

## FROM EMBODIEDNESS TO COMMUNITY: RECOGNITION, ALTERITY AND THE EXISTENTIALIST SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

KALLE PIHLAINEN

The argument presented in this paper hinges on the abolition or at least rethinking of the public—private distinction as it has already been performed in much of contemporary feminist and “postist” theories. The strong separation of the public from the private sphere has led to the marginalization of various issues—among which the general neglect of an embodied understanding of the world is my prime concern in what follows. I approach these issues from a perspective that can loosely be termed one of “existential phenomenology”. While grouping quite diverse thinkers together under such a rubric in no way does justice to their individual philosophies, the term conveys a shared prioritizing of lived experience. I concentrate on separate stages in the thinking of Jean-Paul Sartre, briefly discussing the contrasting approaches to intersubjective relations and their grounding put forward there. I explore those approaches in connection with those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Samuel Todes and Emanuel Levinas. The contrasts and parallels that can be drawn between the thoughts of these thinkers regarding the embodied subject and the ways in which intersubjective or social understanding may be reached provide a way of addressing the formation of what I here refer to as an “existentialist social conscience”—and, I would argue, a distinctive approach to the thinking of “community”. My aim is less an exegetic reading of any of these thinkers than the outlining of a way in which communal understanding could be—and on occasion has been—grounded in an existentially-oriented phenomenology or “existentialist” social theory.

### **Recognition and the limit of intersubjective identification**

On a highly abstract level, all humans are free to voice their opinions and exercise their freedom. Indeed, such an early Sartrian attitude in many ways resembles the stance informing neo-Kantian approaches to community based on the universalizability of freedom for participation in communicative ethics. The ideals of respect, recognition and reciprocity are, however, abstracted from the situation particular individuals find themselves speaking from. Seyla Benhabib makes this point well in emphasizing the limited opportunities for participation allowed to women by approaches to community that rely on the universal of communicative freedom (Benhabib 1992, 29 ff). As she notes, such approaches forget our necessary embeddedness in physical and sociocultural situations and practices—and sometimes

demand more in terms of shouldering responsibility than opportunities permit (Benhabib 1992, 49-51). Freedom to take responsibility for one's actions is not easily had in all circumstances and arguments invoking it thus easily appear to limit themselves to the level of theory.

Despite such obvious problems, accounts of social duty often begin by claiming recognition of the sameness of the other. Intuitively, this recognition of sameness can be seen to arise from a perception of similarities in situation and, more fundamentally, of the fact that we are all equally embodied. Where our experiences as embodied subjects may lead us to recognize the parallel vulnerability of the other, they cannot, however, directly lead us to a social conscience in any explicable sense. In order to avoid the harmful effects of such generalizations, an additional step is traditionally taken: To move from the stage of a recognition of the other as our equal to that of being able to see a shared communal ethics, we are called to abandon our "selves" and relinquish the idea of our special particularity. Invoking this dictum, Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér (1988, 36 ff)—for example—argue that it is only through giving up on the idea of particularity that we can overcome our experience of contingency and—through projects aimed at increasing self-determination across the board—become satisfied. Now, while this thought relates to individual experience and is aimed at changing it, it seems that it might also assist in rehabilitating the phenomenological approach to the ethical. To say this differently: although the transition from the experience of contingency to support for a common cause requires that one relinquish pride in one's particularity and emphasize shared similarities, it does not necessitate a glossing over of differences within the group. Allowing for different particulars among group members in this way while, at the same time, creating the heuristic construct of shared identity, this move at least avoids the problem of claiming ontological status for what is clearly an analytic generalization. Indeed, such a strategy is often employed in justifying oppositional or minority politics.<sup>1</sup>

Although individual differences and the affective aspects of experience easily disappear in philosophical discourse, the adoption of an attitude of respect for otherness may thus help ease the difficulties. A phenomenological account might then—"on top" of its immediate agenda—agree with Heller and Fehér that "recognition" may be seen as "a *positive* category, an assertive one. It implies an active relation to the other without violating the other's negative freedom, the freedom from interference" (Heller, Fehér 1988, 83). It thus implies a caring attitude for the other as a human being despite differences in respective aesthetics of living. It simultaneously denies a relativist "anything goes" attitude since it demands an intervention if the differences are in what can be termed a moral domain: everyone is entitled to a freely chosen life as long as they do not interfere in the lives of others.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> An opposing danger is involved, of course, in the extreme emphasis on contingency and individual differences: critiques of the "universalization of difference" abound and feminist thinking—for one—has gone a long way in finding means of avoiding the politically debilitating effects it has on the construction of shared, or at least shareable, political positions.

<sup>2</sup> Heller and Fehér propose a similar, but more elaborate principle: "all needs should be recognized, and recognized equally excepting those whose satisfaction implies the use of other persons as mere means" (Heller, Fehér 1988, 39). It is clear that valuing recognition in this way

Yet, by consigning commitment or responsibility to the sphere of objective experience, the argument seems to follow deontological approaches in their acceptance of a universalization based on a general “human condition” exhibited by the particular under scrutiny. While the “we”—and more importantly also the “I”—that is arrived at through such a generalization is homogenous, it is also, however, illusory. This difficulty with universalizing theories of subjectivity and moral agency is perhaps best exemplified through a more concrete argument. In his *Body and World*, Samuel Todes notes that many traditional theories relating physical experience to knowledge are based on a visually oriented understanding of embodied subjectivity. Due to the reifying abstraction of the perceiving subjectivity from the sensing body, physical experiences of the world are relegated to the role of observed actions rather than subjective participation in or engagement with the world. As Todes (2001, 46) writes:

When the self, becoming a pure inactive spectator, retreats from the body, detaching itself as a disembodied visual point of view, its body feelings become inert “in” the body. They lose the mobility that is characteristic of body feelings in the active body. ... This involves loss of the basic sense of vital, corporate *unity* in one’s body.

The motionlessness of the perceiving (evaluating rather than sensing) subject thus creates the illusion of a detached cognitive faculty. Voluntarily distancing themselves from their physical surroundings, perceivers adopt an attitude of objectivity and aloofness, easily leading to a generalizing view of human beings and their involvement in the world. Perhaps somewhat stretching a more familiar existentialist term, it might be said that perception in this condition is no longer properly *engagée*. Further, confusing the distinction between subject identity and pre-reflective embodied understanding leads to a situation where conscious beliefs and habitual defences are given undue priority. Our relation to the other becomes altogether a matter for the intellect. Due to this need for conceptualization involved in the kind of self-understanding or self-*representation* demanded in intersubjective encounters there is, as we shall see, a curious dual role assigned to the body.

## **Sartre: two views of the social encounter**

As noted, in situating subjectivity in isolated, particular experiences, phenomenologists by definition find themselves unable to explain the transition from the level of the individual subject to that of the collective. Although this is a particular concern of “existentialist” philosophy and phenomenology focused, as they are, on the affective aspects of existence, it is also, of course, a problem for philosophical discourse in general. Recognizing this, Sartre also quite forcefully

---

presents no problem for phenomenology if the ethical is simply situated outside its domain. Indeed, its difficulties concerning otherness and ethics can largely be attributed to an overly purist approach and a—rather paradoxical—failure to return its philosophical method to a commonsense encounter with the world in general. Effected through a ruling out of the ethical from our immediate concerns, a purely phenomenological recognition of the other as “like me” has a greatly reduced philosophical value.

argues that the abstraction and conceptualization that takes place in philosophical thinking is hostile to the nominalism required for an appreciation of lived experience.<sup>3</sup> Admitting in this way that the heterogeneity of “existence” cannot be properly represented in philosophy leads him, like many others, (at least rhetorically) to an emphasis on poetic or “figurative” uses of language. Following this insight, he attempts to bridge the divide between private experiences and public actions through artistic mediation.

Not content with the general claim that “poetry” provides a means to express existence intersubjectively, the Sartre of *What is Literature?* (1949) takes an intriguing direction, arguing that the transition from the sphere of the private to that of the public can be achieved through a mutual “recognition of freedoms” in the realm of literary prose. While his argument is perhaps problematic,<sup>4</sup> the intention is quite in line with a common-sense understanding of otherness as well as the argument, Sartre postulates a condition (literature) in which two subjects (the author and the reader) are engaged in a relation that necessarily denies the objectification of one by the other since it requires implicit trust from both sides. From describing the dynamics of this specific situation, he goes on to argue that the mutual respect and spirit of generosity entered into by the participants in this relation can be transferred to other social encounters. Once achieved, their recognition of freedoms would constitute a pledge to generally respect and even advance the freedom of others (Sartre 1949, 48-54).<sup>5</sup>

The point at which Sartre moves from his descriptive (phenomenal) account of the particular situation of reading a literary text to the general intersubjective encounter involves him, of course, in the problematic moment of his argument. There is a difference to be noted in the understanding of intersubjectivity produced by the concrete physical presence of the other and in that produced by our personal experiences of embodiment. Or, to put this differently, there is a difference in the kind of recognition that takes place in real-life social encounters as discussed by Sartre, where generosity and understanding need to be carried over to the reflected and conscious level for purposes of socioethical theorizing and those, where there is a pre-reflective recognition and an embodied identification that may remain unconceptualized or unarticulated since it does not face the demands made by a concrete other.

To approach the problem in a different way: by placing emphasis on experience itself, phenomenological thought often loses touch with the way subjectivity is

---

<sup>3</sup> Sartre draws attention to the differences between knowledge and understanding in this context. Where understanding seeks to preserve at least a sense for differences, he argues, knowledge appropriates its subject matter to be dealt with in terms it is already comfortable with (Sartre 1978, 113). Or, as Jill Robbins articulates the same concern with regard to existentialist phenomenology, the affective aspects of existence “are necessarily destroyed once they are brought into philosophical intelligibility” (Robbins 1999, 107).

<sup>4</sup> For a critique of Sartre’s argument, see e.g. Christina Howells (1988, 132), who describes it as a philosophical “sleight-of-hand”.

<sup>5</sup> For Sartre, such respect is engendered by the writer’s need to admit the reader into the relation as a concrete subject. The reader is solicited in the fullness of his or her situation and emotional make-up (cf. Sartre 1949, 51).

founded in the intersubjectivity of culture and socialization. When phenomenology does discuss ethics, it often takes the objectification of the other as its starting-point, attempting to discover ways in which the other may be encountered without performing such an appropriation. In *L'Être et le Néant* (1943), Sartre famously reformulated the issue by emphasizing the way in which awareness of foreign subjectivities comes about as the perceiving subject becomes aware that it is the object of perception for another. This recognition of one's "being-for-others" is markedly different from the quite harmonious mutual recognition of freedoms he later goes on to claim for literature.<sup>6</sup>

In this formulation, recognition of the other as an embodied and encultured subject in the same sense we experience ourselves to be, is not a liberating experience in any way (or an especially ethical or uplifting one either) but rather one that takes us even further from our pre-reflective experience. As Dan Zahavi (1999, 161) summarizes the transformation of self-awareness that takes place in such instances:

My encounter with the Other typically provokes two distinct changes in my self-apprehension. I become someone different (namely, socialized) as well as something different (an empirical object). What, then, is different when I (am forced to) assume a role, a third-person identification of myself?

This encounter does not seem to constitute an ethical experience in that it leads us to reflectively objectify ourselves, moving us from the ontological sphere of subjective self-awareness to a reified experiencing in which we can no longer appreciate the alterity of the other. To state this differently: when I am given to myself as an object I lose the ability to appreciate subjectivity as anything more than a situational aberration, thus also failing to appreciate the transcendence of the other's subjective self-awareness. At the same time that we relinquish our subjectivity for identity, we thus leave the level on which we might recognize the fundamental otherness of the other.

The differences between these two descriptions of intersubjective encounters are significant. Suffice it now to note that the forms of interaction presented are crucially different in one aspect: the issue of mediation. The mutual recognition of freedoms that takes place in the sphere of literature is reached through a disembodied encounter whereas the objectifying gaze is made possible through a joint physical presence and the primacy of visual perception, this latter already effecting a partial generalization from particularity.<sup>7</sup> Quite paradoxically then, physical presence leads to a disengagement from the immediate, to a withdrawal from reality in which much of the encounter becomes conceptualized through habitual ways of conceiving of the world and others. The participants of the encounter are led to enforce their respective subject identities and thus to shut off much of the "self" that is not directly available

---

<sup>6</sup> In *Being and Nothingness* he in fact explicitly states that "we shall never place ourselves concretely on a plane of equality; that is, on a plane where the recognition of the Other's freedom would involve the Other's recognition of our freedom" (Sartre 1958 [1943], 408).

<sup>7</sup> As Zahavi emphasizes, perception is a key issue here: "functioning subjectivity and radical alterity both belong to a totally different ontological dimension than the one dominated by vision. To phrase it differently ... it is not because the Other is an Other, but because it is a self that I cannot perceive it directly" (Zahavi 1999, 193).

to apprehension through a narrative or reflectively constructed self-understanding. Where concrete co-presence with the other thus easily leads to a retreat to habitual understanding, openness to one's embodied pre-reflective attitudes might, however, permit an ethical identification or recognition.

## Embodied perception and the appeal of radical alterity

An important insight concerning the phenomenological method can be gained by returning to Merleau-Ponty's well-known claim that qualities of objects are not in the objects themselves but in our perceptions of them: or more specifically, the *relation* between object and subject. The body is an ineliminable aspect in making sense of sensations. Thus any sense made, is always necessarily private and singular.<sup>8</sup> It is only when we come to communicate such experiences that we attempt to cross the border between private and communicable experiences. Todes puts this across especially well: "the self-moving, freely responsive percipient constitutes himself not merely as a fact, but as the *factory of all facts* in the perceptual world" (Todes 2001, 265).<sup>9</sup>

When the singularity of perceptions and embodiedness of understanding are claimed in this way, recognition of common, shared humanity (in, as it were, an "objective" sense) is no longer enough for grounding intersubjectivity or ethics. To provide a theoretical account of recognition that would also afford a means for an ethical formulation of intersubjectivity we must, then, find a means for motivating this recognition as a recognition of the value of the other as an absolute other while still allowing for a committed and ethical subjectivity on both sides of the relation. In addition to allowing for otherness we must, that is, provide opportunity for a recognition that does not involve an enforcement of the perceiver's subject identity—such identity effectively disengaging the perceiver from the social world and flexible (as opposed to habitual) attachments to community.

One direction might well be found in Levinas. As Dan Zahavi (1999, 196) writes on Levinas's concept of radical alterity:

---

<sup>8</sup> As Todes also points out, Merleau-Ponty was the first to concentrate on the full effects of embodiedness on subjectivity, "to see the body as ineliminable from all perceptual sense, not just causally or instrumentally, but epistemologically, that is, as ineliminable from the intelligibility of all perceptual sense made" (Todes 2001, 265). It is on the basis of this making sense of our sensations that—it seems to me—the differences between the "existentialist" positions I have presented truly hinge. The hope to see an identity between oneself and another are based on a notion of similarities of sensations that have already been made sense of by the subject. In this context our sensing of the world is not simply, however, linguistically and socially translated to something communicable. It is rather, as if the body were a coding device of sorts. The sense made of direct experiences is made only with a private and singular code included. The communicability of the sense of sensations requires a further translation.

<sup>9</sup> Embodied understanding is not, however, a private matter; neither is it—as already stated—something that must give way to analytic generalizations. Rather, embodiment transcends the public-private distinction. Although physical presence and the threat of foreign subjectivity may lead the subject to return to familiar or habitual responses in intersubjective behaviour, relegating the body to the realm of the private only serves to increase confusion.

a true encounter with the Other is an experience of something that cannot be conceptualized or categorized. It is a relation with a total and absolute alterity, which is irreducible to interiority. It is an encounter with something that is not merely absorbed by the subject, and which does not simply leave it untouched, unmoved, and unchanged. On the contrary, a true encounter with radical alterity is an encounter that overwhelms me and shakes me in my very foundation.

It is—in other words—an encounter that denies the retreat into one's codified and habitual understandings of the world. Thus the face-to-face encounter with radical alterity provides a route to a truly ethical attitude toward the other. If defensive withdrawal or disengagement from the world is avoided, the realization that the I is unable to appropriate the otherness of the Other can lead to a recognition of parallel subjectivities and—perhaps more importantly for the committed author of *What is Literature?*—to an experience that is capable of affecting the participants significantly, possibly even leading them to engage with the world more intensely to further a common purpose.

### **From mutual recognition of freedoms to community?**

In order to provide results in concrete situations with concrete subjects, the mutual recognition of freedoms needs to move on two levels. On the one hand, there is the largely intellectual recognition of parallel subjectivity and freedom and the consequent understanding of the need to respect that freedom. Yet at the same time, there needs to be a refusal to settle into one's subjectivity, to the extent that one becomes separated from the world of common interests—and the shared experience of embodiment that provides access to pre-reflective understanding of the other as a subject in his or her own right. As we have already seen, the significance of embodiment and presence in an intersubjective encounter must be taken into account in discussions of community since both are simultaneously facilitators as well as obstacles to successful communication. While the idea of a community of interests is easily explained on the level of reflective understanding, embodiment and pre-reflective understanding or identification and the conflict with subjective identity that these bring cause problems for discussions of community identity. The difficulty is, of course, at the root of a number of discussions on oppositional politics and the possibility of any communal action when groupings are conditional, formed only around particular shared racial, class or gender characteristics.

Looking at Sartre's claims in more detail, we see that the recognition of freedoms he argues for appreciates at least situational differences between the participants. Although the partners of Sartre's literary pact of generosity are not physically present to each other, they are far from being disembodied subjects when it comes to the experiences they bring to the relation. I would thus argue that Sartre's focus in *What is Literature?* is on an "ethical" recognition and thus provides an approach that is better equipped to lead to an understanding of functioning intersubjectivity than the account of objectification by the other or even his later conceptualizations of

scarcity or struggle as providing grounds for the recognition of and identification with other subjectivities.<sup>10</sup> The road from conflict to an open-minded engagement with otherness seems denied in Sartre's earlier approaches, since these involve a retreat from the world to the sphere of individuated identity in a way that is hardly conducive to reciprocal understanding. Accepting the argument presented here, shared situation is thus not enough for the formation of *new* communal attachments in a world where individuals thrive on contingency and difference. The example of the literary pact of generosity is clear: "what the writer requires of the reader is not the application of an abstract freedom but the gift of his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values" (Sartre 1949, 51). In other words, the writer requires of the reader his or her undeniable otherness, rather than the generalized other of universalistic moral theories—or indeed, even the kind of narrative identity located in the reflected upon self-understandings of the participants.

The experience of awe provided by art, or encountered in the face of radical alterity, brings on a suspension of judgement similar to the "willing suspension of disbelief" involved in encounters with literary works. This suspension of judgement or abandonment of what Sartre elsewhere refers to as an "analytic spirit" is essential to setting aside one's self-objectification through an imposition of subjectivity. As already mentioned, the paradoxical nature of a face-to-face encounter involves the danger of the subjectivities of the participants becoming fixed. Participants in such a meeting may return to enforced and secure positions and self-understanding in order to counter any possible threat that the inability to appropriate the other as an object presents to their respective subject identities. In working toward new understandings of community, then, theory would do well to accommodate presence and embodiment in definitions of identity. In this way, it might allow for the complex ways in which they both delimit and enhance the scope for intersubjective understanding.

## References

- Benhabib, S.** *Situating the Self. Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.
- Heller, A., Fehér, F.** *The Postmodern Political Condition.* Oxford and Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.
- Howells, C.** *Sartre. The Necessity of Freedom.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988.

---

<sup>10</sup> With the exception of his claims in *What is Literature?* Sartre seems to see recognition as always involving some form of external threat. In a truly phenomenological investigation, this aspect of Sartre's conception of social encounters might well be seen to lie specifically in his personal experiences with them. Consider the very different attitude of Merleau-Ponty, who quite forcefully argues that such difficulties with intersubjectivity are not in any way natural to our understanding of situatedness and otherness. He uses the example of children in making this point, saying that "[f]or the struggle ever to begin, and for each consciousness to be capable of suspecting the alien presences which it negates, all must necessarily have some common ground and recall their peaceful co-existence in the world of childhood" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 355).



- Merleau-Ponty, M.** *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. by C. Smith. New York and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.
- Robbins, J.** *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1999.
- Sartre, J. P.** *What is Literature?* Trans. by Bernard Frechtman. New York: Philosophical Library, 1949.
- Sartre, J. P.** *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. by H. Barnes. London: Methuen, 1958 [1943].
- Sartre, J. P.** *Sartre in the Seventies. Interviews and Essays*. Trans. by P. Auster and L. Dawis. London: Andre Deutsch, 1978.
- Todes, S.** *Body and World*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001.
- Zahavi, D.** *Self-Awareness and Alterity. A Phenomenological Investigation*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999.

Department of Philosophy  
 Åbo Academi University  
 Piispankatu 3  
 FIN-20 500 Turku  
 Finland  
 E-mail: kalpih@utu.fi