Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology

by Jean-Paul Sartre, translated by Sarah Richmond. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018.

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Legend has it that when Jean-Paul Sartre's first epic tome *L'Être et le néant* appeared in 1943 the publishers were rather surprised by how well it sold. Who were all these people in the midst of war yet eager to read a 722-page philosophical analysis of the structures of human existence? They discovered that the book, which weighed exactly one kilo, was mostly selling to greengrocers, who were using it to replace the kilo weights that had been confiscated by the Nazis to be melted down for munitions.

Sarah Richmond's superb new translation weighs in at nearly a kilo and a half. The text itself is supplemented by a wealth of explanatory and analytical material. Richmond has taken full advantage of the extensive scholarly and critical analyses of Sartre's book published over the past three-quarters of a century. The book has been translated into English only once before, by Hazel Barnes over sixty years ago. Richmond's strategy has not been to edit that version, but to translate the text anew, informed by its reception in both its original form and its Barnes translation. Richmond traces the main contours of this reception in her introduction to the book, which relates the text to the main currents of anglophone and European thought since the war and, in so doing, indicates the influences on her own reading of the text.

This is followed by a particularly detailed and insightful set of notes on the translation. Sartre's text is replete with neologisms and ungrammatical constructions, religious vocabulary that might seem out of place in a seemingly atheistic text, and terminology derived from his major influences and from various great figures in the history of philosophy. Richmond's thoughtful explanations of her decisions on translating these terms provide interesting historical and linguistic information. One particular highlight here is the section on vocabulary relating to the mind, which neatly sets Sartre's philosophy of affectivity and motivation in the context of European literature, philosophy, and psychology of the first half of the twentieth century. A second is the echo of this in the brief section on Henri Bergson's influence on this text. These prefatory sections are supplemented by an extensive set of translator's footnotes to the text itself, which Richmond uses to indicate resonances between Sartre's terminology and those of his major influences, to illuminate some of his more obscure metaphors and images, and to justify particular choices of translation. These notes are consistently pertinent and informative, while being brief enough not to interfere with the text itself.

When a great work of philosophy is old enough to be out of copyright, different editions become available for different readerships. The scholarly edition prioritising precision over readability sits alongside the more fluent edition for students or general readers on the bookshop shelf. One challenge with more recent works is to balance these virtues in a way that appeals to both readerships. Richmond has achieved this admirably. The scholarly apparatus, which includes pagination of the French edition in the margins, is unobtrusive. Her prefatory material and brief notes can be readily understood by a reader unfamiliar with Sartre's philosophy or its context. The foreword by Richard Moran outlines the central aspects of current philosophical interest in this book in clear and engaging style.

Richmond's decision to revise the punctuation has made the text itself more readable. French writing frequently uses long sentences with plenty of commas. English writing makes much greater use of colons, semi-colons, dashes, and indeed full stops. Richmond has broken Sartre's long sentences into shorter ones and used the full range of punctuation to clarify his meaning. But she has not taken the same approach to paragraphing. Barnes broke up Sartre's lengthy paragraphs, but Richmond has kept them as in the original, even where they run over page after page after page. This seems to me the right decision. One can be confident of preserving the

meaning of a sentence in breaking it into shorter sentences or introducing different punctuation. But one cannot be confident, in a philosophical text as complex as this one, that breaking up such a lengthy paragraph will preserve the intended argument structure. Moreover, retaining the paragraphing facilitates the scholar in comparing the translation with the original whereas retaining the original sentence structures would not.

Even so, it is Richmond's deep consideration of the terms she has used to translate Sartre and her explanations of her decisions that really bring the text to life. Given the sheer intellectual and physical heft of *Being and Nothingness*, a decision about how to translate one of the less prominent words in it might seem only of minor importance. But even this has the potential to transform the reader's understanding of his philosophy. This is not only true for new readers, but also for scholars using the translation in place of or alongside the original. The significance of such a decision and the utility of Richmond's explanations are well illustrated by Sartre's use of the word *puissance* in articulating his basic ontology. Richmond generally translates this as 'potential' (B&N: 3 n4), which suggests a very close relation to Sartre's use of *potentialité*, which Richmond almost always translates into the correspondingly technical sounding 'potentiality'.

Sartre uses *potentialité* to describe two kinds of feature that objects are experienced as having. He first identifies the object's *potentialité* 'to be what it is', which he also calls the object's *permanence* (B&N: 271). He does not mean that the object will forever be what it currently is, but that it is part of the structure of an object that it has the potential to persist into the future as what it is. Whether it does persist into the future, of course, is a fact about the future, not about the present. But this *potentialité* is a feature it has in the present (B&N: 272). The object's other *potentialités* are the ways it can be used to operate on other objects and the ways it will respond if operated on by other objects. Sartre refers to these collectively as *ustensilité*, which Richmond translates as 'equipmentality' (B&N: lv). Sartre holds this equipmentality to be as fundamental a feature of the object as its permanence (B&N: 280).

Sartre's term that covers both permanence and equipmentality could be translated as 'potential'. Objects have the potential to persist into the future and a range of potential uses in relation to other objects. Richmond does occasionally take this option, as when she renders Sartre as describing the action of 'picking up the penholder' as 'surpassing the penholder as a mere

existent towards its potential' of providing me with a pen to write with (B&N: 520). Indeed, it could equally well be translated as 'capacity'. Richmond's decision to retain the more technical sounding variant in most instances, however, seems right. It indicates that Sartre has a precise concept in mind, one that he has sought to define in this work. The word 'potentiality' is ungainly, but this does seem to be a case where scholarly precision should be prioritised over textual fluency.

However, a puzzle arises when we consider whether Sartre holds 'potentialities' to be mind-independent features of the world. Are they features that objects already have independently of our experience, or features that objects merely seem to have due to the structures of our experience? Sartre tells us that the object's 'permanence' discloses the structure of consciousness as not being this object and that it is therefore 'the correlative of commitment' and 'an ontological structure of negation' (B&N: 271). These comments do not answer our question. They indicate a correlation between two items: consciousness as both a negation of its object and a commitment; the permanence of the object. They do not indicate which correlate has ontological priority.

Sartre's famous 'ontological proof' of the dependence of consciousness on its objects suggests that permanence has priority and is a mind-independent feature of the object. 'Consciousness is consciousness of something', argues Sartre, which ultimately entails that 'consciousness is born *bearing on* a being that is not it' (B&N: 22). Richmond has here translated Sartre's phrase *portée sur* as 'bearing on' where Barnes translated it as 'supported by'. Richmond adds a footnote to explain that *portée sur*, which is italicised in Sartre's original text, primarily means 'directed upon', and so incorporates the intentionality of consciousness as 'consciousness of something', but *porter* also means 'to carry' and as a result Sartre's phrase here connotes consciousness being supported by its object (B&N: 22 n33). The phrase 'bearing on' captures this complex meaning well, though the footnote is helpful in ensuring that it comes across. This claim that the intentionality of consciousness entails the ontological dependence of consciousness on the 'being in-itself' of its objects implies that the object's 'permanence' described later in the book must be ontologically prior to consciousness as a negation of that object.

Sartre's comments about the 'resistance' of objects to my efforts also imply that an object's 'potentialities' are ontologically prior to consciousness. From the very start of the book, Sartre argues that ontology must explain how the object's 'series of appearances is connected by a *principle* that does not depend on my whim' (B&N: 4; see also B&N: 19). Later he argues that 'Bachelard is right to reproach phenomenology for taking insufficient account of what he calls objects' "coefficient of adversity"' (B&N: 435). Sartre illustrates this with cases where objects do not have the potentiality they seemed to have, as when a 'screw is revealed as too big to be screwed into the nut' or 'the stone as too heavy to be raised right up on to the ridge of the wall' (B&N: 436). These comments seem to entail that equipmentality is part of the structure of the world itself and can contrast with how the object seems in experience.

Sartre adds a second set of cases where objects have the potential to harm or destroy my projects, such as 'the storm and hail for the harvest, the phylloxera for the vine, the fire for the house' (B&N: 436). These too indicate the mind-independence of potentialities. That these potentialities have the significance of destruction is dependent on my caring about the harvest, the vine, and the house (B&N: 39). But these potentialities to 'alter the distribution of the mass of beings' themselves are entirely independent of my experience, and indeed contrary to my projects (B&N: 39).

Given these arguments, why has Sartre often been read as holding that the world is constructed by consciousness out of a formless being-in-itself? One reason seems to be that when Sartre first introduces being-in-itself, he claims that it 'is only ever what it is' (B&N: 29), summarising his argument that it 'has no *inside* that could be opposed to an *outside*', that it 'has no secret: it is *massive*', that 'anything that allows one to say that being is not yet what it will be' is 'necessarily ruled out by being', and that being in-itself 'never presents itself as *other* than some other being' (B&N: 28). These comments are hardly perspicuous. There is only so much a translator can do. It is easy to see how they could be taken to deny any structure, or at least any potentiality, in being-in-itself, but they do not entail this, especially since Sartre echoes them in defining 'permanence' as the 'potentiality' of the object 'to be what it is' (B&N: 271).

Perhaps the most significant passage is Sartre's rejection of the Aristotelian metaphysics of dispositions. 'Being-in-itself can neither "be as a potentiality" nor "have potentialities"', Sartre

writes, in what appears to be a definitive answer to our question (B&N: 153). 'In itself, it is what it is, in the absolute plenitude of its identity', he continues. 'The cloud is not "rain as a potentiality"; it is, in itself, a particular quantity of water vapour that is – at a given temperature and pressure – strictly what it is' (B&N: 153). Richmond's introduction of a semi-colon and two dashes to this sentence, which in the original is articulated only by commas, certainly helps to elucidate its meaning. However, the use of 'potentiality' here might be misleading. Sartre does not use *potentialité* in these sentences. His word is *puissance*: '*L'Être-en-soi ne peut «être en-puissance» ni «avoir des puissances»*'. That he has used a term other than *potentialité* strongly suggests that he has a different concept in mind here. If so, then this passage does not contradict the reading that *potentialités* are mind-independent features of objects, structures of being-in-itself.

Richmond generally translates *puissance* as 'potential', she tells us, because Sartre is using it to translate Aristotle's *dunamis*, of which 'potential' is a standard translation (B&N: 3 n4). Sartre does introduce this paragraph as an argument against '*la «puissance» aristotélicienne*' and Richmond's use of 'potentiality' rather than 'potential' in these sentences might seem innocuous, since the longer English word sounds more technical than 'potential' but adds nothing to its meaning. However, there is some dispute over how Aristotle's term is best translated into English, not least because *potentia*, which is the Latin equivalent of *dunamis*, is the root not only of 'potential' but also of 'potency', which are not equivalent to one another. The former denotes a capacity for some outcome, whereas the latter indicates some force towards that outcome. This is why current debates in the metaphysics of dispositions tend to use the word 'powers' to denote the Aristotelian conception of dispositions as tendencies towards specific outcomes, in contrast the more modern conception of dispositions as capacities to respond in specific ways to specific stimuli.

Given this and since the usual meaning of *puissance* is power or force rather than mere ability, it seems that Sartre's use of it is better translated as 'potency' or 'power'. This would also preserve the distinction between *puissance* and *potentialité*. The sentences that looked like a clear statement that potentialities cannot be part of the structure of being-in-itself, therefore, seem not to be about potentialities, understood as capacities or abilities, at all. '*L'Être-en-soi ne peut «être en-puissance» ni «avoir des puissances»*' seems rather to say that being-in-itself 'could neither "be as-power" nor "have powers"'. This is hardly elegant phrasing, but this may be another case where

precision should be prioritised. Sartre is denying that tendencies towards specific outcomes are mind-independent features of objects, which is consistent with capacities being mind-independent features of objects. He is simply adhering to the usual metaphysical view in modern philosophy that the idea of powers or potencies belongs only in the 'magical' or animistic thinking of the pre-scientific world (B&N: 153).

Perhaps a familiar example would help. What does it mean to say that a copy of the first edition of *L'Être et le néant* weighs a kilo? Among other things, it means that you can use it to measure out a kilo of apples by placing it on one side of a balance and placing apples on the other side until the balance is level. The book has the capacity or *potentialité* to have this effect in the world. The temperature and the pressure of the rain cloud, to use Sartre's own example, are capacities to produce various effects including specific readings on scientific instruments. Does the first edition of *L'Être et le néant* also have the metaphysical power or *puissance* of a continual tendency to move downwards, roughly two-thirds of the magnitude of downwards tendency had by Richmond's new translation of it? Aristotle would say that it does. Sartre, in line with most of modern philosophy, rejects this idea. Being in-itself does not contain tendencies. It just is what it is. Any such 'magical' tendencies that we seem to experience are due to the interaction of our minds with the potentialities of objects.

Why does this matter? It might seem that this shows only that Sartre holds a theory that we can find in the works of plenty of other philosophers, rather than the altogether more distinctive theory that all of the structures of the world depend on our experience. Is this a conclusion worth drawing? Might the reading of Sartre suggested by equating *potentialité* and *puissance* be more philosophically interesting and fruitful than the one that comes into view when they are distinguished? If it is, then why should we care what the author himself actually thought about this? One answer would be that *Being and Nothingness* might, on closer inspection, provide interesting arguments against mind-independent powers but which respect mind-independent potentialities, which could be useful contributions to the debate generated by the recent renewed interest in this Aristotelian idea. But another answer draws on the relation between these ideas about the structure of being-in-itself and the existential philosophy that is this book's primary source of interest for most of its readers.

It is a vexed question just how far Sartre's existential theory really depends on his basic ontology, but in *Being and Nothingness* he certainly presents them as aspects of one seamless philosophy. The difference between potentiality and potency is an area where this may well be true. For at the core of his existentialism is the idea that we experience the world not simply as a set of objects that afford particular kinds of action, but as a realm of invitations, demands, and proscriptions, 'alarm clocks, signposts, tax returns, policemen' (B&N: 79). In ordinary experience our actions respond to felt attractions and repulsions, powers apparently exerting pressure on us, forces seeming to push and pull us. According to Sartre's basic ontology, these cannot be mind-independent features of the world. Indeed, he thinks we become aware of this when our projects are interrupted: 'I suddenly encounter myself as the person who bestows meaning on the alarm clock, the person who prohibits himself — on the basis of a signpost — from walking on a flowerbed or on a lawn, the person who lends the boss's order its urgency' (B&N: 79).

Sartre develops this theory of motivation through an analysis of the relation between the *mobile* and the *motif* of an action (especially B&N: 585-93). Richmond helpfully explains that these are standard terms in twentieth-century French academic discourse, rather than Sartre's idiosyncrasy (B&N: xlvii). The general idea is that an action can be explained by reference either to the agent's state of mind (*mobile*) or to the features of the situation to which the agent responded (*motif*). Sartre develops his theory of freedom through considering the relation between the two types of explanation. Richmond translates *mobile* as 'motive', as Barnes had done. This seems right. The murderer's motive was greed. Richmond translates *motif* as 'reason', which also seems right. The murderer's reason was the inheritance.

Barnes translated *motif* as 'cause', which dissonates with Sartre's view that no conscious act, whether an action in the world or an act of mind, can be a causal effect of anything. Richmond points out that Barnes may have intended 'cause' in the sense of ground, as in 'cause for complaint' (B&N: xlvii). Even so, we should prefer Richmond's 'reason' to either 'cause' or 'ground'. For 'ground' simply indicates which feature of the situation the agent was responding to. It does not clarify how this influence occurs. By contrast, 'cause' connotes a mechanism of the kind operative when a *potentialité* is actualised. The key has the *potentialité* to open the lock because it is precisely the right shape to do so. This is actualised when the key turns causing the

lock to open. This is why 'cause' suggests the picture of thought and action that Sartre wants to deny.

The term 'reason' indicates some pressure towards the outcome, a perceived *puissance*. According to Sartre's basic ontology, it must depend on the structures of consciousness. It is not only the existence of the reason, but also the weight it exerts in the balance, that depend on the agent's attitudes. A reason is something that can be accepted or rejected. Its power can be adjusted. Sartre's basic ontology explains why a reason has these features: it is a *puissance* whose existence and magnitude are not part of the being-in-itself of the world, but depend on the agent's chosen projects. If these considerations are correct, then Sartre's famous theory of human freedom deploys his distinction between *potentialité* and *puissance* thus: the options available to me are circumscribed by the mind-independent *potentialités* of my situation, but the pressures to think and behave in particular ways are *puissances* that reflect structures of my consciousness provided by my projects.

This distinction between *puissance* and *potentialité* might also explain Sartre's insistence at this point in his career that projects can have no inertia of their own, so persist only if they continue to be endorsed or underwritten by the agent. And it might help make sense of Sartre's often baffling sentences using the terms *actuel* and *virtuel*, which Richmond translates as 'actual' and 'virtual', as Barnes generally had done. Perhaps these are best understood as varieties of *potentialité,* so that a *potentialité* that is currently actualised as well as stretching into the future, such as an object's *potentialité* 'to be what it is', is *actuel*, whereas a mere *potentialité* for something that is not yet the case is *virtuel*. If so, then something like 'actualised' and 'merely potential' would be better translations.

There is much more to be said about the relation between *puissance*, *potentialité*, *actuel*, and *virtuel* in Sartre's philosophy. It may well be that the conclusions drawn here are incorrect. It may turn out that a full review of the instances of these terms in the book, which are far more numerous than the ones considered here, rather supports Richmond's interpretation. Either way, such an investigation would benefit greatly from this excellent new edition, as indeed this preliminary consideration has done. Richmond's extensive explanations of her translation decisions and other illuminations of the book's more obscure passages, along with the substantial analytical

index and the French pagination in the margins, provide an excellent framework for such scholarly analysis.

One improvement to this edition should be made in time for the paperback. The contents page currently lists the headings of all three levels of division – Part, Chapter, Section – but unfortunately gives the pagination only for the top two levels. This omission is entirely unnecessary and is especially annoying in a book some of whose chapters are more than 80 pages long. (I have written the Section heading page numbers into the contents page of my copy. If you would like to do likewise, they are: 1, 5, 8, 16, 20, 24; 33, 37, 44, 50, 57; 87, 97, 113; 121, 129, 136, 150, 159; 163, 192, 217; 246, 255, 263, 285, 300; 307, 309, 322, 347; 412, 453, 468; 482, 501, 543; 569, 629, 718; 723, 746, 777; 798, 809.)

A second development that would greatly facilitate scholarship would be to ensure a North America edition of the same translation with the same pagination, ending a difficulty that has hampered the field since the Barnes translation first appeared. Finally, scholarship would be further enhanced by a searchable electronic edition with the same pagination as the hard copy. Given the immense achievement in writing this volume, it would be a shame if production decisions were to restrain its power or preclude its full potential.

The first translation of *Being and Nothingness* was a major academic achievement that has influenced thought across a range of disciplines for more than sixty years. This new edition has the potential to be at least as influential over the coming decades. It exemplifies the reason why the institutional structures and culture of our discipline ought to recognise translation work as capable of making as significant a contribution as any monograph. It clearly demonstrates how much the discipline has to gain from encouraging philosophers to undertake such projects and rewarding them for doing so.