Hart and Sartre on God and Consciousness

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Abstract:
This article offers a comparative reading of the ontologies of David Bentley Hart and Jean-Paul Sartre as well as their respective appeals to phenomenology as a philosophical method. While it may seem odd to compare one of the twentieth century's most celebrated atheists with one of contemporary Christianity's most highly-acclaimed critics of atheism, this article shows that there are many surprising parallels between the ontological outlooks of Hart and Sartre, namely their conceptions of God as the unity of being and consciousness and their accounts of human consciousness as a desire to 'become God'. By examining the similarities and differences between Sartre's and Hart's philosophical and theological works, this article seeks to highlight the phenomenological aspects of Hart's theological outlook and consider how Hart's appeal to the phenomenological analysis of intentional consciousness in his theological work can illuminate our understanding of the ongoing engagements between theology and phenomenology.

Keywords:
Phenomenology; Jean-Paul Sartre; David Bentley Hart; Consciousness; Intentionality; Ontology

Recent scholarship has seen a strong interest in the relationship between Christian theology and the atheistic philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre.[1] While Sartre is known as one of the most celebrated atheists of the twentieth century, at the heart of the phenomenological analysis of the human condition in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* is an account of the human consciousness as nothing other than a 'desire' and 'endeavour' to 'become God'.[2] This article offers a consideration of the phenomenological analysis of this notion of 'becoming God' by bringing Sartre's atheistic philosophy into conversation with the theological works of David Bentley Hart, who boldly asserted in a recent article that a 'scrupulous phenomenology' of the intentional structure of human consciousness would show us that 'teleologically the mind *is* God' and that 'the basis of all knowledge and will is the natural desire of the creature for *theosis*, divinization'.[3]

It is undoubtedly unusual to compare one of the twentieth century's most well-known philosophical defenders of atheism with one of contemporary Christian theology's most highly-acclaimed critics of atheist philosophy.[4] However, by comparing Sartre's and Hart's appeals to phenomenology as well as their respective claims that human consciousness is structured as a desire to 'become God',[5] this article shows that there are some remarkable structural and thematic parallels between Hart's and Sartre's conceptions of God and human existence. The first part of the article highlights how both Sartre and Hart define God as the unity of being and consciousness. The second part then looks at how Sartre and Hart respectively consider human consciousness as oriented to this unity, which they both see as an expression of the natural human desire to become God. Following this, this article concludes by offering some reflections on how comparing and contrasting Sartre's and Hart's accounts of God and consciousness can help us understand and evaluate the relationship between phenomenology and theology.

By way of reading Hart's theological metaphysics alongside Sartre's phenomenological ontology, this article seeks to highlight the phenomenological aspects of Hart's theological outlook and particularly his emphasis on the intentional character of human consciousness. Indeed, Hart's and Sartre's emphasis on intentionality as the fundamental hallmark of consciousness not only notably differs from the accounts of consciousness presented by post-Sartrean phenomenologists such as Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry associated with the much-debated 'theological turn' in French phenomenology.[6] Hart's (and Sartre's) account of intentionality as a manifestation of the human desire to become God can moreover point us to new ways to think about theology's interaction with phenomenology which move beyond the approaches of Marion and Henry, which can in turn offer us new ways of understanding the relationship between theology and philosophy more broadly.[7]

'God': The Unity of Being and Consciousness

As its subtitle indicates, Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* is an essay on 'phenomenological ontology'. In this influential work Sartre presents a systematic ontology that is intrinsically bound up with the phenomenological analysis of lived experience. From the self-reflexive examination of one's conscious activity of counting cigarettes to the elaboration of his controversial notion of 'nothingness' through a missed appointment with his friend Pierre, Sartre's magnum opus is filled with vivid anecdotes and illustrations drawn from concrete experiences in everyday life which explicate various ontological insights.[8] However, above all, Sartre's most central ontological formulation in *Being and Nothingness* is based on one single phenomenological observation of the most basic intentional act of consciousness: namely, that when the conscious mind becomes conscious *of* an entity, that entity is by definition *not* the said conscious mind – what the conscious mind is conscious of is something that is *not* itself. In other words, there is what Sartre calls a 'negative relation' between the knower and the known: 'It is impossible to construct the notion of an object if there is not originally a negative relation by which the object is designated as that which *is not* consciousness… Before any comparison or any construction, a thing has to be present to consciousness as *not being* consciousness.'[9]

Sartre sees this account of negative relation between consciousness and the intentional object simply as a definitional outworking of Husserl's intentionalist conception of consciousness as 'consciousness of something *other than* itself'.[10] For Sartre, insofar as intentional consciousness is always conscious *of* something that is *other than* itself or indeed *outside* itself, what this means is that consciousness is a 'nothingness' (*néant*) without any intrinsic 'content':

> As Husserl showed, all consciousness is consciousness *of* something. In other words, there is no [act of] consciousness that does not *posit* a transcendent object or, if you prefer, consciousness has no 'content'.[11]

To the extent that consciousness is by definition always intentionally conscious *of* something that is outside of itself, consciousness is structurally 'nothing' because it does not – and cannot – have any innate substantial content: 'There is nothing substantial about consciousness… it is total void (since the entire world is outside it).'[12]

Instead of being something substantial in itself, for Sartre consciousness is to be understood in terms of a *relation*: Consciousness is only consciousness insofar as it exists *in relation to* – or indeed it exists *for* (*pour*) – some being that is beyond and other than said consciousness. It is for this reason that Sartre characterises consciousness as being for-itself (*pour soi*) – a paradoxical 'being' that exists as *nothing* but a relation to some being that is in-itself (*en soi*). As Sartre enigmatically puts it: 'the being of the *for-itself* is defined… as being what it is not and not being what it is.'[13] This structure of 'not' is key to Sartre's ontological schema.[14] For according to Sartre's insistence on the 'negative relation' between the in-itself and for-itself (i.e. between the intentional object and subject, or indeed between 'being' and 'consciousness'), the in-itself is by definition *not* the for-itself, the two ontological categories are strictly mutually exclusive: there cannot be a being that is both in-itself and for-itself – what Sartre calls an 'in-itself-for-itself', a perfect unity of being (in-itself) and consciousness (for-itself) whose existence is an ontological impossibility.[15]

However, despite the impossibility of its existence, Sartre notes that the 'in-itself-for-itself' is nonetheless an ideal that is fervently desired by consciousness. In fact, this impossible ideal which consciousness desires is what Sartre calls 'God', as Sartre writes in a well-known passage in *Being and Nothingness*:

> the in-itself-for-itself [is] the ideal of a consciousness that could be the foundation of its own being-in-itself purely by means of its own being conscious of itself. To this ideal, we can give the name 'God'. So we can say the best way to conceive of human-reality's fundamental project is to regard man as the being whose project is to be God.[16]

For Sartre, the 'in-itself-for-itself' is seen as the ideal of the for-itself because it is within the intentional or indeed ecstatic character of consciousness for-itself to wish to grasp and comprehend the in-itself which it is *not*.[17] However, the for-itself's desire to fully grasp and comprehend being in-itself is according to Sartre is inherently futile: Such a desire to become God is, in Sartre's famous words, 'a useless passion'.[18] For according to the original *negative* relation, it is ontologically impossible for there to be a complete unity or coincidence of the for-itself and in-itself: For *if* the for-itself could fully grasp the in-itself, it would by definition no longer be for-itself – as there will no longer be a transcendent being in-itself for it be conscious *of*.[19] Without anything to be conscious *of*, the for-itself can no longer exist as consciousness – as Sartre puts it: 'it destroys itself.'[20]

For Sartre, the for-itself's desire 'to metamorphose its own for-itself into the in-itself-for-itself' – to transform oneself into what Sartre calls 'God' – is fundamentally one that is 'in vain'.[21] This is not just because the for-itself would cease to exist should it become in-itself-for-itself, but moreover because the very existence of God *qua* in-itself-for-itself is (onto)logically 'impossible' for Sartre:

> [The in-itself-for-itself would be an absolute being] whose existence would be the unitary synthesis of the in-itself and of consciousness – this ideal being would be the in-itself as founded by the for-itself, and identical to the for-itself who founds it; in other words, it would be the *ens causa sui*… the indissoluble totality of in-itself and for-itself is conceivable only in the form of a being that is 'its own cause'… [But] this *ens causa sui* is *impossible*, and, as we saw, its concept contains a contradiction.[22]

While this account of God as *ens causa sui* is one that is often explicitly rejected in pre-modern theology, Sartre's formulation of God *qua* in-itself-for-itself as the 'unitary synthesis of the in-itself and consciousness' can nonetheless be regarded as being broadly in line with certain interpretations of the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity.[23]

For instance, according to Thomas Aquinas's influential account of divine simplicity, God is his own being (*esse*): God's essence is simply his existence – what God is is *that* God

is.[24] One of the implications of this formulation of divine simplicity – that God's essence and being are identical – is the theological teaching that God's act of understanding is identical with God's being: 'in God to be and to understand are one and the same.'[25] As Aquinas puts it:

> Whatever is in God is the divine essence. God's act of understanding, therefore, is His essence, it is the divine being, God Himself. For God is His essence and His being… God's understanding [*intelligere*] is His being [*esse*].[26]

In other words, in God we find a perfect identity of being and understanding – or as David Bentley Hart puts it in phenomenological terminology in his work on God and consciousness, God 'is in himself the absolute unity of consciousness and being'.[27]

As if echoing Sartre's phenomenological account of 'God' as 'in-itself-for-itself' – the ideal coincidence of the in-itself and the for-itself or indeed the unity of being and consciousness, in his theological works David Hart speaks of God along the lines of 'the indissoluble, altogether nuptial unity of consciousness and being' or 'the fullness of being [who] is also a perfect act of infinite consciousness'.[28] For Hart, the thesis that 'divine being and divine consciousness are perfectly joined' is not simply a theological dictum concerning 'the infinite simplicity of God', it is also a philosophical statement about human knowledge and consciousness.[29] According to Hart, to say that 'God is the source and ground of being and the wellspring of all consciousness' is to posit 'a transcendent reality where being and knowledge are always already one and the same'.[30]

As such, for Hart, 'the divine unity of being and consciousness' is nothing less than a metaphysical principle which underlies all endeavours of human knowledge and consciousness.[31] As Hart notes:

> The human striving to know the truth of things, as far as possible and in every sphere, is sustained by a tacit faith in some kind of ultimate coincidence or convertibility between being and consciousness.[32]

According to Hart's theological outlook, the ultimate unity of being and consciousness we find in the divine is that which 'grounds' and makes possible not only the structure and acts of

human cognition but moreover also the structure and intelligibility of the entire cosmos.[33] To quote Hart at some length again:

> God, as infinite being, is also an act of infinite knowledge. He is in himself the absolute unity of consciousness and being, and so in the realm of contingent things is the source of the fittedness of consciousness and being each to the other, the one ontological reality of reason as it exists both in thought and in the structure of the universe… the marvellous coincidence between, on the one hand, our powers of reason and, on the other, the capacity of being to be understood points to an ultimate identity between them, in the depths of their transcendent origin.[34]

What this means for Hart is that, metaphysically speaking, human beings as finite creatures can only comprehend things insofar as they are drawn towards the perfect coincidence of being and understanding of God as the source, ground and end of all being and consciousness.[35]

It is following this theological and indeed metaphysical outlook that Hart makes the bold assertation that the intentional structure of all consciousness and cognition is oriented towards – or even 'to become' – God:

> A scrupulous phenomenology of what the mind does… discloses something rather astonishing: that the very structure of thought is an irreducible relation to God as its 'natural' end. I would go so far as to say that teleologically the mind *is* God, insofar as it strives not only *toward*, but necessarily *to become*, infinite knowledge of infinite being.[36]

Not dissimilar to Sartre's account of the innate desire of the for-itself to become God in his phenomenology of consciousness, Hart sees the natural desire to become God as the basis of all acts of human consciousness. For Sartre and Hart alike, the 'divine' unity of the in-itself-for-itself is the ontological ideal is that which underlies – and is desired by – all human consciousness. However, while Hart posits this unity as the transcendent reality which makes possible all acts of human consciousness and cognition, for Sartre this 'divine' unity is an impossible ideal or indeed what he calls a 'constantly absent being which haunts [*hante*] the for-itself' as it perpetually seeks but nonetheless fails to grasp and apprehend being in-itself.[37]

Consciousness: The Natural Desire to Become God

Not unlike how the Sartrean for-itself only exists as a '*for*' or as 'a relation *to*' being in-itself – with what Sartre calls 'a borrowed existence' from being in-itself,[38] in Hart's classical Christian metaphysics of creation, created being exists by sharing in or 'borrowing' God's uncreated infinite being.[39] Creation only exists as a result of God's gift of creation *ex nihilo*: 'One arrives in being not from some other place… but always as one summoned from nothingness, framed by grace, receiving all while meriting nothing.'[40] For Hart, creation exists as and only as an endless ecstatic movement from its intrinsic nothingness towards God's infinite being.[41] As Hart puts it with reference to Gregory of Nyssa's metaphysics of creation: 'Every creature that can see and contemplate is drawn irresistibly, from its creation, toward God's beauty… as a pilgrimage into the infinite, a journey from nothingness into God's beauty.'[42]

According to Hart's metaphysics of creation *ex nihilo*, created being is 'intrinsically nothing *in* itself',[43] but only exists as a '*for*' (somewhat echoing the Sartrean *for*-itself).[44] Creation is created *for* God, not just in terms of being created '*for* God's pleasure' but moreover in terms of being created as a 'desire' or even 'hunger' *for* God – *for* God who is the perfection and plenitude of 'being *in se*' (*in*-itself).[45] According to Hart, this desire and hunger *for* God is particularly manifest in human beings:

> To be human is to be an 'act', thoroughly dynamic… Desire is the energy of our movement, and so of our being… In each instant the self departs from itself, in ecstasy or repetition, urged on by a longing for an elusive beauty… the supreme beauty. As that which moves, becomes, is reborn or repeated, human nature's perfection is nothing but this endless desire for beauty and more beauty, this *hunger* for God.[46]

As Kate Kirkpatrick argues in her recent insightful study on Sartre, such an account of an 'ontological hunger' for God (who is 'being' itself) commonly found in the Christian theological tradition is very much echoed in Sartre's formulation of human consciousness as a 'lack'.[47] Not unlike Hart's account of human nature as a desire for God – who for Hart is also 'being itself', Sartre characterises human consciousness as 'a *lack* of being' that is constituted

by a desire for 'being itself': 'Desire is a lack of being… desire testifies to the existence of a lack in human-reality's being… human reality is the desire to-be-in-itself.'[48] Just as the human creature is understood by Hart as an endless movement from nothingness towards the transcendent being of God, Sartre defines intentional consciousness as a 'nothingness' that is oriented to being in-itself which transcends consciousness itself, an act or movement of 'transcendence' that is always ecstatically surpassing itself towards transcendent being – or even to what Sartre calls 'the infinite' at one point in *Being and Nothingness*.[49]

However, although Hart also speaks of desire in terms of movement – that '"desire" is the proper name for the force of movement', he adamantly insists that a theological understanding of desire cannot be framed in the purely negative terms of 'lack' as found in Sartre.[50] For according to Hart's theological schema of creation *ex nihilo*, desire is not a 'lack' but an 'excess': 'creaturely desire… ventures forth to encounter ontological infinity (to which it aspires) not as a qualitative dialectical negation… but as divine "excess".'[51] For Hart one must not conceive of created being as a negative or dialectical opposition against God's perfect being, but rather as a gift from God, an 'excess' or expression of God's infinite being.[52] Thus, when Hart says that 'desire must be conceived as neither simply lack nor energy… but as a simultaneous power of giving and receiving, creating and being drawn',[53] it is because he sees creaturely desire not just as a gift given from God (creation 'receiving' from God's act of 'creating') but moreover as a gift that is 'returned' to its divine giver in the form of thanks-*giving* or indeed as reciprocating 'desire and delight' (creation 'giving' and 'being drawn' back to God).[54]

According to Hart, as created beings we do not fully possess our own essence. As opposed to God – who is 'being itself' – whose essence and existence are one and the same, 'our being and our essence always exceed the moment of our existence.'[55] Like Sartre's account of consciousness or the for-itself as ever striving towards the being in-itself which is

ever *beyond* itself and indeed *impossible* to ever attain, Hart explicitly speaks of creaturely existence as 'a condition of absolute fragility and fortuity, *impossible in itself*, and so *actual beyond itself*.'[56] Moreover, somewhat echoing Sartre's paradoxical formulation of the for-itself as 'being what it is not and not being what it is',[57] Hart describes finite being as existing in 'a constant and living tension between what a thing is and what it is not… between what is interior to it and what is exterior.'[58] For Hart, the reason why we exist in this 'tension' is because our essence is not in our possession,[59] but is found instead only exteriorly – and indeed transcendently – in God, the ultimate Good and end of all creation:

> That which is most interior to us, 'essence', is the most exterior… Nature and essence exceed our grasp, and our hunger for the Good above us is our feeding upon being, our ontological 'delight'… our striving toward our 'essence' is our participation in God's own convertibility with his own act of love and knowledge. [For] God is the infinity of being in which every essence comes to be, the abyss of subsistent beauty into which every existence is outstretched.[60]

As noted above, this motif of 'ontological hunger' is one that is also found in Sartre's formulation of human consciousness as an endless striving towards 'being itself'.[61] Indeed, just as in Hart's account of creaturely existence is ecstatically 'outstretched' into God's perfect being,[62] for Sartre the intentional structure of human consciousness is also intrinsically ecstatic: 'It is outside itself and, in its innermost being, this being-for-itself is ecstatic, since it has to seek its being elsewhere.'[63]

However, whereas Sartre's for-itself is an 'endless' striving because there is literally no 'end' that could ever complete or fulfil the for-itself's 'lack of being', for Hart the ontological character of created being as 'an endless pilgrimage toward God' is an 'endless' precisely because God's being is *infinite*.[64] The goal of the finite creature is an infinite 'endless end' whose plenitude or indeed 'endlessness' can never be fully exhausted or comprehended by any finite contingent beings:

> Though the infinite cannot be circumscribed or 'grasped', [creaturely] desire never ceases to expand in its constant motion toward the fullness of the good; it stretches out toward infinity, as if, *per impossibile*, to comprise it… though

opening ever more to God, the soul can never reach a satiety *in itself* of the endless good… [But] the creature, unable to assume the infinite into itself fully, nonetheless fully stretches out toward that as its end.[65]

Unlike Sartre, for Hart created being is not in an endless movement of striving because it is ceaselessly 'haunted' by some 'constantly absent being' or some unattainable ideal end which does not and cannot exist.[66] Rather, created being's pilgrimage towards the good is 'endless' because there is so to speak an 'infinite distance' between the finite creature and the infinite God: The created being's ontological journey is, as Hart puts it, 'an infinite exodus from nothingness into God's inexhaustible transcendence' (even though, for Hart, God is also the one in whom this distance is crossed).[67]

However, this does not mean that created being is 'condemned' to be forever alienated at an 'infinite distance' from their essence (*à la* Sartre).[68] For Hart 'it is possible to speak intelligibly of deification, despite the ontological distance between God and creation', because the creaturely being's infinite pilgrimage towards or indeed *into* God *is also* a movement of *becoming* God.[69] Whereas for Sartre the for-itself would cease to be 'for-itself' – as it would no longer be conscious – if it were united with being in-itself and became 'in-itself-for-itself' (i.e. 'God'), for Hart the union with God is an *endless* and *infinite* process in which creaturely beings will never fully become God – never truly become 'in-itself-for-itself' – because God's infinite unity of being and consciousness will always infinitely transcend them.[70] As such, in Hart's account of 'becoming God', conscious beings can remain conscious and ecstatic – they remain 'for-itself' – even if they are in union with God, inasmuch as they are endlessly stretching and reaching out to become endlessly more divinized and at the same time endlessly more and more 'essentially themselves'.[71] The everlasting process of becoming-divine is for Hart *also* the process of our attainment of our true nature and essence,[72] the process of becoming who and what we *essentially* are: 'deification is the *natural* end of all we are, and so the eternal foundation of our nature.'[73]

Hart's theological ontology holds that every finite being is 'without any original or ultimate essence in itself' but only finds its essence or *telos* hidden in God who infinitely transcends finite existence.[74] Since all finite creatures only have their essence and *telos* properly in God their creator, for Hart this means that all created things are ontologically drawn to be joined to God who is 'the being of everything, to which all that is always already properly belongs'.[75] In this instance, Hart's account of universal salvation markedly differs from Sartre's tragic philosophical outlook which Kate Kirkpatrick describes as 'a phenomenology of sin from a graceless position... an account of sin with no prospect of salvation.'[76] As mentioned above, for Sartre the human desire to become God is 'a useless passion' which is 'doomed, by definition, to failure' because the existence of God is ontologically impossible.[77] While Hart does agree with Sartre that there is an innate human desire for divinization, as opposed to Sartre's tragic account that humans beings are all 'condemned to despair' in their efforts to become God,[78] for Hart the theological ontology of creation out of nothingness necessarily entails the divinization of all human rational conscious beings in the universal reconciliation of all creation with God.[79] In Hart's view we are not 'condemned to despair', but instead, as Ed Simon puts it, 'condemned to salvation'.[80] Although both Sartre and Hart understand human existence as one that finds itself in a tensive state between nothingness and being,[81] they draw directly opposite conclusions regarding the salvific trajectory of human existence: Whereas Sartre sees the human condition as irredeemably condemned in a fallen and Godless world, Hart envisions a final blissful consummation of all things where 'all being is perfectly united to God, and God is all in all'.[82]

Conclusion

These two opposing salvific trajectories or 'eschatologies' are not only reflective of Hart's and Sartre's respective views on the trajectory or possibility of human 'salvation', but also more

broadly of their philosophical temperaments and overall orientations of thought.[83] As we saw in their conceptions of God and consciousness, both Sartre and Hart define God as the ideal unity of consciousness and being and posit an innate human desire to become God. But whereas Sartre notably defines this innate desire for God as an ontological 'lack', Hart sees it as an expression of the excess and plenitude of divine generosity.[84] Moreover, while Hart believes that the conscious human being's desire to know and comprehend being testifies to the existence of God as the perfect identity of consciousness and being, Sartre sees finite human beings' perpetual failure to fully comprehend and grasp things as proof that there is no God – no perfect coincidence of consciousness and being – and that the human desire to know things and indeed to 'become God' is fundamentally doomed and condemned to despair.

However, despite their obvious differences, one ought not overlook the remarkable parallels and similarities between Hart's and Sartre's ontologies and phenomenological analyses of human desire and intentional consciousness.[85] Indeed, Sartre's definition of God as the ideal unity of consciousness and being as well as his account of the innate human desire to become God in his committedly atheist outlook can provide some strong – indeed *non-theological* – support for Hart's aforementioned bold claim that a 'scrupulous phenomenology' of the intentional structure of consciousness reveals that the natural desire of rational creatures is for deification.[86] Furthermore, Sartre's emphasis on the intentional character of human consciousness and desire can moreover serve as an atheist account of phenomenology which reinforces Hart's account of rational consciousness as a teleological orientation which has God as its ultimate end.[87]

To the extent that intentionality lies at the heart of Sartre's and Hart's analyses of human conscious experience, both of their phenomenological insights notably differ from the non-intentional or even counter-intentional accounts of conscious experience found in the works of Christian phenomenologists such as Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion.[88] Unlike these

thinkers often associated with the so-called 'theological turn' in post-Sartrean French phenomenology, one can hardly say that Sartre is a secret theologian with a religious agenda to make 'room for God to show Himself' within phenomenology by way of undermining or reversing the traditional Husserlian account of consciousness as intentionality.[89] As we saw in the case of Sartre's explicitly non-theological or even anti-theistic account of human intentionality as 'ontological hunger', the phenomenological analysis of the *intentional* structure of consciousness can be a fruitful conversation partner for theology in its reflections on the finite character of human creaturely existence and its relation to ontological transcendence.[90]

In this regard, Hart's rendition of the traditional doctrine of God in phenomenological terms as the perfect unity of being and consciousness provides theologians with a helpful framework for their engagement with phenomenologists and philosophers who do not necessarily hold the same (or any) religious beliefs and concerns – as we see in the notably atheist case of Sartre.[91] At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that Hart's appeal to phenomenology in his account of God and consciousness is not simply to facilitate the academic exchange between professional theologians and philosophers. It is more importantly, as Hart puts it himself, an effort to 'show how certain classical religious and metaphysical understandings of God are grounded in the phenomenology of our experience of reality'.[92]

This attentiveness to our lived experience is particularly important in light of the contemporary revival in metaphysical theorisation in Christian theology as well as the aforementioned shift away from intentionality with the 'theological turn' in recent French phenomenology.[93] As noted at the outset, Sartre's philosophical project is marked by the way in which his ontological outlook is rooted in the phenomenological analysis of concrete experiences of everyday life. By comparing Hart's ontology to Sartre's or indeed re-reading Hart's theological metaphysics from the perspective of Sartrean phenomenology, we can see

that there is in Hart's ontology not only a Sartreanesque reemphasis on the intentional structure of consciousness but moreover a philosophical sensibility which very much echoes Sartre's integration of ontology and phenomenology. As theology finds a regained confidence and renewed interest in speculative metaphysical theorisation, this philosophical sensibility we find in Hart's (and Sartre's) phenomenological approach to ontology can offer us a helpful and timely reminder that theological inquiry into abstract metaphysical questions ought not be divorced from the phenomenological analysis of concrete lived experience or indeed what Hart calls 'the phenomenology of our experience of reality'.[94] For it is only by doing so that theological ontology and metaphysics can give us a better sense of what it means to exist as finite beings in this contingent world, and in turn uncover how such finite creatures can attune themselves to the mystery of who God is as the prefect unity, source, and ultimate end of all being and consciousness.

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[1] See, for example, Kirkpatrick, *Sartre and Theology*; Khawaja, *The Religion of Existence*; Pattison and Kirkpatrick, *Existentialist Thought*, 97–125; Kirkpatrick, *Sartre on Sin*; Ellis, 'The Quest for God'; Leung, 'Transcendentality and Nothingness'; Catalano, *The Saint and the Atheist*.

[2] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 735, 747, see also, 754, 796–797.

[3] Hart, 'A Sense of Style', 243.

[4] To my knowledge, Hart has not offered a sustained or detailed engagement with Sartre's philosophy in his published work. For some passing mentions of Sartre in Hart's work, see Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 40, note 4, and 77, note 61. In both of these instances, Sartre is just named in relation to other movements or figures. Sartre is not mentioned in Hart's two books which respond to contemporary atheism, *Experience of God* and *Atheist Delusions*.

[5] Indeed, one may argue that Sartre's phenomenological account of the human desire to become God is a general philosophical observation that is shared by a number of non-Christian or even atheist philosophers. As Stephen Mulhall points out, 'Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein… can be read in a certain sense [as] exemplifying Sartre's claim' that there is an ineradicable 'human desire to be God' (*Philosophical Myths*, 13).

[6] See Gschwandtner, 'Turn to Excess'; Simmons and Benson, *New Phenomenology*. See also Janicaud's influential essay 'The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology', 18–22, 35, where Janicaud speaks of Sartre as one of the last great phenomenologists who upheld the classical Husserlian focus on conscious intentionality before the phenomenological tradition shifted its centre away from analysing the structures of intentional consciousness to the more abstract if speculative study of 'phenomenality' *per se*.

[7] Cf. Hart, 'Remarks Made to Jean-Luc Marion'.

[8] See, respectively, Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 11–12, 41–43.

[9] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 247–248, translation modified.

[10] Sartre, 'Intentionality', 5, emphasis added.

[11] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 9.

[12] Ibid., 16.

[13] Ibid., 27.

[14] See Leung, 'Transcendentality and Nothingness'.

[15] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 480.

[16] Ibid., 735.

[17] Ibid., 121–122.

[18] Ibid., 797.

[19] See ibid., 137–139. For a detailed explication of this point, see Bantel, 'The Haunting Image of the Absolute'; cf. Leung, 'Transcendentality and Nothingness', 481–482.

[20] Sartre, 'Intentionality', 5.

[21] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 796–797.

[22] Ibid., 805.

[23] See Leung, 'Transcendentality and Nothingness'. Cf. Crittenden, 'Sartre's Absent God', 499: 'Sartre would have derived the term *ens causa sui* as a name of God from Descartes' *Meditations*, for scholastic theologians, as Descartes acknowledged, all rejected the term. In the second of his five "ways", Aquinas observes that "We never find, nor ever could, that something is the efficient cause of itself, for this would mean it preceded itself, and this is not possible" [*Summa Theologiae*, I.2.3]… Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, critics of Aquinas on many issues, explicitly agreed with him in this regard.' See also Hart's critical remarks on the conception of God as *causa sui* in *Beauty of the Infinite*, 136–137, cf. 166.

[24] See, for instance, Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.21–22, and *Summa Theologiae*, I.3.4.

[25] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.14.4, *sed contra.*

[26] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.45.

[27] Hart, *Experience of God*, 235.

[28] Ibid., 60, 248.

[29] Ibid., 248.

[30] Ibid., 286, 234.

[31] Ibid., 287.

[32] Ibid., 231.

[33] See ibid., 228, 321.

[34] Ibid., 235.

[35] Ibid., 228–234, 286, 321.

[36] Hart, 'A Sense of Style', 243.

[37] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 142

[38] See, for instance, ibid., 50, 58, 129.

[39] Cf. Oliver, *Creation*, 47.

[40] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 250–251.

[41] Ibid., 214, 246–247.

[42] Ibid., 206.

[43] Ibid., 229, emphasis added.

[44] Cf. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 140, 229–230: 'Any missing item is missing *from __ for __*. And what is given within the basic event of arising is the *for*, conceived either as not yet being or as no longer being: as an absence toward which the truncated existent, which is constituted by that very means as truncated… the for-itself is the being that is, in its being, the foundation of any "for".'

[45] See Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 18, 21, 114, 147, 190, 214. See also note 61 below.

[46] Ibid., 189–190, emphasis added.

[47] Kirkpatrick, *Sartre on Sin*, 129–130. Here Kirkpatrick compares Sartre with Augustine and borrows the phrase 'ontological hunger' from Zum Brunn, *Augustine: Being and Nothingness*, 53. While Kirkpatrick does not directly compare Sartre to Gregory of Nyssa in her work, she notes that 'Sartre agrees with Sarah Coakley and longstanding theological tradition that "desire is the constellating category of selfhood"' – a conception that is indebted to Gregory. Kirkpatrick, *Sartre on Sin*, 206; citing Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 58.

[48] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 140, 734.

[49] Ibid., 4, see also 136–149, cf. 492: 'the only thing that cannot be surpassed is, precisely, the infinite.'

[50] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 269.

[51] Ibid., 189.

[52] Ibid., 298, 309, 352.

[53] Ibid., 269.

[54] Ibid., 264–266.

[55] Ibid., 244.

[56] Ibid., emphasis added.

[57] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 27.

[58] Hart, 'The Offering of Names', 39; cf. *Beauty of the Infinite*, 244.

[59] Here Hart draws on Erich Przywara's articulation of the composite non-identity of creaturely essence and existence in terms of a 'unity-in-tension' (*Spannungs-Einheit*) in which the essence of created being is always 'in-and-beyond' (*in-über*) its existence. For an excellent explication of Przywara's engagement with (German, as opposed to French) phenomenology, see Betz, 'Przywara's Critique of Phenomenology'. See also, of course, Przywara, *Analogia Entis*.

[60] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 244–245; cf. 'The Offering of Names', 40.

[61] See note 47 above; see also Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 147, 190. It is however important to bear in mind that whereas Hart understands God as 'being itself', technically speaking, what Sartre identifies as God is *not* 'being itself'. For Sartre, 'being itself' (*l'être lui-même*) refers to 'the absolute being of the in-itself', while 'God' is defined as the synthesis of the in-itself and for-itself, as mentioned above, what Sartre calls 'the in-itself-for-itself'. Whereas consciousness does naturally desire 'being itself' (i.e. the for-itself desires the in-itself), it does not desire to *be* or to *become* 'being itself'. Rather, it desires 'being itself' in order to *become* God: 'desire is defined as the desire to be a certain being which is the *in-itself-for-itself*, and whose existence is ideal.' Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 760. Cf. Copleston, *Biran to Sartre*, 363, note 2: 'It is sometimes said that Sartre denies the existence of God only as conceived by theists. But such remarks are not so important as the people who make them seem to think that they are. If, for example, we care to call *l'en-soi* God, then of course Sartre does not deny the existence of God. But given the ordinary use of terms in the West, it would be extremely misleading or confusing to say that Sartre believes in God because he postulates the existence of *l'en-soi*.'

[62] See also Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 194, 196, 213–214, 229, 398.

[63] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 221. Much of Sartre's phenomenological account of the ecstatic character of the for-itself in *Being and Nothingness* is found in the chapter on

'Temporality' in which the for-itself is portrayed as having an 'ecstatic relation' to both the past and the future (ibid., 163–243) – not unlike Hart's account of finite creaturely existence as being in an ecstatic tension 'between its past and its future' ('The Offering of Names', 39; *Beauty of the Infinite*, 244).

[64] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 206, 243.

[65] Ibid., 196, 200, 205.

[66] See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 142. Cf. Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 193: 'God's transcendence is not absence, that is, but an actual excessiveness; it is, from the side of the contingent, the impossibility of the finite ever coming to contain or exhaust the infinite.'

[67] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 115, see also 205. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for the formulation of this point.

[68] Ibid., 194: 'The distance between God and creation is not alienation.' Cf. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 577: 'I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence.'

[69] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 199.

[70] In a sense, Sartre's argument for the impossibility for finite human consciousness for-itself to attain the 'divine' status of in-itself-for-itself is not dissimilar to Ekkehard Mühlenberg's reading of Gregory of Nyssa – at least as critically portrayed by Hart in ibid., 198: '[Mühlenberg observes] that for Gregory the perpetual dissatisfaction of the soul in its flight toward God testifies not to any innate capacity for the infinite on the soul's part, but only to the unattainability of the divine being… as the soul's progress is endless, it can never arrive at deification… human divinization, claims Mühlenberg, is something to which Gregory of Nyssa's theology is implacably opposed.' For Hart's critique of Mühlenberg, see ibid., 197–201.

[71] Ibid., 200–205.

[72] Cf. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 735: 'the initial project to be God by which man is "defined" seems here to verge on a human "nature" or an "essence".'

[73] Hart, 'The Inevitability of Metaphysics', 95.

[74] Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 250, cf. 409–410 on 'human "essence"'.

[75] Ibid., 357; cf. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 69–71.

[76] Kirkpatrick, *Sartre on Sin*, 214, 229, see also 10, 181. See also Gardner, *Sartre's* Being and Nothingness, 197–199, on Sartre's tragic view and its relation to his understanding of 'salvation'. One may contrast Sartre's 'graceless position' with Hart's forceful insistence that creation – all that is in *being* – is 'always already grace in fullest sense' (*Beauty of the Infinite*, 253, cf. 249, 252, 268).

[77] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 797, 810.

[78] Ibid., 810.

[79] See Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 16, 65–91; see also *Beauty of the Infinite*, 205–207, 355.

[80] Simon, 'Condemned to Salvation'.

[81] See Hart, *Beauty of Infinite*, 214: '[Creaturely existence is] posed between the pure ontic ecstasy of our being *ex nihilo* and the infinite ontological plenitude of God's being *in se* (between, one might say, its intrinsic nothingness and God's supereminent "no-thing-ness").' Cf. Kirkpatrick, *Sartre on Sin*, 113: '[Sartre portrays] human existence as a tensive state between being and nothingness, which is a recognizable descendent of what is described, in theological idiom, as being *fallen*.' Following Gardner's reading that Sartre's for-itself is 'a "fallen", negated form of being-in-itself – it is as if it had once been a thing [but is now] robbed of being' (Gardner, *Sartre's* Being and Nothingness, 68), Kirkpatrick argues that Sartre sees human existence as a fallen or privated being akin to Augustine's account of human fallenness (*Sartre on Sin*, especially 99). As such, whereas human existence is for Sartre (at least as read by Kirkpatrick) a 'fall' from being or indeed a 'lack' or 'privation' of being (see Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 733, 799; Kirkpatrick, *Sartre on Sin*, 186), for Hart human creaturely

existence exists between being and nothingness not as a fall *from* being but as an ecstatic movement summoned from nothingness and drawn *towards* being itself (*qua* God). See Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 141, 206, 250–251.

[82] Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 161, see also 164, 193–195. For Hart, this inevitable union of all things with God is intrinsically connected to the 'endlessness' of God's infinite being, as he writes of Gregory of Nyssa in *Beauty of the Infinite*, 206–207: 'the creature's free progress must ultimately move beyond evil, for in being joined to God's endlessness… the "failure" of God to save all creation would appear, in Gregory's eyes, to involve an impossible dualism: the notion of an eternal hell, of an endless godlessness parallel to the endlessness of God, would involve the logical nonsense of a dual eternity, an eternity that is not God.'

[83] The contrast between Hart's and Sartre's philosophical temperaments is notably reflected in their respective treatment of beauty. Hart holds that the phenomenological experience of beauty demonstrates the character of the world as a gift of God's act of creation: 'The experience of the beautiful is the sudden intimation of the fortuity of necessity, of the contingency of a thing's integrity' (*The Beauty of the Infinite*, 146); 'the special delight experienced in the encounter with beauty is an immediate sense of the utterly unnecessary thereness, so to speak, of a thing, the simple gratuity with which it shows itself, or (better) gives itself… the beautiful presents itself to us as an entirely unwarranted, unnecessary, and yet marvellously fitting gift' (*Experience of God*, 282–283). Central to Hart's account of beauty is an ontological motif of lack and absence – an emphasis which we also find in Sartre's account of the beautiful as a notion of lack.

As if echoing the traditional theological formulation of God's divine simplicity as the perfect unity of essence and existence (which, as we saw above, Sartre sees as an ontological impossibility), Sartre describes 'beauty' as an 'impossible and constantly indicated fusion of essence and existence' (*Being and Nothingness*, 273). Like how he understands 'God', for Sartre beauty is an impossible and unrealizable 'ideal' desired by the for-itself: 'Beauty represents therefore an ideal state of the world, correlative to an ideal realization of the for-itself, in which the essence and the existence of things are disclosed as identical to a being who, within this disclosure itself, might merge with himself in the absolute unity of the in-itself… that is precisely why we *want* the beautiful, and why we apprehend the universe as *lacking* the beautiful, to the extent to which we apprehend ourselves as a lack' (ibid., 273–274, Sartre's emphasis).

Although Sartre does not explain why beauty should be regarded as having the same ontological status as 'God' as a perfect unity of the for-itself with the in-itself, he fervently insists that beauty is an ideal impossibility that could never be properly realised in this world: 'It haunts the world as an unrealisable. And to the extent that man *realizes* the beautiful within the world, he realizes it in the mode of the imaginary… [The beautiful] is implicitly apprehended in things, as an absence; it is implicitly disclosed through the world's *imperfection*' (ibid., 274, Sartre's emphasis). See Sartre's further explication of this point in his earlier work, *The Imaginary*, 188–194. Not unlike Hart's aforementioned characterisation of beauty in terms of lack and absence – that 'the word "beauty" *indicates* nothing' (*Beauty of the Infinite*, 16), we find in Sartre's understanding of the beautiful a similar emphasis on absence, lack, or even nothingness: 'Beauty', as Sartre puts it, 'manifests the triumph of nothingness' (Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 378). See also King, *Sartre and the Sacred*, 130–152, especially 151.

[84] Cf. Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 247. For a sophisticated analysis of the different conceptions of the desire for God as 'lack' (like Sartre's) and as 'plenitude' (like Hart's), see Ellis, 'The Quest for God'.

[85] The following observations on the philosophical and theological significance of intentionality and desire are indebted to Wolfe, 'Eschatological Being'.

[86] In her careful study of Sartre's intellectual debt to the theological tradition, Kate Kirkpatrick argues that Sartre's conception of the human desire 'to become God' is an explicit reference to the Christian terminology for sin, especially the *sicut Deus* of Genesis 3:5 and Augustinian tradition (*Sartre on Sin*, 184). But while one may accordingly argue that Sartre's atheistic account of human desire is influenced by Christian theological sources that form part of his intellectual training, if one believes in the actual existence of original sin – that human beings do have the innate tendency to desire to be God, it may be argued that Sartre's observation of this 'original sinful' tendency does not necessarily need to be informed by theological literature or education. See also footnote 5 above.

[87] See Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 178–179, 186, 190–192; Hart, 'Mind, Soul, World', 48–49.

[88] See, for example, Henry, '*Phénoménologie non-intentionnelle*'; Marion, *Being Given*, especially 175, 266–267, 283. However, some commentators argue that Marion's account of 'counter-intentionality' is anticipated by Sartre's analysis of 'the look' (*le regard*) in *Being and Nothingness*, 276–296. See Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess*, 161–162, 168, 171–172; Welten, 'Saturation and Disappointment', 89–90; cf. Westphal, 'The Work of Jean-Luc Marion'; Westphal, 'Inverted Intentionality'.

[89] See Welten, 'The Paradox of God's Appearance', 206; Simmons and Benson, *New Phenomenology*, especially 8.

[90] Indeed, in comparison to the relative neglect of 'counter-intentional' or 'non-intentional' theories of Marion and (to a lesser degree) Henry, Sartre's phenomenological analysis of intentionality has received much attention in recent philosophy of mind and consciousness. See, for example, Miguens, Preyer and Morando, *Sartre and Contemporary Philosophy of Mind*; Frank and Preyer, 'Sartre and Contemporary Philosophy of Consciousness'.

[91] The 'phenomenologists' here refer not only to thinkers who self-identify with phenomenological tradition following Husserl and whose works on phenomenology are often exegetical commentaries on Husserl, Heidegger and others (see, for example, Marion, *Being Given*), but also contemporary practitioners of phenomenological analysis and inquiry such as the recent work in cognitive phenomenology (see Zahavi, *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*).

[92] Hart, *Experience of God*, 343.

[93] This renaissance of speculative metaphysics in theology is perhaps most notably expressed at the major international conference on *New Trinitarian Ontologies* held at the University of Cambridge in September 2019, where Hart was one of the plenary speakers. Video recordings of the conference are available at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLR3AUOTRu-AxyNhJ67Ml6nTKSF6iy2X_F. See also Betz, 'The Task of Christian Metaphysics Today'; Betz, 'Mere Metaphysics'.

[94] Hart, *Experience of God*, 343.