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Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and the Inevitability of Violence: *Human Freedom in the Milieu of Scarcity*

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Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and the Inevitability of Violence: *Human Freedom in the Milieu of Scarcity*

By Michael J. Monahan

Stephanie Black's 2001 documentary film *Life and Debt* contains a striking moment in which Jamaican dairy farmers are seen pouring fresh milk onto the ground because it would cost more to preserve the milk and ship it to market than it would fetch when it arrived at that market. Hundreds of gallons of milk are wasted, in a country that suffers from immense poverty, because the price of imported fresh and powdered milk had become so cheap that domestic dairy production had been rendered economically irrational. This moment of film serves as a compelling focal point with and through which to think about the notion of *scarcity* – a concept so central to Sartre's account of human struggle and history in both volumes of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. There has been very important work done in the English language on Sartre's *Critique* (Aronson 1987, Catalano 1986) as well as his accounts of violence (Santoni 2003), history (Flynn 1997), and political struggle (McBride 1991) -all of which are, according to Sartre, conditioned by scarcity. Nevertheless, there seems to be relatively little sustained discussion of scarcity itself, and what there is retains the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of Sartre's own account. For the sake of a commitment to an *engaged* philosophy, it is crucial that this ambiguity be thoroughly explored.

This paper is an effort to begin this exploration by opening up a dialog within Sartre scholarship about the nature and function of scarcity. This is important not only because it will foster a better understanding of Sartre's own views on violence and reciprocity and allow for a more rigorous critical assessment of those views, but also because it will have an impact on political and economic theory generally. I will open with a brief account of the function of scarcity within both volumes of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, then provide a critical assessment of that account. I will conclude by drawing upon some of the resources provided in the *Critique* to point toward what I will argue is a more accurate, and politically positive, account of scarcity.

Scarcity in Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason

Economic theory at least since Hume and Smith has been predicated upon the notion that we live in a world in which resources are scarce. There simply are not enough of the things human beings want and need in the world to go around. In Hobbesian contract theory, it is the lack of resources sufficient to satisfy everyone's desires that makes it rational for any given

individual to emerge from the state of nature by means of contract—if there were enough of the things we desire to satisfy all of our desires, there would be no need to constrain one's immediate interests so as to secure long term benefits by means of contract (Hobbes 1985:104-106). The basic mechanisms of capitalism (supply and demand, market value, diminishing returns, labor costs) all function within a context of scarce resources. As Robert Goodin points out, it is "moderate scarcity" which drives the market economy – if there were abundance, there would be no need for trade, while if there were extreme scarcity, there would be little incentive to keep our contracts (Goodin 2001: 204-206). Thus, dominant market theories and political structures are all framed by some notion of material scarcity.[1] So what, exactly, is scarcity, and how does it function? Returning to the example of the dairy farmers in *Life and Debt*, what can we say about the scarcity of milk on that farm, in Jamaica, and globally?

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre saw the desire to be in-and-for-oneself (the desire to be God) as the engine that drives human conflict and struggle (Sartre 1956: 397-400). The look of the other compromises my project of being in-and-for-myself, and so conflict will arise in an effort to eliminate, or at least dominate, that other. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, however, it is scarcity that drives violence and conflict. Sartre states:

> Man exists for everyone as *non-human man*, as an alien species. And this does not necessarily mean that conflict is *already* interiorized and lived as a fight for survival. It simply means that the *mere existence* of everyone is defined by scarcity as the constant danger of non-existence *both for another and for everyone*. (Sartre 1991a: 130)

It is the reality of scarcity as the "individual relation" and "social milieu" (Sartre 1991a: 127*n*)—the simple fact that *"There is not enough for everybody*" (Sartre 1991a: 128) – that conditions each individual's status as a real threat to each other. Scarcity undermines human interaction in a manner that is fundamentally antagonistic. In Sartre's own terms, reciprocity between human beings is corrupted: "In pure reciprocity, that which is Other than me *is also the same*. But in reciprocity as *modified by scarcity*, the same appears to us as anti-human in so far as *this same man* appears as radically Other – that is to say, as threatening us with death" (Sartre 1991a: 131-132). Thus, according to Sartre, the milieu of scarcity, which he later claimed "appears as soon as there is animal life" (Schilpp 1981: 13), makes it the case that every other organism is a literal threat to any given individual's existence, insofar as each organism is consuming an amount of scarce resources necessary for life.

This in turn means that "scarcity is experienced in practice through Manichaean action, and that the ethical takes the form of the destructive imperative: evil *must* be destroyed" (Sartre 1991a: 133). Sartre claims further that "In the framework of scarcity, constitutive relations are fundamentally antagonistic" (Sartre 1991b: 15), and that humanity will be violent until the elimination of scarcity (Sartre 1991a: 736). We are left with a rather bleak picture. As long as there is scarcity, there will be violence, as human beings struggle to secure what they can of scarce resources, which security can only come at the expense of the *insecurity* of some other(s). "Struggle", therefore, "*is* scarcity as a relationship of men with one another" (Sartre 1991b: 14) [emphasis mine]. Scarcity thus stands as a fundamental negation of the human (as Anti-Human), which negation in turn invites its own negation (counter-violence), by way of *praxis* directed either toward overcoming scarcity, or toward insulating oneself from scarcity at the expense of others. Of course, both forms of praxis will, in due course, lead to "counter-finalities" and become "altered" such that they will inevitably lead to effects which differ, sometimes disastrously, from their intended goal.

For now, two important points need to be made about Sartre's account of scarcity. First, he has a peculiar view about the *necessity* of scarcity. On the one hand, he denies outright that it is a logical or a priori necessity (Sartre 1991a: 125; Sartre 1991b: 14-15). Equally clearly, he rejects the notion that scarcity is "ontological" (Schilpp 1981: 13, 31). On the other hand, he states that this particular world is definitely one of scarcity, and seems very dubious about the possibility of overcoming that scarcity (Sartre 1991a: 127-128; Schilpp 1981: 32). Scarcity is thus not an *a priori* reality (Sartre 1991a: 125), but the historical (and thus ultimately contingent) condition *from* which humanity emerged (Sartre 1991a: 131). In this way scarcity functions as a natural, but not a logical, necessity. Like the gravity constant on earth, it could have been otherwise, but it is the same for everyone on this planet, and it is beyond our power to change it. This account of the inevitability of scarcity will prove important for my later critical assessment.

Second, Sartre claims that scarcity functions as a kind of *foundation* for human struggle (and thus History), but it is not a *sufficient* cause of that struggle. Scarcity exists as a milieu that explains human *praxis*, in that it inevitably (as per the above) conditions that praxis, but it does not strictly cause it (Sartre 1991a: 127). Scarcity thus exists both as a kind of *exis*, or passive mode of Being, in that the material world contains within it the possibility of universal destruction, and it is a *praxis*, or active manifestation of freedom, in that we interiorize that scarcity and act it out through others and ourselves (and of course, in series being, through ourselves *as Other*). As Sartre states:

> I do not claim that the relation of reciprocity ever existed in man *before* the relation of scarcity, man being, after all, the historical product of scarcity. But without this human relation of reciprocity the non-human relation of scarcity would not exist. Indeed, scarcity, as a univocal relation of each and of all to matter, finally becomes an objective social structure of the material environment, and in that way its inert finger points to every individual as both a cause and a victim of scarcity. (Sartre 1991a: 131)

In other words, human praxis (freedom) is both the cause and consequence of scarcity. It is the cause insofar as our choices and actions make use of and even exacerbate scarcity, and it is a consequence insofar as our choices and actions are always conditioned by and intelligible within a milieu of scarcity. As Joseph Catalano puts it: "This world is a world of struggle, because there is not enough for all. But it will become clear that this scarcity is also the world *as made scarce by praxis*" (Catalano 1986: 108) [emphasis mine]. Humanity (as freedom) is thus intimately bound up with scarcity both at the level of *praxis* and of *exis*. Echoing Catalano, Thomas Flynn states that "Given the fact of scarcity, violence permeates human history. But Sartrean violence is always a relation between free, organic praxes mediated by 'worked matter'" (Flynn 1997: 133). Thus, scarcity alone does not *cause* human conflict, we have to *choose* to engage in struggle, but at the same time, within the (de facto universal) milieu of scarcity, the choice of conflict "is always being reborn" (Sartre 1991a: 134).

Scarcity in Sartre's *Critique* ultimately stands as a fundamental ground for human interaction, and one that leads ineluctably to conflict. Scarcity is not a logical necessity, it is not an *a priori* given (Sartre 1991a: 125, Aronson 1987: 48), but it is contingently a universal condition of our facticity, and thus informs all of human *praxis*. That being said, it does not *determine* our praxis, and Sartre would be a poor existentialist indeed if he thought otherwise. Scarcity itself may not be chosen, but *how* we respond to it is chosen— in the same way that one is not responsible for being free, but is inescapably responsible for the way in which that freedom is made manifest. Sartre's ambiguity regarding scarcity, in other words, can be explained in part as a reflection of the inherent *metastability* of the human condition. We are responsible for scarcity—we "create a field of scarcity around us" (Schilpp 1981: 31), but at the same time we cannot simply will scarcity away, nor can any given individual determine on her own how scarcity will impact her life.

Before moving on to a critical assessment of this account of scarcity, it will be useful to first take a step back and look more closely at the roots of scarcity for Sartre, and then to examine the treatments of scarcity found in the more important secondary literature. Scarcity, in

the *Critique*, emerges originally because human praxis is driven by *need* (Sartre 1991a: 80). This is linked to our status as organic subjects, and thus to actual substances *necessary* for our continued survival. But scarcity itself quickly transcends these material necessities, and becomes anything that, for a given subject, is *lacking*. Thus, among the examples Sartre employs as manifestations of scarcity are such divers elements as: time, gold, machines, technology, knowledge, coal, and even people (either as means to accomplish some public works project, or as labor, or as consumers for some over-produced product). Thus it is important not to reduce scarcity to *needs*, especially given our capacity, as free subjects, to act in ways contrary to organic necessity. That is, it is not biological need alone which conditions our actions in this way. We can engage in hunger strikes, or carry out suicide missions, for example, both of which demonstrate the inability of needs to determine our actions. Thus, there is indeed "scarcity on every level and from every point of view" (Schilpp 1981: 30), but scarcity alone cannot *compel* us into acts of violence or struggle.

This does mean, however, that scarcity is extremely ubiquitous. It is not merely that there is too little food, or water, or energy, but that, given the finitude of resources both material and non-material, paired with the infinitude of human desire and the *lack* that it generates, everything can be, and on some level is, scarce. This is obvious from the list of examples provided above. If even such things as *ideas* can be scarce (Schilpp 1981: 30), then the traditional focus on scarcity of material resources will be insufficient for the Sartrean account.[2] What this means is that for Sartre, scarcity is effectively the air we breathe. Indeed, this is a very telling metaphor, since it rests on the idea that air is so abundant. And yet, under the right circumstances, air can be quite scarce. Consider someone trapped in a mine, or climbing Mt. Everest, or enjoying a ride in Apollo 13 – even the paradigmatically abundant has the potential to be scarce under the right circumstances. Despite the fact that Sartre clearly includes nonmaterial "goods" like ideas and time in his treatment of scarcity, I will focus primarily upon material goods, both because they are paradigmatic as examples of the role of scarcity, and also because they seem to present the greatest challenge to my ultimate goal, which is to argue against the inevitability of conflict within the milieu of scarcity.

Turning now to the secondary literature on scarcity, one finds general agreement both on the interpretation of Sartre's account, and the assessment of its shortcomings. Scarcity is understood as importantly linked to struggle and violence (Aronson 1987: 75; Catalano 1986: 111, 114; Santoni 2003: 34, 65; Flynn 1997: 133; McBride 1991: 128) yet at the same time as a contingent and historical condition (Aronson 1987: 48, Catalano 1986: 108; McBride 1991: 109). Flynn summarizes the underlying tension here quite nicely when he writes "Scarcity is

profoundly historical in nature yet curiously a priori in function" (Flynn 1997: 234). Scarcity, in sum, is the condition of all human praxis, but is itself conditioned by that praxis (Catalano 1986: 109, 116; Flynn 1997: 133). All of this raises two important questions. First, what does this tell us about Sartre's claims regarding the apparent practical (if not a priori) inevitability of struggle given the milieu of scarcity? Second, can we make any sense of his further claims about the possibility (or lack thereof) "a true 'socialism of abundance'" (Flynn 1997: 124)?

Scarcity – A Phenomenological Appraisal

Given his views on scarcity, and its role as the foundation of human conflict, it is important to subject Sartre's account to serious critical appraisal. What, exactly, is scarcity, and how plausible is Sartre's understanding of it? As is only fitting given the tradition within which Sartre was working, I propose to subject the notion of scarcity to phenomenological scrutiny. The phenomenologist cannot succumb to the "natural attitude" (Husserl 1991: 33-37) and simply accept as given the realty of scarcity and its effects upon human behavior and institutions. Rather we must attend carefully and rigorously to the experience of scarcity itself as a moment of consciousness. What is taking place in the moment (and, as it turns out, one must be critical about one's understanding of a "moment" itself) at which one apprehends something *as scarce*?

We constitute (Husserl 1991: 53-55) a product, object, idea, amount of time, or whatever, *as scarce* by understanding it in some way as lacking, or at least as "about to be lacking ." By way of example, I am sitting in a coffee shop as I write this, and I can find scarcity wherever I look.[3] Obviously, there is the coffee itself. My mug is almost empty. And, since coffee does not exist here in absolute abundance, I shall have to pay in order to have my mug refilled. Given the work I am doing, the time it takes to do that work, and the length of the line at the counter, I am now experiencing a scarcity of time in addition to the scarcity of coffee in my mug. There is only so much food left in the display cases. There are few tables left open. Even the light seems a little dim for reading in most places. This is just the surface, however. If I go beyond my immediate experience, there is so much more. Scarcity conditions the cost and quality of the labor, and the coffee, and the machines that are operated by the laborers to produce the coffee. Likewise, the "barista/os" (as labor), the baked goods, the ingredients in the baked goods, the fuel consumed in shipping the baked goods here, and so on are all conditioned by and manifestations of scarcity. Just as is the shop itself in relation to others of its kind, both independent and corporate, the demographics of the neighborhood it is in, competition from online coffee retailers, weather patterns in coffee producing regions, etc. Every instance of scarcity is itself conditioned by, and a factor in, other manifestations of scarcity, and all of this in

turn informs my perception of the coffee in my mug as scarce. Scarcity, in short, seems every bit as ubiquitous as Sartre suggests.

One can see from this extended example the give and take of *praxis* and *exis*. We live in a world in which coffee, for example, will grow well, if at all, in only so many places. It is a labor-intensive crop, and must ravel quite a long way to be roasted and blended here in Wisconsin. It is, in other words, a limited resource. At the same time, it is a highly desired commodity, and this is a matter not of some inherent biological necessity, nor is it a matter of natural or economic laws. It is the result of a complex array of individual choices, each in turn influenced by advertising, popular culture, recommendations from friends, and the general "coffee culture."[4] Thus, the scarcity of the coffee itself cannot be reduced either to the limitations on the resource as such, nor to the human praxis that acts within those limitations. Its scarcity is, as Sartre suggested, both a cause and a result of the interactions of all of these interconnected facets.

But things are even more complicated than this. Given that this particular shop is also a roastery, and thus stuffed to the rafters with bags of coffee, it seems odd that I should think of coffee, in this shop, as "scarce." In order to apprehend the coffee as scarce, it seems I need to connect that coffee with the larger coffee market, labor factors, processing costs, distribution costs, consumer demand, the relative success of this year's crops, and so on. There seems, in other words, to be quite an abundance of coffee in this building, and my perception of scarcity is on a fundamental level built not merely upon my immediate perception, but rather upon my awareness of and connection to the larger world of coffee beyond these walls. Furthermore, this particular establishment serves only "Fair Trade" certified coffee, which means that the international labor market in coffee *could* tolerate lower wages than these producers are *choosing* to pay. This increases the cost of the coffee, but there seem to be plenty of people, including myself, willing to pay a premium for Fair Trade coffee. So how scarce, really, is the coffee cooling in the vats, or being brewed behind the counter, if we are all choosing to pay more than is strictly *necessary* (in market terms, at least) for our cups of coffee?

Part of the problem lies in a basic ambiguity in the use and meaning of the term "scarce" itself. On the one hand, it can be the simple concept of being limited. Anything that is available only in a finite amount is in this way scarce. This would be a largely *descriptive* account of scarcity, and would, ultimately, include virtually everything. Even air, as mentioned above, is scarce in this way. On the other hand, scarcity can imply something more than a mere limit. It can also mean that the commodity or product is in fact in relatively *short* supply given some end or purpose. This is a more *normative* meaning contingent upon certain goals and understandings of what is or is not a sufficient supply for that goal. Lastly, there is the notion of

scarcity that points toward the more strictly economic sense of commanding a high price. Diamonds are scarce in this sense, but only artificially so. Diamond producers make no secret of the vast reserves of diamonds that are purposefully kept off the market so as to maintain the value of diamonds as a commodity. The phenomenology of scarcity undertaken here will need to keep these distinctions in mind, though I will only focus here upon the first two.

In the first, descriptive, sense of the term, to say of any material resource that it is scarce is universally true. There is no *thing* that is in absolutely limitless supply. The second, normative, sense of the term is more directly linked to human goals and actions, since the scarcity or abundance of a resource will depend on our own needs and desires, and, importantly, on the needs and desires of others. Coffee is thus always scarce in the first, descriptive sense. Even if the amount of coffee in the world were increased by several orders of magnitude, it would still not be in strictly limitless supply. The scarcity of coffee in the second sense, however, is far more complicated. Imagine the manager of this shop leaving for vacation. She inventories the roasted and unroasted beans, and decides that there is plenty of coffee to last through her absence. Coffee, she decides, is in *sufficient* supply – she need not address any scarcity of coffee before she leaves town. Or suppose that she wants to reduce prices to increase sales – the same quantity of coffee could now be seen as scarce, given this particular goal. Whether the same amount of coffee is scarce in this normative sense will depend not only upon the goals of the management of this shop, but also on the consumption patterns of the customers. If a new medical study reveals that coffee fights cancer, or prevents Alzheimer's disease, or increases sex drive, then what was an abundant supply of coffee yesterday might suddenly become a scarce supply, even if the amount of coffee in the building remained the same.

This explains some of the complexity involved in the apprehension of a product or commodity as scarce. The descriptive sense of scarcity, the awareness of the supply as limited, is always there, and is in effect a necessary condition for the normative sense of scarcity. That is, if there were a limitless supply of something, it would be impossible for there to be an amount insufficient for my goals. But it does not seem that the descriptive sense of scarcity is a sufficient condition for the normative sense. Again, think of oxygen. Oxygen is in finite supply. Yet I don't need to worry about my own consumption (do I really have enough left to work-out today?), or that of others in relation to my own (by resenting joggers for burning more than their fair share, for example). Should I change my goals, however, oxygen can become scarce in exactly this way. If I decide to climb Mt. Everest, I'll need to either train my body to make do with less oxygen (decrease demand), or ensure that I bring enough extra oxygen with me (increase supply). If I find myself trapped with you in a bank vault or a mine, I may indeed resent it if you

decide it's time to do jumping jacks. Scarcity in the descriptive sense does indeed appear to be a universal condition, but seldom is it what anyone is really concerned with. That something is in limited supply only becomes *important* given certain desires and goals within a particular material and social setting. The scarcity in the normative sense that emerges in these examples with oxygen *requires* scarcity in the first sense, but the fact that there is a finite supply of oxygen normally doesn't bother us in the least.

I apprehend the coffee in my mug *as scarce* given both the fact that there is but a finite supply of coffee not only in this shop, but globally, and the fact that I would like, all things being equal, to have more. What is more, given what I know about the demand for coffee generally, and my own patterns of consumption, I can recognize the scarcity of coffee even when I'm not particularly interested in more at this exact moment. It is in this way that the "moment" in which one apprehends the scarcity of coffee in fact participates both in a history and a future of coffee globally and "for me." What is crucial to the phenomenology of scarcity, and something which Sartre seems to have understood clearly, is the extent to which scarcity manifests the metastability of the human condition through the interplay of these two senses of the scarce. To use Sartre's terminology, the descriptive sense of scarcity is part of our given situation or *exis*, while the normative sense is intimately and inescapably connected to human freedom or *praxis*. This *praxis* can, at the same time, mitigate, elide, exacerbate, or reveal the scarcity found in *exis*. There is, in other words, a dialectical relation between the "brute fact" of a given supply of something, and the human activity that confronts that supply. Our apprehension of scarcity reflects this dialectic, in that it demonstrates an awareness of the amount of a given commodity in relation to our own goals, all of which must be understood in relation to the goals and actions of others. The investigation of something as simple as a half-empty (or is it half-full?) coffee mug can, if pursued, reveal this dialectic in all of its complexity.

A Critique of Sartre's Account of Scarcity in the *Critique*

There is a strong sense, then, in which Sartre's claim that scarcity is "a fundamental determination of man" (Sartre 1991a: 138) is correct. The more descriptive meaning of scarcity points toward the fact that resources, both material and (some?) non-material, do not exist or manifest themselves in perfect abundance. Scarcity is the background condition, in this way, of all our actions, insofar as it is impossible for us to have at our disposal everything that we could ever want. This counterfactual conditional is crucial here, because scarcity at this level refers not only to things that we actually want or need at the present moment, but even to things that we think *might* be of value or use in a possible future. If I think I have enough water for the

present, but I believe I *could* need more tomorrow, or next week, then it turns out that I really do not have *enough* water – I have a scarcity of water despite the fact that I have ample supply for my immediate needs. All human action, therefore, is informed by the fact that this is a world of finite resources, and any given individual's use of any given resource here and now means that there is less of that resource available for someone else. And indeed, since so much of our activity is directed toward the fulfillment of material and nonmaterial needs and desires, that *milieu* of scarcity is what makes these actions of consumption and stockpiling intelligible in the first place.

Where one might take issue with Sartre's account is in regards to his claims about the ethical implications of the milieu of scarcity. Recall that Sartre characterizes scarcity as generating a Manichean ethos. As conditioned by scarcity, Sartre tells us, human reciprocity causes us to understand the other as "threatening us with death" (Sartre 1991a: 132). He states further that "the *mere existence* of everyone is defined by scarcity as the constant danger of non-existence *both for another and for everyone*" (Sartre 1991a: 130). What all of this in turn means is that "*violence* must be defined as a structure of human action under the sway of Manichaeism and in a context of scarcity. Violence always presents itself as *counter-violence*, that is to say, as a retaliation against the violence of the Other" (Sartre 1991a: 133). Human violence and conflict is thus driven, in a sense, by the engine of scarcity. Indeed, "Struggle is scarcity as a relationship of men with one another" (Sartre 1991b: 14). According to Sartre, every other individual's "mere existence" stands, within the milieu of scarcity, as a threat to one's own existence, and this threat must ultimately be negated through conflict and violence in "Manichean action."

This points toward what is clearly a rather bleak picture, and one that, at its heart, shares much more in common with Hobbes than a good Sartrean might like to admit. It is an account that seems to commit Sartre to the view that violence is inevitable, if not ultimately ontologically necessary, until such time as scarcity can be completely eliminated (Sartre 1991a: 736). At the same time, given the very broad definition of scarcity as simply that which is in finite supply, the very notion that scarcity could be overcome seems highly implausible to say the least. Nevertheless, the following exchange between Sartre and Michael Rybalka is revealing:

R[ybalka]. *Do you see a possible end to scarcity?*

Sartre Not at the moment.

R. *And what of the socialism we were talking about last time?*

Sartre It would not lead to the disappearance of scarcity. However, it is obvious that at that point ways of dealing with scarcity could be sought and found. (Schilpp 1981: 32)

This finally brings the analysis back to the two questions I posed at the end of the first section. How inevitable, really, is struggle and violence? Is it possible to "overcome" scarcity at all? Sadly, the interview moves on to a discussion of Heidegger at this point, and so we are left to wonder. If "the overcoming of some scarcities – lack of time or of ideas, for example – seems incompatible with the human condition as such" (Flynn 1997: 235), then it would seem that the more pessimistic interpretation of Sartre's view must hold. Fortunately, I believe that Sartre does provide the resources for coming to some understanding of what this might mean.

First and foremost, it should be noted that Sartre's account of scarcity as positing "the *mere existence* of everyone ... as the constant danger of non-existence *both for another and for everyone*" (Sartre 1991a: 130) seems to conflate what is in fact a rather important distinction. My very existence is really only threatened when certain particular resources are withheld from me. You threaten me with non-existence only if you deprive me of such things as food, or water, or oxygen, or my livelihood. You do not threaten my existence if you deprive me of coffee, or television. In the descriptive sense, all of these are examples of scarce resources. They do not exist in sufficient quantity for everyone to get all that they want or need all of the time. But to say that they are scarce does not, on its own, entail that their lack is a threat to one's existence. It is a frustration of desire, to be sure, and it might be even painful, but that is not the same as being life-threatening. Potable water and iPods are both scarce, but being deprived of them affects me in radically different ways. The scarcity of iPods can be a threat if I earn my livelihood manufacturing or marketing them, but the threat here comes not from the scarcity of the iPods themselves (which is in fact a necessary condition for me to make my livelihood off of them at all), but from the scarcity of other goods I secure through my relation to iPods. Equivocating between the impact of the scarcity of potable water and iPods trivializes the former at the expense of the latter. People for whom drinking water is scarce are threatened with death—when my coffee mug gets low, I am threatened with inconvenience.

Thus, on the level of those things necessary for our continued survival, Sartre's claims about the other threatening me with death simply by existing *may* be accurate, but on the level of commodities and resources that are in themselves superfluous to survival (like coffee and iPods), the idea that scarcity threatens me with non-existence is simply false. Again, the phenomenology of scarcity is telling. To apprehend that something is scarce is *not* the same as apprehending that its lack is a threat to my existence. My constitution of the coffee in my mug as

scarce does not bring with it any awareness of threat. I do not feel the slightest temptation to come to blows over the next available refill. Even if all the coffee in the world were to be suddenly destroyed, my suffering would be limited to some minor caffeine withdrawal headaches. What matters, then, is not the scarcity of the thing itself, but one's *relation* to that scarce thing. If I were a coffee plantation worker in Columbia or Indonesia, then my existence could most definitely be threatened by changes in the supply of coffee. What is more, as Sartre well knew, scarcity can often be a positive boon for a given individual. If I am the owner of a coffee plantation in Columbia, then a coffee blight in Indonesia, which would increase the scarcity of coffee, and thus raise the price at which I could sell my coffee, would thereby make my own plantation more profitable. Far from seeing a threat in the scarcity of coffee, I would see its scarcity as a personally beneficial development.

Perhaps even more telling, it is not at all clear that the scarcity even of such organic necessities as oxygen and water necessarily leads to a Manichean need to eliminate the other who threatens me with their very existence. Let us return to the oxygen example. As the mine tunnel collapses and we come to realize that there is no way for us to escape, oxygen will suddenly *become* scarce to me in a way that it never has before. Of course, it was always scarce in the sense that there was a finite supply, but there was enough for all, and others' increased use of it cost me nothing. But now it is scarce in the sense that there is very little of it for my purposes, and if my co-worker Bob hyperventilates, he is thereby shortening my lifespan. In short, I am trapped in this mine, and now *experiencing* oxygen as scarce (in the normative sense) such that those trapped with me are indeed a threat to my continued existence by virtue of their own simple presence in the mine with me. What is important about this example is that in point of fact, when real miners confront this situation, they *do not* kill each other off in order to increase their individual chances for, or duration of, survival. They know perfectly well that eight miners will use up the oxygen more quickly than four, which in turn will use it up more quickly than one. And yet they do not slaughter each other in a Manichean effort to negate the threat posed by the other. This is because, as any good existentialist knows, no matter how dire the circumstances, it is still up to me how I face them, and no matter how vitally necessary the resource for my survival, I may still decide to forego it. That is, what all of these examples emphasize once again is the importance of human *praxis* in relation to the milieu of scarcity.

Praxis operates at every level in the constitution of scarcity. Returning to the trapped miners, we have already seen how they may choose not to actively seek to negate their fellow miners for the threat they pose by consuming scarce oxygen. Praxis also conditioned the descriptive scarcity of oxygen in the first place, and the normative scarcity of oxygen in the

collapsed tunnel. The frequency of mining accidents is not a matter of pure chance. Lax safety standards on the part of mine owners, managers, and even mining crews, paired with weak enforcement and monitoring on the part of state and federal regulatory agencies, contributes to the kind of accidents that lead to situations such as my example. The scarcity of oxygen for those trapped miners is thus conditioned, if not directly caused, by the myriad choices and actions by bureaucrats, capitalists, and miners leading up to their predicament. At the same time, the reasons why the different companies, agencies, and individuals relate to safety standards the way they do has to do with protecting the profitability of individual companies and the mining industry as a whole. As we have already discussed, market rationale (profit) is all about the control and use of scarcity. So we see here the dialectic between praxis and exis at work. The background milieu of scarcity makes it "rational" to relax safety standards to improve efficiency in the mining process, this praxis in turn conditions the scarcity of safety, scarcity of the resource being mined, scarcity of job and personal security for the miners, and so on. All of this can in turn lead to an increase in mining accidents, causing a situation like the example used above, which in turn conditions further praxis on the part of the trapped miners. Human praxis conditions, and is conditioned by, scarcity – "every individual [is] both a cause and a victim of scarcity" (Sartre 1991a: 131).

Sartre's stronger claims that scarcity conditions human reciprocity in a way that is fundamentally antagonistic seems dubious in light of the importance of praxis in the dialectics of scarcity. Scarcity is, to be sure, a fundamental condition of human interaction. When scarcity is understood in such a broad manner, so as to include such "resources" as time and ideas, then it would seem that for any given human action, one could find a reason behind it which points toward scarcity of some resource. If, as Sartre held, human action is directed toward the negation of a lack, then it would seem that scarcity is in some sense a necessary condition for human action itself. That is, if we understand any lack in terms of a scarcity, and lack is what drives human choice and freedom, then all action can be understood as an attempt to address scarcity – it is *need*. This, in turn, means that if there were no scarcity, there would literally be nothing for us to *do*. Aronson makes this very point: "The fantasy that human acts might be purer and more rigorous if wholly divorced from need is the opposite of the truth: without need we do not even have 'the dream of acting'" (Aronson 1987: 215). Human praxis is thus saturated with scarcity, but it does not seem to necessarily follow from this that all praxis must be Manichean and directed toward violence and conflict.

Indeed, as Aronson suggests, if scarcity drives need, and need drives praxis, then it is scarcity, in some sense, which makes praxis possible at all. But Aronson does not go on to

discuss the implications of this claim. On the one hand, we must choose how to act in relation to the scarcity we confront in a given situation. Very often this may be in exactly the sort of Manichean fashion Sartre describes, but this is not always the case. On the other hand, when one looks at those manifestations of scarcity that are paradigmatic causes of human conflict, one cannot escape the praxis that conditions that scarcity from the start. Food production is notoriously inefficient, as is our use of land resources in relation to that production. The scarcity of potable water is equally problematic, insofar as people insist on living in large numbers in places (like Pheonix or Las Vegas) where water is hard to come by, and in polluting and wasting what water there is that is readily available. For any given scarce resource one can locate at the root of any given human conflict, one can find human praxis conditioning and even exacerbating that scarcity. Thus, it is at least arguable that the resources sufficient to satisfy our most basic needs are not, in the normative sense of the term, *scarce*, even though they are certainly finite, and thus scarce in the descriptive sense. To be sure, it is this finitude that makes possible and intelligible the use of resources as a means for profit, such as through the privatization of water supplies, the exportation of "cash crops" to rich countries at the expense of growing staple crops domestically, and so on. The truth that Sartre did capture in his discussion of scarcity is the idea that scarcity is what makes conflict work. One *can* exploit others, and threaten their existence, because important resources are not absolutely abundant and easily obtained, but it is not *necessary* that we behave in this way.

Ultimately, there is always scarcity in the descriptive sense, which conditions the human praxis that generates and/or exacerbates scarcity in the normative sense. But there is an important difference between those of us who exploit that scarcity at the expense of others, and those who work toward human flourishing *in spite of* scarcity. If we look seriously at the complexity of causes and effects of scarcity in relation to genuine necessities, we will find not some mechanical economic or political "law", but human agency at work. Sartre saw scarcity as fundamentally alienating, but again this seems to be more a matter of how people *act* rather than what is or is not simply in the world. Scarcity and adversity can bring people into conflict, but it can also bring them closer together. Sartre claims that "scarcity is experienced in practice through Manichean action" (Sartre 1991a: 133), and that we will behave violently toward each other "until the elimination of scarcity" (Sartre 1991a: 736-737), but it is not at all clear why this *must* be so.

Freedom Through Scarcity

Struggle and conflict, as we have seen, "precisely represent the manner in which men live scarcity in the perpetual movement to transcend it" (Sartre 1991b: 13). The claim has never been that scarcity *compels* us to relate to each other in antagonistic ways, but only that scarcity functions as a fundamental condition that renders conflict *reasonable* in a strong sense. At the same time, Sartre does seem to claim that scarcity in the descriptive sense of limited capacity points toward a world that is ultimately hostile to humanity. He states that "conflicts and social struggles as much as individual battles are *all* conditioned by scarcity: negation of man by the Earth being interiorized as a negation of man by man" (Sartre 1991b: 13). The question that emerges is whether the mere fact that resources are finite means that the earth is a "negation of man." If we bear in mind the distinction between what I have referred to as the descriptive and normative senses of scarcity, it is not at all obvious that finite resources necessitate Manichean struggle as an interiorized expression of the earth's negation of humanity. Resources can be finite, but sufficient, provided that human goals and practices are organized in such a way that finitude does not entail *threat*. If one accepts the idea that scarcity is as much a result of human praxis as it is a cause of it, then a space is opened up in which that praxis can work *with* scarcity instead of *against* it.

Sartre argues that within the milieu of scarcity human praxis *must* ultimately take a Manichean turn, leading to violent struggle against others who pose a threat by their very existence. Against this view, I have offered two arguments. First, that there is a confusion here between two senses of scarcity that in turn leads to a misunderstanding about what is or is not a threat. Your existence threatens mine only if your consumption of resources literally deprives me of the means of my continued existence. Within a market economy this can indeed be quite common, but this says as much about the functioning of the market economy as it does about descriptively scarce resources. Second, since it is the case that instances of real threat need not lead to violent struggle and that such instances of real threat are often deeply conditioned by praxis, as in the example of trapped minors and lax safety standards, claims that violent conflict is inevitable just seem inconsistent with the existential phenomenological ontology that informs the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. If one interprets this text as in some sense a response to the excesses of *Being and Nothingness* in terms of the "radicality" of human freedom, it would seem that Sartre is over-stating his case. That is, in attempting to emphasize the important ways in which *exis* or facticity conditions *praxis* or transcendence at a fundamental level, and thus counteracting what seem to be the solipsistic ontological tendencies of his earlier work, Sartre

goes too far, and portrays *praxis* as determined, as opposed to conditioned, by *exis*, at least as it relates to scarcity.[5]

Sartre is surely right that scarcity is *fundamental* to the human condition. Indeed, I have suggested above that insofar as human praxis is directed toward the negation of some *lack*, it is scarcity, in the broadest sense of the term, that is at the root of every instance of human action – without scarcity, there would be nothing for us to do. What this means is that rather than seeing the elimination of scarcity as necessary for the overcoming of human conflict and violence, such an elimination—which Sartre rightly saw as practically, if not logically, – 64 – *Michael J. Monahan* impossible—would in fact make humanity, as freedom, impossible. Humanity truly is both the cause, and the consequence, of scarcity, and the symbiotic aspects of that relation cannot be underestimated. It is true, therefore, that human beings must struggle against scarcity, but not *qua* scarcity. We need not struggle against scarcity as finitude, which would be quixotic at best, but rather we must struggle against scarcity as *threat*. Sartre, echoing liberal social contract theory, proclaims that there is not enough for everyone, but not enough for everyone to *do* what? Not enough for everyone to survive? Or not enough for everyone to have all that they could desire? He is clearly correct if we assume the latter, but it is not at all obvious if we take the former interpretation. It is a question, in other words, not just of how much there is in the world at any given time, but also a question of how much we need, how much we desire, and what we are doing to address those needs and desires. Scarcity in the normative sense, which is the sense that points toward threat, is contingent upon human ends – there is not enough *for* some goal or desire. The struggle against scarcity in that sense, then, is a struggle to take control not only of the resources we need, but over our desires themselves. This must take place in a context in which resources are finite, to be sure, but if our goals and desires are more modest, finite resources might well still be *sufficient*.

Another implication of this analysis is that we need to reconsider the goal toward which we are aiming. Sartre may refer to the “elimination of scarcity” (Sartre 1991a: 736-7) or the “transcendence” of scarcity (Sartre 1991a: 137), but I have suggested that, given the relation between scarcity, need, and practice, this may not be desirable even if it were possible. McBride suggests that “the idea of a potential overcoming of scarcity might prove useful as a sort of limiting- concept, an asymptotically approachable goal against which genuinely possible historical change for the better could be measured” (McBride 1991: 110), but this still takes the *ideal* of a scarcity-free world as valuable (or at least “useful”). I submit that the “transcendence” of scarcity should never be understood as an end-state to be achieved or even asymptotically approached, but rather in-itself as a constant and ongoing *process* in which we must be

continually engaged – freedom is only manifest in a struggle *with* and *through* scarcity, it is not some end goal to be achieved (or approached) by the *elimination* of scarcity. Likewise, in his discussion of reciprocity in Sartre's *Critique*, Catalano makes the following observation: "This spiral unfolding of praxis never achieves synthesis in a Hegelian sense, because praxis takes place within a milieu of scarcity" (Catalano 1986: 144). I have argued elsewhere (Monahan 2006: 411-413) that this is a deep misunderstanding of Hegelian dialectic precisely insofar as it treats the supersession (*Aufhebung*) of the terms of the dialectic as an end state, rather than an ongoing process. The dialectic of scarcity as both a condition of and as conditioned by human praxis will never reach some particular point or moment at which it is "transcended" or resolved, and any view of liberation which holds this as an ideal must be abandoned.

Fortunately, Sartre provides conceptual resources that are, I submit, invaluable in correcting the weaknesses in his account of scarcity and its relation to praxis. Foremost among these is his account of group *praxis* itself. Recall that the originary moment of group praxis for Sartre, the "fusing group", arises out of a negation of some threat (negation of a negation). To be sure, threats may take many forms, but one of them, certainly, is scarcity. Indeed, early in his discussion of fused groups, Sartre uses famine as an example of a negation leading to a fusing group (Sartre 1991a: 350). As he states:

> … the group constitutes itself on the basis of a need or common danger and defines itself by the common objective which determines its common *praxis*. Yet neither common need, nor common *praxis*, nor common objectives can define a community unless it makes itself into a community by feeling individual need as common need, and by projecting itself, in the internal unification of a common integration, towards objectives which it produces as common (Sartre 1991a: 350).

This passage makes clear the way in which a threat or negation need not drive individuals into a Manichean free-for-all, but may (though surely contingently) provide an avenue for the emergence of group praxis. The "common objective" of confronting and negating the threat posed by scarcity[6] can thus serve in effect as an organizing medium for group praxis, which, in turn, is a manifestation of (mediated) *reciprocity* (Sartre 1991a: 392, 419).

Of course, Sartre reminds us repeatedly that the *milieu* of scarcity, as a manifestation of alterity, is always exerting itself as an inertial force driving us back toward series-being. But, as I have stressed above, the very idea that scarcity must be overcome in some definite, *terminal* sense needs to be abandoned. Groups, and their response to the threats that engender them, must always be understood as *in process*, and never as a complete, finished *product*. As Sartre

states: "…we can in fact define the group as a perpetual reshaping of itself, in accordance with objectives, with exterior exchanges and with internal imbalances" (Sartre 1991a: 407). What is crucial is that the possibility of forming a *common project* around the negation of scarcity is always a possibility, and the presumption of its impossibility can only ever serve to undermine that possibility. The question is whether we will begin seeing scarcity in the descriptive sense as an opportunity to organize group *praxis* directed toward the control and satisfaction of human goals within that context of scarcity, or continue to understand it as a threat which drives us into solipsistic/atomistic relations of reciprocal hostility and competition. To see the outcome of this dilemma as pre-determined is simply inconsistent with existential phenomenology. The problem, therefore, is not one of scarcity as such, but rather is about those who take advantage of scarcity to exploit and oppress other human beings. At the same time, we must not aim toward some end state beyond scarcity, but rather we must strive consistently and self-critically to realize human freedom and positive reciprocity within and even *through* a milieu of scarcity.

So what, ultimately, can we make of the Jamaican dairy farmers who destroy their product? Insofar as market forces made their action economically rational, and market forces function as they do *because* of scarcity, we can say that it is scarcity that conditions their actions. But this is not simply a matter of the finitude of the milk supply in Jamaica, or even globally. It is ultimately a matter of the *ends* toward which the human praxis involved in the production, distribution, and sales of dairy products is directed within a context of finite resources. And the ends here, first and foremost, are profit. That is not an inevitability. If the goals of dairy production were the provision of food to those who need it, it is not at all clear that dairy would need to be scarce in the normative sense. By recognizing the inevitability of scarcity in the descriptive sense, and then conflating it with scarcity in the normative sense, it can be made to appear that the struggle for scarce resources is an inevitability of the human condition. For any given individual working solipsistically to satisfy her every desire, this account would seem accurate. But Sartre rejects this ontology, and offers a way to see the challenges posed by scarcity not as a threat to individual existence, but as an opportunity for relations of reciprocity directed toward the shared project of doing the best *we* can, rather than the best *I* can, with the resources available to *us*. That resources are scarce is not up to us, but how we *confront* that scarcity is.

I do not think this is an easy or simple problem to deal with. Part of the beauty of Sartre's discussion of scarcity is the way in which he draws out its complexity. Much work remains to be done here. How should we frame the project of the management of scarcity? What might the criteria or desiderata for success look like, given the rejection of the ultimate "overcoming" of

scarcity as an end-state in lieu of an ongoing *process* of self-critical confrontation with scarcity as a goal? What are the best means for achieving this goal, once it is taken up? Again, my purpose here is not to settle these issues, but to open a discussion of them. If the possibility for human praxis exists that avoids Manichean conflict in spite of scarcity, then there is a real need for elaborating the ways and means of that praxis. I have argued for that possibility. It is now our collective task to point toward ways to make it reality.

Biography

Michael J. Monahan is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Marquette University, where his teaching and research focus upon political philosophy, and the philosophy of race and racism. His recent publications include "Recognition Beyond Struggle" (*Social Theory and Practice*, 32:3) and "The Conservation of Authenticity" (*Philosophia Africana*, 8:1). His current research is directed toward a book on the relation between racial ontology and anti-racist political practice.

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Notes

1. Marx's treatment of scarcity is somewhat different, rather complicated, and in any event beyond the scope of this paper.

2. Indeed, even scarcity itself can become scarce within a market economy, a phenomenon typically referred to as "overproduction" (Sartre 1991a: 138-139). Within the milieu of scarcity, according to Sartre, each individual becomes a "man [sic] of scarcity" (Sartre 1991a: 131), who, in "seeking his abundance, seeks it as a determination of scarcity. Not abundance for all, but his own, hence the deprivation of all" (Sartre 1991b: 421). Value itself is a function of scarcity, and thus in order to secure the value of one's possessions, or at least preserve it, one must ensure that others do not acquire it. In other words, one must protect the scarcity of precious resources, for if that scarcity should itself become scarce, then the value of one's resources is threatened.

3. I am well aware that this is a clichéd example, especially in a paper on Sartre. Nevertheless, it is true, and it yields particularly rich material for phenomenological investigation. And so I will refrain from conjuring some less tried and true example for the sake of originality, and stick with the tired, worn, and yet eminently serviceable *café* example.

4. The influence of this coffee culture on its scarcity cannot be underestimated. As a graduate student, I had several colleagues who deliberately cultivated a taste for coffee

precisely because meetings with students, professors, and peers inevitably took place in coffee shops. They felt that it would be odd for them to meet in coffee shops and not drink coffee, so they basically taught themselves to like it. Thus, their consumption of coffee, and in turn their contribution to its scarcity, is a result of a deliberate choice predicated upon the choices and actions of others. It is because so many others consume coffee so frequently that they became coffee consumers themselves.

5. I offer this more in the spirit of a suggestion, rather than as a full argument, which would be beyond the scope of this essay.

6. Here again the distinction between the normative and descriptive senses of scarcity is critical. One may, at least temporarily, negate scarcity in the normative sense, but not in the descriptive sense. That is, we can see to it that supply is increased so that it is adequate to our need, or we may find another way to satisfy that need, or we may work together to reduce the need itself, but we cannot create a limitless supply.