

Sartre and the Epistemology of the other as Subsisting Subject

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Abstract: One of the serious challenges to epistemology in general is how to account for the Other as a subsisting subject. The problem of the Other (or the problem of Other Minds), is a problem in philosophy that asks: how do I know that there are any other conscious human beings, who think and feel in the same way I do, in the world besides myself? How do I establish that the Other exists as subjects and not just as an object of my perception or knowledge? This topic is worth considering due to its importance in human relation. This essay presents this problem with specific attention to Sartre's approach. For him, the fundamental question is: how do we come into contact with other people and no longer: how do we know other people exist? By this question Sartre establishes that It is not an epistemological question, rather it is an ontological one. His position has a social implication and goes to confirm that the human being is social by nature.

Keywords: Epistemology, Other, Subsisting Subject.

Introduction

When one studies the entire phenomenological and existential tradition general as well as the traditional conception of knowledge, one will encounter the problem of the Other (or the problem of Other Minds). This is a problem in philosophy that asks: how do I know that there are any other conscious human beings, who think and feel in the same way I do, in the world besides myself; that is, they exist as subjects and not just as objects of my perception or knowledge? This topic is worth considering due to its importance in human relation. A good knowledge of how the other thinks and feels will help in building better human relationships. An awareness that other people have minds like us, that they are not mere objects like any other object of our perception, but subjects with feelings like ours and how important they are to a holistic understanding of ourselves, will help us in cultivating an attitude of respect for their persons. This understanding will create mutual respect among human beings, since it will reveal that the other is a complete person like any other human person demanding equal respect and dignity that is the due of all human beings.

Some philosophers seem to think that there is a special difficulty about other minds, since we cannot perceive other minds like we do of other objects of our perception and knowledge. Many philosophers tried to proffer solutions to this problem, but Sartre's presentation of the problem and his solution is particularly interesting. He wrote a lot in the field of philosophy and literature. Sartre's most important works in the area of philosophy include: *The Imagination*, *Transcendence of the Ego*; *Nausea*, *The Wall*; *A theory of Emotions*; *The Roads to Freedom*; and *Being and Nothingness*.

His central argument, in *Being and Nothingness*, is that the relation between the self and the other are related in an internal relation, a relation of negation. And this is explained in the phenomenon of shame and jealousy, because in them I see myself as the other sees me, and all this depends on the being-there of the other-as-subject. This presence of the other rivets and engulfs my freedom and transcendence, because in his freedom he interprets my jealousy and turns my freedom back to me as shame. There arises, then a strange nothingness that is not made to be by my consciousness. (Sartre, 261-3)

Historical Contextualization of the Problem

The problem of other minds is concerned with the fundamental issue of what entitles us to our belief that other human beings do have inner lives; whether they are just mere objects of our perception or just bodies like robots without minds at all. If they have minds how can we come to know the contents of their minds? Francis O. C. Njoku, in his book *Studies in the Philosophy of Mind*, gave a very precise description of the problem when he states:

The problem of other minds examines how one could determine whether something other than oneself is really a thinking, feeling, and conscious being. It is called the problem of self-consciousness. How is it that any conscious being has an immediate and privileged knowledge of its own sensations, emotions, beliefs, desires, and so on? How is this possible? How trustworthy is that knowledge? One, therefore, asks: how am I justified in ascribing mental states to others from the evidence of my own experience or through the observation of their behaviours(Njoku, 101).

The problem is that of solipsism that threatens most of the theories of epistemology and phenomenology, which seem to see the individual's experiences, thoughts and emotions as the only ones that exist. Most theories of knowledge in epistemology and theories of consciousness in phenomenology, when pushed to their logical conclusion, tend to suggest solipsism.

This problem is traditionally in two forms: the epistemological problem, concerned with how our beliefs about other's mental states might be justified, and a conceptual problem, that asks: how it is possible for us to form a concept of mental states other than our own. Thus philosophers have tried to give accounts of how we can come to establish that other human beings have minds like us.

Rene Descartes (1596–1650) could be said to have set the stage for the problem of other minds with his theory of the cogito, existence of the outside world, and the mind-body dualism. Thus when he separated the mind from the body and claimed that only human beings had minds, the seed of the problem was sown at that time, but was just waiting to be noted (Avramides, 2001).

Thomas Reid (1710–1796) is also credited to have been the first person to have spotted the problem of other minds and saw it to be a serious philosophical problem. In fact, it seems that the first frequent use of the words 'other minds' is to be credited to him. But, for him, those minds are not observable. Nor is our belief that they exist to be reached or supported by reasoning. According to him, it is self-evident, an innate belief, that there are minds other than one's own. (Somerville, 152)

John Locke (1632–1704) in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* set out to 'enquire into the origin, certainty, and extent of human Knowledge. There we find him emphasizing our ignorance with respect to what another creature may be experiencing, while insisting that we should not conclude from this ignorance that these other creatures do not have experiences. Locke believes that other minds or spirits exist and that this is something we cannot deny. And Locke holds this despite also holding that it is not possible for us to know what things are like for these other minds. Locke admits that we cannot know that other minds or spirits exist, but he believes that we are of the opinion that they do, and that this opinion is based on reasons that make it probable that our opinion is true (Locke, 43).

The question of our knowledge of another mind or spirit is central to George Berkeley's (1685–1783) concern. The reason for this is that, as Berkeley denies the existence of material substance, the cause of my ideas is held to be spirit; and, as my ideas are not entirely within my control, their cause is taken by Berkeley to be some *other* mind or spirit. In the case of my ideas of the movements of another body, the cause is held to be another finite spirit like myself.

However, not all philosophers have been convinced that Berkeley has given adequate reason to believe in the existence of other finite spirits (Berkeley, 65).

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), in his work *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, gave a classical formulation of the problem against the backdrop of an analogical inference. He began by posing a question asking by what evidence do I know that, or by what considerations am I led to believe, that there exist other sentient creatures; that the walking and speaking figures which I see and hear, have sensations and thought, or in other words, possess minds? He responded to the question by saying that he arrives at the conclusion that others have feelings like him because they have bodies like him, and the body, for him, is the antecedent condition of feelings. Secondly, they exhibit acts, and other outward signs, which in his own case he knows to be caused by feelings (Njoku, 103).

Edmund Husserl (1858–1938) can be credited with establishing the problem of other minds as serious and challenging. In the fifth meditation of the *Cartesian Meditation* he presented this challenge as follows:

when I... reduce myself to my absolute transcendental ego by phenomenological epoche do I not become solus ipse ...Should not phenomenology that proposed to solve the problem of objective being, and to present itself as actually philosophy, be branded therefore as transcendental solipsism (Edmund Husserl, 89).

The task before him was to find the possibility of an actually transcendent knowledge that which goes outside one's ego and reach other egos. He admitted that even as we experience the other as being there before us, neither is the other ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his own essence, become given in our experience originally. Husserl claims that for us to bridge this gap between the two egos we need a certain mediacy provided by the concepts of appresentation and analogical apperception. And with these we constitute the other as an alter ego. It is a process whereby “a body within my primordial sphere, being similar to my own animate body, becomes apprehended as likewise an animate organism” (Husserl, 112). This, he insists, does not mean that would be an inference from analogy, because apperception is not inference. We can say, therefore, that he found the way out by insisting that our experience of the objective world was at the same time an experience of others.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), for his part, does not seek to establish that other human beings exist. Others are necessarily present in the kind of existence each of us has. They are there at the centre of our way of being. Thus, he described the being of Dasein as being-in-the-world and a being-with. In this being-in-the-world of Dasein, which he also called 'dealings', is a being-with entities within-the-world. The kind of dealings here is not a bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use. He claims that if we consider the environment closest to us, the work world, the outcome will be that along with the equipments to be found when we work, those for whom the 'work' is destined are encountered too. For example, a tailor sewing a piece of cloth, in this idea is contained already an essential reference to possible wearers. He continues thus: For example, “we walk along the edge of a field but 'outside it' the field shows itself as belonging to such-and-such a person, and decently kept up by him; the book we have used was bought at so-and-so's shop and given by such- and-such a person and forth.” (Heidegger, 153).

He added that even if the thing under consideration is strange or new to us, it still is indicative of others. The idea of the other, for him, is not an attachment to the idea of the thing ready-to-hand. He writes thus: “the others who are thus 'encountered' in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought to some 'thing' which is proximally just present-at-hand; such 'things' are encountered from out of the world in which they are ready-to-hand for others” (Heidegger, 154).

In clarifying the idea of the other, Heidegger stated that: "By others we do not mean everyone else but me— those over against whom the 'I' stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself— those among who one is too."(Heidegger, 154)

So the world of Dasein is a *with-world*. Being-in is Being-with others; and this being with is an existential characteristic of Dasein even when in fact no other is present-at-hand or perceived.

Sartre and the Problem of the Other

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre presented his ontology and divided the world into two realities: the human reality, which he identified with consciousness or Being-for-itself; and material entities, which he called Being-in-itself. The relationship that exists between the two realities is that of negation. The For-itself is the negation of the In-itself. At this level, Sartre maintains that the unreflective consciousness cannot be inhabited by a self; the self is only given in the form of an object and only for the reflective consciousness. So the human person has no fixed nature or a self at the level of the For-itself considered in isolation. There is, however, a third category of being that arises from the For-itself (human reality) as it encounters the other, and it is known as Being-for-others (Levy, 37). This Being-for-others forms the special topic of part three the book. He started that part by stating the problem and showing how this third dimension of being can only be revealed with the advent of the other. He then went further to present and to criticize the positions of realism and idealism, and the solutions of Husserl, Hegel, and Heidegger. He finally gave a detailed presentation of his own position about the other.

The problem

Sartre set out to find a solution to the problem of the existence the other by going back into the modes of consciousness of human reality. He maintained that the for-itself does not exhaust human reality, but that within our attitude of reflective description we can discover another ontological structure which can only be revealed by the other. He writes:

Without going outside our attitude of reflective description, we can encounter modes of consciousness which seem, even while themselves remaining strictly in for-itself, to point to a radically different type of ontological structure. This ontological structure is mine; it is in relation to myself as subject that I am concerned about myself, and yet this concern (for-myself) reveals to me a being which is my being without being-for-me (Sartre, 221).

He cited 'shame' as one of these modes of consciousness and showed that in analyzing it we find the existence of the other established, since shame can never be shame before oneself but before the Other. He adds:

In, fact no matter what results one can obtain in -solitude by the religious practice of shame, it is in its primary structure shame before *somebody*. I have just made an awkward or vulgar gesture. This gesture clings to me; I neither judge it nor blame it. I simply live it. I realize it in the mode of for-itself. But now suddenly I raise my head. Somebody was there and has seen me. Suddenly I realize the vulgarity of my gesture, and I am ashamed (Sartre, 221).

The appearance of the other on the scene makes me pass judgment on myself as an object, for it is as an object, though not an empty object in the mind, that I appear before the other. And the image I form of myself in shame is not comparable to the one I have of myself in the mode of For-itself. So a deeper reflection on the phenomenon of shame will reveal that we have an understanding of the Other as a subject with a mind capable of passing judgment on us, and not as an object of our perception. Sartre continues: "Thus shame is shame of oneself before *the*

Other; these two structures are inseparable. But at the same time I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being. The For-itself refers to the For-others” (Sartre, 223).

Therefore, in order to have better grasp of the relation of man's to Being-in-itself, an understanding of the existence of Other is one of the ingredients we need.

The Reef of Solipsism

Sartre sees the attempts of both the realists and idealists to establish the existence of the Other as leading to Solipsism. Strange enough, in the face of the problem of the Other's existence realism becomes idealism and vice versa. Since realism postulates the existence of the external world and that it acts on consciousness, the only thing it can establish with certainty is the existence of the Other's body, as for his consciousness it is only by analogy. Sartre explains:

Yet for all that realism attempts to account for knowledge by an action of the world upon the thinking substance, it has not been concerned with establishing an immediate reciprocal action of thinking substances upon each other. It is through the mediacy of the world that they communicate. My body as a thing in the world and the Other's body are the necessary intermediaries between the Other's consciousness and mine. The Other's soul is therefore separated from mine by all the distance which separates first my soul from my body, then my body from the Other's body, and finally the Other's body from his soul (Sartre, 224).

Such an analogy can only give a probable knowledge of the Other's existence, since the body before me can equally, be a robot. Sartre continues:

The hypothesis which gives the best account of its behavior is that of a consciousness which is analogous to my own consciousness and whose various emotions the body reflects. It remains to explain how we arrive at this hypothesis. We will be told at one time that it is by analogy with what I know of myself and again that it is experience which teaches us, for example, to interpret the sudden reddening of a face as the forewarning of blows and angry cries. It will be freely admitted that this procedure can only give us a probable knowledge. It remains always possible that the Other is only a body. If animals are machines, why shouldn't the man whom I see pass in the street be one? (Sartre, 225)

The realist is now forced to abandon his position and assert with the idealist that other minds exist but they are known only as measured by our knowledge. Sartre concludes that in a philosophy based on intuition, there is provided no intuition of the soul of the Other. And that if we are not to make a mere play on words, this means that realism provides no place for the intuition of the Other.

Critical idealism, with Kant as a leading figure, fares not better. Since;

they, preoccupied with establishing the universal laws of subjectivity which are the same for all, never dealt with the question of *persons*. The subject is only the common essence of these persons; it would no more allow us to determine the multiplicity of persons than the essence of man, in Spinoza's system, permits one to determine that of concrete men. At first then it seems that Kant placed the problem of others among those matters which were not within the province of his critique (Sartre, 229).

The Other is treated within the Kantian frame work as a regulative principle, which does not have to be but helps me to organize my experiences. But that cannot account for the very

phenomenon of the other, because I experience him as having a unity of experiences that are not mine. The other is an immanence that is transcendent to me; and this cannot be accounted for by the principles of Critical idealism. It can either become solipsism by showing that the other is unimportant or realism by postulating an immediate communication between two consciousnesses. Sartre puts it this way:

Thus the Other within the perspective of idealism can be considered neither as a constitutive concept nor as a regulative concept of my knowledge. He is conceived as real, and yet I cannot conceive of his real relation to me. I construct him as object, and yet he is never released by intuition. I posit him as subject, and yet it is as the object of my thoughts that I consider him. There remain then only two solutions for the idealist: either to get rid of the concept of the Other completely and prove that he is useless to the constitution of my experience, or to affirm the real existence of the Other—that is, to posit a real, extra-empirical communication between consciousnesses (Sartre, 143).

This problem, according to Sartre, arises for the realist and idealist because they both consider the relation of the self to others as an external relation; and they both consider the other as an object of knowledge. The problem is whether our representation of the other truly corresponds to the other. But only a third mind – God – could guarantee this and the concept of God, for Sartre, is contradictory. The only way out of the problem is to realize that the self and the other are related in an internal relation, a relation of negation (Sartre, 235).

Sartre's Theory of Other Minds (The Look)

Sartre's solution to the problem of other minds (or the Other in general) comes into view when Sartre's analytical re-descriptions of the phenomenology of inter-subjective consciousness is followed through to a point where our understanding of the phenomenology intersects with the abstract, metaphysical appreciation of the problem of the Other which we have gained from the critique of previous attempts at a solution (Gardner, 134).

In order to furnish us with a better grip of the phenomenology, Sartre began by describing two contrasting scenarios in which we have awareness of the Other. The first is the scene in which the Other appears to me ordinarily. I become aware of a figure across the way from me in the park. If I view him as a puppet, this will add nothing to my perceptual world. But when I view him as a man, it effects a limited transformation of the world: the lawn assumes a new orientation towards a remote point with which I am not identical, and there is a 'fixed sliding' away from me as the world 'drains' out of my grasp. But this scenario does not answer the question; it is still at the level of Knowledge. This concerns only the man and the things in the lawn and it is probable that the man I see is only a robot. Even at that it points to me what the Other is to my world of experience. As Sartre puts it: "The Other is first the permanent flight of things toward a goal which I apprehend as an object at a certain distance from me but which escapes me inasmuch as it unfolds about itself its own distances" (Sartre, 255).

At this point the Other is still an object in the world, an object which can be defined by the world. But to what does this refer? Sartre answers that if the Other-as-object is defined in connection with the world, as the object which *sees* what I see, then my fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of *being* seen by the Other. In a word, my apprehension of the Other in the world as probably being a man refers to my permanent possibility of *being-seen-by-him*; that is, to the permanent possibility that a subject who sees me may be substituted for the object seen by me. So this scenario leads us to the next scenario, that of shame. He uses this illustration of my being moved by jealousy or curiosity, I peer through a keyhole and press my ear to the door - the world is organized around my end of discovering what is being said within. Footsteps in the hall tell me that I have been seen, and I am suddenly 'affected in my being: my own structure

undergoes 'essential modifications', for I now have pre-reflective consciousness of myself as an object of the look of the Other. This second scenario, though it comes after the first one, has priority over it. According to Sartre, it is because, and only because, I have the awareness of the Other exemplified in the scenario of shame, that I can have the form of awareness exemplified in the park scenario. In the park, I am aware of the 'Other-as object', in the phenomenon of shame, of the 'Other-as-subject', and it is only because consciousness of the Other-as-subject is possible, that consciousness of the Other-as-object is possible.¹⁸ Awareness of the Other-as-object is, therefore, a metaphysically and epistemologically secondary form of awareness of the Other. It as Sartre puts it, 'the result of the conversion and the degradation of that original relation' to the Other-as-subject. But how does this whole scenario of shame solve the problem of the existence of the Other? Gardner gives the Answer thus:

certain particular consciousnesses – for example, "shame-consciousness" – bear indubitable witness to the cogito both of themselves and of the existence of the Other'; I am capable of 'something like a cogito concerning' the Other; 'the cogito a little expanded . . . reveals to me as a fact the existence of the Other'; 'the cogito of the Other's existence is merged with my own cogito'; awareness of the Other thus 'shares in the apodicticity of the cogito itself, that is, its indubitability (Gardner, 136).

Gardner, however, explains that Sartre does not imply that there occurs a migration of an individual into the Other or a telepathic transfer of the Other's consciousness and 'I' into my own consciousness. Gardner went on to give some point that will help in understanding Sartre's solution is supposed to work in solving the problem of the Other.

- Intersubjective awareness consists primordially in an immediate subject–subject relation: If the Other is to be capable of being given to us, it is by means of a direct apprehension.
- The subject–subject relation is extra-mundane: it is not in the world that the Other is first to be sought but at the side of consciousness; when the Other 'looks at me, he is separated from me by no distance, by no object of the world – whether real or ideal – but by the sole fact of his nature as Other.
- Consciousness of the Other is achieved through the ontological transformation of my own consciousness. The specific transformation effected by the Other consists in the formation, out of my consciousness, of something with characteristics of being-in-itself. At this point the Other has given me a nature.
- The relation obtaining primordially between individual 'for-itself' is, as noted, a negative and internal ontological relation, as opposed to a relation of knowledge. The bond of self and the Other, which from one angle has the bare simplicity of the cogito, has therefore, in the full view, a dialectical complexity.
- it is, therefore, not the body which provides the key to knowledge of Others. The body, like the objectual world at large, plays no epistemic role in Sartre's account. It is neither what hides one mind from another, nor what reveals one mind to another. (Gardner, 137)

The look, for Sartre, does not refer to the organs of sight but our consciousness of being seen or being thrown back at ourselves as having a body that is visible to the other. It is our consciousness of ourselves as objects for the Other. Even if the other happens not to be there, we still experience the reality of our being–for–others as a factual modification of our consciousness that cannot be deduced from the nature of the for– itself.

Evaluation

When one takes a critical look at Sartre's solution to the problem of other minds one will find out that Sartre argues this way: realism and idealism each try to account for the Other in terms

of a unidirectional arrow going solution. In the case of realism, from the Other to me, and in that of idealism, from me to the Other. Both fail, so the solution must lie in conceiving the relation of self to Other in some set of terms that has them co-established at the outset. The attempts of Husserl and Hegel to do just this are unsuccessful also, because their co-establishment of self and Other is cast in terms of knowledge. The relation of self to Other must be, therefore, a relation of being, meaning that consciousness of others cannot be accounted for by giving reasons for believing in the existence of Others. Instead, and accordingly, we turn to the factual necessity of the Other which his analysis showed to be present in our phenomenology, conjoined with his metaphysical account of how such consciousness is possible (Gardner, 140).

Sartre, therefore, recasts the problem of other minds. For him, the fundamental question is: how do we come into contact with other people and no longer: how do we know other people exist? It's not an epistemological question at all; it's an ontological one. For Sartre, the fundamental way we come into contact with other minds is not by knowing they are out there, but by means of feelings of shame, pride, etc. so the certainty of other minds (or of the existence of Others) is a certainty we cannot prove by means of epistemological arguments just as we cannot do same for the certainty of our own existence. For Sartre, other minds do exist, and we can be quite sure they exist.

We are misled easily into thinking that the significance of the Other's gaze is epistemic, but Sartre does not conceive vision as an epistemic power, and the shame I feel is not due to my knowing or believing that the Other knows or believes me to be peeping. The meaning of the Other's look is instead that of an action. Sartre thus reverses the commonsense order of explanation: on his account, it is not because we gain knowledge of Others that we are affected by them; it is because we are affected by Others ontologically that we have knowledge of them. That I do have knowledge of the Other is therefore not denied by Sartre, but is counted into the total configuration - knowledge is the correlate of the other's ontological effect on me, not the cause of that effect. The impression we have of a non-traversable epistemic gulf between self and Other, issuing in scepticism about other minds, results from mistaking what is in fact a negative ontological relation for the absence of an epistemological relation; and this is a consequence of the more general mistake of identifying consciousness with knowledge, and of supposing that the relation of self to Other is mundane.

In Sartre's view then, to raise that question, to doubt the existence of the Other, is to deny the being of one's own pre-reflective consciousness: I experience the inapprehensible subjectivity of the Other directly and with my being and thereby discover the transcendental relation to the Other as constituting my own being (Sartre, 301).

I agree with Sartre that the problem of the existence of the Other cannot be solved on the epistemological level, because we can only experience the Other. So to look at the problem of the Other in light of epistemology involves some assumptions: that it makes sense to think about one's own mind in advance of others, and that the concept one comes to have in this way is entirely general. Anita Avramides observes that while it may be possible somehow to come, by reflection, to have a concept of my mind. She doubts whether the concept one comes to have in this way can be thought to have the generality required to permit one to raise questions about the mind of another. Thus she suggested that in order to avoid this problem we should adopt what she tagged 'the lived position', that is, we begin with a concept that is already general. The lived position just is a position in which our concept is general and where we understand this generality by appeal to our actions and our common human nature. There is, on this position, no gap between myself and others that need to be bridged (no gap arising from a Cartesian metaphysical divide). For me, this is almost the same with what Sartre did in solving the problem of the Other (Avramides, 523).

Conclusion

What impresses me about Sartre's solution is its social implication. First he view that Other adds a new, real dimension to consciousness. Thus the Other has not only reveal tome what I was; he has established me in a new type of being, which can support new qualifications. So if others do not exist, then the social self would not exist. The experience of shame and pride are proof that others have a deep effect on our sense of self. Shame implies being ashamed in front of another person. When I experience shame I experience another person looking at me and judging me. The social self is not fictitious, imaginary, or epiphenomenal, but real. This view is in agreement with the general view that man is a social being. And it helps us to appreciate and value our fellow human beings with whom we share our world, knowing that if they do not exist, or if we act as if they do not exist, our social self will become extinct. The result of this will be that we will create a less human world. The social nature of the human being presupposes the existence of others with whom the human being interacts. The importance of the other is, therefore expressed in this view of Sartre, since, for him, being seen by others has a deep effect on our personality.

The world of human beings is a social and interactive one as seen by the fact of language and communication. Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* argues that solipsism presupposes a logically private language for its formulation. A logically private language is impossible because any language presupposes a public language. A public language presupposes other language users, therefore solipsism may be formulated just on condition it is false (Heter, 25).

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