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**The Meaning(s) of Life:  
A Contemporary Perspective Between Nietzsche, Sartre, & Nancy**

by  
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<sup>1</sup> Nancy 2000:2.

## ABSTRACT

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*What is the meaning of life?* This philosophical question is as old as human existence itself, and has received especial attention in the secular Western world since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Friedrich Nietzsche's polemical proclamation of the 'death of god'. This study enquires into the possibility of a meaningful human life in this increasingly secular and globalized world, which follows in the wake of the death of god and the demise of traditional transcendental sources of human meaning. This study does so through recourse to the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jean-Luc Nancy. Nietzsche's proto-existentialist philosophy raises the problem of *nihilism* to the forefront of our existential and philosophical concern, and urges those following in his legacy to confront the menacing threat of meaninglessness facing human beings after the death of god. Following in the immediate aftermath of Nietzsche's thought, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre takes up the existentialist reigns from Nietzsche and conceives an individualist phenomenological ontology of human meaning. Sartre offers contemporary humanity a possible means-to-meaning(s) by virtue of a fundamental freedom fettered to an unmitigated personal responsibility on the part of each individual to render their own lives meaningful here and now. However, Sartre's ontological account subscribes strictly to the individual or subjective dimension of meaning, and does not adequately account for the possibility that meaning might be made in concert with other human individuals. In this regard, the contemporary thought of Jean-Luc Nancy is employed in order to address the social dimension of human meaning(s). Specifically, through Nancy's philosophy of meaning as 'sense' and existence as 'singular plural', one might be given to understand that meaning is a pursuit that is carried out throughout this world between human beings who are always already sharing in meaning(s) owing to their immediate worldly existence. This study positions itself between the philosophies of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy, so as to arrive at a contemporary perspective on the meaning(s) of human existence in both an individual and social sense, thus allowing us to see that human life today can indeed be thought of as meaningful.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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Given the frequency with which references to particular philosophical works appear in this study, the following abbreviated references will be used:

### Works by Friedrich Nietzsche

Especially in Chapter II, but also throughout this study, the following abbreviations are used:

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<i>BGE</i>	<i>Beyond Good &amp; Evil</i>
<i>GM</i>	<i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i>
<i>GS</i>	<i>The Gay Science</i>
<i>TI</i>	<i>Twilight of the Idols</i>
<i>TSZ</i>	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>
<i>WP</i>	<i>The Will to Power</i>

### Works by Jean-Paul Sartre

Especially in Chapter III, but also throughout this study, the following abbreviations are used:

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<i>BN</i>	<i>Being &amp; Nothingness</i>
<i>EH</i>	<i>Existentialism is a Humanism</i>
<i>NE</i>	<i>Notebooks for an Ethics</i>
<i>TE</i>	<i>The Transcendence of the Ego</i>

### Works by Jean-Luc Nancy

Especially in Chapter IV, but also throughout this study, the following abbreviations are used:

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<i>BP</i>	<i>The Birth to Presence</i>
<i>BSP</i>	<i>Being Singular Plural</i>
<i>EF</i>	<i>The Experience of Freedom</i>
<i>FT</i>	<i>A Finite Thinking</i>
<i>GT</i>	<i>The Gravity of Thought</i>
<i>IC</i>	<i>The Inoperative Community</i>
<i>SW</i>	<i>The Sense of the World</i>

### Work by Martin Heidegger

Throughout this study, the following abbreviation is used:

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<i>BT</i>	<i>Being and Time</i>
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*Note:* All other references to primary and secondary texts will not be abbreviated in this study, and will be referenced in accordance with the Harvard referencing method.

## CHAPTER I:

### Introduction(s) to the Meaning(s) of Life

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I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living... I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions. How to answer it?<sup>1</sup>

This study is concerned with the philosophical question on the meaning of life, which, as the above quote suggests, is anything but a trivial concern. At stake in this question is the human condition in its entirety, encompassing all the eventualities that form part of our human experience of existence in this world. The question on the meaning of life has been put forward by a diverse array of discourses, ranging from the philosophically profound to the comically absurd.<sup>2</sup> The question at hand is, arguably, one of the most important philosophical questions to have been raised in the history of human thought, and one which resurfaces perpetually in the face of the exigent demands of human existence. This fact is no less true of the situation facing humanity in the contemporary secular world, in which more traditional accounts of a meaningful human existence, particularly those of the religious and transcendentalist variety, no longer possess the authority and meaningful potency that they might have held in former years. Additionally, the contemporary world is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent, calling for a conception of life's possible meaning(s) which accounts for the principally pluralistic nature of the world today.

This study attempts to (re)think the possibilities of a meaningful human existence in the contemporary world in a more immediate, secular sense, without recourse to any qualification of meaning beyond this world, here and now. It does so through the proto-existentialist thought of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), the quintessentially existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and the contemporary philosophical insights of Jean-Luc Nancy (1940–). These noteworthy philosophical figures share in the view that the world is beginning to demand a means-to-meaning that speaks to the more secular existential concerns of humanity. With regard to this study in its entirety, this opening introductory chapter serves as a preliminary exposition on the meaning of life as a philosophical concept, its use in contemporary philosophical discourse(s), as well as the possible implications pertaining to the question on the meaning of life. This chapter also serves to briefly contextualize the question of life's meaning within the history of Western thought so as to demonstrate its contemporary relevance, and to outline how this question will be addressed through the philosophies of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy in this study.

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<sup>1</sup> Camus 2013:5-6.

<sup>2</sup> One might think of Monty Python's uproarious film *The Meaning of Life* (1983), or Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), where the answer to the question on the meaning of life is given facetiously simply as '42'.

## 1.1. Meaning as a Philosophical Concept

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The philosophical problem of the meaning of life at once presents itself to human thought in a form so manifestly monumental as to suggest an inexorable inscrutability associated with the posing of such a question. So much so that one might be drawn to ask whether such a question lends itself to philosophical consideration at all, since the question on life's meaning might suggest a potential nebulosity, from which one might be tempted to conclude that such a seemingly unanswerable question ultimately leads only to further confusion or despair. One might, therefore, ask whether or not the question on the meaning of life should be discarded altogether, since its definitive answer has not been clearly unveiled in our human history thus far. However, one significant aspect of the question on the meaning of life seems to ensure its continuation in human thought: its immediate importance to human beings. That is, the question on the meaning of life is not purely an abstract question easily discarded by philosophers; it is a question asked, either directly or implicitly, by human beings *in* and *of* their own lives.

The fact that the question on the meaning of life might lend itself to nebulosity and obscurely formulated enigmatic answers simply means that one must acknowledge that a philosophical investigation into the meaning of life requires strict delimitation and conceptual clarity. A number of conceptual clarifications pertaining to the question on the meaning of life warrant philosophical consideration at the very outset of this study. Firstly, I aim to distinguish between varying conceptions of meaning espoused in different discourses that deal with the subject, leading to a definition of my own philosophical parameters of meaning which will be employed throughout this study. Secondly, I provide a succinct discussion of the most prominent contemporary philosophical approaches to the question on the meaning of life. I will further briefly evaluate these approaches and underscore some of their insufficiencies, thereby carving out a philosophical space for my own approach to this question. Finally, the possible dimensions and implications of the question on the meaning of life will be highlighted, and the scope of this study will be succinctly delineated.

### 1.1.1. Semantic, Semiotic, & Existential Meaning

The philosophical question of meaning can be treated in a variety of ways. Perhaps most common of all these ways is meaning as a study of language, which I will call *linguistic* or *semantic meaning*. Semantic meaning entails meaning as a function of propositions, syntagms and paradigms, as well as linguistic structures. Anglo-American or Analytical philosophers have often reduced the study of meaning as a whole to the study of semantic meaning, sometimes even dismissing the study on the meaning of life on the grounds that it is devoid of philosophical content. This view is patently at odds with the view that the study at hand would make apparent, viz. that the meaning of life is

indeed a worthy philosophical question, replete with possible content from human experience itself. The study at hand will not be engaging in a study of linguistic or semantic meaning, but naturally, such meaning will inevitably contribute in understanding this thesis in its entirety.

A second notable field of inquiry that deals with the concept of meaning is semiotics, or the systematic study of signs and sign systems. I will refer to this variety as *semiotic meaning*, which entails meaning as a function of signification: a relation between a signifier representative of a signified.<sup>3</sup> Semiotic meaning is established through this representational relation which inscribes otherwise empty concepts with meaningful content which facilitates understanding.<sup>4</sup> This type of relational meaning is equally applicable to the mundane and the transcendent. Notably, semantic and semiotic meaning share a certain degree of overlap in that they both understand meaning as a product of systematic structures, which allow humanity the ability to render the world increasingly intelligible. In the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century, post-structuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) sought to redefine meaning as purely relational along these lines. Derrida posits that meaning is established precisely in or through this relation between signifiers and signifieds, and nowhere else. Derrida further sought to undermine the notion that meaning might somehow transcend this relation by arguing that ‘there is nothing outside the text’.<sup>5</sup> Derrida thus asserts that meaning does not subsist ‘in itself’ or apart from the relation in which it is constituted, with the further implication that there is no transcendent meaning beyond human interpretation – a view that is contrary to the Platonic and Christian thought which has dominated Western philosophy. This idea will become increasingly important in the latter part of this study, specifically when considering Jean-Luc Nancy’s conception of meaning. Semiotic meaning will thus form part of the study at hand, but in a secondary rather than primary role.

This study is concerned primarily with what I will designate as *existential meaning*,<sup>6</sup> derived from a philosophical examination of human existence and its possible meaning(s) in the contemporary world. Existential meaning is equivalent to the philosophical question on the meaning of life, or more specifically still, the meaning of *human* life. Existential meaning is not to be equated merely with the semantic signification of logic and linguistics, but refers rather to that which might be thought to constitute a meaningful human existence; one which is considered worthwhile, valuable, purposeful, fulfilling, or in Aristotelean terms, a life of *eudaimonia*. The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) posits that humankind is unique in its being in that

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<sup>3</sup> This is according to Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), who pioneered the field of semiotics.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the word ‘tree’ is representative of an actual, physical tree in the material world. Similarly, though with a greater emphasis on the metaphysical and metaphorical, the word ‘God’ could signify a timeless, formless entity residing in a supernal realm beyond the more immediate material world.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida 1997:158.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this study, ‘existential’ does not refer exclusively to the philosophical discourse of existentialism, but refers to the fact that meaning pertains directly to human *existence* and the human experience(s) thereof.

its very existence is its foremost concern, not only pragmatically speaking, but in the sense that existential meaning is assumed as a *question* for human beings by virtue of their ontological constitution. In this regard, contemporary philosopher, John Cottingham states that '[h]uman beings are hungry for significance',<sup>7</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologist and noted Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl terms this interminable human striving after significance the 'will to meaning',<sup>8</sup> which he further describes as 'the most human of all human phenomena'.<sup>9</sup> From this one might justifiably posit that human existence innately entails the purposive pursuit of meaning, whether that pursuit of meaning leads outwards to a *transcendent* source beyond this world, or inwards to an *immanent* reserve of individual freedom and creativity.

The concept of existential meaning is closely associated with, but not to be reduced or equated to, the relevant concepts of *purpose* and *value*. Purpose implies a teleological relation between human thought and human existence. That is, purpose suggests a life that is oriented towards a *telos* or particular end. The 'purpose of life' would thus entail an instrumental reasoning directed towards existential meaning, the latter of which would, hopefully, come to fruition upon the achievement of the desired goal towards which one's purpose was projected. A meaningful existence is, therefore, one in which a human individual is directed by some projected purpose, but that purpose is not equivalent to existential meaning, nor is it mutually exclusive from meaning. One might say that possessing an existential purpose engenders existential meaning, for a life which is projected into the future is one which is oriented towards possible meaning(s). Yet, the prediction of existential meaning is largely precluded by the contingent and often surprising nature of human existence, which is to say that while I might propose to direct myself towards a particular purpose, its fulfilment does not guarantee the manifestation of existential meaning.

Existential meaning should also be distinguished from the concept of *value*. A meaningful life is necessarily one which is personally valued in the sense that living such a life is thought to be worthwhile by the person living that life. However, existential meaning does not necessarily correlate with the *external* ascription of value to life, especially not in socio-economic terms. For instance, one might consider it a truism that a meaningful life is not necessarily a wealthy or highly productive life in material terms. A person who is not considered to be productive in a socio-economic sense, might well lead a life that is personally fulfilling, and therefore meaningful. A meaningful life is, therefore, one that is valued from *within*, evaluated by the particular human individual living that life. This is not to say that external evaluations of a human life and its meaning are entirely irrelevant, but rather that a life cannot truly be considered meaningful if this

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<sup>7</sup> Cottingham 2003:32.

<sup>8</sup> See Frankl 2008:105-106. See also: Frankl's *The Will to Meaning* (1988).

<sup>9</sup> Frankl 2011:153. Viktor E. Frankl's work in psychotherapy focuses specifically on the question of the meaning of life as it confronts individuals in their own lives, and identifies it as the most important question to ask of one's patients.

view is not held by the person actually living that life. Therefore, the external ascription of value and meaning to a human life is a secondary concern while the internal sense that one's life is indeed meaningful is a primary, which is to say necessary, condition of existential meaning. Whether or not such internal, *individual* meaning is indeed a *sufficient* condition for a meaningful life is subject to philosophical consideration, and constitutes an important concern in this study.

Finally, it is important to qualify the nature of existential meaning, and how human beings might come to recognize existential meaning and develop an expectation of its manifestation. Existential meaning should not be thought of as an *absolute* answer whose manifestation will result in the *complete* and *unequivocal* fulfilment of a human life. It will be argued in what follows that existential meaning is neither predetermined nor permanent, but subject to perpetual fluctuations and interminable change, which human beings would necessarily have to confront in their search for a meaningful existence. In addition to this, the arguments which follow assert that life is neither inherently meaningful nor inherently meaningless, but the result of an existential orientation that projects itself towards existence as (at least) *potentially* meaningful. How exactly existential meaning might be made manifest, or whence existential meaning stems, are the two primary concerns which call to be addressed in philosophical discourse(s) on existential meaning.

### 1.1.2. Philosophical Approaches to the Meaning of Life

Thaddeus Metz<sup>10</sup> identifies two major branches in contemporary philosophical discourses on the meaning of life. This first of these is *Supernaturalism*, which provides an account that inextricably links existential meaning either to an absolute deity or to the human soul; the former of which Metz labels a 'God-centred' approach and the latter 'soul-centred'.<sup>11</sup> Viktor Frankl refers to such supernatural or transcendental existential meaning as 'ultimate meaning', which he distinguishes from existential meaning rooted in the immediacy of the physical world.<sup>12</sup> This latter idea is what Metz identifies as the second major branch of philosophy on existential meaning, viz. *Naturalism*, which stands diametrically opposed to Supernaturalism, specifically through its assertion that existential meaning is created or discovered within the immediate, immanent material world, and not through recourse to any transcendent, immaterial realm. Metz further subdivides the Naturalist view into *Subjectivism* and *Objectivism*.<sup>13</sup> Subjectivist accounts hold that existential meaning is the product of individual human agency, creativity, and freedom of will, while the Objectivist account holds that existential meaning is established in relation to an objective physical criterion which must be satisfied in order for meaning to manifest.

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<sup>10</sup> See Metz 2013a for a complete account, and see Metz 2013b for a succinct overview. See also: Seachris (2016).

<sup>11</sup> Metz 2013a:79-82.

<sup>12</sup> In this regard, one might compare Frankl's works *Man's Search for Meaning* and *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, the latter of which examines the religious or supernatural element(s) to existential meaning.

<sup>13</sup> Metz 2013a:164-165.

While the above distinctions may be applied to both Analytical and Continental philosophical thought, they are undoubtedly employed to a greater extent in the Analytical tradition, while Continental thought, with which this study aligns its affinities, is typically more flexible in its discourses on existential meaning. This study employs three quintessentially Continental thinkers, viz. Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy, whose works have contributed directly to the philosophical study of existential meaning. While the later Nietzsche and the early Sartre might be termed subjectivists in accordance with the above distinctions, Nancy's contemporary thought is far more difficult to define in such terms. In fact, the argument can be made that all of these philosophers, at various points in their respective philosophies, at least partially defy the categories of existential meaning proposed above. This study therefore employs such categories only to a very limited extent, and aims instead to demonstrate, implicitly rather than explicitly, the limitations of a strictly Analytical approach to the question of existential meaning by providing views on this question in such a way as to transcend the subjectivist-objectivist dichotomy.

To be clear, this study may be termed a Naturalist account inasmuch as it is decidedly non-theistic, and deliberately avoids direct engagement with metaphysical speculation on the existence of god, the nature of the human soul, and the possible relation between such supernatural elements and human existential meaning. This study assumes a more secular perspective on the question of existential meaning in order to investigate the possibilities of existential meaning that remain at humanity's disposal in the increasingly interconnected and interdependent contemporary world, without recourse to supernaturalism in any form. Employing Frankl's terminology, as indicated above, this study therefore does not intend to engage in a search for 'ultimate meaning', but rather, for meaning which is rooted in more immediate human experience, in *this* world, *hic et nunc*.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, a comprehensive philosophical investigation into the question of existential meaning is potentially further implicated in other philosophical domains inasmuch as it raises ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical concerns. While most of these dimensions are not addressed explicitly in the study which follows, they may well be implicitly entailed, and it is therefore worth briefly noting the potential implications raised in a discussion of existential meaning. Such implications can also be suggested as areas of philosophical focus for future study.

### **1.1.3. The Dimensions & Implications of Existential Meaning**

There are discernible possible ethical implications in a discourse on existential meaning. Firstly, the question can be raised as to what personal and social behaviour might be warranted or legitimated by an adherence to a particular conception of existential meaning. For instance,

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<sup>14</sup> The 'here and now'. This term suggests the immediacy and immanence of human existential experience within the contemporary world, without recourse to any metaphysical or transcendental realm(s) transcending the immediacy of the contemporary world and its contemporary concerns. The Latin terminology is used throughout this study in order to succinctly convey these specific connotations of the term each time it is employed.

personal convictions concerning a meaningful existence might include the extirpation of a subset of the human race, as was the case in the Holocaust, or might problematically legitimate the act of murder or immolation for the purposes of salvation or reward.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, one might consider what impact a particular conception of existential meaning might have on the natural environment and other beings with whom humanity shares this world. For instance, if humanity believes itself to have been accorded a special authoritative position in this world, and that human existence is meaningful primarily as a result of this, a potentially problematic hierarchy of beings might be established, fostering an unequal and unjust co-existence between beings on this planet. Both of these aforementioned ethical implications highlight the philosophical fact that it is necessary to recognize that existential meaning is not an entirely isolated philosophical affair, and has bearing on the world and other beings with whom one shares that world. These ethical implications will be partly explored in an implicit rather than explicit manner in this study.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, however, this study is descriptive rather than prescriptive in its aims, in that it seeks to describe the possibilities of existential meaning in the contemporary world, without elevating any particular conception of existential meaning to a dominant position above others.

One might further discern an epistemological dimension to existential meaning inasmuch as the question of meaning might be inextricably tethered to a conception of what constitutes truth. Since existential meaning may well contribute to human interpretation and an understanding of reality, it follows that existential meaning has bearing on a human conception of what might be considered as true and untrue of reality. For instance, in the case of Platonic philosophy, Truth (in an absolute sense) is said to reside in a world of immutable Forms, thus removed from this mutable realm of 'mere appearances'. This notion is predicated on Plato's metaphysical presupposition that the meaning of human existence lies in the pursuit of wisdom, which is a pursuit towards perfection which obtains only in an otherworldly realm. This logic might also be said to apply to the major world religions – Islam, Christianity, Judaism – insofar as a revelation of Divine Truth traditionally supervenes on other forms of truth, such as empirical truth, or common sense truisms. Therefore, a discourse concerned with the meaning of human existence potentially exposes itself, either deliberately or inadvertently, to epistemic philosophical entailments. For the purposes of this study, however, such epistemic entailments will not be explored in any appreciable measure, and the focus will remain rooted in existential, rather than epistemological, concerns.

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<sup>15</sup> One might also consider the potentially deleterious effects of a subjective meaning of life established by a human individual operating under a problematic, pathological psychological condition, especially an aberrant psychopathy. Such a subjective existential meaning presents potential psychological, sociological, and ethical implications, and might very well cause considerable problems for other beings who share a space or society with such a pathological individual.

<sup>16</sup> Particularly in Chapters III and IV on Sartre and Nancy, but less so in regard to Nietzsche, who argued that existential meaning should be non-moral or amoral in nature, i.e. 'beyond good and evil'.

Finally, it is noteworthy that existential questions often share a certain degree of relation and even overlap with major *metaphysical* questions in Western philosophy, such as ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’, ‘what constitutes reality?’, as well as, ‘are human beings the creation of a divine creator or merely the product of natural processes?’ Importantly, however, existential questions should not simply be equated or reduced to such metaphysical questions, since metaphysical questions typically seek to understand the *nature* of Being, while existential questions seek to understand the *meaning* of Being, and even more specifically, the meaning of *human* existence. The question on the meaning of life, therefore, often directly or indirectly suggests metaphysical entailments without the possibility of its reduction to such entailments. Conversely, the question on the meaning of life is one which is often implied, either directly or indirectly, in metaphysical philosophical discourses throughout the history of Western thought. One might thus discern existential questions within metaphysical speculation as old as human conceptual thought itself, but this is not the purpose of the study at hand. This study’s emphasis is directed specifically at existential, rather than metaphysical, questions. Following these elucidations, the subsequent subsection serves to briefly trace the question of existential meaning in the history of Western thought, with an especial emphasis on its contemporary relevance.

## 1.2. The Meaning of Life in Context

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The philosophical question on the meaning of life is by no means without historical precedent. As Gilles Deleuze phrases it, ‘[t]he story of the meaning of existence is a long one.’<sup>17</sup> Human questions pertaining to life’s (ultimate) purpose or meaning punctuate the Western philosophical landscape, and can be discerned in various forms of human thought from different traditions and cultures the world over, ranging from traditional spiritual and religious doctrines, to utopian narratives of political liberation and peace. However, the particular formulation of the question on the meaning of life has not remained consistent throughout the history of human thought. The specific question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ is merely one, more recent, formulation of the question on life’s meaning. Yet, *existential questions* pertaining to the meaning of human existence can be found throughout Western philosophy.<sup>18</sup> In order to properly situate and understand the question on the meaning of life as it faces human existence in the contemporary world, one must first briefly account for the philosophical history of this question, highlighting both *how* and *why* this question has, in one form or another, retained its significance throughout the history of human thought.

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<sup>17</sup> Deleuze 2006:18.

<sup>18</sup> The question on the meaning of life is certainly not the exclusive province of Western philosophy. Evidence of this question may be traced in myriad avenues of human thought. However, for the purposes of this investigation, Western philosophical thought will be focussed upon in order to delimit the argumentative scope. However, this by no means limits the potential applicability of these philosophies to human existence in its entirety. For succinct accounts tracing the history of the question on the meaning of life in Western philosophical thought, the following sources are useful: Cottingham (2003); Eagleton (2008); Metz (2013b); & O’Brien (2016).

### 1.2.1. The Meaning(s) of Ancient to Modern Life

In Western philosophical thought, attempts to understand the meaning of human existence have been made either explicitly or implicitly at least since the time of Plato (427–347 B.C.E.),<sup>19</sup> who asserts, via his orator Socrates, that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’. From Plato’s words the idea is established in Western thought that life’s meaning might be intelligible, but only by means of a philosophical investigation into life itself, including a most deliberate examination of life’s most profound complexities and quandaries. Various other ancient Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) and Epicurus (341–271 B.C.E.), ruminated on the nature of the ‘Good Life’, and how happiness, fulfilment, flourishing, or *eudaimonia*, might be achieved and sustained in human life. Existential questions on life’s meaning can also be discerned in Greek and Roman Stoic philosophy, which typically sought to find a way to live in the face of life’s vagaries and vicissitudes. The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (121–180 C.E.), Boethius’s (c. 480–524 C.E.) *Consolations of Philosophy*, as well as St Augustine’s (354–430 C.E.) *Confessions*, might also be read as philosophical journals grappling with life’s meaning in diverse, and deeply personal ways.

During the Middle Ages in Western thought, the question on the meaning of life was asked from a foundation of Christian religious belief, which presupposed that life’s meaning was to some extent guaranteed by the existence of a benevolent God, and that a metaphysical order and stability attended such belief. Following the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and early modern period (c. 1500 to 1700) gave rise to new ways of questioning the meaning of human life. The rise of Renaissance Humanism enabled a newfound faith in human existence, fostering the future view that the meaning of life might be sought within humanity itself. Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers engaged critically with human existence, repudiating dubious doctrines about the nature and essence of human existence, and supplanting spurious ideas with an individual autonomy, allowing individuals to begin to discern their own meaning in the more secular world. Moreover, the Scientific Revolution of the early modern period (1500-1700) brought about a shift in the dynamic relationship between human beings, the natural world, and the cosmos as a whole. Following the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment, the question on the meaning of life became rendered increasingly worldly or *secular*, with a foremost emphasis drawn towards *this* world and its more immediate human concerns, and a diminished concern with the otherworldly ideals of traditional religious belief. John D. Caputo expresses the *Zeitgeist* of the modern age of philosophical thought in his assertion that ‘religion was dead or dying fast among its learned despisers who confidently predicted that it was destined to disappear as science progressed and the general level of learning rose.’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Birth-death dates in this paragraph are taken from the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy for consistency’s sake.

<sup>20</sup> Caputo 2001:56.

One can also account for the influence of the Romantic Movement during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which sought to subvert and supplant the absolute seat of human reason with a multifaceted view of human existence,<sup>21</sup> encompassing questions on the role of human existence in the greater scheme of reality. Both the Enlightenment and Romantic movements feature a significant shift in the philosophical history of the question on life's meaning, specifically inasmuch as existential meaning was, from this point onwards, increasingly placed within the province of human individuality, squarely situated within the immediate world of individual human experience. Yet, most significant to this study, is the emergence of the specific formulation of the question with which the investigation at hand is most directly concerned, viz. 'what is the meaning of life?'. This question emerged in this specific form in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and appears to have haunted human thought ever since.

### 1.2.2. The Meaning(s) of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Life

Philosophical thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century explores and develops questions on existence in a distinctive manner when compared with Western philosophy prior to this period. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is germane to this study in relation to a number of noteworthy historical and philosophical developments that contributed, either directly or indirectly, to the increasing importance of the question on the meaning of life in human thought. Historically, the following important developments are noteworthy: intensified industrialization concomitant with the Industrial Revolution (from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards), leading to poor living conditions for the majority of the urban populace;<sup>22</sup> individualist thinking following from the Enlightenment and French Revolution ideals of personal liberty, autonomy, and equality; and, importantly, increasing secularization and the demise of traditional religion and metaphysics due to the rise of scientific thinking and Enlightenment criticism. Further noteworthy philosophical developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century include the rise of historical consciousness and philosophical hermeneutics,<sup>23</sup> which cultivated a deliberate concern with the 'situatedness' of human existence, and the limitations of human interpretation owing to the *contingent* nature of human experience. This line of argumentation undermined any dogmatic metaphysical order and metaphysical necessity to human existence,<sup>24</sup> and largely subverted the universality of human claims to truth and meaning, since all such claims were henceforth subject to the contingency of historical human existence. Furthermore, hermeneutics lent credence to the notion that human existence itself was subject to

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<sup>21</sup> Tarnas 1991:368.

<sup>22</sup> Here one might investigate the socio-political dimension of the question on the meaning of life by examining the works of Karl Marx, for instance. However, these thoughts, while potentially fruitful, fall beyond the scope of this study. Yet, it is worth noting that the socio-political implications of the question on life's meaning move to greater prominence during this period, which might help to explain Marx's materialist description of the human condition.

<sup>23</sup> The philosophy of interpretation and understanding; born from the works of G.W.F. Hegel, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, and which was later developed into philosophical hermeneutics by Hans-Georg Gadamer.

<sup>24</sup> Eagleton 2008:14.

interpretation, and that such an interpretation needed to account for historical contingencies which contributed directly to any conception of a meaningful life. Writing on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Richard Tarnas draws some noteworthy remarks:

The modern experience was still vexed by a profound incoherence, with the dichotomies of the Romantic and scientific temperaments reflecting the Western *Weltanschauung's* seemingly unbridgeable disjunction between human consciousness and unconscious cosmos. [...] And as the full character and implications of the scientific world view became explicit, that inner division was experienced as that of the sensitive human psyche situated in a world alien to human meaning. Modern man was a divided animal, inexplicably self-aware in an indifferent universe.<sup>25</sup>

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a crisis in existential meaning insofar as traditional avenues of recourse for human existential meaning – specifically traditional religion and entrenched social structures – were either exhausted in their relevant content in a rapidly changing world, or had become increasingly dubious as a result of the philosophical criticism delivered by modern philosophers, especially since Descartes.<sup>26</sup> Caputo asserts that this modern crisis of meaning was born from the fact that 'Modernity had no spiritual vision to offer in the place of the one it had torn down'.<sup>27</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century crisis in human existential meaning featured a twofold aspect. Firstly, it was a personal problematic for individuals who had become increasingly atomized, socially-isolated, and abandoned to a world without epistemic or metaphysical certitude, leaving individuals without a secure foundation for their personal meaning of life.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, a socio-political dimension to the crisis of meaning can be identified in the fact that cultural customs and traditional meanings had come under the scrutiny of reason during the age of Enlightenment,<sup>29</sup> and as a result, new human values, customs, and socio-political meanings were demanded.

Post-Enlightenment thought challenged a number of traditions both within philosophy and outside of its purview, including the ostensible universality of philosophical claims, which problematically neglected the vicissitudes of individual human experience. From the spiritual and social disillusionment of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was born a variety of Counter-Enlightenment<sup>30</sup> philosophies that sought to address marginalized areas of human experience and thought, which had largely been effaced in philosophical discourses hitherto. Such Counter-

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<sup>25</sup> Tarnas 1991:377-378.

<sup>26</sup> The crisis in existential meaning that arose during this period is especially evident in the works of Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, whose philosophical import will be demonstrated presently. This crisis in existential meaning continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and can be traced in the works of Heidegger, Sartre, and Nancy, who not only note the extent of this problem, but attempt to posit possible solutions to these formidable concerns.

<sup>27</sup> Caputo 2001:56.

<sup>28</sup> One could further include Marx's well-known conception (drawn from Hegel) of 'alienation' to this list, which links the individual to the socio-political dimension(s) of the question on existential meaning.

<sup>29</sup> Here one might cite Kant's well-known essay 'An Answer to the Question "What is Enlightenment?"' of 1784, which posits that autonomous, rational individuals should retain a healthy measure of criticism towards social authorities and unquestioned beliefs and customs.

<sup>30</sup> This term is taken from Isaiah Berlin (1973), and was first coined by Friedrich Nietzsche as '*Gegenaufklärung*'.

Enlightenment thought is often diametrically opposed to an over-emphasis on human reason as the superlative human faculty; an over-emphasis which had been a perpetual postulate of modern philosophy since Descartes and his Rationalist school of philosophical inquiry. Contrary to thinkers like Descartes, who famously posited the philosophical axiom 'I think, therefore I am', Counter-Enlightenment thinkers were less concerned with epistemological and metaphysical issues surrounding existence, and more concerned with individual existence and the varieties of meaningful *lived experience* that might transpire therein.

Once one presupposes the metaphysical fact of one's existence, then the question arises: what might be said to be the purpose or *meaning* of the metaphysical fact that 'I am'? The fact *that* we exist as human beings is thus attended by an additional, perhaps more immediate, existential concern: *why* do we exist and what does it *mean* to exist? Richard Tarnas writes of this time that 'many reflective individuals began to turn inward, to an examination of consciousness itself as a potential source of meaning and identity in a world otherwise devoid of stable values.'<sup>31</sup> This shift from a primary emphasis on the metaphysical and epistemological towards the existential and experiential is of great significance to this study inasmuch as this shift marks the inception of discourses *explicitly* dealing with the question of life's meaning. Some of the most prominent thinkers who contributed to this movement towards the existential by means of Counter-Enlightenment arguments were Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900).

Often named as the 'father of Existentialism',<sup>32</sup> Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard argued in contradistinction to quintessential early modern philosophical thought, and placed his primary philosophical focus upon the subjective, non-rational, and spiritual aspects of individual human existence. In his early form of existentialist philosophy, Kierkegaard deals directly with human existence in all its complexities and possibilities, including the themes of human freedom and fear, dread and despair, as well as rational versus spiritual belief. Kierkegaard is a significant philosopher in that he introduced themes into the realm of philosophical discourse that had previously either been relegated to the periphery of philosophical inquiry and thus inadequately addressed, or simply neglected altogether. Noting this, Kierkegaard found a philosophical means to address the crisis of meaning that was confronting humanity during his lifetime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kierkegaard makes room for the non-rational within philosophy itself, allowing humanity to confront its existence and inquire into its potentiality and possible meaning. However, Kierkegaard's philosophy was predicated on his religious Christian convictions, and it appears that in his view, a satisfactory meaning to life cannot be found without recourse to the

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<sup>31</sup> Tarnas 1991:384.

<sup>32</sup> Caputo 2001:51. One might also note that Caputo further asserts that 'many "postmodernists" number [Kierkegaard] among their prime progenitors.' (*ibid.*)

religious through what Kierkegaard famously called ‘the leap of faith’. However, given the increasing secularization of the world following in the wake of the Enlightenment, one might be drawn to ask whether a religious conception of a meaningful life is a satisfactory and apposite response to the demand for meaning from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. That is, if religion is no longer accorded as much credulity as in the past, could or even should it be considered as the best possible means-to-meaning for contemporary human existence? One 19<sup>th</sup> century thinker and contemporary of Kierkegaard who disputed the value of a religious conception of a meaningful life was Arthur Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer was the first philosopher to pose the question on the meaning of life in a form immediately recognizable in contemporary discourse.<sup>33</sup> One of the central preoccupations of Schopenhauer’s thought is ‘*der Sinn des Lebens*’, or ‘the meaning of life’, in answer to which Schopenhauer posits a grim view that denies any inherent meaning to human existence whatsoever. Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy is one of the first major Western discourses on *existential nihilism*, or the philosophy which holds that meaning is absolutely absent from human life. Schopenhauer’s philosophy is significant in that it asks after life’s meaning in a manner that is decidedly non-theistic as well as non-rationalist. Schopenhauer argues that neither religious faith nor logical reasoning can deliver the human individual over to a suitable purpose or meaning, and that human existence is dictated only by a non-rational metaphysical Will, which drives us invariably and inescapably to an existence which vacillates evermore between boredom and despair. Cosmic pessimism, or existential nihilism, was thus Schopenhauer’s philosophical reaction to the crisis of meaning which plagued his age. Despite the patent negativity of Schopenhauer’s answer to the question on the meaning of life, his philosophy does offer some noteworthy insights into this question, and will be examined more closely in Chapter II, due to the fact that Schopenhauer’s thought is one of the first major philosophical accounts of existential meaning (or the lack thereof), and further proved consequential and influential in the later philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose work is the principal focus of Chapter II of this study.

By means of a philosophy that is as audacious as it is insightful,<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche seeks to identify the Western philosophical roots of nihilism, such that he might thereafter root it out and pave the way for a philosophy of the future which moves beyond the nadir of nihilism. Nietzsche’s philosophy is partly an attempt at understanding the threat of meaninglessness which confronted humanity in his own time, and a further investigation into the possibility of overcoming nihilism through a newfound means-to-meaning. By infamously positing that ‘god is dead’, Nietzsche initiates a turn in Western philosophical thought away from meaning dependent on transcendental qualification,

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<sup>33</sup> O’Brien 2016. Notably, Schopenhauer was the first known philosopher to speak of ‘the meaning of life’. In the English speaking world, the term ‘the meaning of life’ was first used in Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* II. p. ix (1834).

<sup>34</sup> Caputo (2001:52) describes Nietzschean philosophy as ‘madly beautiful, bitinglly witty’.

and towards meaning that is rooted in the immediate worldly experience of human individuals. In relation to the Nietzschean proclamation of the death of god, Caputo describes the late 19<sup>th</sup> century milieu in Western philosophy as follows: 'By the end of the nineteenth century God was indeed all but dead among the intellectuals. Religious faith had become scientifically dubious (Darwin), psychoanalytically twisted (Freud), and economically and politically reactionary (Marx).'<sup>35</sup> In the face of such eventualities, Nietzsche calls for a revaluation, or *trans-valuation*, of all human values hitherto, thereby establishing the latent possibility for new human existential meaning(s) in the future. Nietzsche is thus important in the context of this study insofar as his work serves as a philosophical foundation for a possible means-to-meaning that was previously effaced in the history of Western thought. It will be demonstrated in Chapter II of this study that Nietzschean thought ultimately paved the way for later, more contemporary philosophical thought on the question of the meaning of life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

It is in the Counter-Enlightenment philosophies of such thinkers as Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and especially Nietzsche, that the question of existential meaning was elevated into philosophical and existential prominence, specifically by means of its direct address in what has been termed *Lebensphilosophie* [Philosophy of Life], which accorded an important position to the question of existential meaning by including it among the foremost concerns of philosophical investigation henceforth. It is in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that a movement towards the disintegration of traditional philosophy and its attendant metaphysical implications began to emerge.<sup>36</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century is thus a transitional or *liminal* period, born of the Enlightenment's undermining of traditional sources of existential meaning, and advancing towards the positing of new views on human existence that could positively affirm the absence of transcendental sources of meaning.<sup>37</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy anticipated previously unforeseen views on human existence,<sup>38</sup> and for this reason, serves as an important precursor to the contemporary question of existential meaning.

### **1.2.3. Contemplating the Contemporary Meaning(s) of Life**

The existential disillusionment of the 19<sup>th</sup> century followed humanity into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and took on a visage more daunting than it had previously presented. Western humanity found itself uprooted from its traditional past, lacking orientation in an unfamiliar world from which the gods had fled,<sup>39</sup> and mired in a spiritual and existential poverty. Living during this age of metaphysical and existential uncertainty, Viktor Frankl identifies a general 'feeling of emptiness and

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<sup>35</sup> Caputo 2001:55-56.

<sup>36</sup> This disintegration would eventually pave the way for later philosophical movements, such as Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology, and Derrida's post-structuralist project of deconstruction.

<sup>37</sup> The idea of positively affirming the absence of transcendental sources of existential meaning is at the very heart of this study in its entirety.

<sup>38</sup> Caputo (2001:55) even goes so far as to refer to Nietzsche as a 'prophet' in the eyes of 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers.

<sup>39</sup> Heidegger (2002b:58) uses this phrasing ('the gods have fled') to describe 'the loss of the gods' in Western modernity.

meaninglessness<sup>40</sup> in individuals, which he described as the ‘existential vacuum’ of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>41</sup> Writing on the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Richard Tarnas asserts the following:

No transcendent Absolute guaranteed the fulfillment of human life or history. There was no eternal design or providential purpose. Things existed simply because they existed, and not for some “higher” or “deeper” reason. God was dead, and the universe was blind to human concerns, devoid of meaning or purpose.<sup>42</sup>

This sketch of a godless and potentially meaningless human existence, and the underlying existential insecurity harboured by Western humanity at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was further entrenched and exacerbated by two tumultuous World Wars, the scale of which was unprecedented in the history of human warfare. Moreover, Western humanity had to confront the harrowing events of the Holocaust, and the bloody remnants of colonial power that had stained the global landscape. Such historical eventualities were rendered all the more emphatic in their horror and abject tragedy when considered against the idealistic backdrop of the Enlightenment, whose optimism for equality, fraternity, and liberty, fostered a hopefulness for humanity that was all but dashed on the rocks of history in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Terry Eagleton identifies the difficulties which arise concerning the question of existential meaning under such conditions:

Once traditional beliefs begin to crumble in the face of historical crisis, the meaning-of-life question tends to thrust itself to the fore. But the very fact that the question is now prominent provokes a wide range of responses to it; and this bewildering diversity of solutions then serves to diminish the credibility of any one of them. Feeling it important to raise the meaning-of-life question, then, is a sign that it is going to be hard to answer it.<sup>43</sup>

The question of existential meaning as it faces humanity today is indeed a difficult question to address, especially inasmuch as any answer to this question eludes expression in a simple form. Nevertheless, it is a question which warrants consideration because it has immediate bearing on human existence in the contemporary world, which promises a potential plurality of meaning(s), but often precludes the absolute clarity of meaning(s). The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are witness to a pluralism of meaning(s) which abound from the greater absence of absolute narratives of meaning that might once have promised a veritable universalism<sup>44</sup> of meaning to all of humanity. Indeed, a proliferation of possible answers to the question on life’s meaning does little to ameliorate the obfuscation of meaning which dominates our contemporary world, featuring an

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<sup>40</sup> Frankl 2008:143.

<sup>41</sup> Frankl 2008:111. Frankl established a new school of psychotherapy called *Logotherapy* that sought to help individuals identify the purpose or meaning of their own lives, which Frankl believes to be the ‘primary motivation’ of human existence. Frankl thus identifies the problem of meaning which faces humanity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

<sup>42</sup> Tarnas 1991:389.

<sup>43</sup> Eagleton 2008:28-29.

<sup>44</sup> Religion is perhaps the most obvious example in this regard. Notably, the dominant religion of Western history, viz. Catholicism, suggests a ‘universalism’ of religious meaning in its very name.

overabundance of alternatives, ranging from seemingly simple answers proffered by the global ‘self-help’ industry,<sup>45</sup> to a variety of more esoteric ‘new age’ perspectives on human existence. There is, therefore, no shortage of potential contemporary answers to the question on the meaning of life, but despite this seeming abundance, many answers fall far short of genuine profundity and insightfulness, often providing merely superficial answers that lack argumentative rigour, and thus do not entirely warrant serious consideration. This points to both the demand for, and the difficulty of, a re-examination of this most fundamental human question in our contemporary age.

In a world bereft of transcendent significance, what recourse remains at humanity’s disposal in its interminable pursuit of a meaningful existence? In the contemporary secular world, does humanity have recourse to anything other than emergent discourses such as ‘new atheism’, touted by such ‘secular apologists’<sup>46</sup> as Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006), Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great*, 2007), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, 2006), and Sam Harris (*The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, & the Future of Reason*, 2004). If indeed we are to avoid what Paul Kurtz appositely calls ‘the transcendental temptation’<sup>47</sup> of meaning, the problem arises as to which source secular humanity might appeal henceforth in its search for meaning. A number of the abovementioned secular apologists would look to the wonders of the natural world for the beauty and meaning of life, established in the spirit of human reason and our natural inclination towards curiosity. Yet, while the discourses of the natural sciences have undoubtedly provided humanity with manifold streams of knowledge about the world and the universe at large, it seems unlikely that scientific thought is adequately equipped to address the problems of existential meaning confronting our contemporary world. This is because, as Nietzsche had already identified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, science may be especially capable of explaining *how* things work, but remains ultimately incapable of articulating *why* things *are* the way that they are, and what their *meaning* might be. Therefore, while scientific reasoning can eloquently explain the truth of the physical world and its phenomena, the existential meaning of our human reality seems to be situated somewhat beyond its purview.<sup>48</sup>

Thinking beyond the arguments put forward by secular apologists, one might even problematize the very notion of the *secular* world, particularly by acknowledging the possibility that humanity

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<sup>45</sup> The sheer scale of the contemporary global self-help industry may well be indicative of the fact that the question of existential meaning remains very much in circulation in the contemporary world.

<sup>46</sup> I borrow this term from Cottingham 2003:14.

<sup>47</sup> This is, in fact, the very title of a 2013 work by Kurtz.

<sup>48</sup> To be sure, many scientists would dispute this claim, and might even further dispute the claim that philosophy can offer any valuable insights into important questions confronting humanity and our world today. In this regard, one might quote Stephen Hawking, who, in his 2013 book *The Grand Design*, asserts that ‘philosophy is dead’, specifically because it ‘has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics.’ (p. 5). Despite this rather self-important claim, Hawking does not adequately explicate how science, particularly physics, could possibly explain the meaning(s) of contemporary human existence.

might already find itself situated in a *post-secular* world. This is a view upheld by contemporary philosopher John D. Caputo, who posits that strictly secular discourses, especially those following in the wake of the Nietzschean death of god, have often overlooked or too easily dismissed the continuing religious dimension of human existence. Caputo argues that, contrary to certain trends in secular thought, religious thinking in the West did not entirely perish under Enlightenment critique, but rather underwent a ‘deep transformation’<sup>49</sup> in which it began to account for its contingency, and the demise of its metaphysical foundations. Caputo points out that the Nietzschean death of god points to the death of absolutism in its entirety, and ironically, this also includes the view that secularism could not be *absolutely* correct in its worldview. The implication here is that secularism could not assume an absolute position without undermining its own premises, viz. that human ideas are historically contingent, and thus preclude absolute truth. Caputo therefore asserts that ‘a surprising thing happened on the way to the death of God: Enlightenment secularism *also* got crucified on the same Cross, and that spelled the death of the death of God.’<sup>50</sup> For this reason, Caputo puts forward the notion that the world of today is decidedly post-secular, rather than secular, inasmuch as ‘[r]eligion has returned even among avant-garde intellectuals who have given it a new legitimacy by discrediting its discreditors, suspecting its suspects, doubting its doubters, unmasking its unmaskers.’<sup>51</sup>

While Caputo’s views are undoubtedly meritorious, the impact of such views on the study at hand is marginal, since this study aims to investigate the *possibility* of a meaningful human existence in the contemporary world *without* recourse to religious ideals or transcendent qualification of any kind. Therefore, while post-secular trends in contemporary thought cannot be wholly overlooked, they are not entirely germane to this study since they typically assume recourse to a transcendent means-to-meaning – an idea to which this study does not subscribe. In the spirit of philosophical humility, this study does not intend to present itself as superior to a post-secular or religious conception of a meaningful life, but instead wishes to offer a secular alternative on the contemporary question of human existential meaning.

#### **1.2.4. Contemporary Secular Thought on Existential Meaning**

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the face of the world in its entirety has changed considerably. The contemporary world has become more interconnected and interdependent than ever before in human history. This is due, at least in part, to phenomena such as socio-economic globalization; the expansiveness of technology, especially the Internet, as well as mainstream and social media; contemporary global issues such as environmentalism (especially climate change); and even the

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<sup>49</sup> Caputo 2001:56.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

possibility of unprecedented human warfare; all of which would affect the world and humanity in its entirety. Our continued human existence in this world of manifold meaning(s) is beginning to demand a relevant contemporary philosophical account of human existence that can accommodate and affirm difference(s) of existential meaning(s), such that humanity might mitigate the problematic tensions and conflicts that often arise on the grounds of seemingly irreconcilable conceptions of existential meaning. Eagleton aptly expresses this idea as follows: 'No doubt our continuing wrangles over the meaning of life will prove to be fertile and productive. But in a world where we live in overwhelming danger, our failure to find common meanings is as alarming as it is invigorating.'<sup>52</sup>

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers were confronted with a world whose meaning had been marred by recent human history, and was mired in a bleak existential malaise. In both the Analytical (or Anglo-American) and Continental (or European) traditions of philosophical thought, the question on the meaning of life was garnering greater attention within this milieu. In Analytical philosophy, thinkers such as William James, Bertrand Russell, and Moritz Schlick, addressed the question of life's meaning as it confronted their contemporary age.<sup>53</sup> However, a number of philosophers in the Analytical tradition – notably, A.J. Ayer and Ludwig Wittgenstein – contended that the question of life's meaning was itself meaningless, since meaning was the domain of language rather than that of life itself.<sup>54</sup> As a result of this view, the question on the meaning of life in Analytical philosophy was largely expelled to the periphery of philosophical thought until the last 50 years or so.<sup>55</sup> Contrariwise, in Continental philosophy, the question of life's meaning has been accorded considerable attention in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is arguably through the philosophical discourse of existentialism that the question of existential meaning has received the most direct attention.<sup>56</sup> Thinkers following in the wake of Nietzsche's proto-existentialist thought, such as Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre, all address the question of existential meaning in various ways and to varying degrees.<sup>57</sup> In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus acknowledges the seeming meaninglessness or 'absurdity' of human existence, and following in the legacy of Nietzsche and even evincing elements of his philosophical flare, Camus ardently advocates for an individual human rebellion in the face of existential absurdism. In this way, Camus's philosophy may be viewed as a philosophical furtherance of the

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<sup>52</sup> Eagleton 2008:101.

<sup>53</sup> O'Brien 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Seachris 2016 & Eagleton 2008:3-6.

<sup>55</sup> This is according to Metz 2013b.

<sup>56</sup> However, the investigation of existential meaning is by no means limited to the discourse of existentialism, and can be discerned in fields as diverse as the plastic and performing arts, literature and poetry, as well as music.

<sup>57</sup> Notably, neither Camus nor Heidegger identified as existentialists. However, the works of these thinkers focus on certain themes concerning the nature and meaning of human existence. Such themes include anti-essentialism, freedom, responsibility, and individual authenticity (in various guises across the different authors' works).

heroic Nietzschean fight against nihilism. Nietzsche's proto-existentialist philosophical insights into the nature and meaning of human existence further proved influential to the philosophical works of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976).

Heidegger proposes a novel investigation into the very meaning of Being in his esteemed work of fundamental ontology, *Being and Time* (1927). However, Heidegger's ontological inquiry into the meaning of Being is not to be equated with the question on the meaning of life in the study at hand. Heidegger sought to understand what is meant by *Being* itself, or, to phrase the question in another way, Heidegger's ontology asks 'what is "is"?' While this is not the question which concerns the study at hand, Heidegger's ontological insights in *Being and Time* proved to be influential to future studies of human existence and its possible existential meaning(s). Especially consequential to the future of Continental philosophical thought were Heidegger's thoughts on human existence (or *Da-sein*, in Heidegger's terms). More specifically influential were Heidegger's insights on unique individual authenticity; human existence confronting its inevitable demise (*being-towards-death*); humanity's intimate ontological relation with the world (*being-in-the-world*); our human co-existence *with* other beings (or *Mit-sein*); and most significantly for the purposes of this study, humanity's ability and tendency to inquire into the meaning of its existence in-the-world. It is these insights from Heidegger into the nature and meaning of human existence that proved immediately influential and even foundational to the various works of the existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as the contemporary philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. It is upon these latter two thinkers that the study at hand is primarily focused.

Sartre's work of phenomenological ontology in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), and his published lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), both of which are discussed at length in Chapter III, have become important texts for scholars of existentialism, due to their historical pertinence and the new possibilities for existential meaning that these texts brought to the fore. In Sartre's radical, atheistic existentialist view, the meaning of life cannot be said to subsist somewhere beyond the province of individual human existence. Rather, existential meaning is born of human consciousness, constituted in a fundamental freedom and an ineluctable responsibility incumbent upon each individual to determine both the essence and the meaning of their being for, and by, themselves. As will be shown in Chapter III, Sartre deliberately uproots the seat of existential meaning from its former supernal stronghold in the transcendent, and supplants it with the vitality of individual human freedom. Sartre's philosophical move offers an important counter-position to transcendental qualification of existential meaning, which has been largely exhausted with the demise of religious faith concomitant with the rise of secularism. Sartre is thus significant to this study in that he provides an account of existential meaning that understands the demands of the age, without seeking recourse to transcendent truth(s) or absolute meaning(s).

Unlike Sartre's predominantly individualistic account of existential meaning, the contemporary thought of Jean-Luc Nancy offers a social, or co-existential meaning that accounts for the increasingly pluralistic meaning(s) of the contemporary world, and these ideas will be fully developed and explored in Chapter IV of the study which follows. In a manner akin to Nietzsche and the early Heidegger, from whom Nancy draws appreciable influence,<sup>58</sup> Nancy recognizes a world bereft of transcendent significance following in the wake of the notorious Nietzschean death of god,<sup>59</sup> and seeks furthermore to fathom the nature and meaning of human existence in *this world, hic et nunc*, to which humanity is henceforth abandoned without recourse to any qualification of meaning beyond its bounds. Nancy's background in existentialism, ontology, and post-structuralism, in conjunction with his astute contemporary philosophical insights into the contemporary world and human existence, renders him a most apposite candidate for a contemporary (re)conceptualization of the possible meaning(s) of human existence. In this study, the philosophical insights gathered from Sartre and Nancy will be employed in such a manner as to conceptualize a contemporary, more secular, perspective on existential meaning that speaks to the exigent demands of human existence today.

### 1.3. Outline & Objectives of the Study

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The rethinking of existential meaning with which this investigation concerns itself commences by tracing the roots of the contemporary question on existential meaning back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, specifically in the works of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. In order to properly explicate the foundations of Nietzschean thought, a brief discussion of Schopenhauer's pessimistic account of existential meaning will be provided. Nietzsche assumes Schopenhauer's grim conclusions to life's meaning as his philosophical premises, and aims to advance the philosophical discourse on human existential meaning beyond Schopenhauer's negative assertions. In my interpretation of Nietzschean thought offered in Chapter II, Nietzsche paves a path towards at least the latent possibility that existential nihilism might be overcome in our human future. In Chapter II, Nietzsche is thus employed in his capacity as a foundational thinker who opens up human thinking to novel possibilities of existential meaning(s) beyond our historical past and towards our human future. While Nietzsche himself might not have explicitly posited unequivocal answers as to a contemporary human means-to-meaning beyond nihilism, those thinkers who followed in his legacy and philosophical influence undoubtedly did. Nietzsche played a decisive role in laying the foundation for later existentialist philosophers, the most well-known of whom is Jean-Paul Sartre, to whom the study turns its attention in Chapter III.

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<sup>58</sup> Though not himself an existentialist as such, Nancy's philosophy evinces discernible existentialist themes, such as abandonment, human freedom, responsibility, finitude, and most germane to the study at hand, the possible meaning(s) of contemporary human existence.

<sup>59</sup> The Nietzschean death of god will be directly discussed in Chapter II.

Chapter III of this study seeks firstly to explicate Sartre's existentialist conception of meaning, as well as to demonstrate its philosophical and historical significance, such that one might further understand the entailments and implications of a contemporary conception of a meaningful human life, and how philosophy might respond appropriately and responsibly to the demand of this question in our contemporary world. Additionally, a critical engagement with Sartre's existentialism in Chapter III will reveal that Sartre's arguments are potentially vulnerable to a form of existential defeatism in which humanity perpetually strives after that which it is interminably denied: *absolute* existential meaning, manifesting in and of itself. I argue that while this defeatist position is by no means a *necessary* conclusion to Sartre's ontological account of existential meaning, it is nevertheless implied or potentially indicated by Sartre's description of human consciousness, and revealed most emphatically by Sartre's infamous assertion towards the end of *Being and Nothingness* that '[m]an is a useless passion.'<sup>60</sup> Moreover, I argue in Chapter IV that Sartre's individualistic position, though undoubtedly apposite for its time, is being rendered increasingly untenable in light of contemporary thought following in the wake of postmodern and post-structuralist conceptions of meaning. Specifically, by considering the contemporary philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy, which follows in the legacy of Jacques Derrida's influential post-structuralist project of deconstruction, one might argue that Sartre's existentialist conception of meaning remains fettered to an outmoded order of signification reliant upon a vestigial 'metaphysics of presence',<sup>61</sup> where the presence of the signified has simply been displaced from the transcendental domain<sup>62</sup> to immanent human subjectivity.

In Chapter IV, the contemporary thought of Nancy will be employed in such a manner as to reveal the potential pitfalls of Sartre's existentialist account of meaning, and provide a possible new means-to-meaning that has more immediate bearing on human existence in the contemporary world. Nancy acknowledges the post-structuralist critique that has transpired in the period of Western thought since Sartre's ontology first emerged, and actively engages in furthering such critique, with the aim of gaining a greater understanding of contemporary human existence and its possible meaning(s). I argue in Chapter IV that Nancy paves a path for a contemporary (re)thinking of 'the "search for meaning" with which our time is driving itself crazy'<sup>63</sup> through his (re)conceptualization of existential meaning as *sense*, in conjunction with his pluralistic conception of human beings as *singular plural*, rather than strictly individual. Chapter IV engages with the nuanced formulation(s) of existential meaning which Nancy provides in his highly relevant contemporary philosophical thought, and demonstrates the nascent possibilities of

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<sup>60</sup> *BN*, p. 636

<sup>61</sup> Derrida 2001:354. See also: Derrida 2004:284-290. Derrida's conception of the 'metaphysics of presence' is derived from Heidegger's '*Destruction*' of metaphysics *qua* onto-theology in *Being and Time* (hereafter *BT*), Introduction, §6.

<sup>62</sup> Such as the Platonic realm of the Forms, or a monotheistic conception of 'God' residing in a supernal realm.

<sup>63</sup> *SW*, p. 116.

existential meaning(s) that are opened up through Nancy's account of our increasingly interconnected and interdependent contemporary world.

By focusing firstly on Nietzsche, and then predominantly on Sartre and Nancy, as delineated above, this study aims to arrive at an understanding of contemporary human existence and its possible meaning(s) by accounting for the individualism which has dominated the contemporary Western world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the pluralism which is beginning to demand attention in the contemporary world as a whole. In this way, this study aims to provide a contemporary philosophical account that encompasses both the individual and social dimensions of existential meaning, in accordance with the philosophies of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy. Argumentative emphasis will be placed on a conception of existential meaning that does not require recourse to transcendental qualification, but which can be affirmed on the grounds of human existence in *this* world, *hic et nunc*. Moreover, I will provide a preliminary sketch for a possible groundwork of a contemporary sense of existentialism towards the end of Chapter IV, and finally suggest in the concluding Chapter V that such an account might be further developed at a later stage. Following the above outline, this study ultimately aims at providing a contemporary perspective on the possible meaning(s) of human life through the philosophies of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy.

## CHAPTER II:

### Nietzsche & the Problem of Nihilism

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... the question remains whether we are at all able to see the 'meaning,' the 'aim,' whether the question of meaninglessness or its opposite is not insoluble for us.<sup>1</sup>

In order to arrive at a satisfactory philosophical understanding of the contemporary question of existential meaning, one must first fathom the context from which the contemporary problem originally emerged. In what follows, I argue that the roots of the contemporary philosophical question of existential meaning can be traced back to 19<sup>th</sup> century Western philosophical thought, specifically that of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose work proved to be consequential in subsequent Western philosophical discourses on existential meaning. Drawing discernible influence from the pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, Nietzsche addresses the foremost threat to human existential meaning symptomatic of his own age and further prevalent in the contemporary world, namely, existential nihilism: the uninviting view that human existence is inherently and interminably meaningless. In Nietzsche's account, this nihilistic view emerges alongside the demise of traditional ideological beliefs and the ascendancy of secularism in the West. This thought is paradigmatically encapsulated and polemically expressed through Nietzsche's (in)famous proclamation of the death of god, which future thinkers on existential meaning have been compelled to confront.

Significantly, in Nietzschean thought one might further discern a fecund foundation for a creative (re)conceptualization of existential meaning that follows in the wake of the death of god, pointing to a previously untapped potentiality of existential meaning(s), possibly greater than ever before in the intellectual history of the West. As will be shown in my interpretation, Nietzsche implicitly demonstrates that an unexplored *personal* potentiality of existential meaning resides within the province of individual human existence *here* and *now*, requiring no further recourse beyond *this* world. Nietzsche implicitly reveals previously effaced possibilities of existential meaning, and further fosters an existential attitude of life-affirmation, which might allow humanity to overcome the nihilistic bemoaning of its existential condition. In this most significant sense, Nietzschean thought paves a path for future philosophers to identify the problems and demands of existential meaning confronting Western thought after the death of god, and opens up existential meaning to the possibility of its reconceptualization in contemporary terms. The exposition on Nietzsche provided in this chapter will thus serve as the theoretical foundation which historically situates the contemporary question on existential meaning, and prefigures a number of important arguments developed in the later chapters on Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean-Luc Nancy.

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<sup>1</sup> *WP*, §36 (pp. 23-24).

## 2.1. Nietzsche in Context

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'Either abolish your reverences or – yourselves!' The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be – nihilism? This is *our* question mark.<sup>2</sup>

The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche is as radical as it is significant in its unique contribution to the philosophical discourse on existential meaning. Nietzsche's philosophy, in general, lends itself to a plurality of possible interpretations, owing largely to discrepancies between his early and later philosophical writings, as well as Nietzsche's penchant for argumentative ambiguity stemming from his singular creative style, and a philosophical register vacillating between ebullient levity and wistful gravity. The interpretation presented here is based principally on Nietzsche's later writings, especially (though not exclusively) *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), *Twilight of the Idols* (1889) and his posthumously published unfinished work *The Will to Power* (first published in English in 1967).<sup>3</sup> These works, in different ways and to varying degrees, speak either directly or implicitly to the problem of nihilism and the possibility of existential meaning in the face thereof. It is in Nietzsche's later writings in general that one might trace a trajectory in his thought that leads away from his initial identification with Schopenhauer's pessimistic view, and towards a vision directed in favour of a philosophy of the future, in which existential nihilism might be staved off through sheer individual existential fortitude. In what follows in this subsection, I explicate Nietzschean thought as a foundational philosophical account tracing humanity's movement from the demise of its traditional thinking on existential meaning, and towards a latent reserve of existential meaning opening itself onto the horizon of humanity's future. The arguments which follow are undergirded by a number of contemporary interpretations of Nietzschean thought which serve to substantiate and clarify my own view that Nietzsche's philosophy is both fundamental and consequential to a contemporary reconceptualization of existential meaning.

Nietzsche identified the question on existential meaning as situated among the most paramount issues in philosophical thought,<sup>4</sup> both within his contemporary milieu and beyond. Within Nietzsche's philosophy one discerns a precocious study of the phenomenon of existential meaninglessness, or existential nihilism, and its attendant consequences. Gilles Deleuze, in his important contribution to Nietzschean studies in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962), goes so far as to assert that '[n]o one has analysed the concept of nihilism better than [Nietzsche] did, he

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<sup>2</sup> *GS*, §346 (p. 287).

<sup>3</sup> Using this unfinished and posthumously published work is often thought to be potentially problematic in Nietzschean scholarship. However, I believe that Nietzsche's insights in *The Will to Power* offer us a glimpse into the direction that Nietzsche's thought may well have been headed prior to his collapse and subsequent mental infirmity.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze 2006:17.

invented the concept.<sup>5</sup> But Nietzsche's philosophy is more than a philosophical diagnosis of the problem of nihilism; it may also be viewed as the deliberate attempt to establish a revitalized individualist *means-to-meaning* through the purposeful overcoming of existential nihilism. According to Lawrence J. Hatab:

Nietzsche's philosophy, in all its elements, is focused on the question of the meaning of life – not in the sense of finding a decisive answer to 'Why are we here?' but rather the *problem* of finding meaning in a world that ultimately blocks our natural interest in happiness, preservation, knowledge, and purpose. To be precise, the question is not 'What is the meaning of life?' but 'Can there be meaning in life?' So the question that preoccupies Nietzsche's investigations runs: Is life as we have it meaningful, worthwhile, affirmable *on its own terms*?<sup>6</sup>

Nietzsche's philosophy is especially unique within the context of this study in that it stands out in the history of Western philosophical thought as one of the foremost investigations directly addressing the challenges attendant upon existential meaning in the face of a daunting nihilism that surfaced in the wake of modern<sup>7</sup> philosophy. Richard Tarnas, writing on the effects of critical and sceptical thinking during the modern period, asserts: 'The nature of reality had fundamentally shifted for Western man, who now perceived and inhabited a cosmos of entirely new proportions, structure, and existential meaning.'<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche attests to this historical development when he posits that a feeling of despair and meaninglessness, or existential pessimism, 'comes necessarily in the wake of the Enlightenment.'<sup>9</sup>

This follows from the fact that Enlightenment thinkers relentlessly uprooted traditional existential meaning(s) through their dogged critique of dogmatism and general scepticism towards unquestioned absolutism in all its forms.<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche's philosophy comes to terms with the legacy of these historical developments in metaphysics, religion, epistemology, and most importantly, human existence itself. It is important to note that Nietzsche was not the first philosopher of this period to note the encroaching nihilism threatening human existential meaning. For this insight, Nietzsche is indebted to his philosophical forebear and principal influence, Arthur Schopenhauer. In order to comprehend the foundation and consequential nature of Nietzsche's thought, one must first understand the formidable challenge that Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy presented to Western thought.

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<sup>5</sup> Deleuze 2006:xi. The term 'nihilism' was, in fact, coined by Friedrich Jacobi in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term was later popularized by Ivan Turgenev in his novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862). For a full account of nihilism, see Pratt 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Hatab 2005:19-20.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'modern' here refers to Western thought from Descartes (c. 1600) up to, and including, Nietzsche (c. 1900).

<sup>8</sup> Tarnas 1991:283.

<sup>9</sup> *WP*, §91 (pp. 55-56).

<sup>10</sup> Especially in the form of religious absolutism, which came under scrutiny as early as Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century; as well as political absolutism, which came under severe scrutiny during the French Revolution (of 1789) and its denunciation of the oppressive *ancien régime*.

## 2.2. Schopenhauer's Pessimism

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Those who assume that there must indeed be a meaning to life, and an uplifting one at that, have to confront the cheerless challenge of a Schopenhauer. His work forces them to struggle hard to make their vision seem anything more than anodyne consolation.<sup>11</sup>

The well-known German pessimist philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, whom Nietzsche identified as one of his foremost philosophical educators and influences,<sup>12</sup> puts forward the notion that 'life presents itself as a problem, a task to be worked out'.<sup>13</sup> On the question of existential meaning, Schopenhauer was a pessimist *par excellence*. Existential pessimism, in this regard, refers to the view that human existence is inherently without merit, meaning, or transcendent truth. In *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* (1986), Georg Simmel affirms Schopenhauer's importance during this period in the history of Western philosophy by stating that 'Schopenhauer's philosophy is the absolute philosophical expression for [the] inner condition of modern man';<sup>14</sup> an inner condition which may be described as the 'ever-frustrated yearning for meaning'.<sup>15</sup> This is because Schopenhauer indicates squarely towards the *existential disillusionment* of his socio-historical milieu: existence is a 'process of disillusionment: since this is, clearly enough, what everything that happens to us is calculated to produce.'<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche further expresses admiration and affinity for Schopenhauer's atheistic philosophy due its unapologetic and direct confrontation with the problematic nature of existential meaning over against the threat of a foreboding nihilism: 'As a philosopher, Schopenhauer was the *first* admitted and inexorable atheist among us Germans... The ungodliness of existence was for him something given, palpable, indisputable...'<sup>17</sup>

Nietzsche recognises the unequivocally vital role that Schopenhauer plays in elevating the question of existential meaning into the foreground of philosophical concern. Schopenhauer achieves this by highlighting the overlooked yet significant philosophical question: *Should* life have a meaning? This thought arises in conjunction with Schopenhauer's view that humankind does not, in fact, exist in order to be happy at all.<sup>18</sup> Schopenhauer refers to this erroneous conviction that drives human beings towards a will-to-meaning as our chief 'inborn error'.<sup>19</sup> Schopenhauer adds that '[s]o long as we persist in this inborn error, and indeed even become confirmed in it through optimistic dogmas, the world seems to us full of contradictions.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Eagleton 2008:55.

<sup>12</sup> See the essay 'Schopenhauer as Educator' in Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*.

<sup>13</sup> Schopenhauer 1966b:568.

<sup>14</sup> Simmel 1986:5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix.

<sup>16</sup> Schopenhauer 2004:54. See also: Schopenhauer 1966b:574.

<sup>17</sup> *GS*, §357 (p. 307). Original emphasis. See also: *GS*, §146 (pp. 193-194).

<sup>18</sup> Paraphrased from Schopenhauer 1966b:574. See also: *ibid.*, p. 664.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 634.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Schopenhauer subtly undermines the Hegelian dialectic by elucidating the contradictory nature of reality *in itself* not in terms of Hegelian Spirit [*Geist*] but in terms of the World as Will; the former being guided by Reason, and the latter by ‘a blind urge, an impulse wholly without ground and motive.’<sup>21</sup>

Schopenhauer’s metaphysics in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) argues that there is nothing more to the intrinsic nature of reality than a wanton *Will* that constitutes reality in itself. The Will, in Schopenhauer’s conceptualization, is an aimless metaphysical impulse or force which permeates all of existence, following no discernible logic and, in direct contradistinction to Hegelian metaphysics, moving towards no ultimate *telos*. Schopenhauer, heavily indebted to Kantian philosophy, reconceptualizes Kant’s phenomenal realm as the World *qua* Representation and the noumenal realm as the World *qua* Will. Affirming Kant’s conclusion that the noumenal ‘thing in itself’ [*Ding an sich*] cannot be known by human minds, Schopenhauer asserts that the Will, *qua* ‘thing in itself’, is an inscrutable cosmic force that does not adhere to the precepts of human rationality or understanding, thereby precluding the possibility of any discernible metaphysical meaning to the world and human existence. Conceptions of existential meaning thus become stripped of all logical *necessity* and are forever displaced from reality ‘in itself’ to the indeterminacy of human *contingency*. This unalloyed contingency of existential meaning becomes problematic insofar as existence cannot then be said to be inherently meaningful – undermining the metaphysical certitude that may have been accorded to existential meaning in former thought:

The vanity<sup>22</sup> [*Nichtigkeit*] of existence is revealed in the whole form existence assumes: in the infiniteness of time and space contrasted with the finiteness of the individual in both; in the fleeting present as the sole form in which actuality exists; in the *contingency* and *relativity* of all things; in continual becoming without being; in continual desire without satisfaction; in the continual frustration of striving of which life consists.<sup>23</sup>

Importantly, however, in Nietzsche’s view, Schopenhauer’s reasoning does not ultimately manage to move beyond the traditional parameters of meaning established in Western philosophy since Plato. This is evinced in the following quote from Nietzsche:

As we thus reject the Christian interpretation and condemn its “meaning” like counterfeit, Schopenhauer’s question immediately comes to us in a terrifying way: *Has existence any meaning at all?* It will require a few centuries before this question can even be heard completely and in its full depth. What Schopenhauer himself said in answer to this question was – forgive me – hasty, youthful, only a

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<sup>21</sup> Schopenhauer 1966b:357.

<sup>22</sup> According to Janaway (1999:318): ‘It is true that, for Schopenhauer, everything in ordinary life is characterized by *Nichtigkeit*, or nothingness, which might suggest the thought that life is meaningless’ (E.F.J. Payne translates the term *Nichtigkeit* as ‘vanity’, which loses much of its power). For the purposes of this study, the preferred translation of *Nichtigkeit* is that of ‘nothingness’ rather than ‘vanity’.

<sup>23</sup> Schopenhauer 2004:51. My emphasis.

compromise, a way of remaining – remaining stuck – in precisely those Christian-ascetic moral perspectives in which one had *renounced faith* along with the faith in God. But he *posed* the question...<sup>24</sup>

Schopenhauer's significant insights on existential meaning notwithstanding,<sup>25</sup> the undercurrent of his argumentative logic remains firmly rooted in the Platonic and Christian legacy of Western metaphysics – a legacy that Nietzsche believes will need to be *overcome*, since nihilism itself is in fact attendant upon this very Western tradition of thought. The later Nietzsche is therefore not ultimately persuaded by Schopenhauer's conception of the world as Will<sup>26</sup> and his pessimistic conclusions on the question of existential meaning. The Platonic and Christian legacy in Western philosophy may be described in accordance with a *logic of Being over becoming*.<sup>27</sup> What this logic suggests for a discourse on existential meaning is that meaning and truth exist only as the result of an inextricable relation between our *apparent* reality in *this* world *hic et nunc*, and a transcendent reality 'in itself' beyond this world. From this view, *this* life in this ever-changing world of *becoming* draws its meaning from another, more 'real', more 'true', metaphysical world of *Being*, which serves as the supernal and supernatural seat of existential signification. Existential meaning is thus measured and delineated in accordance with a seemingly objective, infallible and immutable, permanent and stable transcendent source.<sup>28</sup>

Within the history of Western philosophy, existence has been accorded meaning primarily in terms of the aforementioned *logic of Being over becoming*, and described positively only in terms of associated *categories of being*, viz. permanence, stability, order, morality, and truth.<sup>29</sup> According to Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche, 'Being, the true, and the real are the avatars of nihilism.'<sup>30</sup> Following in this problematic negative logic of Being over becoming, the seat of existential meaning is extricated from *this* world *hic et nunc*, and rooted firmly in a metaphysical realm, which, to Nietzsche, is manifest only in its flagrant falsity, since a transcendent world somehow extrinsic to *this* world could never be more manifestly 'true' nor 'real' than *this* world of 'becoming' *hic et nunc*, or as Deleuze phrases it: 'For there is no being beyond becoming, nothing beyond multiplicity; neither multiplicity nor becoming are appearances or delusions.'<sup>31</sup> In Nietzsche's account, the traditional transcendent source of existential meaning is thus an illusory 'fiction'<sup>32</sup> insofar as it attempts to fabricate *Being* out of *becoming*, and thereby constitutes a corrupting influence on conceptions of existential meaning based in the *hic et nunc*.

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<sup>24</sup> *GS*, §357 (p. 308). Original emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> Deleuze 2006:18: 'Schopenhauer made the question of existence or justice reverberate as never before'

<sup>26</sup> *WP*, §84 (p. 52): 'Schopenhauer's basic misunderstanding of the will'. See also: *WP*, §692 (p. 369).

<sup>27</sup> Hatab 2005:13.

<sup>28</sup> For a full account of the development of this thought process, see Nietzsche's aphorism 'How the "True World" Finally Became a Fable' in *TI* (pp. 485-486).

<sup>29</sup> Hatab 2005:13. See also: Deleuze 2006:173.

<sup>30</sup> Deleuze 2006:173.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

According to Nietzsche, by situating the source of existential meaning in a transcendent realm which could not be confirmed through human experience, the seeds of an inexorable nihilism were sewn as far back as Platonic thought, since it is inevitable that once such a transcendent source of meaning is called into question and eventually dismantled, the meaning attributed to them would necessarily pass into obscurity.<sup>33</sup> The logic of Being over becoming erroneously describes and explains existence primarily as humanity believes it *ought* to be, but not as it actually *is*.<sup>34</sup> This is an immensely important distinction because it reveals how existential meaning, throughout the history of Western philosophy since Plato, has been fettered to the unrealistic constraints of an idealized and perpetually unrealized metaphysical reality. Platonism, and its logic of Being over becoming, serves as the foundation for all subsequent Western thought on meaning,<sup>35</sup> and according to Joan Stambaugh, ‘under the name of Platonism, Nietzsche is attacking *anything at all that transcends man*: God, ground of the world, first cause, highest being, suprasensible being, all being in general in the sense of that which is changeless.’<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche identifies the pervasive presence of this problematic negative logic throughout the history of the West, up to, and including, Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy.

According to Nietzsche’s critique, Schopenhauer’s pessimism is a direct consequence of the historical development of Western thought and is therefore (perhaps inadvertently) embroiled in its inexorable logic of Being over becoming. Nietzsche goes so far as to say that Schopenhauer is one of ‘the last metaphysicians’,<sup>37</sup> signifying that Schopenhauer’s philosophy has not yet surpassed the logic of traditional Western metaphysics: ‘Schopenhauer has done only what philosophers in general are given to doing: that he has taken up a *popular prejudice* and exaggerated it.’<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche notes the unfortunate fact that Schopenhauer’s pessimism neither truly escapes nor overcomes the traditional value assessments of Western philosophy. Instead, Schopenhauer’s philosophy follows not only as an inevitable consequence to Western metaphysics, but more regrettably for Nietzsche, is guilty of inadvertently propagating this problematic logic, since ‘he did not renounce the absoluteness of the ideal – he sneaked by.’<sup>39</sup>

This problematic logic is such that it favours a metaphysical reality over physical appearance; objective truth over subjective perspective; and univocal reason over multifaceted sensation.<sup>40</sup> Schopenhauer asserts that ‘[w]hat is universally assumed as positive, what we call *being*, the

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<sup>33</sup> Again, see ‘How the “True World” Finally Became a Fable’ in *TI* (pp. 485-486).

<sup>34</sup> Bull 2011:61.

<sup>35</sup> According to Alfred North Whitehead (1978:39): ‘The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato’.

<sup>36</sup> Stambaugh 1994:4.

<sup>37</sup> *WP*, §17 (p. 15). Interestingly, Martin Heidegger, who was heavily influenced by Nietzschean thought, later described Nietzsche in much the same way as ‘the last metaphysician of the West’ (Spivak 1997:xxxiii).

<sup>38</sup> *BGE*, §19 (p. 215)

<sup>39</sup> *WP*, §17 (p. 16)

<sup>40</sup> Hatab (2005:13) lists a number of these dichotomous antipodes.

negation of which is expressed by the concept *nothing* in its most general significance, is exactly the world as representation, which I have shown to be the objectivity, the mirror, of the will.’<sup>41</sup> Schopenhauer’s view evinces the problematic Platonic logic of Being over becoming inasmuch as the world as Representation is merely a metaphysically inferior mirror of the world as Will. Schopenhauer acknowledges the vacuity and tenuousness of antiquated sources of meaning, such as dogmatic religion, but does not yet surpass or overcome the logic of Being over becoming, since ‘[b]y making will the essence of the world Schopenhauer continues to understand the world as an illusion, an appearance, a representation’.<sup>42</sup> Rather than questioning the dubiousness of this logic, Schopenhauer simply perpetuates it indirectly by supplanting a positive Platonic metaphysics of Being with a pessimistic variant thereof. Schopenhauer still favours the negative logic of Western metaphysics inasmuch as he conceptualises this life of becoming, *hic et nunc*, as something deleterious, injudicious, and ultimately meaningless. Schopenhauer thus reinforces the deeply-entrenched logic of Western metaphysics, which, for Nietzsche, is a nihilistic logic to be overcome.

According to Schopenhauer, in the absence of transcendent sources of meaning there could be no purpose to life other than a blind perpetuation of existence which Schopenhauer calls the ‘will-to-live’.<sup>43</sup> Schopenhauer claims that ‘[b]efore us there is certainly left only nothing; but that which struggles against this flowing away into nothing, namely our nature, is indeed just the will-to-live which we ourselves are, just as it is our world.’<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche contests this point directly in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: ‘Only where there is life is there also will: not will to life but – thus I teach you – will to power.’<sup>45</sup> We will see in the subsequent subsections of this chapter how Nietzsche implicitly advocates the *will to power* as a possible means-to-meaning and the overcoming of negative nihilism. According to Schopenhauer, the individualized instantiation of the Will in the physical world of phenomenal Representation manifests only in perpetual suffering<sup>46</sup> as human beings vacillate between the morose ontological antipodes of desire and boredom,<sup>47</sup> joy and sorrow, while moving towards their inevitable death, which, in Schopenhauer’s view, may actually be said to be the only purpose of human existence inasmuch as ‘existence is a constant dying’.<sup>48</sup>

Schopenhauer’s conclusion to the inherently meaningless nature of existence is that life itself should be lived merely as an exercise in the negation of our individual will in this phenomenal world of Representation.<sup>49</sup> Yet, a measure of respite from our worldly suffering may be attained

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<sup>41</sup> Schopenhauer 1966a:409-410.

<sup>42</sup> Deleuze 2006:78. See, in this regard, also: *BGE*, §36 (p. 237).

<sup>43</sup> Schopenhauer 1966b:350-360. See also: *ibid.*, p. 569, 584, & 634.

<sup>44</sup> Schopenhauer 1966a:411.

<sup>45</sup> *TSZ*, ‘On Self-Overcoming’ (p. 227).

<sup>46</sup> Nussbaum 1999:350.

<sup>47</sup> Schopenhauer 2004:45.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques 1999:293 & 298-299. See also: Schopenhauer 1966b:569, 584, 609, & 637.

<sup>49</sup> Janaway 1999:341. One might discern here the Buddhist element in Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Schopenhauer followed the Buddhist logic that this world is one of suffering stemming from human desires, which, if negated through

for ephemeral moments through the aesthetic dimension of the world as Representation. This is because human encounters with the artistic manipulation of the world as Representation allow us to extricate ourselves from our individualized suffering through an escape into universalized abstraction; sundering us from our individual will by permitting us a transient repose in a universal Will. Art may therefore be the only reprieve for this sullen world of suffering and the inherent lack of existential meaning for its human inhabitants. However, Schopenhauer finally teaches that suffering is the inexorable fate of human existence and that existential meaning is the illusory by-product of Representation, ultimately negated into oblivion by an aimless cosmic Will.

In this way, Schopenhauer raises the question of existential meaning to greater philosophical import by emphatically asserting the existential nihilism brought about by Western metaphysics. Moreover, by means of his emphatic argumentation, he calls for subsequent philosophers to seriously consider the merits of his pessimistic arguments, and his two conclusions to the question on existential meaning. Firstly, existential meaning cannot be said to be intrinsically linked to the metaphysical structure of existence since reality 'in itself' is constituted only by the world as *Will*, which is decidedly not inherently rational and therefore not discernibly meaningful. Secondly, if existence is not inherently meaningful, then it follows that existence is merely meaningless vanity or nothingness [*Nichtigkeit*] which should be denied through an ascetic negation of individual will in this world of Representation. It is the latter of these conclusions with which Nietzsche takes issue, and which serves as the principal target of his philosophy to counter and overcome. According to Lawrence J. Hatab,

Nietzsche and Schopenhauer were philosophical brethren in that the core their thinking was an acute, unflinching concentration on one question: Is existence worth it? Schopenhauer's honest answer was No. Nietzsche's answer was Yes, and he accused Western thought of both evading this stark question and concealing a repressed No.<sup>50</sup>

In one of Nietzsche's early essays entitled 'Schopenhauer as Educator' (1874), he writes that '*Schopenhauer's man voluntarily takes upon himself the pain of telling the truth: this pain serves to quench his individual will and make him ready for the complete transformation of his being, which it is the inner meaning of life to realise.*'<sup>51</sup> Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy thus inspired Nietzsche by stirring his thought and orienting his future philosophy towards the *overcoming* of existential nihilism. Although Nietzsche may have initially accepted a number of the basic premises of Schopenhauer's pessimistic arguments, he by no means sustained Schopenhauer's life-negating conclusions. Nietzsche has often been named a nihilist, yet the attribution of this title

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self-abnegation and life-denial, might stymie the suffering of this world somewhat. Nietzsche would later refer to this kind of thinking on Schopenhauer's part as 'European Buddhism' (see, for instance, *WP* §55 & §132).

<sup>50</sup> Hatab 2005:5.

<sup>51</sup> Nietzsche 2009:149.

is somewhat misguided, since Nietzsche's later philosophical conclusions are far from nihilistic as such.<sup>52</sup> Rather, Nietzsche understands that nihilism is perhaps the biggest threat to human existence, and that such a threat cannot be abided or ignored, but must of necessity be overcome.

It is this *overcoming* that Nietzsche recognises as the most demanding existential exigency of his age, and which Nietzsche assumes as his most fundamental philosophical project.<sup>53</sup> The impact of Schopenhauer's philosophical manoeuvre is that it demonstrates that if one follows his argumentative logic, which is derivative of the *logic of Being over becoming* employed throughout Western thought, then human existence in this world would have to be recognized as inherently meaningless, purposeless, and ultimately futile. This highlights the innate negativity of the *logic of Being over becoming* which haunts Western thought on the question of existential meaning: it negates the meaning of our immediate human existence in *this* world, effectively revealing that the history of Western philosophy is concomitantly a history of nihilism.<sup>54</sup>

### 2.3. The Historical Development of Nihilism

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One fails to see, although it could hardly be more obvious, that pessimism is not a problem but a symptom, that the name should be replaced by 'nihilism,' that the question whether not-to-be is better than to be is itself a disease, a sign of decline, an idiosyncrasy.<sup>55</sup>

Nihilism, in Nietzsche's view, is not simply an historical event; it is the impetus and element of Western intellectual history heretofore; the driving force that has led humanity to this particular present.<sup>56</sup> This is to say that nihilism has been deeply and intrinsically imbedded in the religion, morality,<sup>57</sup> and thought that constitutes the Western intellectual tradition. Nietzsche recognizes that a comprehensive critique of Western metaphysics' logic of Being over becoming is vital, and his philosophy endeavours to establish existential *affirmation* in *this* world *hic et nunc*, without recourse to transcendent sources of meaning.<sup>58</sup> It is in this regard that one might assert that Nietzsche is the critic of the Western philosophical traditional *par excellence*. According to John Macquarrie, 'Nietzsche ends the classical age of Western philosophy and ushers in the strange new world of the present.'<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Deleuze posits that Nietzsche's critique of Western thought 'makes nihilism the presupposition of all metaphysics' insofar as 'there is no *metaphysics* which does not judge and depreciate life in the name of a *supra-sensible* world.'<sup>60</sup> Nietzsche importantly

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<sup>52</sup> This thought is confirmed by Hatab 1987:96: 'Ultimately, Nietzsche is anything *but* a nihilist'. See also: Kaufmann's footnote to *GS*, §346 (p. 287).

<sup>53</sup> Deleuze 2006:17.

<sup>54</sup> Bull 2011:43. See also: Heidegger's essay 'Nietzsche's Word: "God is Dead"' in *Off the Beaten Track* (Heidegger 2002a).

<sup>55</sup> *WP*, §38 (p. 24).

<sup>56</sup> Deleuze 2006:32. See also: Heidegger's 'Nietzsche's Word: "God is Dead"' in *Off the Beaten Track* (Heidegger, 2002a).

<sup>57</sup> Bull 2011:43.

<sup>58</sup> Heidegger 1991, Volume IV, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Macquarrie 1980:55.

<sup>60</sup> Deleuze 2006:32.

argues that nihilism does not strictly point to the end of existential meaning as such, but the end of existential meaning reliant upon antiquated traditional forms of Western thought.

In Nietzsche's account, nihilism refers to 'the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability',<sup>61</sup> as well as the fact that '*the highest values devalue themselves*'.<sup>62</sup> Plainly put, nihilism may be defined generally as the *devaluation* of *this* life in *this* world *hic et nunc*, in accordance with an *overvaluation* of a transcendent realm, entity, or ideal. This entails the promotion of *Being* and the concomitant nihilistic repudiation of *becoming*. Importantly, Nietzsche suggests that nihilism is a transitional stage in the history of humanity,<sup>63</sup> and further implies that the possibility might yet exist for nihilism to be overcome. Nietzsche's philosophy attests to a significant fact that was not fully accounted for in the work of his forebears: because nihilism undermines traditional values and arises from the demise of transcendent sources of meaning, it clears the way for new (re)conceptualizations of meaning which seek to affirm life in *this* world, undermining all desiderata of meaning beyond lived human experience *here* and *now*. Nietzsche understands that existential meaning can only be affirmed in this way by means of a revaluation, or *trans-valuation*,<sup>64</sup> of all values upheld hitherto. Such a trans-valuation of all values can transpire only once an understanding of the historical development of nihilism has been achieved; once human thought is freed<sup>65</sup> from the entanglements of the negative logic of Being over becoming.

Nietzsche indicates towards the possibility of such a trans-valuation of all values through the historical development of nihilism itself: 'nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals – because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what these "values" really had. – We require, sometime, *new values*.'<sup>66</sup> Through a philosophical understanding of the historical development of nihilism, humanity might hope to overcome the negative thinking that haunts Western history, and move beyond it towards existential meaning in a new, trans-valuated, sense. It is such an understanding of nihilism, and its historical development, at which Nietzsche aims in his later philosophy.<sup>67</sup> Through his philosophical account of nihilism, and his proposed future philosophy of a trans-valuation of all values, Nietzsche envisions human existence in a world that is meaningful without any measure of transcendent qualification: 'In sum: the world might be far more valuable than we used to believe; we must see through the naiveté of our ideals,

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<sup>61</sup> *WP*, §1 (p. 7).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, §2 (p. 9).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, §7 (p. 11) and §13 (p. 14).

<sup>64</sup> The terms '*revaluation*' and '*trans-valuation*' are used interchangeably in different translations and interpretations of Nietzsche. For the purposes at hand, the term *trans-valuation* will be employed to indicate a movement *across* ('trans') and beyond traditional values associated with traditional existential meanings.

<sup>65</sup> Deleuze 2006:33.

<sup>66</sup> *WP*, Preface, §4 (p. 4).

<sup>67</sup> Bull 2011:57.

and while we thought that we accorded it the highest interpretation, we may not even have given our human existence a moderately fair value.’<sup>68</sup>

Nihilism assumes a myriad of visages through its historical development. According to Malcolm Bull, the first foreshadowing form of nihilism identified in Nietzsche’s philosophy can be described as ‘simple pre-ideological despair induced by the hardships and uncertainties of existence.’<sup>69</sup> This most basic form of existential nihilism is most immediate to human experience and the least sophisticated in relation to a conceptualization of existential meaning. Nihilism in Nietzschean thought assumes more complex nuances in Deleuze’s interpretation, in which he explicates the historical development of nihilism in Nietzschean thought according to three designated movements, namely: *negative* nihilism, *reactive* nihilism, and *passive* nihilism.

*Negative* nihilism emerges from the need for existential meaning in the face of the seemingly insurmountable exigencies of existence. Deleuze defines *negative* nihilism as ‘the devaluation of life in the name of higher values’.<sup>70</sup> Such higher values include, but are not limited to, the transcendentalism of Platonic Idealism, as well as traditional Christian morality. Within *negative nihilism*, existential meaning is described through a transcendental relation with an extrinsic source or *signified* of meaning, thereby circumventing the need for an existential affirmation of *this* world of immediate human experience. An extrinsic signified of existential meaning suggests a meaning externally imposed on life from *without* rather than from *within*.<sup>71</sup> In fact, negative nihilism subscribes to the idea that life, in all its harrowing vicissitudes, could not possibly be affirmed on its own terms, and therefore recourse to extrinsic signifieds is necessary for any worthwhile measure of existential meaning.

The second movement in the historical development of nihilism, as identified in Nietzschean thought by Deleuze, is *reactive* nihilism, which refers to ‘the devaluation of higher values themselves’.<sup>72</sup> This development follows from an existential disillusionment with the established transcendental sources or signifieds of meaning. In this movement, existential meaning associated with previously held views and values is negated, precipitating the conclusion that in the absence of such transcendental signifieds, life must be wholly without merit or meaning: ‘The “meaninglessness of events”’: belief in this is the consequence of an insight into the falsity of previous interpretations, a generalization of discouragement and weakness – not a *necessary* belief. The immodesty of man: to deny meaning where he sees none.’<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *WP*, §32 (p. 22).

<sup>69</sup> Bull 2011:56.

<sup>70</sup> Deleuze 2006:140.

<sup>71</sup> Fink 2003:61.

<sup>72</sup> Deleuze 2006:140.

<sup>73</sup> *WP*, §599 (p. 325).

Nihilism thus becomes *reactive* in its response to the void of existential meaning following from the demise of previously held signifieds of meaning: 'Powerless against what has been done, [humanity] is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards'.<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche recognizes reactive nihilism as a departure from the antiquated value systems that stood as impediments to the existential affirmation of *this* world, while simultaneously acknowledging the undeniable precariousness of positing reactive nihilism as the concluding remark to the question of human existential meaning. This is because *reactive* nihilism does not even remotely amount to an *active* affirmation of human existence. In the case of Schopenhauer's pessimism, the logic of Being over becoming is still promulgated, and thus humanity does not yet escape the perpetual *ouroboros*<sup>75</sup> of life-negation so typical of the Western tradition.

As Nietzsche writes: 'Finally: one discovers of what material one has built the "true world": and now all one has left is the repudiated world [*this* world], and one adds this supreme disappointment to the reasons why it deserves to be repudiated.'<sup>76</sup> Reactive nihilism reveals itself in such manifestations as secular humanism, dogmatic atheism, and even in the Hegelian dialectic. These are reactive in that they are negative displacements of previously held transcendental signifieds of meaning: if God does not exist, then the human being must somehow assume this role (humanism and atheism); or, if contradiction emerges, it must necessarily be synthesized and neutralized in the unfolding of history (Hegelian dialectic). All forms of reactive nihilism are misguided precisely in their *reactive*, which is to say *negative*, logic. Yet, one might argue, through Nietzschean thought, that nihilism requires further development towards an eventual overcoming of this negative logic, thus paving a path beyond existential meaninglessness.<sup>77</sup>

Reactive nihilism often leads to, and ends in, the third movement of nihilism,<sup>78</sup> which Deleuze identifies as *passive* nihilism, or the view that '[i]t is better to have no values at all than higher values, it is better to have no will at all, better to have a nothingness of will than a will to nothingness. It is better to fade away passively.'<sup>79</sup> Passive nihilism might be described as a will-to-complacency insofar as it seeks to affirm nothing other than the absence of transcendental signifieds of meaning, yet does not as yet positively, or *actively*, affirm existence itself. Existence is therefore assumed to lack meaning, but this lack of meaning goes unchallenged, and a quasi-existence, neither fully human nor actively affirmative, ensues. This complacency is also a will-to-neutralize existence in all its facets, including the neutralizing of individuals to a complacent common denominator which Nietzsche designates as 'the herd' and describes as 'the sum of

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<sup>74</sup> *TSZ*, 'On Redemption' (p. 251).

<sup>75</sup> An ancient symbol of the serpent consuming its own tail in perpetuity.

<sup>76</sup> *WP*, §37 (p. 24).

<sup>77</sup> *WP*, §28 (p. 19).

<sup>78</sup> Deleuze 2006:143.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

zeroes'.<sup>80</sup> It would be a serious mistake to consider this stage in the history of humanity and its nihilistic impulse(s) as the end of history.<sup>81</sup> This, too, is something which needs to be overcome. This transitional development from reactive to passive nihilism is most clearly discernible in Schopenhauer's philosophy. Nietzsche explains this development in nihilism as follows:

Extreme positions are not succeeded by moderate ones but by extreme positions of the opposite kind. Thus the belief in the absolute immorality of nature, in aim- and meaninglessness, is the psychologically necessary affect [*sic*] once the belief in God and an essentially moral order becomes untenable. Nihilism appears at that point, not that the displeasure at existence has become greater than before but because one has come to mistrust any 'meaning' in suffering, indeed in existence. One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain.<sup>82</sup>

Schopenhauer does not seek to defy meaninglessness, but passively affirms the meaninglessness of existence which, to Nietzsche, is a 'false affirmation'.<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche describes passive nihilism as a 'decline and recession of the power of the spirit',<sup>84</sup> which is to say 'a weary nihilism that no longer attacks... a sign of weakness'.<sup>85</sup> Passive nihilism further implies that 'the will to nothingness has the upper hand over the will to life – and the overall aim is, in Christian, Buddhist, Schopenhauerian terms: "better not to be than to be."<sup>86</sup> Passive nihilism therefore ultimately amounts to a negation of existence *hic et nunc*; no longer in favour of a transcendental signified, but in favour of passivity or nothingness of will. In this way, humanity teaches itself to no longer *will* existence, but to supplant an interminably frustrated will-to-meaning with a fatalistic will-to-nothingness. According to Nietzsche, this is where the history of our values has brought us, and one might further argue that it is precisely by understanding this history that we may finally be in a position to overcome it. It is at this stage in the historical development of nihilism that a transvaluation of values might come to fruition, bringing humanity a possible new means-to-meaning, born of a fundamental shift in our thought from negative to positive will to power.

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<sup>80</sup> *WP*, §53 (p. 33). See also: Bull 2011:66. This also goes some way in explaining why Nietzsche abhorred democratic values that favour the mediocrity of the masses over the meaningful existence of an elite minority. Nietzsche controversially contends that egalitarian democratic values foster weakness and passivity of the human will rather than existential strength in individuals. This is because democracy inherently seeks to acknowledge the meaning(s) of the majority, often by sacrificing the meaning(s) of the minority, the latter of whom might, according to Nietzsche, actually be stronger human individuals. Nietzsche thus argues, *contra* democratic egalitarianism, that existential meaning is the province and purview of those strong individuals who do not fall prey to the nihilistic passivity and negativity of the masses. For Nietzsche, the masses are seen as a potential threat to the personal existential meaning(s) of strong individuals, and thus Nietzsche eschews the idea of the 'herd mentality' of meaning and prefers a strong individualism of meaning. This idea will also feature, albeit in a somewhat different form, in Sartre's individualist philosophy of meaning in Chapter III, in which Sartre positions individual meaning in conflict with the meaning of the 'Other'.

<sup>81</sup> Here one might identify Nietzsche asserting his views *contra* Hegel.

<sup>82</sup> *WP*, §55 (p. 35).

<sup>83</sup> Deleuze 2006:173.

<sup>84</sup> *WP*, §22 (p. 17).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, §23 (p. 18).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, §685 (p. 364). This type of reactive-passive nihilism is still evident today, as is evinced by David Benatar's Analytical philosophical work, *Better Never to Have Been* (2006), whose nihilism is evinced in the very title of his book.

## 2.4. Trans-valuation & the Will to Power

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There is nothing to life that has value except the degree of power – assuming that life itself is the will to power.<sup>87</sup>

Nietzsche's conception of the will to power is markedly complex, at times ambiguous, and has certainly been subject to controversial interpretations.<sup>88</sup> As a result, a clear and concise definition of the will to power is rendered somewhat problematic. However, for the purposes at hand, the will to power may be understood, at least in part, as the element in our human constitution which stimulates and perpetuates an individual human movement towards an ever more meaningful existence. Terry Eagleton eloquently describes Nietzsche's conception of the will to power as 'the tendency of all things to realize, expand, and augment themselves'.<sup>89</sup> For the sake of conceptual clarity, one might consider a comparison with Spinoza's philosophical conception of the *conatus essendi* [the endeavour to exist], which posits that all living beings possess an innate impetus to persevere and potentiate their existence, while forefending against any external threats to their pursuit of increasingly improved forms of survival.<sup>90</sup> Nietzsche's conception of the will to power is akin to such a notion inasmuch as it bespeaks an inextinguishable, spirited striving of human individuals towards increasingly enhanced states of existence, and correlatively, an existence which might hence be deemed all the more meaningful.

In this regard, Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaims: 'There is much that life esteems more highly than life itself; but out of the esteeming itself speaks the will to power.'<sup>91</sup> The Nietzschean will to power implies the acknowledgement that meaning is not innately manifest in existence itself, but needs to be *made (to be) manifest* by human beings. Nietzsche therefore says that 'it is a measure of the degree of strength of will to what extent one can do without meaning in things'<sup>92</sup> since only those who contend with meaninglessness understand the true measure of existential meaning. The potential productiveness of contemporary existential nihilism resides in the fact that it underscores the absence of *inherent (a priori)* meaning(s) to existence and the world, thereby calling humanity to conscience by reminding us that we, as creatively striving individuals, are the valuers of existence and the world, and thus the very manufacturers of our own existential meaning. That is, human individuals are meaning-makers by virtue of our inherent will to power.

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<sup>87</sup> *WP*, §55 (p. 37).

<sup>88</sup> Most notably, and controversially, is the interpretation of the will to power espoused by Hitler and the NAZI party. This interpretation was cultivated by Nietzsche's anti-Semitic & NAZI-sympathetic sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche.

<sup>89</sup> Eagleton 2008:89.

<sup>90</sup> See Spinoza's *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 6. Eagleton (2008:89) links Nietzsche's will to power with Spinoza's conception of power. Such a link between Spinoza and Nietzsche is by no means arbitrary, since Nietzsche references Spinoza directly in his discussions in *The Will to Power*. Also, in *GS*, §1 (p. 73) Nietzsche writes that 'to do what is good for the preservation of the human race' is an instinct which 'constitutes *the essence* of our species, our herd.'

<sup>91</sup> *TSZ*, 'On Self-Overcoming' (pp. 227-228).

<sup>92</sup> *WP*, §585 (p. 318).

If it may be said that humanity possesses any inherent 'essence' at all, then this, in Nietzschean terms, would have to be described as the will to power:<sup>93</sup> 'Where I found the living, there I found will to power'.<sup>94</sup> Yet, the will to power is not essentialist in the traditional sense of the term, since Nietzsche unequivocally states that humanity 'is the *as yet undetermined animal*'.<sup>95</sup> Rather than bespeaking a fixed essential human nature as such, the will to power offers ingress to any essence and personal meaning that one may freely choose to make of one's existence. In his interpretation of the Nietzschean will to power, Deleuze asserts that it has been the case throughout the history of Western philosophy that the will to power has been employed primarily in its negative or nihilistic capacity, as a will to power *qua* becoming *reactive*.<sup>96</sup> This *negative will to power* had become essentially embedded in our human thinking and valuation(s) of existence heretofore. Therefore, if we are to overcome nihilism and move towards new forms of existential meaning, our will to power will need to undergo a radical transmutation from the negative to the positive; from that which *negates* to that which *affirms*. This announces the import of what Nietzsche terms the *trans-valuation* of all values, which calls for a transmutation in the evaluative element of the will to power from *reactive* (negative) to *active* (affirmative).

In order to properly explicate these concepts, I will further employ Deleuze's conception of the will to power from his noteworthy work, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Firstly, one must ask: What is a 'force' for Nietzsche? According to Deleuze's interpretation, force entails the play of difference<sup>97</sup> between entities, phenomena and/or events in the world *qua* becoming. Nietzsche asserts that the world is constituted by nothing other than a 'multiplicity of forces, connected by a common mode of nutrition, we call "life"'.<sup>98</sup> Force is the play of difference as it arises out of the plurality and multiplicity of becoming, contrary to the totality or wholeness of transcendent Being as such. The play of forces thus entails the fragmentation of Being as a unitary whole; or stated differently, force entails the play of plurality within an existence which is interminably *becoming* without ever wholly *being* complete in and of itself. According to Deleuze, if 'force' bears upon the play of difference, then the will to power is the differential element between forces, in both their quantitative and qualitative dimensions.<sup>99</sup> 'The will to power [is] not a being, not a becoming, but a *pathos* – the most elemental fact from which a becoming and effecting first emerge'.<sup>100</sup>

In terms of Nietzsche's account of existential meaning, two types of force can be identified: *reactive* and *active*. Reactive forces are negative insofar as they define themselves over against

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<sup>93</sup> Heidegger 1991, Volume III, p. 200. The idea of the will to power *qua* human *essence* is supported by Fink 2003:59.

<sup>94</sup> *TSZ*, 'On Self-Overcoming' (p. 226).

<sup>95</sup> *BGE*, §62 (p. 264).

<sup>96</sup> Deleuze 2006:159.

<sup>97</sup> Deleuze's view (2006:49) on Nietzschean 'forces' is also posited by Derrida in his essay *Differānce* (1996:234).

<sup>98</sup> *WP*, §641 (p. 341).

<sup>99</sup> Deleuze 2006:46.

<sup>100</sup> *WP*, §635 (p. 339).

that to which (or to whom) they are reacting. Reactive forces thus imply a kind of nihilistic impulse; a will-to-negation; a *ressentiment*<sup>101</sup> towards other beings and existence itself. According to Nietzsche, Western thought, encompassing both its dominant religion (Christianity) and its discursive philosophy (following in the legacy of Socrates and Plato), is rife with *reactive* forces. This, of course, follows from the fact that the history of the West is concomitantly a history of nihilism, as argued above. In direct contradistinction to the thought evinced in Western philosophical history thus far, Nietzsche advocates for the gestation and eventual emergence of *active* forces.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, in relation to the historical development of nihilism and the question of existential meaning, the will to power manifests in one of its two evaluative capacities: as the *denial* or *affirmation* of existence. The will to power *qua* denial would entail negativity, reactivity, and passivity (or the will-to-nothingness). Conversely, the affirmative capacity of the will to power pertains to active forces. That is, through existential affirmation, or what Nietzsche calls 'active nihilism',<sup>103</sup> *reactive* forces may *become* active.<sup>104</sup> In this regard, human suffering might be said to be the result of the triumph of *reactive* forces. This is to say that the reason suffering endures with an unadulterated negative aspect is because humanity has not yet discovered a way to *overcome* or be in *excess* of their suffering; or more specifically, because humanity has not heretofore discerned an affirmative means-to-meaning requisite for the overcoming of nihilism.

This, to put the matter succinctly, is Nietzsche's biggest challenge: to overcome Christianity, Western metaphysics, and his elemental educator Schopenhauer, all without simply *reacting* against these views by positing yet another dialectical binary opposition, or even more inexcusably still, by seeking recourse to new transcendental signifieds of meaning. Nietzsche wants to overcome the dialectic altogether since its internal logic is drawn to the *negative*, the antithesis, and its resolution.<sup>105</sup> For Nietzsche, the yearning after the complete elimination of suffering is a yearning after its negation, not its affirmation. However, suffering is not something that can be negated, but is instead that which needs to be *transmuted* into life-affirmation. We do not overcome suffering through negation; we overcome suffering only when we use suffering as a fecund foundation for the future of our existential meaning(s). In this regard, Deleuze posits: 'Transvaluing is opposed to current values but also to dialectical pseudo-transformations'.<sup>106</sup> Nietzsche does not favour an end to the play of life's forces, since existence *qua* becoming does not ultimately resolve itself into a fixed state of Being – it remains perpetually in flux.

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<sup>101</sup> '*Ressentiment*' entails the founding of one's meaning on a negative relation to that which has caused suffering or frustration to one's existence and its meaning(s). For a detailed account of this concept, see Nietzsche's *GM*, §§10-11.

<sup>102</sup> To be clear, this is according to Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzschean thought in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (2006).

<sup>103</sup> *WP*, §22 (p. 17).

<sup>104</sup> Deleuze 2006:166.

<sup>105</sup> Nietzsche's critique of the dialectic can be found throughout his oeuvre, which is replete with scathing philosophical rejoinders to both Hegel and Socrates, but I shall omit an extensive explication thereof in this study.

<sup>106</sup> Deleuze 2006:154.

Yet, if suffering remains unresolved, the question which threatens the very possibility of existential meaning, initially raised by Schopenhauer's pessimism, reads as follows: if suffering is a seemingly inexorable element of human existence, then how could it possibly be overcome? Nietzsche's answer is a bold and novel one: the negativity of suffering can only be transmuted into positivity through a transformation, or *trans-valuation*, of the very manner in which humanity judges its existence as meaningful. Human individuals may yet learn to value their existence *hic et nunc* on its own terms, and without recourse to anything which transcends *this* immediate world. Yet, Nietzsche posits that this existential project is 'for all and none'<sup>107</sup> in that it speaks to all of humanity, but requires a singular kind of being who possesses the existential strength necessary to affirm a meaningful existence in the face of the unyielding threat of existential nihilism. This is the Nietzschean project that is projected into the future of humanity: to engender the *Übermensch* [Overman].<sup>108</sup> It is important to acknowledge that this grandiose manifestation of humanity has not yet transpired, nor is it even suspended in a liminal state, on the cusp of emergence. One might say that the *Übermensch* is gestating; *becoming* without wholly *being* born.<sup>109</sup> The *Übermensch* is thus a perpetual projection into the future of humanity, and not a possible predicate of present human existence, since we still remain somewhat circumscribed by the nihilistic values and valuations of existence that have pervaded our human history up to this point.

Humanity typically *reacts* to the world rather than creating meaning(s) of this world through life-affirming human *activity*. Deleuze suggests that this may well be because we are *essentially* 'the becoming reactive of all forces'.<sup>110</sup> Deleuze further expounds this point as follows: 'We can say that negation has dominated our thought, our ways of feeling and evaluating, up to the present day. In fact it is constitutive of man.'<sup>111</sup> Nietzsche's Zarathustra attests to this idea when he professes that 'a great folly dwells in our will; and it has become a curse for everything human that this folly has acquired spirit.'<sup>112</sup> This is what Nietzsche, via Zarathustra, calls the *spirit of revenge*. This vengeful reactive spirit lies at the heart of the nihilistic human impulse: we revenge ourselves upon life and this world; *reacting* negatively to existence through a disposition of *ressentiment*. Since this reactive nature has become seemingly essential to our human thoughts, valuations, and actions, Nietzsche calls for an overcoming of this negative element in human nature through the Overman: '*I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome.*'<sup>113</sup> The Overman does not *react* to existential nihilism by simply supplanting one fictitious transcendental signified with another.

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<sup>107</sup> This is the subtitle to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, suggesting that contained within its pages is a text which applies to all of humanity, but which only a select subset of humanity will be able to comprehend.

<sup>108</sup> I will use Walter Kaufmann's translation of the word *Übermensch* as 'Overman', since it is indicative of Nietzsche's emphasis on the *Übermensch* as a figure of *overcoming*. I will use the terms *Übermensch* and Overman interchangeably.

<sup>109</sup> *BGE*, §62 (p. 264).

<sup>110</sup> Deleuze 2006:159.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>112</sup> *TSZ*, 'On Redemption' (p. 252).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 'Zarathustra's Prologue', §3 (p. 124).

On the contrary, the Overman engages in trans-valuation, which entails ‘transmuting values, converting negation into affirmation.’<sup>114</sup> Only the Overman can achieve this since ‘[t]he element of affirmation is the superhuman element. The element of affirmation is what man lacks’.<sup>115</sup>

Nietzsche thus calls for an evaluative distinction to be drawn between those *high values* which affirm existence (noble; masterful; courageous; strong) and *low values* which denounce, denigrate, or deny existence (decadence; slavishness; cowardice; weakness). But trans-valuation goes even further than this. Trans-valuation is not to be reduced to a simple supplanting of old values with new ones. Rather, trans-valuation calls for a transmutation in the *evaluative element* itself which imputes value to existence.<sup>116</sup> Trans-valuation necessitates a reconfiguration in the hierarchical<sup>117</sup> relationship<sup>118</sup> between values; a fundamental (re)conceptualization of our contemporary human means-to-meaning(s) and the manner in which we evaluate existence and accord it meaning. Therefore, our evaluation of existence, or rather, *that which evaluates* existence, the will to power, needs to undergo a radical ‘transubstantiation’ and ‘reformation’.<sup>119</sup> It is only in this radical way that humanity might cease perceiving the world through negative eyes and couching existential meaning in nihilistic terms. Nietzsche’s conception of existential *affirmation* should therefore not be equated with naïve optimism or unchecked positivity. Affirmation is a positivity born of a negativity; not a dialectical synthesis which seeks to reconcile difference, but a play of difference between forces *qua* will to power. Existential affirmation thus entails an eruption of meaning out of the deep and foreboding abyss of existential nihilism.

One can partially summarize the above by postulating that all configurations of thought known to contemporary Western humanity thus far – including metaphysics, religion, and even science<sup>120</sup> – are the products of *reactive forces*<sup>121</sup> following from the history of the West as a history of nihilism, or the will to power *qua* denial.<sup>122</sup> Drawing from Nietzsche’s views above, and his philosophy as a whole, one might justifiably assert that reactive nihilism and its development towards passive nihilism is a precursor to the establishment of a *positive* will to power, ‘which is the will of life’,<sup>123</sup> or existential affirmation.<sup>124</sup> In Nietzsche’s account, passive nihilism can only be overcome by the emergence of *active* nihilism, which may be described as ‘a sign of increased power of the spirit’.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Deleuze 2006:160. Also repeated in a similar form on p. 166. See also: van Tongeren 2000:286.

<sup>115</sup> Deleuze 2006:160.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162: Trans-valuation entails ‘a change in the element from which the value of values derives.’

<sup>117</sup> *GM*, Book I, §17.

<sup>118</sup> Bull 2011:44.

<sup>119</sup> I use these latter two terms ironically, of course, as I believe Nietzsche himself might well have appreciated.

<sup>120</sup> Deleuze 2006:42, & 93-95. For a consolidated reading of Nietzsche’s views of science see: *WP*, Book I, §5; as well as *WP*, Book III, Section I, sub-section 12: ‘Science’; and also: *GS*, §112.

<sup>121</sup> Deleuze 2006:42.

<sup>122</sup> *TSZ*, ‘On Self-Overcoming’ (p. 225): ‘You still want to create the world before which you can kneel: that is your ultimate hope and intoxication.’

<sup>123</sup> *GS*, §349 (p. 292).

<sup>124</sup> *WP*, §55 (p. 36).

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, §22 (p. 17).

When one extends Nietzsche's above arguments along the trajectories that Nietzsche set in motion in his later works, it becomes apparent that *active nihilism* prepares the way for a possible new means-to-meaning: beyond the forms of nihilism that have haunted Western history heretofore, and towards active existential affirmation. Active nihilism arguably achieves this movement towards meaning(s) by firstly conceding the lack of *intrinsic* meaning to human existence owing to the demise of extrinsic signifieds of meaning, and thereafter, following from such a cognizance, allowing for the possibility of an affirmation of human existence *hic et nunc* on its own terms, removed from a passive acquiescence of meaninglessness (in passive nihilism) and without recourse to any further transcendental qualification of meaning (in negative or reactive nihilism).

*Active nihilism*, which is to say existential affirmation, recognizes that existence *as it is* requires no further (extrinsic) qualification in order to be accorded existential meaning. Active nihilism implies a *double negation* in that it negates the negative element of nihilism itself through a *trans-valuation* in human thought, which further entails the perpetual overcoming of nihilistic thinking and its negative valuation(s) of existence. Active nihilism therefore overcomes transcendental escapism (negative nihilism), vindictive valuation (reactive nihilism), and the powerless<sup>126</sup> passivity of pessimism (passive nihilism). According to Nietzsche, this double negation, where nihilism ultimately undermines its own operational logic through self-nihilation,<sup>127</sup> constitutes an integral part of existence *in toto*: 'All great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming'.<sup>128</sup> The logic of overcoming, including self-overcoming, is thus the logic of life itself,<sup>129</sup> and is thus central to the problem of existential meaning as it faces humanity today.

Deleuze insightfully remarks that 'nihilism is always incomplete on its own.'<sup>130</sup> This is because nihilism 'is the principle of conservation of a weak, diminished, reactive life.'<sup>131</sup> Passive nihilism is an *incomplete* form of nihilism<sup>132</sup> because it flounders on the ineluctability of meaninglessness without ever liberating itself from its own *circulus vitiosus*.<sup>133</sup> Humanity cannot simply displace an active will-to-meaning with a passive will-to-nothingness, because human existence evinces a natural need for existential meaning which demands satisfaction,<sup>134</sup> or as Nietzsche phrases it: 'Gradually, man has become a fantastic animal that has to fulfill one more condition of existence than any other animal: man *has* to believe, to know, from time to time *why* he exists; his race cannot flourish without a periodic trust in life – without faith in *reason in life*'.<sup>135</sup> In Nietzsche's

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<sup>126</sup> Powerless in the sense that it does not exercise will to power.

<sup>127</sup> Deleuze 2006:162.

<sup>128</sup> *GM*, III, §27.

<sup>129</sup> Conway 1992:17.

<sup>130</sup> Deleuze 2006:64.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>132</sup> *WP*, §28 (p. 19).

<sup>133</sup> A vicious circle; used here to suggest the circularity of nihilism, which must be overcome if meaning is to transpire.

<sup>134</sup> Reginster 2006:27.

<sup>135</sup> *GS*, §1 (p. 75).

view, then, humanity ceaselessly endeavours towards meaning because it has believed hitherto, perhaps erroneously, that meaning should manifest itself in accordance with our reason, or a divine ordering principle of some sort. Humanity is thus a singular species in that our conscious thought demands meaning from a reality that might very well offer none. That is, humanity seeks meaning to the same extent that it demands rational order from irrational chaos, such that we might establish a view of the *cosmos* or *mundus* which accords with our existence. Schopenhauer holds that this striving after meaning bespeaks the very vanity of human existence in the face of the eternal cosmic meaninglessness which threatens humanity from every side of its existence.

However, Nietzsche contends that life merely *appears* meaningless at those moments when it is judged against an absolute criterion or measure of meaning that stands apart from this world. This is to say that nihilism emerges at that point where human existence *appears* inherently meaningless through the demise of the ostensible ‘true world’ of traditional Platonic and Christian thought. Yet, as argued above, this nihilistic attitude is predicated on a foundation of the *logic of Being over becoming*, and it is this nihilistic foundation of existential meaning which requires trans-valuation. Nietzsche importantly asserts in *Twilight of the Idols* that ‘[w]ith the [abolishment of the] true world we have also abolished the apparent one’,<sup>136</sup> which is to assert that only *this* world *hic et nunc* remains as *the* source or sphere of existential meaning henceforth. The demise of the dichotomous distinction between immutable, metaphysical reality ‘in itself’ (or *Being*) versus mutable, merely ‘apparent’ physical reality (or *becoming*) is attended by the demise of the nihilistic notion that life is absolutely meaningless since human existence, and the world within which it plays out, can henceforth be accorded meaning in terms of what human individuals actively *make* thereof. In Nietzsche’s view, through a trans-valuation of all our values hitherto, meaning might become something which is *chosen* or *made* through an active, creative human will to power, rather than something which is to be *discovered* through recourse beyond this world.<sup>137</sup>

Contrary to passive nihilism, then, *active* affirmation, which is nihilism *completing* and thus overcoming itself, actively confronts the *apparent* or *seeming* eternal cosmic meaninglessness which threatens humanity, and subverts the *logic of Being over becoming* by turning wholeheartedly and decisively *towards this* immediate world *sans* transcendent qualification; seeking to affirm the meaning of human existence *hic et nunc*.<sup>138</sup> It is within this final *active* movement in the historical development of nihilism that the will to power transforms itself from a negative play of forces – viz. the will to power *qua* life-denial, depreciation, and reaction – into a positive play of forces – viz. the will to power *qua* life-affirmation, life-appreciation, and action.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> *TI*, p. 486. Also: Cf. *WP*, §586 (pp. 319-322).

<sup>137</sup> Young 2003:85.

<sup>138</sup> Deleuze 2006:33.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Trans-valuation is thus inextricably correlated to, and reliant upon, a transmutation from negative to positive will to power, where nihilism *completes* itself and thereby overcomes itself.<sup>140</sup>

Nietzsche further appropriates Schopenhauer's emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of existence, but does so in a manner that prefigures existential meaning and remains critical of nihilism. Nietzsche formulates an *existential aesthetics* or 'an aesthetics of creation'<sup>141</sup> that allows human beings to overcome nihilism by affirming their existence through their own affirmative and creative will to power. By moving from the will to power as negation to the will to power as affirmation, humanity can fashion an *existential aesthetics*, because the '[t]he will is a creator.'<sup>142</sup> This creative will to power, or the will to power as art,<sup>143</sup> is fundamental to the trans-valuation of all values: only such will to power can affirm the meaning of *this* world as it *is*, since artistic creativity is 'the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life'.<sup>144</sup> Artistic creation is therefore 'antinihilist *par excellence*'<sup>145</sup> inasmuch as 'art is essentially *affirmation, blessing, deification of existence*.'<sup>146</sup> Creative, active, and affirmative will to power is thus 'the unexhausted procreative will of life'.<sup>147</sup> Humanity must come to view its existence as a canvas for creativity; the very medium and material of existential meaning.

Ultimately, making meaning in and of existence implies creation. Unlike traditional transcendental signifieds of existential meaning which, from a cosmic distance, negate and depreciate life *hic et nunc*, art stands precisely *within* life and affirms human existence in terms of its potentiality for profundity, beauty, and greatness.<sup>148</sup> Positive, creative will to power is life-affirming inasmuch as it is actively productive (*producing* meaning) and not decadently reactive (*reducing* meaning). The will to power *qua* active affirmation is the human hope for existential exuberance, yet our human, all too human will to power is still fettered to our reactive nihilistic impulses against existence. This is why Nietzsche posits that '[w]e understand the old and are far from strong enough for something new',<sup>149</sup> while Zarathustra proclaims: 'Will – that is the name of the liberator and joy-bringer; thus I taught you, my friends. But now learn this too: the will itself is still a prisoner.'<sup>150</sup> The movement from will to power *qua* negation towards will to power *qua* affirmation is thus precisely a movement forward, towards the future, towards the *Übermensch*, and a vast productive capacity of untapped human creativity.

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<sup>140</sup> *WP*, §585 (p. 319).

<sup>141</sup> Deleuze 2006:95.

<sup>142</sup> *TSZ*, 'On Redemption' (p. 253).

<sup>143</sup> Vattimo 2002:134.

<sup>144</sup> *WP*, §853 (p. 452).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* See also: Vattimo 2002:141.

<sup>146</sup> *WP*, §821 (p. 434).

<sup>147</sup> *TSZ*, 'On Self-Overcoming' (p. 226).

<sup>148</sup> Bull 2011:39.

<sup>149</sup> *WP*, §56 (p. 39).

<sup>150</sup> *TSZ*, 'On Redemption' (p. 251).

Existential meaning thus entails a constant movement *toward* a future that never finally arrives; a constant striving; an existence *qua* becoming. The fact that the history of Western philosophy has led to existential nihilism points to the need for new conceptualization(s) and evaluation(s) of existence favouring a positive logic of *becoming*, in which ‘we say that becoming affirms being or that being is affirmed in becoming.’<sup>151</sup> A new dawn thus makes its way into the historical development of human existential meaning, but its light remains somewhat unclear, and the message harboured within its effulgent emergence retains a strong sense of ambiguity. Human existence must confront the future of its meaning(s) in the face of its possible meaninglessness, as this might allow humanity to recognize the latent potential for an existential meaning which transcends even transcendentalism itself. In this regard, Nietzsche asserts: ‘It could be the sign of a crucial and most essential growth, of the transition to new conditions of existence, that the most extreme form of pessimism, genuine nihilism, would come into the world.’<sup>152</sup> Nietzsche further explicitly suggests that ‘nihilism *could* be a good sign’,<sup>153</sup> inasmuch as it may be interpreted ‘as the movement which carries history forward’,<sup>154</sup> towards the future of humanity.

## 2.5. Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Future

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What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*.<sup>155</sup>

Nietzsche calls for the recognition that nihilism is still in the process of unfolding, of *completing* itself.<sup>156</sup> This is significant since the completion of nihilism pertains directly to the contemporary possibilities of existential meaning. According to Nietzsche, ‘*complete nihilism* is the necessary consequence of the ideals entertained hitherto’,<sup>157</sup> whereas the period of *incomplete nihilism* is that within which we currently reside.<sup>158</sup> Incomplete nihilism is problematic in regard to future conceptions of existential meaning since ‘[a]ttempts to escape nihilism without reevaluating our values so far: they produce the opposite, make the problem more acute.’<sup>159</sup> This emphasizes the need for a trans-valuation of all human values upheld hitherto, such that humanity may overcome and complete the development of nihilism through existential affirmation. In order to affect such a profound transmutation, the demise of our antiquated values, and the meaning(s) traditionally ascribed thereto, should be expressly and emphatically acknowledged in human thought.

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<sup>151</sup> Deleuze 2006:22.

<sup>152</sup> *WP*, §112 (p. 69).

<sup>153</sup> *WP*, §111 (p. 69). Note Nietzsche’s emphasis on the word ‘*could*’: one might infer from this that Nietzsche is suggesting that existential meaning is henceforth a matter of personal perspective and individual responsibility.

<sup>154</sup> Deleuze 2006:xi.

<sup>155</sup> *WP*, Preface, §2 (p. 3).

<sup>156</sup> For further interpretation of these ideas, see Bull 2011:57.

<sup>157</sup> *The Will to Power*, §28 (p. 19).

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

Nietzschean trans-valuation is thus prefigured by the (in)famous proclamation of the death of god in *The Gay Science*: 'God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.'<sup>160</sup> This bold and brazen assertion is 'the metaphor of nihilism and its two possible outcomes: the weak one and the strong one',<sup>161</sup> which, on the one hand, 'points to danger and deterrence, and on the other hand to greatness and expectation.'<sup>162</sup> The proclamation of the death of god announces, somewhat ambiguously, both the threat of meaninglessness that faces humanity in an existence now devoid of transcendent significance, and, more importantly, the nascent possibility of overcoming such a threat through resilient human resolve. In Nietzsche's view, humanity cannot overcome nihilism while those higher values with which nihilism has historically been associated are still venerated; and therefore god, as the ultimate transcendental signified of existential meaning, must meet his demise if life is to be affirmed on its own terms without recourse to transcendent ideals.

Nietzsche's first object of criticism in these words is clearly Christian morality, which subsumed elements of Platonic philosophy and ascribed them with haughty dogmatic overtones. Nietzsche posits that Christianity is 'Platonism for "the people"'<sup>163</sup> inasmuch as it favours a transcendent world as the source or supernal seat of all metaphysical meaning and epistemic veracity.<sup>164</sup> Nietzsche states quite unequivocally that 'it is in one particular interpretation, the Christian-moral one, that nihilism is rooted.'<sup>165</sup> Nietzsche further posits that such Christian 'morality is a way of turning one's back on the will to existence'.<sup>166</sup> Therefore, the death of god may be interpreted as a necessary precursor to the completion of nihilism and a prelude to a trans-valuation of values:<sup>167</sup> 'only where there are tombs are there resurrections'.<sup>168</sup> It is only in the wake of the death of god that humanity begins to convalesce from its former paralysis of existential meaning. The proclamation of the death of god extends beyond its literal meaning by signifying not only the demise of the Christian faith,<sup>169</sup> but of all traditional transcendental signifieds of meaning,<sup>170</sup> or as Joan Stambaugh puts it, 'the absolute loss of transcendence'.<sup>171</sup> In this regard, Nietzsche writes:

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> *GS*, §125 (p. 181).

<sup>161</sup> Van Tongeren 2000:10.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>163</sup> *BGE*, Preface (p. 193).

<sup>164</sup> Stambaugh 1994:4.

<sup>165</sup> *WP*, §1 (p. 7).

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, §11 (p. 11).

<sup>167</sup> Fink 2003:57-64.

<sup>168</sup> *TSZ*, 'The Tomb Song' (p. 225).

<sup>169</sup> Stambaugh 1994:3-4.

<sup>170</sup> Hatab 2005:6 & Heidegger 1991, Volume IV, p. 4. See also: Deleuze 2006:4, & Fink 2003:57-58.

<sup>171</sup> Stambaugh 1994:3.

<sup>172</sup> *GS*, §125 (p. 181).

This idea is also reflected in Nietzsche's assertion that 'we are losing the center of gravity by virtue of which we lived; we are lost for a while.'<sup>173</sup> The aimlessness evident in these Nietzschean descriptions is precisely the aimlessness of an incomplete nihilism; this period in human history when we seek meaning in a world recently voided of our traditional extrinsic transcendental signifieds. Due to the incomplete movement of nihilism, the death of god is an event whose significance and meaning has not yet reached the ears and eyes of humanity.<sup>174</sup> The death of god is an event which announces the possibility of a meaningful human future: the trans-valuation of all values upheld hitherto, and the active overcoming of negative, reactive, and passive nihilism through existential affirmation. For those 'free spirits' who sense the profundity of this proclamation, the death of god is not heard as a cry of anguish, but seen as a bright 'new dawn' emerging over a sea of infinite possible future meaning(s), or as Nietzsche himself phrases it: 'the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an "open sea"'.<sup>175</sup>

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the death of god is further expounded in order to move humanity towards the completion of nihilism and its eventual overcoming: '*Dead are all gods: now we want the overman to live*'.<sup>176</sup> Zarathustra is thus a mouthpiece for the final stages in the historical development and completion of nihilism, and prefigures Nietzsche's 'philosophy of the future'.<sup>177</sup> Yet, one must understand that the death of god, its necessity notwithstanding, is itself nonetheless a product of incomplete nihilism: 'The death of god is a grand, noisy, dialectical event; but an event which happens in the din of reactive forces and the fumes of nihilism'.<sup>178</sup> This is why Nietzsche reminds us, quite plainly, that not only is god dead, but it is *we* who have killed him, and *we* who therefore shoulder the responsibility for the meaning of the future. Inasmuch as reactive nihilism is a necessary stage in nihilism's historical development, so too is the death of god a necessary prelude to what may eventually become affirmative nihilism; active nihilism; complete nihilism. However, '[a]s long as we remain in the element of the negative it is no use changing values or even supressing them, it is no use killing God'.<sup>179</sup>

According to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, overcoming the traditional negative valuation of human existence entails three metamorphoses. Zarathustra explicates these metamorphoses as 'how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child.'<sup>180</sup> According to Eugen Fink, the camel resembles humanity 'burdened by the weight of transcendence';<sup>181</sup> humanity

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<sup>173</sup> *WP*, §30 (p. 20).

<sup>174</sup> *GS*, §343 (p. 279).

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>176</sup> *TSZ*, 'On the Gift-Giving Virtue', §3 (p. 191).

<sup>177</sup> This argument is based on the chronology of Nietzsche's writing, since *Zarathustra* was followed by *Beyond Good and Evil*, the latter of which was subtitled 'Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future'.

<sup>178</sup> Deleuze 2006:150.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>180</sup> *TSZ*, 'On the Three Metamorphoses' (p. 137).

<sup>181</sup> Fink 2003:61.

assuming the burden of its existence out of a sense of religious reverence. This figure 'seeks to obey God and submit himself to the meaning of life which is imposed on him'.<sup>182</sup> This is therefore the figure of *negative nihilism* since its meaning involves a negative valuation of *this* world in favour of the transcendent. The transmutation from the camel to the lion may be said to represent the historical movement from *negative nihilism* to *reactive nihilism*, inasmuch as the lion renounces the old values and thereby 'uncovers his own latent freedom',<sup>183</sup> which is to say the very freedom of humanity; and in this freedom overcomes 'the determination of life through a given meaning of life which must be merely accepted.'<sup>184</sup> This remains *reactive nihilism* and not yet a meaningful affirmation of existence, because '[t]o create new values – that even the lion cannot do'.<sup>185</sup> The lion breathes 'a sacred "No" even to duty'<sup>186</sup> which is necessary to overcome the negative nihilism inherent in our antiquated values. But there remains the danger that such reactive nihilism will become *passive* and inert, unless it undergoes a further metamorphosis: from lion to child.

The child is the symbol of active life-affirmation; of positive will to power; of the overcoming of nihilism itself. The child's voice pronounces 'a sacred "Yes"'<sup>187</sup> which is needed for the future of humanity: a future where existential meaning is created out of an exuberant exclamation of existence. According to Fink, it is the event and proclamation of the death of god which precipitates this ultimate metamorphosis 'from a self-alienation to a creative freedom of self-consciousness'.<sup>188</sup> In the wake of the death of god, meaning is once more opened to the infinite free play of human creativity, and it is precisely the child that plays, creates, and sees the world without the burden of a nihilistic history.<sup>189</sup> The child is therefore the *Übermensch*; the figure who interprets existence, as if for the first time, on its own terms, in the freedom of its future possibilities. The child does not seek to transcend the *hic et nunc* in order to create meaning; the child creates meaning within life precisely because the child transcends the past in order to fashion the meaning of the future.

Zarathustra announces that the future of humanity belongs to this figure who can creatively affirm existence *hic et nunc* to the highest possible degree: the *Übermensch*, who, in constantly *becoming*, will serve as the future meaning of the *mundus*.<sup>190</sup> The *Übermensch* is thus the figure who professes an eternal 'yes' to existence and an unmitigated love of fate, or what Nietzsche calls *amor fati*.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Fink 2003:61.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *TSZ*, 'On the Three Metamorphoses' (p. 139).

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> Fink 2003:61.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62-64.

<sup>190</sup> *TSZ*, Prologue, §3 (p. 125).

<sup>191</sup> *GS*, §276 (p. 223). See also: *Ecce Homo*, III, §10.

The death of god is not simply a cry of existential anguish; it is an exuberant exclamation of the possibilities that lie *in potentia* for the future of humanity.<sup>192</sup> According to Deleuze, the death of the monotheistic god signals the inception of perspectival pluralism,<sup>193</sup> which suggests a plethora of potential existential meaning(s) as life is affirmed on its own terms for the first time. Following the death of god, the earth is bereft of ‘all suns’ (transcendental signifieds) from the bygone age, and the *Übermensch* inherits the valueless earth and *becomes* its meaning; humanity becomes its own *raison d’être*.<sup>194</sup> The *Übermensch* ‘embraces valuation in the full awareness that there are no values and no possibility that the world will ever be other than it is’,<sup>195</sup> and this stance is life-affirming inasmuch as it instils within the *Übermensch* the ability ‘to posit values in the face of eternal valuelessness’.<sup>196</sup> In the figure of the *Übermensch*, transcendence is transmuted into an individualized transcendence of one’s own humanity;<sup>197</sup> one no longer seeks to overcome this world through metaphysical transcendence, only oneself through existential self-transcendence.

Nietzsche famously formulates the ‘eternal recurrence’ as the measure of ‘free-spirits’ who seek to transcend only themselves, and actively affirm existence on its own terms:

If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?<sup>198</sup>

Nietzsche asks after the kind of being that could ‘welcome every moment of universal existence with a sense of triumph’<sup>199</sup> rather than ‘experience the belief in the eternal recurrence as a curse’.<sup>200</sup> Nietzsche’s answer to overcoming nihilism thus involves an existential affirmation of the eternal cycle of *becoming*.<sup>201</sup> Nietzsche asks: ‘Can we remove the idea of a goal from the process [of life] and then affirm the process in spite of this? – This would be the case if something were attained at every moment within this process – and always the same.’<sup>202</sup> The eternal recurrence is the only true affirmation of life because, through it, all negation is forced to serve affirmation; all passive thought and ‘reaction’ is forced towards active affirmation. The eternal recurrence, as the true measure of the affirmation of *becoming* over *Being*, subverts nihilism insofar as ‘negation as a quality of the will to power transmutes itself into affirmation, it becomes an affirmation of

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<sup>192</sup> Fink 2003:64.

<sup>193</sup> Deleuze 2006:4.

<sup>194</sup> ‘Reason for being’; or, in the context of this study, it could also be ‘meaning of life’.

<sup>195</sup> Bull 2011:62.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> Stambaugh 1994:4-5. See also: Fink 2003:59.

<sup>198</sup> *GS*, §341 (p. 274). See also: *WP*, §55 (pp. 35-39).

<sup>199</sup> *WP*, §55 (p. 36).

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. See also: *BGE*, §56 (p. 258).

<sup>201</sup> Deleuze 2006:65.

<sup>202</sup> *WP*, §55 (p. 36).

negation itself.<sup>203</sup> Life *hic et nunc* is thus lived for its own sake: the sake of overcoming the negative, and not for some ancillary function, purpose, idea, afterlife, or 'other world'.

The *Übermensch* is therefore the apotheosis of the affirmation of *becoming* in all its vicissitudes, encompassing both Apollonian order and Dionysian disorder;<sup>204</sup> moving beyond the antipodes of good and evil, and engaging in both profound suffering and joyful exuberance.<sup>205</sup> Nietzsche goes so far as to posit that we live in 'the tragic age'.<sup>206</sup> This is because only the *Übermensch*, as the figure of becoming, could positively affirm the eternal recurrence, since 'only that which *becomes* in the fullest sense of the word can return, is fit to return. Only action and affirmation return: becoming has being and only becoming has being.'<sup>207</sup> Malcolm Bull phrases it thus: 'Faced with meaninglessness eternally, the strongest are those who can accept it without any correspondingly extreme reaction. Their moderation consists in their ability to live with eternal recurrence without direct or mediated self-destruction'.<sup>208</sup> The movement from existential nihilism towards existential affirmation is hence 'the supreme Dionysian metamorphosis';<sup>209</sup> the trans-valuation allowing human beings to move into the productive province of existential meaning in this life *hic et nunc*. Zarathustra's acolyte is no mere follower; he/she is a creator, a fabricator, an interpreter; one who laughs at the severity of discourse, plays with difference, and dances with ineffability. Trans-valuation entails a perpetual overcoming, for this is the nature of existence itself: 'life itself confided this secret to me: "Behold," it said, "I am *that which must always overcome itself*."' <sup>210</sup>

Nietzsche's philosophy is significant in that it may not ultimately posit easy answers to the question on existential meaning, but it does compel us to scrutinize the history of our thought and our values, principally through the genealogical approach and its method of investigating the origin and development of our values and meaning(s). Nietzsche's philosophy seeks to overcome transcendentalist escapism and dogmatic moralism by means of an 'existential naturalism';<sup>211</sup> overcome the need for objective or absolute knowledge through epistemic perspectivism;<sup>212</sup> and overcome existential nihilism through existential affirmation. Nietzsche establishes the latent possibility for a vital and proactive means-to-meaning without recourse to escapist absolutes or a passive abandonment to nihilism. By tracing the historical development of nihilism from antiquity through to our contemporary human condition, Nietzschean thought directly confronts,

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<sup>203</sup> Deleuze 2006:65.

<sup>204</sup> These notions are expounded at length in Nietzsche's first work, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

<sup>205</sup> Deleuze 2006:16: 'tragedy is immediately joyful.'

<sup>206</sup> *WP*, §37 (p. 24).

<sup>207</sup> Deleuze 2006:x.

<sup>208</sup> Bull 2011:63.

<sup>209</sup> Deleuze 2006:66.

<sup>210</sup> *TSZ*, 'On Self-Overcoming', (p. 227).

<sup>211</sup> Hatab 2005:7: 'an embrace of the finite limit conditions of worldly existence as the new measure of thought'.

<sup>212</sup> See *GM*, III, §12 (p. 555): 'There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective "knowing"', and *WP*, §481 (p. 267): 'In so far as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings. - "Perspectivism".'

addresses, and even allows for the promising possibility of continually overcoming the existential meaninglessness which has haunted our human history heretofore, and which continues to loom over the possible meaning(s) of human existence henceforth. As a 'prelude to a philosophy of the future', Nietzschean thought serves as a prescient precursor to more contemporary thought on the question of existential meaning in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries; it further opens up philosophical discourse to unprecedented ways of thinking about existential meaning. It might thus be said that Nietzsche's life-affirming philosophy of existential meaning is pregnant with such possibilities of meaning as our contemporary secular world requires. In the words of Pierre Klossowski:

For those who can hear it, the word of Nietzsche gains a power that is all the more explosive insofar as contemporary history, current events, and the universe are beginning to answer, in a more or less circuitous manner, the questions Nietzsche was asking some eighty years ago. Nietzsche was interrogating the near and distant future, a future that has now become our everyday reality.<sup>213</sup>

## 2.6. Critical Evaluation of a Nietzschean Means-to-Meaning(s)

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Having highlighted the philosophical and existential merits of Nietzsche's idiosyncratic approach to the question of existential meaning, it remains for the study at hand to critically analyse the possible limitations and potentially problematic areas of Nietzsche's arguments on existential meaning. The principal objection to Nietzsche's conception of existential meaning is focused on the ardent individualism discernible at its core. While it can be argued that Nietzsche accounts for an individual means-to-meaning following in the wake of the death of god, he arguably fails to adequately account for the possibility of a social dimension to existential meaning. The merits of Nietzsche's individualism notwithstanding, one might ask whether such an account is wholly adequate for the demands of our pluralistic contemporary world, which is becoming increasingly interdependent and interconnected. It is therefore important that one consider both the merits and pitfalls of Nietzsche's predominantly individualist account of existential meaning.

John Cottingham identifies the import of Nietzschean thought on the question of existential meaning as it faces humanity today in his assertion that Nietzsche's 'conception of meaning as endogenous – the idea of Man as the creator and generator of the meaning of his own life – has plainly had a vast influence on our modern and postmodern culture.'<sup>214</sup> This fact is further attested to by Simon Blackburn, who describes Nietzsche as '[t]he most influential of the great philosophers' and even ironically names Nietzsche as 'the patron saint of postmodernism'.<sup>215</sup> The consequential and influential nature of Nietzschean thought on existential meaning is thus

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<sup>213</sup> Klossowski 2005:xiii.

<sup>214</sup> Cottingham 2003:12. An 'exogenous' meaning is one derived from a source external to the individual subject.

<sup>215</sup> Blackburn 2005:75. The irony here being that Blackburn describes Nietzsche – a self-professed 'Antichrist' – with a phrase that employs overtly religious terminology.

attested to not only by the exposition given above in this study, but also by such secondary authors<sup>216</sup> who acknowledge Nietzsche's impact on the future of philosophical discourse. However, critics of Nietzsche, many of whom are also sympathetic to his philosophical insights, argue that Nietzsche's account of existential meaning is somewhat one-sided inasmuch as it argues almost exclusively in favour of an individualism of existential meaning.

In this regard, Cottingham posits that '[t]he Nietzschean solution, in short, is untenable; and one may add that it is in any case inhuman, or at least inhumane.'<sup>217</sup> In Cottingham's view, Nietzsche's assertive individualist position on existential meaning is ethically and socially questionable in its insistence upon meaning as the product of a highly-individualized will to power, specifically because such a conception pays little, if any, attention to an ethical concern for one's fellow human beings, or for the potential social implications of one's personal existential meaning(s). That is, if existential meaning is *purely* subjective in the sense in which Nietzsche describes it, then how does one reconcile contradictory conceptions of meaning in the social, which is also to say moral, sphere? Cottingham points out that an endogenous or subjective source of meaning, while seemingly credible in its creative formulation, is not what our contemporary world demands following in the wake of such unprecedented tragedies as have transpired in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>218</sup> Contrary to Nietzsche, then, Cottingham opts for the more moderate existential values of 'compromise and compassion' as found 'in the religious ethic of universal brotherhood',<sup>219</sup> which Nietzsche would likely have eschewed as a disposition born of a cowardly Christian morality.<sup>220</sup> In keeping with Nietzsche's critical stance towards Christian morality and values, one might argue that Cottingham's critique remains tethered to an antiquated Christian view that has passed into obscurity alongside the death of god. Perhaps Cottingham thus overlooks Nietzsche's important point that a means-to-meaning predicated on Christian values fails to provide secular Western humanity with an adequate, and contextually apposite, account of a meaningful human life.

Yet, I do believe that there might be some merit to Cottingham's critique, at least inasmuch as his criticisms against Nietzsche's endogenous account of existential meaning are concerned. While Nietzsche acknowledges the social interplay of existential forces between beings through the interactive will to power, he does not seem to allow for any measure of moral consideration in terms of human social relations of meaning. In fact, Nietzsche often advocates against moral

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<sup>216</sup> Countless examples might be cited in this regard. Nietzsche proved consequential to later discourses on post-structuralism (most notably Foucault and Derrida), postmodernism (Lyotard and Deleuze) as well as to other noteworthy philosophical thinkers such as Georges Bataille, Martin Heidegger, Victor Frankl, and of course, the thinkers with whom this discourse deals directly, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean-Luc Nancy. Nietzsche's influence on Continental philosophy thus proves to be immense. In Analytical philosophy, however, Nietzsche's philosophy is often dismissed or denounced due to Nietzsche's idiosyncratic argumentative style and Nietzsche's penchant for ambiguity.

<sup>217</sup> Cottingham 2003:17.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. Tragedies such as World War II, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, or even Apartheid.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> This idea is central to Nietzsche's arguments in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

considerations when considering the question of life's meaning, since morality, for Nietzsche, is an exogenous or external factor that imposes constrictions that might stymie the strength and creativity necessary to establish a heroically meaningful individual existence. In Nietzsche's view, the will of the strong individual is often undermined through moral constraint by the will of the weak, and therefore the *Übermensch* assumes an amoral existential position 'beyond good and evil'. However, Nietzsche must make allowance for the fact that human existence is by no means purely individualistic, for it is a patent fact of life that existential meaning is often, if not usually, tied together through social relations with other beings.<sup>221</sup> Nietzsche thus begins and ends at the individual, while he might, and perhaps should, have expanded his individualist view in such a way as to conceive of social relations not merely as a play of forces between beings, but as an exchange of meaning(s), or rather, an interactive cultivation of inter-personal creativity which, at least possibly, further fosters human existential meaning.<sup>222</sup>

Continuing along the above line of critique, Julian Young identifies two noteworthy problems with Nietzsche's account of existential meaning. The first of these is what Young calls 'the problem of the immoral script',<sup>223</sup> which problematizes Nietzsche's notion that meaning is to be kept separate from morality. Young emphasizes that meaning can never be wholly separated from social and moral concerns, because human activity is subject to social scrutiny. Social mores, upon which morality is based, are created to maintain social stability and foster cohesion, and not simply with the sinister intent of restricting individual greatness and meaning. Therefore, existential meaning and social mores cannot be wholly divorced unless the Nietzschean individual stands entirely apart from, or outside of, society itself. Nietzsche's Zarathustra and the promising *Übermensch* might well adopt this seemingly asocial stance, but not even such elevated 'free spirits' avoid society entirely. The *Übermensch* might stand above others in society, but that nonetheless suggests a *relation* to other beings *within* the social order and its mores, and therefore any individual(ist) conception of existential meaning necessarily finds itself already situated within a moral framework of some kind. Nietzsche's conception of meaning, then, cannot entirely circumvent 'the problem of the immoral script' without removing the individual from society altogether, which would be an extreme demand indeed, if not entirely impossible.

The second problem which Young notes is what he calls 'the problem of authority',<sup>224</sup> which asserts that if individuals are the sole authors of their own meaning, then they are the only authority by which to measure that meaning, and by which such meaning can be meted out. Young

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<sup>221</sup> This is particularly true when one considers the phenomena of love and friendship, for instance, both of which can certainly be directly associated with a meaningful human existence.

<sup>222</sup> This is a view which will feature in Jean-Luc Nancy's account of existential meaning in Chapter IV.

<sup>223</sup> Young 2003:95.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

considers this to be problematic inasmuch as individualized meaning detracts from the necessary authority that a set of actions or principles should have over one's behaviour and thoughts. Young argues that 'if a task has no authority over me, then it cannot be an object of my *commitment*.'<sup>225</sup> This latter 'problem of authority' is one which will be addressed, implicitly, by Jean-Paul Sartre in Chapter III of this study. As will be shown, Sartre allows for an individualist account which imputes the impetus and onus of existential meaning to individual human consciousness and the fundamental freedom it harbours. As to Young's 'problem of the immoral script', one might proffer the rejoinder that one's meaning might contrariwise be quashed or demeaned by social mores and conventions. This is not to say that society should simply condone and support any and all subjective conceptions of existential meaning, but that society should not be an absolute determining factor in existential meaning, since it might very well undermine individual creativity, agency, and freedom. To be sure, meaning and morality cannot be wholly sundered from one another, and Young's criticism of Nietzsche therefore stands. However, Nietzsche's argument in favour of individualism compels us to consider whether morality, and social normativity, might not in fact be hindrances to human thriving and a more meaningful existence.

An additional question which further problematizes Nietzsche's individualist account of existential meaning might be posed, namely: What happens if, or when, the individual pursuit of life's meaning fails to yield any appreciable measure of personal meaning? If Nietzsche is correct in his assumption that an individual means-to-meaning is all that remains at humanity's disposal in the wake of the death of god, then what assures humanity henceforth that such individualized meaning will not go the same way as that of god? That is, what if it should become apparent to us in our human future that the death of god precedes the subsequent death of humanity *qua* meaning-makers, which is to say the death of humanity *qua* individual gods unto themselves. Nietzsche's project thus proves to be partly problematic in that it in no way *guarantees* the existential meaning of our human future. There remains a lingering possibility of despair in Nietzsche's account of nihilism which resonates in the cry of the madman who announces the death of god with an ambiguous tone that suggests at once a 'passionate yearning' and a 'fierce lament' for human meaning.<sup>226</sup> One might say, then, that existential meaning is neither entirely precluded nor finally guaranteed in Nietzsche's account, which balances itself dangerously on that rather thin line between meaning and meaninglessness by accounting for the nihilism that forces humanity henceforth into a precarious existential position between the absolute and the abyss.

Ultimately, one is inclined towards an ambiguous conclusion concerning Nietzsche's philosophy on existential meaning. While it is true that Nietzschean thought is important to the study at hand

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<sup>225</sup> Young 2003:95.

<sup>226</sup> Cottingham 2003:14.

for its confrontation with nihilism and the possibility of meaning(s) that it implicitly announces, Nietzsche's heroic individualism of existential meaning potentially falls prey to all the problematic contingencies associated with an atomistic subjectivism and rampant relativism, which, in an ironic turn of events, cannot finally preclude the possibility that individualized meaning might ultimately falter precisely on the absence of an *exogenous* dimension to its foundation. In the end, one must concede that perhaps Nietzsche's philosophy of existential meaning is not yet *enough* of an account to satisfy the demand for inter-individual or social meaning(s) in our pluralistic and interconnected contemporary world. In this regard, Young argues that meaning cannot purely be created or chosen by an internal (or endogenous) individual will alone, but must retain an external (or exogenous) element from which it draws further strength and credibility. While Young's view is not without merit, it can be criticized in relation to the following notion that it espouses:

One has to allow that the individual is *born into* a set of ends or values which have ultimate authority for her and which, in conjunction with her particular, concrete situation – her talents, tastes, social and historical location, and so on – *determine* a vocation for her, a vocation which if she looks hard and long enough, she can discover.<sup>227</sup>

This notion can, and indeed will, be implicitly criticized through the individualist account of existential meaning provided by Jean-Paul Sartre in the next chapter of this study, in which it will be demonstrated that existential meaning might be justified as a fundamentally free individual human pursuit which can never be entirely *determined* by contingent constraints. Sartre will thus answer for a number of the above concerns and critiques raised *contra* Nietzsche's individualism.

## 2.7. Conclusion: Existential Meaning(s) Beyond Nihilism (?)

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The interpretation of Nietzschean thought offered in the above chapter is based in the idea that Nietzsche's proto-existentialism contains the implicit possibility of overcoming nihilism through life-affirmation. To be sure, there are passages of Nietzschean thought that remain ambiguous or even doubtful that nihilism can be wholly overcome in the sense of being left behind entirely. Yet, with recourse to various supporting primary textual elements from Nietzsche's own thought, in conjunction with secondary source materials that inform my reading of Nietzsche, especially the more contemporary interpretation of Nietzsche offered by Gilles Deleuze, I argue that Nietzsche's philosophy may be read as a possible means to overcoming nihilism without thereby leaving it behind. In Nietzsche's view, the threat of nihilism can never be dispelled entirely due to the uncertainty of an existence that no longer has recourse to any transcendent sources of meaning(s). Yet, to acknowledge nihilism in this way is not to be ensnared by its negative logic, but to be liberated from nihilism as a foregone conclusion to human meaning. I would therefore argue that

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<sup>227</sup> Young 2003:96. Original emphasis.

Nietzsche's thought on nihilism makes possible an understanding of what contemporary human existential meaning is up against, and what would be required if we are to get beyond nihilism, and move toward existential meaningfulness through a life-affirming response to the dire threat of meaninglessness. On this point, Nietzsche remains ultimately uncertain. However, the thinkers following in Nietzsche's legacy, including both Sartre and Nancy, offer apposite answers that may supplement or even ameliorate Nietzsche's uncertainty on this matter concerning meaning.

Following a critical appraisal of Nietzschean thought, one cannot neglect the fact that Nietzsche might be missing a possible means-to-meaning discernible in social relations between beings by emphatically and exclusively favouring the individual dimension of existential meaning. This point is especially significant inasmuch as a social dimension to existential meaning might offer humanity further recourse beyond the nihilism that Nietzsche identified as a threat to secular existential meaning(s). One might argue that a contemporary discourse on existential meaning cannot, in good contextual conscience, overlook or dismiss the possibility of a social dimension to existential meaning, since, as Eagleton puts it, 'there can be no definition of meaning, whether of life or anything else, which is unique to myself alone. If we emerge into being in and through one another, then this must have strong implications for the meaning-of-life question.'<sup>228</sup> By exploring the social dimension of existential meaning in the subsequent chapters of this study, the relevance of Georges Bataille's assertion concerning Nietzsche's philosophy might become more apparent: 'Nietzsche never doubted that if the possibility he recommended was going to exist, it would require community. Desire for community was constantly on his mind.'<sup>229</sup>

In what follows in this study, it should become clear how Nietzsche's philosophy, both implicitly and explicitly, underpins and foreshadows the more contemporary philosophies of both Sartre and Nancy on the question of existential meaning. Specifically, Nietzsche's proto-existentialism serves as a forerunner to the individualist existentialism of Sartre, and precipitates precisely the kind of means-to-meaning later developed by Nancy. Chapter III demonstrates how Sartrean existentialism explicitly attempts to make individuals aware of, and accountable for, their own existential meaning(s) in a world devoid of traditional transcendental significance. Thereafter, Chapter IV explicates how Nancy's project of pluralist ontology, in conjunction with his nuanced (re)conceptualization of meaning as 'sense', effectively advances Nietzsche's project of transvaluation in contemporary thought by extending human existential meaning towards the social dimension of our existence. These forthcoming chapters further aim to demonstrate the meaning of Malcolm Bull's assertion that '[n]ihilism is individual and its limit is social.'<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Eagleton 2008:98.

<sup>229</sup> Bataille 1992:8.

<sup>230</sup> Bull 2011:77.

### CHAPTER III:

#### Sartre's Individualism of Existential Meaning

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Man is nothing other than his own project.<sup>1</sup>

It is arguably through the philosophical discourse of existentialism that the question of existential meaning has received the most direct attention. For the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, arguably the most well-known existentialist philosopher, the meaning of human existence in the increasingly secular contemporary world *hic et nunc* demands our most immediate and deliberate philosophical deliberation. It would not be entirely controversial to claim that Sartre is one of the most significant and consequential thinkers on human existence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> The influence and import of Sartre's work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond is extensive, ranging from his literary and philosophical prominence, to his subversive political activism and public persona as *vox populi*.<sup>3</sup> Sartre's extensive influence is especially evinced by the fact that the name of Sartre is virtually synonymous with existentialism as a philosophical, literary, and political movement.<sup>4</sup> This has been described as the 'Sartre phenomenon';<sup>5</sup> the view that Sartrean thought, in its radical (re)conceptualization of human existence, proved to be notably consequential, both esoterically, in philosophical circles, and exoterically, within the general sphere of public perception.

It is within this chapter that the striking relevance of Sartre's thought to the contemporary question on existential meaning will be elucidated. Sartre argues that human freedom, in the radical way he conceives of it, may be the only viable and authentic means-to-meaning remaining at humanity's disposal today. Sartre reveals a possible means-to-meaning without recourse to traditional transcendental sources of existential meaning, and without an abandonment to an overly oppressive existential nihilism. However, in a manner somewhat akin to that of Nietzsche, Sartrean philosophy resonates with a residual note of grimness and gravity, which lingers in the wake of Sartre's philosophy, drawing each human individual into a confrontation with life's darker and more dismal aspects. Sartre does not conceive of existential meaning in a naïve or idealistic manner, but through a robust ontology that situates the responsibility for a meaningful existence squarely in the individual existential projects of each and every conscious human being. Sartrean thought thus imparts to humanity the promising yet potentially daunting view that the meaning of one's existence can no longer be *discovered* in any absolute form, but must be *made* from the raw material of a contingent, manifestly finite, and undeniably fallible individual human existence.

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<sup>1</sup> *EH*, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Daigle 2010:127.

<sup>3</sup> The voice of the people.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Kaufmann (in Barnes 1973:vii) goes so far as to say: 'No philosopher in all of history has reached as large an audience in his lifetime as has Jean-Paul Sartre.'

<sup>5</sup> Cohen-Solal 2007:11.

### 3.1. Sartre in Context

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In the mid-twentieth century, writing amidst the tragic maelstrom of World War II and the difficult disenchantment that attended its harrowing eventualities, Sartre sought answers to the meaning of life that might allay the fury of our human fears, satisfy our most profound human desires, and bespeak a fundamental human freedom. Mired in a grim European political reality brought about by ideological absolutism,<sup>6</sup> and fully cognizant of the rapidly waning strength of religious faith in the increasingly secular West, Sartre confronts the existential disillusionment of his age directly in his fictional, dramatic, and philosophical writings.<sup>7</sup> Drawing directly from the literature of his philosophical forebears – particularly that of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger – Sartre conscientiously contemplates the contemporary human condition in all its absurdity and seeming inscrutability. This chapter places its foremost focus on Sartre’s existentialist philosophy in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) as well as Sartre’s published lecture, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946). In these works, Sartre discerns and emphasizes a fundamental freedom that accompanies the human condition, as well as the implications, both positive and negative, of such freedom in regard to the possible meaning(s) that might be made of individual human existence. Sartre’s well-known work of phenomenological ontology in *Being and Nothingness* has become a virtual biblical text for existentialist intellectuals, owing to the historical relevance of its content, as well as the radical possibilities of meaning made possible through its robust argumentation.

However, Sartre’s answers to the question on existential meaning are often interpreted as offering only the slightest sliver of a silver lining to a far darker cloud of consternation, entirely gravid with the gravity and excessive enormity of our human existence. Yet, much like human existence itself, Sartre’s existentialism is neither wholly optimistic nor consistently pessimistic, but abundant with a rich ambiguity that situates itself between a radical and potentially hopeful freedom, and a deep despair which threatens to subsume humanity under a nihilistic pall. Sartre’s philosophy is brazen and daunting, weighty and dense, yet optimistic in its own unique manner, even in the face of the potentially dire situation facing humanity in a world from which the former gods of meaning have fled. Sartre expresses his views on the meaning of the contemporary human condition by means of an expansive and diverse literary oeuvre, either through characters or philosophical arguments that reflect the human reality of his age. Sartre is apposite to the question on existential meaning as it confronts our contemporary age insofar as he radically reconceptualizes both the problem and possibilities of meaning in a world following in the immediate aftermath of the death of god; a world in which Sartre was squarely situated, and with which he was all too familiar.

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<sup>6</sup> Specifically, the secular socio-political ideology of NAZI Germany.

<sup>7</sup> Especially Sartre’s novel *Nausea* (1938), which accounts the experience(s) of nausea in the face of an unadulterated metaphysical meaninglessness. One might mention a number of Sartre’s other works here, including *The Roads to Freedom* trilogy (1945–1949), his famous play *No Exit* (1944), and his autobiography entitled *The Words* (1963).

### 3.1.1. Sartre in the Wake of the Death of God

... man finds himself the heir of the mission of the dead God: to draw Being from its perpetual collapse into the absolute indistinctness of night. An infinite mission.<sup>8</sup>

Though he rarely explicitly addresses the problem of nihilism as such, Sartre is undoubtedly concerned with the entailments of the potentially meaningless secular world confronting Western humanity after the death of god, and further seeks to provide posterity with a means-to-meaning beyond the threatening mire of nihilism which Nietzsche made all too apparent. In order to properly situate the significance of Sartre's thinking following in the wake of Nietzsche's philosophy on existential meaning, one should perhaps first consider some of the metaphysical and existential implications of the death of god, as identified in the previous chapter. The death of god is by no means an unequivocal assertion of a metaphysical state of affairs. Rather, it is an ambiguous proclamation in that it is neither inherently positive nor innately negative, but simply a statement of the situation which faces humankind following as a consequence of Western philosophy's historical legacy of nihilism.

As argued in the previous chapter, the death of god announces the demise of traditional sources of existential meaning, and further paves potential paths to meaning by calling for radical new conceptualizations which do not resort to a nihilistic defeatism, nor to a vain attempt of situating human existential meaning in outmoded metaphysical ideals. Nietzsche's proclamation, then, is far more descriptive than prescriptive in this regard in that it offers very little, if any, specificity concerning the reorientation of human existence towards meaning following the death of god.<sup>9</sup> The ambiguity of the death of god thus confronts posterity as the potential threat of nihilism, on the one hand, and as a possible means-to-meaning, on the other. Given the inherent ambiguity of this striking proclamation, the task falls to individual human beings to decide what meaning is to be *made* of the death of god. Without recourse to transcendental qualification, then, the meaning of life becomes an expressly *individual* concern.

This is what Nietzsche already understood at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and what Sartre sought to expound in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, this is how one may come to understand the meaning of Malcolm Bull's assertion that '[n]ihilism is individual':<sup>10</sup> since meaning appears to have been supplanted from its former supernal stronghold in transcendent truths, and repositioned in the province of individual human concerns, a meaningful life and its opposite, nihilism, becomes a function of an individual disposition towards one's particular existence. The death of god is thus

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<sup>8</sup> *NE*, p. 494.

<sup>9</sup> As was indicated in the previous chapter, Nietzsche offers only a general existential aesthetics which views an individual human life as a potential artwork to be rendered through a creative and affirmative will to power.

<sup>10</sup> Bull 2011:77

an assertion reliant upon subjective individual appropriation, and could thus be interpreted as a 'genuine liberation'<sup>11</sup> or as an onerous condemnation for humanity henceforth.

Yet, in Sartrean philosophy, one can discern how these two terms, liberation and condemnation, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, as Sartre would have it, condemnation and liberation are inextricably interwoven in the very fabric of our human condition; an idea that will become apparent in what follows in this chapter. Sartre indirectly affirms the ambiguity of the death of god while importantly emphasizing the responsibility now incumbent upon human beings following in the wake of this proclamation. Thomas Anderson summarizes the Sartrean perception of the death of god appositely when he says that 'since God is dead, as are all objective values, man is completely dependent upon the freedom of men if he is to attain meaning and value for his existence.'<sup>12</sup> Christine Daigle draws a direct comparison between Nietzsche and Sartre along the lines of the death of god;<sup>13</sup> akin to Nietzsche's reflections on the death of god in *The Gay Science*, and echoing an expression used by Joan Stambaugh from the previous chapter, 'Sartre has said that the death of God is the equivalent to the death of all transcendence'.<sup>14</sup> Sartre writes: '*The absence of God* is not some closing off – it is the opening of the infinite.'<sup>15</sup> According to Daigle, this newly actuated infinitude of existence refers specifically to 'the infinite of human possibilities.'<sup>16</sup>

Sartre implicitly addresses the proclamation of the death of god and the attendant threat of nihilism in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946).<sup>17</sup> The world that Sartre inhabits and describes in these works is precisely the world which follows as a consequence of Nietzschean philosophy. According to Christine Daigle,<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche and Sartre 'had the same philosophical starting point: nihilism', and moreover, 'both give a similar answer to the problem opened by nihilism, the question of meaning.'<sup>19</sup> John Macquarrie similarly asserts that 'French existentialism, as we see it in Jean-Paul Sartre, remains, in some respects, close to Nietzsche. In a godless world man himself has to take the place of God.'<sup>20</sup> Sartre himself did not overtly acknowledge an indebtedness to Nietzsche, possibly due to the issue of certain Nietzschean terms to which Sartre would likely not have subscribed: such as the will to power, the *Übermensch*, and eternal recurrence.<sup>21</sup> In an interview conducted later in his life, Sartre asserted quite unequivocally that Nietzsche interested him as a human figure, but that Nietzsche's

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<sup>11</sup> Daigle 2004:200 & Daigle 2010:42.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson 1979:89.

<sup>13</sup> Daigle 2010:54-55.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> *NE*, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Daigle 2010:43.

<sup>17</sup> Sartre further addresses the death of god and its implications more directly in his plays, especially *The Flies* (1944), *The Devil and the Good Lord* (1951), and in his posthumously published philosophy in *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1983).

<sup>18</sup> Daigle 2004:195.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Macquarrie 1972:58.

<sup>21</sup> Daigle 2004:197.

philosophy ultimately ‘never stood for anything particular’.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly enough, however, this does not preclude Nietzschean elements inadvertently entering into Sartrean thought, and we might justifiably assert, along with Daigle, that ‘Nietzsche is certainly present in [Sartre’s] intellectual universe’.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, Nietzsche is the first philosopher directly mentioned by name in Sartre’s magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness* – a point which has not gone unnoticed in Sartrean scholarship,<sup>24</sup> and which further points to Sartre’s assertion that Nietzsche (in addition to Kierkegaard and Marx) is a philosopher ‘who could be taken as a point of departure for understanding twentieth-century thought’.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of the extent of the intellectual affinity present between the works of Sartre and Nietzsche, for the purposes of the study at hand it is more significant that both these thinkers, and their respective philosophies, have immediate and important bearing on the question of existential meaning as it faces humanity after the death of god. Daigle postulates that ‘[t]he major difference between Nietzsche and Sartre is in the tone and manner of their complete nihilism. Nietzsche attacks a crumbling tradition, whereas Sartre finds it already in ruins.’<sup>26</sup> One might well posit, then, that Sartrean existentialism is, in its own idiosyncratic way, a philosophical furtherance of Nietzschean philosophy to the extent that it postulates apposite contemporary answers to inescapable Nietzschean questions on existential meaning.

Sartrean existentialism reflects on what Richard Tarnas calls ‘a pervasive spiritual crisis in modern culture’.<sup>27</sup> Like Nietzsche, Sartre believes that mythical thinking – a metaphysical logic which ideologically precedes the Nietzschean death of God – entails ‘inauthentic compensatory myths [humans] construct out of their own lives in response to the distorting pressures of their age’.<sup>28</sup> Such mythical thinking, which Nietzsche described as a kind of metaphysical escapism aligned with the negative nihilistic logic so deeply embedded in our Western tradition, is viewed with great suspicion by Sartre also, especially inasmuch as it allows human individuals to flee in the face of a finite and wholly contingent human existence. Sartre adamantly argues that human existence is neither metaphysically necessary nor divinely preordained, but simply an ‘unjustifiable fact’.<sup>29</sup> On the foundation that human existence is gratuitous [*de trop*], an idea which follows the ontological fact that it is inherently unjustified in any logical or metaphysical manner,<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Schilpp 1981:9.

<sup>23</sup> Daigle 2004:197.

<sup>24</sup> Kaufmann 2004:21 & Daigle 2010:38. Daigle (2010:10) also makes reference to a study on Nietzsche undertaken by Sartre as part of his work on ethics in the late 1940s.

<sup>25</sup> Schilpp 1981:12.

<sup>26</sup> Daigle 2004:200.

<sup>27</sup> Tarnas 1991:389.

<sup>28</sup> Howells 1981:555.

<sup>29</sup> *BN*, p. 104.

<sup>30</sup> *NE*, p. 491: ‘Consciousness is gratuitous because it is not its own foundation and because it is contingent (a point of view) by necessity.’

Sartre establishes his ontological argument asserting that any justification for human existence, or existential meaning, can only be derived from subjective individual human interpretations of existence through one's conscious experience of the world into which one is *thrown*,<sup>31</sup> without absolute origin, and without ultimate purpose. In Sartre's view, the human search for meaning via a transcendental realm beyond our finite world is a way of sundering ourselves from our existence as meaning-makers: 'our belief in a providential God as the ground of our being, or our uncritical and living acceptance of values as objective realities are ways of being alienated from ourselves.'<sup>32</sup> Considering Sartrean thought in this regard vis-à-vis Nietzsche's denouncement of traditional metaphysics, one might concur with Daigle, who posits that 'Nietzsche says that we must free ourselves of such alienating discourses, and Sartre agrees'.<sup>33</sup>

Religion paints a metaphysical face on an otherwise inherently absurd existence; it is a *choice* of the necessity of the meaning of life, but one rendered on the unguaranteed grounds of human contingency; and, what is more, it entails an unwillingness to live with the gratuitousness of human existence. For Sartre, life is absurd in that it is inherently without *ultimate* meaning.<sup>34</sup> That is, humanity is abandoned to this world *hic et nunc* without any exogenous existential meaning which could be extrinsically qualified beyond the human realm.<sup>35</sup> Traditional religious discourse, or mythical thinking, typically subscribes to the view that human life is absurd or meaningless in the express absence of a divine or metaphysical provenance governing its unfolding. Sartre would not wholly disagree on this point, since along with the disappearance of an Absolute God 'goes the possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven'.<sup>36</sup> Sartre would, however, dispute the verity of claims derived from our human 'metaphysical instinct',<sup>37</sup> and argue against the notion that existential meaning is necessarily predicated on metaphysical grounds.

Simply stated, Sartre would agree that in the history of Western thought, existential meaning has indeed been predicated on a metaphysical substructure; but Sartre would wholeheartedly disagree that such a metaphysical substructure is *necessary* for human beings to live a meaningful existence. Humanity would only need god to justify existential meaning in an *absolute* sense, but this by no means precludes the possibility of human existential meaning in a cosmos devoid of god's existence and absolute guarantee. Contrary to mythical thinking, which would purport the

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<sup>31</sup> *BN*, p. 103. Sartre inherits this term from Heidegger's *Being and Time*, viz. *Geworfenheit*. See *BT*, p. 174.

<sup>32</sup> Scott 1981:293.

<sup>33</sup> Daigle 2010:38.

<sup>34</sup> *BN*, p. 501.

<sup>35</sup> This view is not wholly unique to Sartre, and is by no means limited to his philosophy. It is, in fact, a view shared by Sartre's contemporary, Albert Camus, who wrote extensively on the absurdity of human existence, particularly in his famous philosophical work, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942).

<sup>36</sup> *EH*, p. 28. Sartre expresses this idea more poetically in his play *The Devil and the Good Lord*, in which it is said: 'Each minute I wondered what I could *be* in the eyes of God. Now I know the answer: nothing. God does not see me, God does not hear me, God does not know me. You see this emptiness over our heads? That is God.' (As quoted in Daigle 2010:42).

<sup>37</sup> According to Daigle (2010:37), both Nietzsche and Sartre would agree that human beings are prone to metaphysical speculation due to a 'metaphysical instinct', or what Schopenhauer (1966b:160) calls a metaphysical *need*.

existence of an Absolute entity to ensure the measure of a meaningful human existence, Sartre believes that such a positing of the transcendental on humanity's part is, in fact, *irresponsible*, since, as mentioned above, this would alienate human individuals from their existence as meaning-makers. For Sartre, humanity must come to terms with the patent reality that it is we, as individual human beings, who impose meaning upon the cosmos, not contrariwise.<sup>38</sup> Sartre thus subverts and reverses the traditional metaphysical account of existential meaning and displaces meaning altogether from its transcendent seat in an intelligible heaven.

Contrary to traditional metaphysical accounts of meaning, the existentialist account of human existence, as espoused in Nietzschean and Sartrean thought, avers that the cosmos is a 'human reality',<sup>39</sup> and its meaning(s) are the product of perspectival (Nietzsche) or subjective (Sartre) individual human interpretation(s). In this way, both Nietzsche and Sartre place the principal emphasis on human existence in *this world hic et nunc*. A potential implication of Sartre's atheistic existentialism<sup>40</sup> is that, hermeneutically speaking, the existence of god might be viewed as a distinctly human interpretation in which humanity projects itself, and its self-image as meaning-makers, into the heavens.<sup>41</sup> Metaphysically speaking, of course, god may or may not exist, but only human beings can determine what *meaning* this has for human existence.<sup>42</sup> As a result, if human beings determine the meaning of the metaphysical reality of god's presence or absence, we therefore also determine the meaning of the death of god because it was by human hands, or through our human interpretation, that god has died.

Walter Kaufmann, a contemporary philosopher well-versed in the discourse of existentialism, asserts that 'like Nietzsche, Sartre remains "faithful to the earth"',<sup>43</sup> insofar as Sartre deliberately and explicitly adopts a stance towards human existence that disqualifies the possibility of traditional metaphysical transcendence. In Sartrean thought, this specifically takes the form of an overtly and unapologetically atheistic stance towards all transcendental qualification of human meaning. Hazel E. Barnes, a well-known translator of Sartrean philosophy, asserts that 'Sartre's whole endeavour is to explain man's predicament in human terms without postulating an existing

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<sup>38</sup> *EH*, p. 34.

<sup>39</sup> *BN*, p. 4, & p. 42. See also: *EH*, p. 22. This is a term which Sartre claims to have appropriated from Heidegger.

<sup>40</sup> As Sartre calls it. See: *EH*, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Muller (2010:241) writes: 'Failing to become God on this earth, we project a transcendent God outside ourselves.' One might further compare this with Ludwig Feuerbach's account in *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) – a text almost contemporaneous with Nietzschean thought. This thought is further reflected in Sartre's novel *Nausea* (1938) in which he states that humanity 'tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a delusion, a probability which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift.' (As quoted in Daigle 2010:36).

<sup>42</sup> Once again on a hermeneutical note, biblical authorship (out of which the discourse of hermeneutics was born) may be believed to be derived from the direct word of god, but it is still penned by human scribes, and therefore is always subject to human interpretation. That is, even divine revelation is revealed to a finite and fallible being, whose responsibility it is to determine the meaning(s) of things (this would include god's word).

<sup>43</sup> Kaufmann 2004:46.

God to guarantee anything.’<sup>44</sup> This is why Charles E. Scott states that ‘[Sartre’s] passion has been to live without God.’<sup>45</sup> Sartre rejects a ‘tranquilizing’<sup>46</sup> mythical transcendentalism of this type, and supplants it with a distinctly human transcendence.<sup>47</sup>

Human transcendence, in Sartrean terms, may be said to encompass three finite facets: the transcendence of an individual consciousness towards the world of phenomena or objects (what I shall call *phenomenological transcendence*); the transcendence of a socio-historically situated individual towards their own existential possibilities (what I shall call *existential transcendence*); and the transcendence of individual subjectivity towards humankind in its entirety (what Sartre himself calls ‘existentialist humanism’).<sup>48</sup> Human transcendence, in all the forms it assumes in Sartrean thought, is always a finite and contingent transcendence, predicated not on metaphysical constructs, but on a ‘human reality’ rooted in *this world hic et nunc*, which for Sartre, is a world devoid of god(s). Borrowing a piece of nomenclature from Heidegger’s repertoire, Sartre describes the human condition as one of inescapable ‘abandonment’, which for Sartre, refers to the fact that ‘God does not exist, and that we must bear the full consequences of that assertion.’<sup>49</sup> Sartre uses the term abandonment here in a somewhat ambiguous fashion, akin to the ambiguous implications of Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of god. In speaking of abandonment in such a way, Sartre seeks to affirm an atheistic position which delivers humanity over to itself as the responsible bearer of existential meaning. This is why Sartre asserts that existentialism ‘is merely an attempt to draw all of the conclusions inferred by a consistently atheistic point of view. Its purpose is not at all to plunge humankind into despair.’<sup>50</sup> In a philosophical voice resonant with Nietzschean nuances, Sartre might assert that: ‘Life begins on the other side of despair’.<sup>51</sup>

### 3.1.2. Sartre’s Atheism

One must exercise caution so as not to misconstrue Sartre’s atheistic existentialist position. Two aspects to Sartre’s atheism may be discerned, which I will refer to as *metaphysical atheism* and *existential atheism* respectively. Sartre is undeniably an atheist in the conventional sense of the term, in that he unequivocally does not believe in the actual existence of a god. This is Sartre’s *metaphysical atheism*; it denies the real or actual existence of any transcendent divine entity. Yet, there is an element of Sartrean atheism which is somewhat less straightforward; one which argues that the existence of god is inconsequential to the argument on human meaning because human

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<sup>44</sup> Barnes 1956:xxix.

<sup>45</sup> Scott 1981:293.

<sup>46</sup> *NE*, p. 494.

<sup>47</sup> Daigle 2010:41.

<sup>48</sup> *EH*, p. 53.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>51</sup> Kaufmann 2004:46.

beings do not *require* a transcendent entity to accord meaning to life. That is, whether god exists or not, humanity remains *responsible* for the meaning of its existence *hic et nunc*. This follows from Sartre's argument that it is through human consciousness that meaning is made manifest in the world,<sup>52</sup> not due to an extrinsic qualification derived from a transcendent source. It is for this reason that Sartre asserts that 'even if God were to exist, it would make no difference' simply because 'what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of God.'<sup>53</sup>

This latter form of atheism is what might be termed *existential atheism*. This argument is important to Sartre's existentialism because it emphasizes one of the central tenets of his existentialist thought, viz. the view that humanity is *solely* and *wholly* responsible for its existential meaning. Whether god actually exists or not has no immediate bearing on that inescapable fact. To believe otherwise, in Sartre's view, is not only irresponsible, but quite plainly problematic, insofar as it would undermine the very *freedom* that humanity believes itself to possess; which even the most religious interlocutor would likely have to concede, since, from a religious point of view, this may be interpreted to mean that god imbued humankind with free will such that they might decide for themselves whether or not to believe in his existence and abide by his law. The principal Sartrean argument here is that if human beings are free, whether created by an omnipotent being or not, then they must be free to interpret existence through their own individual perspective. The point that Sartre emphasizes in this regard, is that you can choose to believe or disbelieve in the existence of god, but you cannot choose not to be human. This implies that you cannot choose *not* to be responsible for your belief or disbelief; or alternatively stated, you cannot choose not to choose.<sup>54</sup>

The only way to circumvent or undermine Sartre's position here would be to argue against human freedom itself.<sup>55</sup> Hazel E. Barnes asserts that '[e]ither man is free and does not derive his meaning from God, or he is dependent on God and not free.'<sup>56</sup> Sartre patently rejects the latter hypothesis because he denounces the existence of god on both metaphysical and existential grounds; '[h]e refuses the myth [of god] partly because of his stern conviction that we must face reality and not hide behind myths which would tend to blur the sharp edges of the human dilemma.'<sup>57</sup> Sartre's existential atheism is thus not unlike the anti-theism of Nietzschean philosophy, particularly as expressed in the proclamation of the death of god, inasmuch as it advocates that the traditional

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<sup>52</sup> This idea will be further explicated in the subsequent subsections of this chapter.

<sup>53</sup> *EH*, p. 53.

<sup>54</sup> *BN*, p. 503.

<sup>55</sup> Which is certainly possible; a fact which is evinced by the ongoing debate in philosophy between free will advocates and ardent determinists. For a specific critique of the existentialist conception of freedom, see: Cebik 1971.

<sup>56</sup> Barnes 1956:xxix.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxiv.

conception of god and transcendental sources of meaning are a form of escapism which do not lead human beings to affirm life *hic et nunc* on its own terms. One might say, then, that Sartre and Nietzsche share a kind of *existential atheism* which seeks to emphasize the point that the existence of god is not a necessary condition for human existential meaning.<sup>58</sup> Neither a theistic nor atheistic stance could possibly release one from the fundamental responsibility that one bears for one's own existence. Nietzsche and Sartre would thus likely agree on the *implications* entailed by the death of god: humanity must henceforth assume full responsibility for the meaning of existence.

In this view, the death of god is not an insuperable quandary condemning humankind to the mire of an inescapable nihilism. Notwithstanding Sartre's assertion that he, like other existentialists, finds the death of god 'extremely disturbing',<sup>59</sup> Sartre does not altogether suffer the death of god as an implacable loss to human existence, but understands it to be empowering,<sup>60</sup> albeit in a manner that humanity has yet to fully grasp. In Kaufmann's words: 'Man's situation, as Sartre sees it, is absurd and tragic'; yet '[s]ecular existentialism is a tragic world view without, however, being pessimistic.'<sup>61</sup> What Sartrean philosophy expresses is that humanity, in order to determine the meaning of its future, will need to come to terms with the full implications, both positive and negative, of the death of god. In this regard, Sartre refers to the death of God as the 'great historical change', in which the Eternal and the Absolute will be replaced by 'the temporally infinite'.<sup>62</sup> From this perspective, it is incumbent upon humanity to assimilate this pivotal historical paradigm shift, and in the process become beings with 'infinite potentiality of infinitely manifesting Being'.<sup>63</sup> Fleeing in the face of the existential challenge that arises from the death of god would be irresponsible inasmuch as such cowardice<sup>64</sup> on the part of human beings may precipitate a potentially interminable existential meaninglessness in our human future. In Sartre's view, then, the death of God points to the fact that human beings do not derive the *essence* or the *meaning* of their being from an external source,<sup>65</sup> but are fundamentally free to determine these aspects for themselves: 'If God does not exist, we have to decide by ourselves on the meaning of Being.'<sup>66</sup>

All human individuals are answerable for the death of god and the burdensome charge that Nietzsche has laid upon them: '*We have killed him* -- you and I. All of us are his murderers.'<sup>67</sup> This

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<sup>58</sup> Though, notably, the question of whether or not Nietzsche is a metaphysical atheist remains open to debate.

<sup>59</sup> *EH*, p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> Harries 2012:189.

<sup>61</sup> Kaufmann 2004:47.

<sup>62</sup> *NE*, p. 84.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 484. One might compare this to Nancy's conception of 'infinite finitude' in Chapter IV.

<sup>64</sup> In *EH*, p. 49, Sartre writes: "Those who conceal from themselves this total freedom, under the guise of solemnity, or by making determinist excuses, I will call cowards. Others, who try to prove their existence is necessary, when man's appearance on this earth is merely contingent, I will call bastards. But whether cowards or bastards, they can be judged only on the grounds of strict authenticity."

<sup>65</sup> *EH*, p. 22: 'there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it.'

<sup>66</sup> *NE*, p. 486.

<sup>67</sup> *GS*, §125.

weighty charge against humanity must be appropriately acknowledged if we are to accord existence any measure of meaning worthy of our consideration. This charge of accountability in Nietzschean philosophy redirects into a matter of freedom and responsibility in Sartre's thought.<sup>68</sup> Sartre is anything but defeated by the void or absence of transcendental qualification that follows in the wake of the death of god. In this regard, he asserts that

if we once get away from what Nietzsche called 'the illusion of worlds-behind-the-scene,' and if we no longer believe in the being-behind-the-appearance, then the appearance becomes full positivity; its essence is an 'appearing' which is no longer opposed to being but on the contrary is the measure of it.<sup>69</sup>

Sartre affirms this message most emphatically by employing the philosophical discourse of phenomenology to make his arguments in *Being and Nothingness*. Phenomenology is a discourse defined by its emphasis on the world of phenomenal appearances as apprehended by conscious human experience.<sup>70</sup> The corollary to such a philosophical focus is that phenomenology is typically not concerned with a world constituted by metaphysical postulates. By employing the phenomenological discourse in the unique manner in which he does, Sartre achieves what Nietzsche advocated ardently in favour of: the subversion of the *logic of Being over becoming* – that problematic logic so deeply rooted and rife within the history of Western thought.

Sartrean philosophy, by situating itself firmly in the physical world of concrete phenomenal appearances, and having no further recourse to any transcendental temptations, effectively subverts and reverses the logic of Being over becoming. Sartre therefore tells us that '[p]henomenologists have immersed man back in the world, they have restored to his anguish and his sufferings, and to his rebellions too, their full weight.'<sup>71</sup> This can be seen as an important advancement of the philosophical point which Nietzsche sought to emphasise.<sup>72</sup> By delimiting his discourse to the field of phenomenological investigation in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discovers a means-to-meaning which overcomes humanity's inclination to decry the death of god as an insurmountable nihilistic event in the history of human meaning. It should become increasingly apparent in the subsequent subsections of this chapter that Sartre overcomes existential nihilism by defining human consciousness in a unique relation to its fundamental ontological freedom. It is this phenomenological description of the fundamentally free nature of human consciousness to which this study now turns.

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<sup>68</sup> Daigle 2004:200.

<sup>69</sup> *BN*, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Phenomenology can also be described as the philosophy of human consciousness and lived experience. Sartrean phenomenology is born specifically from Edmund Husserl's school of phenomenological inquiry; a characteristic which Sartre's ontology in *Being and Nothingness* shares with Heidegger's fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*.

<sup>71</sup> *TE*, p. 51.

<sup>72</sup> Kaufmann (2004:42) directly compares Nietzsche and Sartre in this regard: 'the features Nietzsche stressed are found in Sartre, too, if less explicitly: passion and its mastery, independence of convention, and that creative freedom which finds ultimate expression in being a law unto oneself.'

### 3.2. Sartre's Phenomenology of Meaning

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In his major work of phenomenological ontology, *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre assumes, as his philosophical starting point, insights derived from the works of his philosophical forebears, including G.W.F. Hegel,<sup>73</sup> but especially Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger.<sup>74</sup> Specifically, Sartre's ontology in *Being and Nothingness* owes an intellectual debt to both the phenomenology of Husserl, and the fundamental ontology of Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927). Building on Husserl's legacy as the father of phenomenology,<sup>75</sup> Sartre's philosophy has been described as 'Phenomenology Existentialized',<sup>76</sup> since '[i]n Sartre's hands, the importance of phenomenology is not merely epistemological; its findings affect the way we live our lives.'<sup>77</sup> Sartrean existential phenomenology, or phenomenological existentialism, is an idiosyncratic contribution to the field, and extends beyond a barefaced reinterpretation of Husserl's phenomenological ideas. Moreover, Sartre's reading of Heidegger's *Being and Time* undeniably has direct bearing on his thinking, and this Heideggerian influence can be traced throughout *Being and Nothingness*.

One should certainly avoid, however, the prejudicial notion that Sartrean ontology is merely a reworking of Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Sartre's phenomenological ontology differs deliberately and radically from Heidegger's fundamental ontology in numerous instances in *Being and Nothingness*, and it would be erroneous indeed to equate these two philosophical projects since 'Sartre and Heidegger look in fundamentally different places when they interpret the meaning of being.'<sup>78</sup> In this regard, Michel Haar asserts: 'Indeed, one may notice that to each of his principal theses Sartre attaches a vigorous and methodical refutation of the corresponding Heideggerian doctrine.'<sup>79</sup> Moreover, following the publication of *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), Heidegger sought to distance himself from Sartre in his 'Letter on Humanism' (1946), which provided a criticism of Sartre's views, to which Sartre never posited a rejoinder. This study seeks to understand Sartre's thought in its own right, and not through reference to its Heideggerian roots. Unlike Heidegger's fundamental ontology, Sartre's ontology in *Being and Nothingness* does not seek to inquire into the very meaning of Being [*Sein*] itself, but seeks to understand the nature of human existence in terms of our concrete conscious experience(s) of the world. Sartre's ontological account in *Being and Nothingness* has gained great credibility in its own right as a significant work of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical literature.

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<sup>73</sup> Sartre's thought owes a debt to Hegelian thought, but such a debt in *Being and Nothingness* would be implicit rather than deliberate, since Sartre only undertook a serious study of Hegelian philosophy from around 1945, subsequent to the publication of *Being and Nothingness* in 1943 (Schilpp 1981:9).

<sup>74</sup> Derrida (1972:116) refers to Sartrean existentialism as 'Hegelian-Husserlian-Heideggerian anthropology'.

<sup>75</sup> Daigle 2010:18

<sup>76</sup> Richmond 2004:xxvi.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

<sup>78</sup> Scott 1981:296.

<sup>79</sup> Haar 1980:168.

Drawing from Husserl and Heidegger, Sartre defines Being not simply as that which *is*, or that which exists, but more specifically in phenomenological terms, as ‘the condition of all revelation.’<sup>80</sup> Being is thus the necessary ontological ground for all phenomena as they appear to human consciousness. Prior to the ‘upsurge’<sup>81</sup> of human consciousness into Being, ‘Being is itself, with no gap or emptiness or lack or need or meaning or differentiation’.<sup>82</sup> Moving from the general to the particular, Sartre defines the Being of an existent or entity quite simply as ‘exactly what it *appears*’.<sup>83</sup> The Being of an entity, or the Being of a being,<sup>84</sup> is therefore nothing more nor less than its appearance in the world as apprehended by human consciousness. Moreover, Sartre’s phenomenological conception of Being entails significant implications pertaining to the nature and meaning of human existence. Sartre conceptualizes Being from a distinctly contingent, human perspective, and avoids defining Being in a traditional Platonic metaphysical fashion, viz. as that which transcends the physical world of appearances *hic et nunc*. *Contra* Platonic Idealism and Christian metaphysics, which have largely dominated Western ontology,<sup>85</sup> Sartre views Being not as the permanent, enduring, perfect plenitude which *escapes* this world of fallible mutability, or *becoming*, and evades our attempts to assimilate its amplitude. Rather, Sartre draws Being into a directly proportional relation with the world of phenomenal appearances, thereby inverting the traditional Platonic view, since Sartre accords ontological primacy to Being in terms of the manifest appearance of entities to human consciousness in-the-world. Being, on Sartre’s view, thus encompasses the *becoming* of beings through their phenomenal appearances.

Akin to Nietzschean thought, Sartre avoids and undermines the traditional transcendentalism of Western philosophy by emphasizing the human condition as one of contingency rather than logical or metaphysical necessity. In fact, Sartre gives a paradoxical formulation of the relation between human contingency and necessity: ‘contingency is an ontological necessity.’<sup>86</sup> The paradoxical relation between contingency and necessity obtains in the fact that the contingent nature of human existence is the only necessary aspect to our existence, which is to say that the only necessity of our human reality is the absence of metaphysical necessity itself. Contingency is necessary inasmuch as it is inescapable for human beings. Further, it entails that human existence is constantly in the making;<sup>87</sup> a product of unconditioned, contingent human choice and action rather than metaphysical prescription.<sup>88</sup> To be clear, then, on Sartre’s view there is no Being that

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<sup>80</sup> *BN*, p. 5

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>82</sup> Barnes 1973:34.

<sup>83</sup> *BN*, p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> Hereafter, ‘Being’ (capitalized) refers (descriptively, not prescriptively) to that which *is*, or existence as such; while ‘being’ (non-capitalized) refers to particular entities.

<sup>85</sup> Or what Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, critically calls ‘onto-theology’, owing to the Platonic metaphysical legacy embedded in Western ontology, as well as the predominantly Christian theology of Western thought.

<sup>86</sup> *NE*, p. 489.

<sup>87</sup> Muller 2010:239.

<sup>88</sup> Daigle 2010:64.

one may hope to describe or comprehend beyond the contingent phenomenal appearance of the world to human consciousness; there is no transcendent absolute Being *behind* the phenomenal appearance of the world to human reality *hic et nunc*.

Sartre states quite matter-of-factly in this regard that '[t]he Absolute is absence';<sup>89</sup> an idea running counter to the *logic of Being over becoming*, or what Jacques Derrida famously calls the 'metaphysics of presence'.<sup>90</sup> For Sartre, Being *qua* phenomenal appearance is 'full positivity'<sup>91</sup> and remains perpetually subject to human interrogation and interpretation. Sartre's definition of Being is thus fluid rather than fixed; immanent (in-the-world as apprehended through conscious human experience) rather than transcendent (beyond the world of human consciousness); and descriptive rather than prescriptive. Sartre's conception of Being might also be described as affirmative<sup>92</sup> rather than denunciative of human existence in this world *hic et nunc*, insofar as Sartrean ontology defines Being such that it befits the world of immediate human experience: a world of Being *qua* appearance; a life of Being *qua* becoming.<sup>93</sup>

A central assumption of Sartrean phenomenology coincides with that of Husserl: the *intentionality* of consciousness, or the view that consciousness is always conscious *of* (something or someone).<sup>94</sup> In Sartre's phenomenology, human consciousness *is* the intentional apprehension of phenomena. Being is the ground upon which all phenomenal revealing transpires, with the corollary that consciousness is that which apprehends all phenomenal revealing and renders it meaningful.<sup>95</sup> Consciousness thus 'intends to be nothing other than that across which Being manifests itself'.<sup>96</sup> Being manifests through consciousness in a *meaningful* manner; alternatively phrased, one might say that human consciousness is the means by which existential meaning is made manifest.<sup>97</sup> Human consciousness *particularizes* Being – which is initially non-particular and indeterminate – and determines meanings(s) within Being through an act of internal negation, or what Sartre calls 'nihilation'.<sup>98</sup> For this reason, one might assert along with Scott that Being 'is manifestation, and determination is negation.'<sup>99</sup> Consciousness might therefore be understood as an imbibing of Being *qua* phenomenal appearance, and a determination of meaning(s) within Being through its active operation of negating that which is initially undifferentiated prior to human consciousness,

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<sup>89</sup> Sartre 1966:57. As quoted in Scott 1981:288.

<sup>90</sup> Derrida 2001:354. See also: Derrida 2004: pp. 284-290. Derrida's conception of the 'metaphysics of presence' is derived from Heidegger's '*Destruktion*' of metaphysics *qua* onto-theology in *Being & Time*, Introduction, §6.

<sup>91</sup> *BN*, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> Toth (2007:29-30), however, would not concur that Sartrean affirmation in *Being and Nothingness* should be equated with Nietzschean affirmation. Yet, as this chapter will show, such a comparison between Sartrean affirmation and Nietzschean affirmation is not altogether impossible, and might indeed be justifiable.

<sup>93</sup> Daigle 2010:64.

<sup>94</sup> Husserl takes this concept from F. Brentano. See Cumming 1981:64, 68; Rosenberg 1981:255; Blackburn 2008:274.

<sup>95</sup> Barnes 1973:32.

<sup>96</sup> *NE*, p. 484.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 486.

<sup>98</sup> *BN*, p. 32.

<sup>99</sup> Scott, 1981:279.

thereby introducing differentiation and particularity into Being. In Sartrean ontology, human consciousness thus assumes *the* central role in the determination of Being as meaningful.

In Sartre's phenomenological view, human existence may be distinctively described, but never wholly prescribed, in terms of its consciousness and the operations thereof. Sartre designates human consciousness as being-for-itself [*être-pour-soi*]: a mode of conscious being which is constituted and defined in direct dialectical contradistinction to non-conscious being, or what Sartre designates as being-in-itself [*être-en-soi*]. Contrary to the traditional metaphysical dualism of Western philosophy, which posits the existence of two metaphysically distinct *realms* of Being, Sartre prefers to define two distinctive 'fields'<sup>100</sup>, 'orders',<sup>101</sup> or 'modes'<sup>102</sup> of Being: the In-itself [*en-soi*] and the For-itself [*pour-soi*].<sup>103</sup> Sartre subverts metaphysical dualism – including both Platonic world dualism and Cartesian substance dualism<sup>104</sup> – with an ontological dialectic between these modes of Being. Sartre argues that being-in-itself and being-for-itself, while certainly distinct as two modes of Being, always already implicate and affect each other; they are 'intertwined and necessitate each other'<sup>105</sup> because they subsist in a fundamental ontological relation of dialectical negation. Being-in-itself describes non-conscious beings, and encompasses especially inanimate objects; while being-for-itself describes the nature of human consciousness and its ontological relation to the world.

The In-itself and the For-itself are heterogeneous inasmuch as their respective relationships to the world are wholly dissimilar. The In-itself, in fact, does not *relate* to such a thing as a *world* at all, but simply *is* the world outside of human consciousness. The world *qua* meaningful 'synthetic totality'<sup>106</sup> belongs strictly to human consciousness and is the exclusive province of the For-itself. To be sure, the ontological status of the world as a physical reality is not metaphysically *constituted* by the operations of human consciousness;<sup>107</sup> yet without human consciousness the world would not be a world *qua* meaningful totality populated by *particular* beings. Outside of human consciousness and its disclosure of a meaningful world, the world simply *is*: 'Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what it is';<sup>108</sup> an undifferentiated totality, without attribution(s), meaning(s), or the particularization ascribed to it through conscious human appropriation: 'All of Being is there but enmeshed in a total undifferentiatedness.'<sup>109</sup> A preliminary insight may thus be gleaned

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<sup>100</sup> Scott, 1981: 278.

<sup>101</sup> West 2010:158.

<sup>102</sup> Daigle 2010:32. See also: Rose 2003:7.

<sup>103</sup> Capitalization of 'For-itself' and 'In-itself' is inconsistent in the English translation of *Being and Nothingness* used here. For the sake of consistency, I will employ the capitalization of these terms as the standard throughout this study.

<sup>104</sup> Rose 2003:6: 'there is no dualism in Sartre's thought between thinking substance and physical substance. There is only Being and consciousness and the two do not form a duality because consciousness is nothingness.'

<sup>105</sup> Daigle 2010:33.

<sup>106</sup> *TE*, p. 30.

<sup>107</sup> See Sartre's 'Ontological Proof', *BN*, pp. 16-18.

<sup>108</sup> *BN*, p. 22.

<sup>109</sup> *NE*, p. 483.

from the aforementioned descriptions of being-in-itself and being-for-itself: human consciousness *qua* being-for-itself establishes the world as one of semantic and existential meaning(s).

### 3.2.1. The Meaning(s) of the Sartrean Self

For Sartre, consciousness is “‘absolute”, insubstantial, and transparent’.<sup>110</sup> These three terms have very specific meanings in Sartrean phenomenology and must be understood in their specificity. Sartre refers to human consciousness, the For-itself, as an ‘absolute event’<sup>111</sup> owing to its upsurge in-the-world as a manifestly singular point of view on Being *qua* phenomenal appearance. Moreover, the For-itself is a ‘non-substantial absolute’<sup>112</sup> insofar as there is *nothing* ‘behind’ consciousness and the intentionality of its operations: no substance, no ideality, no self-identical unity – precisely *not* being-in-itself. Similar to the metaphysical notion that there is no permanent absolute Being behind this world of Being *qua* phenomenal appearance, human consciousness is a non-substantial, non-essential being, owing to a fundamental ontological absence, or ‘lack’<sup>113</sup> in its being rather than a metaphysical presence behind its intentionality. The For-itself is precisely *not* a metaphysical substance, nor a *thing*. It is therefore within the ontological constitution of the For-itself *not* to have any predetermined essence or meaning for its existence. Following from this absence or ‘lack’ that constitutes human consciousness, Sartre asserts that consciousness *is* its own *no-thing* and must *become* its own essence. From the moment of its original upsurge into Being, human consciousness is therefore nothingness (*no-thing-ness*).

Contrary to being-in-itself, which is self-constituted as the ground of its own plenitude of Being, the For-itself is constituted only on the grounds of its own *nothingness*. Following this, Sartre argues that the In-itself *is* entirely its self, while the For-itself possesses no such *substantial* plenum or internal unity of self-identity. Contrary to the In-itself, the For-itself is ontologically constituted and structured on the basis of its internal *negation*, rather than an internal plenitude. Sartre therefore puts forward the view that ‘[s]ubjectivity is not *in* consciousness; it *is* consciousness.’<sup>114</sup> The subjectivity of consciousness is a spontaneity in that ‘it *is* what it produces and cannot be anything other.’<sup>115</sup> Significantly, then, for Sartre, there is thus no permanent ‘I’ or ‘Ego’ before or behind human consciousness; there is always only intentional *consciousness of*. In *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936), Sartre asserts that the personal Ego, self, or cogito, is a transcendent object of consciousness, rather than something inhering *in* consciousness itself.<sup>116</sup> According to this view, consciousness creates an Ego only upon *reflection*; but prior to deliberately

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<sup>110</sup> Richmond 2004:viii.

<sup>111</sup> *BN*, p. 106, 108, 641.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 582.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111, 113, 586.

<sup>114</sup> Schilpp 1981:11

<sup>115</sup> *TE*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>116</sup> This is the principal point of Sartre’s argument(s) in *The Transcendence of the Ego*.

*reflective* consciousness, when one is immersed within the domain of *pre-reflective* consciousness, there is no subtle or surreptitious 'I' inhabiting human consciousness whatsoever.

In order to fully understand this notion, one must first understand Sartre's phenomenological distinction between the *pre-reflective* and *reflective* levels of human consciousness.<sup>117</sup> At the pre-reflective level, consciousness is wholly engaged in its intentionality and does not constitute an Ego as an accompaniment to its activity. It is engaged in the world of phenomenal appearances, which is not yet a world belonging to *me*. A *pre-reflective cogito* thus underpins conscious human reflection. The pre-reflective cogito is *non-personal* in that it entails an awareness of consciousness without invoking the necessity of the personal pronoun 'I'. The pre-reflective cogito entails an awareness of the intentionality of consciousness as 'consciousness of...' without thereby further intimating that there exists an 'I' who *is* this 'consciousness of...'.<sup>118</sup> The pre-reflective cogito is also *non-positional* inasmuch as it is non-reflectively conscious of consciousness itself<sup>119</sup> without thereby *positing* the existence of a substantial self. The pre-reflective cogito involves a reflexivity only towards the intentionality of its operation, or a *consciousness of a consciousness of*.

This does not yet amount to a positing of a substantial Ego or Self because 'non-positional consciousness is a *self-consciousness* without being a consciousness of self'<sup>120</sup> since 'the self is not necessarily posited as an object'.<sup>121</sup> The For-itself is thus aware of its conscious intentionality towards that which it is *not* (*viz.* being-in-itself), and posits itself as a 'nihilation' or negation of that towards which it is a 'consciousness of...'. In other words, consciousness is directed towards objects which it is *not*, and its self-consciousness is posited on a negative basis such that consciousness distinguishes itself and its operations from that which it is conscious of. Simply stated, the For-itself pre-reflectively understands itself negatively as the contradistinction to being-in-itself; the For-itself is a being such that it is *not* in-itself.<sup>122</sup> There is thus no positive 'self' behind consciousness, only a 'self-ness'<sup>123</sup> or self-consciousness *of* being-for-itself, which is constituted as the dialectical antithesis and nihilation of being-in-itself. This is why the For-itself, as the constitutive ground of its own nothingness, can only be said to be a *not-self*, but never a substantial self somehow existing apart from the intentional activity of consciousness. This is because 'the mode of being of a self is *qua act* – that is, as activity'.<sup>124</sup> For Sartre, it would consequently be erroneous to posit a passive pre-existing self before or behind consciousness, since a self does not exist prior to the activity of consciousness proper. This aforementioned

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<sup>117</sup> These are sometimes also referred to as the '*pre-reflexive*' and '*reflexive*' levels of human consciousness.

<sup>118</sup> Barnes 1956:x. See also: Daigle 2010:17-30.

<sup>119</sup> Barnes 1956:x.

<sup>120</sup> Rosenberg 1981:256.

<sup>121</sup> Barnes 1956:x.

<sup>122</sup> *BN*, p. 310.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>124</sup> Rosenberg 1981:257.

*activity* of consciousness is precisely ‘nihilation’,<sup>125</sup> and the self of human consciousness can be constituted only as a nihilating nothingness. The pre-reflective cogito, then, is nothing more than ‘an implicit consciousness of consciousness *as* nihilating activity, that is, as a perpetual constituting of itself as other than the objects of which it is consciousness’.<sup>126</sup>

Consciousness does, however, posit an externally-oriented, or *transcendent Ego* as the ideal unity of conscious experiences in-the-world, including states, qualities, and actions.<sup>127</sup> Yet, significantly, the Ego is posited as a transcendent *object* of consciousness, not as a subject which stands behind or pre-exists the activity of consciousness. The Ego, or self, is therefore *caused* by consciousness, and not *vice versa*; consciousness precedes the constitution of the Ego as the very source of its inception. In this regard, Sartre asks:

Why should the ego belong to an inner world? If it is an object of consciousness, it is outside; if it is within consciousness, then consciousness ceases to be extra-lucid, to be conscious of itself, in order to confront an object within itself. Consciousness is outside; there is no ‘within’ of consciousness.<sup>128</sup>

The Ego is therefore a dialectical object *of* and *for* consciousness which allows consciousness to unify its phenomenal experiences and direct it back towards the interiority of consciousness itself. Christine Daigle distinguishes this positing of an Ego as a third level of consciousness (in addition to pre-reflective and reflective), namely ‘self-reflective’ consciousness, ‘where consciousness becomes its own object’.<sup>129</sup> Consciousness can only become an object for itself by positing a unifying object that reflects its phenomenal experience back to it; this object is exactly the Ego. The Ego is external to consciousness; an object rather than a subject; and a passivity which reflects the activity of consciousness. Sartre writes that ‘[t]he *I* is the Ego as the unity of its actions. The *me* is the Ego as the unity of states and qualities.’<sup>130</sup> Consciousness must posit such an external object because as a positional consciousness, it ‘can no more take itself as its object than an eye can see itself’.<sup>131</sup> Finally, then, consciousness knows itself non-personally through the pre-reflective cogito as a self-consciousness of that which it is *not*; and understands itself personally, or self-reflectively, through an Ego which consciousness intentionally posits as a transcendent object *in* the world but not *in* consciousness itself.

One can infer from Sartre’s unique and radical conception of consciousness and selfhood that any human interpretation of the meaning of one’s existence is not simply the immediate product of a permanent Ego, self, or ‘I’ residing and subsisting substantially somewhere *inside* consciousness.

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<sup>125</sup> Rosenberg 1981:257.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Barnes 1956:xi. See also: *TE*, pp. 21-28.

<sup>128</sup> A quote from an interview with Sartre, as printed in Schilpp 1981:11.

<sup>129</sup> Daigle 2010:21-22.

<sup>130</sup> *TE*, p. 21. See also: Barnes 1956:xi, & Barnes 1973:41.

<sup>131</sup> Rosenberg 1981:256.

Meaning is not made entirely manifest by 'me', but by means of the active nihilation of being-in-itself which I *am* 'in the mode of not-being it'.<sup>132</sup> I *am* my own conscious being as a nothingness which haunts my existence, and therefore I can never hope to possess a stable, self-identical unity in my identity,<sup>133</sup> since consciousness is, in Sartre's account, never wholly self-same, albeit always a self-consciousness. Each consciousness is certainly singular, or uniquely 'individualized';<sup>134</sup> but, as argued above, this individuality of consciousness is not strictly equivalent to a plenum or self-identical unity of personal consciousness.<sup>135</sup> The meaning of my existence is therefore often *frustrated* by this internal negation of a unified identity which I seek but can never wholly *be*. The For-itself seeks to *be* a self which it fully and unequivocally *is*, but its self-fulfilment is perpetually frustrated and stymied by the activity of negation which constitutes its consciousness. Barnes phrases this appositely as follows: 'Consciousness *pursues* a self; consciousness is a self-making process, a self-projection which is never completed so long as consciousness exists.'<sup>136</sup> For this reason, one's personal existential self-fulfilment cannot be finally assured, since one's conscious existence entails a fundamental emptiness, a 'lack', a *nothingness*. This is why Sartre asserts that 'nothingness haunts being' since it furtively 'lies coiled in the heart of being – like a worm.'<sup>137</sup>

The fact that there is no substantial self or Ego subsisting behind conscious human activity means that the For-itself is responsible for the meaning(s) of the world and its own existence without the assurance of a unified self-identity to fall back upon. Human identity, personhood, or subjectivity, could never exist as complete and fulfilled in-itself, since it is ontologically, thus fundamentally, plagued by the nothingness of its own being, or as Sartre phrases it: 'The self is individual; it is the individual completion of the self which haunts the for-itself.'<sup>138</sup> It is for this reason that Sartre claims that 'in our own apprehension of ourselves, we appear to ourselves as having the character of an unjustifiable fact.'<sup>139</sup> This is part of what it *means*, for Sartre, to be a contingent For-itself *thrown* into a world whose meaning is *made* rather than received or discovered. From Sartre's view on the self, one might further posit that existential meaning does not manifest in conjunction with the potentiation or actualization of one's so-called 'true-self' or 'inner-being'; for the pursuit of such a sense of self is ultimately fruitless, owing to the internal nature of human consciousness. While it might be said that the meaning of my existence belongs to *me* and is made by *me*, the 'me' itself is only constituted so as to unify meaning(s) that 'my' consciousness has ascribed to Being.

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<sup>132</sup> *BN*, p. 569.

<sup>133</sup> Dreyfus & Hoffman, 1981:231.

<sup>134</sup> *BN*, p. 115.

<sup>135</sup> Barnes 1973:42.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *BN*, p. 45. This phrasing summons to mind a similar phrasing employed by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013:6): 'The worm is in man's heart': the idea that humanity's search for meaning is an insatiable pursuit.

<sup>138</sup> *BN*, p. 115.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

The individual, and deeply personal, existential question on the meaning of life is thus a question posited in *reflective* consciousness, and not yet in its pre-reflective element. As a result, existential meaning is experienced as distinctly *my own*. Yet, one should further acknowledge, in accordance with Sartre's insights on the self, that existential meaning is only *mine* insofar as consciousness posits itself as its own object in order to unify its experience(s) and meaning(s). Importantly, then, it is the constantly negating activity of consciousness itself that renders the world and existence meaningful; a meaning which becomes *mine* only when I posit those meanings themselves as objects for my consciousness. From this it follows that one might never be able to achieve absolute self-fulfilment or self-actualization within one's finite individual existence, but this fact in no way precludes the ever-present possibility of a meaningful existence, because one's human existence in-the-world, by virtue of one's individual consciousness itself, always already makes meaning(s) of existence when consciousness transcends itself towards the world in a meaningful manner.

### 3.2.2. The Meaningful Transcendence of the For-itself

According to the intentionality of consciousness, the For-itself is always *directed toward* the world and the beings that inhere therein, including other consciousnesses, as well as non-conscious beings *qua* being-in-itself. Sartre argues that human consciousness is never fully isolated within its purview in a solipsistic fashion.<sup>140</sup> Nor is consciousness solely constitutive of the very existence of reality in an Idealist fashion, since the intentionality of consciousness entails an outward orientation toward entities that always already exist external to consciousness and its internal *modus operandi*.<sup>141</sup> This externally-directed intentionality forms part of what Sartre terms the *transcendence* of human consciousness.<sup>142</sup> Transcendence thus described represents a fundamental ontological relation which exists between human consciousness and the world it constantly appropriates by virtue of its intentionality: "Through intentionality [consciousness] transcends itself, it unifies itself by going outside itself."<sup>143</sup> This connotation of transcendence, linked to the intentionality of consciousness, might be called *phenomenological transcendence*. Phenomenological transcendence must be differentiated from the more traditional metaphysical conception of transcendence. Phenomenological transcendence always remains firmly rooted in *this* world of phenomenal appearances *hic et nunc*, and does not seek to transcend the world itself towards some extrinsic metaphysical signified, realm, or absolute entity.

Sartre therefore displaces the need for metaphysical or transcendental meaning via recourse to *phenomenological meaning*: meaning arrived at through the activity of human consciousness. Phenomenological transcendence refers strictly to the transcendence of the For-itself towards

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<sup>140</sup> See Sartre's refutation of solipsism in *BN*, pp. 16-18.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-23. See also: Richmond 2004:ix.

<sup>142</sup> *BN*, p. 17.

<sup>143</sup> *TE*, p. 6.

entities that exist *in-the-midst-of-the-world*,<sup>144</sup> outside of consciousness. Sartre asserts that all consciousness is a consciousness *of* the world 'in that it transcends itself in order to reach an object, and it exhausts itself in this same positing. All that there is of intention in my actual consciousness is directed toward the outside.'<sup>145</sup> The For-itself is therefore the being who *makes* the meaning of the world manifest by exceeding itself toward other entities that it is *not*. Phenomenological transcendence further suggests that, while consciousness is a meaning-maker, it does not in fact render the metaphysical reality or physical actuality of the world itself. Sartre is by no means attempting a metaphysical thesis on the constitutive nature of reality outside of consciousness.<sup>146</sup> Rather, Sartre conceives of human consciousness as foundational for the phenomenal revealing of the world specifically as a *meaningful* world. This implies that the world would still exist beyond the circumscribed boundaries of the For-itself, but that the world possesses no *inherent* meaning *qua* being-in-itself. As Barnes phrases it, 'before consciousness there was no "world" but only full, undifferentiated being.'<sup>147</sup> This is because '[o]nly through consciousness is there differentiation, meaning, and plurality for Being.'<sup>148</sup>

Prior to a phenomenological appropriation by the For-itself, the In-itself is an indeterminate 'full positivity'<sup>149</sup>; an undifferentiated entity or 'thing' in the midst of a world that is not yet a human world of semantic and existential meaning.<sup>150</sup> In Sartre's view, 'there is no necessity to hold that the "this" [being-in-itself] has any meaning whatever when considered in the indifferent exteriority of its being and independently from the upsurge of the For-itself.'<sup>151</sup> The For-itself thus transcends its own incomplete being, or ontological 'lack', by attempting to establish a *meaningful* world towards which it orients its existence: 'It is in the being of the existing, as the correlate of a human transcendence, to lead outside itself to the being which it is not – as to its meaning.'<sup>152</sup> Significantly, this means that there can be no such thing as an entirely meaningless world for human consciousness, in both the semantic and existential sense, since being-for-itself, by virtue of its phenomenological transcendence, immediately establishes itself in a meaningful relation with that which stands outside of it.<sup>153</sup> Sartre is thus advancing the view that the For-itself is, in and through its very existence, the single source of all the semantic and existential meaning of Being,<sup>154</sup> which is indeed the unending endeavour and responsibility with which human existence

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<sup>144</sup> *BN*, p. 81.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>146</sup> Daigle 2010:31.

<sup>147</sup> Barnes 1956:xiii.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

<sup>149</sup> *BN*, p. 30.

<sup>150</sup> Existential meaning differs from semantic meaning in that it refers exclusively to the meaning of human existence, and not to semantic distinctions and designations ascribed to the world of objects and relations through consciousness.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 624

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18, Sartre writes: 'Consciousness can always pass beyond the existent, not toward its being, but toward the *meaning of this being*.'

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

has been charged: 'the For-itself has a task of quasi creation since it extirpates from the shadows of undifferentiatedness what in essence always falls back into them.'<sup>155</sup> Sartre thus posits that 'the Existence of the For-itself gives Being a meaning, which is To-Be-in-order-to-manifest-itself.'<sup>156</sup>

Unlike objects *qua* being-in-itself that are merely *in-the-midst-of-the-world*, the human For-itself exists *in-the-world*; it is immersed in *its* world, which is a world of entailments and entanglements: 'We choose the world, not in its contexture as in-itself but in its *meaning*, by choosing ourselves. Through the internal negation by denying that we are the world, we make the world appear as world'.<sup>157</sup> As a being of intentional consciousness, the For-itself is never without a world, since a world of meaningful relations arises with the upsurge of the phenomenological transcendence of the For-itself toward the world: 'World thus means how non-conscious things appear with consciousness and are organized by it.'<sup>158</sup> The world of the For-itself is established as a world of 'instrumental complexes',<sup>159</sup> which manifest on the basis of a meaning ascribed to the world by the For-itself through its personal existential 'projects'.<sup>160</sup> The meaning made of the world thus stands in accordance with the distinctive manner in which the For-itself *projects* itself towards its projects in-the-world.<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, one's human endeavours in-the-world are attended by a 'coefficient of adversity',<sup>162</sup> insofar as 'it is in relation to an original instrumental complex that things reveal their resistance and their adversity'.<sup>163</sup> One may phrase this differently to say that the world reveals itself, through one's conscious appropriation thereof, as meaningful or meaningless, amenable or adverse, in terms of one's existential projects. Human consciousness thus reveals the world as one of meaning(s), encompassing all the various interrelations, personal projects, and instrumental complexes implied when we think of the world as distinctively human.

The *semantic* dimension of meaning entails the ascription of predicates to objects *qua* being-in-itself, while *existential* meaning entails a relationship between the For-itself and the In-itself, such that the In-itself is rendered significant to the For-itself in terms of its personal existential projects in-the-world. In this way, being-in-itself becomes *existentially entangled* in the meaning of being-for-itself. This relation is possible because the For-itself is antithetical to the being of the In-itself inasmuch as it possesses no essential 'thingliness' as such. Human consciousness is always already in-the-world but decisively *not* in the manner of a thing; it features an absence of material content, save the transcendent objects of consciousness toward which it is directed. The For-itself makes

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<sup>155</sup> *NE*, p. 484.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *BN*, p. 485. My emphasis.

<sup>158</sup> Scott 1981:279.

<sup>159</sup> *BN*, p. 278. See also: Barnes 1956:xv.

<sup>160</sup> *BN*, p. 495.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 574.

<sup>162</sup> Sartre (*BN*, p. 348) acknowledges that he appropriates this term from Gaston Bachelard's work *L'Eau et les Rêves [Water and Dreams]* of 1942.

<sup>163</sup> *BN*, p. 348.

manifest the meaning of the phenomenal appearing of beings-in-itself, without itself possessing any metaphysical substantiality or predefined ontological essence. The For-itself is ultimately antithetical to the In-itself in that it is an ontological *lack* rather than a plenitude; a being of internal negation rather than a 'full positivity' of Being; and a *no-thing* rather than a thing. Therefore, being-in-itself and being-for-itself are ontologically related in a dialectical relation of negation, and moreover, *existentially entangled* in any and all human interpretation(s) of the meaning(s) of existence. It is precisely through its relation of existential entanglement with the In-itself that the For-itself becomes, and forever remains, the being by and through whom a wholly contingent<sup>164</sup> existential meaning is made manifest and brought to bear on Being.

Sartre proclaims that the For-itself 'is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world',<sup>165</sup> inasmuch as it is through the upsurge of being-for-itself that negation, nihilation, or nothingness comes to haunt Being. By sundering the In-itself from its ontological plenitude, the For-itself introduces its own ontological 'lack' or insufficiency into Being. Being-for-itself and being-in-itself are, ontologically speaking, separated by this veil of nothingness – an implacable divide precluding an absolute synthesis of these two modes of Being,<sup>166</sup> yet without thereby effecting an absolute divorce in the fundamental ontological relation and existential entanglement that obtains between the In-itself and the For-itself. Because human consciousness introduces a nothingness or 'lack' into Being, an attempt is made on its part to fulfil this 'lack' by interrogating its own nature, investigating its being-in-the-world, and seeking out the potential meaning(s) thereof. This 'lack' so deeply embedded in human consciousness effectuates all human *desire* in general,<sup>167</sup> and an enduring human desire for personal existential fulfilment and meaning in particular. Human existence, perpetually plagued by its own nothingness, is thus a ceaseless striving towards some sense of existential meaning. Sartre writes that 'the self-as-being-in-itself is what human reality lacks and what makes its meaning.'<sup>168</sup> The For-itself questions the meaning of its existence owing to the nothingness which haunts its Being: '[f]or man to be able to question, he must be capable of being his own nothingness'.<sup>169</sup> Taking his philosophical cue from Heidegger's ontology, Sartre thus asserts that '*consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself.*'<sup>170</sup> The dialectical tension between the For-itself and the In-itself is therefore precisely a tension which gives rise to the personal question of the meaning of life, which is further linked to what Sartre calls our fundamental ontological freedom.

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<sup>164</sup> *BN*, 105.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. Cf. Heidegger's assertion that the human being, or *Dasein*, is '[t]hat entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue' (*BT*, p. 68).

### 3.2.3. Fundamental Ontological Freedom

Sartre describes the For-itself as an ‘absolute event’;<sup>171</sup> a singular upsurge into Being, and an absolute point of view and point of departure for any and all interpretations of the meaning(s) of existence.<sup>172</sup> Notably, however, the For-itself is not an absolute in the traditional philosophical sense of the term.<sup>173</sup> To be clear, Sartre’s usage of the term ‘absolute’ is not an instantiation of traditional transcendental absolutism, but instead is made on the basis of the strictly contingent phenomenality of consciousness:

Consciousness has nothing substantial, it is pure ‘appearance’ in the sense that it exists only to the degree to which it appears. But it is precisely because consciousness is pure appearance, because it is total emptiness (since the entire world is outside it) – it is because of this identity of appearance and existence within it that it can be considered as the absolute.<sup>174</sup>

In Sartrean phenomenological existentialism one therefore discerns a displacement of traditional absolutism with a more secular and finite absolute, rooted in human consciousness itself. Following in the wake of the death of god, Sartre is affirming human consciousness as an absolute inasmuch as consciousness is the only source of meaning remaining to human beings *hic et nunc*. Yet, human existence further entails a ‘pure contingency’,<sup>175</sup> since humanity is henceforth *abandoned* to a human reality absent of all other absolutes. Sartre thus states that the For-itself is a paradoxical absolute because ‘the absolute event or for-itself is contingent in its very being’.<sup>176</sup> This is to say that human consciousness is always already squarely ‘situated’<sup>177</sup> within a finite human condition which Sartre designates as the ‘facticity’<sup>178</sup> of our human reality. Importantly, however, Sartre further argues that humanity possesses the capacity to engage in an *existential transcendence* of its contingent facticity, owing to the fundamental freedom of human existence. Such an *existential transcendence*, as I have called it here, entails a transcendence of one’s immediate existential situation or ‘facticity’ toward some other, possibly improved, state of affairs.

Following from the nothingness or ‘lack’ in human consciousness, Sartre resolutely affirms that human existence entails a *fundamental ontological freedom*: a non-determined, free choice of one’s individual human existence, encompassing all the valuations and actions executed in-the-world. Barnes phrases it thus: ‘Consciousness is free because it is “not enough.” If it were full being [In-itself], then it could not be free to choose being. But since it has an insufficiency of being... it is free

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<sup>171</sup> *BN*, p. 106, 108, 641.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 622: ‘man, being transcendence, establishes the meaningful by his very coming into the world’.

<sup>173</sup> The For-itself is not an absolute being as traditionally connoted by such transcendental signifieds as God (in Christianity), the Forms (in Platonism), the One (in Neo-Platonism), Idea or Mind (in Hegelianism), and so forth.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

to set up those relations with being which it desires.<sup>179</sup> One might also understand the fundamental ontological freedom of the For-itself as ‘the *play* permitted (or rather, *necessitated*) by nothingness.’<sup>180</sup> Sartre asserts that ‘freedom as the requisite condition for the nihilation of nothingness is not a *property* which belongs among others to the essence of the human being’, but that ‘[h]uman freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom.’<sup>181</sup> Sartre goes on to add that ‘the *existence* of freedom and of consciousness precedes and conditions [its] *essence*’,<sup>182</sup> or alternatively phrased in Sartre’s famous existentialist axiom, ‘[f]reedom is existence, and in it existence precedes essence’.<sup>183</sup>

By means of this latter assertion, Sartre means to say that ‘man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself’; which amounts to the emphatic assertion that ‘man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.’<sup>184</sup> Sartre further posits that ‘there is no difference between the being of man and his *being-free*.’<sup>185</sup> Following this, the essence of human existence can only be formulated upon the upsurge of the For-itself into its existence, and never prior to this upsurge. The For-itself is therefore separated from any fixed essence, static identity, or predefined nature, precisely by the veil of nothingness which forms a constitutive part of human consciousness. The For-itself must perpetually *create* itself, its own unique essence and meaning(s), through a constant choice of its existence. From these premises, Sartre argues that human lives are never entirely predetermined, but are fundamentally free to determine themselves. However, human freedom should not be crudely or naively interpreted as an entirely optimistic facet of being-for-itself, since humankind, as a fundamental freedom constituted on the grounds of an internal nothingness, is simultaneously inescapably *responsible* for the meaning(s) of its existence.<sup>186</sup> Sartrean ontology endows the human individual with the ability, freedom, and responsibility of constantly creating and shaping the world as a meaningful totality.

Sartre further emphasizes that the fundamental ontological freedom of the For-itself entails a paradoxical *condemnation*<sup>187</sup> to freedom inasmuch as each human individual is *thrown* into an absolute contingency, and *abandoned* to an inherently meaningless world, within which, one must constantly assume complete accountability for one’s actions, one’s values, and one’s singular interpretation(s) of the meaning(s) of one’s existence.<sup>188</sup> To *be* such a freedom, as the For-itself inherently and inescapably *is*, entails the full weight of this world, and the entirely contingent

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<sup>179</sup> Barnes 1956:xxiv. See also: *BN*, p. 464: ‘Human reality is free because it is *not enough*.’

<sup>180</sup> Toth 2007:27.

<sup>181</sup> *BN*, p. 49.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 588.

<sup>184</sup> *EH*, p. 22. Sartre refers to this axiom as ‘the first principle of existentialism’.

<sup>185</sup> *BN*, p. 49.

<sup>186</sup> *EH*, pp. 23-24; *BN*, p. 574.

<sup>187</sup> *BN*, p. 462. See also the following pages: 152, 530, 546, 550.

<sup>188</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 506 and pp. 574-577.

burden of Being.<sup>189</sup> In Sartre's philosophy, then, there is no exogenous justification nor recourse – neither within this world nor in any realm transcending it – for individual existential meaning(s); nothing to assure meaning(s) save the freedom and responsibility of each individual human being. Following the death of god, the transcendent seat of meaning has fled and forsaken human reality, and consequently, 'nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what we are'.<sup>190</sup> Humanity is hence ceaselessly suspended under the gravity of an absolutely absurd and ultimately unjustified human condition, which is to say that the For-itself is thrown from nowhere into its nothingness, and by virtue of its fundamental freedom, is solely and wholly *responsible* for the creation of a meaningful *mundus*.

Sartre's conception of fundamental ontological freedom is not simply to be equated with the traditional Western philosophical conception of 'free will'. In this regard, one might compare Sartre's conception of freedom to an assertion made by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

The desire for 'freedom of the will' in the superlative metaphysical sense... the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui*... to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness.<sup>191</sup>

Not unlike Sartre, Nietzsche denounces the 'boorish simplicity' of the traditional conception of 'free-will' as *causa sui* [cause of itself], and equally distrusts and denounces its antipode, namely unfree will, or determinism (as Sartre phrases the dichotomy).<sup>192</sup> Although Sartre states that '[t]he existence of consciousness comes from consciousness itself',<sup>193</sup> he does not intend to conceive of being-for-itself strictly in terms of a metaphysical *causa sui*.<sup>194</sup> In this regard, Sartre's conception of human freedom is more akin to Nietzsche's view on human freedom, expressed as follows:

It is *we* alone who have devised cause, sequence, for-each-other, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose; and when we project and mix this symbol world into things as if it existed 'in itself,' we act once more as we have always acted – *mythologically*. The 'unfree will' is mythology<sup>195</sup>

To act 'mythologically' entails an interpretation of meaning(s) as somehow anterior and exterior to human existence.<sup>196</sup> Contrary to such 'mythological' thinking, Nietzsche and Sartre, each in their own idiosyncratic way, seek to stress the importance of freedom as a form of individual human

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<sup>189</sup> *BN*, p. 574.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 574, 576.

<sup>191</sup> *BGE*, §21 (p. 218).

<sup>192</sup> See *BN*, 455-474 for Sartre's rather limited discussion on the traditional philosophical debate on free will versus determinism. Sartre mentions, yet attempts to go beyond, this debate in *Being and Nothingness*.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>194</sup> To be sure, Sartre does assert that human consciousness entails an implacable desire to exist as a being which is its own foundation, viz. being-in-itself-for-itself, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter.

<sup>195</sup> *BGE*, §21.

<sup>196</sup> As will be demonstrated in the next section, acting 'mythologically' would also be an instance of Sartrean 'bad faith'.

self-determination and existential ability. Specifically, Nietzsche employs the will to power as a possible means-to-meaning, while Sartre defines the ontological freedom of human consciousness as the means-to-meaning. Moreover, Sartre and Nietzsche deliberately undermine the dichotomy between free will and determinism: Nietzsche does so through his conception of the will to power as a mediator of the various human instincts or 'drives', while Sartre does so through his conception of ontological freedom, which is always already *situated* within a particular milieu, but possesses the potential to transcend that situation and is thus never wholly determined thereby. For Sartre, 'the will is not a privileged manifestation of freedom' but is preceded and underpinned 'by an original, ontological freedom' born of human consciousness.<sup>197</sup> In its fundamental freedom, the For-itself is a being constantly in the making – of its *own* making. Following Sartre's views on freedom, one might assert that the essence of an individual human existence is a freely-fashioned creation rather than a forced prescription, and that the meaning of human existence is more subjective than objective inasmuch as meaning is made by human individuals and not by anything beyond them. As a human individual, one must therefore assume the existential task of defining one's own idiosyncratic essence and existential meaning, and by virtue of being-for-itself, assume one's responsibility as the fundamentally free author of the meaning(s) of one's existence.

#### 3.2.4. Existential Anguish & 'Bad Faith'

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre posits the idea that it is in an experience of existential *anguish*<sup>198</sup> that the For-itself recognizes the facticity of its freedom<sup>199</sup> and responsibility, its abandonment in-the-world, and its ultimately unjustified contingency.<sup>200</sup> Sartre states that in anguish 'I apprehend myself at once as totally free and not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself', and it is for this exact reason that 'I have to realize the meaning of the world and of my essence; I make my decision concerning them – without justification and without excuse'.<sup>201</sup> Sartre further states:

the for-itself apprehends itself in anguish; that is, as a being which is neither the foundation of its own being nor of the Other's being nor of the in-itselfs which form the world, but a being which is compelled to decide the meaning of being – within it and everywhere outside of it.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> *BN*, p. 474.

<sup>198</sup> Sartre's conception of 'anguish' is informed by the original existentialist conception of 'dread', as formulated by Søren Kierkegaard, as well as Heidegger's conception of 'anxiety' [*Angst*] (see *BT*, pp. 228–235). However, Sartre's conceptualization of *anguish* is not altogether equivalent to those of his forebears, as will be shown. See Haar 1980:173–176 for a close comparison of Sartre and Heidegger on the concept of *Angst* [anguish/anxiety]. Moreover, Sartre's philosophical concept of 'anguish' is closely associated with his literary description of the experience of 'nausea', in which the absolute contingency and gratuitousness of Being reveals itself to the individual in an overwhelming and somewhat sickening manifestation. Sartre's novel *Nausea* (1938) might thus be read as a fictional character's existential experience of Sartre's philosophical concept of anguish in *Being and Nothingness*.

<sup>199</sup> *BN*, p. 506.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 486.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 577.

Anguish is therefore an existential confrontation with our very being-for-itself, since as a For-itself, I am a being which can never be anything other than its own nothingness. Anguish delivers the For-itself over to itself, which is always a self 'in the mode of not being it';<sup>203</sup> a self which the For-itself can never wholly *be* since it is always separated from such a substantial, unified self by a gap of nothingness. Notwithstanding this problematic relation which the For-itself holds to itself, the For-itself is nonetheless wholly responsible for its being. This responsibility is burdensome in that it encompasses the full weight of an absurd human existence, featuring an accompanying accountability which can never be repudiated. Freedom and responsibility are thus conjoined as an ontological fact of the human condition.

Sartre further asserts that human individuals make constant attempts to flee their fundamental freedom, and the attendant anguish it inspires, through existential 'bad faith' [*mauvaise foi*].<sup>204</sup> Sartre describes bad faith as follows: 'consciousness instead of directing its negation outwards turns it toward itself'<sup>205</sup> by paradoxically attempting to negate its existence as a being of negation. That is, bad faith entails a *double negation* where human consciousness sets out to negate the nothingness that it must be 'in the mode of not being it', thereby attempting to transmute the nature of human consciousness from a *nothing* into a *thing*.<sup>206</sup> When a human individual chooses to assimilate a role designating a being-in-itself, rather than being-for-itself, then such an individual is said to be in 'bad faith' because they deny their fundamental ontological freedom and responsibility by attempting to wholly *be* that which they are *not*. One recalls that the For-itself can only be itself in the mode of not being the In-itself. Conversely, then, if the For-itself attempts being-in-itself in the mode of actually and wholly *being* it, then it is acting contrary to its nature of fundamental freedom, and is therefore said to be in bad faith.

Bad faith is ultimately a paradoxical exercise in human futility, for one cannot finally flee one's existential *anguish*, since, as Sartre states it, 'we *are* anguish'.<sup>207</sup> In bad faith 'we are-anguish-in-order-to-flee-anguish'<sup>208</sup> insofar as 'I flee in order not to know [my being-for-itself], but I cannot avoid knowing that I am fleeing; and the flight from anguish is only a mode of becoming conscious of anguish. Thus anguish, properly speaking, can be neither hidden nor avoided.'<sup>209</sup> Stated in terms of bad faith: 'this bad faith, intended to fill up the nothingness which I *am* in my relation to myself, precisely implies the nothingness which it suppresses.'<sup>210</sup> According to Sartre, human beings are often inclined toward such an evasive means of eluding their fundamental ontological freedom

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<sup>203</sup> *BN*, p. 56.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 577. According to Solomon (2006:132), Sartre appropriates the term 'bad faith' from Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

<sup>205</sup> *BN*, p. 71.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

and the responsibility tethered thereto. However, as Sartre's above argument indicates, this evasiveness is always only a transitory ruse of self-deception,<sup>211</sup> which can never finally be fully established. One cannot finally flee the fact that one is fundamentally free and responsible for the meaning of one's existence,<sup>212</sup> and this involves the conscious acknowledgement that '[w]e have to deal with human reality as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is.'<sup>213</sup>

Following from the above, Sartre postulates that the principle of self-identity does not apply to the human condition<sup>214</sup> because 'as soon as we posit ourselves as a certain being... then by that very positing we surpass this being – and not toward another being but toward emptiness, toward *nothing*.'<sup>215</sup> In bad faith, a human being posits that it is a self-identical being-in-itself, rather than a being haunted by its own internal nothingness. Bad faith also involves a fleeing in the face of one's nothingness towards an *extrinsically* sourced essence or meaning. Though the For-itself cannot be said to possess an intrinsic essence prior to its upsurge into Being, it should not be concluded from this point that such an essence resides somehow extrinsic to being-for-itself. The essence and meaning of our human being-for-itself is neither entirely intrinsic nor extrinsic. Rather, being-for-itself 'comes into the world along with consciousness, at once in its heart and outside it; it is absolute transcendence in absolute immanence'<sup>216</sup> inasmuch as the For-itself must phenomenologically transcend itself towards that which it is not, viz. being-in-itself, in all interpretations of the meaning of its existence, while concomitantly maintaining an absolute interiority or immanence as a contingent and subjective being who is free to choose its own essence and meaning. The For-itself is never a being-in-itself but is rather a being *qua becoming* in that it is constantly in the making: 'The for-itself is always in suspense because its being is a perpetual reprieve.'<sup>217</sup> This making is effected on the grounds of the nothingness which haunts consciousness. I must forever make the meaning of my existence, not have it made for me by extrinsic factors of being-in-itself: 'making sustains being; consciousness has to be its own being, it is never sustained by being; it sustains being in the heart of subjectivity, which means once again that it is inhabited by being but that it is not being: *consciousness is not what it is*.'<sup>218</sup>

The implications of this Sartrean assertion of 'bad faith' are noteworthy. To assume an externally ordained meaning for my existence would be an existential judgement in bad faith, since I do not assume my inalienable responsibility as the maker of the meaning of my existence. To simply assimilate a role prescribed by external factors – e.g. metaphysically derived conceptions of

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<sup>211</sup> Sartrean 'bad faith' is sometimes also referred to as 'self-deception'.

<sup>212</sup> Landau 2012:2.

<sup>213</sup> *BN*, p. 81.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 639. See also: Toth 2007:27, & Howells 1992:333.

<sup>218</sup> *BN*, p. 85.

selfhood; religious conceptions of existential meaning; social conventions of human activity, etc. – suggests a less than honest approach towards my being-in-the-world *qua* For-itself. The essence and meaning of an individualized human existence remains the province and purview of the For-itself as a being of freedom. Barnes aptly summarizes this view in saying that ‘bad faith is a lie to oneself which rests on the denial that a human being is a free self-making process.’<sup>219</sup>

Further relevant to Sartre’s formulation of freedom, anguish, and bad faith, is Sartre’s controversial rejection of the unconscious mind originally posited by Sigmund Freud, and still upheld in contemporary psychology. *Contra* Freud, Sartre posits a consciousness which is fully translucent<sup>220</sup> in terms of its operations and motivations. In this regard, Sartre asserts that ‘it is impossible to assign to a consciousness a motivation other than itself. Otherwise it would be necessary to conceive that consciousness in so far as it is an effect, is not conscious (of) itself.’<sup>221</sup> The unconscious mind is precluded in Sartrean ontology owing to its suggestion that there exist internal operations of consciousness over which human individuals have little, if any, control. Such unconscious mechanisms and motivations would, in Sartre’s view, potentially undermine one’s fundamental ontological freedom. For Sartre, if human consciousness is not fully aware of its own operations and justifications, then human beings might not be as free, nor as responsible for their actions, as they would be under Sartre’s radical conception of consciousness.<sup>222</sup> As a result, the unconscious mind might partially absolve humanity of the burdensome responsibility which it bears in relation to the fundamentally free, self-determined nature of consciousness.

Sartre’s rejection of the Freudian unconscious is anything but a trivial claim, and the effects of such a polemical proclamation are considerable.<sup>223</sup> Without unconscious psychological processes to fall back upon as a means to explain and excuse human behaviour, human beings become wholly and unequivocally responsible for their actions and the meaning(s) attributed thereto.<sup>224</sup> In Sartre’s controversial view, the For-itself should not be disburdened of its radical responsibility for its being-in-the-world, since this weighty responsibility is ‘the logical requirement of the consequences of our freedom’.<sup>225</sup> Yet, one must consider the full implications of Sartre’s rejection of the unconscious. If Sartre is *incorrect*, and human action is, in part, directed by unconscious motivations, then it would seem that humanity might not, in fact, be as free as Sartre seems to suggest.<sup>226</sup> One might further ask whether Sartre, by circumventing the unconscious mind, does

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<sup>219</sup> Barnes 1973:26.

<sup>220</sup> *BN*, p. 72. See also: Barnes (1956:x) and Haar (1980:170).

<sup>221</sup> *BN*, p. 11.

<sup>222</sup> This would certainly elucidate why Sartre discusses Freud’s conception of the unconscious specifically in the section on ‘bad faith’ in *Being and Nothingness*, Part I, §2.

<sup>223</sup> *BN*, pp. 73-78. For further reading on this matter see: Soll 1981.

<sup>224</sup> Daigle 2010:26.

<sup>225</sup> *BN*, p. 574

<sup>226</sup> Nietzsche would likely have disagreed with Sartre’s conception of fundamental freedom inasmuch as Nietzsche upheld the view that human behaviour is affected by various ‘drives’, which have definite bearing on our freedom.

not impose an unbearable psychological burden on human individuals by having them be wholly and solely responsible for the meaning of their lives.

If a human individual experiences a personal sense of meaninglessness in their own life, then, following Sartre's logic, they will have recourse only to themselves, which is to say that they only have themselves to blame without additional recourse to other possible explanations or excuses. This is potentially problematic inasmuch as it might foster a kind of *existential neurosis*, born of existential anguish, in which the individual traps themselves in a vicious circle of self-blame and self-shame for their own failure to render their lives meaningful through their subjective pursuits or personal existential projects. The implications of Sartre's rejection of the Freudian unconscious are therefore potentially dire inasmuch as Sartrean radical freedom might actually cause human individuals to be crushed under the burdensome weight of their responsibility for a meaningful life. Such a burden could instil in the individual a sense of responsibility so unbearable that it may paradoxically and ironically engender a meaningless existence rather than a meaningful one.

Sartre's account of individual freedom and responsibility might therefore require a measure of mitigation in order to render it more psychologically practicable. One might concede, on Sartre's part, that the unconscious mind may well exist, but that it should not be employed for the purposes of 'bad faith', which is to say that recourse to the unconscious mind should not be employed as an absolute explanation or excuse for human behaviour. A study of human psychology might yield an understanding of those unconscious mechanisms that *partially* determine our human thoughts and actions, but which could never be said to determine human behaviour completely, since, as Sartre argues, human existence always includes the possibility for an existential transcendence of those factors that affect one's freedom. Therefore, while one might concede the existence of the unconscious mind, one need not concede that human individuals are entirely determined thereby. Individuals still retain a fundamental ontological freedom, despite the fact that this freedom, with its attendant burden of responsibility, is partly mitigated by unconscious factors, and therefore not an *unmitigated* freedom of consciousness. Such an understanding of the unconscious mind might aid humanity in establishing the contingent parameters of our freedom and responsibility, thus allowing us to freely fashion a more meaningful existence precisely within such parameters.

Sartre's existentialist account of freedom, responsibility, anguish, and bad faith, might ultimately prove to be overly demanding of fallible human beings. However, this should not overshadow the possible merits of Sartre's conception of freedom and existential meaning. By arguing for a fundamental ontological freedom at the heart of human existence, Sartre reveals an inexhaustible means-to-meaning at humanity's disposal. In order to accede to this means-to-meaning, humanity has to recognize its ontological freedom, and accept the burden of personal existential responsibility that goes along with it. Yet, this would mean that humanity would need to learn to

affirm a wholly contingent existential meaning, without recourse to absolutism of any kind. On questioning whether or not such an affirmation of our contingent existence would be entirely possible without any desire for the absolute, even Sartre has his doubts.

### 3.2.5. The Pursuit of the Human God: The In-itself-For-itself

Toward the end of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues, somewhat pessimistically, that the For-itself cannot finally be fully contented with the contingency fettered to its freedom, and thus it seeks to escape its own nothingness<sup>227</sup> and evade the clutches of an absurd existence.<sup>228</sup> This contingency, which humanity discovers through its confrontation with being-in-itself, entails an enthrallment to a *thrownness* which humanity never chooses for itself, and which it can never effectively escape.<sup>229</sup> One must always choose a course of action, and one is never spared the burden of being the maker of one's own meaning. This is the paradox of our ontological freedom as Sartre states it: human individuals are condemned to choose the meaning(s) of their own existence, yet can never choose *not* to choose an existence in an objectively meaningless world. Human beings are fated to choose meaning(s) of a life whose inception was not itself a choice.

This gives further justification and clarification as to why Sartre would posit that ontological freedom is a kind of *condemnation* that is revealed in *anguish*; for not only are we humans the makers of the meaning of this world, but more tragically perhaps, we are alone in such pursuits, without any objective criterion against which one might hope to measure one's individual conception(s) of a meaningful life. Owing to the immensity of such an existential burden, Sartre proclaims that human consciousness seeks to transcend the nature of its condition as an *emptiness* or 'lack' in Being by becoming a being that is meaningfully fulfilled and entirely complete in and of itself. More specifically, the For-itself desires to be both a self-identical being-in-itself, and a fundamentally free conscious being that chooses its being-for-itself.<sup>230</sup> The For-itself therefore ultimately desires being-in-itself-for-itself [*être-en-soi-pour-soi*], or, in Sartre's bold and radical terms, human consciousness is desirous of being god.<sup>231</sup> This striving towards being-in-itself-for-itself is a desire to become god in the sense of being a self-constituted totality with the freedom of founding its own absolute creation.<sup>232</sup> That is, the For-itself secretly and desperately wishes to *be* – finally and fully; no longer contingent, nor fettered to its facticity and its unjustified existence.

In Sartre's extreme existentialist view, this fallible – human, all too human<sup>233</sup> – striving towards godliness is as fruitless as it is futile. The pursuit of the human god stems from an intractable

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<sup>227</sup> Barnes 1956:xxvi.

<sup>228</sup> *BN*, p. 587.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108: 'consciousness can in no case prevent itself from being and yet it is totally responsible for its being'.

<sup>230</sup> Wang 2006:1-2.

<sup>231</sup> *BN*, p. 602, as well as p. 587, and p. 620.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 611.

<sup>233</sup> To borrow an apt term from Nietzsche.

yearning for an implacable ideal synthesis<sup>234</sup> of Being; the ‘perpetually indicated but impossible fusion of essence and existence’,<sup>235</sup> whose impossibility is assured by the fact that the For-itself ‘could not attain the in-itself without losing itself as for-itself.’<sup>236</sup> The idealistic transcendental signified of god suggests ‘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 that he is self-consciousness and the necessary foundation of himself.’<sup>237</sup>

According to Sartre, this human projection towards being god is ‘the *ideal* meaning of all human attitudes’,<sup>238</sup> yet is indubitably damned to futility since it ‘is an obviously self-contradictory ideal, for the essence of the For-itself is the power to secrete a Nothingness, to be always in the process of becoming, to be-about-to-be’.<sup>239</sup> The For-itself is thus forever fated to *become* itself, without ever wholly *being* itself. Human existence is thus a condemnation to a form of ontological freedom which, in a morbid cosmic irony, constitutes the ever-present contingent *possibility* of existential meaning through personal existential projects, while simultaneously ensuring the *impossibility* of its absolute guarantee. For this latter reason, Sartre concludes his ontology in *Being and Nothingness* in a tone resonant with a residual despair: ‘Man is a useless passion’.<sup>240</sup> This assertion is consequential to Sartre’s ontology as a whole, since it contains within its few words the power to undermine the potency of Sartre’s arguments for human freedom and meaning given above.

Yet, it can be argued, with equal philosophical merit and even greater existential significance, that the fundamentally free nature of human existence, as Sartre conceives of it, is a potentially fecund foundation for an affirmation of existential meaning, *if and only if*, humanity could find the means to affirm<sup>241</sup> the *nothingness* sustained in its being-for-itself, rather than aiming towards the impossible ideal unity and self-coincidence<sup>242</sup> of being-in-itself-for-itself. In this way, the meaning of an individual human life would accord with its fundamental freedom, and not engage in a futile fight against, and flight from, being-for-itself. If our objectives of existential meaning stand in agreement with our fundamental nature as being-for-itself, no longer seeking to transcend our contingency through metaphysical postulates and impossible ideals, then there may yet be a creative and constructive means-to-meaning able to affirm *this* life in *this* world *hic et nunc*. Sartre’s ontology thus provides us with austere observations on what it *is* to be human, from which may be gleaned idiosyncratic insights into what it fundamentally *means* to be human.

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<sup>234</sup> *BN*, p. 114, 643.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217. See also: Wang 2006:3.

<sup>236</sup> *BN*, p. 114.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 646.

<sup>239</sup> Barnes 1956: xxx-xxxii.

<sup>240</sup> *BN*, p. 636. This statement is the final statement of Sartre’s ontology prior to the conclusion proper.

<sup>241</sup> Employing terminology from Nietzschean thought, as explicated in the previous chapter.

<sup>242</sup> Wang 2006:3.

### 3.3. The Affirmation of Being-for-itself

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Following Sartre's concluding remarks to his ontology – the assertion that humankind is fated to be 'a useless passion' – one might interpret Sartre's position on existential meaning as less hopeful than it initially appeared, especially if the pursuit of the human good and existential 'bad faith' are understood as inevitable in the human condition. A *prima facie* reading of Sartrean existentialism might suggest that Sartre's position on existential meaning remains somewhat absurdist, if not plainly nihilistic, insofar as it seems to posit that in the absence of absolute transcendental sources of existential meaning, human existence is rendered manifestly meaningless in its inalienable contingency.<sup>243</sup> However, I wish to argue that more may be gleaned from Sartrean philosophy than such an elementary interpretation allows. This subsection of this chapter aims to investigate how humanity can come to terms with its fundamentally free existence, as described in Sartrean ontology, and find a contemporary human means-to-meaning without recourse to absolutism, or a resignation to existential nihilism, or an inauthentic fleeing in the face of what we fundamentally *are*. I therefore argue that humankind is not necessarily fated to be 'a useless passion'.

While Sartre's assertion that humankind is a useless passion might not be the most central thesis of *Being and Nothingness*, it is nonetheless noteworthy and consequential to Sartre's discussion of existential meaning in two discernible ways. Firstly, Sartre's assertion is both emphatic and seemingly conclusive to the arguments made in the preceding pages of *Being and Nothingness*. That is, the assertion is of such a nature that it cannot be avoided or overlooked since it seems to bespeak an inherent ontological futility in the human pursuit of meaning. I would argue that the assertion therefore cannot be considered as a mere passing remark on Sartre's part; it has a most direct bearing on the question of existential meaning with which we are here concerned. Secondly, and most importantly, it is arguable that Sartre's assertion of humankind as a useless passion potentially undermines much of his previous argumentation in *Being and Nothingness* concerning the fundamentally free nature of human existence and its possible meaning(s). If humanity cannot *be* anything other than 'a useless passion', then our fundamental ontological freedom is rendered somewhat paltry and impotent in the face of humanity's inexorable uselessness in securing a meaningful life. Therefore, it follows that Sartre's assertion of humankind as a useless passion demands direct attention in the discourse at hand.

Furthermore, I argue that by understanding and positively affirming our existence *qua* For-itself, humankind might liberate itself from the existential futility implied by our 'useless passion'. Employing Sartre's own existentialist logic, one could argue that the fundamental freedom of human existence precludes any and all reification of our essential nature, encompassing even the

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<sup>243</sup> See Landou 2012.

ostensibly useless pursuit towards absolute meaning through ‘bad faith’ or the ideal unity of being-in-itself-for-itself. One might then further extend the argument somewhat beyond Sartrean delimitations to posit that the preclusion of any essentialism in human consciousness further precludes any predestined futility of our passionate human striving towards fulfilment and existential meaning. Therefore, the emerging existential question with which the following subsection is primarily concerned is the following: is human existence fated to the pre-ordained futility of a ‘useless passion’, or can human consciousness find a means to meaningfully affirm its being-for-itself and the concomitant contingency haunting human existential meaning?

### 3.3.1. Interrogating Sartre: Transcendence, Value, & Meaning

In Christine Daigle’s reading of Sartrean ontology, Sartre appears to be making the following claims in his arguments on existential meaning in *Being and Nothingness*:

When we seek meaning for being and our own existence, we are looking for an a priori meaning. We forget that we are the beings through which meaning comes to the world in the first place. Being-in-itself is devoid of meaning; it simply *is*. The presence of the for-itself generates meaning for Being. Intentional consciousness is thus an interpretative consciousness. We live in the world, not in the in-itself, and the world is a meaningful place.<sup>244</sup>

In his published lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre makes an assertion which would accord with Daigle’s statement above: ‘life has no meaning *a priori*. Life itself is nothing until it is lived, it is we who give it a meaning, and value is nothing more than the meaning that we give it.’<sup>245</sup> Yet, Sartre’s philosophy, in his two seminal works of existentialism (*viz. Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*), effaces a possible ambiguity in its conception of existential meaning. Existential meaning is created by the For-itself in a *contingent* sense, yet *desired* by the For-itself in an *absolute* or *necessary* sense. For Sartre, it seems that the For-itself will never be completely content with a meaning which cannot be absolutely justified beyond the realm of fallible contingency. The For-itself only appears as a ‘useless passion’ when it establishes that the criterion of judgement for any existential meaning must maintain a *necessary* component. Yet, such a necessary component which would *absolutely* qualify the meaning of human existence in a necessary rather than contingent sense, is, for existentialists like Sartre and Nietzsche, illusory and non-complementary to the human condition in its contingency and fallible finitude.

Humanity therefore remains perpetually desirous of precisely the kind of meaning which is precluded from human existence: existential meaning *qua* in-itself-for-itself. While Sartre contends that it is the case that humanity desires final fulfilment in the meaning of its existence,

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<sup>244</sup> Daigle 2010:38.

<sup>245</sup> *EH*, p. 51.

he does not sufficiently explain why this should *remain* the case for human affairs henceforth. To be sure, the history of Western thought, encompassing its metaphysical philosophies and evangelical religions, evinces countless examples that would accord with Sartre's argument that human beings desire existential meaning that is transcendent and absolute. Western philosophers, most notably Plato, have sought the metaphysical permanence of Meaning *as such* – all, it would seem, to no avail. Therefore, it is incumbent upon contemporary humanity to ask: Are we fated to such existential futility or is there a possible means of overcoming this aspect of our human pursuits as permeates our human history?

Sartre's striking assertion that humankind is a useless passion is one which presupposes that consciousness will interminably seek out something which it can never wholly *be* – a being which is ontologically complete and exists in a self-identical unity while maintaining its fundamental freedom. The For-itself therefore exhibits a futility in its very freedom since it is doomed to a projection towards a future which can never realistically transpire. However, this positing on Sartre's part is potentially problematic if one is to assume, as Sartre unequivocally does, that the essence of human nature cannot be predetermined, predestined, or prescribed – a fact which follows from Sartre's anti-essentialist (or non-essentialist) assertion that human 'existence precedes essence.'<sup>246</sup> In fact, Sartrean existentialism might be effacing a hypocritical, surreptitious essentialism which can be traced to Sartre's description of humanity as a useless passion. One must ask why Sartre would condemn humanity to a futile future after he has only just accorded humanity a fundamental freedom to determine its own essence and meaning. Is Sartre then not partly prescribing humanity's fate based on what he considers to be its (essential) nature?

Through careful consideration of Sartre's argumentation in *Being and Nothingness*, one might discern an underlying prejudice that human consciousness, as a nothingness or 'lack', perceives itself as incomplete and fundamentally flawed,<sup>247</sup> and therefore unavoidably seeks to evade the contingency attendant upon its fundamental freedom in bad faith. Sartre further seems to be suggesting that humankind, its ontological freedom and 'lack' of determinate essence notwithstanding, cannot wholly overcome this ontological flaw in its nature. However, Sartre has not sufficiently argued for the strict necessity of his provocative assertion that '[m]an is a useless passion'. More interestingly and significantly, Sartre cannot argue such an assertion on the grounds of strict necessity, since it would undermine the premises of his own argument, viz. that the essence of humankind cannot be predetermined in any *necessary* fashion prior to its existence. This is because human existence, as both a contingent *facticity* and a fundamentally free *transcendence*, precludes prescriptive necessity or metaphysical predetermination of any kind.

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<sup>246</sup> *EH*, p. 20.

<sup>247</sup> *BN*, pp. 113-115: 'it is the individual completion of the self which haunts the for-itself'.

The facticity of the For-itself is defined as ‘the perpetually evanescent contingency of the in-itself which, without ever allowing itself to be apprehended, haunts the for-itself’.<sup>248</sup> Yet the facticity of the For-itself is inextricable from the *transcendence* of the For-itself, not only in phenomenological terms but also in existential terms.<sup>249</sup> There is a connotation to the term ‘transcendence’ in Sartrean ontology which pertains to the nature of human existence as one of *value*. On this usage, transcendence refers to fact that human consciousness transcends the immediate facticity of its ‘situation’ towards its future possibilities as endeavours of *value*. It is apparent here that Sartre is retracing the footsteps of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*, in which Heidegger posits that the kind of being which describes humanity (*Dasein*) comports itself towards its ‘ownmost potentiality’ of existence through its personal projects.<sup>250</sup> This connotation of transcendence, following from Heidegger, describing the projection of an individual human consciousness towards its existential possibilities, is specifically an *existential transcendence*.<sup>251</sup> Existential transcendence pertains to the transcendence of the For-itself towards itself as a being of *value*.<sup>252</sup> Sartre explains this as follows:

Value is the self in so far as the self haunts the heart of the for-itself as that for which the for-itself *is*. The supreme value towards which consciousness at every instant surpasses itself by its very being is the absolute being of the self with its characteristics of identity, of purity, of permanence, etc., and as its own foundation. [...] It is as the meaning and the beyond of all surpassing; it is as the absent in-itself which haunts being-for-itself.<sup>253</sup>

Two implicit connotations to Sartre’s use of the term ‘value’ may be identified: a *moral* dimension pertaining to human valuations of action(s), and an *existential* dimension pertaining to human valuations of meaning. Sartre largely circumvents the moral component of the For-itself as a being of value in *Being and Nothingness*, on the grounds that ‘[o]ntology itself can not [*sic*] formulate ethical precepts.’<sup>254</sup> Not unlike Nietzsche, Sartre is suspicious and critical of moral frameworks that might either directly or indirectly presuppose a human nature in its principles and precepts. Sartre attempts to suspend moralistic judgements of human existence by precluding moral prescriptions in general, at least as far as *Being and Nothingness* is concerned.<sup>255</sup> Although Sartre does not ultimately end up entirely beyond good and evil, Sartre’s philosophy arguably achieves its aim of being more descriptive than prescriptive of human existence.

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<sup>248</sup> *BN*, p. 107

<sup>249</sup> See *BN*, pp. 79-81; pp. 103-119; also pp. 503-511.

<sup>250</sup> *BT*, Division II, §II.

<sup>251</sup> While this term has been previously defined, the additional details provided here are important for the argument that follows concerning the For-itself as a being of value.

<sup>252</sup> *BN*, p. 117: ‘value taken in its origin, or the supreme value, is the beyond and the *for* of transcendence’.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 645. Further see: pp. 645-647.

<sup>255</sup> Notably, Sartre did begin work on his *Notebooks for an Ethics* soon after the publication of *Being and Nothingness* and the published lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

In Sartre's account, the *existential* component of value as it pertains to meaning is largely given preference over the *moral* component. Value pertains to existential meaning but should not simply be equated with it, since, unlike meaning, value 'is not *posited* by the for-itself; it is consubstantial with it – to such a degree that there is no consciousness which is not haunted by *its* value'.<sup>256</sup> While value and meaning often or even typically imply one another, they are not wholly synonymous. For instance, I might be able to determine the value of a certain physical object in the world to which the question of existential meaning would be largely irrelevant: I might value an object fiscally or physically, but the existential meaning of the object could only be determined on the basis of a personal existential project to which I am directed, and in terms of which the particular object is implicated. An object may therefore possess some value without possessing existential meaning, especially if the object is inconsequential to one's fundamental existential projects.

Generally speaking, 'value arises as the For-itself constitutes objects as desirable'.<sup>257</sup> The For-itself is a being of value inasmuch as it directs itself towards other entities, itself as In-itself-For-itself, and its existence as a whole in terms of a value which transcends the immediate experience of the For-itself. Existential meaning is established on the basis of value when the For-itself takes its own existence as the direct object of its conscious *valuation*, and attempts to determine to what extent that existence is desirable. Moreover, existential meaning is established on the basis of a value *toward* which the For-itself *transcends* itself. It is because value haunts the existence of the For-itself that it projects itself towards meaning(s) beyond itself at a distance. Value haunts the For-itself because value exceeds the For-itself as the totality of self-identical Being which is *lacking* in its existence; while 'possibility' always belongs to the For-itself 'as that which it lacks'.<sup>258</sup> Value is therefore the grounds upon which the For-itself *is* an interpreter of the meaning of its existence: because value, or valuation, arises alongside the upsurge of the For-itself into Being, human beings posit themselves, their essence, and their existential meaning, beyond themselves.

Much like absolute meaning, ultimate value is unattainable for the For-itself, but is nonetheless at the heart of its striving beyond its immediate situation towards future possibilities and meaning(s). Because the human being is perpetually haunted by the *potential* value of its existence, it constantly seeks meaning beyond its immediate circumstances. This might explain why existential transcendence, or the transcendence of the For-itself towards existential meaning in terms of value, has often been attended by a *metaphysical transcendence* of humanity towards an absolute meaning. In Sartre's account, such a metaphysical transcendence would follow from a belief that an *ultimate value*, such as being-in-itself-for-itself, must somehow stand outside of human existence and determine human life from an absolute vantage point; and that the meaning

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<sup>256</sup> *BN*, p. 118.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 656. As phrased by Hazel E. Barnes (trans.)

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 586.

of human life must thus subsist somewhere independently of contingent and subjective human interpretation. It would not entail an outlandish stretch of one's imagination to understand how such a movement from existential transcendence to metaphysical transcendence might transpire, especially insofar as human existence in *this* world is often frustrated in its interminable search for meaning, and therefore may well seek to go beyond the province of the *hic et nunc*.

However, such frustration can only transpire on a *comparative* foundation between absolute meaning and contingent or subjective meaning. In other words, the human search for meaning is typically frustrated because it is judged against an absolute value as to the measure of its validity. For instance, human beings can interpret injustice on the grounds of an idealized conception of absolute Justice. Similarly, human beings can interpret a meaningful human existence by means of a comparison with an externally situated source or signified of existential meaning. However, this form of comparative valuation has its roots in a *logic of Being over becoming*, since it tends towards the absolute, and as a result, devalues and decries the finite, the fallible, and the contingent. In the previous chapter, it was demonstrated that this is what Nietzsche understood *nihilism* to be: a devaluation of this world *hic et nunc* in favour of transcendent qualification. But Nietzsche sought, as does the study at hand, to understand whether or not it might be possible to move beyond the logic of Being over becoming, and thereby affirm human existence *hic et nunc* without recourse to transcendental signifieds. In this regard, the following question demands to be addressed: What are the implications for human existential meaning if ultimate value and absolute meaning do not in fact exist?

### 3.3.2. Two Existential Dispositions: Seriousness & Play

As was demonstrated in Chapter II, Nietzsche denounces the absolute in favour of a contingent human existence as it is lived *hic et nunc*. Similarly, Sartre negatively describes a belief in ultimate value and absolute meaning as 'the spirit of seriousness', which 'views man as an object and subordinates him to the world. It thinks of values as having an absolute existence independent of human-reality'.<sup>259</sup> Sartre claims that this spirit of seriousness 'rules the world' and is itself a form of bad faith<sup>260</sup> inasmuch as it does not properly acknowledge the human individual as the singular source of all values and meanings.<sup>261</sup> By according greater reality to an objective, extrinsic measure of meaning than to the subjective domain of individual human consciousness, the spirit of seriousness views value(s) as extrinsically derived, or as somehow residing in the world itself, outside of the subjective dimension of human interpretation. Following this, if meaning cannot be drawn from the objective world or from a transcendent realm or entity, then humanity has no

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<sup>259</sup> *BN*, p. 655. As stated by Barnes (trans.) in her 'Key to Special Terminology'.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 601.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 646.

further recourse to existential meaning since the serious individual 'has no resource in himself'.<sup>262</sup> The spirit of seriousness is therefore to be repudiated, in Sartre's opinion, since it potentially fosters despair<sup>263</sup> towards the fact that a human being is the kind of being who pursues meaning and value only on the uncertain footing of its own subjectivity.

By tracing a path towards meaning, the responsible Sartrean individual discovers only him/herself as a facticity and transcendence. Contrariwise, the serious individual, already in bad faith with their being-for-itself, believes meaning to be a discovery of the external world or a transcendent realm rather than an internal creation of consciousness. The spirit of seriousness stands in opposition to existential anguish, since in anguish 'I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself.'<sup>264</sup> Inversely, 'the serious man' does not acknowledge that meaning and value are derived from his/her fundamental freedom, but is rather one who 'apprehends values in terms of the world and who resides in the reassuring, materialistic substantiation of values.'<sup>265</sup> Where the anguished individual engages in a confrontation with his/her ontological freedom and responsibility, the serious man 'is hiding from himself the consciousness of his freedom'.<sup>266</sup> Following from Sartre's view of bad faith and the spirit of seriousness, then, one might assert that neither religious transcendentalism nor even scientific objectivism<sup>267</sup> offers a means-to-meaning which accords with a responsible human existence *qua* being-for-itself.

Sartre posits that it is only through an existential disposition of 'play' that the spirit of seriousness can be transcended or, in Nietzschean terms, overcome. Play 'releases subjectivity' since it actively recognizes human individuals as the source of existential meaning.<sup>268</sup> Sartre states that '[t]he first principle of play is man himself; through it he escapes his natural nature; he himself sets the value and rules for his acts'.<sup>269</sup> This existential attitude of play is not to be interpreted as a disposition of carefree frivolity or capriciousness, but rather as an open orientation towards meaning as a manifestation of human creativity and subjectivity. Sartre has already indicated that existential meaning is a *choice* of one's existence, and in addition to this acknowledgement, human beings can adopt an attitude of play toward their fundamental freedom with its weighty responsibility, and a completely contingent human condition. The spirit of play negates the spirit of seriousness by embracing human subjectivity as the single creative source of signification founded in freedom.

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<sup>262</sup> *BN*, p. 601.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 646.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 601.

<sup>267</sup> Especially the kind of scientific objectivism posited by the logical positivists of the Vienna circle during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In their view, an assertion could only be deemed meaningful if it was objectively verifiable. All other postulates were deemed nonsensical and useless. Logical positivists were thus guilty of the Sartrean 'spirit of seriousness'.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

Play is dynamic rather than static, and in this way affirms the plasticity of human existential meaning instead of pursuing inflexible conceptions thereof. One might therefore assert that play is life-affirming insofar as it entails an understanding and appreciation of the ontological fact that meaning is subjectively derived and never objectively assured.

One might liken this Sartrean playful disposition to the one evinced and upheld by Nietzsche in both *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a possible means beyond human suffering.<sup>270</sup> One of the points that Nietzsche appears to be making in his philosophy is that humanity takes itself far too seriously in positing absolutes; while Sartre seems to be maintaining that humanity does not take itself seriously in the proper manner, insofar as it often fails to accord primacy to itself as the sole subjective source of existential meaning. Play revels in subjectivity, while seriousness cannot contend with anything other than formal objectivity. If this human spirit of seriousness can be overcome, then the human individual may well come to recognize that he or she 'is the being by whom values exist'<sup>271</sup> and consequently 'when he has done this it will follow that he realizes that he can choose to value whatever he likes'.<sup>272</sup> This might further explain why Sartre eschews essentialism when considering the human condition and its possible meaning(s), since essentialist thought seems to believe itself to have arrived at the objective measure of that distinctive element that constitutes all human existence and its existential meaning(s).

However, and this point is not to be taken lightly, Sartre runs the risk of partially undermining his own anti-essentialist arguments in *Being and Nothingness* and engaging in the spirit of seriousness by stating that human consciousness is destined to be 'a useless passion', mired in the futility of its own pursuit towards the unattainable being-in-itself-for-itself. Sartre's ontological arguments in *Being and Nothingness* in favour of contingency, radical freedom, and individual existential meaning hold ground philosophically only until Sartre later asserts that human consciousness will evermore desire to be that being which it can never be: the god-like being-in-itself-for-itself. An unavoidable concern confronts Sartrean philosophy in this regard: why is it necessarily the case that humankind is fated to the futility of a 'useless passion' when Sartre himself argues that the essence and meaning of human existence cannot be predestined in any way? It seems, then, that there is a 'lack' not only in human consciousness, but in Sartre's argumentation as well.

One might feel compelled to ask whether or not this kind of positing on Sartre's part is not precisely the kind of prescription concerning human nature which Sartre definitively denounces. Why would Sartre revoke with one hand what he accords so liberally with the other, namely, the possibility of freely fashioning an individual existential destiny not necessarily fated to futility? Is

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<sup>270</sup> In this regard, see especially Chapter II, §2.5 of this study.

<sup>271</sup> *BN*, p. 647.

<sup>272</sup> Warnock 2004:xvii.

Sartre not himself partly guilty of this ‘spirit of seriousness’ which he repudiates, inasmuch as he directly suggests that humanity will never be able to fully accept the nature of being-for-itself and their role as the makers of existential meaning? Importantly, human activity is condemned to futility only if one assumes that humanity can never finally escape its search for a non-subjective, transcendental meaning. Sartre strongly suggests that humanity is indeed capable of such a transcendence of transcendentalism itself, but then later seems to equivocate on this possibility.

Moreover, Sartre’s choice of words here is rather revealing: ‘Man *is* a useless passion’.<sup>273</sup> Yet, does Sartre not precisely say that humanity *is* what it is not and that it *is not* what it *is*? This ontological claim on Sartre’s part would imply that at most Sartre would be justified in asserting that humanity *has been* a useless passion (given that our human history evinces the pursuit of absolute meaning) or that it *might remain* a useless passion (given that humanity may not discern in itself the error of its ways), but not that it *necessarily is* a useless passion. The proclamation that human existence is forever fated to futility thus remains one of possibility or perhaps probability, but never necessity – humankind cannot be said to *be necessarily* a useless passion. It would appear, then, that despite his best intentions, Sartre might not have eschewed all prescriptions of a human essence after all. The Sartrean assertion that ‘[m]an is a useless passion’ might therefore be said to be an argument itself in ‘bad faith’, since it potentially undermines Sartrean existentialism’s vehement advocacy in favour of non-essentialism and radical freedom. There is an ambiguity in *Being and Nothingness*, then, that reveals how Sartre is not self-assured as to whether or not humanity can finally confront its freedom, leave behind its seemingly inevitable ‘bad faith’, and finally live an *authentic* human life.

### 3.3.3. Sartre on Authenticity & Death

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre retains a measure of criticism towards the conception of authenticity provided by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Heidegger claims that a human being, or *Dasein*, can only be said to be authentic if he or she accords with a unique individual ‘call of conscience’,<sup>274</sup> which summons *Dasein* to account for its existence. Conversely, inauthentic existence involves what Heidegger terms ‘fallenness’ [*Verfallenheit*]<sup>275</sup> to the non-individualised multitude of humanity; the throng of inauthentic beings, who do not comport themselves towards their own existence, and whom Heidegger designates as *Das Man*, or ‘the They’.<sup>276</sup> Sartre argues critically on Heidegger’s conception of authenticity in *Being and Nothingness*,<sup>277</sup> specifically since Heidegger’s conception of authenticity evinces an implicit ethical dimension of judgement, which

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<sup>273</sup> *BN*, p. 636. My emphasis.

<sup>274</sup> See *BT*, §§ 56-58 (pp. 317-335).

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, Division II, §II.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, §27 (pp. 163-168). This term is also sometimes translated (by Hubert Dreyfus, for instance) as ‘The One’.

<sup>277</sup> See especially *BN*, p. 552 and p. 585.

Sartre views with suspicion insofar as an ethical framework might pave a path to prescriptions – a path that Sartre wishes to avoid in his ontology.<sup>278</sup> Sartre's remark in *Being in Nothingness* that '[m]an is a useless passion' casts a dubious shadow over the possibility of human authenticity, since Sartre seems to suppose that human existence will always retain an element of bad faith and an inauthentic fleeing in the face of fundamental freedom and contingent existential meaning.

Further contrary to Heideggerian thought on authenticity, Sartre does not subscribe to the view that an authentic and meaningful human life is one that takes full account of its finitude vis-à-vis the inexorable eventuality of death. Contrary to Heidegger's conception of *being-towards-death* [*Sein-zum-Tode*]<sup>279</sup> as the foundation for an authentic and meaningful human existence, Sartre contends that death does not form part of the ontological structure of the For-itself, since death stands outside of our ontological freedom and the possibilities manifested therefrom as concerns our actions, values, and meanings.<sup>280</sup> Death is 'nothing other than the *given*', says Sartre, 'a *contingent fact* which as such on principle escapes me and originally belongs to my facticity'.<sup>281</sup> In conjunction with my birth, death circumscribes the subjective meaning of my being; but like the accidental fact of my birth, death has no jurisdiction over the meaning that is made of my life. The contingent facticity of birth and death are *absurd* in that they do not contribute to the meaning of my life whatsoever,<sup>282</sup> but remove my life's meaning from me by means of a rupture or sundering of my consciousness from my existential projects. The meaning of my life is therefore not arrived at through a confrontation with my temporal finitude or my being-towards-death, because death renders the meaning of *my* life, as *my* freely chosen subjective creation, null and void.

For Sartre, I am not only a finite being in the face of my death; I am more primarily a finitude of Being because my choices introduce finite limitations into Being: by choosing one course of action I have not elected for a great number of alternative courses; by conferring one meaning onto existence, I preclude other possible meaning(s).<sup>283</sup> Finitude is therefore an encounter with my freedom rather than a confrontation with my death. Not even suicide undermines this truth, according to Sartre, since the subsequent meaning of my death by suicide would not be mine to determine. Like all forms of human death, it will remain underdetermined, or *determined from without* in an exogenous fashion.<sup>284</sup> Because the meaning of my life is only chosen by *me* as *mine* while I am yet alive, death confers nothing on life but an external meaning which is not my own:

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<sup>278</sup> Sartre is astute in his judgement that ontology and ethics are related but should not be naively conflated; Sartre thus leaves a discussion of authenticity to his later unfinished and posthumously published work *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1983), which will be considered later in this chapter.

<sup>279</sup> See *BT*, §§51-53 (pp. 296-311).

<sup>280</sup> *BN*, p. 565.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 566-567.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 560.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 567.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 560.

'Since death does not appear on the foundation of our freedom, it can only *remove all meaning from life*' because in death, life's 'problems receive no solution and because the very meaning of the problems remains undetermined'.<sup>285</sup> Upon my death, the meaning of my life thus stands external to me and is decided only by Others.<sup>286</sup> The form of the eulogy provides an exemplary showcasing of this point: since I cannot deliver my own eulogy, and therefore cannot determine the meaning of my life once it is enclosed at both of its extremes (birth and death), this ultimate meaning eternally eludes me and is fixed to my existence by external Others.

Because I *am not* when death *is*, the meaning of my non-existence is *not mine*; the meaning of what was formerly my existence is no longer determined on the basis of my freely chosen projects, but is decided *for me* and *without me*.<sup>287</sup> In this specific sense, death entails 'a meaning out of reach'.<sup>288</sup> Sartre interrogates death in terms of the meaning of human existence as follows:

Does this mean that death marks the limits of our freedom? In renouncing Heidegger's being-unto-death, have we abandoned forever the possibility of freely giving to our being a meaning for which we are responsible? Quite the contrary. As it seems to us, death by being revealed to us as it really is frees us wholly from its so-called constraint.<sup>289</sup>

This means that humanity need neither fear death nor derive the authenticity of its existence in terms of death. Following this, existential *authenticity*, encompassing a meaningful existence, does not require a confrontation with one's death, but rather a confrontation with one's being-for-itself. An authentic human life, in Sartrean terms, would rather require a responsibility on the part of human individuals to recognize and assimilate their fundamental ontological freedom in anguish without seeking to evade the kind of incomplete being *qua* becoming which they are fundamentally condemned to be. One might say, then, that Sartre, *contra* Heidegger, states that an authentic human life is a being-towards-being-for-itself and never a being-towards-death. To be sure, the For-itself must acknowledge its existence as one which is both finite and contingent, but this acknowledgement does not implicate the For-itself in a relation of authenticity vis-à-vis its death, nor does it suggest that a confrontation with death is required for a meaningful existence. Ultimately, however, from Sartre's engagement with the theme of death in *Being and Nothingness*, as demonstrated above, one might still acknowledge, along with Christina Howells, that for Sartre, death nonetheless remains an undeniable existential concern for the For-itself, and is thus always 'related to questions of the significance of human life'.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> *BN*, p. 559-560.

<sup>286</sup> Haar 1980:179: 'Indeed, once dead, I am defenseless against objectification by the other.'

<sup>287</sup> *BN*, pp. 564-567.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 568.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 566.

<sup>290</sup> Howells 2009:158.

### 3.3.4. The Temporal Dimension(s) of Existential Meaning<sup>291</sup>

The For-itself is a temporal being in that it temporalizes its existence into its past, its present and its future. This may seem obvious enough, but the nuances and implications of Sartre's arguments on temporality are significant to the manner in which human beings make meaning of their lives. Sartre states it as follows: 'As Present, Past, Future – all at the same time – the For-itself dispersing its being in three dimensions is temporal due to the very fact that it nihilates itself.'<sup>292</sup> As a transmutable being *qua* becoming, the For-itself, on the ontological foundation of its own nothingness, *is* what it *is not* (its future) and *is not* what it *is* (its past). The For-itself not only has a past, but *is* its past. In fact, this retrospective aspect of the temporality of the For-itself is what accords the For-itself the only being-in-itself that it will ever achieve. That is, as its past, the For-itself is a circumscribed self; a being-in-itself which is enclosed within its own past. As its past, and only as its past, the For-itself *is* an essence, since it *is* a being-in-itself, but one that is always already *surpassed*<sup>293</sup> since time and tide wait for no man, and human temporality unfolds as a continuum, punctuated by the events of Being, but never isolated in absolute temporal instants.

The past of the For-itself is encompassed in its facticity, for the For-itself cannot evade its past, and is always already responsible for its past, and yet is simultaneously a transcendence of this past, through its present situation, and towards a meaningful future *in potentia*. Being-for-itself therefore further entails a *temporal transcendence* inasmuch as it never *is* itself at any given moment, but is always already beyond itself. Sartre, adopting Heidegger's terminology, speaks of the For-itself as a transcendent *projection*: 'On the level of consciousness of the world this lack [of the For-itself] can appear only in projection, as a transcendent and ideal characteristic.'<sup>294</sup> As previously explicated, the For-itself posits the *value* of its existence as somewhere beyond itself. Through a temporal transcendence from its past, through its present, and towards its future, the For-itself encounters its existence as one of *possibility* and meaning. It is thus as a temporal transcendence that the temporal dimension of existential meaning is revealed.

Through temporal transcendence the For-itself projects itself beyond its own 'lack' towards that which is lacked, viz. the replete self which lacks nothing. As a being of value, the For-itself is always already ahead of itself through its projects, and it is on this basis that the For-itself determines the meaning of its activity as it is projected towards an idealized future value of its existence which perpetually surpasses its present state of existence. The projection of the For-itself towards the

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<sup>291</sup> Heidegger's influence on Sartre is evident here once again, inasmuch as Sartre explicitly delineates temporal dimensions to human existence in general, and to human existential meaning in particular. Sartre's explication of the temporal dimensions of human existence in *Being and Nothingness* is undeniably influenced by Heidegger's ontological arguments on temporality in Division II of *Being and Time*. However, Sartre's arguments are unique in their own right.

<sup>292</sup> *BN*, p. 165.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

lacking totality of its being is what precipitates potentiality and possibility, which belongs to the For-itself as its particular existential *purpose*. Sartre phrases it thus:

We run toward ourselves and we are – due to this very fact – the being which can not [*sic*] be reunited with itself. In one sense the running is void of meaning since the goal is never given but invented and projected proportionately as we run toward it. In another sense we can not [*sic*] refuse to it that meaning which it rejects since in spite of everything possibility is the meaning of the for-itself. Thus there is and there is not a meaning in the flight. Now in that very flight from the past which I am toward the future which I am, the future is prefigured in relation to the past at the same time that it confers on the past all its meaning.<sup>295</sup>

For Sartre it is thus this ‘flight’ of temporal and existential transcendence which – as a flight *toward* an ideal, goal, or purpose – infuses human life at every given stage with possible meaning(s).<sup>296</sup> Existential purpose, as a teleological projection towards a prospective end which may not finally be fully realized, remains fettered to existential meaning as its very foundation, since meaning is made manifest through a projected *purpose* – a life lived in orientation towards certain goals and ideals. Meaning is thus *in the making* – a making born of a ceaseless striving towards a purposive positing of one’s future aspirations. A purposive projection towards the unique possibilities of one’s individual future is the necessary temporal underpinning for existential meaning, and why one might call the For-itself a *prospective* being in terms of its existential meaning. This goes hand in hand with the fact that the For-itself does not possess a substantial self which endures in a self-identical unity through time. On the one hand, I *am* who I *was* in my past, yet on the other hand, my present stands in a negative relation to my past inasmuch as I *am* at present *not* what I *was* in the past. Nor am I the self-same being towards which I project myself from this present into an unknown future, which I *am* in the mode of *not yet being* it. The present is not an independent temporal dimension as such, but might be viewed as a concentration of Being which obtains in a negative relation to an encapsulated past and a perpetually possible future. The present, in Sartre’s terms, is the For-itself choosing the *toward* of its being – its temporal projection as an orientation toward existential meaning. Therefore, the For-itself is a facticity as its past, a freedom of action in its present choice of its projects, as well as an existential and temporal transcendence toward its future as a world of possibility and potentiality.

The For-itself is thus a temporal being in the following way: ‘the time of consciousness is human reality which temporalizes itself as the totality which is to itself its own incompleteness; it is nothingness slipping into a totality as a detotalizing ferment.’<sup>297</sup> That is, as a being of internal negation, the For-itself is a fractured temporal totality, which is simultaneously its past, its

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<sup>295</sup> *BN*, p. 225.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

present, and its future in an ekstastic unity.<sup>298</sup> The For-itself is an ekstastic being<sup>299</sup> inasmuch as it exists<sup>300</sup> outside of its self as a 'detotalized totality' because it is at one and the same time a being and a nothingness; a being which is itself in the mode of never fully being it. 'To say that consciousness is ekstastic is to say that it is shattered in its very being by temporal ekstases; that is, it is a split process of present intention, past retentions, and future protentions, in a dispersed totality.'<sup>301</sup> The self of the For-itself is an 'ontological mirage'<sup>302</sup> that unifies the experiences of the For-itself within time without thereby effecting an absolute internal unity in the sense of being-in-itself-for-itself. Although the For-itself will never abide in a self-identical unity within itself, this projection or transcendence of the For-itself towards its future as one of distinctive possibilities, co-extensively conjures the meaning of its world and its existence.

### 3.3.5. The (Latent) Possibility of Existential Affirmation in Sartre's Ontology

Despite the fact that the For-itself will never attain the unity of being-in-itself-for-itself, or the absolute existence of a human god, it nevertheless always finds itself engaged and entangled in a meaningful world whose meaning is rendered from the internal negation, or nothingness, of the For-itself. This negation establishes the transcendence(s) of the For-itself: a phenomenological, existential, and temporal transcendence towards meaning. The search for a unified self, ultimate value, and absolute existential meaning may well be interminably frustrated for the For-itself, but its existence is not necessarily less meaningful nor 'a useless passion' as a result. In fact, if the authenticity of being-for-itself is at all possible – which is to say that if the For-itself could fully assimilate the freedom and responsibility of its being-for-itself, thereby accepting and affirming the being of nothingness which it inescapably is – then the meaning of human existence would positively accord with our fundamental ontological constitution. In this way, it may be said that existential meaning is possible for human beings without recourse to the transcendental or the absolute, but only through an existential affirmation of our contingent being-for-itself.

Despite Sartre's anti-essentialist conception of radical freedom, one might discern an inadvertent predetermination of human futility slipping surreptitiously into Sartre's ontology. Sartre does not finally resolve the problematic paradox and ambiguity at the heart of his phenomenological ontology: human existence precedes its essence and is fundamentally free to determine its own meaning(s), yet human consciousness, as an implacable nothingness and insatiable being of desire, wishes evermore to evade its being-for-itself by fleeing toward being-in-itself-for-itself – a pursuit that is always already doomed to a dismal failure:

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<sup>298</sup> *BN*, p. 160.

<sup>299</sup> Derived from the Greek '*ekstasis*', meaning 'standing outside oneself'.

<sup>300</sup> Or '*ek-sists*', to use Heideggerian terminology.

<sup>301</sup> Kenevan 1981:199. Sartre calls this *ekstastic* dispersion the 'diaspora' of consciousness (*BN*, p. 159).

<sup>302</sup> *BN*, p. 159.

The for-itself in its being is failure because it is the foundation only of itself as nothingness. In truth this failure is its very being, but it has meaning only if the for-itself apprehends itself as failure *in the* presence of the being which it has failed to be; that is, of the being which would be the foundation of its being and no longer merely the foundation of its nothingness – or, to put it another way, which would be its foundation as coincidence with itself.<sup>303</sup>

The human god, as the designated ideal of being-in-itself-for-itself, thus bespeaks, for Sartre, a futility that inheres in the human condition: “The very meaning of man is failure: he is without ground, standing in emptiness. God is the symbol of universal failure.”<sup>304</sup> To be sure, as a being of nothingness, the For-itself is undoubtedly a paradoxical being, but can one, on this basis alone, allow for problematic paradoxes to be abided in Sartre’s argumentation? How can humankind be both a free being and a ‘useless passion’? At least two possible rejoinders to my above critique of Sartre’s problematic paradoxical arguments might be offered, and I will consider them briefly.

Firstly, it might be argued that Sartre is merely offering his own idiosyncratic view on human existence by describing, but never wholly prescribing, what he believes to be the particular nature and meaning of human life. In this light, Sartre’s statement that ‘[m]an is a useless passion’ would remain a particular rather than a universal claim, and it would be entirely the purview of individuals to undermine Sartre’s view of human futility in their personal projects, should they feel the personal existential impetus to do so. Secondly, it might well be that Sartre is posing an existential challenge to humanity through his assertion that ‘[m]an is a useless passion’, namely, the challenge to overcome humanity’s pointless positing of an ideal whose reach far exceeds the grasp of human consciousness. Perhaps it is the case that Sartre identifies how Western humanity has typically conceived of meaning in its traditional past, and that humanity would be condemning itself to a futile passion if it were to continue along this line of thought. This could be a keen insight indeed insofar as Sartre could be calling human beings to account, in a manner akin to Heidegger’s ‘call of conscience’, by describing our past pursuits as a ‘useless passion’ and suggesting the latent possibility of a more hopeful human future. These interpretations of Sartrean philosophy are certainly meritorious, but they are not without their own shortcomings.

Since Sartre’s statement forms part of his ontology, it would be somewhat problematic to argue that he is making a particular rather than a universal claim, because ontology aims at making general arguments on the nature of Being and beings. If Sartre is not attempting to postulate something about the nature of human existence in general, then why even include such an unequivocally polemical postulation in his work of ontology, and moreover, why would he not specifically state its nature as a particular rather than a universal claim? Secondly, if Sartre is using

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<sup>303</sup> *BN*, p. 113.

<sup>304</sup> Haar 1980:185.

the claim that '[m]an is a useless passion' to challenge humanity towards an orientation in accordance with its fundamental freedom, then why not simply state such a challenge *explicitly*? Sartre is by no means deliberately indirect or patently abstruse in his philosophy in general; his arguments are characteristically explicit and to the point. Moreover, it is rather perplexing that Sartre should end the last chapter of *Being and Nothingness* (prior to the concluding remarks) on such a pessimistic note. Certainly the arguments in *Being and Nothingness* do not prefigure a nihilistic or pessimistic conclusion, but showcase the complex ambiguity of the human condition.

Based on my reading of primary and secondary materials, it is my understanding and belief that with his assertion that '[m]an is a useless passion', Sartre actually wishes to convey an ontological view of human endeavour as something which is fated to be frustrated *ad infinitum*. This may well be, but human frustration does not in any way *necessitate* a conclusion of human futility – a point which is strengthened all the more by Sartre's words: 'It is therefore senseless to think of complaining since nothing foreign has decided what we feel, what we live, or what we are.'<sup>305</sup> Sartre's statement that '[m]an is a useless passion' thus remains partially unfounded, ultimately unresolved, and undeniably ambiguous. Sartre leaves this statement finally open-ended, and its resounding ambiguity is effaced to the background of his ontology while his anti-essentialist arguments for human freedom more typically assume the foreground. As a result, a *prima facie* and elementary reading of Sartrean ontology typically results in the ascription of nihilism to Sartre's thought, since it concludes on what may appear to be a negative note. Yet, Sartre's words '[m]an is a useless passion', within the context of other arguments put forth by him, evoke an ambiguous argumentative residue concerning the future of the human condition, rather than imposing a distinctly nihilistic nuance to his conclusion. This ambiguity leaves one particular resounding question in its wake: can human beings, as being-for-itself, transcend such futility and cease striving towards a kind of existence which it can never attain? Sartre himself actually points to the possibility of such an existential transcendence in his own words:

hitherto although possibles could be chosen and rejected *ad libitum*, the theme which made the unity of all choices of possibles was the value or the ideal presence of the *ens causa sui* [self-cause being, i.e. god]. What will become of freedom if it turns its back upon this value? [i.e. being-in-itself-for-itself] [...] will freedom by the very fact that it apprehends itself as a freedom in relation to itself, be able to put an end to the reign of this value? In particular is it possible for freedom to take itself for a value as the source of all value, or must it necessarily be defined in relation to a transcendent value which haunts it? [...] Or will it situate itself so much the more precisely and the more individually as it projects itself further in anguish as a freedom within conditions and assumes more fully its responsibility as an existent by whom the world comes into being?<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> *BN*, p. 574.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 647.

These final words on the final page of *Being and Nothingness* suggest that Sartre sought a human means-to-meaning which accounts for the manifold implications pertaining to human freedom and responsibility. Whether or not such a means-to-meaning exists or may yet exist in the future of our human reality remains ultimately open-ended in Sartrean thought, though his ontology in *Being and Nothingness* certainly seems to propose at least the latent possibility of precisely such a means-to-meaning. It is important to note that the absolute repudiation of the possibility of human existential meaning would be patently contradictory to Sartrean thought, since the nature of human consciousness as a fundamentally free being *sans* essence or predetermination implies at the very least the perpetual potentiality for a means to existential meaning even in the face of a daunting and often harrowing condemnation of freedom. This is further supported by a virtually optimistic note which Sartre asserts concerning human freedom and its attendant responsibility:

the for-itself must wholly assume this situation with its peculiar coefficient of adversity, even though it is insupportable. He must assume the situation with the *proud* consciousness of being the author of it, for the very worst disadvantages or the worst threats which can endanger my person have *meaning* only in and through my project.<sup>307</sup>

Existential meaning is therefore a constitutive part of our human reality for Sartre, and remains an unassailable possibility, even within an inescapably contingent human existence. Yet, it would seem that Sartre was ultimately uncertain of his position at the end of *Being and Nothingness* as to whether or not our contingent human existence would in fact be *authentically affirmed* on its own ontological grounds, without humanity demanding an eternally elusive being-in-itself-for-itself. On this particular point, Michel Haar writes that:

It would seem that Sartre should thus be led to that nihilism which is the result, according to Nietzsche, of a disappointed belief in an absolute ideal inscribed at the root of things. If, as Sartre says in the last sentence of *Being and Nothingness* before the conclusion, 'man is a useless passion,' is not this a real pessimism, a profound nihilism that says, 'nothing has any meaning'?'<sup>308</sup>

Importantly, however, Haar goes on to add that Sartre ultimately 'seems to reject any nihilistic attitude in order to affirm a humanistic and moralizing activism.'<sup>309</sup> This statement rings true of Sartre's works subsequent to his ontology in *Being and Nothingness*, particularly his published lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*, in which Sartre attempts to extend the individualist discourse of existentialism towards humanity as a whole and beyond a strict individualism of existential meaning; as well as his posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics*, in which Sartre reconceptualizes the possibility of human authenticity and a meaningful human existence.

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<sup>307</sup> *BN*, p. 574. My emphasis.

<sup>308</sup> Haar 1980:185.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3.3.6. Existential Meaning Beyond Sartre's Ontology

In the posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1983), Sartre critically reevaluates the concepts originally developed through his ontology in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre himself calls his ontology into question in a manner that reflects his concern for many of the issues raised here above. In *Notebooks for an Ethics*, it is clear that Sartre seeks to answer the questions posed at the end of *Being and Nothingness*, thereby resolving certain ambiguities in his ontology pertaining to the possibility of a meaningful human existence. In the later work, Sartre no longer spurns the Heideggerian conception of existential authenticity, but rather extends his own original discourse on human existence and its possible meaning(s) to include a conception of human authenticity 'which transcends the dialectic of sincerity and bad faith.'<sup>310</sup> Using his ontology in *Being and Nothingness* as a foundation, Sartre argues in *Notebooks for an Ethics* that an authentic human existence would encompass an existential form of 'pure reflection'<sup>311</sup> on the part of the For-itself. Reflection here refers to a kind of existential accounting-for-one's-existence rather than a kind of rational contemplation. It is, on Sartre's own admission, a kind of 'willing', through which the For-itself 'renounces being as in-itself-for-itself' and thereby regains itself in its existence as a contingent and unjustified, or gratuitous [*de trop*], being-for-itself.<sup>312</sup>

The renunciation of the project of the human god (being-in-itself-for-itself) is precisely the first step to an authentic human existence, or in Sartre's words, 'authenticity consists in refusing any quest for being, because I am always *nothing*.'<sup>313</sup> By engaging in the 'useless passion' of seeking to be god, the For-itself flees from its being-for-itself and its ontological freedom revealed in anguish, and thus partially loses itself in its alienation from the nothingness and freedom which it must be. While it is debatable whether or not the For-itself can entirely resign the pursuit of being-in-itself-for-itself,<sup>314</sup> it is important that Sartre postulates positively that this is at least a possibility manifested on the grounds of an authentic individual human existence. In order, then, to become an authentic being-for-itself, Sartre advocates in favour of what he calls 'conversion'. For Sartre, conversion is motivated by the possibility of an authentic human existence in which the For-itself may be sated even in its fundamental insatiability as an ontological lack.<sup>315</sup> That is, in seeking an authentic existence, the For-itself affirms the fact that all substance and foundation to its existence remains a perpetually deferred impossibility. Through the process of conversion, the For-itself no

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<sup>310</sup> *NE*, p. 474.

<sup>311</sup> 'Pure reflection', as opposed to everyday 'impure' reflection, is already described earlier in *BN*, pp. 177-178: 'Pure reflection, the simple presence of the reflective for-itself to the for-itself reflected-on, is at once the original form of reflection and its ideal form; it is that on whose foundation impure reflection appears, it is that also which is never first *given*; and it is that which must be won by a sort of katharsis.' For more on this, see *BN*, pp. 178-193.

<sup>312</sup> *NE*, p. 479.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 475.

<sup>314</sup> See: Zheng 2002; Rae 2009:69; and *NE*, p. 37: 'The pursuit of Being is hell. Failure may lead to conversion. It may also be negated by bad faith.'

<sup>315</sup> *NE*, p. 470.

longer seeks to be its own foundation, but understands that all projects, whether fertile or futile, are conducted from the spring of its fundamental freedom: 'Through conversion we grasp ourselves as unjustifiable. At the same time, we grasp the freedom in us and we establish a new relation of the For-itself to its project'.<sup>316</sup>

From this it follows, for Sartre, that human consciousness will no longer direct itself towards the interminably impossible and forever frustrating pursuit of being god, but will supplant this futile existential end with freedom itself.<sup>317</sup> Freedom, and the creative potential encapsulated therein, will become the *purpose* of human existence post-conversion, and the *meaning* of human existence will accord with an authentic affirmation of being-for-itself. One might say that consciousness undergoes a conversion from pursuing being-in-itself-for-itself to truly being-its-freedom, which is a conversion from 'a useless passion' to a creative and affirmative '*Passion*'.<sup>318</sup> It is through pure reflection, or a freely constituted individual will-to-authenticity, that human consciousness comes to confront, comprehend, and confirm its fundamental ontological freedom.<sup>319</sup> In authentic, pure reflection, the For-itself recognizes itself in its fundamental freedom, and thereby displaces its pursuit for the synthetic unity of Being (viz. being-in-itself-for-itself) with the pursuit of its incomplete, non-unified being-for-itself; it renounces the ideal of coinciding with itself, and adopts the contingent purpose of *according with itself* as a being-for-itself.<sup>320</sup> In this way, the For-itself no longer flees its anguished freedom in bad faith, but constantly *becomes* this freedom through a life-affirming, active re-appropriation of itself in terms of its free, yet incomplete, existence.

This existential conversion to an affirmation of one's radical freedom through pure reflection transmutes humanity's *condemnation of freedom* into a personal freedom of creativity and action. Through its subjective and creative *activity*, the For-itself 'unveils' and 'manifests' the meaning of Being.<sup>321</sup> Because the For-itself no longer seeks to *be* that which it *is not*, but rather is able to affirm its own freedom as a being *qua* nothingness, it can further affirm its singular and subjective 'point of view' on the meaning of existence as an 'absolute contingency' that requires no further justification beyond itself for it to be accorded existential value. Through conversion, the For-itself no longer seeks to be anything but its own nothingness, which is to say that it no longer decries the 'contingent, finite, ephemeral, and subjective' nature of its existence, but affirms its existence on precisely such terms. The For-itself thus reflectively understands that 'if it decides that Being has a meaning, Being will have a meaning *for the For-itself*'.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> *NE*, p. 508.

<sup>317</sup> Rae 2009:66, 69.

<sup>318</sup> *NE*, p. 482.

<sup>319</sup> Rae 2009:66. *NE*, p. 470, 474, 508.

<sup>320</sup> *NE*, p. 478.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 485.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*

Sartre further posits the positive proclamation that ‘since the For-itself is an absolute/subject it is absolutely certain that Being will have a meaning.’<sup>323</sup> Human beings, following conversion, come to affirm their own point of view as the subjective meaning(s) of existence, and cease the search for an absolute or transcendent point of view beyond our human reality.<sup>324</sup> Sartre also posits what might be thought of as a pragmatic dimension to human meaning in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, by situating meaning in concrete human activity rather than in abstract transcendentalism or metaphysics. Sartre straightforwardly asserts that it is by active participation in-the-world, and through a creative engagement with the world as one’s fundamental project, that the For-itself can truly become authentic: ‘Authenticity reveals that the only meaningful project is that of *doing* (not that of being)’.<sup>325</sup> Sartre accentuates this fact by stating emphatically and plainly that to create and to act ‘is to posit that Being has a meaning’, since through such human activity, in which consciousness is directed towards freedom as its most important end, ‘Being unveils itself as endowed with meaning.’<sup>326</sup> That is, once the For-itself understands itself in its fundamental freedom, it concomitantly grasps itself as responsible for the unveiling and manifesting of the meaning of Being through its life-affirming activity and creativity.

Moreover, in Sartre’s view in *Notebooks for an Ethics*, an authentic human existence entails that human beings manifest themselves and the meaning(s) of existence in ‘three directions’, namely: affirmation, creation, and action.<sup>327</sup> By means of his subtle shift in emphasis from a human preoccupation with *Being* (in-itself-for-itself) to a wilful concern with *doing* (acting and creating), Sartre successfully circumvents a conception of existential meaning rooted in the traditional Western philosophical logic of Being over becoming. In renouncing the transcendental absolute, and ceasing my striving towards myself as an absolute being, I can fully affirm the meaning of my existence from my creative point of view, through my conscious activity, and in my own terms. Conversion is thus a ‘source of joy’ insofar as humanity ‘stops deploring its underlying structure’ by reflecting upon its nothingness as the productive fountainhead of its freedom.<sup>328</sup> Sartre writes:

Subjectivity appears as an unveiling act. Existential vertigo: the project [being-for-itself] appears to reflection in its absolute gratuity [*de trop*]. But since reflection *wills* it, it is recaptured. Except it is recaptured as absolute and a totality without ceasing to be gratuitous. It is this double simultaneous aspect of the human project, gratuitous at its core and consecrated by a reflective reprise, that makes it into authentic existence.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> *NE*, p. 485.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 489.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 475.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 486.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 508.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 491. One might compare this with Nietzsche’s conception of the will to power, and how, by means of existential affirmation, the will to power might undergo a transmutation from the negative to the positive.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 481.

Sartre's words above indicate that if humanity could find a means to affirm this kind of being that we *are* through a 'reflective reprise' and an authentic existential 'conversion', then there may yet be hope for a human future in which individuals live authentically in accordance with their fundamental freedom, as ultimately unjustified and incomplete beings who nevertheless live meaningful lives. A point that can be drawn from Sartre's above account is that the human condition, though often interpreted as bleak and without reprieve, is neither *inherently* positive nor *inherently* negative, but simply *is*. It is *my, your, and our* human condition, and it is only through conscious human interpretation that this condition could be rendered good or ill, meaningful or meaningless. As argued extensively above, the meaning of human existence is an attribution derived from conscious human activity, not a property inhering in a non-human reality situated somewhere beyond *this* human reality *hic et nunc*. This point is further reinforced by Sartre's words: 'It is certain that human-reality, by whom the quality of being a world comes to the real, can not [*sic*] encounter the non-human; the very concept of the non-human is man's concept.'<sup>330</sup> Hence, when searching for the meaning of existence, human beings discover only themselves.

Upon considering *Being and Nothingness* in conjunction with even a cursory consideration of Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics*, it is apparent that Sartre arrives at a critical interpretation of his own work which parallels some of the critical engagements demonstrated in my arguments above, viz. that human consciousness may well *become* a useless passion, yet, human existence as such does not *necessitate* that it *be* thus. In fact, in Sartre's own terms, it is not possible that contingent human conduct or human nature could be the product of strict unwavering logical or metaphysical necessity. Human consciousness, at once a situated facticity and transcendence,<sup>331</sup> should at least *potentially* be able to transcend its futility by affirming the kind of being *qua* becoming which it *is*, rather than striving towards a kind of being which it is uselessly desirous of being. Or, as Stevenson phrases it: 'If bad faith is not only possible, but common, presumably it is equally possible (even if rarer and more difficult) reflectively to *affirm* one's own freedom.'<sup>332</sup> Christine Daigle highlights the central problem of the inauthentic and futile pursuit of the For-itself towards being-in-itself-for-itself: 'when I say that I *am*, I am missing my own being as one that constantly makes itself. To put it differently, by claiming to have a static being (I am), I am denying that I am a dynamic being (I become) who makes itself via its actions.'<sup>333</sup> Clearly, then, being-for-itself, conceived and desired in the form of any being-in-itself, would be disingenuous to being-for-itself. As a fundamentally free individual human being, I am *strictly unrestricted* in my own existence, formally unfettered, since, ontologically speaking, I *am* what I *am not* and I *am not* what I *am*.

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<sup>330</sup> *BN*, p. 554.

<sup>331</sup> For further treatment of the development of these terms in Sartre's later works, see Busch 2011:193-200.

<sup>332</sup> Stevenson 1983:258.

<sup>333</sup> Daigle 2010:64. See also: *BN*, p. 82: 'we make ourselves what we are'.

### 3.3.7. Critical Appraisal of a Sartrean Means-to-Meaning(s)

Following from the above, one might accept the chief arguments in favour of human freedom in Sartrean ontology while denouncing Sartre's virtually fatalistic conclusion of existential futility in his assertion that '[m]an is a useless passion'. Importantly, the Sartrean conception of freedom and human responsibility *does* allow humanity a means of overcoming the need for an absolute conception of existential meaning, specifically by emphasizing that contingency is fundamentally entailed in our human existence as both a facticity and a transcendence. The corollary to human fundamental freedom, however, is the existential burden, or condemnation of freedom, implied by such an existence. According to Sartre, it is this condemnation of freedom, revealed in anguish, that human beings do their utmost to avoid by resorting to 'bad faith' or the 'spirit of seriousness'. Human beings in 'bad faith' or in subscription to the 'spirit of seriousness' have not yet properly grasped what it means to be a fundamentally free human being. Human individuals must thus learn to fully assimilate their radical ontological freedom and responsibility by recognizing their singular role as the makers of the meaning of existence.

Sartre's ontology in *Being and Nothingness* implicitly suggests that if we, as human beings, position ourselves so as to acknowledge our radical freedom and responsibility, then we might also be in a position to acknowledge, and possibly even affirm, the inexorable contingency of any meaning that we might ascribe to existence. However, in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre does not yet fully realize that humanity need not decry its inescapable contingency, but should, as an imperative, find a means-to-meaning by *affirming* our contingent human condition. As has been shown above, this is a point which Sartre directly acknowledges in his later *Notebooks for an Ethics*. This is a significant point in interpreting Sartrean existentialist philosophy, because if one believes that such a thing as absolute meaning must exist for human life to be meaningful, then Sartre's conclusions about contingency in *Being and Nothingness* could well be interpreted as nihilistic. Contrariwise, if one subscribes to the notion that the contingency of human existence need not be measured against an absolutely necessary metaphysical standpoint, then there is no reason nor need to decry our fate as human individuals thrown into an entirely contingent existence. On the latter view, the contingency of human existence would simply describe our state of affairs, or the human condition as it *is* – something with which we would undoubtedly need to contend, but not something which we need to decry in a fatalistic fashion. As Scott writes: 'For Sartre, the aim to be on the part of human existence finds its fulfilment in a living acceptance of how it has to be.'<sup>334</sup>

Given that human existence is ultimately devoid of rhyme or reason and thus gratuitous [*de trop*], Sartre suggests that a movement towards authentically affirming our human existence would

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<sup>334</sup> Scott 1981:294.

entail a 'consciousness of gratuitousness',<sup>335</sup> or what I designate as a *cognizance of contingency*. In accordance with such a cognizance, human beings might learn not merely to abide, endure, or suffer their contingency and finitude, but to affirm it and, if possible, play and revel in it. The For-itself 'must love [its] gratuitousness as an *a priori* condition of its existence and of the salvation of being' for the simple and inexorable fact that 'the contingency of consciousness thrown into the midst of Being is a condition of its freedom.'<sup>336</sup> Therefore, in order to affirm my human freedom, and further affirm the meaning that I make of my existence on the grounds of such freedom, I must first affirm the ontological fact that I am ultimately a contingent and gratuitous being.

A *cognizance of contingency* entails the understanding that the facticity of our human affairs – including our condemnation of freedom and our ultimately unjustified existence – is not to be lamented, suffered, or mourned, but is rather a state of affairs which we can claim authentically as distinctly our *own*. Therefore, if I seek to be authentic, which is to be living in accordance with the freedom and responsibility implicated in being-for-itself, then I should not *be* a futile passion, but *become* an existentially affirming being-for-itself, by understanding that I have to take up my undeniably contingent and gratuitous existence and freely make it *my own* meaningful project.<sup>337</sup> It is therefore incumbent upon human beings to make meaning manifest precisely *from* the contingency of Being rather than in opposition thereto. As Thomas Anderson argues:

No human can cause herself or her world to be necessary. No human can create a meaning and justification for the world that would make it exist by right rather than by chance. In a word, no human can be God [although, as we have seen, this is what the for-itself desires]. However, this should pose no insurmountable problem, for after all, human beings are the only source of meaning in Sartre's universe, and a thoroughly human meaning can be given to one's creation. The authentic person recognizes and wills to do precisely this. [...] The authentic person gives her life meaning (*sens*) and value by accepting and affirming herself as the free creator of a meaningful world.<sup>338</sup>

On an additional note, a *cognizance of contingency* does not necessarily bespeak an anti-religious view, nor does it inherently prescribe a secular atheism which advocates an unwavering belief that metaphysical transcendence resides on the remote outskirts of possibility. A *cognizance of contingency* could not necessitate or suggest anything of the sort, since a necessary conception of a meaningful human life would not accord with our nature as fundamentally free, non-determined beings, who determine the meaning of their own lives on a contingent basis. A *cognizance of contingency* does, however, require that human beings can concede the non-absolute and non-necessary dimension of their beliefs, and even the possible erroneousness of the doctrines or

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<sup>335</sup> *NE*, p. 493.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 492.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>338</sup> Anderson 1993:58

beliefs upon which their existential meaning is based. For instance, a *cognizance of contingency* would not necessarily imply an outright disbelief in god's existence, but does require an *openness* to possibilities that are not encompassed in one's own beliefs. This might include the *possibility* that god might not exist, but one would still be *free to choose* to believe in such a metaphysical entity or not. The emphatic principle operating here is that of human *choice*: a belief is a choice of one's fundamental freedom, and not something that somehow supersedes and supervenes upon human freedom. Therefore, one must at least concede that one's conception of a meaningful life, i.e. one's worldview, is not necessarily *absolutely* justified or *universally* meaningful.

If there is no absolute existential meaning within a contingent human life, then one's worldview and existential meaning cannot be afforded such grandiose ascriptions. In this view, because beliefs are conceived as a choice and founded upon freedom, a *cognizance of contingency* renders human individuals responsible for their beliefs, and their actions stemming from such beliefs, which furthermore fosters an openness to the fallibility and finitude of one's personal conceptions of existential meaning. A *cognizance of contingency* thus establishes an openness to the world and to others inasmuch as it allows human individuals to account for the fact that their personal conceptions of existential meaning, though singular and worthy of consideration, are finally subject to contingency rather than metaphysical necessity. Following this, human individuals can move from the absolutism of previous historical accounts of existential meaning, as given in Christianity and Platonism for instance, and move towards a being-in-the-world with multiple possible meanings, all subject to the same inexorable contingency of our human condition. This opens up human thought to an *otherness of meaning*, or the view that the meaning of existence may also come from a source beyond one's own consciousness; life may have infinitely many meanings, as rendered by different human beings from different walks of life. In this way, humanity may hope to move from the meaning of life to the more manifold *meaning(s) of life*.<sup>339</sup>

One can glean from Sartrean thought the idea that human beings can shape the meaning(s) of existence in the contemporary world by learning to affirm our human condition, and all the ontological entailments thereof. Humanity's pursuit of existential meaning will profit infinitely from an understanding that life has infinitely many meanings, in accordance with our non-deterministic potentiality as individuals who are neither predetermined nor necessarily or strictly speaking 'a useless passion'. Life has as many meanings as we can render through our choices, values, actions, and creativity. However, if we nonetheless obstinately pursue the self-identical unity of being-in-itself-for itself (i.e. god), or in any way attempt to be something absolutely disparate from being-for-itself, then we alone are responsible and suffer the frustration that such self-deceiving dispositions of bad faith yield. In such instances of bad faith, we deny ourselves as

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<sup>339</sup> This idea will be explored more extensively in Chapter IV through the philosophy of Nancy.

being-for-itself, and thus willingly assume the self-contradictory role as perpetrators of our own futile passion, because we seek to be that which human consciousness is *not*, viz. a *thing*: definite, complete, whole, unequivocal. Contrariwise, if we engage in a *cognizance of contingency*, then we can perpetually *become* beings who affirm the fact that we are completely contingent, and inescapably incomplete – ‘a detotalized totality’.<sup>340</sup> One might therefore concur with Charles E. Scott: ‘For Sartre, ontology rightfully leads to undeceived activity, which I believe may be taken to be a type of enlightenment.’<sup>341</sup> Moreover, Sartrean ontology lends itself to ‘an interpretation of how things occur that may allow us to see at a distance how human being is to be fulfilled.’<sup>342</sup>

It follows from a *cognizance of contingency* that there is nothing to lament in our being-for-itself other than our flawed and failed attempts at a meaningful existence through recourse to absolutism, dogmatism, and transcendentalism. What Sartrean philosophy reveals is the insight that humankind is only a useless passion if we repudiate our contingency in ‘bad faith’ with our ontological freedom, while seeking an entirely necessary or absolute meaning to Being. Sartre allows humanity to come to terms with the contemporary fact that, following the death of god, our human transcendence remains a *finite* transcendence, and requires, in Nietzschean terms, *transvaluation*, such that we no longer seek to transcend this world or this existence, but only ourselves. It is further arguable that Sartrean existentialism is delineating a nuanced variant of the proto-existentialist thinking espoused in Nietzschean philosophy. This is not to say by any means that Sartre is simply plagiarizing Nietzschean thought, but rather that Sartre is formulating a conception of authentic human existence that parallels Nietzsche’s formulation, and therefore fulfils certain goals and visions set out by Nietzsche in his proposed ‘philosophy of the future’. Specifically, one might draw a comparison between the Sartrean conception of the For-itself and the Nietzschean *Übermensch* [Overman].<sup>343</sup>

The *Übermensch* is the kind of being who constantly overcomes or *transcends* itself and thereby renders its existence meaningful in creative ways through its assertion of its will to power as an aesthetic means-to-meaning. Yet, the Nietzschean *Übermensch* never finally obtains a perfect unity within itself or a final meaning for its existence, since human existence is a constant *striving* without the possibility of such absolute attainment – a fact which only the *Übermensch* is able to acknowledge and fully affirm. Similarly, as a facticity and a transcendence, the Sartrean For-itself constantly surpasses itself and its situation, and, by means of an existential *conversion* in which the For-itself takes proper stock of itself and its existence via pure reflection, the For-itself is able to affirm a wholly contingent existence in a responsible and authentic manner that accords with

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<sup>340</sup> *BN*, p. 618.

<sup>341</sup> Scott, 1981:286.

<sup>342</sup> Scott, 1981:286.

<sup>343</sup> A comparison that is indirectly alluded to by Christine Daigle 2010:54-55.

its fundamental freedom. Akin to the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, the For-itself renders its existence meaningful through its transcendence. Through *phenomenological transcendence* the For-itself transcends itself towards that which it is *not*, viz. being-in-itself, and renders meaning where it would otherwise not manifest. Through *existential transcendence*, which is also a *temporal transcendence*, the For-itself transcends the immediacy of its situation in a choice of its personal existential project, indicative of a meaningful future held on the horizon of its present existence.

Much like the *Übermensch*, the For-itself 'decides its own meaning because it is always in suspense; it possesses essentially a power of self-criticism and self-metamorphosis which causes it to define itself as a "not-yet" or, if you like, makes it be as the changing of what it is.'<sup>344</sup> It might be said that when one raises the possibility of the transcendence and conversion of the Sartrean For-itself, one simultaneously raises the possibility of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. Both the Nietzschean *Übermensch* and the Sartrean For-itself (post-conversion) might constantly improve on their existential meaning, even though ultimate meaning and absolute being-in-itself-for-itself remain unrealizable for human beings. As the arguments above demonstrate, the For-itself is not necessarily 'a useless passion', but may to the same degree of possibility become a being who affirms its existence *qua* nothingness by interminably *transcending* or *overcoming* its implacable desire and futile pursuit toward godliness. Sartrean thought thus reveals that existential meaning is not, and indeed need not be, in any way reliant upon transcendental qualification any longer.

Following in the wake of the death of god, as Nietzsche proclaimed it, this may be our human means-to-meaning henceforth: when humanity ceases its search for the absolute or ultimate aim, purpose, or meaning of human existence, we may (re)discover, (re)define, and (re)affirm ourselves as the creative and responsible makers of existential meaning. As Nietzsche and Sartre both indicate in their respective philosophies, transcendental qualification is not a necessary condition for contemporary human existential meaning, especially given the human condition in contemporary secular society, in which the transcendent and absolute are no longer demanded or required to the same extent as in the past. Human ontological freedom might therefore be viewed as a fundamental foundation to a contemporary means-to-meaning insofar as it stands beyond a metaphysical logic that seeks to revive the dead god(s) of existential meaning through absolutism or transcendentalism. To bear responsibility for one's freedom as a meaning-maker and a vital valuator of existence is what it means to be an authentic human individual henceforth. From this vantage point, the existential pursuit of the meaning of our existence within a fractured, fragmented, and wholly contingent existence is perhaps not a condemnation to futility, but rather, humanity's most enduring and endearing endeavour.

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<sup>344</sup> *BN*, pp. 563-564.

In kinship with the existential self-determination found in Nietzschean thought, Sartre is describing the fact that the meaning of existence has actually always been a human construct, yet humanity have heretofore veiled and denied our human, all too human role as meaning-makers through recourse to transcendental ideals, instead of consciously acknowledging our role as meaning-makers and accepting the attendant responsibilities thereof. Following in the wake of the death of god, we are therefore in no exceedingly worse human condition than we have ever been in our human history; and human existential meaning can perhaps finally be understood for what it harbours: the contingent condition of being-for-itself. One might justifiably agree with Hazel E. Barnes, who asserts that: 'despite all the emphasis on forlornness, nausea, and despair, Sartre envisions human life as creative process, a free bestowing of meaning where there would otherwise be chaos.'<sup>345</sup> Sartrean existentialism, while often denoting tones of pessimism, certainly does not strictly have to be interpreted in a nihilistic manner. Wang asserts this point appositely:

We have to seek further values and project ourselves into a newly constituted future. This is why it is inappropriate to think that Sartre's ontology is pessimistic. If it is impossible for human beings to find ultimate happiness in a perfect synthesis [of consciousness with being], it is equally impossible for us to meet irrevocable *failure* in our projects. We *always* have the chance, and indeed the necessity, of going beyond and building something new.<sup>346</sup>

### 3.4. Existential Meaning & the Sartrean 'Other'

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It is clear from the above account of Sartrean existentialism that the existential pursuit of meaning is an individual endeavour which is often frustrated but never wholly futile. Humanity has ingress to existential meaning through recourse to themselves as individual agents shaping their own unique destiny in accord with their fundamental freedom and responsibility. One might question, however, whether or not such a conception of existential meaning remains limited to the individual sphere without influence from the inter-individual or social sphere. One should, therefore, perhaps pause to reflect on the nature of a human life whose meaning is circumscribed within an individual domain, and ask whether the Nietzschean and Sartrean existentialist hero – or that individual who accounts for the freedom and responsibility of his or her own existence – is finally isolated in their individual conception of existential meaning. This immediately appears improbable since human beings never inhabit the world by themselves alone; the world is always already a shared world, and therefore, existential meaning is always already a partially shared formation which cannot be isolated or sundered from the social sphere in a strictly atomistic fashion. In what follows, Sartre's subjectivist account of existential meaning will be explored in terms of its social implications.

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<sup>345</sup> Barnes 1973:17

<sup>346</sup> Wang 2006:8.

### 3.4.1. Sartrean Subjectivism

Sartre asserts that 'being is an individual venture',<sup>347</sup> and from this premise, sketches a subjectivist account of existential meaning. This is further evinced most emphatically in Sartre's assertion that 'a meaning can come only from subjectivity.'<sup>348</sup> Contrary to the more commonplace reading of Sartrean existentialism as a subjectivist account, Iddo Landau offers an objectivist reading of Sartrean thought on existential meaning. According to Landau, 'Sartre is a subjectivist as regards our values – he thinks that people are completely free to choose the meaning of their lives and that there are no justifications or objective criteria on which they can rely – he is an objectivist as regards the meaning of life.'<sup>349</sup> In Landau's reading of Sartrean ontology, Sartre is positing an objectivist account of existential meaning inasmuch as he 'does not think that we are free to choose *whether* our lives are meaningful; our lives are meaningless because our choices cannot be ultimately justified, and there is nothing we can do about it.'<sup>350</sup> Consequently, Landau interprets Sartrean philosophy on existential meaning as ultimately pessimistic: if there exists no objective criterion for existential meaning, then life must be ultimately meaningless.

To be sure, there are aspects of Sartrean thought which may support Landau's interpretation. For instance, Sartre's view that human existence is gratuitous [*de trop*] because it can never be ultimately justified by anything beyond our human reality partially complements Landau's view. For Sartre, '[c]onsciousness is gratuitous because it is not its own foundation and because it is contingent'.<sup>351</sup> Humanity's thrownness into its existence thus entails an encounter with ourselves as an excess that cannot be fully accounted for. Strangely, then, the upsurge of the For-itself into Being simultaneously introduces both an ontological *lack* and an *excess* into Being: humanity lacks the self-identical unity of being-in-itself, and exceeds all explanation and justification. Yet, one must pay careful attention to what this specifically means in Sartrean thought, namely, that human existence cannot be *ultimately* justified, and therefore existential meaning remains contingent rather than necessary in any metaphysical sense. Importantly, however, this fact in no way precludes the possibility of subjective existential meaning(s).

Landau is partially correct in identifying the fact that Sartre is contrasting subjective human meaning with an objective criterion for its valuation and ultimate validation. Yet, for Sartre, humanity must learn to live with its gratuitous existence and render subjective meaning for a life which cannot be objectively justified beyond our human conscious experience of the world *hic et nunc*. To be sure, Sartre does indeed assert quite unequivocally that human existence is *absurd*,<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> *BN*, p. 639.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 559.

<sup>349</sup> Landau 2012:4

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>351</sup> *NE*, p. 491.

<sup>352</sup> *BN*, p. 501.

which is to say *objectively* meaningless, since ‘life has no meaning *a priori*’.<sup>353</sup> In Sartre’s view, the objective criterion for existential meaning has passed into obscurity with the death of god, and following this, all existential emphasis shifts towards human individuals as the sole arbiters of existential meaning in a purely contingent sense. Humanity might lament the fact that no objective criterion for the meaning of life exists, yet Sartre nevertheless advocates that humanity must assume an unmitigated *responsibility* for the fact that we are now the sole subjective makers of our own existential meaning.

To call Sartre an objectivist as concerns existential meaning is therefore erroneous, since Sartre’s existentialist emphasis is rooted squarely in the subjective dimension of existential meaning. Landau indeed admits that Sartre is a subjectivist regarding our values, but does not recognize that human valuation always already implies meaning, inasmuch as the creation of subjective values suggests a participation in a particular conception of a meaningful existence. The question which Landau needs to address in this regard is: why would human individuals establish their own subjective values if not to render their lives more meaningful, even if only in a subjective sense? Sartre’s point is, therefore, that meaning is always already implied in all human action(s) and values since human consciousness is, by virtue of its being-for-itself, always already entailed in meaning-making. Life might not possess the possibility of an objective or absolute meaning, but Sartre argues that individual human beings still have the freedom and responsibility to choose whether that brute fact renders their *particular* lives meaningful or meaningless.

Contrary to Landau, then, I argue that the individual human being always already makes the subjective decision on *whether* their life is meaningful or meaningless, by virtue of implicit rather than explicit choices. Landau seems to assume that human beings cannot make an *explicit* choice of *whether* their lives are meaningful or not, since human existence in an objective sense is inherently meaningless when it is without exogenous qualification. Yet, for Sartre, existential meaning is a choice that is made *implicitly* through individual existential projects and actions, and not by means of an abstract choice predicated on an objective measure of meaning. It is further arguable that one cannot truly *choose* a meaningless life, since such a choice itself already suggests the subjective ascription of meaning to existence,<sup>354</sup> and ultimately, in Sartre’s view, one cannot choose not to choose.<sup>355</sup> Therefore, any individual human choice made concerning their existence is necessarily a choice for existential meaning and not meaninglessness, since human beings need to live with some sense of a meaningful life. Following this, I assert, *contra* Landau’s view, that Sartre is a subjectivist as concerns existential meaning.

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<sup>353</sup> *EH*, p. 51.

<sup>354</sup> This is a point which Nancy (*BSP*, p. 1) also demonstrates, as will be discussed in Chapter IV.

<sup>355</sup> *BN*, p. 503.

### 3.4.2. Sartre on the Social Dimension of Existential Meaning

Sartre's account of existential meaning is deliberately subjective and individualist in that it emphatically focuses on the role of the individual in the determination of the meaning of existence. But is Sartre an individualist in the sense that he prescribes that meaning is the province of the existential individual *alone*? Is there occasion in Sartre's subjectivist account of existential meaning for inter-subjective, social, or communal existential meaning(s)? Is the For-itself, in its capacity as a being-towards-meaning, not also a being-with-Others or even a being-for-Others? Sartre addresses these concerns directly in *Being and Nothingness*, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, and *Notebooks for an Ethics*, by factoring into his subjectivist account the social dimension of human existence, and the implications thereof concerning existential meaning. One must consider whether his responses in these texts are appropriate for a conception of existential meaning in our contemporary world, which is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes a third mode of Being into which he factors the social dimension of existence *qua being-for-Others* [*être-pour-autrui*]. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre counters some of the criticism levelled at his phenomenological ontology by extending existentialism from the individual sphere to humankind in its entirety. And in his unfinished *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Sartre offers a preliminary sketch of the possibility for authentic social relations where existential meaning may be shared between beings. In this subsection of this chapter each of these respective formulations will be considered in turn.

Sartre's investigation in *Being and Nothingness* turns towards the Other through the acknowledgement that our human reality is not a strictly isolated individual reality: 'Within one and the same upsurge the being of human reality must be for-itself-for-others'.<sup>356</sup> Sartre is certainly not blind to the significant ontological fact of the existence of other human beings in-the-world. On more than one occasion in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explicitly refutes the solipsistic argument of an isolated individual realm of Being and meaning,<sup>357</sup> by describing relations between beings on the ontological ground of *existence* rather than on an epistemic ground of *knowledge*. That is, in Sartre's view, we can relate to others in terms of their existence inasmuch as it overlaps and confronts our own, yet we cannot have *knowledge* of the being-for-itself of the Other since this is held at a distance by an 'ontological separation': 'In short the *for-itself* as for-itself can not [*sic*] be known by the Other.'<sup>358</sup> This ontological relation between human beings is what Sartre designates as *being-for-Others*: I exist not merely for myself but *for* Others, and in terms of Others. This further suggests that my existence can have meaning *for* the Other: a meaning determined from without; a meaning given to my existence without originating in my own being-for-itself.

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<sup>356</sup> *BN*, p. 241.

<sup>357</sup> See: *Ibid.*, pp. 247-256 ('The Reef of Solipsism') & pp. 16-23 ('The Ontological Proof').

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 266-267.

This meaning, externally ascribed to my existence by, and for, the Other, is derived from my being a For-itself in the mode of *being-for-others*. There thus exists an inter-subjective dimension to human existential meaning which Sartre explicates as follows:

To live in a world haunted by my neighbor is not only to be able to encounter the Other at every turn of the road; it is also to find myself engaged in a world in which instrumental-complexes can have a meaning which my free project has not first given them. It means also that in the midst of this world *already* provided with meaning I meet with a meaning which is *mine* and which I have not given to myself, which I discover that I 'possess already.' [...] There exists, in fact, something in 'my' world other than a plurality of possible meanings; there exist objective meanings which are given to me as not having been brought to light by me. I, by whom meanings come to things, I find myself engaged in an *already meaningful* world which reflects to me meanings which I have not put into it.<sup>359</sup>

Existential meaning is therefore always *mine* and always already Other to me, since I am the maker of the meaning of the world but I do not inhabit this world as a being-for-itself by myself alone, in a solitary and isolated existence. I exist *with* Others and my being can and must also be *for* Others. Following this, I recognize that existential meaning can arise from my free choices and projects as well as those of Others. I possess the capacity to appear as a being-in-the-world for-others just as they appear to me in that same capacity. With the upsurge of the Other in conjunction with the upsurge of my being-for-itself, the meaning of my existence, as determined by me, is no longer guaranteed. This idea is most appositely articulated in Sartre's famous assertion that 'Hell is other people',<sup>360</sup> and is exemplified in Sartre's famous account of 'The Look' of the Other.

### 3.4.3. Meaning in Conflict: 'The Look' of the Other

In being-for-others, I experience my existence ecstatically inasmuch as I see myself *for* the Other. Being-for-others thus effectuates an additional ekstasis in which I exist (ek-sist) outside of myself in the capacity of a self through the eyes of the Other, or a self-for-others. Through the eyes of the Other, I experience what Sartre calls 'The Look',<sup>361</sup> in which I am removed from my isolated existence, and immersed into a world where the Other confronts me as an external fact of my existence in-the-world. I realize that I am not, nor ever was, ontologically speaking, an isolated For-itself, and therefore not the exclusive being who solely and wholly determines the meaning of my existence for my myself alone. In The Look of the Other, I *am* what the Other makes of my being; the meaning of my existence temporarily escapes me, or rather, is purloined from me and made in excess of my freely determined existence: 'my vital substance, my freedom, flows out of me from the wound made by the other's eyes, which are reorganizing the world without me.'<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> *BN*, p. 531.

<sup>360</sup> Taken from Sartre's play *Huis Clos* [No Exit].

<sup>361</sup> *BN*, pp. 276-326.

<sup>362</sup> Haar 1980:179.

In The Look I become aware of what I am for the Other, not merely what I am for myself, and in this process ‘the world flows out of the world and I flow outside of myself’,<sup>363</sup> while my existential meaning moves beyond me, outside of my subjective sphere of influence. In The Look, I experience an existential encumbrance; an impassable, confrontational ‘ex-centric limit’<sup>364</sup> to my freedom, which is the very freedom of the Other in their existence *qua* For-itself. Sartre states it thus:

freedom can be limited only by freedom. Its limitation as internal finitude [in being-for-itself] stems from the *fact* that it can not [*sic*] not-be freedom – that is, it is condemned to be free; its limitation as external freedom [in being-for-others] stems from the *fact* that being freedom, it *is* for other freedoms, freedoms which freely apprehend it [the For-itself, or my being] in the light of their own ends.<sup>365</sup>

The eyes of the Other thus represent a perpetually potential uprooting of the meaning I have freely fashioned of my existence, because in The Look, I at once encounter ‘the hidden death’ and ‘subtle alienation’ of the existential possibilities<sup>366</sup> rooted in my fundamental freedom, and to which my meaning remains fettered. For Sartre, the Other therefore threatens the meaning of my existence, since the Other transforms my free being-for-itself into a being-in-itself, over which my freedom has no reign.<sup>367</sup> For-the-Other, I become an enclosed being with a particular essence and meaning. The Other, as a For-itself in its own right, is simultaneously confronted by my individual existence in-the-world, and therefore makes of my being-for-itself a being-in-itself so as to make of itself the interpreter of the meaning of this being that I am. The meaning of *my* world is thus partly lost in The Look, and it becomes a *meaning in conflict* with the Other; a militant meaning that remains suspended beyond my subjectivity. Central to Sartre’s account of inter-subjectivity in *Being and Nothingness* is the view that, in being-for-others, I encounter the Other not merely as a benign entity, but in a relation of *conflict*.<sup>368</sup> In The Look, the meaning of my existence is *for* the Other on the basis of *their* fundamental freedom, which is at odds with my own radical ontological freedom to create meaning for myself, and by myself. For Sartre, consciousnesses thus experience each other in *conflict*, rather than in *concert*. Sartre summarizes this contentious view as follows:

It is therefore useless for human-reality to seek to get out of this dilemma: one must either transcend the Other or allow oneself to be transcended by him. The essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the *Mitsein* [being-with]; it is conflict.<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> *BN*, p. 285.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 546.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 451: ‘This petrification in in-itself by the Other’s look is the profound meaning of the myth of Medusa.’

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 268-269. Sartre emphasizes quite unequivocally that being-for-others entails a relation of interminable conflict between consciousnesses and not a relation of mutual recognition. In fact, Sartre goes so far as to assert that ‘existence-for-others is a radical refusal of the Other, no totalitarian and unifying synthesis of “Others” is possible.’ (*BN*, p. 276). This is contrary to Hegel’s conception, whose conception of a fight to the death between consciousnesses finally synthesizes into a relation of mutual recognition. See also: Haar 1980:177.

<sup>369</sup> *BN*, p. 451. See also: p. 533.

Sartre undermines the presupposition of Heideggerian ontology<sup>370</sup> that 'being-with' [*Mitsein*] is formative of the ontological constitution of the human being [*Dasein*].<sup>371</sup> *Contra* Heidegger, Sartre asserts that a positive and meaningful ontological relation of being-with is rendered ultimately untenable by the inexorable conflict entailed in being-for-others. It becomes apparent, then, that Sartre's conception of inter-subjective human relations in *Being and Nothingness* is largely negative, which inevitably does not bode well for the inter-subjective or social dimension of existential meaning. The existence of the Other not only establishes a dialectical struggle to the death for conscious recognition between human beings, as Hegel would have it, but brings to bear on Being a conflict of meaning that remains ultimately unresolved.

Sartre's conception of being-for-others as a relation of conflicting meaning(s) makes all the more sense if one considers Sartre's notion that the For-itself is in pursuit of the human god *qua* being-in-itself-for-itself, since this implies that each For-itself desires to *reign alone* as the supreme human god who determines the meaning(s) of Being. If two consciousnesses seek to be god, then conflict becomes all but inevitable. Moreover, since my conscious pursuit of the human god is frustrated by the Other, my being-for-others forms part of my 'useless passion'. Following Sartre's view, it would be difficult, though not altogether impossible, to conclude that existential meaning could be shared between beings. To be sure, *semantic* meaning is necessarily shared between human beings, at least to an extent, else common sense or mutual understanding would not be possible in any measure. However, this truism does not necessarily apply in the same manner to the question of *existential* meaning. The problem of the existence of the Other, for Sartre, is that it potentially undermines the free determination of the meaning of my existence through my acts, choices, and valuations, since such acts, choices, and valuations, are additionally subject to the fundamentally free existence of the Other. Once the meaning of my existence stands outside of me in an ekstastic relation to the Other, I can longer be the *sole* creator of my existential meaning.

#### 3.4.4. The Meaning(s) of 'We'

In order to be just to Sartre's oeuvre, one must understand that Sartre does investigate the possibility of inter-subjective human meaning, even if his conception of inter-subjective human relations is never optimistic or without its reservations and ambiguities.<sup>372</sup> Sartre speaks of an inter-subjective, communal relation of the 'we' in which 'we discover ourselves not in fact in conflict with the Other but in community with him' and which includes a pluralistic community of individuals who do not objectify one another through The Look but rather 'recognize one another as subjectivities'.<sup>373</sup> However, Sartre explicitly states that this conception of the 'we' is not

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<sup>370</sup> See Haar 1980:176-180.

<sup>371</sup> See *BT*, §§25-27 (pp. 149-168).

<sup>372</sup> See *BN*, pp. 434-436.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 434-435.

synonymous or to be conflated with Heidegger's conception of *Mitsein*, since it does not factor into the ontological constitution of the For-itself, but is established on the grounds of a different mode of Being, namely *being-for-others*: "The "we" is a certain particular experience which is produced in special cases on the foundation of being-for-others in general. The being-for-others precedes and founds the *being-with-others*."<sup>374</sup> This suggests that the For-itself can never wholly evade The Look of the other, but might possibly experience the other within a community of subjectivities. Ultimately, the 'we' does not escape the problem of being an object (in-itself) for the Other – it merely extrapolates from the individual to the social by acknowledging that 'we' might exist *qua* 'being-objects in common'.<sup>375</sup>

However, Sartre's conception of the 'we' is not truly communal nor properly inter-subjective, since the For-itself exists within a 'we' as an individual among other individuals, and not as a newly-constituted 'we-subject' in which individuality effaces itself behind a more primary pluralistic existential experience. Sartre states it thus:

the experience of the We-subject is a pure psychological, subjective event in a single consciousness; it corresponds to an inner modification of the structure of this consciousness but does not appear on the foundation of a concrete ontological relation with others and does not realize any *Mitsein*.<sup>376</sup>

It for this reason that Sartre radically rejects Heidegger's formulation of *Mitsein* as a constitutive part of *Dasein's* existence in-the-world. In Sartre's view, 'being-with' is yet another human projection or existential pursuit of something which remains beyond being-for-itself, and thus eludes attempts at being wholly grasped by human beings: 'the experience of the "we" remains on the grounds of individual psychology and remains a simple symbol of the longed-for unity of [human] transcendences.'<sup>377</sup> *Mitsein* is thus a human ideal of a meaningful being-with others which cannot be attained for the simple fact that 'the subjectivities remain out of reach and radically separated.'<sup>378</sup> It would seem, then, that in Sartre's account, existential meaning remains a radically individualized endeavour that is confronted by the existence and presence in-the-world of the Other who threatens the self-conceived, free project of individual existence. Existential meaning formed on the basis of a we-subject, or any form of *Mitsein* whatsoever, is therefore a secondary rather than primary ontological experience in Sartrean terms, since it remains dependent upon a primary individual experience of being *qua* For-itself.<sup>379</sup> Meaningful intersubjectivity is thus the interminably unrealizable ideal of human consciousness:

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<sup>374</sup> *BN*, p. 436.

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 447.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 448-449.

We should hope in vain for a human 'we' in which the intersubjective totality would obtain consciousness of itself as a unified subjectivity. Such an ideal could be only a dream produced by a passage to the limit and to the absolute on the basis of fragmentary, strictly psychological experiences. Furthermore this ideal itself implies the recognition of the conflict of transcendences as the original state of being-for-others.<sup>380</sup>

Sartre clearly does not seem to see the way past the problem of the existence of the Other, since the ontological confrontation and conflict between the For-itself and the Other is what potentially alienates the For-itself from its fundamental freedom and its existential meaning, which is why Sartre posits that '[t]o come into the world as a freedom confronting Others is to come into the world as alienable'.<sup>381</sup> Sartre's account of the conflictual nature of human inter-subjectivity highlights what might be described as the deleterious *difference(s) of existential meaning*, which manifest between human beings asserting their radical freedom as subjective meaning-makers. Sartre does not seem to make any allowance for the possibility that the Other may equally well exist as internal or even integral to my existential projects, or for the fact that my existential meaning might be directed precisely *toward* the Other. Sartre's view is largely egoistic in that it focuses predominantly on actions, values, and choices on the basis of a conception of the For-itself as a strictly self-interested being, and in this way, Sartre largely disqualifies the possibility of an altruistic dimension to human existence in his ontology. Yet, an individual's existence is not always directed exclusively towards itself, and thus the Other potentially plays a more positive and consequential role in human existential meaning than Sartre allows in *Being and Nothingness*.

Sartre's deliberate omission of an ethical dimension to his ontology may well be meritorious in its reasoning, but this does not mean that Sartre can justifiably exclude from his ontology the possibility of a positive, which is to say meaningful, human inter-subjectivity. While Sartre certainly acknowledges the existence of the Other in *Being and Nothingness*, his consideration of complex alterity in the human condition is somewhat inadequate in that it fails to account for a social dimension to existential meaning. This critique has been raised and emphatically asserted by a number of critics of Sartrean thought following in the wake of the publication of *Being and Nothingness*. This point is made especially evident in the opening remarks of *Existentialism is a Humanism*, where Sartre notes that '[o]ne group after another censures us for overlooking humanity's solidarity, and for considering man as an isolated being'.<sup>382</sup> It is therefore in *Existentialism is a Humanism* and in his *Notebooks for an Ethics* that Sartre addresses these critical concerns more seriously, and begins to extend the question on existential meaning beyond the province of individual subjectivity, and toward inter-subjectivity.

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<sup>380</sup> *BN*, p. 450.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 547.

<sup>382</sup> *EH*, pp. 17-18.

### 3.4.5. Inter-Subjective Meaning Beyond Sartre's Ontology

Following in the wake of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartrean philosophy moves more generally toward the universal rather than the particular, and toward inter-subjectivity as an extension of subjectivity. This movement is chiefly evinced in Sartre's works, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.<sup>383</sup> In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre extends the discourse of existentialism beyond the strictly subjective domain, and in doing so, calls human beings to account for the fact that they are at any given time responsible for their own individual existence, and for the collective meaning of humanity as a whole: 'when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men.'<sup>384</sup> What this statement suggests is that the responsibility of individual human beings extends far further than their subjective sphere of influence, and that existential meaning is not *exclusively* the province of an isolated and insular human individual in terms of their own existence *alone*, but the province of all human individuals in terms of humanity as a whole. That is, not only does human existence always already entail the existence of other beings and therefore other meanings, but also meanings that reflect humanity *in toto*. Sartre thus takes the original existential question of 'what is the meaning of my life' and appends to it the important further question 'what does it mean to be human?' By extending human responsibility beyond strict subjectivity, Sartre extends the domain of existential meaning from the particular to the universal, from the subjective to the inter-subjective.

In *Existentialism is a Humanism* one can therefore trace a movement towards the ethical dimension of human existence, or the idea 'that it is possible to create a human community'<sup>385</sup> – an idea which Sartre deliberately omitted from *Being and Nothingness*. In a statement echoing something akin to an existentialist reconceptualization of the Kantian Categorical Imperative, Sartre asserts that 'there is not a single one of our actions that does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be' insofar as 'a man who commits himself, and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility'.<sup>386</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that no universal human *nature* can be put forward, Sartre indeed concedes and even affirms the fact that a universal human *condition* undeniably overarches all individual human experience.<sup>387</sup> Ontologically speaking, this is significant in that it de-emphasizes the potentially deleterious *differences of existential meaning* that might manifest

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<sup>383</sup> The latter of which is a two-volume tome of 1960, detailing a systematic critique of Hegelian dialectics, Marxist dialectical materialism, and human social structures. This text, however, does not have immediate bearing on this study.

<sup>384</sup> *EH*, pp. 23.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

between human beings by underscoring an ontologically prior human condition, which applies equally to all human beings simply on the grounds of their being human. Sartre's newfound emphasis on the universality of the human condition in *Existentialism is a Humanism* thus opens a possible path toward a *positive* inter-subjective dimension of existential meaning, inasmuch as it allows for each individual's subjective recognition of the human collective that exceeds its subjectivity, and further influences its individual meaning through a commonality of meaning with other beings like itself; an encounter which may equally be adversarial or co-operative.<sup>388</sup> It is this reflective understanding of our shared condition which Sartre designates as human inter-subjectivity, reflecting the fact that 'every project, however individual, has a universal value'.<sup>389</sup>

Sartre therefore departs to an appreciable extent from his strictly subjectivist arguments for existential meaning in *Being and Nothingness*, by shifting his philosophical focus toward the inter-subjectivity of our human condition in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. In doing so, Sartre establishes at least the possibility for shared human conceptions of existential meaning, where the Other might be considered as a *complement* to my existential meaning.<sup>390</sup> This accords with the *otherness of meaning* described earlier in this chapter in terms of a human *cognizance of contingency*: if I acknowledge and accord to myself the freedom to determine the meaning of my existence, then I should accord this same freedom to the Other whom I encounter in the world as a free being like myself.<sup>391</sup> Moreover, my subjective appreciation of the Other may be radically altered through a reconceptualization of the Other as a potential *source* of meaning(s) of my existence, or at the very least, the fact that the Other and I might establish a kind of *existential communion*, through which meaning may be shared on the grounds of a common ontological footing. This is an understanding which Sartre arrives at and articulates more expressly in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, in which he outlines the possibility for an *authentic* ethical life where meaning might eventually be established in concert, rather than in conflict, with others.

In his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Sartre alters his argumentative line from *Being and Nothingness* to include the possibility of a *reciprocal recognition* of freedom between human beings,<sup>392</sup> with the concomitant effect that that the Other no longer *necessarily* exists as a threat to my existence and the meaning(s) that might be made thereof.<sup>393</sup> Sartre argues that 'The Look', while often the source of conflict between consciousnesses, is not the only meaningful encounter which I may have in-the-world with the Other. Sartre arrives at the understanding that within a *relation of authenticity*,

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<sup>388</sup> *EH*, pp. 41-42. This idea is further investigated in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>392</sup> This, no doubt, is a view heavily influenced by Sartre's reading of Hegel during this period of his life (from 1945). To be sure, the discourse of recognition in Sartrean thought features myriad noticeable Hegelian nuances, and Sartre openly acknowledges the Hegelian influences in his work, particularly in later interviews. See Schilpp 1981:9.

<sup>393</sup> *NE*, p. 500.

the For-itself can unveil the Other as a fragile finitude and ‘absolute freedom’ in its own right.<sup>394</sup> As demonstrated previously, Sartre argues in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, that through the process of existential ‘conversion’, the For-itself, as an individual, subjective being-in-the-world, stands in a pure reflective relation of understanding with its fundamental freedom, from which it can render the world meaningful on the grounds of its inalienable personal existential projects and *action(s)*.

Extending this argument to the inter-subjective domain, Sartre posits that through *inter-action(s)* with other human beings and the products of their finite creativity, I come to recognize the Other as a fundamentally free For-itself in its own right, with a subjective existential meaning of its own. To be sure, the personal existential meaning(s) of the Other, despite my recognition of the Other as a fundamental freedom, might nonetheless conflict and threaten my own meaning; Sartre undeniably retains this element of his thought, and never denies this (negative) possibility of inter-subjectivity. Significantly, however, *reciprocal recognition* of fundamental freedom between human individuals – a possibility which was precluded in *Being and Nothingness* – suggests that the Other can become more than a threat to the meaning made of my existence. In recognition of the Other as an authentic freedom such as myself, I can concede that the existence of the Other is akin to my own, which further establishes the possibility that their existential meaning(s) might also be akin to mine. Human individuals may well pursue similar existential projects, and such projects might benefit from, or even require, existential meaning in concert rather than in conflict.

I may further come to comprehend and appreciate the potential merits of a distinct *otherness of meaning* through an authentic relation with the Other, for in recognition of the Other’s freedom, I simultaneously recognize the possibility for authentic human existential meaning springing from a source outside of my own subjectivity. If this recognition is reciprocated from the Other, then an inter-relation of existential meaning may transpire on the grounds of inter-subjective inter-action between authentic human beings who have undergone what Sartre calls ‘conversion’.<sup>395</sup> Sartre argues that an authentic social relation transpires where individuals undergo the process of existential conversion, and thereby reflectively learn to ‘recognise, respect, care for and affirm each other’s freedom’.<sup>396</sup> Through conversion, an authentic intersubjective relation of ‘solidarity’ between human beings becomes possible,<sup>397</sup> which further implies the latent possibility of an existential meaning that is shared between beings. Through a conversion to authenticity, the For-itself ‘understands that the Other is a necessary aspect of its existence in so far as it discloses aspects of its existence consciousness alone cannot disclose’.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> *NE*, p. 500.

<sup>395</sup> Rae 2009:67-71.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69. See also: *NE*, p. 508.

<sup>397</sup> *NE*, p. 479.

<sup>398</sup> Rae 2009:76.

Hence I, as a subjective For-itself, need not seek the meaning of my existence in a purely insular and isolated fashion, because the other 'enriches the world and me, he *gives a meaning* to my existence *in addition* to the subjective meaning I myself give it'.<sup>399</sup> In this way, Sartre establishes at least the nascent possibility of an intersubjective existential meaning that is shared between human individuals on a foundation of human action-in-concert, or *inter-action*, rather than in conflict with the Other.<sup>400</sup> This is a potentially productive avenue for existential meaning in that it redirects human individuals toward a positive *otherness of meaning*, which, by extension, allows for a multiplicity of meanings and plurality of perspectives on human existence, which might not have materialized if existential meaning were limited to the individual sphere alone. In this way, human beings might further move from an isolated conception of existential meaning towards a more pluralistic conception which accounts for the manifold *meaning(s)* of life. The import of such an observations lends substantial credibility to David Rose's assertion that '[o]nly within a social context, that is the actual structures of being-for-others, can freedom be meaningful rather than absurd',<sup>401</sup> or as Christine Daigle phrases it: 'I can give meaning to my existence and my world all I want but if the Other contributes to it by his own existence and acknowledgement of mine, then I stand on firmer ground.'<sup>402</sup>

While it might initially appear that Sartre's views on inter-subjectivity have shifted from being largely negative in *Being and Nothingness* to being almost idealistic in *Existentialism is a Humanism* and his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, this is certainly not the case. As stated previously, Sartre never attempts to deny or circumvent the brute fact that conflict is always a possibility of human inter-subjectivity. In fact, it is precisely because Sartre acknowledges this troubling fact of our human condition that he further investigates the possibility of meaningful inter-subjectivity in his later works. Sartre more than admits to the conflictual nature of human inter-subjectivity in *Being and Nothingness*, and in his subsequent works, Sartre desires to discern an inter-subjective relation between human beings *beyond* such negative human relations of meaning. For this reason, Sartre questions whether conflict is *necessary* in our human condition,<sup>403</sup> or whether humanity might have recourse to more positive forms of inter-subjective engagement. Therefore, it might be said that Sartre's philosophical position on inter-subjectivity shifts from the emphatically negative to a more moderate stance that acknowledges the fact that human inter-subjectivity is inherently neither entirely negative nor entirely positive, but an admixture of both extremes, or rather, human existence bespeaks the *possibility* of meaning in conflict as well as meaning in concert.

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<sup>399</sup> *NE*, p. 500. See also: Rae 2009:67.

<sup>400</sup> *NE*, p. 280. See also: Rae 2009:68.

<sup>401</sup> Rose 2003:16. Further, see: Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1991) Vol. I, p. 334 as well as Sartre's *Search for a Method* (1963) p. 147, and pp. 150-151.

<sup>402</sup> Daigle 2010:94.

<sup>403</sup> This question might further be said to evince an early, nascent Marxist influence in Sartrean thought.

### 3.5. Conclusion: Existential Meaning(s) Beyond Individualism (?)

Following the arguments raised in this chapter, some general conclusions on human existential meaning can be drawn from Sartrean existentialism. One might begin with a consideration of Malcolm Bull's assertion that '[n]ihilism is individual and its limit is social'.<sup>404</sup> Inasmuch as existential meaning involves an individual choice of existence in terms of one's fundamentally free existential projects, one can justifiably posit, along with Bull, that a nihilistic disposition towards our human reality is the product of an individual human choice. Since, as Sartre states, 'existence precedes essence', nihilism cannot be said to be the only conclusion to the human condition, because this would entail the presupposition of a meaning antedating human existence. In fact, if Sartre is to be believed, then there is neither inherent meaning nor inherent meaninglessness in existence prior to the upsurge of the For-itself; there is simply undifferentiated being-in-itself.<sup>405</sup> If one says that nihilism is individual, one therefore implies that existential meaninglessness, like existential meaning, is the product of an individual human encounter with one's existence, and an interpretation made on the basis of subjective human experience rooted in ontological freedom.

To be a being of nothingness is not necessarily to be a being of meaninglessness; in fact, to be a being of nothingness is *necessarily* to be underdetermined, since we arise in this world without a preset essence, and are the beings by whom meaning(s) and value(s) come to this world. By this same Sartrean logic, if the For-itself continues in its pursuit of being-in-itself-for-itself then it *chooses* to be 'a useless passion' rather than a being who authentically affirms its human existence and makes the meaning of existence manifest on the basis of its inalienable fundamental freedom. As Sartre substantially suggests in his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, the possibility always already exists that human beings might affirm their freedom and convert to an authentic and responsible human existence. If human beings choose to live in 'bad faith' by fleeing in the face of the anguish which reveals their fundamental freedom, or choose to hide behind illusory fictions and transcendental meanings even in the wake of the death of god, then human individuals themselves must carry the responsibility for such *choices* of belief, and for the action(s) effected on the basis of such beliefs.

Scott expresses this Sartrean responsibility appositely as follows: 'human existence fulfils itself in its responsibility, in its responding to how it is with appeal to nothing but itself.'<sup>406</sup> Scott further posits the possibility of a rejuvenation of human existential meaning if 'we become free from illusions born of rejecting the primacy of our own fundamental choices for the meaning of what is otherwise absurdly present in the world.'<sup>407</sup> Sartre brings Being back to this world *hic et nunc* as it is experienced through human consciousness, and thereby offers us insights into the human

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<sup>404</sup> Bull 2011:77.

<sup>405</sup> Jones 1980:234.

<sup>406</sup> Scott 1981:294.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*

condition and the meaning that might be made of our uniquely human reality. Sartrean philosophy thus 'teaches us the "meaning" of being who we are, and as such it is a basis for understanding the goals of being human.'<sup>408</sup>

One might further conclude from Sartrean philosophy that the existence of the Other stands as a reminder to each human For-itself that its individual existence, encompassing its meaning(s), is never an entirely insular or isolated project. A fundamentally free project in my being-for-itself always already entails the existence of the Other and implicates me in an *entanglement of meaning* with the Other. The For-itself might never be able to *know* the consciousness of the Other, but through a relation of authenticity, the For-itself can encounter the *existence* of the Other as a free For-itself. Therefore, to the same extent that the For-itself is not necessarily fated to the futility of pursuing the impossible ideal of the human god, being-for-others does not in any way *necessarily* imply a relation of conflict between human individuals. This is especially true if one subscribes to Sartre's view in his *Notebooks for an Ethics* that the human pursuit of being-in-itself-for-itself can be converted to an authentic affirmation of our fundamental freedom in conjunction with a cognizance of our contingency. In this way, by authentically affirming my own fundamental freedom, and recognizing that self-same freedom in the Other through a reciprocal relation, both subjective and inter-subjective possibilities of existential meaning are made manifest.

One cannot help but feel, however, that in the end, Sartre's primarily subjectivist and individualist account of existential meaning provides this study with only one half of an answer to the question of existential meaning as it faces our contemporary world. To be sure, Sartre does somewhat account for the inter-subjective or social dimension of human existence and its meaning in his later works, but the answer as to how humanity might bridge the gap between subjective and inter-subjective meaning(s) ultimately remains rather ambiguous and tentative at best. Sartre's account of inter-subjectivity in *Existentialism is a Humanism* is offered in the very brief form of a lecture, the ideas of which are not fully philosophically developed. The same might be said of Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics*, which promisingly grapples with the *possibility* of inter-subjective meaning(s), but ultimately retains a measure of tenuousness due to its tentative formulation.<sup>409</sup> Sartre therefore never fully bridges the ontological separation between the self and the Other, and comes up somewhat short of providing humanity with a conception of existential meaning that adequately accounts for *both* its individual *and* social dimensions.

Moreover, Sartre does not adequately articulate how one might reconcile the discrepancies between his subjectivist conception of existential meaning in his ontology with his more inter-subjective conception of existential meaning in his subsequent works. This fact should not wholly

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<sup>408</sup> Scott 1981:295.

<sup>409</sup> Which would explain why the work was not published until after Sartre's death, since he felt it to be incomplete.

overshadow the merits of Sartre's account, or the fact that Sartre's philosophy allows for an individual interpretation of existential meaning, and thus reveals that individual human beings in our contemporary socio-historical milieu are never wholly without meaning, since meaning can be an individual venture and creation. However, despite these positive points, one is left with an unsatisfactory account of the social dimension of existential meaning in Sartrean existentialism. Sartre actually critiques himself in this regard later in his life, by stating in an interview: 'What is particularly bad in *L'Être et le Néant* [*Being and Nothingness*] is the specifically social chapters, on the "we," compared to the chapters on the "you" and "others".'<sup>410</sup> Sartre thus openly admits to a critical oversight and lacuna in his work of ontology, and it is this oversight which he never fully amended, and which a contemporary account of existential meaning might try to partly amend by looking beyond the discourse of existentialism, while remaining within the domain of ontology. Marjorie Grene's critique on the narrowness of existentialism's focus is apposite in this regard:

This is not to deny the significance of the existential insight but to demand its interpretation in a wider, other than existential, setting. Without some such immersion in a more inclusive view of man's nature, existentialism remains a significant but static insight into one aspect of human consciousness. [...] if, for the existentialist, freedom is transcendence, he should perhaps be willing to acknowledge that, in the projective creation of the future, existentialism itself is among the data to be transcended.<sup>411</sup>

Therefore, this study hereafter turns its focus from existential ontology to the pluralist ontology of contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. In doing so, I aim to both supplement the subjectivist view on existential meaning as offered by Sartre, and expound a more substantial inter-subjective or pluralistic dimension of existential meaning. Nancy's pluralist approach to the contemporary question of existential meaning will help to address a pertinent question raised by John Macquarrie: 'How do we reconcile the fact that existential analysis reveals the fundamentally communal character of existence with the equally plain fact that existentialist philosophers are in many cases individualists?'<sup>412</sup> By considering Nancy's pluralist ontology, one might arrive at a proper understanding of why it is that the final limit of nihilism is distinctly social in nature.

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<sup>410</sup> Schilpp 1981:13.

<sup>411</sup> Grene 1952:273.

<sup>412</sup> Macquarrie 1980:118.

## CHAPTER IV

### Nancy's Contemporary Sense of Existence

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More or less quietly, more or less clamorously, the question of meaning once again troubles the aging West, which believed itself to have overcome it.<sup>1</sup>

The above citation from Jean-Luc Nancy (1940–) demonstrates a central concern with the theme of existential meaning in his contemporary French philosophy. Nancy's philosophical account of meaning, or 'sense' as he (re)conceptualizes it, holds a most immediate bearing on contemporary thought concerning our human condition. This assertion is based chiefly on the fact that Nancy himself is a living philosopher who is immediately immersed in, and deliberately concerns himself with, the philosophical and existential concerns of human beings socio-historically situated in *this* contemporary world *hic et nunc*. Nancy is therefore truly 'a philosopher of the contemporary'<sup>2</sup> in that his philosophy directly addresses contemporary human concerns in a manner that bespeaks the contemporary question of existential meaning as it confronts secular humanity here and now, as well as the possible implications of these contemporary concerns in regard to the future of our human condition. Nancy outlines his central philosophical preoccupation as follows:

There is something like a general loss of sense. Sense, that's the word that matters to me today. A general flight of sense, whether it occurs in a political or esthetic or religious or whatever other form. Sense matters to me since, finally, 'philosophy' deals with nothing else but sense. Absolutely nothing else.<sup>3</sup>

This emphatic assertion on Nancy's part serves to immediately situate contemporary humanity in the exigency of existential meaning confronting our world *hic et nunc*. As will be demonstrated in the following chapter, Nancy's account of existential meaning highlights our contemporary world as one in which meaning, as *sense*, abounds not as a *property* of our human existence, but as its very unfolding across a veritable plurality of finite beings all inhabiting this world together. Moreover, Nancy argues for a distinctly social dimension to human existential meaning owing to the fact that human existence is not strictly singular, but in fact always already *singular plural*, since human existence is implicated from the outset in relations of meaning that transpire *between* beings, and never purely in individual human isolation. In this way, Nancy reveals the relevance of Malcolm Bull's assertion that nihilism is rooted in the individual dimension of human existence and finds its ultimate limit in the social sphere of meaning(s). Through Nancy's philosophy, this chapter seeks to demonstrate an undeniable social dimension to human existential meaning, and an inexhaustible reserve of existential meaning, in which all human beings are always already participating by virtue of an existence that finds itself immediately implicated in worldly plurality.

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<sup>1</sup> *GT*, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Sheppard, Sparks, & Thomas 1997:x.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy 1993a:108.

#### 4.1. Nancy in Context

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Nancy's philosophical influences determine his philosophical point of departure on the question of existential meaning, and are therefore worthy of mention.<sup>4</sup> In a manner akin to Nietzsche and the early Heidegger, from whom Nancy draws appreciable influence, Nancy recognizes a world bereft of transcendent significance following in the wake of the notorious Nietzschean death of god, and seeks furthermore to fathom the nature and meaning of human existence in *this* world, to which humanity is henceforth abandoned without recourse to any qualification of meaning beyond its bounds. Moreover, Nancy assimilates elements of Jacques Derrida's post-structuralist project of 'deconstruction', employing its insights as a means of demonstrating the challenges of signification reliant upon a 'metaphysics of presence', and arguing that traditional thinking on the question of existential meaning has become exhausted and thus demands to be (re)thought in our contemporary situation. Nancy therefore assimilates the insights and presentiments proclaimed by his proto-existentialist forebear, Nietzsche; builds extensively on the ontological foundation established by Heidegger in *Being and Time*; and further pays homage to the critical claims and philosophical methodology of his post-structuralist contemporary, Derrida. Nancy's background in existentialism,<sup>5</sup> ontology, and post-structuralism, in conjunction with his unique contemporary philosophical insights into the contemporary world and human existence, renders him a most apposite candidate for a contemporary (re)conceptualization of existential meaning.

As is demonstrated in the course of this chapter, Nancy's philosophy on meaning as sense may be viewed as the philosophical furtherance of Nietzsche's original project of trans-valuation, which is to say that Nancy's philosophy of the present is picking up the reigns of Nietzsche's proposed philosophy of the future. A number of Nancy's works – including especially the works with which the study at hand deals directly: *The Gravity of Thought* (1997), *The Sense of the World* (1997), and *Being Singular Plural* (2000) – expand on ontological insights gleaned from Nancy's reading of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, in conjunction with Nancy's own idiosyncratic variety of philosophical deconstruction, in such a way as to question the existential meaning that has passed through the death of god, and opens human thought onto philosophical vistas where meaning can be thought anew in precisely the terms demanded by human existence in the world today. Rather than being flummoxed or confounded by the apparent lack or absence of existential meaning which confronts contemporary humanity, Nancy asserts that 'far from considering this general flight of sense as a catastrophe and a loss, I want to think of it as the event of sense in our time, for our time. It is a question of thinking sense in the absencing of sense.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Hutchens 2005:24-32 for a succinct account of Nancy's principal influences. See also: Devisch 2005.

<sup>5</sup> As Morin (2009:35) posits, it is noteworthy that 'Nancy can certainly not be termed an existentialist in any traditional sense of the word'. However, Nancy's thought arguably evinces certain existentialist themes, as will be shown hereafter.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy 1993a:109.

## 4.2. Meaning(s) in (and of) our Historical Past

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Undoubtedly, the twenty-eight or so centuries of our Western history seem punctuated by the periodic repetition of crises during which a configuration of meaning comes undone, a philosophical, political, or spiritual order decays, and, in the general vacillation of certainties and reference points, one is alarmed at the meaning lost – one tries to retrieve it, or else tries to invent a new meaning.<sup>7</sup>

Nancy's early work on meaning in *The Gravity of Thought* presents its reader with a philosophical discourse on thought itself, particularly in its relation to signification and meaning. Nancy emphasizes that thinking itself requires (re)thinking, or rather, that human thinking demands to be thought in its finitude as the thinking of our contemporary world and its possible meaning(s). In this regard, Nancy writes that '[t]hought weighs exactly the weight of meaning.'<sup>8</sup> This point is significant to Nancy, inasmuch as thinking is the hallmark of our human condition<sup>9</sup> since it is universal to all human beings, particularly as concerns our human search for meaning. It hence stands to reason that attempting to understand the meaning(s) of contemporary human existence requires thought on the nature of the relation between thought, meaning, and signification.

### 4.2.1. Meaning *qua* Signification

Meaning in general is meaning understood as signification. Signification itself, that is, *meaning in the sense of 'signification'* (which is the most ordinary sense of the word 'meaning' in our language and in philosophy) is not exactly, or not simply, 'meaning'; it is the presentation of meaning. Signification consists in the establishment or assignment of the presence of a factual (or sensible) reality in the ideal (or intelligible) mode (which is what one calls 'meaning'); or else, and reciprocally, it consists in the assignment of the presence of an intelligible determination in the sensible mode (a particular reality and/or the materiality of the sign itself).<sup>10</sup>

In *The Gravity of Thought*, Nancy immediately establishes an important distinction between signification and meaning: 'signification is located meaning, while meaning resides only in the coming of a possible signification.'<sup>11</sup> This view suggests that meaning in all its forms is typically or traditionally thought to be that which is *present* or *presentable* by means of an order of signification consisting of a signifier in referential relation to a signified. In Nancy's terms, this is meaning *qua* signified presence, or simply, meaning *qua* signification.<sup>12</sup> Following the logic of meaning *qua* signification, meaning is 'signified' as *present* or *presentable* to human thought typically by means of an Ideal intelligibility. This conception is demonstrated most relevantly in Plato's account of the Forms, and revealed spiritually through a religious positing of absolute

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<sup>7</sup> *GT*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

transcendence towards meaning 'in itself', which may take a myriad of forms according to various narratives of meaning, such as dogmatic religion, progressive history, or even political ideologies. According to Nancy, such traditional conceptions of meaning are all unpinned by a thinking of meaning *qua* signification.<sup>13</sup> In Western philosophy from Plato to Hegel, signification is measured at the juncture of the sensible physical realm with the intelligible (or super-sensible) metaphysical realm; it is at this metaphysical juncture or meeting place that meaning might be said to manifest. This traditional view of meaning as signification is such that it is founded upon a dichotomous metaphysics of the sensible and the intelligible. Nancy thus avers that 'meaning as "signification" is taught (signified) by the most elementary and most constant lesson of philosophy', viz. traditional Western metaphysics.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, traditional thinking on meaning is predicated on what Derrida famously calls a 'metaphysics of presence':<sup>15</sup> a system of thinking which is founded on the notion that meaning may be thought of as static, or present-in-itself, often rooted in a metaphysical source beyond the world of immediate human experience. Derrida writes:

It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence – *eidōs, archē, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, [etc.].<sup>16</sup>

In his philosophical project of deconstruction, Derrida puts forward the idea that a metaphysics of presence has dominated the Western philosophical tradition since Plato, in its subscription, either deliberately or inadvertently, to an underlying binary logic which suggests that meaning has a 'fixed origin' (*archē*), and/or destination (*telos*); and following this logic, it has been the purposive pursuit of philosophers to locate the 'point of presence' of meaning in reality.<sup>17</sup> Stated differently, Western thought has based itself largely on the view that meaning may be rooted in an Ideal source, and might be discerned or uncovered through a philosophical or spiritual relation between our existence in the immediate or immanent world *hic et nunc*, and the Ideal Reality of Meaning 'in itself' residing in a transcendent realm. Therefore, traditional Western philosophy, following in the logic and legacy of Platonic thought, has generally held firm to the view that meaning *qua* signification is present in an immutable form beyond this realm of mutability, and thus meaning is always perpetually (potentially) locatable.

Following Derrida, Nancy asserts that a conceptualization of meaning based on the attempt to situate its presence is, in fact, the very *modus operandi* of Western metaphysics in its entirety. Plato places the presence of Meaning in the metaphysical realm of the Forms; Christianity places

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<sup>13</sup> Morin 2012:40-41.

<sup>14</sup> *GT*, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida 2001:354. See also: Derrida 1996:284-290.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida 2001:353.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

its meaning in a transcendent God in an Ideal Heaven; Hegel places the meaning of human existence at the end of human history; while Marx places the ultimate meaning of humanity in a socialist utopia that serves to synthesize historical class conflicts. All of this 'suffices to make the whole of philosophy into a general enterprise of signification and presentation.'<sup>18</sup> These examples help to clearly demonstrate how the epistemological, metaphysical, existential, and even political meaning of our world has been sought through recourse to meaning as signified presence. As Nancy phrases it, 'meaning, or the signified, is present, by definition and in whatever mode, and signification consists in recapturing this presence and presenting it by signifying it.'<sup>19</sup>

Like Derrida, Nancy problematizes meaning *qua* signification by revealing that the signified presentation of meaning is only ever 'presence-at-a-distance';<sup>20</sup> interminably deferred from its absolute presentation *as such*, which explains why meaning as signification is forever (with)held at a distance from human existence *hic et nunc*. Through a systemic deconstruction of our Western metaphysics of presence, these ideas are brought to light, and the problematic nature of our traditional thinking becomes apparent: when we think of existential meaning on the basis of its metaphysical presence, that is, if we think of existential meaning purely in terms of signification, we are in fact condemning ourselves to a kind of meaning incessantly inaccessible to humanity: meaning-in-itself. Existential meaning as signification is therefore perpetually deferred, and the impossibility of its absolute presentation is forever assured by the nature of signification itself. Ironically, then, meaning reliant upon what might now be termed a *vestigial* metaphysics of presence, is never in fact *present* at all, but ceaselessly suspended, (with)held aloft and afar, *in* or *as* the beyond of our being, causing a projection<sup>21</sup> of meaning perpetually beyond appropriation.

In Nancy's view – a view which I wish here to affirm – meaning as signification is nothing more than a 'fantasy'<sup>22</sup> of meaning; an illusory and ever-elusive mirage of meaning; for it is the meaning of a future which is never fully present(ed), despite its promise and its purchase on our thinking. Contrary to the logic embodied in a metaphysics of presence, the post-structuralist<sup>23</sup> philosophy propounded by Derrida and affirmed by Nancy has typically sought to undermine the operations of such logic by systematically 'deconstructing' the ostensible presence of meaning(s), thereby destabilizing the strict fixity of concepts, and revealing the multivalent ambiguities effaced within. From this post-structuralist view, meaning is made manifest by means of its internal '*différance*':<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *GT*, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Blackburn (2008:284) defines post-structuralism as a 'variety of postmodernism'. Nancy's philosophy might thus be described as postmodern inasmuch as it undermines traditional philosophical thinking by (ex-)posing the irreducible plurality and ambiguity of human existence, its artefacts, and of course, its meaning(s). For the purposes at hand, 'postmodern' will refer simply to 'a denial of any fixed meaning' (*Ibid.*)

<sup>24</sup> Derrida 1996:279.

a Derridean neologism which holds that the presence of meaning is perpetually deferred and established in the 'play' of difference(s) between signifiers in an infinite chain of signification.<sup>25</sup> Meaning – whether semantic, semiotic, or existential – cannot be said to exist in and of itself; it is the (by-)product of *différance* in that its source or origin is perpetually deferred and different from itself *qua* present(able). For instance, a word has meaning by virtue of the difference(s) between its letters; an idea is meaningful by virtue of a relation of difference between its various concepts.<sup>26</sup>

Following the Derridean logic of *différance*, the presence of meaning, rather than being accessible to humanity *hic et nunc*, is interminably *displaced* beyond immediate appropriation. Nancy posits that orders of signification throughout the history of Western thought have attempted to appropriate meaning by making present that which is in fact *absent*: meaning in-itself, complete and concluded *per se*. Contrary to this traditional thinking on existential meaning, Nancy argues that contemporary human existence 'has to appropriate the inappropriability of the meaning that it is',<sup>27</sup> which is what Nancy calls the 'weight' or 'gravity' of contemporary thought on meaning: the fact that existence henceforth 'is the appropriation of the inappropriable.'<sup>28</sup> That is, human thought on meaning should no longer attempt to appropriate meaning in its signified presence, but understand that existential meaning is inappropriable as such.<sup>29</sup> This is because the absolute manifestation of *the* meaning of life would suggest the *closure* of meaning, since the definite article ('the') precludes any further difference(s) of meaning. Traditional conceptualizations of meaning *qua* signification have thus attempted to make meaning present through its very closure, which is to say that because meaning can be identified and located in its presence, it is, in theory at least, presentable and accessible to human beings, but only to the extent that it relies upon a closure of meaning itself. According to this kind of thinking on meaning as a closed signified presentation, meaning must mean *something* rather than nothing, even at the expense of everything (other).

Nancy phrases this idea succinctly as follows: '*Signification is thus the very model of a structure or system that is closed upon itself, or better yet, as closure upon itself.*'<sup>30</sup> That is, meaning *qua* signification implies meaning as 'closure upon itself'; meaning that is, paradoxically, *closed* in its very *disclosure* as present: for that which is presentable *as such* is closed or provides the closure of its signification in its very presentation. From this traditional view, for meaning to be Ideal or Absolute it must of *necessity* be closed, and thus complete in its source ('in itself'), lest any form of relativism threaten its pure metaphysical presence. Furthermore, an order of signification is built upon or around its central meaning; a meaning whose presence is *signified* through recognizable

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<sup>25</sup> Derrida 2001:369.

<sup>26</sup> This description is also applicable to existential meaning, as Nancy's arguments demonstrate.

<sup>27</sup> *GT*, p. 80.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* See also: *FT*, p. 9: 'all sense resides in the nonappropriation of "being"'.  
<sup>29</sup> *GT*, pp. 80-84.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. Original italics.

*signifiers*, and thereby rendered accessible to humanity.<sup>31</sup> Western philosophers have thus conceived various orders of signification which rely to varying degrees on a metaphysics of presence, which is now subject to the post-structuralist deconstruction of Derrida and Nancy.

Meaning *qua* signification is both existentially consoling and metaphysically convenient, since the metaphysical order of signification ensures that meaning is promised to humanity, but by means of a perpetually postponed presentation thereof. In this regard, Nancy writes: 'The *meaning* that thought invokes is always elsewhere, always displaced, always on the move; or more exactly, the presence of meaning immediately opens the indefinite perspective of its projection into an elsewhere.'<sup>32</sup> On the metaphysical model of signification, as described above, the *hic et nunc* is a realm of sensibility, mutability, fallibility, and finitude, and therefore cannot be the *true* source or seat of infallible and immutable existential meaning, since, in this view, meaning is only secured in its subsistence beyond the immediate world of fluctuating eventualities; meaning is assured only in its constancy, its non-ephemerality, and its indefatigable and indubitable character. However, Nancy, once again following Derridean thought, posits that meaning is always already deferred and different from its 'presence' in each instance of its manifestation. That is, meaning cannot be grasped 'in-itself' or 'as such' because it is within the very nature of meaning to evade its own completion and to elude those who seek to isolate it: 'Meaning always has the sense of the noncompleted, the unfinished, of the yet-to-come'.<sup>33</sup>

Following the above critical exposition, Nancy asserts that existential meaning needs to be (re)thought beyond the entailments of signification suggested by the history of Western thought. Nancy argues in *The Gravity of Thought* that existential meaning resists its reduction to a signified presentation, because meaning 'understood as presentation or as coming into presence – pre-exists signification and exceeds it.'<sup>34</sup> For Nancy, meaning is thus not hidden within an order of signification that constitutes an intelligible reality, but is precisely '*the element in which there can be significations*' in the first place.<sup>35</sup> Nancy thus effects a reconceptualization of meaning in which meaning is always already *presupposed* of our existence because human beings are immersed from the outset of their existence into the element of meaning within which signification is brought to bear on Being. Meaning is thus not beyond humanity, suspended in its metaphysical presence-at-a-distance; meaning is 'offered at the very level of our existence', before and beyond appropriable signification or 'constituted meaning'.<sup>36</sup> Meaning, or meaning-making, is that which

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<sup>31</sup> For instance, the meaning of 'God' is revealed through scripture in Christian thought; the Form of Meaning is revealed (imperfectly) through the philosophical pursuit of wisdom according to Platonic thought; the meaning of humanity and its manifest destiny is revealed at the end of history according to Hegelian thought.

<sup>32</sup> *GT*, p. 30.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

is constantly at our disposal inasmuch as meaning is made manifest through our very *thinking* of existence, which is implicitly entailed in our human condition.<sup>37</sup> For Nancy, our thinking accedes or is 'passible'<sup>38</sup> to this new *sense* of existential meaning when we ourselves are open or exposed to a 'nakedness of meaning',<sup>39</sup> beyond the traditional delimitations of signification. For Nancy, an immediate ontological immersion in the possible arrival of meaning is itself the precursor to all (orders of) signification. As will be demonstrated in what follows, this is what Nancy refers to as meaning *qua* 'sense': a worldly source of meaning *sans* any locatable 'point of presence', for, as Nancy writes, there is no 'meaningful provenance of meaning'.<sup>40</sup> It is further arguable that this meaning *qua* sense, before and beyond all signification, reveals itself in the exhaustion of meaning *qua* metaphysical signification, announced in Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of god.

#### 4.2.2. Meaning after the Death of God

As was argued in Chapter II on Nietzsche, the death of god is a monumental event in the history of Western philosophy, and Nancy assumes and reiterates the gravity of this grave eventuality as a starting point to the question of meaning: 'the accomplishment of metaphysics constitutes as a result its exhaustion, which is designated by the death of God.'<sup>41</sup> This is a death through which we are still living in our contemporary age; the effects and implications of which may yet resound for our foreseeable human future. The death of god and the concomitant exhaustion of traditional metaphysical signification is an event which lingers with an ironic longevity unlike any other, for within it is contained the history of Western thought stretching over two millennia. Nihilism, as identified by Nietzsche as symptomatic of his own age and of ages yet to come, is precisely an existential attestation to the exhaustion of meaning *qua* traditional metaphysical signification. This exhaustion is perceived by humanity as a form of meaninglessness insofar as the most readily identifiable signifieds of meaning have been devalued in an age which no longer recognizes their philosophical and existential validity to the same degree as that of the past. Such signifieds of meaning, and the orders of signification that accommodate them, pass into obscurity because they have been emptied of their meaningful content by human beings themselves.<sup>42</sup>

Following this, it initially appears as if all meaning has fled with the god(s) of old, and only the vacuous shell or empty framework of an outmoded order of signification remains. Nancy asserts that the demise of traditional signifieds of meaning attests to the fact that existential meaning *qua* metaphysical signification has been exhausted,<sup>43</sup> and any formulations of meaning in accordance

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<sup>37</sup> A point originally indicated by both Heidegger in *Being and Time* and Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*.

<sup>38</sup> *GT*, p. 69.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> This is likely why Nietzsche, in *GS*, §125, has the madman emphasize that it is *we* who have killed god.

<sup>43</sup> *GT*, p. 48.

with such traditional thought are bound to fail, since recourse to this former means-to-meaning entails recourse to an empty placeholder of meaning and thus condemns itself to nihilism. As Nietzsche announced and Nancy affirms, the death of god leads initially to a nihilistic existential outlook that formerly held fast to the idea of existential meaning as metaphysical signification. Yet, and this point is anything but inconsequential, despite the critique levelled against existential meaning *qua* signification, existential meaning remains nonetheless sought after, but no new form of existential meaning has yet been *thought* following the death of god. Such thinking on meaning in and *for* our contemporary human existence is a central concern in Nancy's philosophy. Nancy paves a path toward a contemporary (re)thinking of human existence and its possible meaning(s) by posing the following pertinent philosophical questions: 'What is one asking, henceforth, when one asks for meaning? What is it to ask for meaning? What is the meaning of this request?'<sup>44</sup>

According to Nancy, human thinking toward a new meaning or sense of existence must begin in earnest with a confrontation with 'sense as absence of sense',<sup>45</sup> which demands a preliminary philosophical encounter with the implications of existential nihilism.<sup>46</sup> Existential nihilism is the natural *initial* consequence of the death of god, which is to say that the exhaustion of traditional signification(s) of meaning in Western thought is attended by a vacuum of meaning demanding fulfilment. A new signified of meaning is sought to displace the foreboding emptiness of a human reality from which meaning has been seemingly dispelled, but such a superlative signified has been absent since the death of god. For Nancy, however, it is not a new *signified* of meaning that should be sought, but rather an entirely new *thinking* on meaning – meaningful thought on meaning itself – is required of humanity in order to displace the vacuum of meaning that appears to render human existence devoid of meaning in the wake of the death of god.<sup>47</sup> In this way, Nancy assumes a post-Nietzschean position by asserting that nihilism is merely a point of departure for (re)thinking meaning post-death-of-god, and is by no means our human condition henceforth.

Importantly, Nancy shows that it is not meaning itself which has been exhausted, but only meaning *qua* traditional metaphysical signification, or meaning predicated on a metaphysics of presence. The death of the signified meaning evoked by the signifier 'god' does not necessarily suggest the death of meaning altogether, but the death of an order of signification that places meaning in a transcendental signified beyond an immanent signifier. The death of god may be interpreted to indicate a diagnosis of human existential meaning in terms of our history and the potential paths opening onto our undetermined future. Consequently, the death of god announces both the *need* for, and *possibility* of, a new sense of existential meaning which goes beyond signification and

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<sup>44</sup> *GT*, p. 10.

<sup>45</sup> Nancy 1993a:109.

<sup>46</sup> Hutchens 2005:41.

<sup>47</sup> Watkin 2009:139.

operates at the very limit of human finitude.<sup>48</sup> Meaning is therefore no longer to be uncovered in an intelligible reality, nor within a metaphysical space where the transcendent and the immanent are brought into meaningful relation. God, as emblematic of all transcendental signification, has perished, and any such order of signification that holds at-a-distance the meaning of this life in *this world hic et nunc* is now beyond appeal, redemption, or revival – god cannot be resuscitated.<sup>49</sup>

Significantly for Nancy, the death of god disrupts meaning as *closed*, which is to say that it brings about a violent and inescapable rupture<sup>50</sup> of the closure of meaning itself, paralleled by the infinite *opening* of meaning onto our human finitude.<sup>51</sup> Through Nancy's philosophical insights, one might interpret the death of god as the death of a metaphysics of presence which sought to secure meaning by arresting it in a static order of signification. The meaning demanded by the existential exigency of our age is one which resists 'signifying finality and enclosure'<sup>52</sup> and thus opens onto our contemporary humanity, which is situated in an existential space between nihilism and absolutism – the very space of our finitude.<sup>53</sup> For this reason, Nancy calls for a *finite thinking* on existential meaning: 'a thinking that... is only ever able to think to the extent that it also touches on its own limit and its own singularity.'<sup>54</sup> A finite thinking is thus a responsible<sup>55</sup> thinking which understands that absolute meaning entails an obsolete closure of meaning. Henceforth, the closure of meaning, or meaning precisely as closure, is itself rendered meaningless, and this is the important fact attested to by the death of god and the nihilism which follows initially in its wake.

Nancy's thought therefore moves meaning from the province of its closure in strict signification toward the immanent space of this contemporary world, where meaning manifests through an *open* disclosure or 'exposure'<sup>56</sup> to the finitude of existence in all its multifarious manifestations. Nancy's conception of meaning thus precludes the nihilistic closure of meaning upon itself, and assures us that post-death-of-god nihilism cannot bespeak the death of all meaning henceforth:

It is often said today that we have lost meaning, that we lack it and, as a result, are in need of and waiting for it. The 'one' who speaks in this way forgets that the very propagation of this discourse is itself meaningful. Regretting the absence of meaning itself has meaning. But such regret does not have meaning only in this negative mode; denying the presence of meaning affirms that one knows what meaning would be, were it there, and keeps the mastery and truth of meaning in place.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Fischer 1997:33.

<sup>49</sup> Hutchens 2005:89.

<sup>50</sup> *GT*, p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> This is a point which Nancy draws from Derrida (2001:354), who asserts: 'The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.'

<sup>52</sup> *GT*, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>54</sup> *FT*, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13: '*Finitude is the responsibility of sense, and is so absolutely.*'

<sup>56</sup> *GT*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>57</sup> *BSP*, p. 1. See also: Hutchens 2005:44.

Therefore, the death of god is the end of meaning as pure presence-at-a-distance; the exhaustion of meaning reliant upon a metaphysical order of signification and transcendental qualification. The exigency of existential meaning in our contemporary world, or ‘the “search for meaning” with which our time is driving itself crazy’,<sup>58</sup> demands a (re)thinking of meaning along these lines, and Nancy calls us to account for this fact; a fact which takes us beyond meaninglessness by thinking through nihilism and overcoming the death of the metaphysical order of signification which brought it about.<sup>59</sup> Nancy will further argue that a new thinking of meaning as *sense* is demanded by the existential exigency of our age, and it is precisely this ‘sense of the world’ which Nancy will raise in order to reveal and address the demands of our human present, and open possibilities of meaning for our human future: ‘But today this is where there is some sense: in saying sense is absent, in saying that this absence is what we are exposed to, and that this exposition constitutes what I will call not only our present history but, along with Rimbaud, our refound eternity.’<sup>60</sup>

Metaphysical speculation offering recourse to the transcendent now being widely precluded, this world and human existence *hic et nunc* could indeed be thought of as meaningful on its own terms. In Nancy’s thought, then, Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of god announces simultaneously a kind of thinking about meaning as metaphysical signification that has passed away, as well as a new thinking on finitude that is demanded by our contemporary world.<sup>61</sup> In this regard, Nancy asserts that ‘Nietzsche conceives the now in its exposure to an eternity of meaning, or rather, to an eternity understood as an infinite opening of meaning where its signification collapses.’<sup>62</sup> The challenge, therefore, which Nancy wholeheartedly takes up, is to conceive of ‘an infinite opening of meaning’ which emerges after the Nietzschean death of god.

Furthermore, Nancy recognizes that the death of god symbolizes that existential meaning must now be transmuted in its very nature. This is why Nietzsche initially called for a *trans-valuation* of all values such that existence itself is (re)valuated not in the terms proposed by traditional metaphysical thinking, but through a thinking that engages the very immanence of this world, and its infinite possibilities for finite meaning(s). That which demands to be thought of our own age is precisely meaning *sans* foundation; meaning *sans* essence; and meaning *sans* absolute source. Nancy further draws influence from Derrida’s interpretation of Nietzsche, which pursues ‘the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.’<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *SW*, p. 116.

<sup>59</sup> Fischer 1997:33.

<sup>60</sup> Nancy 1993a:110.

<sup>61</sup> For a full account of this see Nancy’s essay ‘A Finite Thinking’ in *FT*, pp. 3-30.

<sup>62</sup> *GT*, p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> Derrida 2001:369.

Notably, however, Nancy prefers the concept of ‘openness’ to that of ‘play’ in his view that the demise of meaning as a metaphysical presentation opens up meaning to infinite new possibilities. Like Derrida’s conception of meaning as ‘play’, Nancy’s conception of meaning as ‘open’ refers to the disruption or fracturing of meaning as a pure signified presentation,<sup>64</sup> which, through its deconstruction, exposes an infinite plurality of possible meaning(s) that were formerly effaced and relegated to the periphery of meaning’s absolute presentation. That is, absolute meaning has heretofore closed itself off from a multiplicity of meaning(s) in order to maintain the integrity of its absolute nature; but the demise of the absolute, playing out in the death of god, has revealed those multifarious meaning(s) to(ward) which contemporary humanity is hence exposed or *open*. In this sense, it might be said that Nancy takes up the philosophical project initiated by Nietzsche, from which Nancy endeavours to establish his own philosophy of the present out of Nietzsche’s proposed ‘philosophy of the future’.

Nancy thinks *toward* the future by (re)thinking the present, that is, thinking that which demands to be thought in and of our present. Nancy is thus properly speaking a philosopher of the present, of the *hic et nunc*, where the *hic et nunc* is understood as a continuum of contemporary existence, rather than an isolated moment in human history. Nancy is further a philosopher of the future, in the Nietzschean sense that the future is always already arriving through the present, or better yet, the present is a *birth to presence* of the future. Nancy calls the future the as yet ‘unheard-of’, for which ‘one has to get one’s ears ready.’<sup>65</sup> Contemporary philosophical thought must therefore move forward toward this as yet unheard-of future, since existential meaning from our traditional past has now been exhausted in the death of god, and there can be no thought of going back.

#### 4.2.3. The Ever-Elusive ‘Return’ to Meaning

Nancy expresses a distinct aversion to any retrograde conception of meaning that seeks to *return* to a previous order of signification. Prior to his *prospective* conception of meaning as sense, Nancy asserts in *The Gravity of Thought* that there can be no *retrospective* ‘return’ to a meaning that was upheld prior to the death of god. Nancy eschews pre-death-of-god and pre-Nietzschean forms of thought on the question of existential meaning because they attempt to return to a meaning that no longer has proper bearing on contemporary human existence. Traditional existential meaning has been unequivocally exhausted; it has run its course, and in doing so, it has run beyond all recourse, finally revealing a human *will-to-meaning* or *will-to-presentation* which ‘constantly makes meaning return’ in a myriad of ways – ‘in knowledge, history, work, the State, the community, law, ethics, and even in art and faith’, for the simple yet significant reason that human beings demand that ‘there *must* be signification, that is, Ideas *must* not be empty, and experience

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<sup>64</sup> Derrida 2001:369.

<sup>65</sup> Nancy 1993a:109. See also: Van Den Abbeele 1997:13-17.

must not be chaos.<sup>66</sup> Secular humanity today desperately demands meaning of its world and its existence owing to the exigency of a finite human existence that is without foundation and without absolute origin.<sup>67</sup> Humanity thus demonstrates an inexhaustible will-to-meaning which demands the presence of meaning and decries its negation. This logic is at the very heart of the human call for a *return* to meaning as presentation and signification, which Nancy problematizes as ‘a strange way of proceeding’ inasmuch as it ‘proposes retreating in order to advance’.<sup>68</sup>

A return to a previous order of signification and its meaning can assume a variety of different forms: a return ‘to values, to reason, to God, to Kant, or to God knows what else.’<sup>69</sup> A conception of a return to a formerly established existential meaning is evinced especially in neo-modernist, post-Enlightenment discourses;<sup>70</sup> post-secular theology featuring an all-too-limited concern for the implications of the death of god;<sup>71</sup> and secular humanism which seeks to re-establish the essential meaning of humanity.<sup>72</sup> Nancy problematizes the philosophical position(s) of such accounts by arguing that a *return to* meaning is tantamount to a ‘forgetting of philosophy’ itself, insofar as ‘philosophy is that which thinks the present reality (the only one there is...) by thinking the present, the presence and presentation of reality’ and in doing so, the philosopher ‘orders [history] into a new apprehension’.<sup>73</sup> Philosophers, then, are properly speaking, thinkers of the present as it presents itself to human existence. The philosophical and existential narrative of the ‘return’ conceives of meaning as if it has somehow been lost *to* the past through its sacrifice on the altar of the present. But such a sacrifice cannot be made, for meaning is manifest(ed) on the temporal horizon of contemporary concerns. This is why Nancy asserts that ‘it is hardly possible today to act as though nothing has happened that would have to be taken into account’.<sup>74</sup> Responsible philosophical thought cannot ignore the death of god and its implications *vis-à-vis* existential meaning, and contemporary thought must therefore think from that position, rather than before or beyond it. Philosophy – thinking itself – must think instead of the return *of* meaning in our contemporary reality rather than a retrospective return *to* meaning in some ideal past.<sup>75</sup>

A return *to* meaning suggests an ideal of meaning that is not affected by the passing of historical time; meaning that has somehow survived the onslaught of historical eventualities, and remained intact beyond the contingencies of our human experiences, ‘shielded from history by a strange

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<sup>66</sup> *GT*, p. 24. Original emphasis.

<sup>67</sup> Devisch 2002:388. This idea is articulated appositely by one of Nancy’s primary influences, Heidegger, who posits that human existence, or *Dasein*, is ‘thrown’ into the world and abandoned to its existential vicissitudes (*BT*, §38).

<sup>68</sup> *GT*, p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Raffoul 1997:ix. See also: Hutchens 2005:39.

<sup>71</sup> See Hutchens 2005:85-96.

<sup>72</sup> See *GT*, pp. 24-25. See also: Hutchens 2005:37-42.

<sup>73</sup> *GT*, p. 15.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22. See also: Raffoul 1997:xi.

intellectual freeze.<sup>76</sup> This is not only a far-fetched idea, in Nancy's view, but altogether impossible, insofar as a return *to* meaning demands the return of the identical,<sup>77</sup> which cannot ever return as such. Conversely, thinking on the return *of* meaning should acknowledge that only *difference* returns to thought: an ideal and identical meaning ostensibly lost in the passages of temporality cannot return, nor indeed did it ever in fact exist. Following Nancy's logic, one might argue that an inherent *retrospective bias* is discernible within those narratives seeking a return *to* meaning. The retrospective bias of existential meaning, as I call it, or the return *to* meaning as Nancy names it, operates in such a way as to colour contemporary existence bleak in its relation to a brighter past. The retrospective bias of existential meaning thus devalues this life in this world *hic et nunc* and, as a result, is guilty of the kind of reactive nihilism which Nietzsche outlines and critiques.

The retrospective bias is, in Nietzschean terms, equivalent in its nihilism to that of transcendental escapism: it seeks recourse to existential meaning through the past rather than the present, and in this way undermines *that* the present needs to be *thought*, and that *only* the present can be thought. We cannot think in terms of past meaning(s) because our thinking is always already contemporaneous within an existence that is in the process of unfolding – a birth to presence that cannot be unborn in the past. Any past *archè* or absolute origin of meaning<sup>78</sup> is exhausted with the death of god. The thought of the return *to* meaning, then, demonstrates an operational logic akin to that of a metaphysical order of signification which forever (dis)places meaning 'at-a-distance' from contemporary human existence. A return *to* meaning can therefore only ever inform us of what existence might have *meant*, but not what it *means*.

It follows from Nancy's insights above that both the thought of a return *to* meaning as well as the thought of meaning *qua* traditional metaphysical signification harbour an inherent discrepancy in positing that meaning is simultaneously present and absent: present-at-a-distance and therefore absent at present.<sup>79</sup> Because Nancy's thought is so firmly rooted in the contemporary world, and follows steadfastly in the wake of the death of god, it consequently disallows any retrospective thinking which seeks to re-establish existential meaning in an order of signification that has already been exhausted, and has left humanity abandoned without further appeal or foundation.<sup>80</sup> To be sure, Nancy also argues against any new form of existential meaning which purports to advance the historical progress of humankind.<sup>81</sup> Rather than placing his primary emphasis on past or future meaning(s), Nancy proposes philosophical thinking on meaning that is contemporary in

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<sup>76</sup> *GT*, p. 19.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17

<sup>78</sup> Raffoul 1997:ix

<sup>79</sup> *GT*, p. 30, 35.

<sup>80</sup> One might compare Nancy's thinking here to that of Albert Camus's absurd 'rebel', who engages in an existential revolt against meaninglessness and toward a meaningful existence 'without appeal' to the gods, or the transcendental.

<sup>81</sup> *GT*, p. 21. One might claim that Nancy's criticism and suspicion here of the modern philosophical notion of human 'progress' demonstrates a possible postmodern element in Nancy's thought.

the truest sense; one in which meaning *is* always already present by being rooted in *this* world, *hic et nunc*.

In this contemporary world from which ‘the gods have fled’,<sup>82</sup> Nancy identifies our unmitigated existential abandonment henceforth. Following in the philosophical train of thought established by Heidegger, Nancy claims that abandonment, following the death of god, has become intrinsic to our contemporary human condition.<sup>83</sup> Yet, Nancy would not have our existential abandonment treated in a nihilistic or negative sense, but rather as a merely descriptive assumption of our contemporary existence which cannot be overlooked, nor should it be displaced by any salvation or redemption beyond this world, since ‘one cannot save oneself or live in a “saved” world if that requires adopting belief in the transcendental condition of meaning.’<sup>84</sup> Abandonment in no way suggests a nihilistic conclusion to our contemporary human existence, but rather unexpectedly implies a potential abundance of meaning(s) inasmuch as an abandoned existence ‘opens on a profusion of possibilities’,<sup>85</sup> neither wholly negative nor positive. Our abandonment simply means that we are ‘without return and without recourse’,<sup>86</sup> which may be understood as the condition of our human existence in *this* world which causes us to (re)think our contemporary existence in different terms, or indeed, in terms of difference itself, as will be argued later in this chapter.

By assuming the death of god as a philosophical and existential premise to his thinking on meaning, Nancy leads us to a new means-to-meaning precisely within our abandoned existence, and not despite it. The question which Nancy would proffer in the face of our existential abandonment is the following: can this abandoned world and our abandoned human existence nevertheless be considered as meaningful as ever before, if not more so? And if the answer to this question is affirmative, which Nancy indeed believes it to be, then it is incumbent upon humanity today to inquire into precisely *how* this might be the case. In his approach, exhibiting a somewhat Nietzschean spirit, Nancy attempts to overcome such nihilistic human impulses by means of a movement or orientation *toward* this world itself as a realm *of* the always already meaningful. Nancy’s philosophy reveals how the death of god henceforth announces at one and the same time the passing of our past meaning(s), the birth to presence of our contemporary existence, and the perpetual promise of meaning for our human future. Nancy thus identifies the death and birth of meaning(s) within the same eventuality: with the death of god dies traditional signification, and following this most monumental and meaningful event, the world *as* sense may be born.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> As Heidegger (2002b:58) phrases it.

<sup>83</sup> *BP*, pp. 36-47.

<sup>84</sup> Hutchens 2005:88. In *The Gravity of Thought* and *The Sense of the World*, Nancy rebukes recourse to transcendental redemption by positing its superfluosity in a world that is always already one of sense.

<sup>85</sup> *BP*, p. 37.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>87</sup> Devisch 2002:389.

### 4.3. Existential Meaning as 'Sense'

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I will suggest that the only chance for sense and its only possible sense reside either this side of or beyond the appropriation of signifieds and the presentation of signifiers, in the very opening of the abandonment of sense, as the opening of the world.<sup>88</sup>

The above prefatory remarks from Nancy's *The Sense of the World* help to place us squarely within his (re)conceptualization of meaning as *sense*. *The Sense of the World* provides a continuation of Nancy's project of (re)thinking meaning initiated in *The Gravity of Thought*. It is in *The Sense of the World* that Nancy points away from the meaning as signification which has dominated Western thought, and orients his discourse towards meaning as sense. Nancy's choice of the word 'sense' [*sens*] is deliberate and apposite to a (re)thinking of meaning insofar as it signifies far more than straightforward signification.<sup>89</sup> Sense is always already more than mere meaning, since it exceeds that which could be signified through any static structures of signification.<sup>90</sup> In this regard, Nancy articulates the many meanings of sense as follows:

the sense of the word *sense* traverses the five senses, the sense of direction, common sense, semantic sense, divinatory sense, sentiment, moral sense, practical sense, aesthetic sense, all the way to that which makes possible all these senses and all these senses of 'sense,' their community and their disparity, which is not sense in any of these senses, but in the sense of that which comes to sense.<sup>91</sup>

#### 4.3.1. Meaning *qua* Sense versus Meaning *qua* Signification

In his essay entitled 'A Finite Thinking' (1990), Nancy defines sense as follows: 'by "sense" I mean sense in the singular, sense taken absolutely: the sense of life, of Man, of the world, of history, the sense of existence'.<sup>92</sup> In *The Sense of the World*, Nancy commences with the premise that the contemporary world no longer *possesses* any signified sense to call upon, but has itself become its own sense. Nancy therefore posits that the world *is* sense inasmuch as our worldly existence today offers only itself as a space of sense; *sans* transcendental signification, sense circulates along the very confines of *this* world, *hic et nunc*, and nowhere else. By (re)thinking existential meaning in this way, Nancy is addressing that which demands to be (re)thought under contemporary human conditions: meaning that is rooted in the immediacy and immanency of human existence, and which no longer requires recourse beyond this world as concerns its justification or legitimacy.

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<sup>88</sup> *SW*, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> A note is necessary here on the translation of the French word '*sens*' and the usage of 'sense' and 'meaning' hereafter. The French word '*sens*' suggests a number of meanings, primary among which are 'sense', 'meaning', and 'direction'. Nancy clearly distinguishes between '*le sens*' and '*la signification*' since he is attempting to rethink meaning in terms that go beyond meaning *qua* signification. Translations of the term '*sens*' in Nancy's works differ. For instance, in *The Sense of the World*, the translated term 'sense' is clearly employed, while in *The Gravity of Thought* and *Being Singular Plural* the translated term 'meaning' is employed. For the purposes of my work in this chapter, I will speak of 'meaning as sense', 'meaning *qua* sense', or simply 'sense' in reference to Nancy's idiosyncratic (re)conceptualization of meaning.

<sup>90</sup> *GT*, p. 59.

<sup>91</sup> *SW*, p. 15.

<sup>92</sup> *FT*, p. 3.

As Watkin states it: 'For Nancy the world is patently and tautologically meaningful, for the disjunction of sense and world is always already false.'<sup>93</sup> This is because, in Nancy's view, humanity is always already immersed and implicated in the world and its *circulation* of sense, which 'preexists signification and exceeds it'.<sup>94</sup>

For Nancy, sense entails 'existence *qua* liability to meaning';<sup>95</sup> an original ontological orientation toward the possibility *that* existence and the world can *make sense*. This original orientation *toward* the world as a space of sense facilitates all human (inter)action, communication, and thought, since when we (inter)act, speak, or think, we are always already swept up in the world and the possibilities of its sense(s). Importantly, Nancy's conception of sense is purposefully polyvalent and resistant to its reduction to meaning *qua* pure signified presence. In this way, sense remains almost advertently ambiguous and always retains a measure of equivocality, or what might be termed its *liminality*, especially insofar as its worldly presence flits between arrival and departure, never revealing itself as fully and finally formed.<sup>96</sup> Existential meaning as sense is thus perpetually in flux – a circulation sans static settling. Sense is especially liminal in that it transpires in the *between* of Being; '*between* things, ideas, bodies, and people in their encounters'.<sup>97</sup> This is to say that 'meaning takes place between us and not between signifier, signified, and referent',<sup>98</sup> which further suggests that 'the relation of signification is vertical while that of sense is horizontal.'<sup>99</sup> Sense therefore does not reside in a locatable point of presence either *in* or *beyond* this world, but precisely in the relational space(s) *between* everything that *is*.

Nancy understands that contemporary humanity requires a conceptualization of sense that goes beyond our historical narratives of meaning by (re)thinking existence in its own terms; a finite thinking which thinks (of) this world as one in which meaning is a continual *presencing* rather than a fixed presence. Stated differently, sense retains a *liminal* dimension in that it unfolds on 'the twilight border *between* the presence and absence of both sense and world.'<sup>100</sup> Nancy's philosophy departs from Derrida in this regard, since '[u]nlike Derrida, Nancy does not dismiss presence as metaphysics, but seeks to think it differently, otherwise than as self-presence.'<sup>101</sup> In Nancy's terms, meaning *qua* sense, while never being *fully present* in itself, is a *presencing* or birth to presence<sup>102</sup> that is always already coming into existence without the solidity and finality of fully

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<sup>93</sup> Watkin 2009:142.

<sup>94</sup> *GT*, p. 59. See also: James 2012:41, 43. Watkin (2009:138) similarly asserts: '*Sens...* is anterior to all *signification*, making all significations possible... and it precedes, succeeds, and exceeds every appropriation of signification.'

<sup>95</sup> *SW*, p. 157.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>97</sup> Morin 2012:5.

<sup>98</sup> *GT*, p. 57. Morin 2012:41.

<sup>99</sup> Morin 2012:5.

<sup>100</sup> Librett 1997:ix.

<sup>101</sup> Watkin 2009:144.

<sup>102</sup> An idea which is fully explicated in Nancy's *The Birth to Presence* (1993).

presenting itself. Meaning as sense is thus always *becoming* manifest without manifesting itself in and of itself. In this way, 'Nancy is challenging the dichotomy of presence and absence, elaborating a notion of presence inextricable from absence, of presence as passage'.<sup>103</sup> Rather than awaiting the arrival of meaning in its final and fixed form, Nancy avers that we should understand that meaning as sense is a *presencing* that moves like the vacillating ebb and flow of the tide. The presencing of sense is the very condition and possibility of presentation itself because sense precedes signification as the '*praes-entia* of being present'.<sup>104</sup> Meaning can be made manifestly present to us in a certain sense by virtue of the fact that we are always already *predisposed* to the arrival of meaning through an original ontological orientation *towards* this world which *is* sense, which is to say that the manifest patency of this world 'is all there is to presence'.<sup>105</sup> This is also to say that sense exceeds that which *can* be presented in signification; sense is beyond and before all orders of signification, but never beyond or before our shared worldly existence itself, since sense is precisely *right at [à même]*<sup>106</sup> the level of our existence as it unfolds *hic et nunc*.

According to Nancy, human beings must remain exposed to the constant coming, the undecidable arrival-departure of meaning as sense, which is always already manifest(ing) *in* and *as* this world; never fully finalized but always already *here* between-beings. Nancy asserts quite appositely in this regard that '[m]eaning does not have the sense of an answer, and not even of a question; in this sense, it has no meaning. But it is the event of an opening. It brings no salvation, but greets (calls) the to-come and the end-less'.<sup>107</sup> Human existence is an open participation in meaning which should not be delivered over to an unrealistic expectancy for finality and fullness from an existence which offers neither but is nevertheless always already meaningful as sense. Perhaps, then, we might refrain from positing that age-old philosophical question, 'what is *the* meaning of life?', supplanting it with *the sense of the world*, and an exposure to existence in the difference(s) of its myriad possible meaning(s).

Contrary to the signified meaning which haunts our human history and 'the will to a signifying appropriation of sense'<sup>108</sup> which attends that history, sense circulates *between* beings and *across* or *throughout* the world, and is only stymied through its reduction to a recalcitrant order of fixed signification. As previously argued, the Nietzschean death of god may be interpreted as the demise of such aforementioned fixed signification, but this demise points to the end of transcendental or absolute meaning, and certainly not the end of all existential meaning as such.<sup>109</sup> The end of

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<sup>103</sup> Watkin 2009:144.

<sup>104</sup> *SW*, p. 126, & *GT*, p. 59. See also: Morin 2012:41. The '*praes-entia*' here refers to sense as *preceding* and *constituting* all possible presentation(s) of meaning; sense is thus the very condition that makes meaning *qua* signification possible.

<sup>105</sup> Watkin 2009:144.

<sup>106</sup> Raffoul 1997:xvi.

<sup>107</sup> *GT*, p. 78.

<sup>108</sup> *SW*, p. 80.

<sup>109</sup> Librett 1997:ix-x.

signified meaning is, in fact, the end of meaning *as an end* in itself; that is, the end of meaning that has an ending or closure.<sup>110</sup> Sense bespeaks an abiding *openness* of meaning inasmuch as it evades static appropriation<sup>111</sup> following the death of god; the absolute presence of meaning has imploded and collapsed in on itself, and an absolute referent point for the appropriation of meaning can no longer be discerned beyond this world *hic et nunc*.

Where meaning *qua* signified metaphysical presence meets its demise in the death of god, sense as an infinite openness of finite meaning(s) is born, for it follows that if humanity has met with the exhaustion of signified metaphysical meaning in our contemporary age, it has therefore reached the end of sense as closure *qua* signified presentation, or as Nancy writes: 'What makes up "world" and "sense" can no longer be determined as a given, accomplished, "finished" presence but is intermingled with the coming, the in-finity of a coming into presence'.<sup>112</sup> This is where Nancy's philosophical project of meaning as sense properly establishes itself: in the thinking of meaning(s) as manifest in our finite human existence in *this world hic et nunc*. As Ignaas Devisch phrases it: 'As far as the world stands into a relation with a creator outside the world, it can have sense. As soon as this relation to a creator disappears, the world *has* no sense any longer. It *is* sense.'<sup>113</sup> Meaning as sense therefore entails a meaning whose presence can only ever be non-localized; incomplete; and indefinitely open in its unceasing disclosing of the world and existence(s) therein. The end of existential meaning as signified presentation bespeaks a new and 'unprecedented'<sup>114</sup> sense of existence and the world, which no longer points to a unified presentation of meaning, but a fragmentation<sup>115</sup> of meaning following in the wake of its post-structuralist deconstruction.

The critique and deconstruction of sense in terms of its signification and presentation reveals a rupturing of meaning such that meaning no longer closes in on itself, or closes itself off in order to secure its signified presence, but extends itself towards infinite possible sense(s), which could never possibly be reduced or entirely exhausted. Therefore, existential meaning as sense is no longer what we *have* but what we *are*, for it takes place right at the level of our existence itself,<sup>116</sup> not somewhere beyond or before human existence in *this world*. The deconstruction of existential meaning as predicated on a metaphysics of signified presence thus indicates the birth to presence of sense as openness, and the emergence of meaning *qua* sense as infinite and inexhaustible.<sup>117</sup> For Nancy, when existential meaning as metaphysical presence is deconstructed, its inherent ambiguity and pluralistic polyvalence is unveiled and brought to bear on Being. The effect of this

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<sup>110</sup> *SW*, p. 26.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>113</sup> Devisch 2002:389.

<sup>114</sup> *SW*, p. 127.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132. Hutchens 2005:36: 'Nancy emphasizes the fragmented nature of the finite thinking of the lack of sense'.

<sup>116</sup> *SW*, p. 41. See also: Raffoul 1997:xiv-xviii, & Watkin 2009:138-139.

<sup>117</sup> *SW*, pp. 29-33.

deconstruction is the opening of existence to itself in its veritable multifariousness, as well as the preclusion of the reduction of existence to any one particular essence, meaning or sense. This is because deconstruction, in its characteristic operation and application to thought, undermines or subverts fixed structures of signification and binary antipodes of meaning by destabilizing the structures of signification underpinning such thought.

Nancy's philosophy in *The Gravity of Thought* and *The Sense of the World* calls into question the fixed orders of signification that have come to dominate Western thought: Platonic metaphysics in all its various guises; religion in its multiple manifestations; conceptions of socio-political life<sup>118</sup> which are often taken for granted; and even secular humanism<sup>119</sup> which attempts to define the nature of contemporary humanity. Nancy is immediately suspicious of any thinking on human existence which attempts to arrive at its meaning by conceptualizing it in terms of such static, structured forms. The reason for Nancy's critique is akin to that of his philosophical forebear Derrida, who claimed that such structures of signification falter precisely on their foundation of fixity; an argumentative point which deconstruction as a discourse seeks to expose. Nancy's idiosyncratic use of deconstruction is, at least in part, an attempt to show that the meaning of existence in all its manifestations cannot be ossified in any order of signification which seeks to arrest its presence. For Nancy, existential meaning as sense features a dynamic *presencing* rather than presence as such, and in this way, cannot be arrested in a timeless and immutable form.

Nancy's philosophy in *The Sense of the World* might be termed *existential deconstruction* for the reason that it entails and employs deconstruction writ large: the deconstruction of Western philosophical thought on the meaning of existence; deconstruction applied to our thinking right on the very level of our finite worldly existence. Nancy's approach demonstrates the *existential* potential and potency of deconstruction as a possible means-to-meaning; a means which is invariably flexible, and a meaning which cannot be appropriated through strict structures of signification. Nancy's deconstruction may be thought of as the autopsy which follows in the wake of the death of god; an autopsy which reveals how meaning as metaphysical signification rendered its own demise through its attempts to reduce existence to a single meaning which was complete in and of itself. Nancy's existential deconstruction of traditional Western philosophical thought on the meaning of human existence thus exhumes and examines traditional metaphysical meaning that has perished through its own exhaustion, in order to reveal the contemporary aftermath of the death of god vis-à-vis existential meaning.

Moreover, the demise of traditional thought on existential meaning is attended by a fracturing of traditional signification into parts that no longer constitute a larger unitary whole; a (dis)order of

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<sup>118</sup> See *SW*, pp. 88-93, & 103-117.

<sup>119</sup> *GT*, pp. 24-25.

signification whose structure has been destabilized by means of post-structuralist critique in the form of deconstruction. Deconstruction examines these fragmented meaning(s) as *partes extra partes* (parts outside of parts)<sup>120</sup> without attempting to (re)assemble them into a single meaning that is unitary and whole in itself. Deconstruction thus deals directly in fractured or fragmented meaning(s) that does not seek recourse to any former holistic meaning conceived in terms of static signification.<sup>121</sup> Nancy's deconstructive approach emphasizes that fractured or fragmented meaning is not equivalent to 'broken' meaning,<sup>122</sup> and therefore does not need to be 'un-broken' through its (re)constitution in any single unicity of meaning. In Nancy's view, contemporary human existence *is* the fragmentation of sense,<sup>123</sup> and existential meaning henceforth remains fragmented since signification itself can no longer be thought in terms of a unity but rather as a deconstructed or 'nontotalizable totality'.<sup>124</sup>

Nancy's deconstruction of Western thought on existential meaning reveals a philosophical and existential movement in thought from its traditional modalities embodied in the reductionist expression 'the meaning of life' toward a philosophy of existence which thinks in terms of manifold fragmented *meaning(s) of life*, or rather and more simply, *the sense of the world*, which always already entails a plurality of singular meaning(s). On this note, existential meaning as sense encompasses a multiplicity of meaning(s) that are each time *singular* in their particular manifestation in existence, and *plural* inasmuch as sense resists its reduction to any absolute meaning rigidified within a predefined order of signification. According to Nancy, contemporary humanity is living through the end of existential meaning *qua* signification, or the death of 'a regime of *sense* that is coming full circle and completing itself before our (thereby blinded) eyes.'<sup>125</sup> It is incumbent upon contemporary humanity to *sense* the very fact that this is transpiring and demands to be addressed. We therefore can no longer speak of the singular 'meaning of life', but of existence itself *as* meaningful inasmuch as it is always already partaking of sense.

This is because, in Nancy's view, sense is not something ancillary to our existence in this world, nor is it a *property* of human existence or the world. Rather, sense and world are co-extensive and co-originary,<sup>126</sup> such that sense is implicated in human existence as a constitutive element of worldliness *per se*: 'world is not merely the correlative of *sense*, it is structured as *sense*, and reciprocally, *sense* is structured as *world*. Clearly, "the sense of the world" is a tautological

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<sup>120</sup> *SW*, p. 130, & *IC*, p. 29. This is an idea borrowed from Derrida.

<sup>121</sup> Librett 1997:xviii.

<sup>122</sup> *SW*, p. 132.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129. One might be tempted here to draw a comparison between Nancy's formulation of existential meaning *qua* sense as a 'nontotalizable totality' and Sartre's conception of human existence as a 'detotalized totality'. Both these terms seem to suggest that human existential meaning is fractional and finite rather than whole and absolute.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78. See also: Hutchens 2005:6.

expression.<sup>127</sup> From the very outset of Being, sense implies an orientation *toward* the world<sup>128</sup> and relation(s) *between* beings sharing that world: ‘Sense, for its part, is the movement of being-*toward* [*l’être-à*], or being as *coming* into presence or again as transitivity, as passage to presence – and therewith as passage *of* presence.’<sup>129</sup>

This being-toward indicates ‘distance, direction, intention, attribution, élan, passage, gift, transport, trance, and touch: *sense* in all senses’.<sup>130</sup> Following Heidegger’s conception of *Dasein*’s ‘being-in-the-world’ – according to which human beings are always already situated ‘there’ [*Da*] in-the-world<sup>131</sup> – Nancy expands this concept to include a *being-to* or *being-toward* the world *as* sense, which is to be ‘caught up in sense well before all signification’.<sup>132</sup> This *being-toward* the world bespeaks a ‘rapport, relation, address, sending, donation, presentation *to* – if only of entities or existents *to* each other.’<sup>133</sup> The sense of the world, which is the world *as* sense, is therefore not an isolated sense rendered by discrete beings or individual existents on their own in a purely subjective sense, but an outward movement of beings toward each other; an extended orientation toward the world specifically as a meaningful milieu or space of sense. In this regard, sense suggests an intimate and ultimately inextricable ontological relation between all entities in existence, since sense circulates *between* beings who are in-the-world, and an orientation *toward* the world and its various beings immediately and necessarily entails a *meaningful* participation in-the-world.<sup>134</sup> In *being-toward*, all singular human beings transcend themselves toward the immanence of *this* world and all the beings therein. This is what Nancy terms ‘*trans-immanence*’.

#### 4.3.2. The Trans-Immanence of Sense

*Contra* existential meaning *qua* signification, sense elides its inception and eludes its closure, since it is *between* beings, and therefore could not truly be absolutized or fixed for all time – neither in a timeless transcendental meaning, nor in the immanence of an individualist existential meaning. Sense is only ever present as a *presencing between* us, but never at any fixed or isolatable point of presence. According to Nancy, there is no existential meaning to be made or discovered in a single source, whether that source be immanent (in-the-world) or transcendent (beyond the world). Nancy therefore puts forward the idea that sense is ‘trans-immanent’. Nancy deploys his novel neologism of ‘trans-immanence’ partly to undermine the traditional philosophical dichotomy

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<sup>127</sup> *SW*, p. 8.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>131</sup> See *BT*, §12.

<sup>132</sup> *SW*, p. 7.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>134</sup> James (2012:43) notes that ‘[t]he original French term *être-au-monde* can translate both as being-in-the-world and as being-toward-the-world, depending on what kind of inflection one gives to the preposition *à* which can have many meanings, including ‘at’, ‘to’, ‘with’ and ‘in.’

between immanence and transcendence.<sup>135</sup> In this regard, B.C. Hutchens identifies three forms of immanence in Nancy's works: '(a) the immanence of atomic individuals in closed association with one another; (b) the immanence of a group of individuals reflecting upon their cohesion as such; and (c) the immanence of sense itself at the interstices of irreducibly open relations of sharing.'<sup>136</sup>

Hutchens further distinguishes between what he calls 'closed' or 'reflective' immanence, on the one hand, and 'open' immanence, on the other. He ascribes the latter 'open' immanence to the work of Nancy, and the former 'closed' immanence to both (a) and (b) above. Closed immanence has dominated Western thought since Plato; it establishes a dichotomous relation between an internal immanence in diametrical opposition to an external transcendence.<sup>137</sup> Closed immanence thus establishes an interiority of meaning, which renders reality meaningful only by virtue of its closure from an exteriority of *other* meaning(s), or even the perceived threat of meaninglessness. In this way, meaning is sealed in place and secured from any external *otherness of meaning*.<sup>138</sup> Closed immanence further maintains the immanence of its meaning through a positive relation to that which transcends its immanence: an immutable source of meaning as a myth or narrative that reflects the immanent community, its identity, and its meaning, back to itself.<sup>139</sup> That is, immanence 'is closed by means of the reference to a transcendent reserve of meaning.'<sup>140</sup> Traditional conceptions of closed immanence have therefore relied heavily on a transcendental element of existential meaning sited in a realm beyond the immanence of this world *hic et nunc*.

Moreover, transcendence has also been employed in Western thought to refer to that which goes beyond the purely subjective domain of individual human consciousness, and could even be said to exceed the domain of this material world *hic et nunc*. Immanence and transcendence, conceived along such lines, have remained either largely irreconcilable, or different yet connected domains that somehow retain their metaphysical separation.<sup>141</sup> Nancy rejects this traditional philosophical distinction and dichotomy, and (re)envisions existence in terms of both transcendence and immanence simultaneously. However, it must be understood that in doing so, Nancy redefines both immanence and transcendence in his own idiosyncratic philosophical terms. Immanence is (re)conceptualized in terms of the world as sense: the space or spacing of sense must be in and of this world, since sense is discernible where we always already *are*, namely in-the-world.<sup>142</sup> Sense

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<sup>135</sup> *SW*, p. 17. See also: Raffoul 1997:xvi.

<sup>136</sup> Hutchens 2005:33-34. See also: van den Abbeele 1991:37.

<sup>137</sup> Hutchens 2005:34.

<sup>138</sup> For instance, socio-political communities often establish their collective identity on the basis of such binary grounds. This is why Nancy calls for a retreating of the political and a rethinking of community in our contemporary world. See Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (1991) and *Retreating the Political* (1997) for further elaboration on this point.

<sup>139</sup> See Nancy's essay 'The Inoperative Community' in *IC*, pp. 1-42.

<sup>140</sup> Hutchens 2005:35.

<sup>141</sup> We need look no further than certain glaring examples in the history of Western thought. In ancient thought, Plato's dualistic Idealism showcases this distinction quite patently, while in more modern philosophical thought, Descartes's substance dualism aptly demonstrates this distinction. Notably, this distinction is even true of Sartrean phenomenology.

<sup>142</sup> *SW*, p. 55.

is therefore immanent inasmuch as it does not exceed or operate in excess of our world but *is* the world as a shared space of beings. This is further to posit that sense resides *with* and *between* us *in* this world, and the world for Nancy can therefore be (re)envisioned as the space of sense itself, or rather, sense is ‘the spacing of this world here.’<sup>143</sup>

Sense is also transcendent, but, to be sure, not in the traditional philosophical sense of the word. For Nancy, sense is transcendent insofar as it cannot be contained in, or reduced to, any singular meaning in or of this world. Sense is certainly not transcendent in the manner of operating *before* or *beyond* this world, in some pre-worldly or otherworldly form, for such transcendence remains, for Nancy, inscrutably abstract in that it forecloses a concrete accessibility to sense for human beings *hic et nunc*. Nancy therefore purposefully diverges from any philosophy of transcendence that thinks of meaning as operating at a metaphysical remove from this world *hic et nunc*. Instead, Nancy conceives of transcendence as a transverse movement of sense *across* (*trans*) this world and all the beings existing therein. Sense therefore exceeds the singular, but only ever towards the plural and never towards the otherworldly, since sense never escapes this world but operates precisely as the constitution of its worldliness and its limit. In this regard, Raffoul writes that ‘the limit *is* the place for the event of meaning, the event of transcendence itself, that is, existence.’<sup>144</sup> One does not pass *beyond* this limit. Rather, one exists precisely *right on* or *right at* [*à même*]<sup>145</sup> the limit of existence, for meaning as sense is a *finite* transcendence; our existence remains rooted in this world and oriented *toward* its manifold meaning(s). Transcendence is thus described by Nancy in terms of a *being-between* beings in-the-world and not as a *being-beyond* this world.

Moreover, sense cannot exist in isolation alone, for worldly existents – such as human beings are – do not exist in isolation, for ‘reality is necessarily a numerous reality’,<sup>146</sup> and therefore sense remains in excess of the purely subjective domain of human existential meaning. Sense transcends any subjective conception of meaning by sharing out [*partage*]<sup>147</sup> Being and its meaning(s) to all beings who orient themselves *toward* the world, thereby resisting the reduction of sense to any static symbolic order, or what might be designated as a *totalitarianism of meaning*. No authority has final domain over existential meaning as sense, because sense implies multiple meaning(s) circulating in this world. Sense entails the division and sharing [*partage*] of the meaning(s) of this world,<sup>148</sup> and in Nancy’s view, sense is therefore ‘the meaning of all and of each (and of no one).’<sup>149</sup> Sense hence transcends subjectivity toward inter-subjectivity, or better yet, sense transcends the

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<sup>143</sup> *SW*, p. 56.

<sup>144</sup> Raffoul 1997:xv.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>146</sup> *SW*, p. 58.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>148</sup> Raffoul 1997:xxiii.

<sup>149</sup> *GT*, p. 84.

singular toward the plural. Furthermore, the *différance* of existential meaning *qua* sense suggests that sense transcends even its own internal sameness by having its *presencing*, or its 'coming', deferred *throughout* the world, and differing from any static conception of sense by means of the perpetual momentum of its worldly circulation. Nancy writes that '*sense will defer itself and will differ always from all that you will seize, from all philosophy, and yet you will have had a sense of it, and philosophy will have had the sense precisely of this*'.<sup>150</sup> In this way, Nancy uses *différance* to demonstrate that sense cannot be apprehended, appropriated, or applied to the world, but arises *right at* our existence in the world, never outside of it. We stand within the worldly circulation of sense and never exterior to, or over against, the world, existence, and its meaning(s) *qua* sense. Owing to the internal *différance* of sense, any attempt at an absolute appropriation of existential meaning as sense can result only in a displaced meaning, or 'meaning present-at-a-distance'.<sup>151</sup> Significantly, then, Nancy's conception of meaning *qua* sense transcends meaning *qua* static signification by moving thought toward a dynamism of meaning(s) that are ceaselessly flowing through the world by means of human (inter)actions, thoughts, and worldly engagements.

Following Nancy's redefining of immanence and transcendence as above, it becomes clear that sense is neither strictly transcendent nor immanent, but precisely both at once: *trans-immanent* insofar as its space of circulation is always already *here* in *this* world (immanent), across (*trans*) all beings that reside within the space of its worldly circulation. The trans-immanence of sense thus reveals that meaning *qua* sense, or *existential sense*, is 'a transcendence *inside* the world.'<sup>152</sup> Moreover, we are worldly beings who always already accede to sense, yet we cannot isolate or grasp at sense as if it were some static object of our appropriative efforts. Sense is dynamic in that it transcends its own finality or closure; it transcends itself constantly as it circulates in this world, and evades absolute appropriation without thereby precluding access to its worldly circulation.

#### 4.3.3. Entailments of Sense: Surprise, Infinite Finitude, & Exposure

Nancy posits that existential meaning *qua* sense is inexhaustible in that it always contains the latent potential of *surprise*: 'existence is (the surprise of) sense, without any other signification.'<sup>153</sup> Unlike meaning *qua* signification, sense forms part of the 'event' of existence,<sup>154</sup> which never ceases to be potentially surprising and ultimately defies any suspension of sense. That is, human beings might be surprised at the event of existence precisely because existence, as an endlessly unfolding event or ceaseless happening, retains an appreciable measure of *unpredictability*. This further leads Nancy to the idea that human finitude is not only a confrontation with the eventuality

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<sup>150</sup> *SW*, p. 36. Original italics.

<sup>151</sup> *GT*, p. 43.

<sup>152</sup> Devisch 2002:388.

<sup>153</sup> *SW*, p. 128, & p. 147. In *GT*, p. 70, Nancy writes of the surprise of existence as a 'shock of meaning'. For further elaboration, see: Hutchens (2005:57-60), who succinctly and aptly outlines Nancy's account of sense as surprise.

<sup>154</sup> *SW*, p. 127.

of our non-existence or death, as Heidegger suggests in his conception of being-towards-death.<sup>155</sup> For Nancy, human finitude involves a thinking of our existence at the extremes of its possibilities, which entails opening up ourselves to our human existence as an event that retains a perpetual potentiality in surprise. Existence and its possible meaning(s) remain open to surprise henceforth, for god is dead and the meaning of human existence is no longer metaphysically predetermined by anything beyond *this* world and *this* existence as it is lived *hic et nunc*.<sup>156</sup> The surprise at the event of existence, and the irremovable potential for difference(s) of existential meaning(s) which such surprise announces, indicates that the meaning(s) of existence can be inexhaustible in scope. Following the death of god, the latent potential for a plurality of different existential meaning(s) now stands before us as an infinite sea,<sup>157</sup> and our erstwhile human, all too human existence may hence be (re)defined as one of '*infinite finitude*', for 'Being is the infinite actuality of the finite.'<sup>158</sup>

Nancy's conception of '*infinite finitude*',<sup>159</sup> or '*the infinity of finite senses*',<sup>160</sup> refers to the idea that meaning *qua* sense 'is nothing other than "the world *tout court*," this world here whose "*here*" is not opposed to a [transcendent] "*there*" but *articulates* all possible [immanent] beings-there.'<sup>161</sup> This means that the world, and our human existence therein, bespeaks 'a certain limitlessness of actual and material worldly existence.'<sup>162</sup> For Nancy, the possibilities of existential meaning *qua* sense are thus rooted in humanity's immediate worldly finitude, but are infinite in number, owing to the plurality of worldly beings, and the innumerable possible permutations and combinations of responses to existence by means of different human (inter)action(s), thought(s), and worldly engagement(s). For Nancy, the finitude of one's human existence is not the ground for an authentic existence in confrontation with one's eventual demise, as Heidegger would have it, nor is it a limit condition suggested by our contingent freedom of choice, as Sartre would have it.<sup>163</sup> Nancy goes further than this by asserting that human finitude has not yet been adequately thought for our contemporary world, and therefore needs to be reopened and redressed.<sup>164</sup>

This is why Nancy calls for a 'finite thinking' in which human beings think of their existence precisely in terms of its infinite finitude. Moreover, because human finitude is a *shared* finitude, infinite finitude further suggests that new possibilities to human existence and its meaning(s) are constantly opening up on the fringes or limits of our shared human experience(s). Nancy asserts: 'The coming [of sense] is infinite: it does not get finished with coming; it is finite: it is offered up

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<sup>155</sup> See *BT*, §§51-53.

<sup>156</sup> *SW*, p. 159.

<sup>157</sup> *GS*, §125.

<sup>158</sup> *SW*, p. 152.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-33.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> James 2012:42.

<sup>163</sup> See *BN*, p. 567.

<sup>164</sup> *SW*, p. 29. This is also the central theme of Nancy's book *A Finite Thinking* (2003).

in the instant.<sup>165</sup> If we think of finitude in the narrow sense of a limit condition of our existence in Heideggerian or Sartrean terms, then finitude is perceived as a *closing off* of human existence: either from one's ownmost potentiality for existence (in Heidegger), or from other possible choices of one's fundamental ontological freedom (in Sartre). *Contra* Sartre, Nancy argues that the finitude of meaning as sense is not merely a matter of free individual choice(s), but rather a matter of *participation in* existence and the world as sense – what Nancy terms 'ex-position' or 'exposure': 'Sense belongs to the structure of the world... its existence and exposition.'<sup>166</sup>

For Nancy, meaning *qua* sense is an *exposure* – the 'being-exposed-of-the-ones-to-the-others'.<sup>167</sup> Exposure is also an *existential attitude* toward the world as sense, and the dispositional correlate of the inexhaustible openness of sense that follows after signified (closed) meaning is exhausted. Nancy goes so far as to posit that exposure is the 'essence of Being' inasmuch as 'existence is nothing other than Being exposed'.<sup>168</sup> This existential exposure entails a fundamental openness that coincides with a responsible<sup>169</sup> and responsive human orientation of being-toward this world and other existents with whom one shares this world. Existential meaning as sense implies the manifest 'nudity of existing',<sup>170</sup> such that every human being is open 'to making sense, to receiving sense, to leaving sense open.'<sup>171</sup> This exposure suggests that one is susceptible or *passible* to the event or happening of sense<sup>172</sup> through a recognition that this world itself is precisely the space where infinite possibilities for finite meaning(s) may be made manifest. On this point, Nancy writes: 'But the sense of all this, the meaning of philosophy at its end, is that the world is the origin, and that the worldliness of the world, qua absolute existential condition, exhausts its finite sense – exhausts it, that is, opens it infinitely. *Mundus patet*.'<sup>173</sup>

This infinite finitude that is our lot, and upon whose foundation existential meaning is made manifest, demands of humanity to be open to(ward) difference(s) of meaning(s), for difference is always already contained in the very operation of sense as *differánce*. Existential exposure does not entail an unmitigated socio-political tolerance of difference(s), but an existential attitude of amenability to the possibility of sense in its manifest *otherness* and difference. Existential meaning has traditionally been built on the grounds of sameness or ideal identity rather than difference, especially the closed immanence of identity discernible in an individual subjectivity, or even in a communal identity that subscribes to an inflexible symbolic order, and thus believes itself to be

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<sup>165</sup> *SW*, p. 35.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>168</sup> *BSP*, p. 187.

<sup>169</sup> *SW*, p. 155. See also: *SW*, p. 71, & p. 151: 'To have a sense of what is happening is quite precisely to respond to, and to be responsible for, that which is unappeasable and inappropriable as such'. See also: Morin 2012:46.

<sup>170</sup> *SW*, p. 128, & p. 137. See also: *GT*, p. 70, where Nancy writes of the 'nakedness of meaning'.

<sup>171</sup> *SW*, p. 165, & *GT*, p. 69.

<sup>172</sup> *GT*, p. 69.

<sup>173</sup> *SW*, p. 160. '*Mundus Patet*' translates from the Latin as 'world' that is 'open', 'accessible', 'apparent', or 'exposed'.

impervious to the vagaries of Being and the caprices of its contingency. But as Nancy argues, sense makes sense only on the grounds of deferral and difference(s) *between* beings, a point succinctly described under sense's internal *differánce*.<sup>174</sup> Therefore, sense, as Nancy conceives of it, can only be made through an open human exposure to difference(s) as the constitutive ground of *all* sense. This pertains to the 'otherness of meaning' discussed in Chapter III, for to be exposed to this world and to those who exist within its confines entails an exposure to precisely such an *otherness of meaning*, especially inasmuch as 'exposure is a unity conceived *as* multiplicity'.<sup>175</sup>

Nancy therefore calls upon contemporary humanity to adopt an existential attitude of exposure to the world, its inhabitants, and its myriad possible meaning(s).<sup>176</sup> Such an existential exposure requires a responsiveness to this world as it *is, hic et nunc*, and a responsibility to this world as it may yet be. Humanity henceforth must therefore not *anticipate* the manifestation of meaning in its pure signified presence, but must *participate* in the meaning *qua* sense of the world which is always already circulating in *passages* of presence<sup>177</sup> *between* worldly beings, specifically in the form of human (inter)activity, shared thoughts, and worldly (co-)operations. In this regard, Nancy asserts that Being is 'not an "individuality", but punctuations, encounters, crossings.'<sup>178</sup> Through his finite thinking on meaning as sense, Nancy demonstrates that finitude is indeed meaningful, even infinite in its potential meaning(s), but only insofar as finite human beings allow themselves to be exposed to the world in all the polyvalence and difference(s) of its meaning(s).

#### 4.3.4. Between the Absolute & the Abyss<sup>179</sup>

As demonstrated previously in this chapter, Nancy argues that there can be no return to former traditional conceptions of existential meaning *qua* metaphysical signification, which is to say that meaning as absolute closure or signified presence is henceforth generally precluded under Nancy's delimitations. It has also been demonstrated that, following the exhaustion of existential meaning as closure, existential meaning as sense may reveal itself as inexhaustible; opened to an infinity of finite possibilities after the death of god and the demise of transcendent meaning(s). This leads to a most significant point in Nancy's philosophy on meaning as sense: absolute meaning, or what Nancy calls 'myth', as well as its antipode in meaninglessness or 'nihilism',<sup>180</sup> are both equally subverted by a finite thinking on existential meaning as sense. Since sense and world are co-extensive, human beings are immediately immersed in sense through an existential *exposure* and open orientation *toward* the world and its beings. The openness of sense therefore

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<sup>174</sup> *SW*, pp. 34-36.

<sup>175</sup> Watkin 2007:59.

<sup>176</sup> *SW*, p. 74.

<sup>177</sup> *BSP*, p. 5: Nancy refers to 'the crossing-through [*passages*] of presence.'

<sup>178</sup> Fischer 1997:34.

<sup>179</sup> This formulation is derived from Librett 1997:ix-xv.

<sup>180</sup> *SW*, p. 50.

positively undermines meaning appropriated as an absolute closure of the sense(s) of the world. In this view, myth and nihilism, though seemingly opposed to one another, are actually alike in that they are both reliant on closed (absolute) orders of signification. Specifically, 'myth' points to absolute conceptions of a meaningful human existence, while 'nihilism' points to the absolute lack of any existential meaning or sense. For Nancy, myth and nihilism delineate the antipodal limits of meaning to which human thinking has historically been drawn: 'either disposed in accordance with the power of myth or thrown frozen into the bottom of the abyss' of nihilism.<sup>181</sup>

Nancy argues that both these polarities (myth and nihilism, the absolute and the abyss) are found wanting under philosophical scrutiny, since the sense of existence lies somewhere in the opening *between* these polarities, and never finally rests or becomes *arrested* at either pole: myth and nihilism together 'form the double border of the opening that philosophy itself wants to be'.<sup>182</sup> Myth, as sense 'purely given',<sup>183</sup> actually undermines meaning as sense by attempting to establish its unequivocal closure, thereby falsely sundering sense from any further fluctuation. Myth thus cuts sense off at an arbitrary, ostensibly metaphysically predefined point, and seeks (erroneously or in vain) to stymie sense into submission within a static order of signification, which purportedly guarantees an existential meaning in perpetuity via the impossible promise of its permanency. This is what grandiose orders of signification, or grand-narratives of meaning, have historically hoped to achieve.<sup>184</sup> Yet, such mythic orders of signification, specifically metaphysics predicated on transcendental signifieds, have revealed themselves as inadequate in accounting for existential meaning,<sup>185</sup> and do not deliver on their promise of fulfilment, despite their grandiose pretensions.

Moreover, attempting to arrest sense in a static order of signification constitutes a suspension of the worldly circulation of sense; unnecessarily closing existence to its myriad possible meanings by selectively securing some particular sense of the world in an ossified absolute. Such a move is problematic inasmuch as it denies the *singular plural* nature of our worldly human existence. By making an absolute of singular sense, meaning is made to bypass the plural, which, for Nancy, cannot be bypassed, because plurality is an intrinsic aspect of our ontological constitution as *singular plural* beings, as will be demonstrated in Nancy's ontological arguments to follow. Nancy is of the view that only meaning as sense guarantees meaning in perpetuity, for it does not seek to stultify sense into static structures which would undermine the unceasing circulation of sense. Sense cannot be finally fixed in any singular source, for sense is restless,<sup>186</sup> sans beginning or end.

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<sup>181</sup> *SW*, p. 50.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.* See also: *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>184</sup> According to Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), it is precisely such grand-narratives or meta-narratives of meaning that postmodern thought seeks to place under scrutiny. Such meta-narratives of meaning include religion, the philosophical project of Enlightenment, or even contemporary science. In this specific sense, Nancy might be termed a postmodernist.

<sup>185</sup> An inadequacy rooted in the exhaustion of meaning *qua* signification; emphatically announced by the death of god.

<sup>186</sup> Hutchens 2005:44.

Existential meaning *qua* absolute myth is therefore metaphysically and existentially problematic insofar as it ossifies that which resists ossification – viz. the sense of the world – and in doing so, inadvertently condemns itself to its own failure.<sup>187</sup>

At the opposite end of the spectrum of existential meaning, nihilism is equally problematic in Nancy's view, in that nihilism negates the very possibility of meaning, and thereafter experiences a *horror vacui* in its absence.<sup>188</sup> But for Nancy, there could be no absence of sense, since there is meaning already in the positing of such absence.<sup>189</sup> That is, to posit the absence of meaning is nonetheless to participate in an understanding of meaning as sense, for one cannot posit the lack or absence of meaning if one were not already exposed in some measure to what would constitute its fulfilment or presence. Therefore, nihilism misses the patent participation in sense which its discourse immediately demonstrates in its very positing. To posit the absolute absence of meaning is merely to posit its absence in terms of a metaphysics of presence, thereby announcing the end of closed signification and absolute meaning. Existential nihilism in all its forms emerges as a result of the failure of any metaphysics of presence to ensure existential meaning for *this* world of human experience *hic et nunc*. But this failure on the part of a metaphysics of presence points only to the end of absolute meaning via static orders of signification, and certainly not the absolute end of all meaning. Nihilistic thinking thus basis itself in an order of signification that has now met its demise in the death of god, and on this basis alone, blindly neglects any possible sense of the world *to come*. In this way, nihilism henceforth reveals its participation in a conception of existential meaning that has passed, and a determinate myopia concerning any future meaning yet to pass.

One might say that nihilism experiences and interprets the death of god only in terms of *death* – the death of meaning itself – and therefore does not recognize in this monumental existential eventuality the *birth* of new possibilities of existential meaning as sense. For Nancy, nihilistic perspectives on contemporary existence hold fast and firm to an obsolete thinking on meaning that is now fast fading into obscurity. Nihilism hence (dis)colours and taints human existence with saturnine tones in its bemoaning of metaphysical meaning's death. Nancy, following Nietzsche, identifies that the nihilism humanity has known heretofore, must, for the sake of contemporary human existence and its meaning(s), be overcome, thereby revealing unforeseen possibilities for existential meaning under different terms. Understood in terms of its philosophical import and existential gravity, nihilism henceforth announces a despair at the death of traditional modes of meaning, yet significantly further intimates the possible future birth to presence of meaning(s) rooted in the immediacy of human existence in our contemporary world.

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<sup>187</sup> *SW*, p. 22.

<sup>188</sup> Hutchens 2005:2. The term '*horror vacui*' translates from the Latin as 'fear of emptiness'.

<sup>189</sup> *BSP*, p. 1.

In Nancy's view, it is unequivocally true that '[t]he curtain has fallen on the metaphysical scene, on metaphysics as scene of (re)presentation.'<sup>190</sup> Yet, it is equally true that, after the death of god, the 'growing of the desert [of nihilism] could indeed unveil for us an unknown space, an unknown, excessive aridity of the sources of sense. The end of all sources, the beginning of the dry excess of sense.'<sup>191</sup> As a result, nihilism cannot be said to be the necessary, enduring fate of humankind following the death of god, but might instead announce the possibility of meaning(s) in excess of all signification and mythic transcendental signifieds. Nancy writes:

the very movement of the occidental history of *sense* as the movement of an ontotheology in principle involved with its own deconstruction, the *end* of which, in all senses, is precisely 'this world *here*,' this world that is to such an extent '*here*' that it is definitively beyond all gods and all signifying or signified instances of sense: itself alone all in-significant sense.<sup>192</sup>

To remain open to the sense in and of our contemporary human existence, we must not think of sense as something externally derived, divinely prescribed, or finally determinable as such. Sense is our ingress or access to the meaning(s) that are always already circulating across this world and the sharing of Being that forms part of what constitutes our human existence. Humanity can always accede to worldly sense, but only through an existential disposition of exposure to the inevitable<sup>193</sup> otherness of meaning, and openness to the world and the beings residing therein. Sense is thus an accession *to* meaning, rather than an absolute appropriation of meaning 'in itself'. We cannot seek out Absolute Sense in the way we have sought after Absolute Truth or Meaning. We must therefore reconfigure the manner in which we are *toward* the world. Following in the wake of the death of god, humanity is abandoned to nothing but this world here as sense itself. Sense encompasses, in its very foundation, the loss of existential orientation and meaning which we are facing today, and one might therefore say that '[s]ense... is its own constitutive loss'<sup>194</sup> inasmuch as '[s]ense, even in its apparent absence, is accessible to a thinking that is directed towards existence, whether that sense is one of life, man, world, history, or whatever else.'<sup>195</sup>

Nancy's conception of sense is indicative of a philosophy that has overcome the outmoded antipodes of myth and nihilism, both of which point toward existential meaning as immovable: fixed in a superlative narrative (myth), or enclosed in an interminable meaninglessness (nihilism). This overcoming of both myth and nihilism is an important philosophical and existential move on Nancy's part, since the positing of a new myth of meaning might very well be overturned in time, as has certainly been the case with myths of meaning throughout history; and on the other hand,

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<sup>190</sup> *SW*, p. 23.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>193</sup> Inevitable inasmuch as the world is a shared space of meaning(s).

<sup>194</sup> Hutchens 2005:38.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

a sheer nihilistic despair over the absence of absolute meaning does little, if anything, to advance our contemporary thinking on existential meaning toward the future. By means of a philosophy that is contemporary in the truest sense, Nancy circumvents our human, all too human desire for absolute existential meaning by (re)thinking and affirming *this world as sense*; and moreover, Nancy subverts the possibility of utter meaninglessness by affirming the fact that human existence finds itself thrown into an uncertain, yet inexhaustible space of sense between the absolute and the abyss, and he does so with a straightforward, yet significant, thought: there is *this world here*, nothing more nor less, and existential meaning(s) must be affirmed precisely on that foundation.

#### 4.3.5. The Nietzschean Nancy: Sense as Life-Affirmation

Nancy's Nietzschean nuances are most evident in his assertion that 'nothing exceeds the measure of the world.'<sup>196</sup> By moving from existential meaning *qua* signification to existential meaning *qua* sense, and in the process undermining both absolutist mythical meaning and defeatist nihilistic meaninglessness, Nancy's philosophy answers the existentialist and philosophical call issued by Nietzsche over a century ago; one that highlighted the urgency of a trans-valuation of values, and an affirmation of human existence in this world on its own terms. One might even go so far as to say that Nancy's conception of sense puts forward a trans-valuation of existential values that surpasses even Nietzsche himself. That is, Nancy is a Nietzschean beyond Nietzsche in the sense that Nancy's thought is not indicative of any devout discipleship under Nietzsche's philosophical tutelage, but may be viewed as a philosophical furtherance of the thought raised by Nietzsche in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this way, Nancy partly realizes Nietzsche's proposed 'philosophy of the future'.

Continuing along the above line of argumentation, one can assert that Nancy's conception of sense as the existential deconstruction of meaning *qua* signification, and the exposure of an infinite finitude of meaning(s) in the trans-immanence of this world here, is a Nietzschean affirmation, or 'a Nietzschean new sense'<sup>197</sup> of existence *hic et nunc*, inasmuch as Nancy does not seek to set sense in opposition to existence in this world of Being *qua* becoming, but rather understands that this world *is* sense, and that sense remains forever in excess of any transcendental signified or fixed order of signification. In true Nietzschean form, Nancy conceives of a meaningful world which requires only itself as concerns its meaning, without the need for redemption or salvation from beyond its domain. This world *hic et nunc* can be affirmed as it *is*: 'decidedly neither *cosmos* (smile of the Immortals) nor *mundus* ("vale of tears"), but the very place of sense.'<sup>198</sup> One might therefore posit, along with Nancy himself, that sense 'is affirmation itself... a power to affirm.'<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> *GT*, p. 3.

<sup>197</sup> Van Den Abbeele 1997:16.

<sup>198</sup> *SW*, p. 147.

<sup>199</sup> Nancy 2005:438.

Nancy's conception of sense might also be said to be akin to Nietzsche's formulation of 'forces', which entails the play of difference(s) between entities, phenomena, and/or events in the world *qua* becoming.<sup>200</sup> Nancy recognizes that difference, and the tension(s) established in and through difference(s) between beings, cannot simply be negated, since difference forms an integral part of human existence, and therefore an integral part of existential meaning. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Nancy does not describe any hierarchy of difference(s), nor an assertive or *forceful* will to power, but aims at promoting the incorporation of difference(s) into the world as a shared space of sense. Nancy affirms sense as the trans-immanent movement or play of difference(s) across the world between all beings who share in the *differánce* of sense. Moreover, the trans-immanence of sense contributes to an affirmation of our ever-changing and pluralistic existence in this world, insofar as it calls us to account for the fact that sense circulates here where *we are*, and never *beyond us*.

Nancy's philosophy of sense further evinces an existential affirmation in that it takes place beyond the death of god and the exhaustion of meaning *qua* metaphysical signification. Nancy *affirms* the absence of metaphysical sense by playing with the infinite ambiguity remaining to humanity in a world that has recourse to no source of sense other than itself. Nancy conceives of sense as an exposure to our abandoned contemporary human existence; an existence which no longer *has* sense as a property, but entails an *active* and *responsible* participation in the circulation of sense across this world as it *is*.<sup>201</sup> Contemporary humanity must hence remain open to the affirmation of existence as an event or *surprise*, thus exposing the world in its infinite potential for finite sense. In this way, the openness of sense stands in direct contradistinction to the closed narratives of meaning that haunt our human thinking. Moreover, inasmuch as sense is a birth to presence, or *presencing*, rather than a pure presence as such, sense affirms that Being is a becoming, and that its meaning is a constant arriving to which we accede at each moment of our existence *hic et nunc*. This is to say that we can affirm our existence because we always already accede to sense by virtue of our worldly existence as finite beings exposed to the inexhaustibility of our human – no longer *all too human* – existential meaning. Devisch thus asserts that, 'for Nancy, thinking the worldwide is nothing other than an *ontological* affirmation of the most ordinary aspects of our existence.'<sup>202</sup>

Contemporary human existence is indeed *mundane*,<sup>203</sup> but not in a sense that suggests tediousness or the banality of a quotidian existence. Rather, meaning as sense is mundane because it cannot be sundered from this world which gives birth to it, and which *is* the very space of its circulation.

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<sup>200</sup> Deleuze 2006:49. See also: Derrida 1996:234.

<sup>201</sup> This is by no means equivalent to the existentialist assertion, as seen in Sartre's philosophy, that existential meaning is a subjective product of free human individuals, and a choice of Being within that freedom. In fact, as will be shown, Nancy refutes the notion that human individuals can render the world and existence meaningful in and of themselves, since this amounts to a closed immanence, which runs counter to Nancy's open immanence, or *trans-immanence*.

<sup>202</sup> Devisch 2002:389.

<sup>203</sup> One should note here that the word 'mundane' is derived from the Latin word '*mundus*' [world].

The *mundaneness of meaning* therefore refers to the fact that this world as sense always already intimates meaning(s) in all the diverse eventualities that transpire within its confines, ranging from the most ordinary and everyday events of human life, to the most profound existential exuberances, or even catastrophic and deeply tragic events. Meaning is thus mundane insofar as it is always manifesting itself *here and now*; it is everywhere in *this* world and nowhere beyond it, circulating in and across the happenings of human existence, and not in a transcendental domain. Transcendental signification heretofore has traditionally promised humanity the grandiose gift that corresponds to an implacable human desire for existential meaning,<sup>204</sup> but has never properly delivered on that promise, and as a result, has left secular humanity in a forlorn and nihilistic state in which we lament the loss and apparent absence of existential meaning as it was promised.

Contrary to existential pessimism and nihilism, Nancy would argue that existence is neither too much to suffer nor too tiresome to endure in existential ennui.<sup>205</sup> According to Nancy's account, human existence can only be deemed to be *sans* sense if it is judged against a superimposed measure of what existence ideally *ought* to be, which runs counter to a truly responsible human orientation toward the world as an infinite reserve of finite meaning(s).<sup>206</sup> Owing to an imbalance between the *is* and the *ought* of Being and the world, suffering is interpreted as 'discounted sense' or senselessness itself.<sup>207</sup> Yet, for Nancy, suffering does partake of sense, but only when the world is thought of as sense itself, and no external measure of meaning is problematically imposed onto this world as it *is*. This is not to say that humanity should not seek to improve its existential condition, but requires that human beings recognize the *worldly* nature of our condition, and thus remain ever exposed to the trans-immanent circulation of sense throughout *this* world *hic et nunc*. Hence, Nancy fundamentally delivers human beings over to our existence in this world as it *is*; calling upon us to engage in a cognizance of our existential contingency, and demand nothing more nor less of this existence than that for which we ourselves can assume existential responsibility, especially since '[n]othing is promised to existence. Hence disappointment itself is sense.'<sup>208</sup>

This responsibility of sense is indeed a responsiveness and receptivity to existence in its various eventualities, including all its harrowing tragedies and its joyous exuberances.<sup>209</sup> Our fundamental ontological orientation of *being-toward* the world entails an inexorable confrontation with the various contingencies of an existence that is no longer, nor has it ever truly been, metaphysically justified. If we are indeed, as Heidegger proposes, *thrown* into our existence and henceforth abandoned to this world with only our own existential resources from which to draw meaning,

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<sup>204</sup> *SW*, pp. 50-53.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143-153. Schopenhauer posits that human existence is merely a vacillation between boredom and suffering.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.

<sup>208</sup> *FT*, p. 30.

<sup>209</sup> *SW*, p. 151.

then it is imperative that we cultivate a cognizance of our contingency and a means-to-meaning *within* this world. Everything need not happen in service of some grander metaphysical purpose, yet everything that happens is necessarily subject to the sense of the world. Nancy addresses this point in his description of existence in terms of *happenstance*:

Neither happiness nor unhappiness, there is the *happenstance*, the sense of the *happenstance* [...] Not destiny, the Fates, [Divine] Providence, the drawing of lots. Not irresponsible chance.<sup>210</sup> But, on the contrary, the sovereign possibility of responding to the happenstance of sense.<sup>211</sup>

Humanity must be *open* to the happenstance that existence *is* – the happenstance of the *hic et nunc*. Following the death of god, in a world bereft of any absolute reference point of meaning, existence simply *is* – neither inherently meaningful nor meaningless, but precisely a matter of existential *happenstance*, which is to say that all experiences are subject to the contingencies and vicissitudes of Being, and existential meaning involves a responsible interpretation of the happenstance that takes place between beings right at the level of their worldly existence.<sup>212</sup> Following these insights, Nancy can affirm the virtually Nietzschean existential viewpoint that ‘[j]oy has no more sense than suffering’,<sup>213</sup> since all meaning is subject to happenstance. In this regard, Nancy further writes:

This affirmation – sense beyond all sense, sense in the absence of sense, the overflowing of sense as element of the world or *world as absolute excess of sense* – can be considered tragic, comical, sublime, and/or grotesque. Indeed, it can and should be considered all of these things at once.<sup>214</sup>

Following the above, one might discern in Nancy’s thought how life-negation may be transformed into an existential affirmation. Nancy’s deconstruction of meaning *qua* signification vis-à-vis his conception of sense can be interpreted under the Nietzschean schema of a trans-valuation of the values that have hitherto dominated our Western thinking on existential meaning. Specifically, by operating within the exhaustion of meaning as closure, Nancy is able to open meaning as finite sense infinitely. Nancy’s philosophy therefore testifies to the ‘open sea’<sup>215</sup> of possible meaning(s) that emerges on our secular human horizon following the death of god. Nancy does so by allowing for an interpretation of the death of god as the exhaustion of meaning *qua* signification *and* as a birth to presence of meaning *qua* sense. In this way, Nancy realizes a kind of *double affirmation*<sup>216</sup> of existence that Deleuze indicates in his interpretation of Nietzsche: by undermining nihilism and deconstructing the historical thought that brought it about, Nancy effectively negates life-negation itself, and is thus able to positively affirm the sense of the world.

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<sup>210</sup> Especially not the blind chance metaphysically ordained by the World as Will, in Schopenhauer’s pessimistic terms.

<sup>211</sup> *SW*, p. 151.

<sup>212</sup> For further elaboration on this point, see Nancy’s essay ‘Sharing Voices’ (1990).

<sup>213</sup> *SW*, p. 150.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>215</sup> *GS*, §343 (p. 280).

<sup>216</sup> Deleuze 2006:165-183. See especially §12, pp. 175-179, entitled ‘The Double Affirmation’

Nancy causes Nietzschean life-affirmation to come full circle insofar as Nancy's thinking attests to, and expands on, the latent possibility of existential affirmation suggested in Nietzschean thought. Nietzsche's philosophy serves as a fecund foundation for a contemporary philosophical account of existential meaning by issuing a call for a meaningful 'philosophy of the future'. Nancy takes up Nietzsche's prescient call and renders a philosophical account of existential meaning apposite for our contemporary world, and further announces the inexhaustible possibilities for a meaningful human future.<sup>217</sup> Beyond Nietzsche, Nancy envisions our human future in terms of a finite thinking founded in a shared existence between beings in this world. As is demonstrated in what follows, Nancy transcends the dogged individualism discernible in the existentialist philosophies of both Nietzsche and Sartre by proposing a (re)conceptualization of contemporary human existence that is neither strictly singularized nor purely pluralistic, but *singular plural*.

#### 4.4. Existential Meaning in Nancy's Ontology

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There is no meaning if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because *meaning is itself the sharing of Being*.<sup>218</sup>

It has been posited that Nancy's ontology in *Being Singular Plural* can be read as a reworking of Heidegger's fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*, but with the emphasis placed principally on *Mitsein*, or 'being-with'.<sup>219</sup> While this interpretation is meritorious in its own right, it paints an incomplete picture of Nancy's ontological project in *Being Singular Plural*. What Nancy attempts, and arguably achieves, in his work of 'co-ontology' is more than a mere commentary on Heidegger, or a reworking of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. To be sure, Nancy owes a notable philosophical debt to Heidegger, and he makes no attempt to efface this fact.<sup>220</sup> However, Nancy's ontology in *Being Singular Plural* goes beyond Heidegger's project<sup>221</sup> by allowing us to see the meaning of our existence as fundamentally and inextricably *shared*. Unlike Nietzsche and Sartre, Nancy offers a philosophical account that expresses a distinctly *social* dimension to human existential meaning by underscoring the ontological fact that we inhabit this world together, and therefore its meaning must, at least in part, be the result of a shared human existence, or co-existence, which 'does not happen to existence; it is not added to it, and one cannot subtract it out: it is existence.'<sup>222</sup>

*Contra* Nietzsche and Sartre, Nancy argues that meaning is no mere subjective creation but rather a worldly co-creation between beings. As articulated above, meaning as sense refers to our human exposure to a shared world in which sense is always already circulating. This sense of circulation,

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<sup>217</sup> Hutchens 2005:3.

<sup>218</sup> *BSP*, p. 2.

<sup>219</sup> Critchley 1999:54. See also: Morin 2012:22-27 and Hutchens 2005:29.

<sup>220</sup> Morin 2009:35 and James 2012:39.

<sup>221</sup> Bull 2011:114.

<sup>222</sup> *BSP*, p. 187.

or rather, the circulation of meaning(s) *qua* sense, is what constitutes all meaning in the *diffférance* of its origin. This circulatory nature of sense makes its birth in a space of co-existence *between* beings, with the attendant corollary that existential meaning as sense is co-originary, since its presence can be neither sourced nor fixed in any singular subjective origin. Sense in subjective isolation stagnates at its source because meaning as sense immediately implies the operation of *diffférance*, and thus the perpetual deferral of the creative source(s) of sense. Contrary to the idea of meaning as a purely subjective creation, meaning as sense thus implies a dynamic displacement of meaning's source as it circulates through the world. In this regard, Nancy bases his arguments in *Being Singular Plural* on a foundational premise which is presupposed of his entire ontology: '*Being itself is given to us as meaning. Being does not have meaning. Being itself, the phenomenon of Being, is meaning that is, in turn, its own circulation – and we are this circulation.*'<sup>223</sup>

#### 4.4.1. Meaning as the Sharing of Being

According to Ian James, 'Nancy's arguments run broadly as follows: if being is given to us as sense, this is so only insofar as a fundamental privilege is accorded to the "us" or the "we" of this donation and only insofar as sense is always and only an element which is *shared*.'<sup>224</sup> For Nancy, meaning *qua* sense undermines the notion that meaning could ever be a property of one's subjective existence owing to the *diffférance* entailed in its very constitution. The source, presence, or origin of meaning exists only as a *trace*, since meaning is always already a *sharing in* Being, which is always already *shared out* between beings. Nancy therefore asserts that '[m]eaning begins where presence is not pure presence but where presence comes apart [*se disjoint*] in order to be itself *as* such.'<sup>225</sup> Moreover, Nancy goes beyond the existentialist view that meaning is simply a subjective individual creation, and argues instead that meaning is traceable only to the co-ontological 'we' of our co-existence, and never to any single 'I' in its isolated existence. Meaning as sense is *sans* beginning or end inasmuch as the sharing of Being *is* its meaning, and this suggests that meaning cannot be possessed or held by any *one* being alone, but can only be held *in-common*. Succinctly stated, one might say that, for Nancy, meaning is a shared participation *in* existence rather than a predicate thereof, specifically because '[m]eaning does not precede its sharing'.<sup>226</sup>

This is not to say that all beings do, or must, subscribe to the *same* existential meaning and thereby hold that meaning *in-common*. In a noteworthy philosophical move, Nancy argues that sameness is not, in fact, the element that is held *in-common* between beings, but it is, in fact, *difference* that serves as the common ground of our shared co-existence. This is to say that all beings actually hold *difference in-common* inasmuch as each and every individual being is necessarily singular,

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<sup>223</sup> *BSP*, p. 2.

<sup>224</sup> James 2012:45.

<sup>225</sup> *BSP*, p. 2.

<sup>226</sup> Morin 2012:39.

which is to say unique or different from every other being; but because we are *all* different from one another in innumerable aspects, we necessarily hold difference *in-common* as an ontological fact of our co-existence. Nancy phrases this idea as follows: ‘What we have in common is also what distinguishes and differentiates us’;<sup>227</sup> that is, ‘[w]hat is commensurable in [human beings] is their incommensurability.’<sup>228</sup> Difference is thus implied in our very human condition, and any search for unequivocal sameness that subverts this inescapable difference is existentially irresponsible to the extent that it ignores the ontological fact of difference which constitutes our co-existence.

In our traditional attempts at appropriating *the* meaning of life, or meaning ‘in itself’, we already fundamentally misconceive the ontological fact that meaning is only appropriable in terms of our being-in-common.<sup>229</sup> As argued above, meaning *qua* sense is not actually appropriable as such, but *is* the in-common of Being, which is to say that meaning is not something we can *possess* or grasp, but is something which *we are*. In this regard, Nancy writes that ‘we are meaning in the sense that we are the element in which significations can be produced and circulate.’<sup>230</sup> Once again in a Nietzschean spirit, Nancy trans-values existential meaning by redefining the *element* in which there *can be* meaning. Nancy reevaluates the *how* of existential meaning in addition to the *where*: the ‘we’ is the *how* of meaning inasmuch as *we* are the ontological element in which meaning is brought to bear on Being; while the *where* of meaning is the co-ontological space *between* the ‘we’ – the trans-immanent circulation of sense in this world *hic et nunc*.

For Nancy, the human being, whether as *Dasein* (Heidegger) or *pour-soi* (Sartre), is not only the being that takes its existence and the meaning thereof as its foremost concern or question.<sup>231</sup> In *Mitsein* [being-with] the question of existential meaning is answered not only by *me* but rather *through* the ‘we’, by means of the shared existence that always already holds *between us*. As a result, when looking for the source of existential meaning, we need look no further than our shared existence itself. This is because Being, on Nancy’s view, is not something beyond us, nor is it something inscrutable or ineffable: Being is nothing more nor less than that which *is* – our existence in-the-world – and that which *is*, *is* in such a way that it is always already shared, or *shared out* [*partage*]: ‘The sharing of the world is the law of the world. The world has nothing other; it is not subject to any authority; it does not have a sovereign. *Cosmos, nomos*. Its supreme law is within it as the multiple and mobile trace of the sharing that it is.’<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> *BSP*, p. 155.

<sup>228</sup> *SW*, p. 72. See also: Watkin 2007:57.

<sup>229</sup> Nancy distinguishes ‘being-in-common’ from ‘being-in-common’. The former refers to the ontological fact that human beings always already share Being together *with* one another – a view which Nancy himself upholds; while the latter refers to the idea of communal identity, or some form of foundational *sameness*, which constitutes a community in a closed immanence of meaning. Nancy is critical of the latter view, especially in *The Inoperative Community* (1991).

<sup>230</sup> *BSP*, p. 2.

<sup>231</sup> This idea is, of course, central to the ontologies of both Heidegger (*Being and Time*) & Sartre (*Being and Nothingness*).

<sup>232</sup> *BSP*, p. 185.

In Nancy's philosophy, meaning is the sharing of Being in two senses. Firstly, and most obviously, Being is that which we all *are* in common since we all exist and inquire into the nature of our Being and its meaning(s). Secondly, meaning is a sharing *out* of Being between beings insofar as beings have access to meaning(s) as sense by virtue of their existence *toward* the world, which itself *is* sense. What this implies is that existential meaning is not strictly reserved for any being or group of beings, nor can it be preserved in any single order of signification. Meaning is the sharing (out) of Being because it belongs to none but all at once: meaning is not the province or purview of any particular being alone, but the domain of all beings in-the-world *together*. Nancy thus asserts that

meaning has... no chosen or privileged ones, no heroes or saints, and it is rather a formidable density of *common destiny* that is brought to light, to our light, the entire weight of a community of equals that does not come from a measure, but from the incommensurable opacity of meaning, which is the meaning of all and of each (and of no one).<sup>233</sup>

Absolutist conceptions of meaning, or what Nancy calls 'myths', undermine the shared nature of existential meaning by attempting to negate our difference-in-common by subsuming it within an overarching narrative of ontological *sameness*. Major world religions, for instance, paint an image of humanity with the broadest brush possible in order to allow for an existential meaning with mass appeal. As laudable as this may initially appear, it falters on its failure to adequately address difference(s), both within the myth and beyond its order of signification.<sup>234</sup> Meaning *qua* myth typically claims exclusive access to existential meaning while denying access to those who exhibit difference(s) to this myth. On this absolutist view, meaning is shared (out) only by, and to, those beings situated within a particular grand-narrative of meaning, and held back from *others* who differ from a particular existential meaning *qua* myth. On the opposite end of the spectrum of existential meaning, nihilism denies access to meaning for all beings and thus inverts meaning as the sharing of Being by sharing meaning *with none*. Summarized succinctly, myth thus misapplies the sharing of meaning by severely restricting the sharing thereof, while nihilism generally precludes the sharing of meaning altogether.

Existential meaning as shared sense, as shown above, circulates between myth and nihilism, and resists its reduction to either pole. Nancy's conception of meaning as sense demonstrates that meaning exists in fragments that need not constitute a large unitary whole. Existential meaning becomes fragmented or fractured with the death of god, since meaning as a whole henceforth belongs to none, while fragmented meaning is shared (out) between all beings in existence. The

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<sup>233</sup> *GT*, p. 84.

<sup>234</sup> Which would go a long way to explaining the thousands of different denominations of Christianity, for example. Religious factions tend to separate on the basis of difference(s) (in different sects or churches, for example) rather than account for difference(s) as an ontological fact. While all denominations of Christians are subsumed under the universal heading of Christianity, minor, yet seemingly significant, differences of meaning(s) between groups purportedly of the same faith often lead to conflict and divergence.

fracturing or fragmentation of meaning does not suggest that fragments of meaning are rendered meaningless *in* their fracturing, nor does it suggest a meaning that is broken and somehow requires (re)constitution in a unitary whole.<sup>235</sup> On the contrary, fractured meaning emphasizes the need for shared existential meaning(s), for *we*, in the plurality and polysemy of our different human meaning(s), are responsible for those fragments *together* rather than in isolation. The fragmentation of existential meaning is a breaking apart of meaning *qua* signification, which is to say, a breaking open of that which formerly perpetuated the closure of meaning. The opening of fragmented existential meaning is thus an opening onto meaning as shared in Being.

This further explains why we cannot *return to* (former) meaning(s), for we cannot rebuild that which is irrevocably fragmented. Our only recourse henceforth is to hold our fragmented meaning(s) in-common such that we might constitute the meaning of *our* existence as shared. In this way, meaning as fragmented is a sharing out of meaning in terms of our human responsibility and our exposure to the world *as* sense. This ontological fact of our shared human existence has been the case throughout human history, but is now, perhaps more than ever before, confronting our contemporary existence due to what Nancy terms '*mondialisation*'<sup>236</sup> or the 'becoming worldly of the world',<sup>237</sup> which entails 'responding to the demands of our time' and 'in a radical way being exposed to sense, to the world as such'.<sup>238</sup> Our world is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent, and can therefore no longer sustain the negation or undermining of meaningful difference(s), for such action entails an obliviousness in the face of the difference(s) rooted in human existence itself. Our contemporary world calls upon human beings to take responsibility for the meaning(s) of existence in terms of such difference(s) and plurality.

The existential meaning that arises in our shared world must therefore be based precisely in a direct encounter with difference and plurality, giving rise to a *community of meaning(s)* that does not establish itself on the basis of a utopian myth or idealized vision of existence,<sup>239</sup> but holds true to the ontological principle that difference is indicative of the most fundamental commonality of our human condition, and that such difference and plurality of meaning(s) can actually serve as the constitutive ground for a shared community of meaning(s). Thought of in this way, along Nancian lines, the ontological fact of difference(s), rather than constituting a problem vis-à-vis existential meaning (as Sartre posits), actually constitutes the possibility for a distinctly social dimension to existential meaning. It is this philosophical line of thought which underpins Nancy's pluralistic ontology of meaning in *Being Singular Plural*.

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<sup>235</sup> *SW*, p. 132.

<sup>236</sup> See Nancy 2007:27-29 for an account of this word. This word is somewhat problematic to translate into English; Nancy himself uses the English translation 'world-forming' (*ibid.*, p. 29). See also: Morin 2012:45.

<sup>237</sup> *SW*, p. 24.

<sup>238</sup> Devisch 2002:387.

<sup>239</sup> See Nancy's essay 'Myth Interrupted' in *IC*, pp. 43-70.

#### 4.4.2. Meaning Singular Plural

Nancy accords ontological primacy to the social dimension of human existence, and bases his conception of existential meaning as sense on a premise of shared existence, as explicated above. For Nancy, the social facet of human existence does not follow merely as an extension of the subjective toward the intersubjective. That is, human existence is not first singular and then plural, nor is it contrariwise plural and then singular. In Nancy's ontology, human existence is both singular and plural from the outset.<sup>240</sup> This is because the singular and plural dimensions of human existence are inextricably intertwined with one another in an ontological relationship that cannot be sundered. Following from his principal premise that human beings hold difference in-common, Nancy argues that each individual is singular or unique only by virtue of their relation of being-with other beings who are similarly singular in their own right.<sup>241</sup> The singularity, distinctiveness, and inimitability of my individual existence thus reveals itself comparatively in relation to that which I am *not*; which is to say that an ontological relation of difference grounds the singularity of each human individual. Human beings are therefore *singular plural* in the sense that human singularity always already bespeaks a comparative relation of difference between beings: to be a unique individual is to be different *from* another being *with* whom one shares a world, and this difference implicates each singular being in the pluralism of *being-with*.

Owing to the singular plural nature of human existence, existential meaning is similarly never an isolated affair, but entails an original ontological relation of difference and plurality. For Nancy, being-with is a fundamental aspect of human existential meaning because all human beings necessarily inhabit this world *together*, and human existence is therefore meaningful in terms of co-existence.<sup>242</sup> Even loneliness, according to Nancy, can only be experienced through a negative relation of *being-with*, for to experience loneliness, one must always already be oriented *toward* a being-with someone *other* than, or *different to*, oneself.<sup>243</sup> As argued above, existential meaning *qua* sense entails an exposure, engagement, or encounter with an *otherness* of existential meaning derived from a play of difference(s) between beings sharing this world; and this exposure takes individual human beings beyond the confines of a finite subjectivity. The singular therefore makes sense, or is meaningful, only by virtue of the fundamental ontological relation of being-with. Nancy reveals that thinking of existence in terms of a finite subjectivity sundered from human plurality is flawed from the outset, since Being is always already being-with, or *singular plural*, and never wholly reducible to either one of these poles. In this regard, Nancy subscribes to a fundamental idea that is appositely articulated by Terry Eagleton as follows:

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<sup>240</sup> *BSP*, p. 12.

<sup>241</sup> *SW*, p. 71, & p. 39.

<sup>242</sup> *BSP*, p. 187.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66, & p. 97.

For we are already plunged deep in the midst of meaning, wherever it is we happen to find ourselves. We are woven through by the meanings of others – meaning which we never got to choose, yet which provide the matrix within which we come to make sense of ourselves and the world. In this sense, if not in every sense, the idea that I can determine the meaning of my own life is an illusion.<sup>244</sup>

Arguing along these lines, Nancy breaks with the dichotomy which would deliberately separate the individual and social domains of human existential meaning. In Nancy's terms, these domains necessarily imply each other in the singular plurality of human existence, with the concomitant implication that existential meaning is necessarily 'meaning-with'.<sup>245</sup> As a result, in Nancy's co-ontology in *Being Singular Plural*, meaning is referred to as a co-originary,<sup>246</sup> co-creation between beings: 'Existence is creation, *our* creation; it is the beginning and end that *we* are.'<sup>247</sup> This idea goes hand-in-hand with Nancy's conception of sense in *The Sense of the World*, insofar as meaning as sense is co-extensive with the world since sense is always already circulating between-beings who are exposed to other beings in a fundamental ontological relation of being-with. This means that the source of meaning lies somewhere *between* the singular and the plural. Since human existence is always already being-with, we must account for the simple fact that our thoughts on the meaning of existence are necessarily influenced and impacted by others.

Hence, existential meaning cannot simply be a purely subjective creation manifested in isolation; human beings appear together in this world, and human existence thus entails a co-appearance or *compearance* [*com-parution*].<sup>248</sup> Existential meaning is founded on the *compearance* of beings in-the-world for the simple ontological fact that this world is always already a shared space of meaning(s): 'We compear: we come together (in)to the world'.<sup>249</sup> Nancy adds to this that 'the with is the (singular plural) condition of presence in general [understood] as copresence'<sup>250</sup> and 'this appearing is meaning.'<sup>251</sup> The compearance of human beings sharing this world further suggests that humanity shares a common human condition, or rather, we share the *absence* of any absolute condition, origin, substance, essence, or meaning to Being, for we are abandoned to *this* existence in *this* world without further foundation: "The ontology of the "common" and "share" would not be other than the ontology of "Being" radically removed from all ontology of substance, of order, and origin. Only at such a point will the "death of God" have been accomplished and surpassed.'<sup>252</sup> The meaning of human existence, post-death-of-god and the deconstruction of the metaphysics of

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<sup>244</sup> Eagleton 2008:76.

<sup>245</sup> *BSP*, p. 55.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-31.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17. Original emphasis.

<sup>248</sup> This word translates to 'appearance with' [*cum* + appearance]. It is also used as a legal term to indicate appearance before a judge together with another person. See Translator's Note #55 in *BSP*, p. 201. See also: *IC*, p. 28.

<sup>249</sup> Nancy 1992:373.

<sup>250</sup> *BSP*, p. 40.

<sup>251</sup> *GT*, p. 62.

<sup>252</sup> Nancy 1992:374.

presence, is a co-presentation of meaning that takes place only within *our* world and between *us*; a co-presence of existential meaning that ‘is neither a presence withdrawn into absence [nihilism] nor a presence *in* itself or *for* itself [absolutism, or myth].’<sup>253</sup>

To be sure, however, existential meaning is not *purely* pluralistic or collective, because this would require the existence of an idealized or utopian community of meaning, in which each individual is immediately subsumed within a collective identity without the possibility of individual identity. One might further argue that individual freedom, will, or agency, is all but absent from a purely collectivist conception of existential meaning, since such a conception of meaning would preclude the possibility of subjectivity entering into meaning whatsoever. It becomes apparent, then, that meaning is irreducible to the strictly singular or subjective, and conversely, equally irreducible to the purely pluralistic or objective. For Nancy, existential meaning as sense is *singular plural* in its (lack of) origin and in its (defiance of its) end, which is to say that it retains its circulatory nature between beings, and cannot escape the beings of this world without escaping meaningfulness itself. Post-death-of-god, meaning before or beyond this world is not *of* this world, which is to say that it does not properly describe the infinite finite meaning(s) of human existence *hic et nunc*. Consequently, *we are* (the origin of) meaning because we are beings of this world and the world itself *is* (the origin of) sense. Nancy continues along these lines and asserts the following:

The relation of singular origins among themselves, then, is the relation of *meaning*. (That relation in which one unique Origin would be related to everything else as having been originated would be a relation of saturated meaning: not really a relation, then, but a pure consistency; not really a meaning, but its sealing off, the *annulment* of meaning and the end of origin.)<sup>254</sup>

Each and every singular plural being is thus an origin and an originary meaning of this world.<sup>255</sup> Each singularity is finite, but the vast plurality of singularities implicates an infinitude of origins. Therefore, one can say that being singular plural is an infinite finitude of originary meaning(s), all of which exist together without recourse to any absolute origin or end. The meanings *qua* sense of the world are therefore meanings that are meaningful precisely by virtue of their singular plurality. This world features a profusion of origins of meaning owing to the singular plurality of being-with, and in this way, our world is disseminated as *world(s)*, at once singular and plural, which is why Nancy posits that ‘[a] world is always as many worlds as it takes to make a world.’<sup>256</sup> Therefore, existential meaning in our contemporary interconnected and interdependent world always already suggests an existential abundance in the form of manifold meaning(s), ceaseless sense(s), a veritable plethora of purpose(s), and an infinitude of finite worldviews.

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<sup>253</sup> *BSP*, p. 40.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83: ‘the origin of the world occurs at each moment of the world.’

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Following Nancy's views above, the death of god might be interpreted as an open wound from which pours infinitely many finite meanings. The opening of meaning post-death-of-god cannot be circumscribed or closed ever again, for there is simply no suture which can be stitched across the implacable impasse stretching out between our past thinking on existential meaning, on the one hand, and its contemporary (re)conceptualization, on the other. Our Western intellectual legacy of transcendental signification evinces an incessant, yet finally futile, attempt at 'sealing off' any ambiguous openness of meaning, so as to effectuate a non-plural, Absolute Origin of Meaning – a singular sense *sans* plurality. Nancy describes such thinking as 'the *annulment* of meaning':<sup>257</sup> the sundering, divorce, or nullifying of meaning(s) in the plural in favour of meaning in the Absolute singular. Our past thinking on meaning thus entails a fundamental oversight in its failure to recognize our human reality as one of singular plurality, with the attendant implication that, historically speaking, multiple meaning(s) have always existed, but have typically been reduced to *a* or *the* particular meaning *tout court*.

Contrary to such thinking, Nancy's contemporary view holds that meaning is *between* beings, and thus *between* the particular and the universal. Since human existence always already entails a meaningful relation of being-with, the meaning of existence is between the Self and the Other,<sup>258</sup> between the one and the many, between me and you, or 'us' and 'them'. To be sure, secular humanity no longer has recourse to any absolute or ideal referent of meaning which establishes a central referent that situates all other relations within an ordered structure of signified meaning. However, what secular humanity does have at its disposal is the actual *relation* of meaning itself, without the need for any other (external) reference. In fact, one might say that *we are* the only referent point(s) necessary, since it is *between us* that meaning is made manifest, without further recourse or need for any other referent point beyond our ontological relation: 'we are meaning'.<sup>259</sup> Nancy's conception of being singular plural is thus significant in that it subverts the dichotomy between subjective and objective existential meaning, thereby reuniting the individual and social dimensions of existential meaning by demonstrating that these dimensions are co-extensively implicated from the outset of any posing of the question on existential meaning.<sup>260</sup>

However, Nancy's emphasis undoubtedly falls more on the *plural* aspect of being singular *plural*, and it is debatable whether his conception fully accounts for the individualistic tendencies and trends of the contemporary liberal Western world. Moreover, Nancy's philosophy must further

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<sup>257</sup> BSP, p. 84.

<sup>258</sup> However, it is important to note that 'Nancy is not another philosopher of "the Other"' (Hutchens 2005:5). That is, Nancy does not dichotomize the Self and the Other, since he does not wish to divorce them. Hutchens (2005:51) posits that '[e]ach one is *a* one, *any* one, but there is no mere one (and no "other")'. For Nancy, the relation *between* the singular and plural is ontologically primary to any dichotomization of the Self and the Other.

<sup>259</sup> BSP, p. 1.

<sup>260</sup> Moreover, Nancy's philosophy reveals the inadequacies of discourses that seek to maintain this distinction between meaning as subjective *or* objective; as found, for instance, in Analytical philosophical discourses on the meaning of life.

account for problematic pluralities that might manifest themselves in our contemporary world. That is, plurality is not inherently positive, and might negatively lend itself to disparities or even conflicts of meaning – a point which Sartre acknowledges in his ontology. It might therefore be posited that Sartrean individualism offers a more accurate portrayal of existential meaning in the contemporary capitalist world, which is largely dominated by a competitive and often atomistic individualism. Nancy's ontology of singular plural existential meaning might therefore be said to be subject to critique vis-à-vis Sartrean ontology, particularly concerning its relevance for our contemporary world. Conversely, Sartrean individualism is also subject to critique from Nancy's ontology, insofar as Sartrean ontology clearly fails to adequately account for the social dimension of existential meaning, despite Sartre's attempts at fathoming the social domain in his later works. It is in this distinction between the individual and social dimensions of existential meaning that the respective philosophies of Sartre and Nancy can engage in a philosophical encounter that serves to highlight their respective strengths as well as their potential pitfalls.

#### 4.5. Nancy & Sartre

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We say that we are in crisis or in distress, but it was in Bataille's and Sartre's time that the boil was first lanced: the terrifying insufficiency of all the various assurances of knowing, believing, and thinking, and the necessity of confronting the lasting failure of accomplishment, the impossibility of ending, and even the responsibility of not ending.<sup>261</sup>

In order to properly understand how the philosophies of Sartre and Nancy might be employed in rethinking existential meaning for the contemporary world, one needs to firstly consider the role of ontology in their respective works. Although Nancy's philosophy follows chronologically in the wake of Sartrean ontology, Nancy's work by no means follows in Sartre's line of argumentation. On the contrary, one is able to identify a number of disparities and even oppositions between the respective philosophies of these two contemporary thinkers. However, Sartre and Nancy have one important aspect of ontology in common: Heidegger's fundamental ontology in *Being and Time* as their philosophical point of departure. It is well-known that Sartre's phenomenological ontology in *Being and Nothingness* draws its primary influence from Heidegger's fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*. As was demonstrated in Chapter III, Sartre takes his existentialist cue from Heidegger,<sup>262</sup> but goes beyond Heidegger in his radical individualist view of existential meaning. While Sartre focuses on the individualistic aspects of human consciousness *qua* nothingness, Nancy, also drawing from Heidegger's fundamental ontology, instead emphasizes the pluralistic nature of human existence, and how the question of existential meaning is one that calls for an

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<sup>261</sup> *FT*, p. 31.

<sup>262</sup> A fact evinced in Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*, in which Sartre places himself and Heidegger in the same category of 'atheist existentialists'. This categorization and existentialist association was subsequently dismissed by Heidegger in his 'Letter on Humanism' (1947). However, this does not negate Sartre's overtly Heideggerian influences.

investigation into the nature of our shared human existence. While Nancy openly acknowledges his philosophical debt to Heidegger, 'his indebtedness to Sartre is, throughout his entire work, somewhat more hidden.'<sup>263</sup> Using ontology as the common factor in the respective philosophies of Sartre and Nancy on the question of existential meaning, this subsection establishes a mutual philosophical dialogue between Sartre's individualism and Nancy's pluralism.

#### 4.5.1. Sartre's Individualism versus Nancy's Pluralism

Sartrean ontology bases its conception of existential meaning in a *principium individuationis*: an individualism of meaning where meaning is in conflict rather than in concert with the Other.<sup>264</sup> Here one discerns a critical potential impasse between the philosophies of Sartre and Nancy, since Nancy's ontology is an attempt at understanding human existence precisely on a foundation of being-with other beings. Nancy would thus fundamentally disagree with Sartre's contention that co-existence is necessarily conflictual without the possibility for shared existential meaning(s). Nancy offers a means-to-meaning in being-with others, which Sartre fails to provide in *Being and Nothingness*. In his later *Notebooks for an Ethics*, it is clear that Sartre wishes to fathom a social and ethical bridge toward the Other, but his attempts to do so are not altogether successful, for his views are still largely based in the existentialist individualism of *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>265</sup> Therefore, to be sure, Sartre does not adequately account for a properly meaningful co-existence established between human beings, and this lacuna in Sartrean thought is becoming increasingly problematic in our contemporary globalized world, which features a plethora of different meaning(s), and a need for a (re)conceptualization of existential meaning precisely in these terms.

As a result, Sartrean thought might inadvertently render itself all the more irrelevant as our contemporary world moves increasingly toward interconnectedness and interdependency, and Nancy's philosophy may consequently prove itself to be more apposite for our contemporary and future human existence in this world. Alternatively, one might argue that Nancy is apposite for the world to come, the world which is being born and coming into presence but which currently evinces forms of individualism, particularly in the liberal and secular West, which would lend greater credence to Sartrean ontology than that of Nancy, at least for the time being. It might be said that Sartre describes the world from his Western European perspective as one in which existential meaning can only be an individual endeavour following in the more proximal wake of the death of god; while Nancy, being allowed further philosophical distance from the death of god and its immediate aftermath, renders a different account of existential meaning based on a world

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<sup>263</sup> Morin 2009:35.

<sup>264</sup> *BN*, p. 451. '*Principium individuationis*' translates from the Latin as 'principle of individuation'.

<sup>265</sup> Perhaps this partly explains why Sartre chose not to publish his *Notebooks for an Ethics*, viz. he could not ultimately establish that bridge towards the other without recourse to grander, more metaphysical narratives such as the historical necessity of a community of individuals united under a common cause (as espoused in Marxist dialectic materialism, for example). This is addressed in Sartre's later work *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

that, as a matter of historical course, has been moving toward pluralism, particularly owing to globalization and its attendant effects. Perhaps, then, the contemporary world is best described in a philosophical space somewhere *between* the ontologies of Sartre and Nancy; an existential space somewhat preoccupied with individualism at present, but increasingly moving toward pluralism. Following these insights, it might be argued that a mutual philosophical dialogue between Sartre and Nancy could aid in an understanding of what the contemporary world requires in terms of existential meaning.

In this regard, one might begin with a statement from the opening pages of Nancy's ontology in *Being Singular Plural*: 'In order for the human to be discovered, and in order for the phrase "human meaning" to acquire some meaning, everything that has ever laid claim to the truth about the nature, essence, or end of "man" must be undone.'<sup>266</sup> Parallels can certainly be drawn between Nancy's statement here and Sartre's project of existentialism in *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Sartre, not unlike Nancy, argues that humanity itself needs to be (re)thought in terms of its existence in this world, and it is only in this way that a contemporary means-to-meaning might be made manifest. Moreover, Sartre and Nancy both argue in line with anti-essentialism that the essence of human existence cannot be preordained or predetermined in any fixed manner. In a phrasing akin to the Sartrean axiom 'existence precedes essence', Nancy asserts that '[s]ense is: that existence *should be* without essence.'<sup>267</sup> Unlike Sartre, however, Nancy roots his anti-essentialism in a co-ontology of being-with, and therefore further contends that '*[b]eing singular plural* means the essence of Being is only as co-essence.'<sup>268</sup> This is to say that any formulation of human essence cannot be drawn on the ground of individual freedom alone, as Sartre posits, but is a perpetual co-creation that transpires between beings in their being-with.

Nancy argues along these lines because of his view that existence is not first singular and then plural, as Sartre would have it, but is in fact singular plural from its outset. Nancy thus contends that co-essence follows from our singular plural compearance; *we share* in the joint absence of any predefined human essence, and we sense this ontological fact when we are exposed to the world and other beings through an existential disposition of openness. One might even go so far as to posit that the essence of human existence is being-with, or, being singular plural is the essence of what we human beings henceforth *are*.<sup>269</sup> Commencing from the strictly singular, Sartre holds that both the essence and meaning of human existence are attendant upon our individual human freedom alone. Sartre would thus likely interpret Nancy's idea of a 'co-essence' as at least somewhat threatening to the singular essence and existential meaning of the individual For-itself,

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<sup>266</sup> *BSP*, p. xi.

<sup>267</sup> *SW*, p. 32.

<sup>268</sup> *BSP*, p. 30.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

since it seems to suggest that the essence and meaning of one's individual existence are externally determined by others, at least in part. Despite these differences, however, Sartre and Nancy share a philosophical commonality here in that they both argue against essentialist predeterminations of human nature based on some grand-narrative or fixed order of signification. This is why Sartre asserts his anti-essentialism most emphatically in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, in which he further provides a sketch for an existentialist humanism that seeks to differentiate itself from former formulations of humanism that adhere to an essentialist conception of human nature.

However, in *The Gravity of Thought*, Nancy takes his anti-essentialism a step further than Sartre, specifically by assuming a critical stance on humanist discourses that favour the individual subject as the source of all human meaning. In this regard, Nancy asserts the following critical claim:

This is how contemporary humanism defines itself: as the self-presentation of the will to meaning, or more exactly, as the self-presentation of the meaning of the will to meaning. That which governs the process and project of signification is the following: "man" signifies this project – and this project signifies man.<sup>270</sup>

Nancy's above description of contemporary humanism is strongly applicable to Sartrean thought in *Being and Nothingness*, and even more so as regards *Existential is a Humanism*. Nancy takes philosophical issue with the simple displacement of meaning from the transcendental domain to the domain of pure or closed immanence in human subjectivity. The closed immanence of Sartrean thought advocates in favour of a conception of meaning that is based on individual or subjective ontological freedom and responsibility; an individual or subjective immanence which is closed in upon itself and conceives of itself as a 'detotalized totality'.<sup>271</sup> This closed immanence still suggests an existential meaning that is unamenable to difference or otherness, and therefore necessarily finds itself in conflict with the *otherness of meaning* which it must face in a pluralistic world of manifold meaning(s). Sartrean closed immanence further neglects to account for the fact that subjective existential meaning is no less vulnerable to the pitfalls of meaning *qua* signified presentation, and thus subscribes either deliberately or inadvertently to a now outmoded and vestigial metaphysics of presence, all of which demands critical reappraisal post-death-of-god.

#### 4.5.2. Deconstructing Sartre

Nancy acknowledges, and is heavily influenced by, the post-structuralist critique of meaning that has transpired in the period of Western thought since Sartre's ontology first emerged, and actively engages in furthering such critique, specifically with the aim of gaining a greater comprehension of contemporary human existence and its possible meaning(s). Nancy draws discernible influence

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<sup>270</sup> *GT*, p. 24.

<sup>271</sup> *BN*, p. 523.

particularly from the post-structuralist project of deconstruction made famous by Derrida.<sup>272</sup> Akin to Derrida's deconstructionist critique, Nancy redefines meaning in such a manner as to look askance at previously upheld human orders of signification.<sup>273</sup> It is important to note, however, that Nancy's approach also extends its arguments beyond Derridean deconstruction, and has therefore been described, even by Derrida himself, as 'post-deconstructive'.<sup>274</sup> In what follows, the post-deconstructive elements of Nancy's thought, underpinned by Derridean deconstruction, will be highlighted and applied to Sartre's existentialist philosophy, with the intention of revealing the potential pitfalls of Sartrean existentialist thought on the question of existential meaning, and thereby indicating the need for its contemporary (re)conceptualization.

In Sartrean existentialism, specifically in *Being and Nothingness*, one can discern a paradigmatic displacement in the seat or source of existential meaning from the transcendent domain to the strictly subjective immanence of human consciousness. This may appear to be the obvious counter position once transcendental qualification for existential meaning has been exhausted with the death of god. This shift in the locus of existential meaning is of significance to our human condition inasmuch as it offers humanity a possible means-to-meaning even while staring down the grave eventuality of the death of god. Yet, this position, though undoubtedly apposite for its time, is being rendered increasingly untenable in light of contemporary thought on existential meaning. Following in the legacy and logic of Derrida's post-structuralist deconstruction of the Western metaphysics of presence, it can be argued that a paradigmatic displacement in the locus of existential meaning from the transcendental domain to the immanent domain, while perhaps a necessary next step in the evolution of existential meaning, is nonetheless prey to the pitfalls of a metaphysics of presence, specifically inasmuch it adheres to the problematic notion that meaning has a locatable 'point of presence'.<sup>275</sup> In Sartrean phenomenological ontology, meaning's point of presence has simply been resituated in the subjective sphere of human consciousness.<sup>276</sup>

Sartre's conception of existential meaning as the product of the strictly subjective immanence of human consciousness is no less guilty of subscribing to a metaphysics of presence insofar as it still seeks to locate, establish, and pinpoint the presence or source of signification, albeit in a more immediate location. Nancy's critical engagement with existential meaning *qua* signification allows one to understand that Sartre's existentialist attempt at meaning ultimately succumbs to the same

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<sup>272</sup> Post-structuralism here refers to a particular variety of postmodern thought which seeks to disrupt the fixed presence of meaning by revealing that meaning is constituted by a play of *differance*, and not secured in a static source.

<sup>273</sup> Specifically, religious orders of signification, deconstructed in *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* (2008), as well as socio-political orders of signification, as may be found in *Retreating the Political* (1997).

<sup>274</sup> This description is found in: James 2012:39 & Watkin 2009:137. Derrida himself, in his book entitled *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* (2005:46), refers to Nancy's work as a form of 'post-deconstructive realism'.

<sup>275</sup> Derrida 2001:352.

<sup>276</sup> Nancy (*SW*, pp. 16-21) highlights the more recent 'point of presence' established in human consciousness through the discourse of phenomenology, as well as in humanity itself through the discourse of humanism (*GT*, pp. 24-25). Both points are applicable to Sartrean thought, which is phenomenological and humanist. See also: Derrida 2001:352-353.

elusive meaning 'present-at-a-distance' that haunts all meaning *qua* signification.<sup>277</sup> Through Sartre's existentialist conception, meaning has changed merely its point of presence, but the underlying problematic logic of existential meaning *qua* signified presentation remains largely unchallenged and unchanged. As a result, existential meaning is still implicitly pursued by Sartre as if it *should* manifest as 'in-itself-for-itself', but that such a manifestation of meaning ultimately remains perpetually absent, to humanity's undying despair. This is because, as was demonstrated previously in this chapter, the presence of meaning-in-itself is elusive and ultimately illusory, leading to the conclusion that such a pursuit of meaning-in-itself proves to be fruitless and futile. Nietzsche names this pursuit of absolute meaning 'nihilism', while Sartre refers to the human pursuit of meaning 'in-itself-for-itself', as our most 'useless passion'. A deep-seated metaphysics of presence in Sartre's existentialist individualism means that humanity might condemn itself to a most frustrating fate where meaning is desired as fully formed and freely fashioned, yet such ultimate or absolute meaning (in-itself-for-itself) could never find fruition in a finite world.

However, I argue that by deconstructing Sartre's existentialist individualism, and demonstrating that Sartre's conclusion ('man is a useless passion') is predicated on a vestigial metaphysics of presence operating at its core, one may yet discover that humanity need not decry its existence, but can in fact *affirm* it. Nancy arguably achieves this by circumventing Sartre's dialectical logic as follows: 'The structure of existence is neither the in-itself nor the for-itself nor their dialectic, but the *toward*'.<sup>278</sup> While Sartre maintains that human consciousness, or the For-itself, is haunted by its own internal negation and hence brings nothingness to bear on Being, the post-deconstructive elements in Nancy's philosophy allow us to see that Sartre's ontological premise here is dependent on a problematic presupposition of a dialectical logic which places being-for-itself in a *negative* relation to being-in-itself. As a result, the For-itself is immediately defined negatively, and forever thereafter *lacks* any positive definition whatsoever; and as a consequence, the For-itself is banished to an existential wasteland where it remains a frustrated being which is what it is not and which is not what it is. Contrary to Sartrean thought, Nancy effects a double negation by positing the negation of any lack in or of Being, rather than equating negation with a fundamental ontological nothingness at the heart of human existence, as Sartre does. Nancy writes:

Nothing is lacking in our being: the lack of given sense [myth] is, rather, precisely what completes our being. Nothing is lacking in the world: the world is the totality, and the totality completes itself as the open, as the nontotalization of the open or of the *happenance*. In this sense, the being-existent of the world is infinite, with an *actual* and not a potential infinity. Being is the infinite actuality of the finite. Its act – existing – depends on nothing and does not have to progress in order to perfect itself.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> *GT*, pp. 37-42.

<sup>278</sup> *SW*, p. 152.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

*Contra* Sartre, then, Nancy avers that human existence does not bespeak a nothingness following from an interminable internal lack subsisting within consciousness, but rather, human existence *lacks precisely nothing*, which is to say that it simply *is*, and can only be said to *lack* something when it is measured against a criterion that falls beyond the finitude of this world *hic et nunc*. Nancy thus transmutes the negative dialectical logic of Sartrean thought into a possible existential affirmation by inverting the negative itself: 'To lack nothing, despite everything that's lacking: this is what it means to exist.'<sup>280</sup> In this way, Nancy's double negation becomes a positive affirmation. Such a positive totality of Being as Nancy describes above, has traditionally, on the model of a metaphysics of presence, been posited as precisely that which *this* world is *not*, for such positivity has traditionally been positioned beyond Being *qua* becoming, and therefore beyond *this* world. Through his contemporary critical engagement with these ideas, Nancy reveals that the absolute positivity of any meaning beyond our Being in this world has been exhausted in the death of god, leaving this finite and mutable world in its wake as the only space where a positive affirmation of existential meaning might be made manifest. Nancy would eschew the Sartrean thought of finitude because, as Watkin phrases it, 'finitude is not to be understood, Nancy stresses, as a lack to be deplored and which, it is hoped, will be filled. Finitude must be understood wholly otherwise'.<sup>281</sup> Nancy replaces such a negative thinking of finitude, as Sartrean thought evinces, with a positive thinking of finitude, which Watkin calls Nancy's 'good finitude' or 'absolute finitude', insofar as Nancy's finite thinking 'has nothing to do with "bad finitude", the inevitable incompleteness imposed on the human condition in a Hegelian dialectic.'<sup>282</sup>

Therefore, in Nancy's view *contra* Sartre, humanity does not lack the beyond of Being any longer; the sense of the world is itself 'always already completed, full, whole, and infinite.'<sup>283</sup> Existential meaning is always already available to humanity by virtue of shared (out) fragments that remain absolutely non-appropriable, since sense must be allowed to circulate without being fixed through our appropriative efforts. In this regard, Nancy writes: 'That which, for itself, depends on nothing is an *absolute*. That which nothing completes in itself is a *fragment*. Being or existence is an absolute fragment. To exist: the *happstance* of an absolute fragment.'<sup>284</sup> Since the world itself now *is* (its own) sense, it is henceforth constituted as an absolute space of sense insofar as the world, and human existence therein, depends on nothing beyond its bounds as to constitute its meaning. Through the death of transcendental signifieds of meaning, this world *hic et nunc* (re)affirms itself as the only remaining absolute that is unfettered from a metaphysics of presence.

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<sup>280</sup> *FT*, p. 12.

<sup>281</sup> Watkin 2009:144.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145. Sartre's ontological dialectic indeed draws from Hegel and is thus guilty of such a 'bad finitude'. See also: Morin 2009:44, & Hutchens 2005:47-48.

<sup>283</sup> *BSP*, p. 98.

<sup>284</sup> *SW*, p. 152.

If, indeed, the law of meaning *qua* signification is the desire for meaning-in-itself-for-itself, then conversely, the law of meaning *qua* sense is the desire for nothing more nor less than a human existence squarely situated in this finite world of infinite possible meaning(s). From Nancy's perspective, then, contemporary existential meaning therefore demands a human engagement with existence as the happenstance of a fragmented absolute.

Nancy argues in a way that allows us to see how existential meaning might be affirmed without recourse to anything beyond what this world always already *is* and who we always already *are*. Using Nancian thought one can identify an additional problematic element in Sartrean thought that leads directly to Sartre's despairing conclusion that 'man is a useless passion' – the element of *desire*. In *The Gravity of Thought*, Nancy argues that the desire for existential meaning has historically entailed a problematic projection towards the presentation of meaning in its fullness and finality.<sup>285</sup> This final or fully-present meaning-in-itself-for-itself (as Sartre might describe it) is necessarily offered only at a distance which is forever maintained, resulting in the existential experience of a *lack* of meaning, since meaning is anticipated in the fullness of its presentation and manifestation. This lack further induces desire, but because existential meaning-in-itself-for-itself is forever held at a remove from human pursuits, this desire is necessarily precluded its own placation and is thus forever frustrated.<sup>286</sup> Sartre's existentialist project suffers from precisely this form of existential desire, or what Nancy designates as the 'will to signify',<sup>287</sup> which entails an implicit purposive projection towards the presentation of meaning-in-itself-for-itself.

If, as Sartre asserts, human consciousness *is* itself an implacable nothingness, or *lack*, then our *desire* for existential meaning remains interminably unsated, and any manifest presence of meaning is infinitely deferred through a perpetual process of internal negation in human consciousness. The internal negation entailed in being-for-itself means that the meaning that consciousness makes of itself, its world, and its existence, is necessarily itself (in turn) subject to further internal negation *ad infinitum*. For Sartre, this is why human consciousness is haunted by its own internal nothingness, since the source of all meaning, viz. human consciousness, is the same element which precludes the complete and final manifestation of a meaning which is no longer subject to the internal negation of consciousness. According to Nancy, the *desire* for complete meaning is indeed 'the law of signification',<sup>288</sup> and ultimately, such human desire for meaning-in-itself-for-itself in accordance with meaning *qua* signification is doomed to disappointment because it immediately demands that which is forever deferred. However, one might (re)interpret Sartre's phenomenological ontology in such a way as to identify the very

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<sup>285</sup> *GT*, p. 32.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

operation of *differánce* in Sartre's conception of consciousness *qua* nothingness. That is, internal negation in human consciousness might be interpreted as the internal *differánce* of meaning itself – its perpetual deferral and difference from itself *qua* present in-itself-for-itself.

The recognition of *differánce* within the very operations of human consciousness allows us to see that consciousness is not in fact *lacking* its own completeness, but that the lack or absence of meaning-in-itself-for-itself is indeed suggested by the very operation by which all meaning is established. This is to say that human consciousness need not be described by Sartre in a negative manner – as a 'lack' and a 'nothingness' – but can be understood instead as the medium through which *differánce* plays itself out. The human pursuit of meaning-in-itself-for-itself which Sartre describes is therefore derived from 'a thought of the negativity of incompleteness, a thought of lack, of relativity and weakness.'<sup>289</sup> Yet, this negative thinking on human consciousness and human existence as a whole does not necessarily follow from Sartre's description of consciousness in *Being and Nothingness*. One might still subscribe to Sartre's account of consciousness in his phenomenological ontology, but rather than designating the process of internal negation in human consciousness as a 'lack' and 'nothingness', one might instead recognize that what Sartre is describing about consciousness in *Being and Nothingness* is that it in fact plays host to the very *differánce* of meaning; a process whose conclusion is perpetually deferred rather than forever frustrated. Following this, humanity need not decry its existential condition as 'a useless passion', but might positively affirm the *differánce* internal to its conscious activity. This is to say that Sartre's ontology might ultimately be saved from itself by means of a critical appraisal offered through the lens of Nancy's contemporary post-phenomenological<sup>290</sup> insights. Using Nancy's philosophy, one might thus identify in Sartrean thought the problematic fact that

desire is at work with its own power, which is the power of the negative: the division of the subject from itself, the ensuing revelation that its truth, value, and end lie elsewhere, though it *is* itself this elsewhere, one that consequently never ceases to reopen in the subject a gaping hole full of fever and disorder – the fever and disorder of an identification that is condemned in advance to an infinite exhaustion.<sup>291</sup>

This logic is, at least in part, evinced in the Sartrean thought of the displacement of meaning beyond our appropriative human efforts, or what Nancy refers to as 'the naked horror of impossible Meaning'.<sup>292</sup> To be sure, the human individual can never *be* a complete being-in-itself-for-itself. Yet, the desire for such a being is inspired by an idealized conception of meaning *qua* signified presentation always beyond our grasp; an absolute meaning that has never, and likely would never, transpire. Sartre, despite his meritorious efforts, has in the end fallen victim to the

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<sup>289</sup> *GT*, p. 81.

<sup>290</sup> This description of Nancy's thought is used in: James 2006:202; James 2012:39; & Watkin 2009:139.

<sup>291</sup> *GT*, p. 33.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49. Note the capitalization of 'Meaning', suggesting a meaning that is Absolute, complete in-itself.

same problematic logic which haunts Western thinking on meaning *qua* signification by implicitly basing itself on a problematic metaphysics of presence. Moreover, it is telling that Sartre engages in the discourse of *phenomenological* ontology, since phenomenology is based on the conscious experience of the singular human subject whose intentionality of consciousness leads toward the *appropriation* of meaning(s). Morin states that '[t]he problem with phenomenology, according to Nancy, is that it thinks access [to meaning] (significance, light) only in terms of appropriation.'<sup>293</sup> Nancy contends that 'phenomenology does not open us up to that which – in sense and consequently in the world – infinitely precedes consciousness and the signifying appropriation of sense', which is to say that phenomenology 'still irresistibly convokes us to the pure presence of appearing' and thus 'it does not yet sufficiently touch on the *being* or the *sense* of appearing'.<sup>294</sup> Nancy's post-phenomenological thought is further aptly expressed in Nancy's conception of Being *contra* that of Sartrean phenomenology, as described by Morin:

For Nancy, Being is not an undifferentiated whole, lying in wait until the For-itself of consciousness breaks in upon it and configures a world. Rather, Being is always already the plurality of articulated beings, which already themselves make sense, and which can, only because of this original and intrinsic articulation, come to be signified.<sup>295</sup>

The immanent appropriation or creation of meaning by a conscious human individual or subject therefore remains partially closed off in its immanence from the happenstance, surprise, or *event* of sense, which is non-appropriable in its unanticipated arrival or manifestation. Phenomenology awaits this arrival through its anticipation of meaning(s), but Nancy asserts that meaning as sense entails a *participation* in sense rather than a conscious *anticipation* thereof. We are the very circulation of the sense of the world, partly through our conscious thought(s), action(s), and word(s), yet we must not anticipate the pure presentation of sense, but *be* its circulation. Phenomenology, specifically that of Sartrean ontology, seems to maintain the view that consciousness stands over against the world, interpreting its phenomena through a dialectical negation of an inherently meaningless being-in-itself. Sartre's conception of consciousness describes a closed immanence in which each individual consciousness 'remains in itself',<sup>296</sup> that is, 'as a self-consciousness that is infinitely withdrawn in itself, into itself',<sup>297</sup> and renders the world meaningful through the transcendence of its consciousness toward the inherently inert material world.<sup>298</sup> However, Nancy argues that the world *is* the space(-ing) of sense, and therefore cannot be said to be meaningless prior to the upsurge of human consciousness.

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<sup>293</sup> Morin 2012:45.

<sup>294</sup> *SW*, p. 17.

<sup>295</sup> Morin 2009:44.

<sup>296</sup> *BP*, p. 182. See also Raffoul 1997:xvi.

<sup>297</sup> *BSP*, p. 79.

<sup>298</sup> Raffoul 1997:xxix-xxx.

All that can be known, according to Nancy, is that the world *is*, and that humanity partakes of sense even before we attempt to appropriate any meaning *qua* signification through consciousness.<sup>299</sup> Phenomenology thus allows us a particular ingress into some sense of the world, but leaves human individuals cloistered within the closed immanence of their consciousness. Employing Nancy's post-phenomenological insights, one might recognize that '[c]onsciousness does not first constitute sense and then in a second moment impose sense onto the world. Rather consciousness exposes the world *as sense*', which is to say that '[m]aking sense does not mean producing sense or possessing sense but rather letting sense circulate between ourselves and between each other according to the *to* or *towards* of Being.'<sup>300</sup> Because meaning is between us, and circulates in a trans-immanent fashion across all worldly beings, it exempts itself from appropriation, and therefore consciousness might be viewed, in this post-phenomenological sense, as that human element *through* which sense circulates, rather than that which, in and of itself, constitutes sense as such (as Sartre would have it). It follows from this that '[t]here is no sense *given* to existence, nor any to be *produced*'<sup>301</sup> by subjective human consciousness in and of itself. Instead, 'sense is pre-subjective in that it is prior to conscious thought or cognition.'<sup>302</sup>

Nancy's conception of being singular plural further properly problematizes subjectivist accounts of existential meaning, such as that of Sartrean ontology.<sup>303</sup> The closed immanence of Sartrean subjectivism or individualism suggests that meaning is an individual venture, and is in fact threatened or undermined by the presence of others. Sartre subscribes to binary thinking on the Self and the Other that creates an impassable rift between individual ascriptions of meaning to one's own being, and oppositional meaning(s) which are ascribed to one's being by others. Sartre perceives the latter to be confrontational and provides an individualistic sketch which does not truly exceed the subjectivist domain of meaning. Against this subjectivist line of argumentation, Nancy asserts that singularity and plurality are not, in fact, necessarily at odds with one another, and thus cannot be philosophically described in terms of dichotomies or binaries that contribute to an insurmountable conflict of relative subjectivist meanings. Nancy destabilizes the absolute position accorded to subjectivity in Sartrean thought by arguing that 'no single subject could even designate *itself* and *relate itself* to itself as subject'<sup>304</sup> since this would entail an *absolute* self-reflexive relation to oneself, to one's identity, and to one's existence. From Nancy's perspective, sense 'is that from which any experience of self-reflexivity, individual subjectivity or of personal individuation can arise as such.'<sup>305</sup> Therefore, when considered from Nancy's view on sense,

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<sup>299</sup> Especially in the sense of the phenomenological 'bracketing' (*epoché*) of sense.

<sup>300</sup> Morin 2009:49.

<sup>301</sup> Fischer 1997:34. My emphasis.

<sup>302</sup> James 2012:46.

<sup>303</sup> Raffoul 1997:xvii. For a full account of Nancy's critique of 'the subject', see his work *Ego Sum* (1979) or James 2002.

<sup>304</sup> *BSP*, p. 40. See also Morin 2012:32.

<sup>305</sup> James 2012:46.

Sartre's phenomenological subjectivism posits an absolute subject position which is rendered untenable in a world consisting of multiple subjectivities, all born from an original ontological sharing of meaning as sense in our singular plurality – the very plurality which precludes the absolute singularity of the Sartrean subject.

*Contra* the closed immanence of Sartrean subjectivity, then, Nancy articulates the *singularity* of meaning as follows: "There is no "meaning" except by virtue of a "self," of some form or another. (The subjective formula of the ideality of meaning says that "meaning" takes place for and through a "self.") But there is no "self" except by virtue of a "with," which, in fact, structures it."<sup>306</sup> Nancy thus moves thought away from an absolute subject *position* and toward the 'with' of being singular plural, which implies a *dis-position* and *ex-position* between beings.<sup>307</sup> We are *dis-possessed* of an absolute subjectivity in a relation of meaning that is constituted in the 'with' and 'we', and *ex-posed* to the ceaseless circulation of the sense of the world. Nancy hence eschews the fixity of an absolute subject position by avoiding *individualism* and advocating in favour of the *singular* instead:

... one becomes aware of the essence of singularity: it is not individuality; it is, each time, the punctuality of a 'with' that establishes a certain origin of meaning and connects it to an infinity of other possible origins. Therefore, it is at one and the same time, infra-/intra-individual and transindividual, and always the two together. The individual is an intersection of singularities, the discrete exposition of their simultaneity, an exposition that is both discrete and transitory.<sup>308</sup>

Raffoul summarizes Nancy's conception of singularity appositely as follows:

To the extent that there is no singularity outside of such a relation to other singularities, the concepts of autonomy and individuality collapse. [...] This is why [singularity] is not simply another term for the individual. [...] What we call individuality should be conceived on the basis of singularity, because as Nancy writes, individuality is ultimately nothing but a limit or boundary of community.<sup>309</sup>

Following Nancy's conception of being singular plural, any notion of an ostensible 'pure identity' or self-contained 'ipseity' entailing an unadulterated 'being-its-self' is rendered ontologically problematic at the very least.<sup>310</sup> Nancy holds that any closed conception of a pure, circumscribed immanence and identity is precluded by the fact that identity involves *identification*, or the fact that one is identifiable *by* someone *other* than oneself.<sup>311</sup> Consequently, for Nancy *contra* Sartre, existential meaning as sense is never a *purely* subjective creation, for there is no pure or absolute subjectivity that stands outside of the co-ontological relation of being-with.<sup>312</sup> From this can be

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<sup>306</sup> *BSP*, p. 94.

<sup>307</sup> *IC*, p. 29. See also: Morin 2009:46.

<sup>308</sup> *BSP*, p. 85.

<sup>309</sup> Raffoul 1997:xxvi. See also: Morin 2009:44, as well as Devisch 2002:391.

<sup>310</sup> *BSP*, 153.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>312</sup> Morin 2012:29-30.

drawn the implicit conclusion that existential meaning is neither strictly subjective nor objective, but singular plural inasmuch as it is born of a co-existential *relation* and never in an existential(ist) *isolation*. Arguing in this way, Nancy severely weakens Sartre's claim that '[t]he essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the *Mitsein*; it is conflict.'<sup>313</sup> Concluding from the above, one might concur with Nancy's view that '[n]either "Personalism" nor Sartre ever managed to do anything more than coat the most classical individual-subject with a moral or sociological paste: they never *inclined* it, outside itself, over that edge that opens up its being-in-common.'<sup>314</sup>

#### 4.5.3. Nancy Beyond Sartre

By simply supplanting a transcendental source of meaning with the closed immanence of human individualism, Sartre is drawn toward the inexorable conclusion of his metaphysical assumptions, viz. existential meaning forever deferred and infinitely distanced. Moreover, Sartre's humanist conception of meaning in *Existentialism is a Humanism* possibly even overextends human beings beyond their fallible and finite nature, for it asks of human individuals to embody and evince a creative ardour akin to that of a god, and thereby overinflates our responsibilities as individual meaning-makers by assigning the entire burden of meaning to the shoulders of human individuals *alone*. If we, as individuals, then miscarry this weighty assignment to render existence meaningful in and of ourselves, then we might look upon ourselves as abysmal creatures plunged once again into the infinite night of nihilism. The inevitability of such a grim eventuality is all but guaranteed by a subscription to a metaphysics of presence and the attendant (unrealistic) anticipation of absolute existential meaning-in-itself-for-itself to be made manifest through a fallible individual human consciousness. The irony of Sartre's existentialist conception of meaning should thus not be overlooked: for resituating the source of existential meaning in human consciousness may yet precipitate an even deeper meaninglessness in human existence if, or indeed when, meaning does not manifest itself fully in individual consciousness alone.

Sartre's existentialist conception of meaning is arguably the product of an errant form of liberal humanism, which postulates that individual freedom accompanied by human creativity should in and of itself simply suffice to guarantee a meaningful human existence, albeit one in which human individuals are potentially atomized into discreet meaning-makers who have very little meaning held in-common due to a plethora of personal rather than inter-personal or social meaning(s). Therefore, if the source of existential meaning is simply transferred into the hands of human individuals, then it is delivered over to all the problematic implications of a rampant relativism and a potentially atomistic subjectivism, which may yet foster further discord and discontent between competing conceptions of existential meaning, possibly even precluding a *shared* sense

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<sup>313</sup> *BN*, p. 451.

<sup>314</sup> *IC*, p. 4.

of existence between human individuals. A study of human history heretofore demonstrates the potential negative implications of discord between competing conceptions of existential meaning, ranging from religious crusades to genocidal atrocities committed in the name of more secular ideologies. Therefore, with the aim of diminishing the prevalence and extent of such troubling human tragedies, and further fostering a more fruitful and hopeful human future, one might argue that it is incumbent on humanity henceforth to rethink existential meaning in such a manner as to purposefully cultivate a pluralism of meaning(s), with humanity participating in the world as a shared space of sense.

One can clearly see how Nancy differs drastically from Sartre in this regard. Sartre reverts to subjective immanence (the particular) in lieu of the transcendental (the universal): if there is no absolute meaning to existence in a universal sense, then meaning, in Sartre's view, must be created by individual beings who will never attain the absolute. It is clear in Sartrean ontology that the absolute is nevertheless depicted as a desirable *telos* of human existential meaning: a point plainly evinced by Sartre's claim that human consciousness desires the absolute freedom and unity which comes in being-in-itself-for-itself – the human god. In this way, Sartre's philosophy demonstrates an adherence to a more traditional thinking of Being which pits itself against the vagaries and inconstancy of Being *qua* becoming. Sartre's existentialism, while attempting to conceptualize of human existence in terms of our radical freedom, implicitly subscribes to a metaphysics of presence by yearning for absolute meaning and absolute Being, and despairing over the fate of human existence in the absence of such absolute(s). Sartre thus concludes *Being and Nothingness* in a grim tone because his fundamental ontological freedom, while being radical and *potentially* life-affirming, nonetheless disallows him respite from his desire for the absolute. This desire for the absolute subject (being-in-itself-for-itself) and absolute existential meaning may be viewed as a shortcoming of Sartrean thought on the question of existential meaning, insofar as it leads to a 'heroism of despair',<sup>315</sup> which *could* be circumvented by a (re)conceptualization of existential meaning in which the absolute is no longer required or desired.

As argued above, Nancy provides precisely such a (re)conceptualization where meaning *qua* sense no longer entails an anticipation of the absolute, but an affirmation of our shared human finitude in *this* world *hic et nunc*. Using Nancy's philosophy of meaning as sense in *The Sense of the World* in conjunction with his (co-)ontology in *Being Singular Plural*, one might redeem Sartrean thought somewhat by demonstrating how its reliance upon an outmoded thinking of meaning as signified presentation is largely unnecessary and can be overcome by a finite thinking of meaning as sense. Specifically, the trans-immanent nature of sense suggests that sense need not be located within a singular subject, nor does it need to manifest through recourse to transcendental signification.

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<sup>315</sup> *EF*, p. 99.

Sense opens up our finitude to an infinite mutability of meaning, rather than establishing finitude as the limit situation of our existence in-the-world. In Nancy's view, *contra* Sartre's conception of our finite condition, finitude is not simply the negation of the infinite,<sup>316</sup> but more significantly, it 'is the responsibility of sense, and is so absolutely. Nothing else.'<sup>317</sup>

In *The Experience of Freedom* (1993), Nancy establishes his contemporary philosophical position on human freedom beyond that of Sartrean existentialism.<sup>318</sup> For Nancy, human freedom is not derived from an ontological lack inherent to human existence, but is rather to be discerned in the existential experience of abandonment that confronts contemporary humanity. For Nancy, our contemporary human existence is abandoned to nothing other than itself,<sup>319</sup> which is, in actuality, an abandoning of the foundationalism and essentialism deeply entrenched in our past thinking on existential meaning and human freedom, and not an abandonment that delivers humanity over to an inescapable despair over the futility of existence. That is, once the meaning *qua* metaphysical signification of existence has been exhausted with the death of god, human beings are abandoned indefinitely to the *hic et nunc*, and we must begin to think of our existence in this world of sense precisely as freedom.<sup>320</sup> Removed from a fixed essence, existence within *this world as sense* need no longer look beyond itself to discern the foundation of its freedom, for our abandoned existence entails 'the deliverance from foundation and the releasing into existence',<sup>321</sup> in such a way that any *necessary* foundation to the freedom, essence, and meaning of our existence, has now become itself *unnecessary*, and hence, 'given over to unfounded "freedom."<sup>322</sup> As a result, the meaning of human existence – which, prior to the death of god, depended on some entity *beyond* our worldly confines to serve as its metaphysical foundation – henceforth depends on no other foundation than 'the recognition of the freedom of being in its singularity',<sup>323</sup> which, when one encompasses Nancy's works beyond *The Experience of Freedom*,<sup>324</sup> would mean to recognize the world *as sense*, and existence as singular plural.<sup>325</sup> Nancy thus posits that '[f]reedom perhaps designates nothing more and nothing less than existence itself.'<sup>326</sup>

In the absolute subjectivity of its fundamental ontological freedom, the Sartrean being-for-itself is unnecessarily sundered from the circulating sense of the world and the singular plurality of Being. The For-itself maintains its separation from the world as sense and the singular plurality of Being

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<sup>316</sup> *EF*, p. 98-99.

<sup>317</sup> *FT*, p. 13.

<sup>318</sup> For a succinct overview of the dialogue Nancy establishes with Sartre's conception of freedom, see Martinot 1995.

<sup>319</sup> Morin 2012:35.

<sup>320</sup> *EF*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>321</sup> Morin 2012:35.

<sup>322</sup> *EF*, p. 12.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>324</sup> Specifically, *The Sense of the World & Being Singular Plural*.

<sup>325</sup> Morin 2012:35.

<sup>326</sup> *EF*, p. 14.

by asserting the freedom of its own personal meaning(s) in conflict with the otherness of meaning necessarily implied by our shared worldly human condition. In this way, by not fully participating openly in meaning *qua* sense as an existential exposure to beings and meanings *beyond* its own being-for-itself, the For-itself condemns itself to the closed immanence of its ontological freedom, and thus remains abandoned within itself and to itself *alone*. From a Nancian perspective, Sartre's conception of freedom problematically situates our finite human condition negatively against the backdrop of that *by* or *from* which humanity has ostensibly been abandoned, viz. the absolute; the transcendental; meaning-in-itself-for-itself. It is for this reason that Sartre's account bespeaks the 'unhappiness of consciousness',<sup>327</sup> which ultimately leads to Sartre's rather cynical conclusion to *Being and Nothingness* ('man is a useless passion').

Unlike Sartre's 'simple immanence', Nancy's open immanence, or trans-immanence, argues for a freedom that is not founded in individual subjectivity, but revealed *through a shared abandonment* to our existence in this world.<sup>328</sup> In Nancy's account of freedom, Sartrean subjectivity cannot truly be the foundation of freedom in lieu of metaphysical or transcendental foundation(s), since the death of god not only announces the demise of metaphysical foundationalism, but the death of foundationalism *per se*. This further precludes the founding of freedom and meaning in absolute subjectivity, for the notion of an absolute subject contravenes the ontological singular plurality of our existence in this world *with* other beings. The radical ontological freedom of the Sartrean subject is rendered especially problematic in Sartre's thinking of plurality as a *limit* to individual freedom and existential meaning,<sup>329</sup> specifically since such a Sartrean limit suggests that humanity is ultimately destined to be divided in its individuality; condemned to an irreconcilable relativism of existential meaning(s); and worse still, drawn to inevitable conflict(s) of meaning(s) between absolute subjectivities, rather than an infinite opening of finite meaning(s) in a shared world.

Hutchens asserts that 'Nancy attempts to think of freedom in terms of a self-engendering and multifaceted free space of meaning'.<sup>330</sup> One might therefore posit that Nancy goes beyond Sartre in his philosophical sketch of existential meaning inasmuch as his thought opens meaning *toward* the *being-with* of our pluralistic world, while Sartre partly closes meaning off within a subjective sphere that bespeaks atomistic individualism. However, it is imperative to emphasize that Sartre's existentialism answers the call of his age for a conception of meaning that holds human beings to account for their existence when they can no longer depend upon external qualification for their existential meaning. Moreover, in one of the rare instances where Nancy directly mentions Sartre, he attributes great credit to Sartrean thought and the possibilities of meaning that it opens up:

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<sup>327</sup> *EF*, p. 99.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13. See also: Hutchens 2005:68.

<sup>329</sup> Morin 2012:35.

<sup>330</sup> Hutchens 2005:68.

How, indeed, can we address that which, so far as we are concerned, can be neither religion nor science nor philosophy and that we need more than ever now that we have done with religion, science, and philosophy, now that we have passed beyond this configuration, now that we know all this – without ever knowing what it is that we are becoming, if not a humanity whose sense is naked and exposed? Both Sartre and Bataille laid bare and exposed the sense of this sense.<sup>331</sup>

Drawing from Nancy's insights, then, one might assert that existential meaning is a co-existential *ad-venture* inasmuch as it entails a being-toward [*ad*] the world and other beings, and not simply a solitary being-in-the-world where otherness implies irresolvable conflict. By being-toward the world, in conjunction with an existence which is always already in-the-world, Nancy achieves a movement beyond 'The Look' of the Other and the conflict of meaning it entails for Sartre;<sup>332</sup> for the Other is only a threat to the meaning of my existence if that meaning is conceived along the lines of a *pure subjectivity* cloistered within a closed immanence. Nancy appends an important amendment to the closed immanence of Sartrean existentialism: existential meaning is, in part, an individual *venture*, but is never strictly or solely the province and purview of the individual alone, since existential meaning is always already co-meaning(s), and a singular plural *ad-venture*.<sup>333</sup> Nancy thus takes us beyond the 'useless passion' that Sartre ascribes to our human existence by offering humanity the means to affirm existential meaning beyond the closed immanence of their subjectivity, and within the open immanence, or trans-immanence, of *this* shared world as sense. Morin astutely summarizes Nancy's position *beyond* Sartre as follows:

In looking at Nancy's 'response' to Sartre, we saw that his thought as well is guided by the 'death of God' and the groundlessness of existence. Yet, Nancy undercuts the problem of the 'meaning' of the world in the face of an absurd universe. As opposed to Sartre, it is not the task of the human to give meaning *to* or impose meaning *on* the world. Rather Being itself as Toward-Itself already makes sense. Our task is therefore not to create sense, but to let ourselves be exposed to... those singularities that are already exposed one to another.<sup>334</sup>

Following the account given above, an important question remains to be addressed concerning Nancy's philosophy of meaning as sense and his conception of human existence as singular plural: Is Nancy's view wholly adequate, in and of itself, for a (re)thinking of existential meaning in the contemporary terms demanded by this world today? That is, how might Nancy's thought be critically appraised in terms of its possible implications and potential pitfalls? Following these questions, it remains for this study to critically engage with Nancy's contemporary philosophy, and the following subsection seeks to address precisely such critical concerns.

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<sup>331</sup> *FT*, p. 46.

<sup>332</sup> *BSP*, pp. 35-36: 'It can no longer be a matter of treating sociability as a regrettable and inevitable accident, as a constraint that has to be managed in some way or another.'

<sup>333</sup> An '*ad-venture*' here refers to a venturing *toward* [*ad*] – in concert, rather than in conflict, with other beings.

<sup>334</sup> Morin 2009:51. See also: Morin 2012:43.

#### 4.6. Critical Engagement with Nancy's (Finite) Thinking

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A critical appraisal of Nancy's thought on existential meaning calls for an engagement with the two concepts that are especially central to his philosophy, viz. meaning as sense, and existence as singular plural. These central Nancian concepts are the product of a contemporary thinking of our finite human condition that is meritorious insofar as it allows us to go beyond traditional Western philosophy when addressing the contemporary possibilities of a meaningful human existence. In a manner that accords appositely with his philosophical arguments on sense, Nancy's philosophy itself seems to participate in an intuitive sense of what is demanded of meaning in a secular world. However, this *prima facie* sense suggested by Nancy's arguments should nonetheless be subjected to critical scrutiny in order to reveal the possible pitfalls of Nancy's philosophy on existential meaning, particularly in terms of its potentially problematic presuppositions and implications. The critical engagement with Nancy's philosophy presented in the following subsection is twofold: firstly, it focuses on the ethical entailments of Nancy's singular plurality of meaning as sense; and secondly, it problematizes Nancy's neglect of that individual element of existential meaning that cannot be shared between beings. This critical engagement with Nancy therefore aims to show that Nancy's philosophy is subject to its own share of shortcomings.

##### 4.6.1. The Ethical Impracticability of Sense

One might begin a critical engagement with Nancy's concept of sense by inquiring into the specific form and content of Nancy's idiosyncratic conception. Due to the deliberate openness of Nancy's formulation and style, his conception of sense possibly lends itself to an ambiguity and vagueness that becomes potentially problematic when trying to apply Nancy's thought to actual lived human experience. Reading Nancy's philosophy, one may be drawn to ask how it is that one is supposed to recognize and participate in the sense of the world in our everyday human (inter)activities and (inter)personal projects. In providing a primarily *descriptive* account of meaning as sense, Nancy does not clearly indicate a *prescriptive* measure of *how* one should engage (in) sense, and thus he partially neglects to explicate sense in its practical and ethical dimensions. One could therefore assert that sense, in the specific style in which Nancy formulates it, 'has no determinate content'<sup>335</sup> in that it describes something which precedes signification itself. Therefore, in his open and rather opaque formulation of meaning as sense, Nancy ironically renders his own account vulnerable to a kind of meaninglessness by means of his idiosyncratic form of philosophical signification.

This is undoubtedly a problem that any thinker would face in attempting a (re)conceptualization of meaning that aims to disrupt and question former meaning(s) predicated on a particular system or order of meaning-making *qua* signification. In other words, Nancy's philosophy attempts to

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<sup>335</sup> Watkin 2009:141.

(re)conceptualize existential meaning along the lines of the world as sense, but still requires recourse to meaning *qua* signification to express his (re)thinking of meaning in different terms. Nancy's philosophy thus evinces a certain circularity of articulation, inasmuch as he is attempting to describe meaning as sense by using meaning as signification, the latter of which he is also trying to call into question in his very (re)conceptualization of meaning. Nancy's argument is certainly not so logically problematic as to be begging the question,<sup>336</sup> but does suggest a certain difficulty of expression that is necessarily implied in what he is attempting to achieve; the irony being that Nancy's thought on sense does not itself always make complete or explicit sense, especially since it requires expression in the form of meaning *qua* signification – a system of meaning which is not always amenable or open to sense as Nancy conceives of it. Nancy therefore remains somewhat vague in his formulation, lest he fall back upon a metaphysics of presence and an inflexible foundationalism of meaning. While this point might be considered an acceptable defence of Nancy's philosophical form and style, it does little to ameliorate the fact that Nancy's philosophy, in the vagueness of its expression of meaning concerning meaning itself, somewhat stymies the immediate practical application of his thought to human experience as it is lived.

The lack of a definitive prescriptive dimension to Nancy's thought on sense further problematizes the practical application of Nancy's thought to human life in the world beyond his texts. According to Watkin, sense is concerned with the '*that*' of meaning rather than the '*what*' of meaning.<sup>337</sup> This is to say that the *content* (or '*what*') of sense cannot be prescribed since sense must remain open to multiplicity and difference(s) of meaning(s). One might append to Watkin's view the idea that the '*what*' of meaning can only be given in meaning *qua* signification, which, in Nancy's view, is secondary to meaning *qua* sense in that signification succeeds the open primary ground of sense. Watkin writes in this regard that 'Nancy's sense is a "but..." in the closure of signification.'<sup>338</sup> Sense is thus the foundation to all signification, but not in the sense of traditional foundationalism, since sense remains open and precludes closure. Watkin asserts that sense is therefore 'a non-nihilistic alternative to foundationalism'.<sup>339</sup> However, one might question, along with Alexander García-Düttman,<sup>340</sup> whether Nancy's anti-foundationalism is an adequate response to the existential nihilism of the contemporary world following in the wake of the death of god, and whether it 'can resist resolving to the dogma it seeks, equally, to avoid.'<sup>341</sup> This view, espoused by García-Düttman *contra* Nancy, seems to suggest that meaning cannot remain open and must ultimately be closed

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<sup>336</sup> Hutchens (2005:8) asserts, rather controversially: 'It would be pointless to impose logical standards upon [Nancy's] work, for his deconstructive commitments are such that this logic would be imbued with precisely the values incommensurate with the project of finite thinking.' Hutchens (2005:4) also paraphrases Naas (1991:74) in his assertion that Nancy is 'one who daringly explores the resistances of meaning to sheer production and appropriation.'

<sup>337</sup> Watkin 2009:142.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>340</sup> See Guibal & Martin 2004:152. As cited in Watkin 2009.

<sup>341</sup> Watkin 2009:143. This is Watkin's phrasing of García-Düttman's argument.

and secured in a foundationalism if it is to overcome the vagaries of nihilism.<sup>342</sup> Such a critique reveals that the openness of sense potentially lends itself to an unbridled relativism of meaning(s), inasmuch as all meaning(s) become equally meaningful, which is also to say, equally meaningless. However, as Watkin points out, this argument *contra* Nancy's view on the infinite openness of sense, problematically presupposes that 'openness and determinacy are in a mutually exclusive dichotomy', which is not the case in Nancy's philosophy since 'openness describes the way that the determinate exceeds itself, not its opposite.'<sup>343</sup>

Yet, such a defence of Nancy's position cannot fully account for the lack of a clear pragmatic and/or prescriptive component in Nancy's conception of sense. According to Watkin, in lieu of an explicitly prescriptive dimension of sense and being singular plural, Nancy offers 'the imperative to openness', described by Watkin as the one and only imperative of a finite thinking, and which entails a release from, or letting go of, any finality or end to meaning(s),<sup>344</sup> which, in the context of the study at hand, would mean letting go of meaning as an absolute closure. This further means that the imperative to openness 'is also an imperative to interruption',<sup>345</sup> in the sense that meaning must retain the capacity for (its own) disruption, either through an exposure to an *otherness* of existential meaning, or in the event of the unexpected surprise of sense which existence maintains in infinite reserve. Despite the possible merits of Nancy's tolerant advocacy in favour of an imperative to openness, a number of ethical and social (or even political) implications are raised by Nancy's stance on sense. Andrew Norris asks: 'Does [Nancy] offer a standard of any sort with which we can distinguish between the wise and the foolish, or the virtuous and the wicked, or the decent and the depraved?'<sup>346</sup> Watkin poses a most pertinent question to Nancy's philosophy in this regard: 'The imperative to openness and interruption cannot help us here; what, short of some determinate content... can rescue us from a chilling impotence?'<sup>347</sup> That is, without any criterion by which to measure the merit(s) of shared meaning(s), how are we to judge which meaning is more ethical than which other meaning(s)?

This has bearing on the problem of existential meaning inasmuch as the openness of sense does not explicitly allow for any ethical judgement(s) of those conceptions of existential meaning that might run counter to social normativity, and might therefore struggle to (be) assimilate(d) (into) the circulating sense of the world.<sup>348</sup> Watkin contends that the radical openness of sense might be

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<sup>342</sup> Watkin 2009:143. In this regard, see also May 1997:21-75, who argues along similar, though not identical lines, that Nancy's conception of community tacitly bespeaks the need for some form of normative foundation in order to arbitrate shared meanings held in-common within that community.

<sup>343</sup> Watkin 2009:157. See also: James 2006:110.

<sup>344</sup> Watkin 2009:155.

<sup>345</sup> Gilbert-Walsh 2002:41. As quoted in Watkin 2009:155.

<sup>346</sup> Norris 2000:286. As quoted in Watkin 2009:154.

<sup>347</sup> Watkin 2009:157.

<sup>348</sup> Except, perhaps, for activities that might be thought to be meaningful, but which transgress the bounds of legality, and which can be therefore be judged through a system of jurisprudence.

viewed as a *universalism* that describes the worldly circulation of meaning(s) *qua* sense. Yet, such a universalism can only 'affirm the *that* of shared finitude and furnish no means to regulate or even discern what might be shared.'<sup>349</sup> James further problematizes this point in saying that 'there is a question as to whether Nancy's affirmation of an originary sharing is not a little too optimistic and whether it is able to articulate a more originary violence or unequal division of the shared.'<sup>350</sup>

This point has two immediately identifiable implications. Firstly, sense could facilitate 'a tyranny of the majority',<sup>351</sup> who might either deliberately or inadvertently marginalize meaning(s) that do not conform to the dominant trends in the worldly circulation of sense. That is, the openness of sense might, in the actuality of its worldly circulation, reveal itself to be more open to some than to others, since the circulation of sense is ultimately still subject to the power dynamics and relations that this world has to offer. One might argue, of course, that Nancy is trying to prevent precisely such an eventuality by precluding any closure of sense, whether that closure is facilitated by a majority or minority of human beings. However, Nancy fails to provide a means to arbitrate the multiplicity of meaning(s) that the openness of sense implies,<sup>352</sup> and therefore he does not fully account for such an eventuality, nor does he buttress his arguments against such a possible tyranny of meaning. Secondly, Nancy's conception of sense as an open exposure to meaning in all its worldly plurality would only prove to be successful and workable under the express condition that most, if not all, of humanity would have to subscribe to an explicit openness to difference(s), which is to say that the majority or even entirety of humanity would need to adopt an existential disposition of openness toward any *otherness* of meaning with which they might be confronted.

Insofar as Nancy's philosophy implicitly disregards any prescriptive or foundationalist means of mediating difference(s) of meaning, one might argue that if, or indeed when, conflict does arise between competing conceptions of meaning, Nancy's only recourse would be to simply restate and reaffirm his (dis)position of openness and exposure. However, such a (dis)position might be incompatible with paradigms of meaning beyond the liberal Western secular worldview within which Nancy's thought finds itself situated. While Nancy's philosophy, in its *prima facie* aspect at least, does appear to describe the human condition in general, and thus appears applicable to humanity in its entirety, it cannot possibly speak for all paradigms of existential meaning that play out in this world – some of which might even foster an implacable impasse when confronted with Nancy's thought. Despite the optimistic intentions of Nancy's thought, it might ultimately prove itself to be *tragically* optimistic, especially in its hopeful assumption that all human beings are implicitly capable of adopting such an open disposition toward any otherness of meaning(s).

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<sup>349</sup> Watkin 2009:158.

<sup>350</sup> James 2012:49. This is a point which James admittedly draws from Caygill 1997:30-31.

<sup>351</sup> Watkin 2009:158.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Nancy thus implicitly holds a view of humanity, and hopes for its behaviour, to which humanity itself perhaps would not, or even could not, subscribe. Nancy's philosophy hence runs the risk of rendering itself unrealistic on its optimistic foundations, since it requires more from humanity than that which is evinced in our human history heretofore. Moreover, if the greater portion of humanity refuses or is unable to acknowledge and participate in the world as a shared space of sense, then Nancy's philosophy becomes downgraded to a description of the ideal or even utopian condition(s) of existential meaning *qua* sense, which might never actually find fruition in a world beset by human frailty and fallibility, countless cases of human conflict, as well as blatant human complacency and unabashed apathy. Nancy's philosophy, then, while undeniably noteworthy in its novel philosophical approach to the contemporary problem of existential meaning, would still need to be put to the test of the world in all its problematic and complex actualities, with the optimistic hope that Nancy's philosophy would not be found wanting under real-world conditions.

#### 4.6.2. The *Mineness* of Meaning

In addition to the above critique of Nancy's conception of sense, one might further critically probe Nancy's conception of the singular plural nature of meaning, which posits a philosophical account that establishes itself well beyond any individualism. While Nancy's conception of being singular plural can be considered meritorious, particularly given the potential pitfalls and inadequacies of the individualist model of meaning outlined in the previous chapters, Nancy's philosophy of singular plural sense is not without its share of shortcomings. Specifically, one might pose the following question to Nancy which problematizes his view on the singular plurality of meaning: how do *I* make sense of *my own* life in those deeply personal and introspective moments in which the question of life's meaning draws me inward toward my own innermost sense of self, and away from the plurality of this world outside of such a deeply personal experience of my own existence? The existential question on the meaning of life is not only a general philosophical question that confronts secular humanity in the aftermath of the death of god; it is first and foremost a personal existential quandary that confronts human individuals in the immediacy of their *own* existence.

One might therefore argue that the question on the meaning of life is one which is typically raised by individuals in and *of their own* lives well before the question is asked of humanity writ large. Following this, it is arguable that the individual dimension of existential meaning is *at least* of equal import to that of the social dimension. By going beyond the individual domain of meaning, Nancy risks neglecting those specifically subjective concerns that attend an individual's personal encounter with the question of the meaning of his or her own life. Admittedly, Nancy does describe existence as *singular* plural, but given Nancy's conception as described above, it is generally quite clear that Nancy's emphasis falls far more on the latter (plurality) than on the former (singularity). Nancy is not an existentialist in any traditional sense of the term, and it is perhaps for this reason

that he does not accord enough gravity to the unique individual nuances and personal difficulties of the question of existential meaning as it confronts the human being *qua* individual. This is also to argue that Nancy's philosophy might unintentionally render itself excessively abstract and intellectually removed from the more immediate individual existential exigency of the meaning of life. To be clear, this certainly does not mean that one need denounce Nancy's claims concerning the singular plurality of meaning, but rather raises the notable point that there may be more to existential meaning than Nancy's conception allows or accounts for.

Unlike his philosophical forebears in existentialism and ontology – specifically Nietzsche, Sartre, and Heidegger – Nancy arguably does not make enough room for the personal aspect of existential meaning. Heidegger describes this aspect of human existence (*Dasein*) in terms of the 'ownness'<sup>353</sup> of each individual human being's existence, which may be defined as that unique element of one's individual existence that is quintessentially one's *own*, and which further bespeaks the meaning of one's *own* existence. For Heidegger, unlike Nancy, this existence that *I am*, is first and foremost *mine*, and therefore my existence belongs to *me* and cannot be wholly shared with others unless it is *mine* to share. In this way, Heidegger posits the 'mineness' of individual human existence,<sup>354</sup> which, when applied to the study at hand, bespeaks the *mineness of meaning*, which describes the personal existential experience that an individual human being undergoes when faced with the question of the meaning of his or her *own* life. Both Heidegger and Sartre acknowledge that there exists a deeply personal element in the experience of this existential question, which no other human being can assume on one's behalf, and for which one therefore bears a full and unmitigated responsibility. Heidegger describes this in terms of the 'call of conscience' – calling each individual human being to the authenticity of their own existence (their 'ownmost potentiality for being'); while Sartre describes it in terms of the individual confrontation of the For-itself in anguish with its radical ontological freedom and absolute responsibility for its own existential meaning(s).

Unlike Heidegger and Sartre, Nancy seems to pass over, or even partially neglect, an existential reflection on the *mineness of meaning* as described above; a point attested to in his assertion at the very outset of his ontology that 'we are meaning' – a message that is undoubtedly positive in its affirmation of existential meaning as a shared experience, yet does not adequately engage in

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<sup>353</sup> In *Being and Time*, Division I, §I (p. 67) Heidegger writes: 'The Being of any such entity [*Dasein*] is in each case mine. These entities, in their Being, comport themselves towards their Being. As entities with such Being, they are delivered over to their own Being. *Being* is something which is an issue for every such entity.' The translators' footnote (p. 67) further states this as follows: 'the kind of Being which belongs to *Dasein* is of a sort which any of us may call his own.' In Heidegger's ontological terms, then, the existence of each human individual is experienced, first and foremost, as belonging to that particular individual. This is an important point for Heidegger, since the fact that one's individual human existence is one's 'own' [*eigen*] pertains to the 'authenticity' [*eigentlichkeit*] and meaning of one's individual existence, specifically insofar as one's individual existence bespeaks what Heidegger calls one's 'ownmost' [*eigenst*] 'potentiality-for-Being', which might be identified through a personal existential 'call of conscience', which calls that individual human being to their own authentic (and hence meaningful) individual existence. (see *BT*, Division II, §II).

<sup>354</sup> Heidegger (*BT*, p. 68) posits that human existence 'has in each case mineness [*Jemeinigkeit*]' . The 'mineness' of existence clearly pertains directly to the fact that one's existence is always already, or first and foremost, one's 'own'.

an understanding of *why* the question of life's meaning matters specifically to human beings *qua* individuals, and the fact that each individual must personally come to terms with this question for and by themselves, and not only through singular plural relations *with* others. In this regard, Morin asserts that, for Nancy, the 'ownness' or 'mineness' of existential meaning does not suggest, as it does for Heidegger,<sup>355</sup> 'an extraordinary or exceptional way of living that would set me apart from everyone else', but instead 'consists of nothing more than merely existing as I already am' in the finitude of existence.<sup>356</sup> For Nancy, an authentic and meaningful human existence would entail an exposure to the limits that constitute one's finitude – including the world itself and the plurality of beings residing therein – without thereby suggesting any personal *mineness of meaning* that describes existential meaning specifically in its relation to *me*. In his formulation, Nancy therefore does not fully address the fact that the individuation, authenticity, or indeed singularity that sets individuals apart from each other might itself be of vital importance to each of those individuals in regard to their personal confrontation with existential meaning.

One further recalls from the arguments given previously in this chapter that Nancy posits the non-appropriable nature of meaning *qua* sense, which is to say that he is of the view that the meaning of life cannot be appropriated by individual beings in and of their own lives alone. However, the non-appropriable nature of the *answer* to the question on the meaning of life does not suggest the non-appropriable nature of the *question* or *quandary* of the meaning of life which confronts human beings specifically in their capacity as individuals. To be sure, the social dimension of existential meaning does entail that meaning is not *wholly* appropriated by an individual in *pure isolation*. Yet, the individual is nonetheless responsible for appropriating the *question* of existential meaning by directly confronting it, and engaging with it on a personal level *as well as* an inter-personal, or *singular plural*, level. While it is clear that Nancy conceives of existence as singular plural rather than individual so as to open up human existence to the sharing of existential meaning, it also becomes quite clear that Nancy does not adequately address the *mineness of meaning*, which is an important concern for individuals and thus cannot simply be cast aside or passed over in silence.

Heidegger's philosophy might further be employed to demonstrate an additional potential danger in Nancy's conception of existential meaning as singular plural. Nancy's conception leaves itself vulnerable to the possibility that, in absence of any explicit personal *mineness of meaning* and an authentic relation to my existence as my own, existential meaning might be delivered over to the homogenous and prosaic everyday existence of *Das Man* ['the they'],<sup>357</sup> which, in this context, may be described as an amorphous collective of human beings in which human singularity is quashed or effaced beneath the overwhelming anonymity of the plurality, and within which singular plural

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<sup>355</sup> And also for Nietzsche and Sartre in terms of their respective individualist accounts of existential meaning.

<sup>356</sup> Morin 2012:25.

<sup>357</sup> See Heidegger's *BT*, Division I, §§IV-V.

human existence cannot properly thrive. For instance, in contemporary consumerist societies, where meanings are often manufactured in terms of their marketability and consumability,<sup>358</sup> certain more profound existential meaning(s) might be negatively subsumed within more readily accessible discourses that propound meanings lacking any appreciable measure of existential profundity. In this regard, Nancy conceptualizes the singular plurality of meaning in a way that does not lend due credence to the possibility that individual existential meaning(s) might be *shared away* between beings situated in the mass culture of contemporary consumerist societies. Pluralism thus opens up the possibility for individual meaning(s) to become *lost* within a shared space of existence between beings (in what Heidegger calls *Das Man*); and hence, plurality should not only be looked upon favourably, but also critically. This critical view allows us to see that the opening (up) of meaning(s) into an infinite plurality potentially opens up a space of meaning(s) so wide indeed that some human meaning(s) might actually become lost amid a plurality of more palatable meanings, or shared away on the winds of a problematic plurality of human beings who apathetically refuse to deal with the difficulties and demands of human existential meaning.

Admittedly, and to be fair to Nancy, the problematic plurality described in *Das Man* is not strictly synonymous with the plurality of openness and exposure described in Nancy's ontology. However, it is nonetheless significant that while Nancy's philosophy might not *inherently* lend itself to such an amorphous plurality, it is never entirely immune from deteriorating into such a problematic plurality, especially when one considers the contemporary social, cultural, and economic context of the Western world, featuring the dominant mass culture(s) of consumerist societies, where more marketable meanings might cause other (possibly more profound) meanings to be effaced. This is a problem which Nietzsche and Heidegger both understood well,<sup>359</sup> and thus accounted for by means of their respective individualist conceptions of the *Übermensch* and *Dasein*. Nancy's philosophical account of meaning, however, does not seem to foresee such eventualities, and might therefore benefit from the individualist existentialist insights of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and even Sartre, all of whom vouch for at least the possibility that one's personal meaning(s) might be threatened to some degree by an absolute openness and sharing of meaning between beings.

Perhaps, then, there is room to be made for Sartre's conception of closed immanence in parallel with Nancy's open immanence; or rather, one might try to find the middle ground between these views so as to address the problems that have been raised above regarding Nancy's philosophy. Firstly, one must address the problem of *conflict* between competing conceptions of existential meaning that are clearly *not shared* between beings – a problem which Sartre views as an almost foregone conclusion to human existential meaning, and which Nancy fails to adequately address,

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<sup>358</sup> For example, the global 'self-help' industry, or the esoteric 'new age' fads of meaning peddled to a consuming public.

<sup>359</sup> Heidegger's *Das Man* might be said to have its origins in Nietzsche's conception of 'the herd' – the common mass of human beings which assimilates common meanings and eschews difficult, or more profound meaning(s).

except by means of the radical openness of meaning as sense, which, as argued above, might finally fall short of fully accounting for the complications entailed in such problematic worldly realities. Secondly, one might further employ Sartrean and Nancian thought together in such a way as to redress Nancy's oversight regarding the *mineness of meaning*. None of the above critique is to say that Nancy's philosophy is simply blind or naïve as concerns the personal dimension of existential meaning, but that Nancy's more optimistic account of existential meaning as the sharing of Being might benefit, at least in part, from some of Sartre's individualist insights on the more pessimistic aspects of human existence. To be clear, this would not entail a resignation to a kind of pessimistic defeatism, but a more balanced and realistic approach between Sartre and Nancy as to what could or should be expected from human existence vis-à-vis existential meaning(s).

#### 4.6.3. Being Singular as well as Plural

In Chapter III, it was argued that Sartre's existentialist account of inter-subjective meaning(s) as necessarily conflictual is not yet fully adequate in describing the social dimension of existential meaning. However, while this point still stands, one might argue at this juncture that Sartre's problematizing of inter-subjective existential meaning might be employed in such a manner as to both critique and supplement Nancy's position on existential meaning as singular plural. Sartre's view that existential meaning between human beings raises potential problems and conflicts allows for an explicit addressing of a concern that is only ever implicit in Nancy's thought on sense, viz. the fact that conflict is an unavoidable part of our human existence, and must therefore be addressed in any discourse which seeks to describe the possible meaning(s) of human life in the contemporary world. To be sure, Nancy's philosophy might diminish the possibility for conflict by (re)thinking the world in such a way as to deal directly and critically with the *grounds* on which conflict is typically established, viz. difference(s) of meaning(s) built upon a closed immanence in a pure subjectivity or community. As has been shown, Nancy proposes an open immanence (or trans-immanence) of meaning(s) as sense, such that the very condition that typically fosters the (meaningful) conflict of meaning(s) (viz. difference) is positively incorporated into his ontology at its outset, and following this, conflict might actually be mitigated to a greater extent.

However, it seems that Sartre is more willing to concede those negative elements of our human existence that, without being an essential or necessary aspect of human existence, always seem to manifest themselves in this world, and play a decisive role in how meaning arises between beings. Considering the conflict that arises between disparate conceptions of existential meaning(s), one might put forward the idea that the moment of conflict is precisely the moment when the radical openness of sense breaks down, and following this, one can say that meaning cannot remain interminably or perpetually open and shared, but that meaning is itself subject to periods when it is not entirely shared, and thus momentarily closes in on itself. However, this does not mean that

one can assume this position of conflict in closed immanence to be the foregone conclusion to the *Mitsein* of existential meaning, as Sartre does in his ontology. Rather, in conjunction with insights gleaned from Nancy's views on sense, one must realize that in such instances of conflict where meaning is drawn back upon itself and into a closed immanence, the circulating sense of the world calls upon that meaning to (re)open itself once again, and (re)constitute itself *within* the trans-immanence of this world as sense. Meaning may undergo *short*, and not indefinite, periods of closure, but only if it will (re)open again with the aim of mediating and mitigating the difference(s) of meaning that brought such closure about. Hence, where a conflict of human meaning(s) arises – and one must concede that conflict most likely will arise – meaning cannot finally *remain closed*, but must always *(re)open* again at some time in the proximal or foreseeable future.

This is clearly a position between Sartre and Nancy, since Sartre closes off individual meaning from the Other altogether in the moment of conflict, while Nancy aims at meaning's perpetual openness in the shared relation of meaning(s) between beings. By arguing for a position between Sartre and Nancy, one situates meaning between absolute closure (in the closed immanence of Sartrean subjectivity) and infinite disclosure or openness (in the trans-immanence of Nancy's singular plurality of sense). This allows meaning to vacillate between closure and disclosure in such a way as to allow different human beings their own singular space in which meaning may be thought of as *their own* for a transitory time, but never indefinitely so, since human beings are not simply isolated individuals but are always already implicated in the singular plurality of existence. Hence, existential meaning might *belong to oneself* in introspective moments of self-reflection, but must eventually be (re)situated as a participation and sharing in the circulating sense of the world.

Simon Critchley's critique of Nancy's co-ontology becomes especially relevant in this regard: 'Perhaps, the co-existential structures of being-with overlay a prior level of "being-without," a being-without the other'.<sup>360</sup> Following Critchley's line of critique, I would argue that one should introduce into Nancy's thought a moderate(d) measure of separation between the singular and the plural; not in order to re-establish an absolute separation and dichotomy between the two in a closed immanence, as Sartre does, nor in order to wholly undermine Nancy's philosophy of being singular plural, but rather, in order to allow for a modicum of private and personal meaning(s); a space in which meaning is not yet fully shared between beings but experienced at the distinctively personal level. This would entail (re)thinking Nancy's conception of the 'singular plural' as the 'singular *as well as* plural', where the '*as well as*' represents the moderate(d) space of separation between the singular and plural aspects of Being, in which each human individual is accorded a personal existential space so as to accommodate and affirm their own *mineness of meaning*.

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<sup>360</sup> Critchley 1999:66.

According to being singular *as well as* plural, the *mineness of meaning* would not entail a *selfishness* of existential meaning, as such an assertion would mean utterly undermining Nancy's conception of meaning as singular plural. To be clear, the mineness of meaning is not a reference to the fact that meaning belongs *exclusively* to me in my individual existence *alone*, but rather maintains the idea that when meaning is shared between beings, the space of this sharing implies a contact *as well as* a separation. Sharing implies a separation inasmuch as human beings *touch* upon each other's lives by *being-toward* each other, but *touch* in such a way as to simultaneously maintain a separation in the very contact of their touching *upon* or *toward* one other. That is, to be singular plural means that the respective *difference* between beings both separates *and* joins those beings, since they are not the same being, but rather a plurality of singular beings drawn into the intimacy of an ontological relation in which difference, rather than sameness, is held in-common.

On this point, Nancy writes that 'touch alone exposes the limits at which identities or ipseities can *distinguish themselves* [se démêler] from one another, with one another, between one another, from among one another',<sup>361</sup> insofar as each singular being is 'on the border of the other, at the entrance yet not entering, before and against the singular signature exposed on the threshold.'<sup>362</sup> Following this, one might argue that Nancy's conception of meaning as singular plural does not entirely preclude the possibility that the meaning of the specifically singular facet of my existence can retain a moderate(d) space of personal meaning(s) that may yet *touch* upon other meanings, but is not *immediately* shared, or rather, is shared precisely as a contact *as well as* a separation, or what might be termed a *contact-separation*. To be clear, this contact-separation does not drive an ontological or existential wedge between the singular and the plural, thereby undoing Nancy's work by re-establishing a potentially problematic dichotomy of the Self and the Other. The shared separation of the *between* might rather be understood as that which allows for the singular to be recognized specifically in its very singularity, and as distinct from a plurality.

Moreover, Nancy's conception of the singular plural suggests that singularity and plurality are intimately intertwined, and that the one always already implies the other. Yet, while Nancy's emphasis seems to fall primarily on the fact that the singular always already implies the plural, one cannot thereafter simply ignore the inverse relation that is further entailed in the singular plurality of meaning. That is, if existence is singular plural, as Nancy posits, and if the singular always already implies the plural, as he further posits, then the plural must also always already imply the singular due to the reciprocal nature of the shared relation of being-with. Following this, I must acknowledge that the meaning of my existence is not mine purely in isolation from the plurality of beings, and reciprocally, the plurality of beings that constitute the circulating sense of

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<sup>361</sup> *BSP*, p. 156. Nancy also phrases this as follows: 'Beings touch; they are in con-tact with one another; they arrange themselves and distinguish themselves in this way.' (*Ibid.*, p. 96).

<sup>362</sup> *SW*, p. 60.

the world must acknowledge that the meaning(s) of existence belong not only to the existence of a plurality of beings, but belong also to my existence *qua* singular being.

Therefore, on the one hand, 'being singular *as well as* plural' means to acknowledge those deeply personal existential moments when the social dimension of existential meaning is mostly effaced from one's immediate individual experience of existence, due to the unadulterated immediacy of one's confrontation with the question of the meaning or meaninglessness of one's *own* existence. On the other hand, and conversely, 'being singular *as well as* plural' would also be to acknowledge those existential moments when one's solipsistic individuality is mostly effaced in experiences of inter-individual exchanges of existential meaning; where the *mineness of meaning* is eclipsed in those meaningful moments in which shared experiences of existence, and the meanings that are made of and through them, are neither wholly mine nor yours, but surely *ours*. Importantly, then, Nancy affords us the insight that no human individual is ever an individual by themselves alone, and as a result, the existential question on the meaning of life can be understood as a question that emerges from a common human condition which can be shared. One might thus arrive at the idea that the meaning(s) of life belong both to me *and* us, but are neither mine *nor* ours *exclusively*.

One might ultimately ask whether Nancy's conception of existential meaning as provided in this chapter is not too open, too optimistic, or even too demanding of human beings, and therefore altogether unrealistic and finally untenable. However, this question contains within itself the very reason to investigate Nancy's philosophy, for within his finite thinking on existential meaning one may discover the infinite potential promise and avid hope that we might harbour for our human existence, both in a contemporary sense and for our human future. It is perhaps for this reason above all that Nancy's philosophy always already seems to make sense, even if only in an indirect or intuitive way; it makes sense because we want or even need it to make sense, perhaps because it so appositely represents our contemporary human condition in an optimistic and hopeful light. Nancy's philosophy might be deemed difficult, and even demanding of our contemporary human existence in this world, but that, in and of itself, is not a sufficient condition to abandon one's fidelity to his philosophical project. As Watkin phrases it, Nancy draws urgent attention to the fact that 'we must think from the irreducible primordially of being-with, difficult as that may be.'<sup>363</sup> For this reason, Nancy's philosophy may be understood as an incisive engagement with the concerns of human existence in our contemporary world – not only as it is in its immediate actuality, but surely in such a way as to showcase how it may yet be if human beings (re)envision the finitude of our shared world, and allow for the question of life's possible meaning(s) to remain indefinitely open by offering it up to the infinite finitude of this world *hic et nunc*.

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<sup>363</sup> Watkin 2007:61.

#### 4.7. Conclusion: A Contemporary Sense of Existentialism

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If creation is indeed this singular ex-position of being, then its real name is *existence*. Existence is creation, *our* creation; it is the beginning and end that *we* are. This is the thought that is the most necessary for us to think. If we do not succeed in thinking it, then we will never gain access to who we are, we who are no more than us in the world, which is itself no more than the world – but we who have this point precisely because we have thought *logos* (the self-presentation of presence) as creation (the singular coming).<sup>364</sup>

Nancy's arguments on existential meaning as sense and existence as singular plural provide us with a contemporary means-to-meaning(s) removed from the fetters of our past thinking, situated squarely within the world of the present, and oriented toward a more meaningful human future. Nancy's account allows immediate access to the world *as* sense, thereby emancipating existential meaning from its former closure in the transcendental or in a restricted immanence. As a properly contemporary thinker engaging in a finite thinking of human existence in *this* world *hic et nunc*, Nancy speaks directly to the increasingly interconnected and interdependent worldliness of our contemporary world, and (re)directs human existence toward the plurality and polysemy of its possible meaning(s). While perhaps somewhat underplaying the potential import of existential meaning as an individual venture, Nancy fully accounts for the social dimension of existential meaning by revealing that existential meaning is an *ad-venture* undertaken in concert *with* others.

Following an account of Nancy's contemporary sense of existence, one might consider extending Nancy's philosophical project beyond its own delimitations and toward what might be designated as *a contemporary sense of existentialism*, defined as a philosophical account of human existence and its various elements in terms of the contemporary demands of human existence in this world. A contemporary sense of existentialism would affirm that existential meaning is situated neither in the entirely transcendental, for god is dead, nor in the purely immanent, for meaning is more than a strictly subjective creation that plays at being god. Contrary to Nietzsche and Sartre, Nancy maintains that existential meaning is not born of an individualistic will-to-power (Nietzsche), nor through one's fundamental ontological freedom (Sartre). Rather, existential meaning as sense is a participation in the *between* of Being: between the singular and the plural, between subjectivism and objectivism, between transcendence and immanence, between absolute myth and abysmal nihilism, and ultimately, 'between totalizing unity and incommensurable heterogeneity.'<sup>365</sup>

A contemporary sense of existentialism would further recognize that existential meaning is a heterologous play *between* beings sharing in Being. The *hetero* of the *logos* encompasses all the possible meaningful difference(s) that exist between beings, and further undermines traditional,

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<sup>364</sup> *BSP*, p. 17.

<sup>365</sup> Watkin 2007:55.

and increasingly extraneous, existential meaning(s) predicated on a problematic metaphysics of presence inherited from the Western philosophical tradition, and which poststructuralist thought at least since Derrida has revealed and sought to subvert. Following this, humanity might come to understand that meaning cannot be fully guaranteed by its signified 'presence-at-a-distance', and that such traditional thought on existential meaning is subject to deconstruction in such a way as to rupture its closure and open up existential meaning into its infinite finitude, and in so doing, perpetually preclude the absolute exhaustion of existential meaning in that infinite night named nihilism which Nietzsche brought to our human attention. The phrase '*the meaning of life*' seems to suggest that life contains an inherent meaning derived either via transcendence or immanence. However, a contemporary sense of existential meaning, such as that found in Nancy's philosophy, is trans-immanent, between human beings who are always already singular *as well as* plural: singular sans absolute subjectivity; plural sans absolute difference.

To posit *the meaning of life* would therefore be senselessness itself, since the veritable plurality of possible meaning(s) to human existence ensures that there could be no one absolute, ultimate, or definitive meaning that fully and finally defines our shared human existence. A contemporary sense of existentialism might thus rather maintain that human existence is never *fully* meaningful nor *finally* meaningless, but precisely *between* these antipodes, especially inasmuch as meaningful human experiences often fail to retain the consistency of their meaning(s) even within a single moment, and even more so over the expansive span of a human lifetime. A contemporary sense of existentialism would thus assert that humankind is not in fact 'a useless passion' striving in a most futile fashion toward the ideal of some grandiose meaning worthy of the glory of a god. Rather, as Nancy's philosophy demonstrates, the human orientation toward existence as meaningful always already presupposes a *participation* in, and an *exposure* to, *this world as sense*, and it is this orientation *toward* the world as sense which allows us to understand that no human passion could ever be deemed *absolutely* meaningful nor *utterly* meaningless.

Following from the above, a number of tentative tenets for a contemporary sense of existentialism might be put forward here and left open for future philosophical consideration and development. Firstly, *sense precedes existence* inasmuch as sense and world are co-extensive, which is to say that human existence always already entails a participation in the trans-immanent circulation of sense. Moreover, to posit that *sense precedes existence* is to append to Sartre's axiomatic existentialist adage 'existence precedes essence' the further qualification that the world *as sense* antecedes all individual existential projects of meaning *qua* signification. Secondly, the world *is* a shared space of sense which calls for an existential (dis)position of responsive and responsible openness to existential meaning(s); an *exposure* to an *otherness* of existential meaning, which is to understand existential meaning as trans-immanent rather than transcendent *or* immanent, relational rather

than absolute, and worldly rather than otherworldly. Thirdly, human existence is singular plural rather than exclusively individual, with the concomitant corollary that this world plays host to the trans-immanent circulation of an infinite finitude of sense made manifest on the grounds of an original ontological relation of difference(s) between beings. Finally, a contemporary sense of existentialism should avoid the reduction(ism) of an infinitude of finite meanings to *the* meaning of life, and argue instead for the manifold *meaning(s) to(wards) life*. In this way, a contemporary sense of existentialism would acknowledge and affirm the pluralism of our contemporary world, and offer a possible means-to-meaning(s) that speaks to its exigent demands.

Following Nancy, when we say that we exist and that we seek the meaning(s) of our existence, we mean to say that contemporary existential meaning is between nothing and everything at every stage of its unfolding; between the *be all* and *end all* of Being itself. By opening up the possibility of meaning(s) beyond the typical parameters of traditional Western philosophy, Nancy allows contemporary human beings to face the fact that only our shared contemporary existence in our interconnected and interdependent world summons us to sense, and it is this summons to sense that requires humanity to take responsibility for the plurality of possible meaning(s) of existence in this shared world *hic et nunc*. In this way, Nancy provides us with an account of existential meaning that is dynamic and flexible, suitable for our rapidly changing world, pliable enough to shape itself to the contours of our mutable human existence, and always already amenable to the manifestation of multifarious human meaning(s) in our present, and toward our uncertain, yet infinitely hopeful, human future.

## CHAPTER V:

### Conclusion(s) on the Meaning(s) of Life

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Here at the end of this study, one arrives once more at the cardinal question that initially gave rise to the philosophical investigation carried out in the preceding pages: What is the meaning of life? In addressing this question in this concluding chapter, one might revisit the words of Albert Camus offered at the very commencement of this investigation: 'I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.'<sup>1</sup> Following the extensive exploration of this question that has occupied the chapters of this study, one might justifiably claim that this philosophical question is indeed a most significant theme for our contemporary philosophical consideration, if for no other reason than the fact that an investigation into the meaning of life entails an inquiry into that which makes our human existence as a whole worth living in all its diverse vicissitudes, ranging from our harrowing human sorrows to our ebullient joys, and everything in between that human life might possibly (re)present. One might even go so far as to posit, in kinship with Camus, that the question at hand is ultimately 'the fundamental question of philosophy'. Regardless of whether or not the question at hand is finally as fundamental to humanity as I have claimed here in this study, it nonetheless remains for this investigation to address Camus's question on existential meaning: 'How to answer it?'

The philosophical question of existential meaning always assumes, as its point of departure, the contemporary context out of which it emerges. In this study, the existing context is described predominantly in terms of the more secular world *hic et nunc*, which is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent due largely to globalization and its various attendant effects, as identified in the introduction to this investigation. Our existence in this world today demands a philosophical conception of existential meaning that can account for the veritable pluralism of meaning(s) that plays out across the surface of this world; meaning(s) that increasingly resist the reduction of their plurality (in)to an overarching grand-narrative of absolute meaning; global meanings that touch upon one another and reveal a vast (inter)textuality of human meaning(s). Such intertextual meaning(s) can be traced in the eclectic pluralism of contemporary culture(s), and an increasing awareness of our shared worldly condition, rendered all the more apparent by the advent of undeniably *global* concerns and crises that now confront humanity in its entirety. Moreover, this world *hic et nunc*, specifically as described within the contemporary context of this study, might be said to be a world that features a larger share of secular thought on the question of existential meaning than ever before in our human history, despite the noteworthy emergence of post-secular religious resurgences and contemporary conservatism(s).

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<sup>1</sup> Camus 2013:5-6. The subsequent citations concerning Camus are also taken from these pages.

Therefore, the contemporary consideration of the question of existential meaning calls for it to be addressed in secular rather than spiritual terms, especially since traditional religious narratives of existential meaning, which have long offered a measure of meaningful existential security and solace, might now be viewed as progressively outmoded or even entirely irrelevant given the demise of metaphysical thinking and religious adherences, particularly in the Western world. Given these contemporary conditions and concerns, this study aimed at an investigation into the possibilities of existential meaning that remain at humanity's disposal in the face of a declining spiritualism and a concomitantly ascending secularism. The decline of traditional spiritual orders of signification in the Western world is attended by a decline in the metaphysical emphasis of the otherworldly, further voicing a contemporary call for a vital emphasis of *this world hic et nunc* precisely in terms of its contemporary manifestation. Given the contemporary condition(s) within which the problem of existential meaning now confronts humanity, this study investigated the possibilities of a meaningful human existence without recourse to the metaphysical tradition of transcendentalism, and without falling prey to the numerous daunting implications suggested by a resignation to existential nihilism. This study therefore sought to answer the following question: What might be said to be a contemporary human means-to-meaning(s) in *this world hic et nunc*?

### **5.1. Tracing the Movement(s) of Meaning from Nietzsche to Sartre to Nancy**

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The 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche serves as a germane launching platform for this study inasmuch as the roots of the contemporary problem of existential meaning may be traced back to its initial emergence in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western philosophical thought. Contrary to the optimistic Enlightenment thinking of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which often upheld the view that humanity was progressing toward a more meaningful form of historical harmony through the exercise of its rational faculties, the Counter-Enlightenment philosophies of Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and especially Nietzsche, sought to show that in the wake of philosophical modernity and its project of Enlightenment, humanity was possibly facing an altogether unprecedented crisis in human existential meaning owing to the demise of traditional social and cultural formations, especially traditional religious beliefs, which heretofore had served as a foremost fundament to Western thought on the question of existential meaning.

Nietzsche's proto-existentialism, in particular, proved to be enormously consequential, especially in his emphatic and polemical proclamation of the death of god, which, for those who hear its cry, might be said to announce and usher in a new dawn for humanity and its existential meaning(s) – one in which meaning can no longer be extrinsically assured through recourse to transcendental elements beyond this world. Nietzsche therefore emancipates human existential meaning from its former metaphysical foundations by freeing the fetters that falsely secured all meaning in a source beyond the immediate reality of human existence *hic et nunc*. Nietzsche importantly recognizes

that this emancipation of meaning from its former supernal stronghold is not simply a propitious eventuality for humankind, but an eventuality steeped in a deep ambiguity; for with the positive boon of existential freedom arises also the inexorable bane of existential uncertainty henceforth. Nietzsche thus foresees a tentativeness and precariousness of existential meaning following in the immediate aftermath of the death of god. Drawing influence from his foremost philosophical educator, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche confronts that menacing scourge of meaninglessness plaguing his contemporary milieu – a scourge which would likely continue to threaten human existential meaning in human history following in the wake of Nietzschean thought.

However, unlike his philosophical forebear Schopenhauer, Nietzsche does not allow himself to be drowned in the dark waters of nihilism, but understands instead that such dark waters might eventually drain into an infinite sea of possible meanings; an infinite sea appearing vaguely on the horizon for Nietzsche, and which possibly awaits humanity in the potential of its proximal future. That is, in raising the problem of existential nihilism to philosophical and existential prominence, Nietzsche's thought further importantly invokes at least the latent possibility that the historical moment of nihilism might eventually be transmuted into a more meaningful state of affairs for humanity in its future. Nietzsche demonstrates that it is important that we must first understand and undermine our antiquated values and meaning(s) before we can ever hope to reach any new meaning(s) to existence. We need to *overcome* our past thinking on meaning in order to (re)create ourselves and the meaning(s) of our lives as if for the first time in terms of this world *hic et nunc*. Standing on the horizon of a previously uncharted existential landscape bereft of transcendental significance, and immersed squarely within a fundamental (dis)orientation in human existence that the death of god brought to bear upon Being, Nietzsche contemplates a world unchained from its otherworldly sun, and a contemporary humanity lost without its former bearings, floating on an infinitely open sea of potential future existential meaning(s).

In this way, Nietzsche creatively sketches the rudiments for a philosophy of the future in which human existence might be thought to be meaningful on its own terms – no longer 'human, all too human', but human with a life-affirming positive will to power of an *Übermensch*. Yet, Nietzsche's philosophy ultimately falls somewhat short of the mark of a fully-fledged philosophy of the future. Nietzsche's proto-existentialist project bequeaths its legacy on the question of existential meaning to philosophical posterity to fathom and develop further. Subsequent thinkers would need to continue Nietzsche's project by finding a revitalized means-to-meaning for humanity through an investigation into the possibility of a meaningful human existence unfettered from the nihilistic baggage of its past, and fully cognizant of the present realities bearing down on human existence. It was Jean-Paul Sartre who took up the existentialist reigns from Nietzsche and further developed a new human means-to-meaning(s) that goes beyond the nihilism that haunts our human history.

By means of the discourse of phenomenology, which Sartre inherited from Husserl and Heidegger, Sartre approaches human existence in a manner that affirms the lived experience of our conscious apprehension of the world and existence as meaningful. As an outspoken and ardent atheist of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century situated within the disillusioning tumult of World War II, Sartre harbours no transcendental illusions as to the source of existential meaning, and argues instead that existential meaning is the sole product of individual human consciousness *qua* being-for-itself, and therefore cannot be guaranteed by any measure of meaning beyond one's individual existence in-the-world. Drawing influence from Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*, Sartre's individualism of meaning in *Being and Nothingness* makes each human being accountable for an existence that is fundamentally and inextricably one's *own*; a notion which encompasses a radical ontological freedom and responsibility residing at the heart of each human individual.

Sartre therefore emphasizes that human meaning is never situated at a metaphysical remove from human subjectivity, but contrariwise, that meaning is established and maintained only in and for individual human consciousness in a closed immanence. Meaning is a subjective creation that is immediately at the disposal of all human beings owing to the fundamentally free nature of their existence. Sartre thus famously asserts that human existence precedes its essence, since nothing beyond one's immediate existence in-the-world predetermines one's meaning(s) prior to one's upsurge into Being. Following this, each human individual, in the closed immanence of his or her own conscious experience of human reality, is fundamentally free to determine both the essence and meaning of existence for, and by, themselves. In this significant way, Sartre provides secular humanity with an individual means-to-meaning which is always already present within one's own consciousness itself. However, Sartre's account is certainly not without its own potential pitfalls.

In his strict individualism of existential meaning, Sartre argues for what he considers to be an impassable conflict of meaning(s) between different meaning-making individuals in-the-world. Sartre unequivocally eschews Heidegger's conception of *Mitsein* (being-with) on the basis of the irreconcilable dialectical conflict that manifests between one's own existential meaning(s) and those of the 'Other'. Sartre further maintains, at least as far as *Being and Nothingness* is concerned, that meaning is manifested in the purely subjective immanence of individual consciousness, and not through the inter-subjectivity of shared worldly relations, since the existential meaning(s) of the Other are external to my own subjective ascriptions of meaning to existence, and thus always potentially threaten to subvert my subjective existential meaning(s). In his philosophical works subsequent to *Being and Nothingness*, namely, *Existentialism is a Humanism* and his posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics*, Sartre clearly seeks a means-to-meaning(s) beyond the strictly subjective sphere, but, as was demonstrated in Chapter III, ultimately fails to satisfactorily achieve this aim. Sartre never fully reconciles existential meaning(s) between the For-itself and the Other,

and hence relegates humanity to a *closed immanence* of individual existential meaning(s), which stands in opposition to, rather than in meaningful conjunction with, other human individuals.

It is precisely at this juncture – viz. where Sartre’s phenomenological ontology fails to adequately account for the social dimension of existential meaning – that this study turned its attention to the contemporary thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, whose (re)conceptualization of meaning as *sense* and existence as *singular plural* allows for a profusion of possible existential meaning(s) beyond the strictly subjective or individual domain. Nancy observes that human existential meaning rendered within the closed immanence of human consciousness, as Sartre conceives of it, does not yet go far enough in explaining how meaning might be made manifest *between* beings who *share* their existence(s) in-the-world *with* one another, and not only as isolated individual beings locked in interminable inter-subjective conflict(s). Drawing influence from his philosophical predecessors – Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida – Nancy acknowledges this *abandoned* world from which the gods have fled; a world which henceforth demands, in a quintessentially Nietzschean spirit, a (re)conceptualization of our existence in this world as the (only) possible space of meaning(s). Nancy thus contends, *contra* Sartre, that meaning entails an existential exchange that transpires between human beings throughout *this world hic et nunc*, and nowhere else.

In *The Sense of the World*, Nancy adopts an argumentative line between traditional binaries that hold that existential meaning is manifested either on the grounds of an exogenous transcendence or an endogenous immanence. Drawing such binary thinking directly into a critical philosophical confrontation, Nancy (re)conceptualizes the *trans-immanence* of existential meaning as sense: the worldly circulation of sense *across* all beings participating in the meaning(s) of this world. Nancy’s conception of meaning *qua* sense may be interpreted as an important philosophical contribution to contemporary thought on existential meaning inasmuch as it critically engages with the more traditional orders of meaning *qua* signification that litter the Western philosophical landscape, but which promise meaning only ever at a distance from our more immediate human experience. In *The Gravity of Thought*, Nancy critiques meaning *qua* signification for potentially (with)holding meaning at an infinite remove from actual human existence *hic et nunc*. In conjunction with this, Nancy identifies that meaning *qua* signification often bases itself on a metaphysics of presence that assumes that the external presence of a transcendental signified in referential relation to a worldly signifier is the only possible guarantee of existential meaning to human beings.

Nancy argues contrariwise that it is precisely such problematic logic predicated on a metaphysics of presence that perpetually suspends meaning from its worldly manifestation *hic et nunc*. This is because meaning based in such logic forces humanity to project itself towards an otherworldly realm where the transcendental signified is housed, and in this process, human beings transcend the ostensibly troubling mutability and fallibility of this world, leaving it behind in order to obtain

something more meaningful than what this world always already manifestly *is*. Nancy subverts this logic by (re)affirming this world precisely as it *is* through his conception of the world *as* sense. This Nietzschean affirmation on Nancy's part effects a trans-valuation of values such that this world can be thought of as meaningful precisely on its own terms: (infinite) finitude, (affirmed) abandonment, and (co-ontological) contingency. In his own idiosyncratic manner, then, Nancy effectuates a Nietzschean philosophy of the future via his affirmation of this world as sense itself.

In his work of (co-)ontology in *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy expands on his conception of the world as sense and further formulates that existence is *singular plural* rather than strictly singular or purely plural. The implication of Nancy's thought for this study in this regard is that existential meaning is that which is always already *shared* between beings in their *being-with* each other. Nancy undermines the dichotomous logic of the Self and the Other, and places these antipodes into an immediate ontological relation of entanglement that cannot be torn asunder. Nancy argues that each individual is singular only by virtue of their relation to a plurality of other singular beings, all of whom are somewhat similar, not because they share some common substance or essential nature, but because they all have *difference* itself in-common. Continuing with this logic, Nancy asserts that 'we are meaning' since meaning is always already entailed in a relation that obtains *between* beings, and in this way, Nancy expressly articulates human existential meaning in its specifically social dimension – a point inadequately expressed by both Nietzsche and Sartre.

Tracing the movement(s) in existential meaning from Nietzsche to Sartre to Nancy, one arrives at an understanding of existential meaning that manifests itself somewhere between their various philosophies. Both Nietzsche and Sartre provide important individualist conceptions of existential meaning that account for the fact that meaning might be made manifest by means of personal existential projects, and the exercise of an ontologically unencumbered freedom that may be both a boon and a bane to human individuals in their quest for meaning. Nancy, on the other hand, accounts directly for the social sphere of existential meaning by arguing that meaning is always already beyond the individual, but not so far beyond as to be altogether beyond the world as sense. These three thinkers, employed together in this way, allow for a contemporary perspective on existential meaning that evinces elements of the individual *and* social dimensions of existential meaning as it faces the more secular world of today. The subsequent subsection of this conclusion will further demonstrate that Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy not only each independently contribute significantly to the contemporary philosophical discourse on existential meaning, but can in fact contribute valuable insights to each other's conceptions of existential meaning. That is, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy, can all be employed in dialogue with one another in order to enhance each other's views through supplementation and/or critique, and in this way allow for a more thorough contemporary philosophical perspective on the possible meaning(s) of life.

## 5.2. Meaning(s) *Between Nietzsche, Sartre, & Nancy*

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It serves this study well here at its end to recall Malcolm Bull's assertion that 'nihilism is individual and its limit is social'. This subsection of the conclusion will reveal the validity of this assertion in terms of the philosophies of existential meaning put forward by Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy. More specifically, by drawing from Nietzsche's life-affirming proto-existentialist philosophy, Sartre's existentialist individualism of meaning, and Nancy's contemporary sense of existence as singular plural, one can employ these three thinkers in conjunction with one another and facilitate a philosophical interchange of ideas in order to arrive at some additional final insights on the possibilities of contemporary existential meaning(s). While it might initially appear as though the existential individualism of Nietzsche and Sartre stands in opposition to the ontological pluralism of Nancy, it should become apparent in what follows in this section that three these philosophies, rather than being at interminable odds with one another, might actually supplement each other, and remedy some of the possible pitfalls and shortcomings of each other's respective accounts.

As argued in Chapter III, Sartre's philosophical account of meaning in *Being and Nothingness* resonates with a residual despair in his emphatic concluding words, 'man is a useless passion.' These words are expressed with a gravity that imposes itself upon Sartre's ontology as a whole, even though one must not mistake these words for the crux of Sartre's arguments. Significantly, these words leave Sartre's account of meaning vulnerable to existential despair, and might even possibly indicate a problematic relapse into a form of existential nihilism that seeks out an existential meaning-in-itself-for-itself, which the Sartrean For-itself can never possibly attain. Yet, I wish to argue that this possibly for despair and nihilism, to which Sartrean ontology ultimately leaves itself vulnerable, might be overcome using the combined philosophies of Nietzsche, Nancy, and even Sartre himself. Firstly, as was demonstrated in Chapter III, one might point out that Sartre's own arguments in *Being and Nothingness* might finally save him from the despair that human existence as a 'useless passion' suggests. By employing Sartre's own argumentative logic – which is to say that the For-itself is a fundamental ontological freedom whose existence precedes its essence – it is arguable that an undying despair over human existence in no way follows as a *necessary* conclusion to Sartre's ontology, specifically since human existence means *nothing* at its inception, which is to say that it is neither entirely meaningful nor utterly meaningless, it simply *is* – being-for-itself, *nothing* more *nor* less. Sartre certainly could not prescribe otherwise, since this would entail undermining his own arguments concerning the fact that human existential meaning is born of a fundamental freedom that cannot be predetermined nor circumvented.

In addition to the above, one might employ Nietzsche's proto-existentialism as a supplement to Sartre's existentialism, with the aim of transmuting the internal negation of human consciousness into positive life-affirmation. The process of internal negation in the Sartrean For-itself suggests

a being that is constantly and unavoidably *overcoming* itself, that is, existing as a being which *is* what it *is not* and *is not* what it *is*. From a combined Nietzschean-Sartrean perspective, this kind of constant internal negation of one's internal sense of self and one's internal existential meaning might actually be viewed as central to a Nietzschean form of existential overcoming or *affirmation*. In this view, Sartre's account of meaning, rather than suggesting the despairing inexorability of humankind's 'useless passion', actually presents each human being with an important individual *existential decision* regarding their own being-in-the-world. Sartre sets up an existential path that bifurcates along the freedom of this individual existential decision: on the one hand, one can *affirm* one's being-for-itself and concomitantly renounce the forever frustrated pursuit of being-in-itself-for-itself; or on the other hand, one is free to resign oneself to a 'useless passion' by ceaselessly seeking out existential meaning(s) that can no longer manifest in the wake of the death of god. Using Nietzsche in conjunction with Sartre in this way allows one to understand that the Sartrean 'useless passion' is in fact itself the product of free individual choice, and not a foregone conclusion that follows necessarily from Sartre's arguments concerning human existence and its possible meaning(s) in *Being and Nothingness*. Following the fact that existential meaning and its antipode in existential nihilism might both be thought of as the product of an individual choice of one's own existence, one might fully affirm Malcolm Bull's assertion that nihilism is indeed individual.

Sartre is significant to this study in that he affords us insight into the kind of being that the human being fundamentally *is*, viz. a being of internal negation and incessant frustration stemming from our implacable desires constantly reproduced by the nothingness of our consciousness. Moreover, I would argue that an understanding of, and critical engagement with, these fundamental aspects of our human constitution, may allow us to confront the negative facets of human consciousness, and furthermore, possibly even *overcome* or *affirm* those problematic elements of one's human consciousness which would otherwise hinder the possible meaning(s) of one's human existence. Sartre himself puts forward the view that the human being is a being of transcendence, which might well extend to a form of meaningful existential self-transcendence, through which a human individual would realize their own capacity to transcend even their most implacable desires. By understanding and accepting ourselves for who and what we are, ontologically speaking, human individuals might thus be said to possess the will to power necessary to overcome their ceaseless striving toward that which necessarily and perpetually exceeds their grasp, viz. godliness itself and absolute existential meaning-in-itself-for-itself. In this specific Nietzschean-Sartrean sense, the internal process of negation in human consciousness might actually be transformed into life-affirmation through a particular insight drawn from Deleuze's unique interpretation of Nietzsche, namely, the view that the element in human thought which has historically negated the meaning of existence heretofore, viz. the will to power, might itself, through a trans-valuation of our values hitherto, become precisely the element through which life-affirmation might ultimately transpire.

As was indicated by Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche in Chapter II, such a transmutation from a negative to a positive will to power is only possible through the movement of double negation. Applying this logic to Sartrean phenomenology, this would entail the direct confrontation with, and purposeful negation of, those negative elements within human consciousness that would decry human existence *hic et nunc* as a useless passion due to a pursuit of being-in-itself-for-itself. In this way, the confrontation with our ontological constitution which Sartrean existentialism makes possible, might be (re)conceived as a powerful means-to-meaning(s) indeed, since it would allow humanity to overcome or transcend its futile pursuit of absolute meaning-in-itself-for-itself. If humanity can give up this pursuit of being-in-itself-for-itself, and pursue instead an existence as it manifests itself in and through *this* world, then humanity might discover a meaningful life affirmed on its own terms, nevermore threatened by the absence of absolutes. Humankind would thus no longer have cause to bemoan its fate in this world in the wake of the death of god.

In addition to the above Nietzschean-Sartrean formulation, Nancy's philosophy might be used to supplement and amend some of Sartre's shortcomings. These supplements pertain to Nancy's concepts of sense and being singular plural. As argued in Chapter IV, Nancy's thought may be employed in its post-structuralist capacity in order to highlight a problematic metaphysics of presence operating within Sartre's conception of existential meaning. By (re)thinking of meaning as neither immanent nor transcendent, but as *trans-immanent*, Nancy establishes a perpetual displacement in the presence of meaning(s) in and around this world of singular plural beings. In Nancy's view, contrary to a static metaphysics of presence, meaning *qua* sense circulates through a trans-immanent *presencing* between beings, but is never wholly situated nor entirely *present* in any single point or singular human subject. This is significant in that it undermines the notion that meaning is a *purely subjective* pursuit, and as a result, Nancy's account of existential meaning overcomes the potential pitfalls that one might associate with Sartre's predominantly subjectivist paradigm of meaning, viz. an atomistic individualism, an unmitigated subjectivism or relativism of meaning(s), as well as inter-subjective conflict and the failure of social existential meaning(s).

Following the above engagements with the possible pitfalls of Sartre's conception of existential meaning, one might further take heed of a noteworthy point. The fact that Sartrean philosophy needs to be partially saved from itself and its own grim conclusions, either through Nietzschean affirmation or Nancy's contemporary critical account, suggests a possible shortcoming in Sartrean thought. Sartre sometimes comes across as a somewhat sombre thinker still suffering to some extent from the death of god and the loss of an absolute or transcendental guarantee of meaning, albeit that Sartre suffers silently, which is to say that he suffers this loss implicitly rather than explicitly in his ontology. This is to say that despite the potential promise and potency of Sartre's answers to the question of existential meaning, one nonetheless detects a semblance of nostalgia

and mourning over lost meaning, and a lingering despair that should be addressed and quelled lest it stimulate a nihilistic existential disposition. By using Nietzsche and Nancy in conjunction with Sartre, it becomes apparent that the shortcomings of Sartrean thought are by no means insurmountable, and one might hope to address these shortcomings of his otherwise meritorious ontology through recourse to other philosophical accounts of meaning that supplement his view. It thus follows that Sartrean existentialism *alone* cannot fully address the exigency of existential meaning that confronts humanity in the contemporary world. For this reason, among the others cited above, the philosophies of Nietzsche and Nancy prove to be all the more expedient in their respective contributions to a contemporary consideration of existential meaning.

Nancy's contemporary thought demonstrates the possibility of affirming our existence *hic et nunc* – a possibility first announced by Nietzsche in his proposed philosophy of the future. Yet, where Nietzsche falls short of the mark, Nancy provides us with a fully-fledged philosophy of the future in addition to his philosophy of the contemporary. Nancy arguably achieves such a Nietzschean philosophy of the future by redefining *this* world itself *as* sense; a reconceptualization that allows us to move beyond the past, through our present, and toward a more meaningful human future. Additionally, while Sartre's account of meaning evinces a great deal of merit, Nancy allows us to see that Sartrean individualism entails a personal pursuit of existential meaning *qua* signification via one's human ability to ascribe signification(s) to existence through one's own consciousness. Nancy goes one important step further than Sartre in his conception of meaning in this regard. Indeed, meaning *qua* signification may be a fulfilling human endeavour, especially when it offers contemporary humanity a possible means-to-meaning that does not fall back into any escapist transcendentalism. But for Nancy, this is not yet enough of an account of existential meaning, since there is always already a world that antecedes the individual existent; always already a sense of the world that pre-exists signification and exceeds it; always already an ontological relation with other beings within this world that cannot be described purely in terms of conflict, as Sartre does.

On this latter point, it might be argued that Nancy supplements Sartre's account by delineating a strong social dimension to existential meaning in his conception of *being singular plural*. Nancy is, in fact, supplementing the individualism of both Nietzsche and Sartre in this regard, and allows for a further means-to-meaning beyond the nihilism of Nietzsche and the 'useless passion' of Sartre, thereby illustrating Malcolm Bull's assertion that the limit of nihilism is indeed to be found within the social dimension of existential meaning. Nancy does so by accentuating the simple, yet significant ontological fact of human *co-existence* and *co-existential meaning*. It is for this reason that Nancy posits that 'there is no meaning if meaning is not shared.' Nancy therefore carves out an ontological niche beyond the heroic individualism of Nietzsche, and what might be termed the *individual-in-conflict* that Sartre outlines in his ontology. In this way, Nancy directly undermines

Sartre's assertion that the nature of social human relations is inevitably and invariably conflictual, and he achieves this by arguing, in a manner partially akin to that of his forebear Heidegger, that *Mitsein* is ontologically integral to human existence, and thus further fundamental to the meaning of *our* shared existence as human beings in a singular plural sense.

However, it should also be noted that while Nancy's account can be considered as a critique and supplement of Sartrean thought, it is not immune from its own share of shortcomings. Specifically, Nancy fails to adequately account for any individual *mineness of meaning*, or that which makes the question of existential meaning a deeply personal concern in individual terms. While Nancy does well to bridge the schism between the meaning(s) of the Self and the Other, his conception of singular plurality might inadvertently efface the importance and weight of existential questions for human beings *qua* individuals. Given the importance of this criticism, one might employ the individualism of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, in order to partially reconceptualize Nancy's account of being singular plural in terms of being singular *as well as* plural. By bringing Nancy's thought into a dialogue with his existentialist forebears and their respective individualist accounts of meaning, one might salvage Nancy's philosophy from the possibility of a portentous pluralism in which the individual and their personal existential meaning(s) may become effaced or even lost. As was argued in Chapter IV, it is not only the singular *plural* which should be emphasized, but a human individual who cannot truly be sundered from their deeply personal *mineness of meaning*. One might therefore seek to establish a moderate(d) ontological separation between the singular and the plural such that each individual human being might be allowed a measure of personal space within which to fathom their own meaning(s) before (re)immersing themselves in(to) the circulating sense of the world and an existence that is singular plural. In this way, it becomes apparent how the existentialist individualism of Nietzsche and Sartre might aid Nancy's account in understanding existential meaning in the specifically singular aspect of being *singular plural*.

From the above approach, which might be termed a *Nietzschean-Sartrean-Nancian* approach to existential meaning, a number of conclusions can now be drawn. By means of their respective individualist existentialist philosophies, Nietzsche and especially Sartre encourage human beings to directly confront those darker and more dismal aspects of an individual existence set in an uncertain world whose meaning cannot be guaranteed, and through this very confrontation with the darker elements of our human existence, Nietzsche and Sartre, especially when employed in conjunction with one another, offer us a possible means-to-meaning beyond a despairing nihilism. Nancy, from his pluralistic perspective on meaning as sense, argues for a more open and positive outlook on human existence and its possible meaning(s) by highlighting the always already present possibility that meaning might be shared between beings, even if such sharing might not (yet) be manifest or ubiquitous among human beings across this world. In this way, through the

combined thought(s) of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy, both the darker and lighter elements of our human existence are brought to the fore of our thinking, leaving one ultimately with a sense that the meaning(s) of life are neither purely positive nor entirely negative, but always already in circulation by means of individual meaning(s) *qua* significations in one's *own* personal existential projects, in conjunction with a strong social sense of *our* shared existence in this world as sense. Using Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy together in this way, the individual and social dimensions of meaning are raised and offered together, since in the end, neither the individual nor social dimension of existential meaning could ever be fully effaced or wholly sacrificed in a responsible contemporary philosophical account of the meaning(s) of human life. Using these thinkers in this way, one is thus able to arrive at a contemporary perspective on the *meaning(s) toward life*.

### 5.3. The Meaning(s) to(ward) Life

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This study finally finds itself situated in a philosophical space that has been largely unoccupied in previous Western thought on the question of existential meaning: the liminal philosophical space of the *between*. From its very outset, this study positioned itself between transcendental myth and abysmal nihilism; between the subjectivity and objectivity of existential meaning in its individual and social dimensions; and between all human beings sharing in the pursuit of a meaningful life, both in their individual endeavours as well as together with one another. This position between such binaries of existential meaning further suggests that one cannot answer the question that asks after *the* meaning of life as if only one answer to this question were ultimately possible. Contrary to such a narrow conception of existential meaning, this study denotes the possibility of manifold meanings that are constantly unfolding between human beings in this world *hic et nunc*. In the preceding pages, this study has positioned itself in a critical argumentative space between the philosophies of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Nancy, all of whom offer meritorious contributions to a contemporary view on human existential meaning.

The contemporary (re)conceptualization of existential meaning offered in this study is one which establishes itself in an idea that could only be expressed through a combined consideration of Nietzsche's views on existential nihilism, Sartre's individualism of existential meaning, and Nancy's contemporary sense of existence. Through these thinkers, this study announces a critical movement in human existential meaning: a movement *away* from the realm of the otherworldly, and *toward* this world itself as the one and only meaningful space of sense; *away* from meaning(s) (with)held aloft and afar beyond humanity, and *toward* our more immediate human existential experience(s), projects, and pursuits; *away* from the meaning(s) of our past thinking of existence, and *toward* a more contemporary finite thinking on the meaning of existence *hic et nunc*. This study has shown that even in a world bereft of transcendental significance, our human existence can assuredly still be affirmed and considered meaningful, *perhaps* even more so than previously

in our human history, but only by means of a fundamental existential (re)orientation taking place right at the most immediate level of our human existence *here* and *now* and nowhere else. This further entails a (re)orientation toward ourselves as meaning-making human individuals, as well as a (re)orientation toward our shared world and its progressive pluralism of meaning(s). The contemporary perspective put forward in this study hence holds that existential meaning is the province of each one *and* all of us; existential meaning is always already mine *as well as* ours.

How, then, might one come to conclude a philosophical investigation into the meaning(s) of life? One concludes precisely by paradoxically withholding the conclusion; by not concluding in a form that might be thought of as complete in and of itself. The meaning of life is anything but conclusive since the question remains perpetually *open* and precludes its own closure in any one definitive answer. The philosophical account of existential meaning offered in this study might be further developed in a discourse directed toward *a contemporary sense of existentialism*, which would aim at a philosophy of human existence as a whole, conceived along the lines of contemporary human concerns. In anticipation of such an account, one might proffer a philosophical gesture rather than a definitive answer to this question; a gesture indicating a deliberate philosophical and existential movement away from a concern with *the meaning of life* and toward a contemporary sense of existence that concerns itself instead with the *meaning(s) to(ward) life*, since there is no (one) *meaning* to life, only *meanings* to life that manifest when one (re)directs one's existential efforts toward oneself, the world, other beings, and, life itself in all its plurality.

Such a theory as I have put forward here might ultimately falter on its enduring sense of optimism. Perhaps it is finally too ambitious in its aims, or overly hopeful in the assumptions it makes concerning the possibilities of human existential meaning. However, I nonetheless wish to assert that a hopeful philosophy of human meaning must be put forward, since it might very well be what humanity desperately requires as it moves away from its past thinking and advances toward an unforeseeable future, all the while immersed wholeheartedly in the disquieting uncertainty of our present. It seems to me that this is what our contemporary and future world demands, but I admit in all humility the possibility that human existential meaning might alternatively follow a destiny for which this study has not accounted. Yet, in the end, which is never truly an end in the sense of being final or finished, it seems that meaning will always manifest itself among human beings in one form or another, and that existential meaninglessness therefore cannot be our human fate henceforth. Ultimately, one must not relent in one's pursuit of a meaningful human existence, for the pursuit itself bespeaks something utterly significant about what it means to be human.

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