

Ontology, Otherness, and Self-Alterity: Intersubjectivity in Sartre and Merleau-Ponty

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Broadly speaking, there are two approaches to the problem of intersubjectivity. Philosophers in the Cartesian tradition view the subject as self-enclosed and detached from the other. This leads directly into the problem of solipsism. If we define consciousness as a non-temporal, transcendental ego, I have no way of authentically welcoming another person, of encountering his or her otherness. I can know myself and only myself. Intersubjectivity is at best an inter-monadic community of isolated egos. Philosophers in the Cartesian or Husserlian tradition therefore understand the self as a hermetically sealed entity, locked away as it were in its own mind, fully present, unified, and self-certain. At the other end are the social ontologies of Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger. Heidegger and Scheler replace the axiom of Cartesian subjectivity with another axiom: the first principle of sociality. Intersubjectivity is no longer a problem for them since it is implicit in their ontology. The portrait of the self drawn by Heidegger and Scheler is a kind of non-self: open, ecstatic, and in Heidegger's case punctuated with a network of social structures.

Heidegger and Scheler's departure from Cartesian egology is undeniably radical, yet I do not believe we deepen our understanding of intersubjectivity by replacing the notion of a solitary ego with a social pre-ego. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty both make important divergences from the Cartesian and Heideggerian heritages. The weak points in Sartre's philosophy, however, are precisely those elements of Cartesianism that he retains. Understanding the significance of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, especially his theory of intersubjectivity, necessarily involves understanding his break from the Cartesian tradition.

Sartre is an anomaly within the Cartesian tradition, for he discards the transcendental ego yet upholds the subject-object duality: being-for-itself and being-in-itself. He thus defines the self as a constituting agent in relation to an object, not as a transcendental operator behind such relations. Sartre, of course, is in no sense a dualist. His thought, especially in *Being and Nothingness*, is residual of Cartesianism to the extent that he retains an "ontological separation" between the self and the other. For this reason, Sartre's critique of Hegel is essentially Cartesian.

Hegel is clearly the precursor of Sartre's philosophically mature ideas developed in "The Look." Part III of *Being and Nothingness* begins with a

chapter on "The Existence of Others," a chapter culminating in "The Look." Regarding the formation of Sartre's social phenomenology, it is Hegel, not Husserl or Heidegger, who plays the central role. In his words, "By proceeding from Husserl to Hegel, we have realized immense progress.... Solipsism seems to be put out of the picture once and for all."¹ Sartre's interpretation of Hegel allows him to conclude that a refutation of solipsism entails affirming a being-to-being relation between self and other, not a knowledge-to-knowledge relation (BN, 329). Husserl and Hegel fail, on this account, as Husserl "measures" being by knowledge; Hegel "identifies" being with knowledge, and in general, the other for these thinkers is always an epistemic other. Hegel nevertheless "put the discussion on its true plane" (BN, 330).

I will now briefly summarize the salient points of Sartre's discussion of Hegel. By doing so, we will be able to see the groundwork from which Sartre fashions his ideas of "the look." I am not concerned with how accurate Sartre's interpretation of Hegel is, but how his interpretation, however flawed, is crucial to understanding Sartre's own ontology. One of Hegel's central shortcomings, Sartre argues, is his epistemological optimism. Hegel, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, equates the truth of being with recognition of self-consciousness, a recognition that entails grasping my self as an object. The other fulfills this recognition by acting as a canvas from which the "image" of my self as an object takes form. I can grasp myself as an object in the other, Hegel says, because my initial approach to the other is as an object.

Hegel describes the I-other relation as starting with the opposition of pure self-consciousness and consciousness-for-another, or "consciousness in the form of *thinghood*."² At this stage, "one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman" (PS, 115). Hegel maintains that this relationship is equally reciprocal to the extent that each individual gains independence through their dialectical interaction with the other, but as Sartre points out this relationship can never be equal since there is no transparency between what I am for myself and what the other is for him- or herself (BN, 324). I thus negate the other by denying his consciousness in order to seize the recognition of myself as I would in front of a mirror. We can thus interpret Hegel's words in the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "The negative is the self" (PS, 21). I gain self-knowledge, and in turn self-presence, by cancelling out the essentiality or interiority of the other. Hegel thus considers the other not only as an object, but an object necessary for apprehending the self.

Sartre ultimately undermines Hegel's epistemological optimism on ontological grounds. Again, the division of being-for-itself and being-in-itself

is of central importance. As consciousness, I cannot flee myself. In Sartre's words, "I pursue myself everywhere, I can not escape myself, I reapprehend myself from behind. Even if I could attempt to make myself an object ... I should have to be the subject who is looking at it" (BN, 326). Sartre understands this prison-cell type of subjectivity as a simple fact of being-for-itself, which is why he posits an "ontological separation" between oneself and another (BN, 328). My consciousness, as it appears to another consciousness, undergoes radical modifications (BN, 327). We are both constituting agents, so there cannot be a passive relationship between us. More importantly, for Sartre, we cannot have a circuitous understanding of each other: "I am incapable," he writes, "of apprehending for myself the self which I am for the Other, just as I am incapable of apprehending on the basis of the *Other-as-object* which appears to me, what the Other is for himself" (BN, 327).

Hegel's error, according to Sartre, is to assume I could approach the other as an object while simultaneously apprehending myself as an object by way of the other. For Sartre, if I am to understand myself as an object in the other, the other must be a pure interiority, for only a subject is capable of reflecting the recognition of myself as an object (otherwise any inanimate object could give me the recognition I seek). But if I understand the other as a subject, the reflection of myself will blur, as the other is not simply a passive backdrop for my acts and intentions, but is a source of his own acts and intentions. When I recognize the other as subject, the other will thus modify my own sense of self (BN, 326). Hegel's idea of the other-as-mirror, as Sartre shows, is misconceived. The other avails no clear reflection of myself, and as a result, "No universal knowledge can be derived from the relation of consciousnesses" (BN, 328). If Hegel is an epistemological optimist, Sartre is an epistemological cynic, a cynicism that is rooted in his ontology. This aspect of his thought becomes most apparent in his discussion of the look.

For Sartre, "the Other does not constitute me as an object for myself but *for him*" (BN, 362). The other, Sartre believes, is not an other-as-object but an absolute freedom. My relation to the other, my being-for-others, is directly as a subject of being, not an object of knowledge (BN, 341). Solipsism is not an issue here because individuals relate not as knowledge-objects but as being-subjects, actively engaging and affecting each other. But this is just the problem. As a being-for-itself, a nothingness, the other is free of determinations, unfixed and unlimited. I experience the other's freedom, Sartre says, at the cost of my slavery (BN, 362). The other's infinite freedom is precisely what limits my own sovereignty, and the other's look—the moment of my direct or indirect encounter with the other—petrifies me, strips me of my subjectivity, in a

word, objectifies me. Another consciousness is like a black hole, drawing all surrounding objects, including myself, into its undeniable gravity. When the other is subject, I am object and when I am subject, the other is object; within this vicissitude we can never encounter the alterity of the other as a subject.

According to Sartre, any experience of a we-subject, an intersubjective or communal consciousness, is purely psychological, a subjective feeling within the process of individuation that, in his words, "is produced in special cases on the foundation of being-for-others in general" (BN, 537). The essence of the intersubjective relation is ultimately conflict and not being-with. Dan Zahavi makes the important observation that Sartre mistakenly conflates the idea of intersubjective consciousness with collective consciousness, thus denying any relevance to the we-subject.³ Sartre is rightly opposed to a position like Scheler's that posits an a priori relatedness linking subjects. This view reduces intersubjectivity to a homogeneous type of pre-subjectivity. But by discrediting the we-subject altogether, Sartre splits any relation between the self and the other, which in turn destroys the possibility of ontological unanimity between them. By ontological unanimity, I mean a positive encounter with the alterity of the other—positive in the sense that such an encounter does not strip away my own subjectivity. This may occur in an everyday situation, through a conversation perhaps or a simple handshake, preferably when two people are proximate and engaged, not distant or silently gazing at one another.

The intersubjective world, in Sartre's view, rests on negation. Sartre recognizes the alterity of the other—his philosophical advance from Husserl and Hegel, and his escape from epistemological solipsism—but this alterity is oppressive. Sartre denies equable relations between people, and to this degree his notion of intersubjectivity is severely one-sided. He systematically exposes the violent side of alterity but his ontology prevents him from understanding alterity outside of the negative, or what I, following my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, will call positive alterity.

Merleau-Ponty's break with Sartre's ontology is a break with the Cartesian tradition that Sartre inherits. Part II of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* includes a section titled "Other Selves and the Human World," a chapter devoted to the problem of intersubjectivity. The task of this section is twofold. Merleau-Ponty assigns the first half to a critique of Cartesian egology, establishing in its place a radical social ontology of embodiment. In the second half he preserves the distinction between self and other by way of a non-Cartesian concept of subjectivity. One of the first points Merleau-Ponty stresses is that a philosophy of the cogito or transcendental ego will in the end prove

absurd, an absurdity that leads to solipsism. If I am merely a thinking thing, a pure atemporal consciousness, thereby constituting and synthesizing objects of my experience, the other will appear to me as an object, devoid of consciousness or human agency. Yet this other, as a being-for-itself in its own right, a consciousness necessarily invisible to me, will in turn assimilate me as an object, and neither of us will be able to encounter the alterity of the other. This is the paradox of defining consciousness as a transcendental agent:

I cannot conceive of another consciousness, for it too would have to constitute the world and, at least as regards this other view of the world, I should not be the constituting agent. Even if I succeeded in thinking of it as constituting the world, it would be I who would be constituting the consciousness as such, and once more I should be the sole constituting agent.⁴

Merleau-Ponty wants a social ontology to the extent that it establishes a we-subject, a genuine intersubjectivity, but not to the point that it dissolves subjectivity altogether. In order to do this, he begins by reconsidering the division of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, and his starting point is the body. The body with which Merleau-Ponty is concerned is not the body of biology or medicine, reducible to cells, bones, and tissue. He is interested in the lived body, my body as a dimension of existence, a being-in-the-world. Through an understanding of the lived body, Merleau-Ponty believes we can step beyond the antinomy of the for-itself and in-itself in order to account for the authentic presence of the other. The lived body is not a being-in-itself, a constituted object, nor is it a pure subject, interior, for-itself; it is what Gary Madison describes as a dialectical synthesis of the two.⁵ The for-itself and in-itself are really two sides of the lived body. In Madison's words, "As perceptual consciousness I am not a pure subject, I am not a consciousness *of* my body; I *am* this massive and opaque body which *knows itself*" (PMP, 39). As Martin Dillon further states, as a phenomenon, the lived body incorporates the "immanent agency of my conscious life," and the "transcendence of worldly objects."⁶

The lived body, for Merleau-Ponty, is thus a subject-body, a conscious-body. We may now approach the problem of the other from a new vantage point. Just as I do not experience my body as an object, I do not experience another's body as an object. I am no longer concerned with discerning an imperceptible being-for-itself behind the other's body. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty argues that consciousness "has to be conceived, no longer as a constituting consciousness and, as it were, a pure being-for-itself, but as a perceptual consciousness" (PP, 409). In

effect, as a perceiving consciousness in the world my vision is not, as Descartes said, a "thinking about seeing," but a "gaze at grips with the visible world" (PP, 409). With this new understanding of the body, Merleau-Ponty criticizes the notion of individual perspectives, or isolated points of view, for this applies only to the notion of a self-enclosed cogito, a constituting consciousness in which the world appears to him or her as a private spectacle. The lived body instead is an open, reflexive, and shifting perspective, directly interactive with the world and the other. Between my body and another's there exists a reciprocity or "internal relation," whereby the other appears as the "completion of the system" (PP, 410).

Merleau-Ponty uses the example of playfully pretend-biting the finger of a fifteen month old baby. As I do this, the baby opens her mouth. Why does she give this response, considering she has rarely seen her reflection in a mirror and that her teeth are different from my own? The baby, Merleau-Ponty argues, has an understanding of biting, as she can feel her teeth with her tongue and the motions of her jaw from the inside, and so can understand my intentions displayed externally in my pantomime. The expressions of my body always carry with them an intersubjective significance. Biting is just one example. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the baby "perceives its intentions in its body, and my body from its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body" (PP, 410).

Nevertheless, by centering a social ontology on the lived body (as "anonymous subjects of perception"), the problem of intersubjectivity remains. At this stage in his thought, Merleau-Ponty does not have the difficulty of all subject-based philosophies (i.e., how to account for our knowledge of other existing minds), nor does he share Sartre's limitation (by, for example, viewing the intersubjective world as merely a battleground for subject status). He now shares the same problem as Heidegger and Scheler: how to account for a genuine difference between oneself and another.

"[I]f the perceiving *I* is genuinely an *I* [a cogito], it cannot perceive a different one; if the perceiving subject is anonymous, the other which it perceives is equally so" (PP, 414). This is the paradox. "At the level of perception," as Madison notes, "there can only be a natural subjectivity and an anonymous intersubjectivity" (PMP, 41). But while wishing at all costs to discard the Cartesian cogito, Merleau-Ponty does not want to lose the distinction between subjects. The question now becomes how I can posit an other that is not I, the alterity of the other. In order to preserve the transcendence of the subject, Merleau-Ponty must renew the notion of subjectivity itself (PMP, 42). This is, in Dan Zahavi's opinion, the most important aspect of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of intersubjectivity. It entails that I, before I am open to an other, am

already an other to myself. As Zahavi expresses it: "I can only encounter the other if I am beyond myself from the very beginning; thus I can only experience the other if I am already a possible other in relation to myself, and could always appear to myself as an other."⁷ This entails that at the level of perception the subject is an anonymous counterpart of the other, and there is only unidentified intersubjectivity. But perceptual consciousness is always open to the world and to others, and this openness is the key to an understanding that "[m]an can create the alter ego which 'thought' cannot create, because he is outside himself in the world."⁸ The openness of the self therefore allows for the alterity of the other. Because I can always transcend myself, be another for myself, or experience otherness within myself, I can be open to the otherness of another person.

When confronted with the problem of openness to the other, Merleau-Ponty concedes this is the difficulty of aligning transcendence with the existential modality of the social: "Whether we are concerned with my body, the natural world, the past, birth or death, the question is always how I can be open to phenomena which transcend me ... *how the presence of myself (Uprasenz) which establishes my own limits and conditions every alien presence is at the same time derepresentation (Entgegenwartigung) and throws me outside myself*" (PP, 423). It is interesting to note that for Hegel self-consciousness and the other, or Lord and Bondsman, are both necessary for each other's individuality; they co-arise through opposition and unity, conflict and resolution. With Merleau-Ponty, the contrary is true: self-otherness or internal-alterity conditions the possibility for encounters with the other. However, we are now faced with an even more daunting question: what are the conditions for self-alterity? How are we to understand this otherness within the self? This question leads Merleau-Ponty into a further reappraisal of the subject, as the internal alterity Merleau-Ponty speaks of involves re-framing subjectivity in terms of temporality. I will now focus on the third and last section of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, especially the chapters on "The Cogito" and "Temporality." In order to ground this analysis in a broader philosophical context, I will briefly discuss the role of time in both Descartes's and Kant's writings.

As Merleau-Ponty notes, Descartes makes the mistake of positing a timeless *res cogitans*, a thinking thing certain of itself prior to any contact with the world, thus wielding the universal powers of self-constitution, self-certainty, and self-unity. Such a cogito is, in Merleau-Ponty's estimation, indistinguishable from the creative mind of God, which is why the causal unity of Descartes's cogito fully depends on the infinite power of the deity. That is also why the self for Descartes lacks the power to sustain its identity through time. By expelling time from the

self, Descartes accounts for the unity of self-consciousness by referring to God's continuous acts of creation. In other words, if the cogito does not constitute time, then Descartes concludes it is a matter of divine power to perpetuate the chain of temporal succession and causal order.

Kant disrupts the entire Cartesian tradition by engendering time, along with space, as the self's internal intuitions, thus giving the self (not God) the power of active synthesis, to organize a "before" and "after," a past, present, and future. The Kantian introduction of time into the subject, however, obscures any direct intuitive cognition of a transcendental self, exposing the self as it appears in a temporal succession of thoughts. Kant therefore gives the self the power of temporal synthesis at the expense of losing the absolute certainty of Descartes's intuited cogito. As Kant writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "Inner sense, by means of which the mind intuits itself or its inner state, yields indeed no intuition of the soul itself as an object; but there is nevertheless a determinate form (namely, time) in which alone the intuition of inner states is possible, and everything which belongs to inner determinations is therefore represented in relations of time."⁹

Merleau-Ponty is dissatisfied with both Descartes and Kant: Descartes, because his notion of the cogito lacks distinction and independence from God, and Kant, because his division between the empirical ego and the transcendental self generates ambiguity in the heart of the subject. As Merleau-Ponty puts it,

We shall never manage to understand how a thinking or constituting subject is able to posit or become aware of itself in time. If the *I* is indeed the transcendental Ego of Kant, we shall never understand how it can in any instance merge with its wake in the inner sense, or how the empirical self still remains a self (PP, 494).

Although Kant incorporates temporality into the heart of the subject, he retains the atemporal character of the transcendental ego.

Cartesian and Kantian philosophies of the self in the end share the same fate: Descartes achieves self-unity by expelling time (and the world) from the cogito, while Kant, despite representing the empirical ego in temporal relations, acquires self-certainty and self-identity through the synthesizing power of the transcendental ego. By crystallizing the ego, Kant and Descartes separate the experiencing self from the other. By rendering the self as ontologically complete (self-contained) and epistemologically whole (self-certain), Kant and Descartes destroy the ability of the self to encounter alterity or anything truly different from what the self posits and projects. Merleau-Ponty writes:

If the awareness I have of myself is perfect, then the contact of my thought with itself seals me within myself, and prevents me from ever feeling anything that eludes my grasp. There is no opening, no 'aspiration' towards an other for this self of mine, which constructs the totality of being and its own presence in the world ... never finds anything outside itself but what it has put there (PP, 434).

For Merleau-Ponty, the body-subject does not live in an objective temporal succession, nor is time a mere succession of psychic states: "if consciousness of time were made up of successive states of consciousness, there would be needed a new consciousness to be conscious of that succession and so on to infinity" (PP, 490). Time is, as he says, one's relation to things and to the world (PP, 478). Phenomenologically speaking, subjectivity is temporality. Because my consciousness is essentially temporal, because I am "given to myself" as a situation and a body, there is no way in which I can achieve absolute self-certainty. In thinking of my own past I rediscover not a transcendental self but what Merleau-Ponty calls a "prehistory," an "unreflected fund," an "original past, a past which has never been present" (PP, 279–82). This unreflected fund indicates the opacity or absent center of the subject: on the one hand I cannot fully comprehend the meaning of my existence, my origin, my historical foundation, but on the other hand I cannot deny or overcome my existence. The self is at once ineffable and provocative, in the way that Hegel describes reflective consciousness as a consciousness "split within itself" (cited in PMP, 159).

As Rimbaud says, "we are not of the world" (cited in PP, 474). My deepest reflection catches a glimpse of what Merleau-Ponty, echoing the words of Rimbaud, describes as a "non-human ground," that is, a horizon of the most general possibility, a situation, a particular existence (i.e., a body). Although there is no overarching historical or psychological determination to my existence, there is the effervescence of a possibility that manifests an incarnate existence. This "central phenomenon" is, Merleau-Ponty says, "at the root of both my subjectivity and my transcendence towards others": "*I am given*, that is, I find myself already situated and involved in a physical and social world—I *am given to myself*, which means that this situation is never hidden from me as an alien necessity, and I am never enclosed in it like an object in a box" (PP, 419). The temporal nature of the self therefore exposes the openness and transcendence of the self towards others. A hermetically sealed subject has no way of accessing alterity because there is no sign of alterity within him- or herself. Merleau-Ponty thus transforms the problem of the other by "rediscovering" otherness in the very fabric of the self. Whereas

Descartes banishes the world from his cogito in order to gain self-certainty (a certainty that quickly turns into solipsism), Merleau-Ponty pulls the pure interiority of the self inside out and rediscovers a profound split between my past and present, my origin and existence. I can no longer constitute, alongside Descartes's intuitive cognition or Kant's transcendental apperception, the identity and knowledge of my experience. I am "split" within myself because I can never reify myself; I can never capture and enclose my origin because I am a temporal subject, a body in the world.

Separating the external world from an internal subject is now implausible. This is why Merleau-Ponty can affirm that "[t]he world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself" (PP, 474). I am open and intertwined with the other because I am an other. I am open to the world because the world is inside me—not as water is inside a cup but as a living structure that coalesces with the very movement of embodied experience. "Subjectivity," Merleau-Ponty writes, "is not motionless identity with itself; as with time, it is of its essence, in order to be genuine subjectivity, to be open to an Other and to go forth from itself" (PP, 495). The possibility of transcendence, the possibility underpinning an encounter with the other, is self-alterity. Self-alterity is conditioned by time, a time that is the simultaneous cohesion and transcendence between myself and my existence, the dynamic split between my origin and situation. As a temporal subject I can never enclose myself, I can never gain timeless self-certainty; but this also means I can never totally cut myself off from the other.

In his working notes on *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty considers his theory of intersubjectivity not as a solution to the problem of the other but as a transformation of the problem.¹⁰ As he writes, with implicit reference to Sartre: "The other is no longer so much as freedom seen *from without* as destiny and fatality, a rival subject for a subject, but he is caught up in a circuit that connects him to the world, as we ourselves are, and consequently also in a circuit that connects him to us."¹¹ This is, in my view, the best characterization of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the other. It does not solve or dissolve the problem of intersubjectivity, but opens it up to a renewed level of significance. The lived body reveals to me that I have the immanence of a conscious being and the transcendence of a worldly object, and that my subjectivity, which is in no way separate from my body or from my interaction with the world, is constituted by the internal dehiscence of time, a continual otherness at the core of my selfhood, thereby opening me up to the positive alterity of the other.

Notes

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 321. Hereafter cited as **BN**.
2. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115. Hereafter cited as **PS**.
3. Dan Zahavi, *Husserl and Transcendental Intersubjectivity: A Response to the Linguistic Pragmatic Critique*, trans. A. E. Behnke (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001), 138–140.
4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962), 407. Hereafter cited as **PP**.
5. Gary B. Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 39. Hereafter cited as **PMP**.
6. Martin C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), 143.
7. Zahavi, *Husserl and Transcendental Intersubjectivity*, 159.
8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. R. McCleary (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 170.
9. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith (Macmillan, 1965), A68.
10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 269.
11. *Ibid.*, 269.