

SOME PROBLEMS IN SARTRE'S NOTION OF THE OTHER*

Sartre's notion of the other is different from the other philosophies which deal with the same topic. The analysis of the immediate structure of consciousness, holds Sartre, involves my recognition of the other. Following Hegel's example of the master-slave relationship, Sartre points out that the reciprocal relationship of mutual negation is the foundation of our intersubjective relationship. The reason for this condition is the look of the other on account of which I become an object and he, at my expense, a subject. The social philosophy of Sartre is built up on the notion of the look.

The minimum recognition of the other is that he is a human object. But such a recognition points out that the horizon of my comprehension of the other lies beyond his objectness, viz., in his being as a "presence in person". In other words there is an intuitive recognition of the other as a person. The other does not appear to me as a person who is constituted first so as to encounter me later, rather he appears as having an original relationship of being to me. But his presence is the disintegration of my universe. The appearance of disintegration in my universe is what is meant by the appearance of a man in my universe. But how does he bring about this disintegration? It is through his look. The meaning of the look is my awareness of being seen by the other. His look enables him ever to sustain himself as a subject by transforming me into an object, i.e., my objectification is the result of his look. This objectification fills me with shame.

Shame is to recognize that I am an object for the other's look. It is to apprehend myself as seen by the other, to comprehend myself as submitting most unwilling, yet helplessly, to the other's unpredictable judgement and evaluation. The other in *no* way is

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given to me as an object. If at all I try to objectify the other; it is merely a desperate attempt on my part to do away with the dimension my being—for—others.

What the other looks at is the bond between the pre-reflective and the reflective Cogito. On account of his stare, my ego flows to him; it is made alien to myself. As a for-itself "*I am what I am not and not what I am.*" But his look reifies me. It makes somebody, it deprives me of my transcendence and consequently makes him a transcendence-transcended. He, as a subject, and, therefore, as a boundless freedom, fixes my possibilities and thereby reveals to me my limitations yet without revealing the inmost of his subjectivity. The other, though not the meaning of my objectivity, is the necessary and the transending condition of it. By being the subject the other, while remaining unknown to me, is present to me without any distance, without any intermediary. Yet he is out of my reach for my presence to him and his presence to me are not reciprocal.

What evidence do I have that I am looked at? That there is an other does not assure me of being seen by him. The other may be far or near; but irrespective of his proximity or remoteness, he is always around me because he is within the "human-space" and consequently I always experience his distanceless presence. In other words, my certainty of other's existence is independent of my experience of him and it is this certainty which paves the way for my experience of him. While my experience of him as a subject gives me absolute certainty of his existence, my experience of him as an object gives me only probability. If he were an object he could have been categorised, schematised and known systematically; this is my fate by becoming an object when I am looked at.

Having made an attempt to understand the Sartrean notion of the other, we shall enter into a few problems which it poses.

In the past often philosophy while trying to establish the existence of the other degraded him to the status of an object, ascribing the maximum of subjectivity to oneself. Sartre reversed the order assigning all subjectivity to the other and rendering to oneself the status of an object with the essential difference that

in the past the attempt was to know the other, but in Sartre the attempt is to experience the other. Is it not correct to infer that the problems regarding the other in the traditional philosophy turn out to be now in Sartre, problems regarding the for-itself. In other words, in the past the point of mediation between the other and the me was the object. But in Sartre the point of contact is no more the object but the subject.

The psychic make up of Sartre must have contributed a lot to his notion of the other. The squint-eyes¹ of Sartre must have created in him an inferiority² feeling. This personal awareness, later on, crept into his philosophical works. Sartre here is rationalizing his experiences, the experience of himself as an object in the imagined vulgar look of the other while analysing theoretically the notion of the other. It is, therefore, a universalization of his inferiority feeling on account of his bodily deformity. Thus he extrapolates his personal experience into a general theory. In the study of the other, personal experiences can be of great help. But how far it is justifiable to make an exclusive use of ignoble experiences and state categorically that only such experiences can be of help in the study of the problem of the other ?

What kind of look is "the look" of Sartre ? The meaning of a look is the intention built in it and the intention of a look is ever changing from one look to another. Consider, for example, the way a mother looks at her little baby. It is a look of love. When the baby is ill, compassion is an additional factor in her look. Think of the look of a man at his wife; in the normal circumstances it is an expression of their mutual commitment. The biblical story of the prodigal son is an example of the merciful look. A thief caught red-handed is familiar with the fierce look of the police. One can go on narrating a numerous kinds of looks. The question now is of all these which is Sartre's objectifying look ? If at all we conceive of the possibility of an objectifying look, it can only be one among the many kinds of looks. All looks are not the objectifying kind and the objectification is not the end of all sorts of looks. The universalizing of an aspect of a phenomenon without the due consideration of its various dimensions is illegitimate and unsatisfactory and this is what one can say of Sartre's "the look."

Sartre's analysis of the other as he himself claims "has been worked out entirely on the level of the cogito."³ The cogito mentioned here is the Cartesian. In that case I, as in the pre-reflective cogito, remain unaffected by the look of the other. I have no outside there. My self from my inside i.e., subjectivity as manifested in the pre-reflective cogito is distinguished from myself from my outside viz., the ego as shown in the reflective cogito. I experience the existence of the other, from Sartre's point of view, to the extent that the other affects me. It is myself from my outside i.e., the ego which is looked at. The look of the other makes me aware of my externality and it is at this level that I encounter the other. But my subjectivity i.e., myself from my inside is in no way affected by the other and remains totally cut off from the other creating an incommunicable gap between the other and my subjectivity and making me aware of my inmost aloofness. It can, therefore, be pointed out that Sartre has been able to solve the problem of the other only partially viz. at the experiential and not at all at the subjectivity level.

My recognition of the other as a subject is an insight drawn out from my intuition of myself as a subject. When I am looked at, holds Sartre, my subjectivity crumbles and all my defences against him in protecting my subjectivity shatter. I realize that he, having usurped my subjectivity at one stroke, by means of his look, thrives on it making me an object unceasingly. What is assumed here is that the original mode of relation between the other and me is a sort of involvement, an involvement based upon bad faith. It is an involvement which does not enrich and enoble me. It is a negative kind of involvement.

Consider indifference. It is a negative mode of involvement and as asserted by Sartre himself, it is based upon bad faith too⁴. The source of indifference is my lack of solicitude and fellow feeling. It could very well arise from my empty superiority feeling, from my contemptuous attitude towards the other, or even from my arrogance. Although bad faith is inbuilt in indifference, as in the case of object-feeling, it does not produce the undesirable consequences of object-feeling. In indifference a constant effort is made to preserve one self as a subject. The other is not considered as worthy of deserving any attention; consequently one avoids the other as far as possible. My being totally engrossed in my world

in no way leads to solipsism for I know well that my indifference is paradoxically directed to the other; nor does it involve any blindness as Sartre thinks, for I am aware of my being indifferent to the other. As in object-feeling; in indifference too, I have an experiential encounter with the other. In indifference I desist the other; I do not succumb to the other; I maintain an attitude of defiance toward the other. I know of his freedom as well as of mine; in spite of his freedom, I exercise mine. An attitude of confrontation and never say-die persists. I refuse to have a meaningful dialogue with him in order to solve the problems. The basis of all this is my confidence to face the other despite insurmountable difficulties.

Did Roquestin of *Nausea* ever become an object while strolling along the roads, while sitting in the cafe, while being in the park, while working in the library, while taking to the Autodiadact or even when he met Anny? One wonders. He was indifferent to everything in all his dealings and this was the secret of his "success".

What the analysis of indifference points out is this. Sartre establishes the existence of the other as a subject on an experiential basis because of which I am aware of myself as an object. This is a model whose roots lie in my awareness of my helplessness and inferiority feeling. But another model based upon indifference to and defiance of the other can be proposed for the experience of the existence of the other as an object and of myself as a subject, consequently avoiding my helplessness and inferiority feeling. That which is common to both is bad faith and the second is as much valid as that of Sartre's. It being so, Sartre does not have any rational justification for insisting that my experience of the other necessarily degrades me to the status of an object.

An important question that one can ask is, does the simultaneous and reciprocal presence of (two or more) consciousness(es) involve their mutual exclusion or abnegation? Sartre's answer is in the affirmative by accepting the Hegalian model of the master-slave opposition. But should it be so? It must be pointed out that it is not quite possible to refute Sartre. This problem has Sartre's notion of consciousness as its foundation. The concept

of consciousness as a fissure, the assumption that for a consciousness everything else must be an object, the presupposition that the reciprocal relation of mutual negation defines my association with the other can, indeed, lead to the contention that simultaneous and reciprocal presence of consciousness involves their mutual exclusion. This position of Sartre is further aggravated by his attempt to universalize the partial and the fractional and to state dogmatically that his approach alone constitutes the final explanation of the phenomenon under consideration. True, all of us live bad faith on certain occasions; all of us entertain objectifying look in some measure; we do hate others and deal with them indifferently, but only occasionally. But to assert that these are the defining characteristics of life, to affirm that one does not have any sort of escape from them, to state that we always relate ourselves only on the foundation of such experiences is to reveal the absence of a panoramic view of life.

Being seen by the other leads to shame if and only if my action is vulgar and if it deserves a contemptuous regard from the other. But suppose I have done a praiseworthy act; I am greeted and congratulated. Indeed, I am an object of others look, judgement and evaluation. But it does not implant in me any sense of shame, instead I feel great. This clearly shows that Sartre's consideration of the look is too narrow.

When I confront the other I think I am an object and he the subject. Similarly he thinks that he has become an object on account of my presence. As I am not a subject for myself, he is not for himself a subject. Thus Sartre has assigned to all equally the status of objects on account of an existential gap. True, the gap cannot be bridged because everyone is an individual and hence distinct from everybody else. But one wonders whether Sartre has elucidated the phenomenon correctly. May be so from the angle of bad faith. In as much as there is no salvation possible from bad faith, the experience of the other as a subject on account of which I become an object has no remedy for it is a relationship arising in bad faith. It is the application of bad faith to a concrete instance.

Now, look at the language of Sartre. His avowed aim is to establish the existence of the other on an experiential basis. As a

first step towards it he condemns and rejects the cognitive approach towards "proving" the existence of the other. But examine his own vocabulary. It is full of terms like the subject, object, etc. In other words his language permits a free play of cognitive terms. Does it not show that the tools at his disposal are too insufficient to his declared aims.

To conclude, we find in Sartre a categorical assertion of the various phenomena without any due consideration of the possibility of alternative interpretations i.e., the universalization of the partial. This dogmatic approach combined with an examination of all sorts of human relations from the point of view of bad faith is the most serious drawback of Sartre's philosophy. The error lying at the very root of Sartre's thought is the assumption that "he is not o. k." in the sense that the other is the one who makes me an object, he is the alienating reality, etc. If Sartre were to examine the complex of human relationship from the postulate "he is o. k.", he would have been able to see the other in a different perspective altogether. In such a relation, I, a for—itself as a subject, encounter the other as a subject; i.e., we meet on an equal footing. It is subject to subject-relationship characterized by participation; my participation in him and his in me. Then the basis of my experience of the other is no more the objectifying vulgar look but *Caritas*. After all, the singularity of an experience cannot be the foundation for the explanation of a universal phenomenon especially if the experience is abnormal. In fact Sartre himself advocates a relation of engagement and participation in his literary works and demonstrates it concretely in his social commitments and political actions.

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NOTES

1. "It was not yet apparent then". The word 'it' here stands for the squint-eye. This statement implies that it become apparent later on. (*Words*, by Jean-Paul Sartre, p. 20, Penguin Books 1977).

2. The point here is not whether the others did infact stare at Sartre or not, but how he reacted to his bodily deformity. The inferiority feeling most often, arises not because the others notice a particular defect but ones awareness of ones deformity instills in him such a feeling. At a later stage one relationalizes it and tries to findout its cause. One, most often concludes, though wrongly, that the other is the cause because such a feeling arises only while confronting the other. The truth is that one only has an intense awareness of it infront of the other. It is very much like Freud's notion of 'projection'.

Despite Sartre's strong objections to the Freudian Psychology, due to the lack of appropriate words expressing the intented meaning, a few of Freud's favourite terms are used.

3. *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre, p. 385; Trans. Hazel Barnes; Washington Square Press, 1972.
4. *Being and Nothingness*. p 494 to 497.