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ARTICLE

Is Sartre an Eleatic Monist?

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Abstract
It has long been recognized that Sartre's description of "being-in-itself" in the Introduction to *Being and Nothingness* (B&N) is reminiscent of Eleatic monism, the view traditionally attributed to Parmenides on which there is only one mind-independent entity, which is undifferentiated and atemporal. I reconstruct two arguments from premises Sartre endorses in B&N for Eleatic monism. These arguments are interesting not only because they give new life to an old reading of B&N, but also because there has recently been a revival of interest in monism in analytic metaphysics.

Keywords: Sartre; monism; Parmenides; negation; identity; temporal passage

1. Introduction

In the notoriously difficult Introduction to *Being and Nothingness* (B&N), Sartre presents his "ontological proof," an argument meant to establish the existence of mind-independent substance and thereby refute a form of idealism that Sartre attributes to Husserl. The argument infers the existence of mind-independent substance ("being-in-itself") from the "emptiness" of consciousness ("being-for-itself"), which I interpret as its purely relational nature.[1] A question left open by the "ontological proof" and the ensuing characterization of being-in-itself is whether Sartre endorses Eleatic monism—the view that there is a single mind-independent substance that is not subject to differentiation, temporality, and other features of the manifest world. Several commentators have noted the Eleatic resonances of Sartre's description of being-in-itself. Yet little work has been done to determine whether B&N contains the resources for a principled and plausible defense of Eleatic monism. In the following, I argue that premises Sartre endorses across the bulk of B&N commit him to Eleatic monism.

Let me say a bit at the outset to frame my project. First, I take what one could call a "metaphysics-first"[2] approach to interpreting B&N. This is not an especially common way of approaching the text, whose lasting insights are typically taken to belong either to the philosophy of mind (e.g., Sartre's

[1]This article is a sequel to my "Idealism and Transparency in Sartre's Ontological Proof" (Kinkaid, forthcoming), where I work out this interpretation of the ontological proof.

[2]One difficulty in putting the phenomenological tradition into conversation with analytic metaphysics is that the two traditions draw the contrast between ontology and metaphysics differently. For the analytic tradition, following Quine, ontology is concerned with existence questions and is a subdiscipline of metaphysics. For the phenomenological tradition, ontology concerns essences, whereas metaphysics concerns existence (see the Conclusion to B&N for Sartre's conception of metaphysics). This difficulty is merely terminological, however; Sartre's "phenomenological ontology" counts as metaphysics in the analytic sense.

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views on self-consciousness[3]), on the one hand, or ethics (broadly construed to include issues like bad faith vs. authenticity and existential psychoanalysis), on the other.

On a metaphysics-first reading, Sartre's existentialist/ethical project cannot be divorced from his bold and often puzzling ontology. A metaphysics-first reader such as myself owes some account of how a monistic metaphysics could bear on the more popular existentialist/ethical dimensions of the work. There is some precedent for deriving ethical conclusions from monistic metaphysics. An obvious example is Spinoza's *Ethics.* On Schopenhauer's view, the compassionate person sees through the *principium individuationis*, thereby recognizing the non-distinctness of all living beings and regarding their suffering as her own (Marshall, 2020). T.H. Green grounds his moral perfectionism in a monistic absolute idealism (Stern, 2017). Now, I do think Sartre's existentialist/ethical project is grounded in his metaphysics, but I doubt monism plays much of a role in that story. What does play a central role is being-for-itself's non-self-identity, in contrast to the self-identity of being-in-itself emphasized in the Introduction; this contrast, for example, grounds Sartre's claim that "man is a useless passion" due to his impossible project of being God (in-itself-for-itself) (B&N 797). But while I doubt that one needs to read Sartre as a monist to make sense of this grounding of the existentialist/ethical project in the metaphysical project, I see no reason to suppose that a monistic reading is *incompatible* with that grounding story.

Second, I should be clear about my intended audience. First, I am addressing myself to Sartre scholars who are skeptical of the Eleatic monist reading of B&N. I will raise some objections to a non-monist reading in Section 5, but the general challenge I issue to non-monistic readers is this: if Sartre is not an Eleatic monist, which premise(s) of the two arguments I reconstruct in Section 3 does he reject? Even should the monistic reading turn out not to be viable, I suspect meeting this challenge would deepen our understanding of Sartre's views of negation, individuation, time, and more.

Second, I am addressing myself to contemporary analytic metaphysicians. There has been something of a monist revival in analytic metaphysics of late. Michael (2020) employs the Principle of Sufficient reason to mount a Bradleyan regress argument against the intelligibility of relations. Builes (2021) argues for a version of monism on which the world "just is the way it is" as the best account of the relation between objects and their properties. Horgan and Potrč (2012) argue for a monistic view they call "blobjectivism" based on the rejection of metaphysical vagueness. Schaffer (2010) argues for "priority monism," on which the cosmos is the sole fundamental entity, from the possibility of "atomless gunk" and considerations about quantum entanglement. Rea (2001) argues that Eleatic monism follows from four plausible claims about material objects and spacetime.

I draw upon analytic work on negative facts, identity, time, truthmaking, mass logic, and ideology to articulate my interpretation of Sartre's metaphysics. Notably, the reasons I see as leading Sartre to monism differ from those offered in favor of monism in the recent analytic literature. In Section 4, I draw upon analytic metaphysics to raise philosophical objections to the case for Sartrean monism—some of which are forceful but none of which are obviously decisive. I will not be considering what kind of uptake Sartrean monism would get from recent movements in continental metaphysics—"speculative realism," "new materialism," and "object-oriented ontology" (Harman, 2005; Meillassoux, 2008). This is in part because I can only do so much in one paper, in part because I lack the requisite expertise in contemporary continental metaphysics; one thing I can say, though, is that the speculative realists would presumably reject the transcendental idealism I attribute to Sartre (Section 3.3) as an instance of "correlationism."[4]

With these preliminary remarks out of the way, here's the plan for the paper. After defining Eleatic monism and presenting some *prima facie* textual evidence for the Eleatic monist reading in

[3]See, e.g., Longuenesse (2017) and Boyle (2024).

[4]See Zahavi (2016) for a critical discussion of the speculative realists' critique of the "correlationism" they attribute to the phenomenological tradition.

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Section 2, I show that premises Sartre endorses in B&N can be used to reconstruct two Eleatic arguments: one against the mind-independent reality of differentiation (Section 3.2) and the other against the mind-independent reality of temporal passage (Section 3.3). Underlying both arguments is a claim about negation and negativity that is both a central feature of the ontology of B&N and recognizable in the analytic literature on negative facts (Section 3.1). I consider some philosophical objections to the reconstructed arguments in Section 4. In Section 5, I evaluate a notable recent non-monistic reading of B&N and conclude that an Eleatic monist reading is both textually viable and philosophically interesting.

2. Being-in-itself and Eleatic monism

Rea (2001, 129) defines Eleatic monism as the conjunction of the following four theses:

(a) There exists exactly one material thing.
(b) What exists does not change.
(c) Nothing is generated or destroyed.
(d) What exists is undivided.

It's important to keep in mind that if Sartre is a monist, his monism applies only to one of the regions of being he distinguishes. The "ontological proof" that Sartre presents in the Introduction to B&N is meant to refute a form of idealism on which all physical objects depend for their existence and nature on consciousness. The upshot of the argument is that there are "two absolutely distinct regions of being:" consciousness or "being-for-itself," on the one hand, and mind-independent reality or "being-in-itself," on the other. Sartrean Eleatic monism, to a first rough approximation that will be refined below, is the view that there is exactly one instance of being-in-itself, which is not subject to change, generation and destruction, or division.

The obscure final section of the Introduction, in which Sartre discusses the nature of being-in-itself, provides the main textual evidence for a monistic reading of B&N. Let's start with Eleatic theses (b) and (c), which deny change (whether qualitative or substantial) to being-in-itself.

> Transitions and becomings—anything that allows one to say that being is not yet what it will be, and that it is already what it is not—all of this is necessarily ruled out by being.
>
> From this point of view… it escapes temporality. It is, and when it collapses one cannot even say that it is no longer.
>
> Uncreated, without any reason for being or any relationship with any other being, being-in-itself is *de trop* for eternity. (B&N 29)

Being-in-itself is not subject to "transitions:" this suggests a denial of qualitative change. It is not subject to "becomings:" this suggests a denial of substantial change (generation and destruction). It is "uncreated" and "*de trop* for eternity:" this suggests a denial of substantial change for the cosmos as a whole. Finally, "it escapes temporality:" insofar as qualitative and substantial change occur in time, this too is suggestive of Eleatic theses (b) and (c).

Another passage that lends *prima facie* textual support to a reading on which Sartre denies substantial change to being-in-itself is the famous discussion of destruction.[5]

> A geological fold, or a storm, does not destroy anything—or, at least, they do not destroy *directly*: they merely alter the distribution of the mass of beings. After the storm there is no *less*

[5]Thanks to Jake McNulty for suggesting this.

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> than before. There is *something else*. And even this phrase is inappropriate, because in order to posit the disparity, we need a witness who can in some way retain the past and compare it to the present in the form of a '*no longer*'. (B&N 39)

Sartre's claim here seems to be that there is no destruction without consciousness, i.e., being-for-itself. One way of understanding this claim is that consciousness carves up the "amorphous lump" (Dummett, 1973) or "blobject" (Horgan & Potrč, 2012) of being-in-itself into discrete individuals; considered in itself, the blob loses nothing in a storm, earthquake, or war.

Next let's turn to the Eleatic thesis (d):

> It is as if a decompression of being were required to liberate an affirming *of* itself in the heart of being. Nor should we understand being as *one* undifferentiated self-affirmation: the lack of differentiation in the in-itself lies beyond an infinite number of ways of affirming oneself. We can sum up these first results by saying that *being is in itself*. (B&N 26–7)

Sartre's talk of undifferentiation here is suggestive of the claim that mind-independent reality is undivided. Yet this passage is also in tension with thesis (a), insofar as Sartre denies that we should think of being-in-itself as (exactly) *one* undifferentiated being. I will return to this issue at the end of Section 3.2, where I follow Michael (2020) in replacing (a) with a more accurate way of formulating the monist position.

A number of commentators have taken the appearance of Eleatic monism in B&N at face value. For example, David Detmer writes

> Being for itself makes a world out of being in itself through negation, much as a sculptor makes a sculpture through negative carving, by removing part of a slab of stone. (Detmer, 2008, 65)

Christine Daigle presents a similar picture:

> The world of differences, categories, objects, space, and time is the world of phenomena for consciousness. It is consciousness that introduces such distinctions, and thus generates a world. Being-in-itself, however, remains unaffected by this. It is what it is. It is timeless, changeless: it is. (Daigle, 2010, 33)

Other interpreters who read Sartre as a monist about being-in-itself include Barnes (1993), Pettit (1968), and Spade (1996). Pettit and Spade emphasize the specifically Eleatic resonances of Sartre's position. Pettit, for instance, summarizes his comparison of Sartre and Parmenides as follows: "Like his forerunner, Sartre defines being in terms of self-identity, asserts at least its intensive monopoly, and regards it as eternal, static, one and homogenous" (172–3). Spade (1996) writes: "I cannot read this passage without thinking that Sartre had Parmenides in mind" (78). Spade also suggests that the "classical philosophical problem of *negation*" is behind Sartre's Parmenidean pronouncements. I will develop this suggestion in detail in Section 3.

I will consider some textual evidence that *prima facie* tells against the Eleatic monist reading in Section 5, but I think the passages above give us good reason to ask whether Sartre has principled reasons for accepting Eleatic monism about being-in-itself. My answer (if the reader will allow me a bad pun) is *fully positive*.

3. Negation and Monism

In this section, I will develop Sartrean arguments for two Eleatic theses: that mind-independent reality is undifferentiated (Section 3.2) and that mind-independent reality is not fundamentally temporal (Section 3.3). The common ground between these arguments is a claim about negation:

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negation is not part of the fundamental structure of mind-independent reality. Before proceeding to the reconstructed arguments, I will first say a few words to elucidate this claim and to display its Sartrean credentials.

3.1. Against fundamental negation

Sartre characterizes being-in-itself as *fully positive*: "It is what it is, which means that, on its own, it cannot even not be what it is not; indeed we saw that it does not include any negation. It is full positivity" (B&N 28). This is in contrast to being-for-itself, which Sartre characterizes in terms of nothingness or "internal negation" (B&N 249–50). My purpose in this subsection is to spell out a principle that will be central to the Sartrean arguments I reconstruct in the remainder of Section 3.

The key principle is this: There is no fundamental negation or negativity. Russell (1919) speaks to the intuitive pull of this principle:

> There is implanted in the human breast an almost unquenchable desire to find some way of avoiding the admission that negative facts are as ultimate as those that are positive. (4)

Negative truths are generally taken to be a hard case for a theory of *truthmakers*. Theories of truthmaking are guided by the idea that "truth depends on being." Negative truths pose a challenge insofar as their subject matter seems to concern not being, but non-being. One way to provide truthmakers for negative truths is to allow negative facts into one's ontology. But as Fraser MacBride writes, "negative facts are an unruly bunch" (2022). First, positing negative facts is a heavy ontological commitment, since there are indefinitely many ways that reality is not. Second, if facts have constituents, it's hard to see how negative facts concerning nonexistent objects and properties could obtain. A more conservative approach posits a "totality fact" as the truthmaker for all negative truths (Armstrong, 2004).

So far I have spoken in ontological terms of negative facts. But it will be useful going forward to speak not only in ontological but also in *ideological* terms. Following Quine (1951), it is customary to distinguish a theory's ontology—which entities it posits—from its ideology—the primitive concepts in which it is expressed. A theory's ideology is the set of concepts needed to "write the book of the world," "carve reality at the joints," or limn reality's structure (Lewis, 1983; Sider, 2011). In the pursuit of a parsimonious theory, we often have to balance ontology and ideology against each other: a simpler ontology will require a more complex ideology and vice versa (Cowling, 2013; Quine, 1951). For one example, in accounting for objective similarity, David Armstrong makes an ontological posit of universals, whereas David Lewis makes an ideological posit with the notion of naturalness. For another, eternalist theories of time posit past and future objects, whereas Priorian presentists posit primitive temporal operators. A familiar starting point in formulating a theory's ideology is first-order predicate logic with identity. There is then room for debate about whether temporal and modal operators, operators for grounding and essence, mereological and set-theoretic concepts, and higher-order, plural, and mass quantification are part of primitive ideology. Moreover, there is room for debate about which logical concepts best limn reality's logical structure (McSweeney, 2019; Sider, 2011).

Expressed in ideological terms, the principle that I see as implicit in Sartre's characterization of being-in-itself is this: Negation and other negative concepts are not part of the primitive ideology needed to give a complete and perspicuous description of the mind-independent world. This is in contrast to being-for-itself, which can only be adequately characterized in terms of "internal" or constitutive negation. Spade gives perfect expression to this ideological principle in his discussion of Sartre's relation to Parmenides: "…it ought to be possible to *describe* the whole of reality without ever once resorting to the little negative word 'not', or to any other negative word that implicitly has 'not' built into it. It ought to be possible simply to strike the word 'not' from our vocabulary" (76–7).

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3.2. Against differentiation

The key to the Sartrean case against differentiation is the slogan "*Omnis determinatio est negation*:" All determination is negation. This slogan was introduced by Spinoza and adapted by Hegel (see Melamed, 2012 for discussion). Sartre devotes a section of the "Transcendence" chapter of B&N to unpacking the formula. In this subsection, I will summarize Sartre's discussion of the slogan, introduce and set aside two readings of it, introduce my own reading, and mobilize it in defense of the Eleatic thesis that being-in-itself is undifferentiated.

The "Transcendence" chapter of B&N is devoted to articulating the relations that obtain between consciousness (being-for-itself) and mind-independent reality (being-in-itself). Much of the chapter is concerned with the constitution of various features of the manifest world, including determination or individuality, object-property structure (quality), spatiality and quantity, potentiality, equipmentality, and world-time. Sartre begins the section "On Determination as Negation" as follows:

> To *which* being is the for-itself present? Let us note straight away that the question is badly put: being is what it is, and it cannot bear by itself the determination 'this one', in answer to the question 'which one?'… the for-itself cannot be present to *this one* rather than *that one*, since its presence is what makes it the case that *there is* a 'this one' rather than a 'that one'… The negativity of original transcendence is not determined on the basis of a *this*; rather, it makes it the case that a *this* exists. (B&N 263)

Taken at face value, this passage appears to say that the differentiation of being-in-itself into individuals ('this' and 'that') is dependent upon being-for-itself. On a straightforward reading, the idea is that determination or individuality consists in distinctness facts—e.g., "The table≠the chair"—which, as negative facts, depend on being-for-itself.

A deflationary reading of "all determination is negation" interprets Sartre as making a *phenomenological* point about conditions of the perception of individuals rather than an *ontological* point about principles of individuation. As Eshleman (2020) notes, the method of B&N is a complex mixture of phenomenological description, ontological analysis, transcendental argumentation, and metaphysical speculation. A phenomenological reading of the slogan is suggested by Sartre's appeal to the figure-ground structure studied by the Gestalt psychologists: "The original relation between the whole and the *this* is at the source of the relation, illuminated by *Gestalttheorie*, between the ground and the figure" (B&N 258). On this reading, Sartre is concerned in "On Determination as Negation" with "constitution" in the Husserlian sense: not the construction or dependence of entities and their features from/on consciousness, but rather the structures of conscious acts in virtue of which entities and features are perceptually given (or otherwise consciously intended) (Hopp, 2020, 68).

The structures studied by the Gestalt psychologists are certainly important for phenomenology generally (see Gurwitsch, 2009) and for Sartre in particular (for instance, in his famous description of Pierre's absence from the café). Against this phenomenological reading of the *omnis* principle, though, note again that Sartre claims that the negativity of consciousness "makes it the case that a *this* exists." This language of "making it the case" strongly suggests that Sartre is making a claim about *explanation* or *ontological dependence*. And this suggests that in the "On Determination as Negation," Sartre is concerned with an ontological account of how individuation occurs, rather than a phenomenological account of how individuals are given.

Another deflationary reading can be drawn from Brandom's (2019) discussion of Hegel's adaptation of Spinoza's slogan. On Brandom's reading of the "Perception" chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the kind of sensory awareness involved in perception of determinate particulars must be understood in terms of relations of material incompatibility, a relation that (Brandom's) Hegel takes to be prior to formal or logical negation. Although Sartre's debt to Hegel is undeniable and worth exploring in detail, Brandom's formulation of "all determination is negation" is not

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available to Sartre as I interpret him. I'm sympathetic to the view that formal negation for Sartre is grounded in a more robust form of incompatibility.[6] Yet, I take it that Sartre's ban on fundamental negativity applies not only to formal negation but to any negativity ideology, including *in*compatibility.[7] Second, as Brandom notes, determinate negation or material incompatibility is an irreducibly *modal* notion. Yet for Sartre, modality is a structure of the for-itself (see B&N Part Two, Chapter 1, Section 4). Insofar as relations of determinate negation are meant to obtain between concepts understood according to Hegel's "conceptual realism" or "nonpsychological conception of the conceptual," according to which "the objective world is always already in a conceptual…shape," I'm doubtful that this reading of the slogan is available to Sartre (Brandom, 2019, 3).

On the two interpretations I've rejected, "all determination is negation" is a phenomenological claim—about the Gestalt structure of perception, on the first interpretation, or about the modally rich content of perception, on the other. On the reading I favor, "all determination is negation" is a claim about the ideological commitment of a pluralist metaphysics, i.e., a theory according to which there are many entities. Consider the simplest pluralist hypothesis: there are at least two entities. In first-order logic with identity, the entry in the "book of the world" for this hypothesis is

$$\exists x \exists y (x \neq y)$$

The entry for the monistic hypothesis, on the other hand, is

$$\exists x \forall y (x = y)$$

Compare the ideological commitments of the hypotheses: both employ quantification and identity, but only the pluralistic hypothesis employs negation. What the slogan says, then, is that any differentiation of reality into distinct (determinate) individuals incurs an ideological commitment to negation. Though expressed in a different idiom than Sartre would employ, I think this interpretation captures the point about individuation Sartre is making in "On Determination as Negation:" the differentiation of being-in-itself into 'this' and 'that' rests on negated identities like 'the inkwell is not the table' (B&N 262).

The pieces are now in place to complete the Sartrean argument for the Eleatic thesis that mind-independent reality is undifferentiated. By "all determination is negation," differentiation depends on negation in the sense that one cannot formulate a pluralist metaphysics without employing negation. By "no fundamental negativity," mind-independent reality cannot be accurately represented in irreducibly negative terms. It follows that a pluralistic metaphysics cannot accurately represent mind-independent reality. Thus mind-independent reality, or being-in-itself, is undifferentiated. This corresponds to Rea's thesis (d): What exists is undivided.

What about thesis (a): There is exactly one material thing? Michael (2020) mounts a Bradleyan regress argument against the existence/intelligibility of relations, concluding that reality is undifferentiated. But he denies that the answer to the question "How many things are there?" is "one." Rather, Della Rocca holds that in rejecting relations as unintelligible, one must also reject counting as unintelligible. His monist view is best expressed not as "There is exactly one being," but rather "There is, simply, being" (78–82). As I noted in Section 2, Sartre's obscure description of the undifferentiated nature of being-in-itself could be read as making a similar point. Moreover, "all determination is negation" might be taken to entail such a view: insofar as being-in-itself is free of negation, it is thereby free of determination and thus doesn't even count as an individual. Insofar as the quantifiers of first-order logic are typically taken to range over individuals, this suggests that any regimentation into first-order logic will fail to fully capture the monist position. Della Rocca

[6]See Kinkaid (2020, 1023-5).

[7]See MacBride (2022) for a discussion of difficulties involved in distinguishing positive and negative ideology.

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recognizes as much when he ends his defense of monism with a Tractarian gesture of silence at what cannot be said (namely, a blank page) (Michael, 2020, 291).

I agree with Della Rocca that the Eleatic monist should deny that first-order logic adequately limns the structure of reality. As a friendly amendment to his position, though, I think that monism can be articulated in terms of *mass quantification.* Just as some authors argue that plural quantification (quantification over pluralities) is irreducible to singular quantification (quantification over individuals), Laycock (2006) and McKay (2016) have argued that mass quantification (quantification over stuff) is irreducible to quantification over individuals (singular or plural). Being-in-itself, on the Eleatic monist interpretation, is not an individual; it is an "amorphous lump" (or rather, some amorphous stuff) that gets "carved up" by consciousness. This suggests that monism is best expressed as follows

$$\exists\mu\forall\nu(\nu \leq \mu)$$

where '≤' is the relation of parthood and μ and ν are variables ranging over stuff rather than individuals. In English, this formula reads: "There is some stuff of which all stuff is a part [or maybe more perspicuously, if less grammatically: of which all stuff is some]." This claim about parthood might seem incompatible with Eleatic thesis (d). But I take it that the force of (d) is that reality is not divided into *individuals*, or relatedly that there is no *privileged decomposition of reality*.[8]

Despite this amendment to Della Rocca's view, I think the monist will still have to resort to his Tractarian maneuvers. This is because the monist cannot *say* that reality does not divide into individuals, on pain of reintroducing negative and singularist ideology. Rather, (d) is best *shown* through the monist's choice of ideology—or rather, not by what she says, but by what she doesn't say.

In this section, I have argued that two premises Sartre endorses—the full positivity of being-in-itself and "all determination is negation"—commit him to (suitably modified versions of) Eleatic theses (a) and (d). I now turn to theses (b) and (c). I will show that Sartre is committed to these theses because he is committed to denying that temporal passage is a feature of being-in-itself.

3.3. Against temporality

We saw above that Sartre claims in the Introduction to B&N that being-in-itself "escapes temporality." He expands upon this claim in the "Temporality" chapter:

> …we may describe the law that applies to the being of an intraworldly instant in these simple words: 'Being is'—and these words express a massive plenitude of positivity, in which nothing of what *is not* can be represented in any way whatsoever, not even by a trace, or a void, or a reminder, or a 'hysteresis'. Being that is exhausts itself entirely in being; it has nothing to do with what is not, or with what is no longer. No negation, whether it be radical or in the milder form of 'no… longer', can find any place within this absolute density. (B&N 167)

Sommerlatte (2020) reads Sartre as claiming that "temporality is ontologically dependent on consciousness, and consciousness can only exist temporally" (198). Sommerlatte flags the similarity of Sartre's view to Kant's transcendental idealism (202). The Eleatic monist reading naturally leads to a transcendental idealist reading on which the differentiation and temporality of the manifest world are grounded in the negativity of consciousness.[9] On this view, differentiation and temporality are what Sartre calls *négatités*. Erhard (2020) describes *négatités* as "existent yet irreducibly

[8]Huge thanks to Jonathan Payton for suggesting this way of formulating the Eleatic monist position.

[9]See Gardner (2009, 75-84) and McCulloch (1994, 111-7) for critical discussion of the transcendental idealist reading of Sartre.

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and essentially negative phenomena" (172). The most famous example of a *négatité* in B&N is Pierre's absence from the café. *Négatités* are "transcendent realities," but they "all immediately underline an essential relation of human-reality with the world" (B&N 60). They thereby resemble the features of the manifest world that Kant sees as dependent on the forms of sensibility and understanding but nevertheless objective features of appearances. Insofar as differentiation and temporality are irreducibly negative for Sartre, they are *négatités* and thus transcendentally ideal but empirically real features of the manifest world.

My plan for this subsection is to reconstruct Sartre's argument that being-in-itself is not temporal against the backdrop of J.M.E. McTaggart's (1908) infamous argument for the unreality of time. This manner of presentation will be useful because McTaggart's argument has provided a framework, at least terminologically, for the analytic literature on time that I will draw upon to critically evaluate Sartre's case against the temporality of being-in-itself. Since McTaggart it has been standard to distinguish two temporal series. The A-series orders temporal positions using the properties of *being present*, *being past*, and *being future.* The B-series orders temporal positions by the relations *earlier than* and *later than.* A-theorists hold that the A-series is fundamental, whereas B-theorists hold that all change can be described in terms of the B-series. A-theorists accord special ontological status to the present and defend the reality of temporal passage, whereas B-theorists hold that all times are equally real and hold a "spatialized" view of time (see Sider, 2011, Chapter 11 for discussion). In the section "The Ontology of Temporality" Sartre draws a distinction that I believe maps onto the A/B-series distinction. What Sartre calls "static temporality" is the ordering of time in terms of "before" and "after"—this is the B-series. What Sartre calls "dynamic temporality" describes the flow of time from the past to the present to the future—this is the A-series.

McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time runs as follows:

P1. Time is real only if the A-series exists.
P2. The A-series does not exist.
So, C. Time is unreal.

McTaggart argues for P1 as follows: Time is real only if real change occurs, and real change occurs only if there is an A-series. In defense of P2, he argues that the existence of an A-series would entail contradictions. This is because the A-properties are incompatible, and yet all events possess *being past*, *being present*, and *being future*—from different temporal perspectives, as it were (see Fine, 2006) for a helpful presentation of the argument). Both premises of McTaggart's argument have been subjected to extensive scrutiny. Without getting into these controversies, we can use McTaggart's argument as a jumping-off point for exploring Sartre's case against the fundamental reality of time.

The basic idea behind Sartre's argument is that A-series concepts are pieces of negative ideology. In order to capture the flow or passage of time, the present has to be accorded a special status. Expressed ideologically, this special status is that the past and future are defined negatively by contrast to the present: the past is *no-longer* present, and the future is *not-yet* present. Given Sartre's ban on negative fundamental ideology, *being past* and *being future* cannot accurately characterize mind-independent reality. But then the A-series does not belong to mind-independent reality. And if we loan McTaggart's P1 to Sartre, it follows that being-in-itself "escapes temporality."

I will discuss an objection to this argument in Section 4.2, but for now a few comments are in order. First, for Sartre it does not follow from the fact that being-in-itself is atemporal that time is unreal; rather, Sartre on this interpretation holds, like Kant, that time is empirically real but transcendentally ideal. This is because being-in-itself doesn't exhaust what's real, and temporality is a basic feature of consciousness or being-for-itself. In the "Temporality" chapter, Sartre cashes out the A-series in terms of structures discussed in the previous chapter, "The Immediate Structures of the For-Itself:" facticity, lack, value, and possibility (Sommerlatte, 2020, 201). Later in the book,

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Sartre extends his analysis to the temporality of objects and the intersubjective temporality of the shared world (Sommerlatte, 2020, 209).

Second, Sartre doesn't just think that the past and future are defined negatively; he also thinks that the concept of the present is negative. This is because he analyzes the present at its most basic level in terms of what is intentionally *present to* consciousness (B&N 180–4). As he will go on to explore in the "Transcendence" chapter, intentionality has to be understood in terms of a kind of "internal negation"—in particular, consciousness's *not being* the object toward which it is intentionally directed.

Third, Sartre holds not only that "dynamic temporality" (the A-series) depends on being-for-itself but also that "static temporality" (the B-series) depends on being-for-itself. This seems to be because static temporality has not just an order but also a direction, which, on Sartre's view only being-for-itself can impose. Note that in rejecting the fundamentality of the B-series in addition to the A-series Sartre actually follows McTaggart, who recognizes a C-series that "is not temporal, for it involves no change, but only an order" (1908, 462).

Finally, note that while Sartre and McTaggart agree that the A-series is not fundamental, they do so for different reasons. McTaggart rejects the A-series because it is contradictory, whereas Sartre rejects it because of its negativity. This is worth mentioning for two reasons. First, though they share an obvious kinship, Sartre and McTaggart's arguments for the unreality of time don't stand or fall together; even if McTaggart's argument that the A-series is inconsistent is unsound, there might still be hope for Sartre's argument. Second, on the other hand, Sartre is not exactly shy of asserting what appear to be flat-out contradictions concerning being-for-itself. If we should read these flirtations with contradiction at face value, Sartre could happily accept McTaggart's argument for the inconsistency of the A-series as providing confirmation of a *dialetheic* account of being-for-itself, i.e., an account on which there are true contradictions concerning being-for-itself.[10]

In Section 3, I have reconstructed Sartrean arguments for two Eleatic theses: that being-in-itself is undifferentiated and that it is not subject to temporality. Both arguments rely on a ban on fundamental negative ideology that, while controversial, seems to be a foundational assumption of B&N and one with some intuitive plausibility. In the next section I will draw upon analytic discussions of negative facts, identity, and time to pose some challenges to the reconstructed arguments and consider how the Sartrean monist might respond.

4. Philosophical Objections

4.1. Differentiation

In Section 3.2, I reconstructed the following argument for the Eleatic thesis that mind-independent reality is undifferentiated: Pluralism is committed to admitting negation as part of its primitive ideology; because being-in-itself is "full positivity," there is no fundamental negation, so pluralism cannot adequately represent mind-independent reality. In this subsection, I'll consider several challenges to this argument, in ascending order of severity.

According to the first challenge, monism is implicitly committed to fundamental negation via its commitment to universal quantification. The thought is that, since the quantifiers are duals (i.e., $\forall x\varphi$ is classically equivalent to $\neg\exists x\neg\varphi$), ideological commitment to universal quantification carries ideological commitment to negation. This worry is easily handled. On the Sartrean view I've sketched, the classical equivalence does not hold in the language used to "write the book of the world," since that language does not contain negation. In the fundamental language, the existential and universal quantifiers are both primitive. This is compatible with holding that the classical

[10]Jordan (2017) explores an apparent dialetheia in Sartre's account of reflection. Brown (2023) and McNulty (2025) pursue dialetheic reading of the chapter on bad faith. The possibility of a dialetheic reading is mentioned, though rejected, by Erhard (2020).

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equivalence holds in the non-fundamental language used to describe the manifest world (i.e., the world as structured by being-for-itself and its constitutive nothingness).

The next two questions were posed by an anonymous referee.[11] The first question is whether the "undifferentiation" of being-in-itself entails its "homogeneity." I've interpreted the denial of differentiation as the denial that being-in-itself admits of a privileged, mind-independent decomposition into individuals. But we could also ask whether being-in-itself is (for lack of a better phrase) diversely propertied (F here, G there). That is, we could ask whether the "book of being-in-itself" could, compatibly with the ban on negative ideology, contain locutions capturing the qualitative diversity of the manifest world. Perhaps, the Sartrean monist could do this using a "feature-placing language" (Strawson, 1964), but this prospect raises two questions—one philosophical and one textual. First, it's not clear to me whether qualitative diversity could be captured in a feature-placing language without smuggling in negative ideology through the backdoor. Second, Sartre seems to deny that we can say much of substance about being-in-itself beyond a simple: "It is what it is" (B&N 28). The referee's second question is whether, if being-in-itself is not only undifferentiated but also homogenous, the second Eleatic monist argument becomes otiose. The thought is that, if we accept that time requires real change and also that being-in-itself is homogenous, it follows straightforwardly that being-in-itself is atemporal. I think there's definitely something to this, but that it's still dialectically worth laying out an independent case against temporality in case an alternative reading of the *omnis* principle turns out to be viable.

A third worry is that Sartre's claim that there is no fundamental negation is simply false. Sider (2011), for example, argues that negation is part of fundamental ideology. He criticizes a rival truthmaking conception of fundamentality on which all claims involving negation are made true by the existence of some entity or entities. His complaint is that this theory either smuggles in facts involving the banned negative ideology, or else it is ultimately unexplanatory (157–61). On the one hand, truthmaker theorists might appeal to a totality fact ("that's all"), but Sider plausibly argues that this is implicitly negative ("there's nothing more"). On the other hand, without this totality fact, the truthmaker theorist will just cite the fundamental entities as the truthmakers for all truths, but "[i]t's hard to see how all the complexity we experience could possibly be explained from that sparse basis" (160). Evaluating this objection is well beyond the scope of this paper, but I suspect that matters would look very different in the transcendental idealist framework I attribute to Sartre, where the negativity of consciousness plays a decisive role in explaining the features of the manifest world.

Fourth, consider Stephen Barker's and Mark Jago's proposal for "being positive about negative facts" (Barker & Jago 2012). Following Armstrong (1997), they hold that facts or states of affairs consist of particulars and properties standing in a non-mereological relation of unity. Their proposal is that this non-mereological unity relation comes in different flavors. To use their example, in the fact *the lake's being frozen*, the particular (the lake) is unified with the property (frozenness) by instantiation, whereas in the fact *the lake's not being frozen*, they are unified by *anti-instantiation.* Barker and Jago argue that their theory answers traditional worries about negative facts by showing how they exist in the same way as positive facts, are spatiotemporally located, and are causally efficacious. Applying the account to the case of differentiation, the distinctness facts underlying determination, e.g., "The table≠the chair," would be analyzed in terms of the table, the chair, and the identity relation being unified by anti-instantiation. The Sartrean Eleatic monist would have to object that Barker and Jago's *anti-instantiation* is a piece of negative ideology and so ruled out by the ban on negative ideology. Of course the ban on negative ideology is the big unargued-for premise in the case for Sartrean Eleatic monism, though one that Sartre could perhaps motivate on phenomenological grounds: he claims that being-in-itself—presumably including its full positivity—is disclosed to us immediately in boredom and nausea (B&N 6).

[11]Thanks!

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The final and most serious worry is that the distinctness facts posited by the pluralist are not fundamental. I'll discuss two versions of this objection. The first appeals to the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles: distinctness facts are grounded in facts about discernibility. That is, the fact that a≠b is grounded in differences in the properties of a and b. The problem with this proposal as a response to Sartre is obvious: discernibility facts are expressed using negation. The second and more promising version of the objection seeks to ground distinctness facts in existence facts. The thought here is that a≠b is grounded in the existence of a and the existence of b. Burgess (2012) illustrates the view as follows:

> Imagine God creating a field of poppies. Once the flowers exist, there's no need for Her to survey the field and stipulate that this poppy will be identical to itself, and distinct from that poppy, that poppy, etc. Intuitively, the identity/distinctness facts come along for free; they seem to be nothing over and above the relevant existential facts. (90)

Turner (2013) makes a similar point in a different context, claiming that identity is "thin:" "there's nothing to identity over and above the existence of the individuals in question" (4). If this proposal for grounding distinctness facts in existential facts is workable, the pluralist can eliminate negation from her fundamental ideology, undermining the Sartrean case against differentiation I reconstructed. While this strikes me as a plausible reply for the pluralist to make, it may suffer from a circularity problem: the distinctness fact a≠b is grounded in the plurality of existence facts [Ea], [Eb], but what explains the distinctness of [Ea] and [Eb], other than the fact that a≠b?[12]

4.2. Temporality

In Section 3.3, I reconstructed the following argument for the Eleatic thesis that mind-independent reality "escapes temporality:" Time is fundamental only if an A-series exists; concepts for the A-series are pieces of negative ideology; there is no fundamental negation; so mind-independent reality is atemporal. Since I discussed the possibility of fundamental negation in the last subsection, in this subsection, I will sketch an objection to the claim that A-series concepts are negative ideology.

The objection I have in mind derives from Arthur Prior's tense realism. According to Prior, tense logic is part of fundamental ideology. Tense logic adds tense operators like the following to standard propositional or predicate logic:

> *P* "It has at some time been the case that…"
> *F* "It will at some time be the case that…"

The key point here is that, on the Priorian picture, these operators are primitive:

> Tense logic is for me, if I may use the phrase, metaphysically fundamental, and not just an artificially torn-off fragment of the first-order theory of the earlier-later relation. (Prior and Fine 1977, 32; quoted in Sider, 2011, 240)

The Priorian view constitutes a challenge to the Sartrean argument against the temporality of being-in-itself because it denies that *P* and *F* are defined in terms of negation. Thus the Priorian tense realist can capture facts about temporal passage without violating the ban on fundamental negative ideology.

I find this objection fairly compelling, but let me mention one way that the Sartrean Eleatic monist could respond. Sider (2001) accuses tense realists of "cheating," where the "cheater is

[12]See Burgess (2012) and Shumener (2017) for discussion.

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unwilling to accept an ontology robust enough to bear the weight of the truths he feels free to invoke" (41). The problem is that primitive tensed properties are objectionably *hypothetical* in the sense that they "point beyond" their instances (Ibid.; see Caplan & Sanson, 2011 for discussion). Though this is to trade a relatively lucid metaphor for some far more obscure metaphors, this worry about hypotheticality seems to be part of what Sartre is getting at in describing being-in-itself as "immanent," "opaque," and "massive" (B&N 26–7).

5. Textual Objections

Although the impression that Sartre flirts with Eleatic monism is widespread, a number of scholars have recently challenged the Eleatic monist reading. Sebastian Gardner, for example, begins by registering the appearance of Eleatic monism in Sartre's notion of being-in-itself.

> It seems that Sartre's picture is one on which a Spinozist or Parmenidean One lurks, somehow still visible and showing through from behind a thin phantasmagoria of phenomenal objects projected onto it. Even if there is no immediate logical inconsistency in this picture, still it seems barely coherent. (Gardner, 2009, 76)

This picture, while certainly revisionary, doesn't strike me as "barely coherent," especially given the detailed defenses of monism in recent analytic metaphysics. In any case, Gardner sketches his alternative picture in discussion of the famous description of the chestnut tree root in *Nausea*.

> It [existence] had lost its harmless appearance as an abstract category: it was the very stuff of things, that root was steeped into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass on the lawn, all that had vanished; the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, in disorder—naked, with a frightening, obscene nakedness. (Sartre 2007, 183)

On Gardner's non-monist reading, the shift brought about by an experience of nausea is not best captured in terms of the contrast of "a conceptualized, determinately propertied object, with a raw, property-less substrate or raw matter" (Gardner, 2009, 78). Instead, the contrast between an ordinary experience and that of nausea is a difference in two "modes of apprehension:" an apprehension of the tree root as intelligible and meaningful in virtue of its connection to human projects versus an apprehension of the tree root in its brute, contingent existence. While Gardner puts this non-monistic interpretation on the table, he seems to think the monism-plus-transcendental-idealism reading I've defended is still viable (Gardner, 2009, 80).

Gusman (2022) decisively rejects the monistic reading—what he describes as the "common misconception" that "outside of consciousness a monolithic mass of brute being exists from which consciousness distills definitive objects" (Gusman, 2022, 120). By my count, Gusman gives three main arguments against the monist reading. First, following Gardner, Gusman argues that Sartre's description of what nausea reveals in the tree root scene from *Nausea* is incompatible with the monist reading. Second, Gusman argues that Sartre's remarks on differentiation and totality in the Introduction to B&N and "On Determination as Negation" are incompatible with the monist reading. Third, in what I take to be his strongest argument, Gusman appeals to a passage from the 1947 lecture "Self-Consciousness and Self-Knowledge" to argue that being-in-itself is a mode of being rather than a "monolithic mass of brute being." I'll take each of these arguments in turn.

First, Gusman points out that in the tree root scene, Sartre refers to "masses, in disorder." Gusman makes two points about this phrase. First, "['Masses'] is clearly plural, suggesting masses of beings rather than a single being" (Gusman, 2022, 125). Second, "These masses are in disorder, which also excludes that it is a single being. How can a single being be in disorder?" (Ibid.) To the first point, recall that the proper formulation of the Eleatic monist view I offered in Section 3.2

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allows that there are "masses" of stuff that are part of the amorphous stuff of being-in-itself, as long as there is no privileged, mind-independent decomposition of being-in-itself into individuals. To the second point, the reference to "disorder" in the *Nausea* passage can be easily accommodated on the monism-plus-transcendental idealism reading. On this reading, what nausea reveals is that the order characteristic of the manifest image is not intrinsic to being-in-itself, but is rather due to the various ontological structures of being-for-itself. The "masses" are "in disorder" in the experience of nausea because the decomposition of being-in-itself into individuals characteristic of ordinary experience is shown to be a contingent imposition of consciousness.

Second, Gusman argues that some of the passages I've cited in support of my reading actually tell in favor of the non-monistic reading. First, he claims that Sartre's denial that being-in-itself is "*one* undifferentiated self-affirmation" shows that the monist reading is untenable. He cites another passage from "On Determination as Negation" in support of the same point. There Sartre claims that "totality can only come to being only through the for-itself" (B&N 256). Remarking on this passage, Gusman writes: "Sartre cannot be more clear: there is no such thing as a pure monolithic being that encompasses all things *outside of experience*" (Gusman, 2022, 133). Gusman misreads these passages, or at least he overstates their evidential force in favor of a non-monist reading. First, I offered an alternative, monist-friendly reading of the Introduction passage about differentiation at the end of Section 3.2. As a reminder, Sartre's point, as I read it, is that it's not correct to say that there's exactly one mind-independent being; following Della Rocca, the monist should instead say, "There is, simply, being," and doing so requires a rejection of the ideology involved with individuals and counting (even counting to one). Second, and relatedly, Sartre's point about totality is that "any totality presupposes an internal relation of being between the terms of a quasi-multiplicity," i.e., that in order to quantify over all beings, those beings must already be individuated (B&N 256). This is perfectly compatible with the monist reading: Sartre's point is that the concepts of individuality and totality are alike dependent on being-for-itself. Worse for Gusman, though, premises he endorses in his interpretation seem positively incompatible with a non-monist reading. Gusman writes that "Sartre stresses that the relationships between things are inessential to them: they are imposed upon them by us" (Gusman, 2022, 128). But if *distinctness* is included among these relationships, which Gusman seems to allow, then the argument I gave in Section 3.2 goes through. If distinctness is imposed by us, then there's not a privileged, mind-independent decomposition of being-in-itself into individuals, as I've argued.

Finally, Gusman appeals to a passage from "Self-Consciousness and Self-Knowledge," a 1947 lecture summarizing the arguments of the Introduction and Part II, Chapter 1 of B&N.

> When it comes to being, however, we find that it accompanies all of an object's appearances. In every one of its appearances, it remains the same. An appearance does not conceal it, but it does not reveal it, either. If I so please, I may cut this book into tiny pieces – [and] there will be as much being in each one of these pieces as there is in the book [as a whole]. When I change its form by burning it or gluing it together, there will always be the same amount of being in each of these manifestations. An infinite dissolution or transformation of the book will not reveal more of it to me, nor will it conceal it from me. (Sartre, 2023, 37)

This passage seems to tell against the Eleatic monist reading, since if being-in-itself were an amorphous stuff there would be less of it in each of the pieces of the book than there is in the book as a whole. Gusman interprets this passage as showing that being-in-itself is a *mode of being*, rather than an amorphous stuff. Sartre's point then, according to Gusman, is that "[e]ach thing exists in this way, there is no ontological differentiation between their modes of being" (B&N 134). I admit that this passage should be read as making an "ontological" (about modes of being) rather than "ontic" (about entities) claim about being-in-itself, to use a Heideggerian distinction, and more generally that the distinction between being-in-itself and being-for-itself is a distinction in modes of being. But this is compatible with Sartre arguing that the mode of being-in-itself necessarily does

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not admit of plurality. The argument I reconstructed in Section 3.2 purports to show this, so in order to undermine the monist reading Gusman would need to say which premise of the reconstructed argument against differentiation Sartre rejects.

I've argued that all three passages Gusman adduces in support of his non-monist reading are compatible with the monist reading. This doesn't alone show that the monist reading is correct, of course, but it does shift the burden back to the non-monist to explain where I've gone wrong in attributing the two reconstructed arguments from Section 3 to Sartre. The non-monist needs to offer alternative readings of at least one of three key claims Sartre makes in B&N: the ban on negative ideology, the *omnis determinatio est negatio* principle, and the claim that temporal concepts are negative. On what I've argued are straightforward and plausible interpretations of these claims, Eleatic monism follows. I invite non-monist readers of B&N to develop such alternative interpretations; doing so can only enrich our understanding of this fascinating and frustrating book.

6. Conclusion

I've argued that premises Sartre endorses in B&N commit him to Eleatic monism, understood in terms of (suitably modified versions of) Rea's theses (a)-(d). The arguments against the differentiation and temporality of being-in-itself should be of interest to analytic metaphysicians invested in the recent monist revival. Moreover, by showing that plausible interpretations of key Sartrean claims entail Eleatic monism, I hope to have breathed new life into an old reading of *Being and Nothingness*.

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