

The Look and the Face: Comparison of phenomenological approaches to encountering the other and its ethical consequences in the works of Sartre and Lévinas¹

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Main goal of this paper is to address the issue of encountering the other in the works of two famous French phenomenologists – Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Lévinas, both of which are generally acclaimed for being among the first philosophers who introduced and propagated Husserlian Phenomenology in France. The principal aim of this article is to highlight and contrast their positions by means of exploring core phenomena which they use to describe the encounter with the other. On the side of Sartre I will focus on his notion called the Look (*le regard*) while on the side of Levinas I will draw from his analysis of the Face (*le visage*). Even though their stances on the issues of emergence and subsequent meaning of other human being are wildly considered to be if not straight opposite than at least radically different, I will argue that they might have much more in common than how it is generally perceived.

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1. Sartre and objectifying nature of the Look

The most compact formulation of the phenomena which I will be describing can be arguably found in probably the most renowned works of both authors – in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (*L'être et le néant*)² and Lévinas' *Totality and Infinity* (*Totalité et Infini*)³. Given the fact that *Being and Nothingness* was published eighteen years prior to *Totality and Infinity*, I will start with the exposition of “the Look” first. Placing this famous chapter in the third part of the book (out of four parts in total), it plays a key role in general section entitled *Being-for-others* (*être-pour-autrui*). To be able to grasp its content we will nevertheless be forced to briefly introduce main ontological outline which Sartre designed in the early parts of the book.

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² Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, Gallimard (Paris, 1943).

³ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, Le Livre de Poche (Paris, 1990).

The main figures of his conception are Being-for-itself (*l'être-pour-soi*) and Being-in-itself (*l'être-en-soi*). Being-for-itself can be understood as acronym for consciousness, but what is important is the condition that it is only applicable to consciousness in first person perspective. Throughout the whole book Sartre continuously insists on his claims that it can be also described as nothingness, temporality, contingency or pure activity. Opposed to that stands Being-in-itself which in his ontological spectrum represents that sort of being which is identical with itself, fundamentally non-temporal, passive and because of that also transcendent and impenetrable for the consciousness. The two poles can also be seen as subjective and objective ontological dimensions of our experience. The similarity of this scheme to dichotomies famed by other key figures in the continental tradition of course comes to mind. Just to name a few, we could find reminiscent aspects in husserlian noesis-noema theory as well as some resemblance to phenomenon-noumenon distinction made by Kant in the Critique of Pure Reason. Although it is not our goal here to explore the plausibility of such comparisons, I would like to advice caution before making any such comparisons let alone any conclusions. What however remains relevant for our cause here is that when we apply Sartre's terminology to the situation in which we perceive the other, we could be at first tempted to label the other within our perceptual field with the objective nature – as we would have done with any other material entity targeted by the acts of our consciousness. Is this attribution justified? Or does Sartre offer some way out of this obvious dead end?

First and foremost we have to take into account that Sartre says explicitly that the existence of the other is accessible to us also by other means than by cognition.

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Et un mot, pour qu'autrui soit objet probable et non un rêve d'objet, il faut que son objectivité ne renvoie pas à une solitude originelle et hors de mon atteinte, mais à une liaison fondamentale où autrui se manifeste autrement que par la connaissance que j'en prends.⁴

The quotation above seem to dismiss possible accusations of Sartre that the foundation of the access to the other occurs only in the two extremes of his basic ontological setting. How than, do we have according to Sartre access to the notion of the other? He says that there has to be a certain kind of specific *cogito* that arranges it.

[...] j'ai toujours su qu'autrui existait, que j'ai toujours eu une compréhension totale encore qu'implicite de son existence, que cette compréhension « préontologique » renferme une

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p. 292.

intelligence plus sûre et plus profonde de la nature d'autrui et de son rapport d'être à mon être que toutes les théories qu'on a pu bâtir en dehors d'elle.⁵

However, Sartre does not deny that the other can appear as an object in our experience for us, but he insists that I do not acquire my knowledge about the existence of other from these experiences. It is precisely the other way around – this knowledge about the other enables me to have this kind of experience.⁶ For the description of these experiences, Sartre uses vast array of examples. Perhaps the most famous of them presents us a situation in which somebody is watching a scene behind closed door by looking through a keyhole. And suddenly in the middle of his act he hears sound of footsteps behind him. According to Sartre this event should essentially transform the experience of the person standing in front of the door. His position changed from the position of the observer to one in which he is being observed, yet he himself does not see the intruder.

In Sartrean terms we could say that on the pre-reflective state of consciousness, there is no place for something as an “ego”, which in turn appears only for the reflective consciousness. But now, when we suddenly feel that we are being watched, an “ego” appears even at the pre-reflective level of consciousness.⁷ Exactly this phenomenon Sartre names “the Look”. The situation in which we are exposed to the look of the other implies another interesting discovery regarding the other – as Sartre says, an object cannot gaze. The situation in which I am seen only uncovers the other as a subject, who is a transcendent present in the world and is at the same time a condition of my own being as an object.⁸ According to Sartre the other does not objectify me in his own perception – but I do it myself as a result of me feeling being watched and the objective “ego” appearing for me on my own pre-reflective level of consciousness.

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En aucune façon, autrui ne nous est donné comme objet. L'objectivation d'autrui serait l'effondrement de son être-regard. D'ailleurs, nous l'avons vu, le regard d'autrui est la disparition même des yeux d'autrui comme objets qui manifestent le regard. Autrui ne saurait même pas être objet visé à vide à l'horizon de mon être pour autrui. L'objectivation d'autrui,

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p. 290.

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p. 319.

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, pp. 299, 300.

⁸ « Elle ne me découvre en effet que l'autrui-sujet, présence transcendante au monde et condition réelle de mon être-objet. » Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p. 315.

nous le verrons, est une défense de mon être qui me libère précisément de mon être pour autrui en conférant à autrui un être pour moi.⁹

This doesn't mean, however, that I would feel as if I was losing my freedom and becoming an object. My freedom is still there, but outside of the lived freedom, as an attribute prescribed to the being which I am for the other.¹⁰ This fixation on the pre-reflective level causes what Sartre calls a feeling of "threat" and is an essential structure of our Being-for-others. It comes from the feeling of dependability on a freedom which is not me.¹¹ Being an object of qualifications which I cannot influence nor know, in the eyes of the other I can also become a tool for achieving specific possibilities that are not my own.

Before we move on to Lévinas, let's recapitulate few important aspects of "the Look". It is based on original accessibility of the other, which is not founded by any sort of experience of cognition. To be able to experience "the Look" we do not even have to be actually seen by another human being. As we have seen in the example of somebody looking through a keyhole – that person could have just turned back and realized that it was not another human, but for instance a gust of wind. The transformation which occurred on his pre-reflective level of consciousness still took place and is according to Sartre the main effect of the encounter as well as a testament to a fact that our notion of the other precedes the experience. The process of objectivization which happens than as a result of a necessary distance between my Being-for-itself and my Being-for-other is subsequent event which does not provide any basis for my original sense of justification and plausibility of the other as such.

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2. Lévinas and *l'épiphanie du visage*

In his sole explicit remark on Sartre in all of *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas dismisses Sartre's theory rather quickly claiming that:

La rencontre d'Autrui chez Sartre menace ma liberté et équivaut à la défaillance de ma liberté sous le regard d'une autre liberté.¹²

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, pp. 307-308.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p. 302.

¹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p. 307.

¹² Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infinit*, p. 338.

While I find this statement to point out an important aspect of what Sartre says, it is hardly enough to accept it as a reason of refusal of Sartre's theory. To show why, I will now focus on Lévinas' own take on the matter. It will also hopefully help us understand the distinction between the two conceptions which are known for such different take on ethical matters. To begin, I will briefly introduce the basic terminology used in Totality and Infinity to depicture the subjectivity and the emergence of the other.

Human being is according to Lévinas an exteriority which is separated, that means it lives somewhere and from something. This separation fulfils itself as an interiority which relates to itself and holds itself from within. Its ipseity is based in its egoism and as an exercise of such egoism Lévinas calls it an identity par excellence. The self-relation is constituted in enjoying the things the subject lives from, by exercising pleasure. It is driven by desire which unlike need is not satisfied by reaching its target but by transcending itself in engendering another desire. It is in another words a desire of another human being. The subjectivity however contains something which cannot be deduced from its identity.

Elle se produit dans le fait invraisemblable où un être séparé fixé dans son identité, le *Même*, le *Moi* contient cependant en soi ce qu'il ne peut ni contenir, ni recevoir par la seule vertu de son identité.¹³

The thing Lévinas speaks about in the quotation is none other than infinity. He goes so far as to claim that even the very idea of intentionality presupposes the idea of infinity as a result of the fact that it operates with a notion of radical non adequacy. The prototype of the experience of infinity comes from the encountering the face of the other. The actual presence of such a being, which does not belong into the sphere of the same (*le Même*), according to Lévinas transforms the sphere of the same in its very foundation and by doing so shows its own statute as an infinity. It takes place exclusively in the relation face to face which highlights the situation of something "higher", as Lévinas puts it, contained in something "lesser". Only the idea of infinity enables us to maintain the relation of the same to the other while keeping its status as pure exteriority.¹⁴ He means however such kind of exteriority that at the same time confirms the above mentioned plurality by mutual connection. At the core of the relation face to face, lies a discourse which ties this plurality together.

¹³ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 213.

Lévinas repeatedly rejects those kind of those philosophical conceptions that aim to explain the other by trying to offer a view in which they could justify and incorporate both the same and the other into one perspective. It would mean to annihilate the extreme otherness, which in his own view the other possesses. As he repeats several times, those conceptions lead to advocating totality over plurality and by doing so they destroy any ground for possible ethical relation. If we try to trace his arguments back to their roots we will be confronted with what I think could be described as a phenomenological evidence in our experience. He continuously refers to an epiphany of the face (*l'épiphanie du visage*) and its experience as an evidence for the need of maintaining a plausible notion of plurality.

La séparation s'effectuant dans le concret, comme habitation et économie rend possible le rapport avec l'extériorité détachée, absolue. Cette relation, la métaphysique, s'effectue originellement par l'épiphanie d'Autrui dans le visage. La séparation se creuse entre termes absolus et cependant en relation, qui s'absolvent de la relation qu'ils entretiennent, qui n'y abdiquent pas au profit d'une totalité que cette relation esquisserait.¹⁵

We therefore cannot say that the other would pose a threat by opening a possibility of our objectivation as it was in the case of Sartre. While in his case the other may indeed pose a threat of alienating my non-existing identity, in the system of Lévinas the other is necessary to exercise it. What remains quite similar though is a fact that the other, once encountered, transforms by his presence the very subjective perspective I have about my own subjectivity. In his later book *Otherwise Than Being* Lévinas will even say that the language, which we just identified as the core connection of the plurality in the relation face to face, belongs to the order of the traumatic, in other words to a vulnerability or openness to the Other. On the ground of Totality and Infinity Levinas' position remains more restrained when he says that

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Le Discours est ainsi expérience de quelque chose d'absolument étranger, « connaissance » ou « expérience » pure, traumatisme de l'étonnement.¹⁶

It is not a look, but a speech by means of which the other addresses me and by doing so causes the foundation of my subjectivity to undergo the transformative experience. In the case of Sartre we had a nothingness which was shaken because it was confronted by its own “ego” on the pre-reflective level of consciousness as a result of feeling of being seen. Now in the

¹⁵ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 242.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 71.

instance of Lévinas the “Me” (*Moi*) is traumatized and even questioned by the alterity discovered by discourse taking place within the ethical relation face to face with the other who in his face represents the very idea of infinity.

Le fait que le visage entretient par le discours une relation avec moi, ne le range pas dans le Même. Il reste absolu dans la relation. La dialectique solipsiste de la conscience toujours soupçonneuse de sa captivité dans le Même, s'interrompt. La relation éthique qui sous-tend le discours, n'est pas, en effet, une variété de la conscience dont le rayon part du Moi. Elle met en question le moi.¹⁷

3. Ethical implications

We can see that even though both conceptions are quite different in some regard, they operate with underlying schemes that show number of similarities. Both work with an understanding of other which is based on more original way of plausibility than that which can be provided by cognition or experience. Even though Sartre as well as Lévinas use the description of the actual encounter with other as it happens in our experience as an example for their theories, they both do it in order to justify their claim that such experiences are possible only on the basis on some notion that precedes the actual encounter. To compare both positions explicitly I would like to mention Sartre's term ”preontological” by which he labels our consciousness of the existence of other. Lévinas on the other hand claims several times that ethic is prior to ontology. Could this ethical domain be the sphere to which Sartre situates our knowledge of the existence of the other?

Apart from this original level of justification of the ontic plausibility of the other they both seem to operate with a similar role of the encounter itself. For Sartre “the Look” causes alienation and thus possible objectivation of my subjectivity, it presents the consciousness which is by its own nature pure nothingness, with such a version of itself that shows identical and thus objective qualities. The discourse in the case of Lévinas is also connected with an establishment of objective basis which can be thematically grasped.

La présence d'autrui rompt la sorcellerie anarchique des faits : le monde devient objet. Être objet, être thème, c'est être ce dont je peux parler avec quelqu'un qui a percé l'écran du phénomène et m'a associé à lui.¹⁸

¹⁷ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infiniti*, p. 213.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infiniti*, p. 101.

The Face is for Lévinas something that transcends pure phenomanality, but even in the case of the Look Sartre says that one cannot perceive the eyes as an object while being affected by the Look.¹⁹ The phenomenal experience of the other denies a possibility to grasp him as only as objectivity. The specific meaning of the encounter implies that what we actually encounter is another subjectivity. The other as an object would not simply be able to spark the phenomena which occur during the encounter. In both cases, the encounter with other also serves as a constituting moment for the establishment of my freedom. Sartre raises an interesting claim which has often been often overlooked, according to which I can escape existential fear by projecting myself towards my possibilities and by founding my objectivization as non-determinant. All of that, says Sartre, can happen only if I come to conclusion that I am responsible for the being of the other. In the words of Sartre himself:

[...] j'échapperai à la crainte, dans la mesure où je considérerai mon objectivité comme inessentielle. Cela ne se peut que si je me saisis en tant que je suis responsable de l'être d'autrui.²⁰

4. Conclusion

In the light of this conclusion we could finally respond to the critique which Lévinas raised against Sartre. While for Sartre the other indeed poses a threat to my freedom, he at the same time serves as the only mean to achieve it. Given the fact that the others actually exist and we encounter them (what Sartre says is a contingent fact), my freedom would be doomed to get fixated in the gaze of the other. But the objectivation in his Look offers me also a way out. The alienated version of my Being-for-others can either cause me to submit myself to this given identity or to dedicate myself to negating it along will all other identic being which I am not and project myself towards my possibilities. In the end, says Sartre, subject actually needs the other in order to affect all structures of his being, which means that Being-for-itself refers to Being-for-others.²¹

¹⁹ The proximity of Sartre and Lévinas in this regard has been pointed out earlier, let me name among others Dan Zahavi. See Dan Zahavi, "Intersubjectivity in Sartre's Being and Nothingness", in *Sartre phénoménologue*, Revue Alter 10/2002, 2005, pp. 265-281.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p 372.

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, pp 260-261.

For Lévinas, the freedom is not any sort of experience or state that would occur to me, it is the production or emergence of the “Moi” itself.²² The main principle of such individuation is happiness (*bonheur*). This individuation, auto-personification and substantialization of the “Moi” takes place in the happiness of delight. But even for him to approach the other means to put my freedom in question.²³

Aborder Autrui, c'est mettre en question ma liberté, ma spontanéité de vivant, mon emprise sur les choses, cette liberté de la « force qui va », cette impétuosité de courant et à laquelle tout est permis, même le meurtre.²⁴

But in this situation, continues Lévinas, the commandment “Thou shalt not murder” brings forth the face in which the other manifests himself and by that he puts my freedom on trial. Its subsequent justification is than an exploit of my own non-benevolent approach to it and by exposing myself to infinite demand (*exigence infinite*). However, doing so does not provide my freedom as a possible result, rather than being an accomplishment, it lies in a continuous movement of life in the face of the fact, that I am not alone.²⁵ Even for Lévinas than, the freedom, while put in danger by encounter with the other can subsequently justify itself only thanks to the encounter.

To conclude I think it is safe to say that the encounter with the other plays key role in the process of founding subjective freedom in both of respective philosophical systems. While the freedom does not originate from the other, he rather puts it in danger. It is my following reception of this endangerment which than becomes an essential part of its justification and when done accordingly (depending on the author we refer to) ends up solidifying it. The similarities I have outlined, does not of course mean that the ethical philosophy of Sartre and Lévinas would be without some very fundamental differences. However, I think we had a chance to see that in their analysis of the phenomenal level of our experience, they both show certain degree of resemblance. Even though the evidence for such claim extends the scope of

²² Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 158.

²³ “Freedom” for both concerned philosophers apparently bears slightly different meaning, but to explain all the connotations in depth would exceed the space provided by this paper. For our case here is important that in both philosophical systems it is far from being some sort of an experiential state of mind, it is rather much deeply connected to the very nature of the subjectivity itself. For Sartre the subjectivity *is* freedom.

²⁴ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 339.

²⁵ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 340.

this presentation, I think the similarities we outlined can be viewed as a desideratum of their common Husserlian background, which is a theme for another paper.