Sartre's Original Insight

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ABSTRACT. Sartre's discussion of «being-with-others» in Part Three of *Being and Nothingness* is extraordinarily rich and highly original. At its core, I argue, lies an insight into the aporetic character of intersubjectivity – «the scandal of the plurality of consciousnesses», as Sartre puts it – which emerges most clearly in his critique of Hegel's theory of intersubjectivity. My aim in this paper is to isolate this thesis of Sartre's and spell out his grounds for it. I argue furthermore that Hegel's conception of intersubjectivity corresponds to that of natural consciousness, such that, in rejecting Hegel, Sartre is also impugning the reality of a conception integral to ordinary thought. I suggest that Sartre's insight also holds the key to his distinctive approach to social and political theory in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

KEYWORDS. Hegel; Sartre; Transcendental Intersubjectivity; Dialectic.

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The history of philosophical reflection on intersubjectivity is a chiefly post-Kantian affair, in which Sartre occupies a singular position. Sartre is known for having characterized human relationships as irresolvably conflictual in his early philosophical writings, while his literary works from that period give forceful expression to an intensely pessimistic vision of human relations, according to which love, hatred, sexual desire, and so on, are merely so many variations on a fundamental dynamic, and all ultimately futile to an equal degree.

   This part of Sartre's account of intersubjectivity must however be distinguished, on my view, from his fundamental insight concerning what may be called the transcendental logic of intersubjectivity – his claim that the condition of being with-and-among others cannot be made rationally transparent, for the reason that intersubjectivity, as such and of itself, lacks the intelligibility and reality attributed to it in ordinary thought, and in much philosophical theory. I describe this claim as one of transcendental logic, though the term is not used by Sartre himself, in order to make clear that it is not an instance of conceptual analysis, and nor does it belong straightforwardly to either the epistemology of other minds or normative theory. Certainly it is bound up with and has bearing on these more familiar areas of enquiry: Sartre articulates it in the context of a lengthy discussion of the grounds of our knowledge of others, and it has implications for how we should understand the problems of social and political life. But the crux of Sartre's position is a negative *a priori* claim concerning the relation of the concept of intersubjectivity to its purported object.

   The interest and importance of this insight has not, I think, been well appreciated. In part this is due to the simple fact that Sartre's position is at variance with the firmly pro-intersubjectivist consensus of the age, but it also owes much to the way in which Sartre allows his argument to be construed as dependent on premises which are, critics have alleged, naively Cartesian or dogmatically subjectivist. My primary aim in this paper is to show that, though the text of *Being and*

Nothingness may admit of interpretations which make controverting his position a simple matter, Sartre's doctrine of aporetic intersubjectivity, once disentangled from its surroundings and pared down to its essence, holds up under scrutiny and commands attention.

1. Sartre's thesis

The historical originality to which I alluded lies in the challenge posed by Sartre to the long and distinguished philosophical tradition, beginning in classical German philosophy, which maintains that a single arc of theoretical reflection can comprehend simultaneously (i) self-conscious subjectivity in all of its interiority, and (ii) the essential institutional, ethical, and other normative structures of modern sociality, in such a way as to exhibit their rational interconnection. Sartre refers to this outlook, as he finds it in what he considers its fully developed form, namely Hegel, as intersubjective «optimism». There is no space here to rehearse the history in any detail, but I think it will be agreed that this is a fair characterization of one important trajectory in the post-Kantian development, and it will be helpful to have the major landmarks in view.

The basis of our cognition of others in theoretical and practical contexts is an issue to which Kant pays scant attention, but which becomes abruptly central to the work of his successors, who evince a deeper appreciation of Rousseau's insight into the interdependence of our self-conception and our conceptions of others – a relation which they regard, furthermore, as opening up new philosophical avenues. Schiller in the *Letters on Aesthetic Education* addresses on a broad historical plane the question of how the individual might hope to realize the reconfiguration of subjectivity demanded by her own practical reason at the collective level of aesthetically informed *Bildung*. Fichte in his later Jena writings advances the extraordinarily original and powerful idea that bare self-consciousness presupposes (cognition of) its own recognition by another self-consciousness.

Schelling recasts this transcendental moment as a turning point in the self-construction of consciousness, which makes possible, through human history, the absolute unification of subjectivity and objectivity or Freedom and Nature. Hegel, dissatisfied with Fichte's solution on various counts, including its alleged «one-sidedly» subjective character and the sharp separation which it presupposes of transcendental from empirical levels of consideration, reworks Fichte's thesis that recognition is constitutive of self-consciousness in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in terms that, if Hegel is right, (a) dispose of the empty formalism implied by Fichte's treatment of the I, (b) acknowledge the role played by Nature in the formation of self-consciousness, and (c) facilitate the construction of a new ontology of *Geist*, the fruits of which are seen in Hegel's treatment of the human sphere at large. A great deal of later philosophy, from the Young Hegelians, through Dewey, down to Habermas and Brandom in the present day, follows Hegel's path of expounding the social character *of* human reason and the permeation of sociality *by* reason.

Sartre's critique of this tradition, in all of its varieties, focuses, as I have said, on the aporia which he claims to find at the root of intersubjectivity: his thesis, in preliminary formulation, is that intersubjective consciousness demands a doubling of standpoints, between which we can alternate without strict inconsistency or overt conceptual incoherence, but which resist systematic integration, or more exactly, which can be integrated only at a level of thought which prescinds from one or other of the standpoints which it pretends to synthesize. The upshot is that intersubjectivity involves a mere *superimposition* of disjoined perspectives, sufficiently stable to allow for the conceptual scheme of ordinary psychology and the pursuit of common forms of life, but which falls short of the unity required for intersubjective structures to qualify as fully intelligible realities. Sartre attempts to establish this result, moreover, by drawing on the native resources of classical German philosophy.[1]

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1   Indeed, Sartre's model for the aporetic superimposition just described is the Unhappy
    Consciousness of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (§§206-11/III:163-6). References to this

Fichte has been credited by Dieter Henrich with an original insight into the problem posed by self-consciousness,[2] and my parallel suggestion regarding Sartre – that he offers a similarly ground-level insight concerning the interrelations of self-consciousnesses (in Sartre's memorable phrase: «the scandal of the plurality of consciousnesses»[3]) – is intended to follow Henrich's pattern in two respects. First, the insight itself concerns the existence of an aporia, and implies no positive theoretical claim. Sartre's own account of our knowledge of other minds is therefore not strictly at issue. Second, elaborating the insight involves certain steps which cannot be presented as matters of immediate logical implication, and because conceptual analysis cannot directly establish Sartre's aporetic conclusion, its demonstration needs to be indirect. Accordingly, I will reconstruct his argument – with reference to his critical discussion of Hegel in the chapter on «The Existence of Others» in *Being and Nothingness*, where the insight first gets articulated – in the form of a dilemma for intersubjectivism.

It is characteristic of aporetic theses that they are elusive, and the present case is no exception. At one extreme, Sartre may seem to be saying something incontestable and anodyne – perhaps simply that there exists no collective mind in the same sense as there exist individual minds; and at the other extreme, to be denying the basic facts of interpersonal knowledge and social existence which define the very phenomena he holds to be problematic. Getting his insight into focus means arresting its tendency to oscillate between trivial truth and inconsequential absurdity.[4]

Also to be acknowledged at the outset is Sartre's openness to the objection that his whole approach, which proceeds at a level of

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work, prefixed PS, are first to the numbered paragraphs of the translation and then to *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in Hegel's *Werke*.

2 HENRICH 1982.

3 SARTRE 1995 [1943], 244/300, henceforth abbreviated BN. References are first to the English translation and second to the original French edition of 1943.

4 Notable treatments in the commentaries include O'HAGAN 1981, SCHROEDER 1984, THEUNISSEN 1986, Ch. 6, and HONNETH 1995 and 2003.

maximal abstraction and aims to grasp the very essence of the self-other relation, fails to get purchase on any philosophically substantial issue. If this is true, then Sartre is, as I have indicated, not on his own. The tradition of theorizing in which Sartre follows supposes that abstraction is needed precisely in order to exhibit the *deep* intelligibility of intersubjectivity, by bringing to light a structure which intermediates between various spheres: general metaphysics, knowledge of other minds and other-ascription of mental states, social ontology, and normative ethical and political theory. If Sartre is right that such intelligibility is missing, and if what this result should really be taken to signify is that philosophers have been thinking about the issue in entirely the wrong way, then that is a whole other story – with wide repercussions, since, the next section will argue, our ordinary pre-philosophical conception of intersubjectivity appears to involve equally a set of highly abstract commitments.

2. Commitments of natural consciousness

Before turning to Sartre's text, I want to offer a characterization of our pre-theoretical conception of intersubjectivity, which will allow us to understand why so much is at stake in Sartre's critique of Hegel's intersubjectivism: because our ordinary conception of intersubjectivity corresponds so closely to that of Hegel, critique of the latter implies a critique of natural consciousness.[5]

Attempts to state in philosophically neutral terms the basic constituents of intersubjectivity as natural consciousness conceives it, are inevitably prey to the charge of tendentiousness, but the following list of conditions has a good claim to capture key elements of any recognizable modern conception of intersubjectivity, which is what Sartre and Hegel are concerned to elucidate.

- It is a condition for a relation to qualify as intersubjective that

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5   Sartre himself does not explicitly make this mapping, but it is clear that he regards Hegel's intersubjectivism as mirroring errors in natural consciousness.

it should allow for its being *understood* as such from the standpoint of the individual subjects which comprise its *relata*. (Intersubjectivity, like selfhood, is necessarily self-ascribable, "I-/We-thinkable".)

- Intersubjective relations presuppose that subjects have access – if not explicitly or in fact, then implicitly or in principle – to a *universal* under which they can jointly know themselves to fall. (Whatever determinate, mutually differentiating conceptions of self and other may be deployed in intersubjective relations, all parties must be able to conceive themselves as being in some essential respect, however indefinite, of a single *kind*.)

- Intersubjective relations, though amply creative of the *properties* of subjects, do not ground but presuppose the basic *individuation* of their *relata*. (Our fundamental numerical distinctness from one another is not something which could have been *produced* out of our relations to one another.[6] This independence is integral to our conception of intersubjectivity as a domain which we do not merely act *on* but which we participate *in*, in a sense that nature does not permit.)

- We find ourselves standing in relations to others somewhat as we find ourselves standing in relation to external material objects, in so far as our relations to particular others exhibit a *contingency* which is necessarily absent from our self-relation. (Self-relations cannot assume the same richly complex, limitlessly mediated forms as our relations to others, which exploit, in a way that self-relations cannot, the separateness of external bodies.)

- Nevertheless, the *general* circumstance of finding oneself in relations to others, though not given as deriving from any prior and independent source, cannot be outright contingent. (The natural facts of common species membership, biological generation, material dependence and so forth, though possessing a kind of necessity, are insufficient to explain the

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6   Such that «it is by the very fact of being me that I exclude the Other» (BN 236/292).

non-accidental interlocking of our existences: the manner in which we are intentionally contained in one another, «mutually imbricated»,[7] in a way that things in nature cannot be, and that our relation to nature cannot replicate. Because the possibility of being (so to speak) inhabited by others cannot be erased, we cannot take the distance from others that we can from nature: solipsism, as distinct from mere isolation, is phenomenologically inconceivable.)

- Intersubjectivity encompasses the possibility of the other's immediate, apodictic *presence*. (Necessarily it is possible in principle to look others in the eye, as we commonly put it: to apprehend the other with certainty of being presented with a *subject* of predication, a *bearer* of properties, and not merely with a predicate.)

- The possibility of being determinately related to another subject presupposes a *common dimension*, some homogeneous medium of interrelation, with respect to which we find ourselves interchangeable in principle, and by virtue of which intersubjective relations have, potentially if not actually, a communicative character.[8] (Whatever I can say or do to or with you must be something that, were our positions reversed in appropriate respects, you could intelligibly say or do to or with me. And what makes this the case – the plane on which we meet and by virtue of which we are able to interact – must in some sense pre-exist our encounter, i.e., cannot be a simple direct function of our conjunction.)

All of these conditions are ordinarily taken to be fulfilled in the simple transactions and communicative acts of everyday life. No puzzle is presented when one person employs a shared natural language to induce another to act in a certain way, social behaviour manifests the unproblematic interaction of beliefs and desires across individuals,

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7   BN 236/292. The Other «penetrates me to the heart» (BN 237/293).
8   See BN 240/296 regarding the «common measure» and «homogeneity» of self and other.

and no internal subjective dissonance is registered by default in quotidian intersubjective episodes; we do not seem to need to cross any conceptual or metaphysical divide in order to make contact with one another, and such exchanges do not typically induce an experience of self-diremption. This capacity for immediate congruence, whereby we find ourselves securely co-situated and enjoying equal reality on a common plane, is most naturally taken to demonstrate the full reality of the field of intersubjectivity, and speaks loudly in favour of philosophical positions, such as Hegel's, which affirm its full rational reality.

If Sartre is right, reflection which takes the experiential coherence of everyday intersubjective phenomenology – including, pre-eminently, linguistic practice – as a guide to its ontological ground, allows itself to be misled by appearances. The question is therefore: By what measure of philosophically intelligibility could it be held that intersubjectivity is not what it seems? Once again, if Sartre's thought is to come into focus, it is crucial that it be distinguished from more familiar claims. It may be philosophically puzzling that a mind can have physical effects which in turn can have mental effects, and that these sequences can exhibit a causality of reason, or manifest freedom, and that we are able to grasp others' bodily behaviour as freighted with rich mental life, and can comprehend an indexical with the peculiar properties of the first-person pronoun. Equally it may be doubted that it is possible to discover universally valid norms governing the relation of one subject's will to that of another. But none of these are Sartre's fundamental concern. His target conclusion is not that theoretical or practical solipsism is inescapable, i.e., that the problem of other minds is insoluble or that human relations fail to admit of rational regulation. The aporeticity of intersubjectivity, for Sartre, lies in the impossibility of *completing* the picture projected by the various commitments listed above: they cannot all be followed through – they cannot all be *rationalized* – without coming into collision.

To a degree this result should already seem half-way plausible, for natural consciousness' commitments, once spelled out, are revealed

neither to be individually self-explanatory and self-justifying, nor to explain and justify one another. Indeed it is not even clear that they are consistent, in so far they appear to presuppose (i) a form of consciousness which extends beyond selfhood yet somehow avoids terminating in mere objectivity, and, in addition, (ii) the possibility of an essential unity inseparable from its constituents, which are nonetheless able to grasp themselves independently: natural consciousness appears to envisage intersubjectivity as both a purely relational structure, and a relation-facilitating reality in its own right, and to conceive intersubjective relations as both external, in so far as they mirror the relations of bodies, and internal, in so far as they allow for our intentional containment in one another.[9] These tensions are what Hegel's theory aims to resolve – without success, according to Sartre, and in a way that brings to light their specific irresolvability.

3. Sartre's critique of Hegel's intersubjectivism

Sartre's discussion of Hegel begins at a point where he takes himself to have demonstrated the inadequacy of «classical» accounts of knowledge of other minds, namely those of realism and idealism, and also of Husserl's account of intersubjectivity, which he describes as having failed to make any real advance beyond Kant. From this it might have been expected that, following the historical sequence, Sartre would proceed next to Heidegger, but instead he turns to Hegel, whom he considers the first to have grasped the true «ontological» character of intersubjectivity, though not in a correct form. Sartre's treatment is dense and intricate, and I will attempt to reconstruct his critical argument independently from the positive theses which are also woven into his discussion.[10]

   Though Sartre presents his critique of Hegel in the form of a

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9   BN 298-9/359-61.

10 The portion of the text in question is BN 235-44/291-300. Note that, if Hegel's account fails, Heidegger's *Mitsein* – which in one respect aggravates Hegel's defectiveness – offers no alternative (BN 244-50/301-7, 413-29/484-502).

«twofold charge of optimism», «epistemological» and «ontological».[11] This may suggest that Hegel's account is to be criticised in two different respects, the first of which has to do with knowledge of other minds. It is better viewed however as a single argument in several stages, none of which involve questioning the possibility of knowing another's mental states. In the first, preliminary stage, Sartre challenges Hegel's assumption that intersubjectivity can be understood in terms of cognition. In the second, Sartre fixes on Hegel's concept of reciprocal recognition, which, Sartre argues, both specifies what is required for the intelligibility of intersubjectivity, and shows why it cannot be supplied. The third stage seeks to confirm the aporia by arguing that Hegel's intersubjectivism presupposes the metaphysical holism of his *Logic*. I will take them in turn.

(1) Sartre begins with the assertion that Hegel undermines his own achievement – grasping intersubjectivity ontologically – by subordinating the «relation of being» of self and other to a «relation of knowledge»:[12] Hegel represents intersubjective relations as if their essence were exhausted by the shared conceptual representations that we form of them. This assumption is rejected by Sartre not simply because it is idealistic,[13] but on the grounds that, in the present context in a way that is not true of others, knowledge necessarily modifies being: in becoming conscious of the other, I do not simply add to my doxastic stock, rather I am necessarily *altered* in respects that go beyond cognition. Intersubjective relations involve, Sartre claims, the production of *new* kinds of objects and properties, to which *new* relations are required, and of which the self must try to *achieve* a certainty not afforded immediately by the new entities themselves. Intersubjectivity thus sets self-consciousness a task, one which, for all that Hegel is entitled to suppose at the relevant point in his *Phenomenology*, there is no *a priori* guarantee of its being able to

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11 BN 240/296.

12 BN 240-1/296-7.

13 Though also for that reason: «consciousness *is* before being known» (BN 241/297).

complete. There would be reason to think that knowledge of intersubjectivity can catch up with its being, and secure their harmony, only if there were reason to think that the new ontological dimensions of plural self-consciousnesses necessarily cohere in a single "social reality". That this is so is assumed by Hegel, but without justification: In celebrating the new logical moment of *Geist*, Hegel grasps correctly that thought and being are interrelated in the social sphere in a way that they are not in our cognition of nature, since in intersubjectivity the object of knowledge is itself a *knower*, which knows itself *as* (known to be) a knower. To be sure, this implies a potential infinity of new relations, but all that we are entitled to assert of them is that they concern a new «dimension of being» of self-consciousness,[14] a new realm of objects and properties exhibiting an original type of complexity. Whether they also constitute an intelligible reality is a further and separate matter, which we cannot be allowed to decide by direct appeal to absolute idealism.

I describe this argument as merely preliminary, since it only lays down the terms of Sartre's challenge. Even if Hegel cannot assume the identity of the epistemological and ontological aspects of intersubjectivity, it may still be asked why the possibility of their rational coordination should be positively in doubt. The second stage of Sartre's argument is designed to answer this question.

(2) Hegel, following Rousseau and Fichte, sees that, if intersubjective relations are not to shrink to relations to mere objectivity, then they must retain the essential character (whatever it may be) of self-relations, whatever other dimensions they may also involve. The question is how this possible – or, more pointedly, how it can *not* be *im*possible (since, on the face of it, the only thing that can grasp itself as related to *itself* is precisely a *self*). Because natural consciousness has no answer, philosophical construction is necessary. Hegel proposes accordingly that intersubjective relations are possible in so far as they are *reciprocally recognitive*. Such relations are not cases of mere

14   BN 268/326-7.

duplication or mirroring – i.e., merely relations to another *instance* of the kind of thing that I am, or to a mere *image* of my I-in-its-particularity – rather they consist, according to Hegel, in a recuperation or *restoration* of selfhood. To the question, What is a self, such that it is open to the possibility of «finding itself in another»?, Hegel has an answer: Individual self-consciousness is *deficient* in «truth» in a way which makes possible both the initial movement of self-alienation which reciprocal recognition presupposes, and the restoration itself. The merely formal emptiness which comprises the deficiency of self-consciousness, on Hegel's account, is what dialectically compels the individual into sociality.[15]

Sartre agrees with Hegel both that a speculative grounding of natural consciousness is needed if its commitments are to be shown to be consistent, and that individual self-consciousness is deficient.[16] However, the latter presupposition, though necessary for Hegel's recognitive solution, is also its undoing. If self-identity («existing in its truth») is missing from pre-intersubjective self-consciousness, then intersubjectivity cannot supply it, for, whatever the rewards of intersubjectivity may be, selfhood cannot be one of them, since for

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15 E.g., Hegel, Encyclopaedia *Philosophy of Mind*, §§424-5.

16 Sartre's reasons for thinking that self-consciousness is defective are not Hegel's, and on his account, what is defective in self-consciousness not only cannot be remedied by intersubjectivity but in fact *entails* the impossibility of intersubjective realization; see BN 298-302/360-3. The difference may be put by saying that, whereas for Hegel the defectiveness of pre-intersubjective self-consciousness consists merely in the purely formal character of its self-identity – its lack of determinacy – Sartre understands it as a *formal* defect: because the subject is always still occupied with the (uncompletable) *task* of becoming reflexive and is always *striving to achieve* self-identity, which it never comes into possession of (each is «perpetually a reference to a *self* which it has to be», BN 241/298), it is in no position to project its reflexivity out into the intersubjective arena; it cannot lend to being-with-others what it does not have. If it sought to (re)discover "itself" in intersubjectivity, it would first need to abandon the task which constitutes it, i.e., cease to be. In one regard Sartre agrees with Hegel regarding the mirroring of self-consciousness in intersubjectivity: consciousness of being-with-others – of its formal failure – *underlines* and *reexpresses* my own failure to achieve self-identity and the absolute limit that this sets on the kinds of relations that I can form with the Not-I. (I present Sartre's critique of Hegel, however, without reliance on his theory of the self's original defectiveness).

Hegel, as for Fichte, the form in terms of which self-consciousness must understand itself is that of self-identity, «I = I»,[17] and grasping oneself in the shape of an identity is incompatible with grasping oneself as the effect of any composite cause. If, alternatively, what we ordinarily call selfhood is a condition available only to intersubjectively embedded beings, and to which they can lay claim only on the strength of their intersubjectivity, then intersubjectivity does not have the character that natural consciousness supposes. In any case, if this is Hegel's view, then his true claim is not, as it initially seemed to be, that in intersubjectivity self-consciousness finds its *own* reflexivity projected outwards onto a larger but still self-enclosing canvas, but rather that intersubjective reality comprises an *original* whole, which may presuppose individual self-consciousness in the same weak sense as self-consciousness presupposes existence as a natural organism, but the true constituents of which are not the individual self-consciousnesses with which his story began. On this model, pre-intersubjective self-consciousness cannot be said to *enter into* intersubjectivity, but only to provide materials out of which intersubjectivity *creates* new entities, which supplant it.

The problem is not removed by positing a logically contemporaneous coming-into-being of intersubjective reality and individual self-consciousnesses. This would accord with natural consciousness by dint of reproducing its commitments, while doing nothing to elucidate them. If anything, the difficulty would then be aggravated, for if the complex structure "self and other as constelled in a non-aggregative unity" is ultimate, then intersubjectivity involves a superimposition of two modes of self-consciousness – consciousness of oneself as two different *types* of entity, the one enjoying independence from intersubjectivity and the other enclosed within it – without any possibility of insight into their ground or systematic integration. The complexity of the contemporaneity model, once internalized by individual self-consciousness, as intersubjectivity requires, becomes a lack of coherence within it.

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17 BN 235/291, 239/295.

The dilemma which stands at the core of Sartre's anti-intersubjectivism can now be spelled out. (1) If the *relata* of intersubjective relations are self-identical selves, then they are (monadically) closed in a way that is, of course, compatible with their entering into certain sorts of (limited) relations with one another, but incompatible with their mutual intentional containment, and with the supra-relational reality of intersubjectivity. (2) If, on the other hand, the *relata* lack self-identical selfhood, then intersubjectivity cannot supply it, and whatever entities intersubjectivity may give rise to cannot grasp themselves as enjoying the independence which is necessary for intersubjectivity to constitute a field in which they participate. Stated differently, the «circuit of selfness» disclosed in reflection to each subject[18] needs to run *through* relations to others if intersubjective relations are not to be merely relations to contents of the world; but no entity which grasps itself as individuated by means of this circuit can intelligibly abstract it from the context of reflection in such a way as to reinstall it outside themselves. Hegel's concept of reciprocal recognition appears in this light a product of conflicting vectors in natural consciousness' conception of intersubjectivity: it expresses the form that a solution would need to take, but the concept provides no actual solution, merely encapsulating the conflicting demands placed upon philosophical theory by natural consciousness.[19]

If this is correct, then Sartre's argument is independent of quasi-Cartesian assumptions to the effect that (to take some of the more obvious candidates, cited in criticism of Sartre[20]) (i) object- and subject-

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18 BN 102-4/146-9, 150-8/196-205, 239/295.

19 It is instructive at this point to consider Honneth's Hegelian critique of Sartre, which turns on the claim that the meagreness of Sartre's basic ontology leads him to under-describe the actual rich phenomenology of recognitive consciousness (HONNETH 1995). If, however, Sartre's challenge is pitched at the fundamental level that I suppose, this does not meet it: Sartre grants the *phenomenological* veracity of the Hegelian conceptualization while disputing its Hegelian *ontological* interpretation. (Of course, a general issue lurks here. On my account (2010), Sartre's metaphysical reach extends beyond phenomenological characterization; this is needed if the ordinary is to be revised. Cf. MULHALL 2013 and MORRIS 2015.)

20 E.g., HONNETH 1995, 161-2.

consciousness are metaphysically repugnant, or (ii) that the essentially practical character of the self-relation cannot be integrated with the essentially theoretical character of our relation to others, or (iii) that intersubjective relations are riven by an insurmountable dichotomy of intuition and concept, or (iv) that the reality of the Other presupposes an impossible sublation of the distinction of facticity and transcendence, or, finally, (v) that the absolute freedom of the for-itself is necessarily antagonistic to the reality of the Other. These are not altogether false trails, since each represents a consideration that, in *some* form, plays some role at some point in Part Three of *Being and Nothingness*, but none are the motor of the present argument. Thus while it is of course true that Sartre regards the problem of the Other as bound up with his comprehensive dualism of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, this general metaphysical duality is not responsible for the aporeticity of intersubjectivity; the «scandal» of intersubjectivity is a further «event», over and above the *surgissement* of being-for-itself. Similarly, Sartre's thesis of the immiscibility of subject- and object-consciousness is not the source of the aporia: Sartre dwells on the non-objectifiability of interiority[21] in order to (a) confute an important subsidiary element in Hegel's theory, his conception of *Leben* and self-consciousness as able to form a transparent rational unity, (b) defend his own, previously articulated, conception of intersubjective cognition, and (c) bring to light the positive forces which obstruct even a contingent harmony of the epistemological and ontological dimensions of intersubjectivity.

(3) What I am calling the third stage of Sartre's argument corresponds to what he calls the charge of «ontological optimism».[22] It focuses on the *Phenomenology*'s argument for the necessity of intersubjectivity, which is revealed to be methodologically ambiguous and ultimately dependent on Hegel's *Logic*.

The *Phenomenology* invites, on the one hand, an interpretation

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21   BN 240-3/296-9.
22   BN 243-4/299-300.

according to which self-consciousness functions as the central node of intelligibility, the point at which object-consciousness has been understood, and the basis of all that follows, giving Hegel's overall argument in that work the shape of an "X": the diverse components of objective knowledge come to a head in the "I", which then expands into progressively comprehensive circles of spirit. This construal opens Hegel, as we have seen, to Sartre's objection that self-consciousness in its first capacity does not secure its second, for understanding it as having a world, practically and/or theoretically, does not suffice to explain its supposed capacity to transcend itself into intersubjectivity.

It might be proposed that this move can be validated if we understand Hegel's theory of intersubjectivity as a development of Fichte's, in the following way. What Fichte aims to show in his *Foundations of Natural Right* is that the experience of recognition by the Other – their «summons to activity», which leads me to posit myself as a member of a community of rational beings – is a strict condition of self-consciousness. For, Fichte argues, it is only by *being determined* to *self-determine* that I can come to know myself as self-active and, thereby, come to be presented to myself as an object in the way that I-consciousness demands.[23] Hegel can be interpreted as following out a direct implication of this account which Fichte's exclusively first-personal philosophical method leads him to overlook: If I need the Other to issue me with a summons, then the Other who summons me also needs *me* to summon *them*; so either the process cannot get started, for want of a unitary transcendental ground, or it can do so only by virtue of some antecedent ground irreducible to individual self-consciousness.[24] Hegel's claim would accordingly be – in line with the holist trajectory of the *Phenomenology*, and as on other occasions where reflection on the purported individuation of entities reveals a greater underlying whole – that self-consciousness resolves itself "upwards" into a reality that contains it as a part.

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23 FICHTE 2000 [1796-97], §§1-4 ('First Main Division: Deduction of the Concept of Right').

24 In GARDNER 2005, 237-40, I suggested that this consideration brings Sartre into line with Fichte (though not Hegel). This now seems to me too quick.

On this construal of Hegel's intersubjectivism, it would support, not presuppose, his metaphysical holism. The problem, however, is evident. Even if Fichte's transcendental argument succeeds, and even if it implies (as just argued) a further trans-subjective ground, Hegel's conclusion has still not been secured, for what has been shown is only that *something or other* initiates the «scandal of plural self-consciousnesses», not that this indeterminately conceived ground *is* the «We»; to suppose so is to read back into the *origin* of intersubjectivity what is only conceived *through* it.[25]

Now what *would* validate the transition is a different interpretation of the argument, which Hegel also seems to invite, according to which a constant conceptual form repeats itself at each point of *Gestalt*-reconfiguration, and logically compels consciousness' forward movement – the form described by Hegel, on the occasion of its first appearance, as a «movement» in which the «immediately simple» is first sublated in an other, and then restored as something «reflected into itself».[26] On this reading, which makes the *Phenomenology* in effect an application of the *Logic*, the same general *type* of necessity as transforms sense-certainty into perception, and that in later chapters carries spirit through the various transformations which terminate in absolute spirit, is *also* and *equally* what raises I-consciousness to We-consciousness.[27]

This bypasses Sartre's criticism in one respect, while leaving Hegel exposed in another. If a certain *conceptual form* is what supplies the

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25 See Sartre's discussion of the «metaphysical» question, «Why are there Others?», BN 297-302/358-64.

26 PS §107/III:89.

27 Weight can be lent to this interpretation by attending to the course of Chapter IV and what follows in the *Phenomenology*. *Contra* Rousseau and Fichte, Hegel denies that the We is immediately realizable in reciprocal recognition, since his proclamation that *Geist* has made its appearance (PS §177/III:145) is followed directly by the master/servant dialectic. In so far as intersubjectivity *begins* in this asymmetry, Hegel may be thought to *accept*, at this initial point, the break of intelligibility between I and We asserted by Sartre. In other words, Hegel knows that the problem of intersubjectivity is insoluble with the resources at hand. The redirection of the enquiry in the second half of Chapter IV into stoicism and other ideologies of servile self-consciousness supports this construal. On this interpretation, Hegel's reply to Sartre's objection is therefore, as indicated, that it is

relevant dynamic, it must nonetheless be thought to have worked *through* individual self-consciousnesses (since it cannot be thought to have coerced them externally) – in which case, it has still be explained how an individual self-consciousness can relate (subordinate?) itself to the conceptual form, which *ex hypothesi* cannot be simply "the form of self-consciousness". Sartre's dilemma thus returns in modified form: If the conceptual form adduced by Hegel is exemplified in self-consciousness, then it must *consist in* (the form of) selfness, for self-consciousness has no other form; if not, then its relation to selfness can only be external, and intersubjectivity, even if it does not destroy the subject's reflexivity, cannot give it new reality.

Sartre's criticism of the *Phenomenology* is therefore that Hegel exploits an ambiguity between two ways – the one "Fichtean", the other "Platonistic" or "logical" – of telling the story of the advance from individual self-consciousness to intersubjectivity, in order to give an impression of continuous intelligibility: Hegel presents as self-consciousness' *own* self-motivated achievement, a change of shape which in fact must be engineered from outside it. The *Phenomenology* thus relies on the absolute idealism which it is supposed to be arguing us into.[28]

If Sartre is right about Hegel, and if Hegel's theory of intersubjectivity articulates our ordinary conception of intersubjectivity, then this concept is defective not in the weak sense

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only through a massive self-displacement, involving religion's solution to the Unhappy Consciousness, that self-consciousness can come to make intersubjectivity intelligible to itself – and find itself (when direct discussion of intersubjectivity is resumed at the beginning of the Spirit chapter) belonging to ethical substance, a member of a «living ethical» world (PS §§437-40/III: 325-6). Sartre can accept this claim of Hegel's if it is understood in conditional form: *only if* I were capable of becoming God, could I understand myself as belonging essentially to a We. (The issues raised here are endlessly complex and I am seeking not to defend the "logical" interpretation, but merely to indicate how it serves Sartre in his dispute with Hegel. For an account of the *Phenomenology* that limits self-consciousness to an epistemological *means* by which we arrive at a monistic ontology, see HORSTMANN 2006.)

28 Hegel «places himself at the vantage point of truth – i.e., of the Whole – to consider the problem of the Other»: if he resolves it so easily, «it is because for him there never has been any real problem in this connection» (BN 243/299-300).

that it mistakes the properties of its object, but in the strong sense that the concept lacks objective reality *a priori*.[29] In Kantian terms, the transcendental logic of intersubjectivity proves to be a dialectic, not an analytic.[30] Yet Sartre can hardly wish to be understood as saying that what is taken to be the *domain* of the manifold of individual self-consciousnesses in their projects of interrelation is *empty* – it is, after all, his own claim that this field exhibits its own *specific* pattern of non-coherence, which differentiates it from others and shapes the phenomena that populate it. How, then, should we think of intersubjectivity, according to Sartre: can it be conceptualized *positively*, i.e., as anything *more* than a projected but unrealizable object of natural consciousness?

The new concept which Sartre introduces, in language intended to counter Hegel, is that of «detotalized totality».[31] Now the obvious objection suggests itself, that, in order for there to *be* a *de*totalized totality, there must once have *existed* a *totality*, if not in time then in some other order, in the same way that the fragments of a broken vase imply a former vase. Sartre must of course deny this, since it amounts to a reinstatement of Hegel's position on the basis that, even if present conditions fall short, the possibility of actualizing the concept is guaranteed (the pieces give evidence, as it were, that a vase can be constructed from them).

The following shows how Sartre may meet the objection. In general, attempts to conceptualize the impossible result, on the one hand, in formulae that appear to refer to *impossibilia* – "Square circles are

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29 Similarly, according to Sartre, there is no such thing as "the mind", as ordinarily conceived. The reality of each individual for-itself is the reality of its consciousness, and when consciousness represents itself to itself as what Sartre calls a *psyche*, this entity is its own fiction: see BN Pt. II, Ch. 2, Sect. III, 158-70/205-18 (summarized in GARDNER 2009, 117-22).

30 In parallel with the way that Kant's Paralogisms of Pure Reason show the non-realizability of rational psychology's Idea of the soul *qua* object of cognition, limiting self-knowledge to transcendental apperception, Sartre shows the unrealizability of the "Idea" of intersubjectivity. The comparison may be pursued: just as Kant grants the Idea of the soul regulative significance, and objective reality for practical cognition, Sartre transfers the "Idea" of intersubjectivity into the practical context of social and political critique.

31 BN 252/309-10 and 299-302/360-4.

geometrically impossible" – while also, at the same time, enabling the formation of positive concepts, viz., of the attempts themselves: self-stultifying acts, necessary performative failures – the *thinking* of "I do not exist" or "Nothing is being thought", the *uttering* of "I am not speaking" or "I promise to break my promises" – are indexed by the *impossibilia* which they invoke (but fail to realize). In the same way, Sartre's «detotalized totality» can be understood as referring to a *sustained endeavour*, a «project», which must end in self-stultification but which has not yet come to its end, and to which existence must be attributed in so far as each individual for-itself is necessarily conscious of itself as engaged in this performance, and of each other for-itself as also doing so.[32] Now, if the manifold of for-itselves could be conceived not merely *distributively* but *collectively*, then it could be urged at this point, against Sartre, that objective reality can after all be given to the concept of their totality, simply by dint of its *grasping itself as such*. Again, Hegel would then be vindicated, for the «We» would have posited itself into existence, and Sartre's «detotalized totality» would have resolved itself into Hegelian spirit. But if Sartre is right, this is exactly what cannot be done, since the possibility of the collective unity of the manifold of for-itselves which this Hegelian story of objective spirit's self-positing presupposes at the outset, is exactly what needed to be established.

I acknowledged the elusiveness of Sartre's insight and its liability to aspect-switching. More may now be said about this. One natural response to Sartre is to wonder if he is not imposing, as necessary for the intelligibility of intersubjectivity, a condition which it is *logically* impossible to meet, reducing his "aporia" to a facile paradox: if intersubjectivity requires the numerical identity of my "I" with your "I", or something equivalent, then it is of course impossible. To the extent that we start with our actual knowledge of intersubjectivity, Sartre will inevitably seem to be making some such assumption. And since the nub of his argument – the dilemma he presents for

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32 Sartre of course freely admits such entities into his ontology; the for-itself *is* a contradictory project of seeking to become God.

intersubjectivism – turns on a failure to make intelligible the transition from individual self-consciousness to intersubjectivity, the reality of the former remaining beyond doubt, Sartre appears to be asserting the non-compossibility of self-consciousness and intersubjectivity: a claim which, we infer, must rest on some positive doctrine which, whatever it may be, cannot be as well grounded as our actual common knowledge that both individual self-consciousness and intersubjectivity enjoy reality. On this view, Sartre merely diverts us from the truly purposive philosophical task at hand, of developing a theoretical understanding of *how* exactly the two realities can co-exist, a question which Hegel at least attempted to answer.

If the reconstruction presented earlier is correct, then this response misconstrues Sartre (and thereby misses the opportunity to grasp the deeply perplexing character of intersubjectivity, in the same way that Fichte, Henrich shows, reveals what is deeply puzzling in self-consciousness). For Sartre does not deny that we are related to others internally, and that we intentionally contain one another: on the contrary, he asserts the greatest possible intimacy with the Other's interiority – «there is a sort of *cogito* concerning» the Other's existence.[33] That intersubjectivity has reality in *this* sense is a premise of his critique of Hegel and no more stands in doubt than do ordinary plain truths concerning the social properties of persons and other social facts. Sartre's thesis, rather, is that we have no insight into what makes this situation *possible*, and his argument rests only on the assumption, which is present in natural consciousness and endorsed by Hegel, that the ground of intersubjectivity must be accessible to individual self-consciousness. This is where philosophical reflection comes to a halt, according to Sartre: self-consciousness cannot without self-cancellation alienate itself in the way needed to rationalize the necessity of its relation to the Other.

It is reasonable to regard Part A of Chapter IV of Hegel's *Phenomenology* as seeking to give metaphysical reality to Rousseau's

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33 See BN 251/308; discussed in GARDNER 2005, 326-33.

problematic conception of the General Will.[34] Rousseau offers his account as normative political theory, yet it is hard to reconstruct his argument as a piece of strict contractarian reasoning, and if one thinks, as Hegel no doubt does, that Rousseau is right that the problems of normative political theory in general cannot be solved without delving into the foundations of selfhood and relations to others (in a way which yields moreover a less methodologically individualistic outlook than Kant's), then Hegel's endeavour to rationalize Rousseau is strongly motivated. In Sartre's terms, however, the familiar stumbling-blocks of Rousseau's political theory – how can I be *forced* to be free? how can the General Will be my *own* will? – become the problem of Hegel's metaphysics of intersubjectivity – how can I *be* the We? – meaning that Rousseau's problem, of grasping how it might be possible for us to live together, remains unsolved. To anticipate the following section, we can now begin to see how Sartre's aporetic thesis might have a positive aspect, for if taking natural consciousness' conception of intersubjectivity at face value – construing the sum of its commitments realistically and accordingly seeking their real ground – fails to make it intelligible, then aporeticity offers itself as at least allowing natural consciousness to sustain, on a *non*-realist basis, its commitments concerning what it means to live with-and-among others. The insight is also purgative, for once illusions of essential collectivity and foundational community have been eliminated, it is seen that the only possible foundation of collective life is *solidarity*, a condition which is not given but which can be constructed, through a self-overcoming of individual subjectivity motivated not by considerations of utility but by affirmation of freedom as the Good.[35]

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34 The problem emerges in the crucial sixth chapter of Book I of *The Social Contract*, when Rousseau advances from (i) individuality in the state of nature, by way of (ii) an «agrégation» of the forces of each, to (iii) a «forme d'association», in which (iv) each is «partie indivisible du tout», (v) this «tout» being «la volonté générale». Granting that the General Will is necessary for rational collective life, what underpins this movement? Utility, or non-fulfilment of need, is not a sufficient explanation.

35 The «absolute conversion to intersubjectivity» (SARTRE 1992 [1947-48], 406-7, 479) which yields solidarity with others, is Sartre's version of Rousseau's social contract.

4. Sartre's social theory

I noted at the beginning that Sartre's conception of aporetic intersubjectivity is associated with a pessimistic account of personal relationships, and the text of *Being and Nothingness* leaves little doubt that, in 1943, Sartre is heavily preoccupied with the sphere of intimate relations; the concrete practical and axiological upshot of the aporetic character of intersubjectivity, he explains, is that attempts to form purposive relations with others, even if they do not in fact come to grief, are essentially empty. The broader implications for ethical and political thought appear plainly nihilistic or at best Hobbesian. Marxist and other critics have hurried to point out the evident disputability of Sartre's ("bourgeois individualistic") assumption that dyadic personal relationships are ontologically and hermeneutically independent of broader social, historical and material structures – entities which, they argue, display a robust degree of reality, and attention to which gives us reason to reject the anti-intersubjectivism of *Being and Nothingness*.

   Against this assessment, I suggest that, though *Being and Nothingness* may seem to close philosophical enquiry into intersubjectivity, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* represents a continuous development of Sartre's earlier thought with respect to this topic,[36] in so far as Sartre discovers a constructive use for his earlier aporetic thesis in application to the social sphere, allowing him to appropriate the social realism of his critics on the Left. Properly substantiating this claim would require a lengthy discussion, but some things can be said briefly to make it plausible.

   It quickly becomes clear to readers of the *Critique* that Sartre regards social ontology as at once problem and solution, *explanandum* and *explanans*.[37] Theoretical problems of understanding history and society

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36   The standard view, by contrast, is that Sartre makes philosophical progress to the extent that he deserts his early anti-intersubjectivism; e.g., HONNETH 1995, 166-7.

37   Central passages are in part II of the Introduction, and in Bk. I, Ch. 1, of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. I am of course not offering here a summary of the *Critique*; my suggestion is just that the aporeticity of intersubjectivity is the precondition of its major

have their solution in grasping the peculiarly problematic *kind* of existence possessed by social entities, and this mode of existence is also the ultimate source of the problems of actual social and political existence: it mediates the factual causes of political conflict and domination, making them occasions for the irruption of a metaphysical problem underlying collective life, and lending them forms that make them resistant to rational solution. Thus for Sartre the decisive role reserved by classical liberal theory for individual self-interest, and by marxist theory for material factors, is taken by an ontological structure, which subsumes them: the Sartrean problem, concerning the heterogeneous types of existence exemplified by individual subjects and by social realities, is what threatens to make the (familiar, manifest) problems of conflicts of interest and material scarcity insoluble, and sets human history in motion – which, if it has a meaning, must lie in the resolution (in some sense that, Sartre is well aware, has yet to be specified) of the original aporia of intersubjectivity.

   What allows Sartre to go on to raise questions concerning the conditions of rational sociality and the total meaning of human history, without executing a metaphilosophical *volte face*, is essentially straightforward. It turns on a notion which had already been introduced in Part Two of *Being and Nothingness*, though not expanded on. Having argued that individual mindedness consists in consciousness grounded on freedom, which misrepresents itself as sharing in the unfree mode of being of the in-itself, Sartre acknowledges that the «psychic facts» into which consciousness degrades itself, once they have been constituted, acquire a quasi-reality; they are derivative and virtual, but not abstract or illusory.[38] Being-for-itself thereby surrenders to what is, in terms of origin, its own fiction. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Sartre turns to examine, as *Being and Nothingness* had only begun to do,[39] the quasi-autonomous

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   innovations – the «practico-inert», the role of scarcity, the shift to ternary relations, intersubjectivity's mediation by «things», and so on.

38   BN 158-9/205-6, 161-3/208-11, 170/218.

39   In the section on the «We»: BN Pt. III, Ch. 3, Sect. 3.

life of these pseudo-realized fictions, in order to lay bare their specific logic, which is inadequately grasped in the respectively idealistic and materialistic dialectics of Hegel and Marx. The failure of subjects to cohere intelligibly renders human reality ontologically vulnerable: it defines an empty space into which the entities which give the social and historical world its pseudo-substantiality project themselves. In this way the aporetic thesis provides the key to the new forms of social and historical explanation explored in Sartre's *Critique*.

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