Pregnancy and motherhood bring enormous change to one’s life. As a student of philosophy, I have struggled to find a place for myself, as a new mother, in academic life. Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* examines human consciousness -- it places human experience as the starting point of philosophical inquiry. This approaches the sort of place I think human experience should rest in philosophy. If I am to claim that motherhood is academically significant, surely, this examination must begin with an examination of human experience. This paper tries to root my experience of pregnancy as something that I think is academically interesting. It was through writing this paper that I found myself hopeful that my becoming a mother was not the end of my academic career, but rather presents an interesting and important new path in my philosophical journey.

For Sartre, the answer to the question ‘where does human consciousness begin?’ is not clear. Furthermore, the answer to this question is unimportant. Sartre suggests that we direct our questions about birth to the insoluble fact that consciousness does indeed arise. It is the perplexing thought that ‘I’ was once not a consciousness, and furthermore, that there was a time that consciousness erupted as this ‘me’ that drives us to question the circumstances surrounding our ‘births’. It is in this fact of the birth of consciousness that we begin our investigation.
In what follows, I intend to offer an explanation of the ‘circumstances’
surrounding human birth from a Sartrian perspective. Sartre says very little of birth and
pregnancy in *Being and Nothingness*. However, my investigation will lead us through
what Sartre does say, and furthermore, I will point to those topics that bear some
significance to what my experience as a pregnant woman has been.

Being pregnant is a unique part of being a woman. It touches the very core of
one’s sense of being in the world. No longer does your body ‘belong’ to you alone -- it is
experienced as a shared thing. Similarly, your conscious activity and possibilities are
projected towards yourself along with this ‘other’ being who is part of you but separate.
Carrying a baby is a creative act -- pregnant, you are aware of your body as a creator of a
separate consciousness. This investigation will lead us through Sartre’s discussion of the
body, of love, and finally creation.

It is not surprising that Sartre has little to say, directly, of pregnancy. I do not
think that this omission is one that reflects a dismissive attitude towards pregnancy as a
mode of consciousness but instead an inability for Sartre, as a man, to capture this mode.

*Being and Nothingness* allows us the tools and the freedom to extend Sartre’s
ontological discoveries; to, in a sense, map out other primary human experiences as they
arise in our lives and our world. Stare’s system is complete -- it touches on those very
core ontological experiences that consciousness makes real in the world. However, Sartre
also offers us a system of analysis that extends beyond his examples and experiences.
What I intend to do with this investigation is use those tools and map out my experience
with pregnancy as an ontologically significant and separate mode of consciousness.
The Foetus

It is commonly held that the existence of consciousness signifies that there was a beginning to consciousness. However, this conception rests on a foundation of time that is separate from consciousness. Time, in this sense, acts as an existing thing in which events find their place -- as before, now or after. This is not the sense of time that Sartre is investigating in his phenomenological and ontological inquiry. What Sartre is looking for is an understanding of time as it is experienced by consciousness. How time is a function of the very structure of how being is.

In the case of our apprehension of ourselves as foetuses, we are driven to ask ourselves, what is my past? When did I come to be? ‘Being’ here, must be understood in the Sartrian sense. Simply put, to ‘be’ a consciousness is to be in relation to that which I am not. I am separated from being a ‘self’ -- a unified thing in the world -- and it is this separation that signifies that I am conscious. Furthermore, this relation is one of questioning and searching; it asks, who is this me? How can I come to be ‘me’? This relation is identified as the nihilation of the for-itself. Nihilation from the in-itself is what is meant by consciousness.

Consciousness, then, is in a state of being what it is not. It is, in this way, a surpassing relation. There is always a something that the for-itself is beyond such that this nihilating (ekstatic) relation remains a relation -- that is, as something that is separated from what it is not (in-itself). This surpassing -- this ‘ekstasis’ -- signifies the ‘past’. The past is the structure of consciousness.

Consciousness, then, does not ‘belong’ to a past. It is the past that is made, as an experienced surpassing of the for-itself from the in-itself, through consciousness. We are
now in a better position to understand Sartre’s position of the ontological status of the foetus.

What concerns Sartre about the beginning of consciousness is not when it happens, but rather, that it does in fact come about. We now see that it not only comes about, but also brings about ‘pastness’. At one moment, the for-itself erupts as a relation that is separate from itself. This separateness is all that there is to the past. The foetus, if it is conscious, comes with a past. The world comes about as the past does. When a for-itself becomes, it arrives as something that has surpassed (as pastness) -- furthermore, the for-itself is relative to the world. It is not the case that there is first, an in-itself, and then, a for-itself that separates from the in-itself. Instead, consciousness begins as a for-itself with a past -- with a relationality to itself and to things in the world.

Pastness situates the for-itself in its world. As the for-itself is brought into being as consciousness, as already having a past, it is brought into a world -- a world that is already structured and contains those in-itselves that give content to the world. However, these are not isolated and disconnected in-itselves. The world is opened up as new consciousness erupts as a horizon of possibilities -- as possible relations with things. In this horizon of possibilities others are, at once, immediately vast but also concrete. The world opens up as a world that is apprehensible as ‘my’ world. This explains how ‘I’ can understand myself as a foetus. Though, on the one hand, consciousness ‘creates’ a past and through that past, the world becomes, consciousness is also born into a structured world that appears to itself as having a past. We know that there was a world before this ‘I’ was born. Those in-itselves that are co-present to me in this world reflect their pastness to me in my apprehension of their being. I am not tricked by the world into
thinking that I am responsible for it. This is how we can be taken by the illusion that the past is something in which consciousness simply participates. But, as we know we are born into a world, if we understand Sartre’s past, we also understand that it is a condition of consciousness’ ontological structure that it arrives as already having pastness. The world that comes into being when consciousness begins is ‘my’ world. I am not shown a separate world but am, at all times, fully involved as consciousness in this world of mine. Yes, I can abstract that the world ‘existed’ before my beginning in this foetus -- indeed, it is designated as such. However, as I became a consciousness, I also created a world that is mine, a world with my past, my possibilities, ridden with my facticity. The world and the past have not created my consciousness in a foetus. Rather, the fact that I am here as consciousness dictates that I have and have always had a past and a world of possibilities.

But, this original structure of consciousness as nihilated from the in-itself is not the only structure that is encountered by consciousness. Not only is the past experienced as ‘my’ past -- that the world is owned by me -- the world as objects is mine. That is, the world is revealed to consciousness as being unique to it. I do not see an object from any other perspective other than my own. Rather, I see objects in the world as this very object that appears in this way only. I do not deny that others will see the object in front of me differently. For example, if I am seated on different sides of an object from an other, I do concede that they will ‘see’ that object as being to the ‘left’ as I see it to the ‘right’. That I do not argue with the other about the correct position of the object (either to the left or to the right) is proof that I understand the relativity of the world. Consciousness is in relation to the world as it is in relation to the past. This relation to the world is the body. I
experience the world as my body -- as a relation to the world that is, at the same time, inseparable from it.

The body dictates perspective. It is not the case that consciousness resides in a body that is separate from it. Sartre rids himself of this messy dualism -- he is not concerned about questions concerning the relationship between the body and its soul or ‘psyche’. Instead, he suggests that we should look at the body as consciousness. The body signifies the very relationality of the for-itself that is living in a world. Without the body, there is no world (perspective) that is there. Like with the past, consciousness brings about, through its fundamental ontological structure of a nihilated for-itself, a relationality. The body is this relationality that enables us to claim the world as mine.

It is my intention to examine the circumstances surrounding birth. We have looked at the fundamental structure of the foetus as a spring of consciousness. The upsurge of consciousness in the foetus shows us that consciousness does not invade the life and body of foetus -- instead it is the fact that my consciousness exists that creates a pastness and a body for ‘me’ who was once this foetus. But, the experience of myself and my understanding that I ‘came to be’ does not exhaust the question surrounding the experience of birth. Yes, there is my birth. However, there is also the experience of motherhood that is rooted in a unique relationship with this ‘other’ consciousness of foetus. We now turn our attention to the pregnant body as a concrete relationship with an other and it is this relationship that, I hope to show, qualifies as a unique mode of consciousness.
The Pregnant Body

What is this relationship that a mother has to her foetus? A pregnant woman can feel a range of emotions directed towards this foetus that is growing inside of her. They can range from apprehension, love, anticipation, nervousness and even indifference (denial) and hatred. However, emotions do not describe the ontological significance of being pregnant. In what follows I will speculate by trying to piece together a possible Sartrian perspective of pregnancy. As I have mentioned before, I can only speculate because Sartre offers little or no discussion of the subject. However, I am confident that *Being and Nothingness* allows us to extend Sartre’s ontology.

There are three attitudes that I will examine that the pregnant body adopts towards her foetus. The first seeks to understand the foetus as unified with the body -- this, I think, is the initial response of the pregnant body. Secondly, the pregnant body is experienced as a tool or object for the foetus -- an ‘incubator’. Lastly, the pregnant body adopts the attitude of creator towards the foetus as it tries to establish a concrete relation with the foetus as ‘other’.

Unification

It is Sartre’s position that as soon as we are in the world with others, we are in conflict. Relationships with the other always dictate that the other is seen as either a transcendence-transcended or myself as a transcendence-transcended. It is always the case that the other is encountered either as annihilating or annihilated. Consciousness, in an effort to undo this conflict adopts attitudes towards the other. These attitudes are efforts in acceptance -- consciousness, by adopting an attitude towards the other, is trying
to overcome conflict with the other. Consciousness is continually seeking either to
ground her freedom in the other or to ground the other’s freedom in her. By doing this,
consciousness shows its discomfort (and even terror) in the absurd fact that
consciousness must, at one time, live in a world with the other, but at the same time, be
unable to reconcile her relationship with the other.

As I have mentioned earlier, the body is how consciousness lives the world. My
body is not a thing, among other things, that exists in the world -- my body is not
experienced immediately, as a tool. Instead, it is the fact that I have a body that allows
the world of instrumentality to open up to me -- I can apprehend this very desk as my
desk because it is my experience that allows it to come into being (as my desk).

We are tempted, however, to enter into the common philosophical problems with
the body when we want to apprehend our bodies as ‘the body’. Sartre is careful to point
out that this is a mistake. Science will tell us that all bodies are basically the same. They
function with a heart, brain, organs, and so on. But, is this how I experience my body --
as a heart, brain, and organs? The answer is no. My consciousness is always ‘filled’ with
the world -- I am always conscious of something that is the world -- and it is my body
that brings it to me as mine. There is no indication that I experience my brain. If I am
able to look at my lungs through an x-ray, I don’t experience my lungs, suddenly, as
lungs. What I experience, when I look at an x-ray, is the knowledge of my body as an
object in the world. Here, my body is no different than a ‘generic’ body of the other. The
experience of my body, however, is different. If I am experiencing my body as mine, then
I am unaware of it as ‘a body’, I am simply aware that I apprehend things in the world as
a bodied being. The world is a relation to ‘my body’. This, in no way, allows me to apprehend my body as I apprehend the body of the ‘other’.

The pregnant body is no different in this case. Properly speaking, the pregnant body does not even have to adopt an attitude towards her body -- it is simply experienced as such. It is not the case that the foetus makes itself known, initially, as a separate other that is inhabiting the body. Rather, the body is experienced similarly to a sick body. Morning sickness, for example, leaves no trace of the foetus as ‘other’. What the pregnant body feels is simply ‘morning sickness’. There is no possibility of ‘other’ present in the fact that my body is ‘morning sickness’. The foetus, here, is my body. Being pregnant, here, is no different than feeling ‘sick’. I am the sickness.

Foetus as ‘Other’

There is a passivity in this first ‘attitude’ of pregnancy. However, this attitude is not sustainable. Why? The foetus, simply, in fact, makes itself known as ‘other’ to a pregnant woman. The foetus commands its presence to a mother. This, however, is not easy. What is required for the apprehension of the ‘foetus’ as other is knowledge. Knowledge of ‘morning sickness’ as a sign of pregnancy is enough to make the presence of the foetus as ‘other’ known. As soon as a woman realizes that she is pregnant, she embarks on a second attitude -- that consciousness of the ‘other’ makes her become a tool for the other.

My body, as we have seen, is different from simply ‘bodyness’. My body is experienced as my body, whereas the other body is experienced as an object in the world. However, I can apprehend my body as ‘other’ when it is treated as an ‘other’ body. When
I looked at the x-ray of my lungs, for example, what I saw was an object -- the lungs of a body. But, I am told, these are my lungs. With pregnancy, an ultrasound (among many other things) tells us that there is a ‘foetus’ in my uterus, and that this foetus is moving, growing, and possibly even conscious.

Thus it is that the foetus makes itself known to the pregnant body as some ‘other’ that inhabits the body. A first startling ‘kick’, with the knowledge that this is a ‘kick’ from the foetus, is enough to secure its position as other. But how is this ‘other’ experienced? Surely, there is a relation here with the other that is more that just one body (the mother) looking at an ‘other’. There is an immediate relation that exists between the foetus and the mother that is apprehended as separate. The pregnant body becomes something that is overtaken when the foetus is apprehended as ‘other’. Why is this?

There is a closeness between a mother and a foetus that does not allow for the separation of the body of one from the body of the other. This is not only a physical closeness but more importantly, a relational closeness. Although my decisions, as a pregnant woman, affect my body, they also immediately effect my child’s body as ‘an other’ body. For example, a pregnant woman who drinks a cup of coffee will feel the excitement caused in the foetus by increased activity. The pregnant woman, alone, is not noticeably affected by the coffee. However, she feels the difference between her reaction and that of the foetus -- she realizes that those decisions that she makes are apprehended and engaged in the foetus. The effect of this reaction is one of separation -- mother and foetus, here are separate. The pregnant body becomes a home for an ‘other’. The ‘look’ or presence of the foetus reflects the mother’s own ‘otherness’. She now looks at her body as a ‘thing’ in the eyes of the foetus -- she becomes a transcendence transcended.
What she is becomes founded in the foetus’s freedom as an ‘other’ that exercises his freedom and subjectivity. This relation is one that accompanies a feeling of being ‘used’. The pregnant woman often feels a sense that she is but a tool for the growth of her baby. It seems as though the foetus ‘takes over’ a body making it become solely ‘pregnant’.

This second attitude leads into what I will call the third attitude of pregnancy -- that of creation. If we look at Sartre’s first attitude towards others (love), we see a similar relation. This attitude fails. The lesson we learn here is that when consciousness tries to assimilate its freedom in the freedom of the other, it fails.

What the lover seeks from the beloved is a direct contact with the freedom of the lover. As the free other, the beloved seems to be able to provide the lover with its freedom. The lover loves because it wants to avoid being consumed by the other. Instead, to secure his freedom, the lover wants to, in a sense, latch onto the freedom of the beloved. In the case of the mother, we see that the foetus as other acts as a freedom. The presence of this other makes the pregnant body one of object -- it is not free. This is why the pregnant body is unhappy in this state. What we see in the second attitude is an attempt to accept this fate in order to secure the mother’s freedom in the foetus’s. She claims -- “my body is a tool, I live for my child, I exist as provider for my foetus”. As I have said before, this second attitude fails because, like love, it is not enough to want to assimilate my freedom with that of another.

In love, the lover wants the beloved to exist as beloved. But, this places restrictions on the beloved. However, the lover wants to maintain the beloved as a thing that loves and is loved. This places a demand on the beloved. The beloved’s freedom, here, is jeopardized. The beloved reflects, here, not a pure source of freedom, but rather,
a limited relation between a lover and beloved. Similarly, when a mother wants to accept herself as grounded in the foetus’s freedom, she requires that the foetus exert this freedom over her as other that is ‘provided for’ -- as taker. Surely, the foetus takes from the mother (for example, in the form of nourishment) but this, in no way, indicates that the foetus is living as a freedom for the mother. As with love, once responsibility and demands are placed on the foetus, the foetus can no longer be thought of as a source of freedom. Instead, what is reflected in this desire (of assimilation), is the mother’s desire to relegate her ‘freedom’ to the foetus. However, this second attitude fails in reducing the conflict that exists in all relations with ‘others’.

**Creation**

In adopting an attitude of creation, we see an attempt of the mother’s consciousness to reconcile her relation with the foetus. When Sartre talks about creation, he refers to the creation of things -- this is not, for Sartre, a relation with the other. However, it is what makes pregnancy unique. Only the pregnant woman can see herself as the creator of an ‘other’. She, with the recognition of her pregnancy, can see herself as creator -- this foetus becomes something that is ‘created’.

To be created is to belong to the domain of consciousness that is ‘having’. A created object is one that is possessed. To ‘have’ is to enter into a relationship with an object. When a pregnant woman sees herself as a creator -- she is seeing herself as being the source of the foetus as consciousness. It is my foetus that I have created -- I, as a pregnant woman, enter into a relation of ownership with the foetus. It exists because of me and through me. This act of creation is one of appropriation.
The created object stands as an in-itself. But, this in-itself bears the mark of being possessed by me. It is my object that is there in this in-itself. As a possessed in-itself, a created object is a continual reminder that I am its creator. A kick from a foetus is a continual reminder that the foetus exists because of me -- it is identified as an ‘other’ but this other bears my mark. I imagine that the foetus will look like me and share its ‘meness’ to the world, and also, it reminds me that it exists through me.

The foetus, as created object, comes out of the pregnant body. No longer does my body exist for the foetus (as we saw with the second attitude), but rather, it is owned by my body as a created ‘other’. But there is a limit to this ‘other’. When I see that the foetus bears my mark -- it exists as a continuous creation as mine -- it becomes me. What the foetus reflects here is only me and my ownership. But, as a creator of an object, a mother wants to be creator of a foetus as foetus. On the one hand, we possess the foetus, but on the other, we only can possess the foetus as foetus when we relinquish our mark on the foetus -- when he is no longer mine. What we have, here, is a symbolic relation of the ultimate desire of the for-itself -- this ultimate desire of consciousness being the desire of the for-itself to be its own foundation.

The foetus, as a separate and indifferent ‘in-itself’ that bears my mark is a source of the foundation of my for-itself. My foetus belongs to me but it is, doubly, a separate thing in the world. I am, therefore, able to enjoy the foetus as my ‘free foundation’.

But, as with other created objects, the foetus as my foundation is simply a symbolic and not a real relation in the world. The foetus never really belongs to me. This is made especially clear at birth (when a foetus becomes an ‘other’ in the world).
The difference between Sartre’s created object and a foetus is that the foetus exists always only as a possibility. The foetus is not a complete in-itself in the world. In fact, it is a developing consciousness that always points to its possible ‘objectness’ in the world. A foetus is significant because it points to the inevitability of human consciousness. Objects (those simple created objects that Sartre talks about), only exist as an in-itself. The foetus, in addition to being able to point to its owner (the mother), also, at the same time, points to its future. A mother is forced to pay attention to this inconcreteness of the foetus as object, making the original failure of creation every more present.

We have seen a failure in the attempt of the for-itself to resolve conflict with the ‘other’ in pregnancy. The three attitudes that I have posited offered us a look into Sartre’s ontology and how it might relate to the pregnant body. It has been my experience, though, that pregnancy involves much more than these very ontological categories (and musings). I introduced the section on the pregnant body with dismissive talk of emotions -- these have no place in an ontological examination. However, it is not the case that these have no place in talk of pregnancy. Perhaps the most perplexing element in Being and Nothingness is its completeness. This ‘completeness’ makes us wonder about the place of spirituality, emotions and genuine care, in human life. We must remember, though, that although Sartre was able to offer a complete ontology of human existence, perhaps the question of human existence is not fully captured by ontological investigations.
i. This, I realize, is no argument. Why the first attitude falls into the second is troubling to me. But, it simply does. Surely there have been cases where mothers have denied that a foetus ever existed as an other in her body. This is not even uncommon. However, that this attitude is unsustainable is arguable. Though not an argument on ontological grounds, it seems clear that nature and the progression of life dictates that a mother recognize her foetus as an ‘other’ -- that she recognize that something is happening to her body and that this change brings along with it responsibility as provider.

ii. That the foetus is possibly consciousness or not is not really important. That a pregnant woman sees the foetus as an ‘other’ is enough to ensure this second attitude of pregnancy. I was asked if my baby enjoyed music since she seemed to become more active when I was listening to music. My answer was either yes or no -- I’m not sure if ‘increased movement’ means ‘liking music (a conscious act)’. However, I did not consider the possibility that there was no conscious act involved -- I imagined that she either liked or disliked music but not the possibility that she was not conscious of music. Like when we encounter the other, it is not important that the other is actually looking at me. What matters is that I feel as though I am being looked at -- I feel the presence of the other. It is this presence that puts me at odds with the other and not necessarily that active and actual presence of the other as adversary.

iii. Physical closeness, of course, is part of pregnancy -- of course there is the fact that the foetus depends on the mother for survival. But, on an ontological level, the relation of closeness is still there. Either there is a relation of unity (as we saw in the first attitude) or there is one of separation. Either way, both attitudes represent a relational aspect of the mother and foetus. Mother and foetus are never fused together -- instead, the necessary adoption of attitudes by the mother allows for the decision to experience the foetus either one way or the other.

iv. Creation, even when we are dealing with simple created objects as ‘in-themselves’, fails for this reason. I am simply stating the exaggerated failure in the case of pregnancy.