concern oneself with inflating one's own ego, but rather

devote oneself to the illumination of being. Subjectivity is therefore a condition of the possibility of the illumination of being. The illumination of Being can only take place on the basis of the choice of a perspective. This is the relationship between man and Being in Sartre. One recognises that in Sartre too – as in Heidegger – it is a matter of adopting an attitude of caring intuition towards Being.

The aim of this essay was to highlight the affinities and differences between Heidegger's and Sartre's concepts of humanism. In doing so, it became clear that this aim is difficult to pin down. There is no pithy formulation that hits the nail on the head. Instead, difficult judgements must be made, which then plunge apparent certainties back into an opaque fog. A cautious approach to each specific issue and a clear formulation of the unambiguous and undisputed aspects of the relationship between Heidegger and Sartre are recommended.

The crux of this essay is the significance attributed to the dialectic of knowledge and non-knowledge. In this context, the word 'knowledge' can be equated with 'objectivity' and the word 'non-knowledge' with 'subjectivity'. Sartre explained his position in detail during a discussion with Marxists. His lecture, followed by a discussion, has been published in a book: 'Jean-Paul Sartre, What is Subjectivity?', Turia – Kant Publishers, Vienna-Berlin'. Here is a quotation from the lecture and the discussion that may help to shed light on the question of the meaning of 'existence':

I take the clear position that the two concepts, the subject and the object, make no sense whatsoever in and of themselves. (Sartre, What is Subjectivity?, p. 84)

The forms of dialectics mentioned also shed light on Sartre's concept of reality. Is there a difference between 'objectivity' and 'reality'? The answer is clear: yes! A distinction must be made between objectivity and reality. This fact, too, sheds light on the relationship between man and being in Sartre's philosophy. This will be the subject of the next essay.

