From the Look to Mitsein: Sartre's Description and Vision of Relations with Others

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Abstract. Sartre's identification of the presence of others begins with the analysis of shame, through which others are defined as syntheses of objecthood and subjectivity. In this context, others form a fundamental relationship with me by looking at me. Others exist in tandem with me as both object and subject, exerting a decentering effect on my existence. Furthermore, others compel my being-for-itself to be redefined by my being-in-itself. Consequently, I develop two concrete relationships with others: one involves transcending the specificity of others, while the other involves assimilating the specificity of others to my own. However, both types of relationships are destined to fail due to the inherently conflictual nature of interpersonal interactions. The coexistence of "we" arises from the interplay between myself and others, wherein "we" can jointly serve as both subject and object. Nevertheless, this "we" relationship remains secondary to the conflictual dynamic between myself and others. Achieving harmony and equilibrium with others requires transcending one's natural state and pursuing mutual recognition of each other's freedom.

Keywords: Sartre, others, the Look, freedom

1. Introduction

Sartre's discussion of the relationship between myself and others is most famously represented by his line "Hell is other people" in his play No Exit [1]. This conflictual view of others is consistent with his description of the relationship between myself and others in Being and Nothingness. In the first two volumes of Being and Nothingness, Sartre describes human reality starting from the negating actions of individuals and the "cogito," but the self's being-for-itself cannot provide a comprehensive description of human reality. What is lacking in the self's being is the dimension of the other. Consequently, Sartre extends the discussion to the relationship between myself and others.

2. The Development of the Basic Relationship Between Myself and Others

When Sartre addresses the relationship between myself and others, he adheres to his characteristic Cartesian methodology. This means the discussion must be framed from the first-person perspective, focusing on how I relate to others. This requires the objects of discussion to have sufficient immediacy, meaning that the argument must adequately present the directness of the relationship between myself and others or explain how the intersection between "I" and "the other" becomes possible. Thus, Sartre views the problem of the relationship between myself and others not only as an epistemological issue but also as an ontological one to be resolved.

2.1. From My Shame to the Other

Sartre's discussion begins with an examination of shame. The structure of shame mirrors that of "consciousness is consciousness of something" [2]; it is also intentional. In other words, shame is the feeling I have toward what I am. Furthermore, shame is non-positional and pre-reflective, meaning that its original structure must be one in which I feel shame for what I am in front of another person. For instance, when someone falls, the initial feelings are of pain or anger, but when the presence of others is noticed, there is an immediate sense of shame. This indicates that shame is founded upon the presence of the other. After revealing myself to others, I feel shame for who I am. Therefore, the other exists as an indispensable mediator between myself and my own being.

Through this, another dimension of the self is revealed: "Only through the manifestation of the other can I judge myself as I would judge an object" [3]. Through the presence of the other, I am able to judge myself as I would judge another person.

Shame is the feeling of being ashamed of oneself in front of others. Thus, "from the experience of shame, the existence of the other can be undeniably confirmed" [4]. This relationship between myself and the other reveals a new dimension of the self, allowing the self to judge itself in the same way as the other. This analysis of shame highlights the other, who plays an intermediary role in my judgment and evaluation of myself. The other is a significant object to be discussed, as it evokes various emotions within me yet remains inescapable.

2.2. The Other as Object and Subject

The existence of the other first manifests to me as an object. The mode of the other's presence for me is initially object-like; I engage in active behaviors such as gazing at, observing, and thinking about the other. However, the existence of the other cannot be solely reduced to objecthood, because the other's presence is a real, direct presence. Therefore, the relationship between myself and the other must be a more fundamental connection, one in which the other must present itself in some way rather than merely being known through my recognition of it. Moreover, "if the original relationship between myself and the other is one of the other as an object, it would be impossible to explain the everyday certainty of the other's actual existence" [5]. Thus, the other is not only an object that I recognize but also a subject that reveals itself to me.

Therefore, the relationship between myself and the other is not one in which I merely know the other; it is a relationship of mutual recognition and mutual revelation. This is a relationship in which we "exist together as pairs." When I, as a subject, recognize the other, the other, as a subject, also gives recognition to me. This kind of other is obviously different from other things around me, which merely exist as objects. The appearance of the other disrupts the original relationship between myself and the things in my world. I, the things, and the other form a new relationship.

All the things in my world exist at an objective physical distance from me. However, temporarily disregarding these objective physical distances, when there is no other present, the things that constitute my world are "without distance" from me; they are all contained within my world and appear to me. But when the other appears, this sense of "no distance" is broken or stretched. I will feel that these things have "moved away" from me. They cease to be a part of my world surrounding me and instead move toward the other, becoming a part of the other's world.

Therefore, we find that the appearance of the other differs from that of ordinary objects. For example, when the other blocks my view, I experience a stronger sense of irritation than when an ordinary object blocks my view. The reason for this difference is that we regard the other as a subject, not merely as an object. The presence of the other as a subject exhibits a spatial relationship; objects in my world no longer converge toward me but instead gather in the direction of the other. Moreover, because the other remains my object, these things have not truly escaped from my world; rather, it is a process of flowing back toward itself and reconstituting itself. In Sartre's words, this is "internal hemorrhaging"; the things in my world are like sand in an hourglass, flowing from one end to the other, yet still retained within the hourglass.

2.3. The Gaze Relationship Between Myself and the Other

The other exists both as an object and as a subject, and the specific mode of the other's presence is "the basic connection between myself and the other as subject must be traceable to the permanent possibility of being seen by the other" [6]. In other words, the original relationship between myself and the other is a "being seen by the other" relationship. The meaning of the concept of the other arises from this original relationship, as a result of being seen by the other.

In principle, the other is someone who gazes at me. This gaze most frequently manifests as the other's eyes converging toward me. However, in reality, the gaze is not tied to any specific form, as it can take various manifestations, such as the sound of footsteps approaching from outside the door, a rustling sound coming from the bushes, or the monitoring camera in a room turning in my direction. Even when the gaze manifests as the other's eyes looking at me, we would perform a phenomenological reduction of this gaze. We do not focus on the physical nature of the gaze but instead reduce it to the pure act of gazing.

When the other is not present, everything I do is done in the completion of that particular action itself, and nothing can serve as a point of reference for defining or evaluating my actions. All my actions are realized based on my own freedom. However, when situations arise such as footsteps coming closer down the corridor, rustling sounds from the bushes next to me, or the monitoring camera in the room turning toward me, it signifies the appearance of the other, who can now gaze at me. At this moment, the previous pre-reflective "I" is presented before the other and also before myself. I begin to feel emotions such as shame, anxiety, and fear. This is because, in the gaze of the other, I meet myself again; due to the presence of the other, I now face a self that is oriented toward the other, a self that is evaluated by the other.

3. The Concrete Relationship Between Myself and the Other

After describing the basic relationship between myself and the other, which is established through the gaze, Sartre further explores the concrete relationship between myself and the other. Although the concrete relationship includes the basic relationship between

myself and the other, it is not a mere concretization of the basic relationship; rather, it consists of entirely new modes of existence for the self. These modes represent the different attitudes I hold in the world where the other exists.

3.1. From the Basic Relationship to the Concrete Relationship

The self, as a nothingness of the in-itself, manifests as an escape from the in-itself. However, the appearance of the other causes my self to be fixed in the in-itself. For the other, I am what I am, and my freedom is the characteristic of my existence. The in-itself re-establishes and fixes my self, and the passage of the self transforms into a given passage — a passage determined by the other's gaze. This fixation is an external fixation imposed by the other, a form of alienation that I cannot transcend. In this process, I realize that the other gives my in-itself to my self. Therefore, I cannot avoid turning toward the other and adopting certain attitudes toward the other, which forms the concrete relationship between myself and the other.

In the face of the presence of the other, I can take two different concrete relationships: one that transcends the particularity of the other, and one that absorbs the particularity of the other into myself. It is important to note that these two attitudes toward the other are opposites. The adoption of one attitude intensifies the failure of the other, and within one, the other is also present. In other words, either of the two is internally conflicted with the other. Next, we will examine these two different concrete relationships between myself and the other.

3.2. The First Concrete Relationship Between Myself and the Other

In the first concrete relationship between myself and the other, my self attempts to assimilate the other's freedom into my own. I strive to free myself from the other's domination and seek to control the other. This relationship is not a one-sided relationship between myself and the other, but rather a reciprocal one where I attempt to control the other, and the other also strives to control me. Moreover, this is a process of assimilation set against a backdrop of "conflict," because conflict is the original meaning of the other's existence. Even though this concrete relationship is a scheme of assimilation, it is filled with conflict between myself and the other.

My being-for-the-other exists in the form of "possession." I am possessed and shaped by the gaze of the other, and therefore, I seek to reclaim my existence. In doing so, I can only assimilate myself into the other's freedom. This assimilation of the other's freedom directly leads to the formulation of the concept of love, which becomes the motivation and goal of love: "Love, as an original relationship with the other, is the totality of the scheme through which I realize this value" [7]. Here, love is not purely physical desire or possession but rather the "conquest" of consciousness. This conquest does not involve possessing the beloved as one would possess an object, but rather involves possessing the other's freedom. Furthermore, the lover, while hoping to be loved by a freedom, also wishes that this freedom would no longer remain free. In other words, the lover wishes that freedom gives rise to love, yet hopes the other will not freely betray that love. Therefore, if someone loves me, I am liberated from instrumentality and maintain my independence.

This is the scheme of temptation in love, and in order to achieve this temptation, the lover must conceal their own subjectivity and place themselves under the gaze of the other, making themselves an object of the other's gaze. This temptation can conquer the free other, but the conflict lies in the fact that the other, who possesses freedom, will not easily accept being a subordinate. The potential for the other to suddenly awaken to their own freedom is always latent, threatening love and putting it at risk of fragmentation. Thus, this kind of love contains conflict and danger, revealing the irreconcilability of the relationship between myself and the other.

3.3. The Second Concrete Relationship Between Myself and the Other

Sartre criticized Hegel's conception of the relationship between the self and the other, established through the master-slave dialectic, as presented in the theory that "self-consciousness is both in-itself and for-itself, and this is because, and only because, it exists for another self-consciousness that is in-itself and for-itself; self-consciousness thus exists only because it is recognized by the other" [8]. Sartre criticized Hegel for reducing both self-consciousness and the consciousness of the other to mere objects. However, Sartre still acknowledged Hegel's genius in his solution to the problem of the relationship between the self and the other in Phenomenology of Spirit, as Hegel made the self depend on the other in its existence. Sartre, therefore, drew much inspiration from Hegel's work.

In the description of the first concrete relationship between myself and the other, the plan of love was emphasized as a typical representative. In contrast, hate, which corresponds dialectically to love, emerges as the second concrete relationship between myself and the other. Also described in this context are the opposing plans of indifference and desire.

In the first concrete relationship between myself and the other, the attempt to assimilate my freedom with the freedom of the other inevitably ends in failure. As a result, the self moves toward the second concrete relationship with the other, in which I attempt to regard the other as an object in order to regain my freedom. This effort leads to "my ignoring the other as a free being" [9], because this second concrete relationship represents an opposite attitude to the first. Under the gaze of the other, I, in turn, gaze at the other who gazes at me, thereby establishing my own subjectivity, which is "indifference." Indifference leads to desire. This

desire is not merely a physical impulse, but an attempt to possess the consciousness beyond the object — a desire to possess the other's body through touch. When this desire reaches an extreme state, it turns into sadistic pornography; conversely, if it remains unfulfilled, it transforms into hatred.

Sartre uses a narrative description to discuss these attitudes toward the other, but there is no temporal sequence because the relationships formed by love, hate, etc., intertwine and integrate into all attitudes toward the other. Moreover, these different attitudes toward the other are dialectically interdependent; they exist within each other and attempt to dissolve the other's presence through their own success. However, in summary, the attitudes of indifference, desire, sadism, and hatred — as the second concrete relationship between myself and the other — like the first concrete relationship, reflect the "conflict" in human relationships, and this conflict is irreconcilable. From a realistic perspective, it reflects the inevitable failure of human relationships in the ontological domain.

4. Coexistence and Freedom

After discussing the two specific relationships between myself and the other, which are based on conflict, we may feel somewhat frustrated, as our attempts to establish a relationship with the other have led to failure. However, it is important to note that these descriptions of human relationships are not comprehensive enough, because we do not always encounter the other in conflict. Often, it is in our union with the other that we find ourselves, and this union may offer a new perspective for easing interpersonal relations.

4.1. As Object and Subject, "We"

As we often say the word "we," it reflects the fact that we frequently experience the "coexistence" of our reality, in which "we" exist as subjects. This is a collective, first-person plural consciousness. From the relationship between myself and the other to the relationship of "we," my existence for the other is embodied in our coexistence, which is a coexistence amidst conflict. To achieve this, we must distinguish between two different experiential forms of "we": the first is "we" as an object, and the second is "we" as a subject.

The first form of our experience as "we" requires the intervention of a "third party" (le Tiers). The third party witnesses the situation faced by the relationship between me and the other, and together, we as objects become a "we" that is observed. When I realize this, I can then grasp both myself and the other from an external perspective, and we together form an object-whole.

The second form of our experience, "we" as a subject, is revealed when I interact with man-made objects. For example, the bench in the park is intended for use by people, and "we," as the people who use the bench, form this subject of "we" who use the bench. Unlike natural objects in the world, these man-made objects exist for us; they are "targeted" at us, and this targeting exists simply because I am a person like the other. This is an anonymous experience of the self, and for Sartre, such an anonymous experience is fleeting, unstable, and will not provide a foundation for our consciousness of the other.

4.2. Coexistence as the Secondary

Thus, these two experiential forms of "we" are not symmetrical. The object-we, as a concrete existence, fills the one-dimensional experience of being-for-the-other, while the subject-we is merely a psychological experience that does not reveal anything. Therefore, while the experience of "we" as a form is real, it can still only be said that the essence of the relationship between consciousness is not "coexistence," but conflict. This is because the gaze relationship between myself and the other is always primary, while the relationship of "we" is secondary.

This is primarily because the object-we is based on the relationship between me and the other, as only after the relationship between me and the other is revealed can the gaze of the third party towards us become possible. Hence, this relationship of "we" is merely an enrichment of the relationship between me and the other. Secondly, the subject-we is also merely a subjective experience, and this anonymous experience is fleeting and unstable, so it has no ontological significance.

The appearance of the other fixes my being-for-itself in my being-in-itself, which is an "Medusa myth" realized by the gaze of the other. While I and the other have this coexistence beyond the conflict relationship, where we as subjects or objects together form "we," this seems to enable a utilitarian union, but it remains difficult to achieve true fulfillment, because on a metaphysical level, the essence of interpersonal relationships is conflict. Moreover, it is precisely the appearance of the other that leads to my being-for-itself being re-imprisoned. Interpersonal relationships cannot eliminate the alienation of my being-for-itself, nor can they enable the movement of my being-for-itself to escape from being-in-itself.

4.3. The Path to Harmony Through Acknowledging Each Other's Freedom

Although the union arising from secondary coexistence is temporary, and viewing the other as either an object or a subject is mutually exclusive, in reality, we cannot fully fix ourselves in one form to eliminate the other. This is because the two are opposed yet mutually dependent. Therefore, in the lived experience, we constantly shift between these two different perceptions of the

other. Hence, we can consider the possibility that an awareness mode exists that can achieve a balance between the other's subjectivity and objectivity.

According to Sartre's earlier conclusions, even if such a balance could be achieved, it would not be a Hegelian synthesis. The original conflict in the relationship between me and the other can never be erased. Therefore, even if such a balance is realized, it would not be a natural state of being-for-itself, but rather the result of some kind of intentional scheme. This scheme seeks to reduce conflict between the self and the other and promote harmony, and the means to achieve this scheme is mutual affirmation of each other's freedom.

This freedom specifically means treating oneself as an absolute value or end. The focus of this freedom is on affirming and becoming aware of oneself. For an individual, freedom "is impossible to have any other purpose besides itself, and once a person realizes that value is determined by themselves, in this state of being utterly alone, they can only decide one thing: to make freedom the foundation of all value" [10]. The only possible way to achieve a harmonious, balanced relationship between individuals is to go against the natural state of oneself and mutually acknowledge this pure freedom, rather than attempting to assimilate or transcend the other's freedom as in the two previous forms of concrete relationships.

Sartre did not express a completely definite attitude about whether this scheme could achieve harmony and balance between people, but it remains his philosophical attempt to reach this goal. His discussion of the relationship between me and the other portrays a scene full of conflict. The natural setting between people is based on the gaze, forming a hellish relationship, while the two social attitudes people adopt—sympathy and love—cannot reconcile this conflict. Overcoming this vicious circle requires transcending our natural attitudes, forming a counterforce under the goal of achieving harmony and balance between people, and resolving conflict by acknowledging each other's freedom.

5. Conclusion

Just as Sartre's description of humans being thrown into freedom evokes a sense of helplessness, we are born thrown into the gaze of the other. Our process of escaping being-in-itself is always disrupted by the gaze of the other. We always attempt to achieve some kind of reconciliation or transcendence with the other, but ultimately, it leads to failure. This is a real yet cruel situation, and transcending this situation is not impossible. Only when we recognize, as we understand our state of being in a freedom without support, that we are also in the gaze of the other, can we transcend our natural state and strive to find a path to reconciliation through mutual respect and acknowledgment of each other's freedom.

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