

APPROACHING THE FISSURE IN BEING: PARMENIDES, SARTRE, PLOTINUS, AND
EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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This essay is a project aimed primarily at mapping certain philosophical and theological ontologies onto existential psychology. This psychology is strongly inspired by Sartre, and the ontologies which are investigated are those of Parmenides, Sartre himself, Plotinus, and early Christian representations of the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ as well as the persons of the Trinity. Early (primarily Eastern) Christian doctrines of deification are also treated as expressions of a similar, latent existential psychology. The nature of this psychology reflects tension between conscious and non-conscious being. Consciousness reveals that being can be other to itself: it is the “hole” in the heart of being, as Sartre calls it. I argue that Parmenides regards being as whole and unified in part because he does not or can not find a place for the gap in being which is the nothingness of consciousness. For similar reasons, both Plotinus and Sartre describe conscious being as a denigration of sorts in being. Because being is other to itself in the form of human consciousness, man is other to himself, and can never fully be what he aims to be. Sartre describes this failed effort as the attempt to become “self-caused.” It is suggested that Sartre’s description of non-conscious being as well as Plotinus’ description of the One sometimes appear internally inconsistent insofar as they suggest self-causation within non-conscious being, and I argue that this is due to the inability or refusal of either to imagine consciousness as a failed project. Similarly, I argue that the early Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the Christian church as well as some early Christian conceptions of deification (particularly Eastern conceptions) can be seen as representative of attempts to reconcile conscious being with non-conscious being; either in the form of the self-cause or in something approaching it.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The existence of consciousness implies that being is in some respect other to itself.

Consciousness is always directed towards an object (which can include the conscious thinker him or herself), and in order for the separation of subject and object to exist in the first place, there must be some form of division in being. There could not be a distancing of being from being, as implicit in consciousness, if being itself did not have a property or mode that allowed for such distancing.¹

Substantial portions of the philosophies of Parmenides, Plotinus, and Sartre, and certain fundamental concepts within Christian theology (particularly in late antiquity), represent attempts to both make sense of this state of affairs and to provide some sort of teleological justification for it.

I begin, perhaps fittingly, with the pre-Socratic Parmenides, who found the existence of any kind of differentiation within being (including both plurality and change) to be paradoxical. I then fast forward several millennia to the twentieth century in the figure of Jean-Paul Sartre, who I utilize as a resource to explain Parmenides' puzzlement over the apparent divisibility of being. Sartre demonstrates that, in a sense, differentiation only exists insofar as consciousness exists: that is, insofar as being is other to itself in the form of the human being. (Even for Parmenides, the locus of the *illusion* that such things exist is human nature.) There are nonetheless passages within Sartre's seminal work, *Being and Nothingness* which render it ambiguous whether or not non-conscious being precedes conscious being, and thus the origin of differentiation within being remains ambiguous, as it does in Parmenides. This ambiguity is

¹ Hazel E. Barnes, translator of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, expresses this well in relating Sartre's ontology: "Somehow ... there emerged in the mass of being a power of withdrawal, a separation. Consequently, one part of being (although to say 'part' is already to have adopted the distinguishing point of view of consciousness) could relate itself to the rest of being. The separation and consequent relating are accomplished by means of this, as it were, crack or hole in being. The splitting apart is the activity we know as consciousness" (Barnes, 15). Or as Sartre himself writes, "Presence to self ... supposes that an impalpable fissure has slipped into being. If being is present to itself, it is because it is not wholly itself" (*Being and Nothingness*, 124)

evident in passages of *Being and Nothingness* in which Sartre describes conscious being as a *project* of non-conscious being. Projects only exist insofar as agents create them, and if non-conscious being does not then truly exist (since it is in fact conscious being all along), it would appear that Sartre is asserting in such passages that conscious being (paradoxically) brings itself into existence.

After the discussion of Sartre, I return to antiquity—albeit in a much later era than Parmenides—to demonstrate that similar difficulties are present in the philosophy of the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus. Plotinus could perhaps fairly be described as the thinker who first made the tension between conscious and non-conscious being explicit by his insistence that the origin of being must be unified, in the form of the One, and must therefore not possess consciousness, which is always other to itself. Nonetheless, like Sartre, he occasionally appears to attribute conscious properties to the One and thereby makes it ambiguous whether non-conscious being truly precedes conscious being. This is reinforced all the more by passages in which Plotinus suggests that the One brings itself into existence (e.g. E. VI.8.16: “He has given Himself existence”²).

I then return to a brief focus on Sartre to highlight the significance of these contradictions. What is interesting about the intimations of conscious being bringing itself into existence in both Sartre and Plotinus is their accord with Sartre’s explanation of the ideal of human existence. Sartre describes human existence as “a perpetual surpassing toward a coincidence with itself which is never given” (BN 139³): that is, no happiness or fulfillment can be total, since the self-reflexive transcendence of the human being guarantees a perpetual, fundamental feeling of separation from oneself in which one never fully *becomes* any possible happiness or fulfillment one might achieve. This unity of mind and being, Sartre believes, is logically impossible, since achieving it would result in a loss of self-reflexivity, and in such a condition there would no longer *be* a mind to experience its fulfillment. Sartre thus characterizes human striving as an impossible attempt to achieve unity with itself without losing its self-reflexivity. He sometimes describes this as the striving to become *enscausa sui*; or the cause of oneself, because in order to give oneself fulfillment as the essence of one’s being, one would already have to possess that essence, in

² “E” refers to Plotinus’ *Enneads*. See references.

³ “BN” refers to Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. See References.

which case there could be no giving of anything—in fact, there would no longer be an agent, because no self-reflexive mind can possess essence by virtue of being self-reflexive. There would then be no mind to give itself anything: thus *enscausa sui*; that which brings itself into being. The human being strives to be a mind before it is a mind, in a way that both Sartre and Plotinus' accounts of the beginning of consciousness in general sometimes seem to suggest that mind gave birth to itself. I argue that these problematic passages can therefore be interpreted as suggestive of a desire by the authors to conceive of self-given existence/essence as in fact somehow possible, thereby encouraging the perpetual human effort to be prior to itself.

Finally, I apply these insights to certain elements of early Christian theology which promote what I consider to be a model of self-caused human existence (more explicitly than either Sartre or Plotinus). The Trinitarian and Christological controversies in late antiquity reflect to some extent, as I will show, a desire to have a human model of self-caused existence in the figure of the simultaneously transcendent and immanent Christ. I reason that by way of this interpretation the Incarnation is regarded as a mystery and a miracle because it represents the seemingly impossible ideal of a self-caused existence. Finally, I describe how Christ may be seen as serving not merely as a model but as an actual transformative power in Christian theology for the human quest to achieve the self-cause. This is most evident in some forms of late ancient Christian theology that proclaim that the believer can become united in some measure with God, the fount of being, in this life or (more commonly) in the next. The preservation of some measure of personal identity of the believer apart from God even following this transformation in such theologies suggests that the goal of salvation can be interpreted as a kind of self-given essence: by becoming united with God, the human being shares in God's ability to create essence (in this case, directed at oneself) and thus escapes becoming a mere product of the divine nature without a created essence of its own.

II. PARMENIDES

Every thought is a thought of *something*. If every thought is a thought of something, no thought is of *nothing*. Thus, Parmenides infers that nothingness is illusory. All that can be thought is *being*, that is, whatever is thought of is something that exists. He writes, “That which is there to be spoken and thought of must be. For it is possible for it to be, but not possible for nothing to be. I bid you consider this” (Parmenides, fr. 6.1-3, trans. Cohen).⁴

Just as nothingness cannot exist in thought, so it cannot exist in reality apart from thought. As Parmenides expresses, “it is not possible for there to be not being” (fr. 2.3, trans. Stamatellos). Because there is thinking, there exists something. If there exists something, there cannot also exist nothing, because nothingness, in Parmenides’ view, is itself complete lack of being. Nothingness, it would appear, is not something that can be added or subtracted from being, since it is itself *nothing*. Hence Parmenides’ statement that, “...it is right for what is to be not incomplete; for it is not lacking; if it were, it would lack *everything*” (fr. 8.33-4, Cohen). If nothingness does not exist *in* being, then, Parmenides asserts, being is not “divided, since it all is alike; nor is it any more in any way, which would keep it from holding together, or any less, but it is all full of what is. There it is all continuous” (fr. 8.20-25, Cohen).

Parmenides’ logic might be reconstructed as follows. If any one thing in being is different from another in any way, this suggests that there are properties one entity has which another does not have (or even a position in space which the other does not have). To suggest that there is a multiplicity of things

⁴ It might be tempting to reply that one can think of imaginary entities which don’t exist, but this is to use an overly-narrow definition of *existence*. If something exists in the imagination, it exists at least in that respect: it exists as a mental representation. Furthermore, to say that one can think of *nothing*, as if it its own entity of some sort, is to be mistaken. It may be possible that there are moments in mental life where thinking does not happen (it probably depends on how one defines thinking). However, such moments, if they exist, cannot be characterized as thoughts of *nothing*, since such moments cannot be characterized as *thinking* at all.

or properties is to suggest that each of these things or properties does not possess the set of all properties (or again, does not fill all of space). If a thing were to possess the set of all properties and take up all space, there would of course be no room left for any other thing or property to exist, by definition. Every existing thing or property then seems to contain nothingness within it, insofar as it is not everything. Yet nothingness is not a property, and therefore it cannot be contained. This being the case, Parmenides concludes, there must not be any genuine multiplicity of things or properties in being.

One might reply that the sense in which one thing is not another thing has nothing to do with either thing *in itself*. That is, one could say that nothingness is not a *property* of either thing; it only has to do with the relationship *between* things. This is correct. Parmenides is wrong to suppose that nothingness and negation are illusory concepts simply because they cannot be thought to inhere in any single thing. Clearly, human beings are able to detect and perhaps even introduce (via perception, judgment, feeling) differences within being. Such perceptions, judgments, and feelings are derived from the human power to negate; to posit an absence of identity between things. Nothingness may not be something that can be thought of *in itself*, but it makes its presence known by any mental act which posits difference within being—and it would seem that all conscious thought does this. Parmenides is correct, however, insofar as he recognizes that conceptions of the absence of identity between things are wholly relative to human consciousness. Millennia later, Sartre would expand upon this notion with his insight that the human being is the nothingness at the heart of being which separates being from itself.

III. SARTRE (I)

Sartre's improvement upon Parmenides is that he recognizes that the human tendency to posit nothingness in being is something to be taken seriously and not merely dismissed as illusion, as if this is something that can (and should) be shaken off at will.⁵ Like Parmenides, Sartre maintains that negation and nothingness are products of human consciousness. He accepts that differentiation (and its corollaries, multiplicity and change) might exist within the universe, but he denies, like Parmenides does in his own way, that such differentiation ever takes the form of the *negative* in non-conscious being. Sartre describes non-conscious being (which he calls the "in-itself") as "full positivity. It knows no otherness; it never posits itself as *other-than-another-being*" (BN 29).⁶ Sartre's in-itself cannot "encompass negation" (ibid.) just as Parmenides argues that being cannot contain nonbeing. It is because negation and nothingness are wholly relative to human consciousness that Sartre can say that "being [as such] has no need of nothingness in order to be conceived and ... we can examine the idea of it exhaustively without finding there the least trace of nothingness" (BN 49). In both Parmenides and Sartre, therefore, there is a suggestion that differentiation is not intrinsic to being as such: it would appear that the in-itself, like Parmenides' being, is the non-conscious, self-unified origin of conscious being.

Sartre uses a number of devices to make clearer the sense in which negation and nothingness are exclusively products of human consciousness. One is his example of destruction. He writes, "A geological placation, a storm do not destroy—or at least they do not destroy *directly*; they merely modify

⁵ The extant fragments of Parmenides call such *illusion* "habit born from much experience" (fr. 7.3-4, Cohen). It is born simply of the "opinions of mortals, in which there is no true reliance" (fr. 1.29-30, Cohen).

⁶ Paul Vincent Spade goes as far as to say that, with respect to p.29 of *Being and Nothingness*: "Sartre is in effect just *listing* here the same conclusions Parmenides came to. I cannot read this passage without thinking that Sartre had Parmenides in mind" (Spade, 78).

the distribution of masses of beings. There is no *less* after the storm than before” (BN 39). Here we see that Sartre accepts ontological differentiation (“distribution of masses of beings”) but also conveys the sense in which it is only perceived as a form of *negation* (destruction) by human consciousness: “man is the only being by whom a destruction can be accomplished” (ibid.). The negative can only be cognized by a comparison between what is and what a human mind cognizes that there *could* be. He writes that “[t]his lack does not belong to the nature of the in-itself, which is all positivity. It appears in the world only with the upsurge of human reality. It is only in the human world that there can be lacks” (BN 135). As Parmenides taught, nothingness cannot be a property of a thing. However, it is through human transcendence (nothingness) that absence of identity can be posited between entities within being. It is similar with desire, expectation, regret, hope, and any other kind of judgment or attitude which posits a difference between what there is and what the human mind feels that there could or should be.⁷

Sartre describes conscious being as being for-itself, or simply the “for-itself.” As the discussion of the in-itself above makes clear, negation and nothingness are foreign to non-conscious being as such; the in-itself. They are imposed upon being by human reality. This being the case, it would appear that human reality represents a kind of transcendence of being—an ability to stand apart from being: “Being can generate only being and if man is inclosed [sic] in this process of generation, only being will come out of him. If we are to assume that man is able to question this process—*i.e.*, to make it the object of an interrogation—he must be able to hold it up to view as a totality. He must be able to put himself *outside of* being and by the same stroke weaken the structure of the being of being” (BN 59). Man is thus not enclosed in the process of generation which is being engendering being. The for-itself is that which constantly falls away from being, it is “a being which perpetually effects in itself a break in being” (BN 126). This is the sense in which human reality introduces negation and nothingness into the world.⁸

⁷ Sartre provides a non-exhaustive list beginning with “distance,” and continuing with “absence, change, otherness, repulsion, regret, distraction, *etc.*.. There is an infinite number of realities which are not only objects of judgment, but which are experienced, opposed, feared, *etc.*, by the human being and which in their inner structure are inhabited by negation, as by a necessary condition of their existence” (BN 55).

⁸ The idea that man *creates* negation and nothingness should not be understood to suggest that man is able to choose not to do so (as Parmenides may be taken as suggesting, insofar as he holds that reason can allow man to see past differentiation so as to understand the true nature of being). It is the nature of the for-itself to enact this

One could go as far as to say that man simply *is* the questioning of being on the part of being: “Nothingness is the putting into question of being by being—that is, precisely consciousness or for-itself” (BN 126). However, this questioning, it seems, cannot be performed by *all* of being, for then all being would be for-itself, and the distinction between the for-itself and the in-itself would not exist—the in-itself cannot question itself; it simply is. Sartre nonetheless surprisingly describes the in-itself as *creating* the for-itself as an “attempt” by the in-itself to found itself as self-cause, so that is not merely contingent (in Sartre’s sense, a brute fact of existence without purpose): “the appearance of the for-itself or absolute event refers indeed to the *effort* of an in-itself to found itself; it corresponds to an *attempt* on the part of being to remove contingency from its being” (BN, 133—my emphasis). He also writes that “The for-itself is the in-itself losing itself as in-itself *in order to* found itself as consciousness” (BN, 130—my emphasis). If the in-itself has its own purposes, is it not truly for-itself, and thus a meaningless category? Furthermore, if there is only for-itself, what is creating and what is being created in these passages which describe the “in-itself” as creating the “for-itself”?

Sartre is aware of the difficulty, but he addresses it only passingly towards the very end of the book: “In order to be a project of founding itself, the in-itself would of necessity have to be originally a presence to itself—*i.e.*, it would have to be already consciousness. Ontology will therefore limit itself to declaring that *everything takes places as if* the in-itself in a project to found itself gave itself the modification of the for-itself” (BN 789-90). The level of dissimilitude in the analogy is not made clear. In what sense did the in-itself attempt something without strictly speaking *attempting* something? To add to the perplexity, he then entertains the possibility that this act of the in-itself is in fact an attempt in the presumably traditional sense: “...the task belongs to the metaphysician of deciding whether the movement is or is not a first ‘attempt’ on the part of the in-itself to found itself” (BN 790).

disruption in being. The active sense is preserved by Sartre in order to convey that man is the original site in being at which this disruption occurs: “...the being postulated can not be passive in relation to Nothingness, can not receive it; Nothingness could not *come* to this being except through another Being—which would be an infinite regress” (BN 57).

IV. PLOTINUS

A candidate for one such metaphysician might be the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus, who provides a metaphysical account of the origins of consciousness which is in many ways similar to Sartre's.⁹ Plotinus' notion of the One serves a similar function as Parmenides' being and Sartre's in-itself: it establishes a non-conscious origin of being, so that reality is not conceived as self-divided at its very origin.¹⁰ Plotinus goes as far as to assert that all differentiation, multiplicity, and change is ultimately eliminated, or at least reconciled (although he is not clear as to how), by the unifying power of the One. Thus, the One is "...the author of all that exists, and ... the multiplicity in each thing is converted into a self-sufficing existence by this presence of the One" (E. V.3.17). At times, it seems that Plotinus is suggesting that this elimination and/or reconciliation is eternal, owing to the fact that the One is omnipresent (although this is a curious kind of omnipresence, as Plotinus frequently says that the One is both nowhere and everywhere¹¹). In any case, one can sense the distaste he shares with Parmenides for the idea that nothingness, and thus division, can exist as a property in being in his theory of the One (or as

⁹ John N. Deck draws some comparisons between Plotinus and Sartre similar to the ones that I do below, although his focus lies more with the othering of being implicit within knowledge rather than within human existential projects (see Deck 1976).

¹⁰ Sartre's concept of the in-itself can be seen as a way of locating unity at the heart of being whether or not he (intentionally or otherwise) conceives of the in-itself as covertly for-itself. If the in-itself is truly non-conscious being through and through, then unity is preserved in some realm of being insofar as mind does not exist within it. The theoretical contemplation of this unity, however, is not enough to satisfy the human project to become in some way united with it. Perhaps for this reason, Sartre occasionally describes the in-itself as if it has conscious properties. If the in-itself has such properties, it nonetheless represents a concept meant to express a fundamental unity, because it is in that case really the for-itself-in-itself (the *enscausa sui*): the union of essence and existence in the form of the mind which wills its own existence. Of course, Sartre regards this as a logical impossibility, but one of the arguments of this essay is that he (perhaps unintentionally) sometimes imports this concept into his definition of the nature of the in-itself by attributing purposes (etc.) to it.

¹¹"...in the sense that it is nowhere held, it is not present: thus it is both present and not present; not present as not being circumscribed by anything; yet, as being utterly unattached, not inhibited from presence at any point" (E. V.5.9).

he sometimes calls it/him, God¹²): "...nothing can be left void ... We cannot think of something of God here and something else there, nor of all God gathered at some one spot: there is an instantaneous presence everywhere, nothing containing and nothing left void, everything therefore fully held by the divine" (E. V.5.9).

Interestingly, Plotinus considers Parmenides' notion of being, and rejects it as a *not unified enough* conception of the fundamental nature of reality. Plotinus interprets Parmenides' being as in fact descriptive of the Intellectual Principle, or Nous, which is the first hypostatic emanation of the One¹³ and represents the birth of consciousness in reality. The reason for this is that Plotinus interprets Parmenides' doctrine that "Thinking and the thought that it is are the same" (fr. 8, 34, Cohen) to mean that Parmenides considers consciousness intrinsic to the origins of the universe. Plotinus rejects this, because cognition entails multiplicity, and thus cannot be a trait of the unified One: "...a knowing principle must handle distinct items: its object must, at the moment of cognition, contain diversity ... anything capable of analyzing its content, must be a manifold"¹⁴ (E. V.3.10). The principle or entity which accomplishes the reconciliation of differentiation within the universe cannot then have a conscious foundation. In one explicit formulation (there are many), he remarks that "...anything that is to be thought of as the most utterly simplex of all cannot have self-intellection: to have that would mean being multiple. The transcendent, thus, neither knows itself nor is known in itself" (E. V.3.13).

However, like Sartre and the in-itself, he sometimes describes the One as if it does in fact possess cognition (particularly in Ennead 6.8, "On Free Will and the Will of the One"). Also like Sartre, Plotinus' occasional characterization of the One as if it has mental properties seem to indicate a desire to imagine the very existence of mind as somehow prior to itself. Although the birth of the Intellectual-Principle from the One proceeds via emanation, and thus is supposed to be unconscious to the One, Plotinus

¹² Plotinus uses the titles the One, the Good, and God more or less interchangeably. Other, less-commonly used designations are the Supreme, the Primary, and even more anthropomorphic titles like the King.

¹³ Plotinus' theory of emanation is well-covered ground. It is perhaps best described by him as follows: "All existences, as long as they retain their character, produce—about themselves, from their essence, in virtue of the power which must be in them—some necessary, outward-facing hypostasis continuously attached to them and representing in image the engendering archetypes: thus fire gives out its heat; snow is cold not merely to itself ... the offspring is always minor" (E. V.1.6).

¹⁴ See E. V.1.8 for Plotinus' discussion of Parmenides.

describes the One's giving birth to consciousness as if it is an intentional endeavor on the part of the One (similar to Sartre describing the for-itself as a "project" of the in-itself). For example, he writes that: "The Highest began as a unity but did not remain as it began; all unknown to itself, it became manifold; it grew, as it were, pregnant; desiring universal possession, it flung itself outward" (E. III.8.8). Here Plotinus says that the One gives rise to the Intellectual Principle "all unknown to itself," but a moment later says that it "desires universal possession." Whether this desire is supposed to occur after the original emanation or not is unclear, but it is nonetheless described as a desire *of* the One. If the One has mental properties, the birth of the Intellectual Principle cannot be the birth of mind. That Plotinus describes it this way, however, is indicative of a desire to explain mind as being prior to itself in a way that does not seem obviously contradictory: one entity creating another.

Plotinus in fact appears unconcerned about expressing a similar point in a straightforwardly contradictory way in other passages. In *Ennead* 6.8, he writes, "If He [the One] preeminently is because He Holds firmly, so to speak, towards Himself, looking towards Himself, so that what we must call his being is this self-looking, He must again, since the word is inevitable, make Himself" (E. VI.8.16).¹⁵ What is particularly interesting about this passage is that Plotinus describes the being of the One as subsisting through a "self-looking," which in other passages is very similar to how he describes the being of the Intellectual Principle: "...it possesses self-knowing, as a being immanent to itself ... the pure Intellectual-Principle cannot be straining after any absent good—the intention can be only towards the self" (E. V.3.6). The connection appears to be not lost on Plotinus, for in the very next paragraph he seems to indirectly say that the One and the Intellectual Principle are the same: "Knowing God and His power, then it [the Intellectual-Principle] knows itself ... here the act of vision is identical with the object ... we are driven back upon that self-seeing and self-knowing in which seeing and thing seen are

¹⁵ If that is not enough, consider that he also says that, "He has given Himself existence" (E. VI.8.16.), "God is cause of Himself" (*ibid.*), and "as He willed to be so He is" (E. VI.8.13). Plotinus evades the paradox of self-causation by arguing that "The Supreme is cause of the cause" (E. VI.8.18). Similarly, his dispensation with temporality in general when discussing the One allows him to make statements like the following: "...what He is He is from before all time, his self-making is to be understood as simultaneous with Himself" (VI.8.20). This intimation of eternal self-generation will become relevant in the discussion of late ancient Christian theology below, as well as in the conclusion of the essay.

indistinguishably one thing” (E. V.3.7). In other words, Plotinus seems to be saying almost straightforwardly that the One and the Intellectual Principle are the same thing.

What then is the meaning of describing them as two entities; as if they are different, and why does this take on the form of one *creating* the other? It is because Plotinus wants to portray the possibility that mind can be prior to itself (indeed, this is the very foundation of reality; the natural order) and must find a way to describe this in a way that does not appear to be a total contradiction. The sense in which this creative act of the One (or Intellectual Principle, for that matter) aligns with Sartre’s account of the human aspiration to be prior to itself to create its own essence is clear. As Plotinus says, “...will and essence in the Supreme must be identical ... He is wholly master of Himself and holds His very being at His will” (E. VI.8.13).¹⁶ Not coincidentally, Plotinus describes the Intellectual Principle also as master of itself: “...the Intellectual-Principle knows itself as self-depending...” (E. V.3.6). The Intellectual Principle is the freely-willed essence of the One; it is the One creating itself.

¹⁶ To be fair, Plotinus does hold that the One is *above will*, in the same manner that he holds the One to be above any category or predication one attempts to ascribe to it. Nonetheless, as with Sartre’s suggestion that things are only *as if* the in-itself strives to found its being in the for-itself, it is the sense in which we should understand the will of the One as something other than will that is not clear.

V. SARTRE (II)

These suggestions of self-causation are similar to the passages in Sartre discussed above in which Sartre appears to be suggesting that the creation of the for-itself is or was a purposeful venture on the part of the in-itself. If the in-itself is already in some form the for-itself, the creation of the for-itself on the part of the in-itself would appear no different than the creation of the in-itself on the part of the in-itself—and for that matter, the creation of the for-itself by the for-itself. Similarly, the creation of the Intellectual-Principle by the One would appear to be no different than the creation of the One by the One—and for that matter, the creation of the Intellectual-Principle by the Intellectual-Principle. Plotinus alludes to such self-creation in all three aspects, although Sartre only describes the in-itself creating the for-itself. However, this discussion shows that the identification between the in-itself and the for-itself implies that either one is creating itself, as each is in some sense the same thing. If they are the same thing, the meaning of “creation” in these passages is unclear, as is what exactly is being created.

Even if we do not make this last judgment and assume that the birth of the for-itself from the in-itself occurred via something like Plotinus’ concept of emanation (as a non-conscious process), the paradox of self-causation haunts Sartre’s ontology as much as it does Plotinus’s. This can be attributed to the difficulty, or unacceptability, of understanding reality as being self-divided at its origin in the same manner that the human being is itself self-divided. To be the for-itself is to have one’s being perpetually in question. The nothingness within (or, that is) consciousness is the felt lack of unity between subject and object: “the cogito is haunted by being” (BN 139). Consciousness implies that a being is never fully itself, and it is for this reason that Sartre suggests that the for-itself both is and is not itself (e.g. BN 116).

Note that becoming a self-cause is not equivalent to becoming the in-itself. The in-itself, though self-unified, does not have the value of consciousness’s creative power: “consciousness does not surpass

itself toward its annihilation; it does not want to lose itself in the in-itself of identity at the limit of its surpassing” (BN 140). If being cannot know itself to have value, it has no value, since value is conferred by the for-itself.¹⁷ Uncreated being is simply contingent (a brute fact), and as has been shown, the for-itself “corresponds to an attempt on the part of being to remove contingency from its being” (133). Hence, “the real is an abortive effort to attain to the dignity of the self-cause” (BN, 792), and the for-itself and in-itself appear to be in a “state of disintegration in relation to an ideal synthesis” (ibid.). That synthesis is the self-cause, or as Sartre calls it, the *enscausa sui* (or the for-itself-in-itself).

Sartre, it is to be reminded, says that it is the case that “*everything takes places as if* the in-itself in a project to found itself gave itself the modification of the for-itself” (BN 789-90), even if we are not to understand the in-itself as actually having conscious projects. Sartre recognizes that self-causation is of course “*impossible*, and the concept of it ... includes a contradiction” (BN 792). If that is so, how or why is it that being includes or gives rise to this project in the form of the human being’s perpetual attempt to be self-caused?¹⁸ It is supposed to be an unrealizable state, yet as a goal it arises out of being. Thus, being seems to be fundamentally *flawed*, and it is this conclusion that drives much of Sartre’s philosophy.

¹⁷ In this connection, see especially BN 133-147.

¹⁸ The very innateness of this project to consciousness is suggested as follows: “...if we can raise the question of the being of the for-itself articulated in the in-itself, it is because we define ourselves *a priori* by means of a pre-ontological comprehension of the *enscausa sui* [self-cause]” (BN 791-2).

VI. EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

A similar problem afflicts several theological traditions which attribute both consciousness and self-unity to God (as Plotinus appears to do himself, insofar as he identifies the One with God). This is and always has been characterized by ambivalence, because any form of division in the fount of reality (as suggested by divine consciousness) remains problematic, even if it is in some cases believed to be reconciled via the already rather obscure resolution of the self-caused nature. Yet if God is assigned the utter self-unity of the One/the in-itself, and does not have consciousness, then the human inability to be self-caused is reinforced. If God Himself is fundamentally and eternally unified—*not* self-caused—then what hope is there for humanity in its own project to attain the status of the *enscausa sui*?

This ambivalence in the theological domain appears to have begun to be thrown into its most salient relief in the Logos doctrines found in late antiquity among certain Jewish and (many more, particularly Eastern) Christian theologians. In the pioneering writings of the Alexandrians Philo and Origen, for example, one can witness an explicit effort to divorce God as an agent (or we might say, a for-itself) from God as a self-sufficient unity (an in-itself). Some or all of the conscious nature of God is frequently described in such doctrines as the Logos and is treated as if it is a being of its own, a hypostasis¹⁹ that either emanates from or is created (usually created²⁰) by the Godhead. In this capacity as a subsidiary, *active* deity, the first to arise out of inactive (because utterly self-sufficient) being, the Logos

¹⁹ “Hypostasis” generally refers to having some form of independent existence. Philo calls the Logos, among other things, “the first-born son of God,” “the man of God,” “the image of God,” “second to God,” and “a second God” (Wolfson 1947, 234). Origen makes it clear that the pre-existent Christ, identified with the Logos, or “wisdom” of God, is in a manner its own being: “...Let no one think, however, that when we give him [Christ] the name ‘wisdom of God’ we mean anything without hypostatic existence ... the only-begotten Son of God is God’s wisdom hypostatically existing” (Origen, B.1, C.2, 1)

²⁰ Creation is usually favored over emanationism in Jewish and Christian theologies in opposition to the Neoplatonists, and this seems to invite the familiar problem of the in-itself having conscious properties. Many of these early theologians of course want to both ascribe and not ascribe a conscious nature to the Godhead for reasons already well-covered in the question of whether the One and/or in-itself have conscious properties discussed above.

has parallels with Plotinus' Intellectual-Principle (hence, Plotinus: "the Intellect, which is the universe of authentic beings, the Truth ... is a god, a secondary god" [E. V.4.3]).

The effort to clarify the relationship between the Logos and God (or perhaps more appropriately, the Godhead) had, as its greatest expression, the Trinitarian disputes in the formation of the orthodox Christian church. The question at the heart of the debates, whether the pre-existent Christ (identified with the Logos²¹) was or was not a *creation* of the Father/Godhead, may be seen as in part a dispute over to what extent differentiation was to be seen as intrinsic to the Godhead and thereby as intrinsic to the original nature of reality itself. If the pre-existent Christ is a creation of the Father (the so-called Arian position), this suggests that the Father shares in the nature of the for-itself (not self-unified, containing nothingness in His being) insofar as creation implies conscious action, and perhaps even a form of desire. On the other hand, even if the pre-existent Christ is uncreated and exists eternally alongside the Father, this implies that reality has always had at least this element of differentiation within it, and therefore that differentiation is intrinsic to the foundation of reality. It may be that, partly for these reasons (even if this was not fully realized), pressure arose among Christian theologians to suggest that the differentiation between Christ and God is wholly apparent, and the two are in fact one.

The Nicean solution that the Father perpetually begets the Son, and that this is in fact the only difference between the two, is ingenious at least in its function of what I argue was maintaining ambivalence regarding whether or not being (more appropriately: mind) is self-created.²² It professes the unity of God while keeping the possibility of a self-creative foundation for reality and mind—just as Plotinus and Sartre profess the unity of being with the One/ the in-itself while keeping the possibility of a self-creative foundation for reality and mind in their suggestion that the One/in-itself intentionally gives rise to consciousness. If it is not certain that God and Christ are any different, and therefore not certain that God creating the Son is any different than the Son creating Himself (or for that matter, God creating Himself), then the self-cause remains viable as it appears to remain in both Plotinus and Sartre, above.

²¹ See Wolfson 1956, 177-183.

²² The credit for the creation of this doctrine perhaps properly belongs to Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, II.13, 8—cited in Wolfson 1956, 199). It is also elaborated in Origen (*First Principles*, B.1, C.2, 4).

Furthermore, to assert that this creation is *eternal* appears to evade the paradoxical nature of self-causation, just as the One eternally begetting the Intellectual-Principle functions in Plotinus' system.²³

The sense in which the incarnate Christ serves as a more palpable model (than the pre-existent Christ, or God for that matter²⁴) for the human aspiration to be the *enscausa sui* can be read from the Christological controversies which followed the Trinitarian disputes. One way to interpret these controversies was that in part they represented attempts to find a way to assert the foundation of the in-itself in the human Christ and the foundation of the for-itself in the transcendent Godhead. If Christ is not fully God and fully man, then humanity has no conceptual model for achieving the union of the for-itself with the in-itself; no proof that it is in fact possible. For Christ to be fully God is for man to have assurance that the salvation accomplished with Christ is total; that through Christ's grace man can eventually participate in the in-itself with Christ and thus invest himself with the essence he perpetually and unsuccessfully strives to achieve.²⁵ Similarly, for Christ to be fully man is for man to have assurance that the model is in fact a genuine one that can be accomplished by a human being.²⁶ What is the nature, however, of this participation in Christ/God? In virtually any Christian soteriological system, the transformative power of Christ towards humanity is emphasized. Variation exists concerning whether this is something that is an inspirational change or in fact an ontological change; whether it is a finished action which affected/affects the race as a whole (which would seem to be a sort of ontological change) or instead something that each individual is given or which he or she earns; whether it is something that occurs or has occurred in this life or only in the life to come (if one exists in the system); and so on.

²³ Even in Sartre, the for-itself continually produces itself as for-itself, although it does not achieve the synthetic union with the in-itself as Plotinus' Intellectual-Principle does, and as the Logos does. It is also clearly the case that each individual for-itself (human being) begins and ends at certain points in time.

²⁴ The connection with God as such is as far as Sartre goes in drawing a parallel between his argument and theology: "Is not God a being who is what he is—in that he is all positivity and the foundation of the world—and at the same time a being who is not what he is and who is what he is not—in himself?" (BN 140).

²⁵ Thus: "...the true Redeemer must be God, because, according to the new doctrine of the Church, redemption implied 'deification'" (Werner, 161). Athanasius' famous dictum that "God became man so that man may become God," or "he became what we are in order to make us what he is in himself," may be relevant in this connection (*The Incarnation of the Word of God*, 54.3).

²⁶ Hence Russell writes (in connection with the doctrine of deification in Gregory of Nazianzus): "As [Donald] Winslow has shown, the deification of the human nature of Christ is 'the principle upon which our analogous deification is based'" (Russell, 224).

In any such system, the more that unity with Christ and/or God is emphasized in such transformation/s, the more one can sense that those saved have similarly achieved a total synthesis of the for-itself and the in-itself via a reunion with the source (that is, God).²⁷ Perhaps because of the perplexing nature of such a synthesis, to the extent that it is cognized, doctrines of soteriological transformation vary concerning how much they ascribe the nature of the in-itself to saved souls (for example, systems which maintain that the believer “becomes one with Christ” or even “becomes God”—although both of these are usually given qualification²⁸—seem to suggest greater unity of the for-itself and in-itself). To be sure, the difference between the in-itself and the for-itself does not seem to admit of degrees: being is either unified or it is not; any differentiation in being is enough to make being disunified. Nonetheless, there are various qualities of being (and of course the existence of qualities already presupposes disunity), which can themselves appear to admit of either unity or disunity, despite the fact that that they stand in a larger hierarchy of being which is intrinsically disunified by the fact that it has qualities.

Throughout this essay there has been talk of differentiation, multiplicity, and change, and it has been said that multiplicity and change are types of differentiation. This is because differentiation refers merely to the fact that there is *any* kind of difference in being, whereas multiplicity and change are

²⁷ It has already been shown that Plotinus has a similar notion of a return to the source in his philosophy—that is, conversion. All that proceeds from the One ultimately returns to the source, so that reality may re-accomplish its (purported) original unity (as Emilsson aptly puts it, “the very fact of departure from the One is seen to contain in itself a reason for the conversion” [Emilsson, 73]). This is a necessary feature in Plotinus’ cosmology since “everything which is many is also in need, unless it becomes one from the many” (E. VI.9.6.). Plotinus nevertheless is ambiguous regarding whether the soul can achieve absolute union with the One (unlike, as will be shown, his Christian counterparts, who preserve some measure of identification between God/Christ and the believer even in the most deifying of theologies): absolute union would not only threaten to violate the transcendence of the One, but would represent a complete collapse of the for-itself into the in-itself. Thus Plotinus sometimes seems content to say that man can become one at least with the Intellectual-Principle: “the true way is to become the Intellectual-Principle and be, our very selves, what we are to see” (E. VI.8.15). However, the Intellectual-Principle itself is sometimes represented as becoming able to transform into the One, or at least share in its nature in some respect (cf. above the relationship between the Intellectual-Principle and the One, and the following: “The Intellectual-Principle in us must mount to its origins ... if it seeks the vision of that Being [the One], it must become something more than Intellect” (E. III.8.9) ... “The soul [once ascended/deified]... is no longer Intellectual-Principle, for the Supreme has not Intellection and the likeness must be perfect” (E. VI.7.35). The ambiguity pervading the *origins* of the Intellectual-Principle (or in parallel, consciousness) is paralleled by ambiguity with respect to its teleological *end*. In any case, participation in the Intellectual-Principle is a reconciliation between conscious and non-conscious being in the same manner that participation in the Logos functions in early Christian theology as a meeting place of transcendence and immanence; a veritable for-itself-in-itself.

²⁸ For example, in Maximus the Confessor: “God will also completely fulfil [sic] the goal of his mystical effort to deify humanity, in every respect, of course, short of an identity of essence with God” (*Ad Thalassium* 22, 137).

specific types of differentiation: multiplicity here refers to a variety of spatial differentiation, and change refers to any sort of temporal differentiation. In virtually all Christian soteriological systems, the existence of multiple believers in both this life and the next (again, if one is part of the system) conveys that multiplicity is not or at least should not be conceived of as eliminable: the existence of multiple subjects even in many pictures of the hereafter entails that the division between subject and object remains and will remain. Nonetheless, the experiential qualities of being a subject are often minimized, particularly in those soteriologies which describe an ontological transformation of the believer in the next life (which can in most cases be understood as *deification*²⁹). That is, experience becomes *unchanging* in many such systems, frequently even in principle: this can be seen in the frequent allusions to the virtues (or inevitable states, particularly if an ontological transformation of the believer is said to happen in the next life) of rest,³⁰ contemplation,³¹ and dispassion.³² One could say that in such systems, the for-itself remains separated from being by virtue of its consciousness as a subject, however this consciousness becomes transfixed upon one (usually itself static) object, God, and through this contemplation either becomes ontologically one with God or experientially unified with God—in either case, it achieves greater unity with oneself and with being. By virtue of its transfixion upon the in-itself (or perhaps, the for-itself-in-itself), the for-itself in some measure loses consciousness of its separateness from it—but it would seem that enough is maintained so that the value of consciousness remains. God provides the

²⁹ See Athanasius, above. Ontological transformations of the believer are suggested in a variety of early theologians, but perhaps none more explicitly and systematically than in the work of Maximus the Confessor (particularly in his *Ambigua*).

³⁰ Even in the non-Christian Plotinus, for example: “...the soul ... learn[s] the greatness of rest in the Supreme...” (E. IV.8.7). Note also that both the Intellectual-Principle and the One are described as “motionless”: “Soul arises as the idea and act of the motionless Intellectual-Principle—which itself sprang from its own motionless prior” (E. V.2.1). Maximus the Confessor probably uses these tropes more than any other early Church Father. For example: “...none of the created things that move has ever come to rest, nor obtained the prize laid up in God’s plan ... How can those who have actually found rest in God become satiated and [then] be drawn away recklessly by desire[?]” (*Ambiguum* 7, 1089A). The sense in which movement is associated with *desire* is made more clear by fn. 31 below. Maximus also associates rest directly with contemplation (e.g. *Ambiguum* 7, 1076D).

³¹ Of course, the ideal of contemplation has been shown to exist in Plotinus insofar as the Intellectual-Principle spends eternity contemplating the One (or perhaps, itself—see above). It is found in one form or another in many other church fathers, as well (e.g. Clement, Origen, Maximus).

³² A paradigmatic example is Clement, *Stromata*, B.VI.C.XII. This emphasis on dispassion is significant for, as Sartre says, desire and lack are fundamental qualities of the for-itself: “Desire is a lack of being. It is haunted in its inmost being by the being of which it is desire. Thus it bears witness to the existence of lack in the being of human reality” (BN 137). In Plotinus, the high number of references to the self-sufficiency of the One, being above any form of desire or need, is significant. Cf. also Maximus, *Ad Thalassium* 21.

believer with enough satisfaction that he or she need no longer seek to merge the nothingness in his or her being with actual essence. In contemplating God, the believer loses the fallen state of having ultimately insatiable passions, and achieves true rest.³³

³³ Nonetheless, some theologians may be interpreted as if they are suggesting that deification does not amount to total complacency. For example, Russell interprets Pseudo-Dionysius to mean that, “Deification is merely our participation in one of the divine attributes, that of deity, as we strive towards an ultimately unattainable goal [becoming God Himself]” (Russell 249). It is similarly ambiguous whether Plotinus’ description of the Intellectual-Principle’s contemplation of the One amounts to a never-fully-fulfilled goal. Emilsson writes for example, “Plotinus evidently believed that that which has distanced itself from the One, and hence needs it, has no hope of fully getting it” (Emilsson, 76).

VII. CONCLUSION

Each of the philosophers and theologians surveyed above advance ideas that are derived from consciousness of the separation of being from itself that is manifested in and by consciousness itself, and each strives to discern whether this separation can be undone without thereby sacrificing the seeming value that self-awareness presents to the human being. Sartre can be said to have seen the problem most directly; however, he also appears the most pessimistic regarding whether a solution to the problem can be found or achieved. For him, consciousness is a “hole in being at the heart of being” (BN 786), and it cannot be filled up. The only things which can be said to be *full*, or have an *essence* in Sartre’s philosophy, are those things which cannot *know* themselves to have an essence—aspects of the in-itself. Once something knows anything, it appears that it cannot be fully unified, since, as Plotinus demonstrated centuries before, knowledge implies a separation of subject from object, even if the object is itself the subject (again, “anything capable of analyzing its content, must be a manifold” [E. V.3.10]). For Sartre, it is this lack of coincidence between consciousness and its object (primarily itself) which is the root of all anxiety and despair. Nonetheless, the human being cannot be totally satisfied in simply abandoning consciousness, since there is then no subject capable of realizing a coincidence with its object. The only way that such coincidence could be achieved, in Sartre’s view, is for consciousness to create itself; to give itself its own essence. Since nothing can be prior to itself, however, this ideal is impossible to realize. Thus, Sartre concludes, “Human reality ... is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state” (BN 140).

It is possible however that Sartre has acted too hastily by labeling the self-cause as a logical impossibility. In Plotinus’ theory of the procession, emanation from the One is eternally recurring,³⁴ just as early Christian orthodoxy views the pre-existent Christ as eternally begotten from the Father. In the

³⁴ Hence the already-mentioned reference to the One creating itself: “... what He is He is from before all time, his self-making is to be understood as simultaneous with Himself” [VI.8.20]

idea of eternal generation, there is nothing that is truly *prior to itself*, since the “itself” in question in such a formulation has in some sense really always existed. To be sure, the meaning of the very notion of causality in such a picture becomes incredibly obscure, but any thorough analysis of causality is bound to generate some measure of obscurity, since the bounds of thought thereby become tested. If eternal generation is a valid type of causality, it is possible to imagine that being perpetually separates from itself (in some form, including at least consciousness) and perpetually reunites with itself into some kind of synthesized unity; much as emanation and conversion function in Plotinus as an eternal systolic and diastolic movement of the One. If such movements are simultaneous, much as the self-making of the One is “to be understood as simultaneous with Himself” (E. VI.8.20), then there is no moment of pure in-itself or pure for-itself; only an eternally synthesized duality.

Clearly, however, this is not the case in human experience: coincidence with oneself is not perpetually given as it would be in such a picture. Perhaps the hope implicit in the aforementioned doctrines of deification, particularly in several of the above-mentioned early Christian theologians, is that the human being can acquire its place in such a scheme of perpetual synthesis—as if finite human existence represents a divergent process from this cosmic synthesis, which itself can offer no ultimate resolution to the human condition within its own parameters. Such possibilities remain beyond the scope of empirical verification and can serve as little more than idle speculation, but they at least provide logically possible alternatives to Sartre’s view on the impossibility of self-causation. Sartre regards the innate human hope for the *enscausa sui* as a tragic flaw in the nature of being, but this seems to be an unnecessary projection of pessimism unto an unknown (and perhaps unknowable) state of affairs.

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