Being and Otherness: Sartre’s Critique

Given his account of Dasein as a care-driven intentionally directed immersion in the shared world, Heidegger seems to avoid the difficulties associated with other accounts of social relations. For Heidegger, there is no private cabinet of consciousness to which others have no access—on the contrary, Dasein’s selfhood is defined by an existential self-responsibility that expresses itself in publicly articulated satisfaction conditions. Insofar as the Heideggerian self is rooted in this mineness of self-responsibility, however, it may be argued that his account suffers from a type of existential solipsism. Though this mineness only finds expression in the public arena of shared meaning, Heidegger defines this arena in terms of anonymity and averageness, undermining the sense that his reformulation of the Cartesian subject offers much in the way of resources for adequately characterizing the interpersonal encounter.

The question remains, then, as to the nature of intersubjectivity given such a view of selfhood: If Dasein exists as mine, in what sense can one genuinely or directly encounter others who are similarly defined by such a way of being? Is such a being-in-relation-with-others always secondary to Dasein’s mineness? If such relations always occur through the mediation of average and anonymous public roles and meanings, in what sense have I experienced the other in all her mineness? The problem, as we will see, is that Heidegger’s account seems to fall into the danger of viewing other Dasein merely as interchangeable representatives of the public norms and meanings through which we all pursue our particular abilities to be. Heidegger claims, for example, that the concrete meeting with the other on the street already involves an environmental encounter based on the commonality of the street. This “already” seems to indicate that the world’s commonality and publicity exist prior to any and every encounter with particular others. As we saw in chapter 1, Heidegger seems to explicitly endorse this view when he asserts that being-with belongs to Dasein regardless of whether others are actually present:

The phenomenological statement, “Dasein as being-in-the-world is a being-with with others,” has an existential ontological sense and does
not intend to establish that I in fact do not turn out to be alone and
that still other entities of my kind are on hand. If this were the inten-
tion of the stipulation, then I would be speaking of my Dasein as if it
were an environmental thing on hand. And being would not be a de-
termination which would belong to Dasein of itself by way of its kind of
being. Being-with would rather be something which Dasein would have
at the time just because others happen to be on hand. Dasein would be
being-with only because others do in fact turn up. (HCT 238)

If it is indeed the case that, for Heidegger, others are experienced merely
as ontic instances triggering an ontological determination of Dasein’s
being that “belongs to Dasein of itself by way of its kind of being,” how
can he explain our sense that this fundamentally social mode of exis-

tence depends on concrete encounters with others in all their unexpect-
edness, uniqueness, and particularity? Could we still say that someone is
“with” others if she had never directly encountered another?

Many thinkers have argued that Heidegger’s focus on the existential
ontological sense at the expense of the concrete encounter means that he
cannot account for the ability to encounter the other in all her par-
ticularity, and that this is, in fact, a—if not the—major flaw in his work.
Indeed, this criticism is so widespread that it has come to be accepted as
a kind of truism. In order to combat this view, it will be necessary to first
formulate the details of the criticism, however, and this chapter will do
so by considering the version of it presented in Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being
and Nothingness. Others have also analyzed and attempted to overcome
this weakness in Heidegger’s work—Emmanuel Levinas being an obvi-
ous example:

Beginning with Plato, the social ideal will be sought for in an ideal of
fusion. It will be thought that, in its relationship with the other, the sub-
ject tends to be identified with the other, by being swallowed up in a col-
clective representation, a common ideal . . . This collectivity necessarily
establishes itself around a third term, which serves as an intermediary.
[Heidegger’s] Miteinandersein [being with another], too, remains the
collectivity of the “with,” and is revealed in its authentic form around
the truth. It is a collectivity around something common. Just as in all
the philosophies of communion, sociality in Heidegger is found in the
subject alone; and it is in terms of solitude that the analysis of Dasein in
its authentic form is pursued.²

Despite the relevance of such later critiques, I will focus on Sartre’s for-
mulation of the difficulty not only because it was one of the first such
criticisms, but because it is one that has yet to be adequately answered. Thus this chapter will outline Sartre’s critique by analyzing his interpretation of being-with and the conclusions that he draws from it. I will then consider the alternate account that Sartre submits in its stead. As we will see, Sartre raises significant concerns that—if correct—would seriously undermine Heidegger’s position. His own account faces equally severe difficulties, however—difficulties that Heidegger’s own position can avoid. By articulating how Sartre interprets—and misconstrues—Heidegger’s concept of being-with, it will become clear that Heidegger has better resources with which to account for concrete encounters between individual selves. Though the details will only be examined in the following chapters once the temporal implications of Heidegger’s position are taken into consideration, it will become evident here that the nature of the Dasein-to-Dasein encounter is in fact much more complex than is typically acknowledged.

Sartre

Sartre’s assessment of Heidegger’s view is not entirely negative; indeed, he thinks that Heidegger made huge advances over Husserl and others insofar as Heidegger recognized that “my relation to the Other is first and fundamentally a relation of being to being, not of knowledge to knowledge.” As we saw in the previous chapter, Heidegger’s approach represents a step forward because he does not characterize the intentional relationship in subject/object theoretical knowledge terms, but emphasizes the deep pre-theoretical commitments and entanglements in terms of which we encounter the world and those who share it with us. Sartre, like Heidegger, rejects the tendency to “measure being by knowledge” (BN 329)—a tendency associated with figures like Husserl and Hegel. Instead, Sartre endorses Heidegger’s approach insofar as it avoids characterizing the other as an object of knowledge. Heidegger’s position represents progress, Sartre believes, because it recognizes that an adequate account of the experience of the Other must meet the following requirements: “(1) the relation between ‘human-realities’ must be a relation of being [and] (2) this relation must cause ‘human-realities’ to depend on one another in their essential being” (BN 330). In other words, the very nature of my being in the world must depend on other Dasein—it cannot be a mere theoretical knowing tacked on to a fundamentally solitary mode of being. Thus the ontological dependence of Dasein on the shared world appears to overcome all of the difficulties associated with
the Husserlian approach—not to mention the analytic analogues with
the “problem” of other minds.

Despite its promise, however, Sartre ultimately rejects Heidegger’s
approach to intersubjectivity for two reasons—one substantive, one
methodological. The methodological concern relates to the fact that
Heidegger merely stipulates being-with as a kind of existential given. In
other words, Sartre argues that Heidegger simply claims being-with as an
ontological determination that belongs to Dasein qua Dasein; he does
not show how this way of being is supposed to depend on the other Da-
sein who actually share the world with me. Thus Sartre claims that “in
his abrupt, rather barbaric fashion of cutting Gordian knots rather than
trying to untie them, [Heidegger] gives in answer to the question posed
a pure and simple definition” (BN 330). He defines Dasein as being-with
without examining the relationship to the specific others with whom Da-
sein must be.

Treating Dasein’s being as fundamentally social in this way means
that the presence or absence of other Dasein appears to be completely
irrelevant to whether or not my being-in-the-world is defined by being-
with. Thus concrete instances of encounter that fall under such an on-
tological determination do not affect the nature of the ontological de-
termination itself—but only the details of its factual fulfillment: “Even
Dasein’s being-alone is a being-with in the world. Being-alone is only a
deficiency of being-with—the other is absent—which points directly to
the positive character of being-with. The other is absent: this means that
the constitution of the being of Dasein as being-with does not come to
its factual fulfillment” (HCT 238). On Heidegger’s account, then, being-
with will always be one of Dasein’s ontological structures—regardless of
whether other Dasein are ever directly encountered such that this struc-
ture comes to its realization. As Heidegger explicitly claims: “Being-with
existentially determines Da-sein even when another is not factically pre-
sent and perceived” (BT 120/113). The experience of the commonality
of the street does not require there to actually be others experiencing this
street in common with me; the self’s relatedness to others applies regard-
less of whether other concrete persons are ever encountered.

But for Sartre, this type of account can only reach the abstract other
and cannot give us others in their concrete presence: “Even if this af-
firmation [that the existential structure being-with belonged to Dasein]
were proved, it would not enable us to explain any concrete being-with.
In other words, the ontological co-existence which appears as the struc-
ture of being-in-the-world can in no way serve as a foundation to an ontic
being-with, such as, for example, the co-existence which appears in my
friendship with Pierre” (BN 334). Because being-with is merely an on-
tological structure belonging to Dasein’s way of being, Sartre argues, it provides a type of a priori condition for the possibility of ontic encounters, thereby reducing the social dimension of being-in-the-world to a structure of the self. Individual others are secondary to the dimension of sociality that precedes them—the consequence being that Heidegger “never draws attention to the actual transcendence and alterity of the other, for once being-with is introduced as a structural element of Dasein’s being-in-the-world, the radical otherness of the other is ignored.”

Though Heidegger initially appears to overcome the ontological solipsism of the Cartesian subject, then, this is ultimately an illusion. Because Heidegger characterizes sociality as such an abstract, universal, and essential quality, he ultimately reduces the social dimension of being-in-the-world to an a priori structure of the self. Heidegger’s account is essentially “metaphysical solipsism in disguise” because possible modes of encounter are established in advance on the basis of the preexisting structures of self that permit the encounter to occur: “Because the Dasein is essentially being-in-the-world, projection unveils in every instance a possibility of being-in-the-world . . . This entails that along with understanding there is always already projected a particular possible being with the others” (BPP 278). The consequence of this shift to understanding the social as an a priori feature of Dasein’s being is profound, argues Sartre; the other is no longer experienced in terms of a direct face-to-face encounter with otherness but is experienced in terms of a mute and anonymous coexisting in worldly activities: “The original relation of the Other and my consciousness is not the you and the me; it is the we. Heidegger’s being-with is not the clear and distinct position of an individual confronting another individual; it is not knowledge. It is the mute existence in common of one member of the crew with his fellows . . . which will be made manifest to them by the common goal to be attained” (BN 332). Interestingly, Sartre here uses “knowledge” to characterize the direct encounter between individuals and to distinguish it from the anonymity of the Heideggerian mode of encounter. It was, however, precisely the use of knowledge as the model for intersubjective encounter that led Sartre to criticize Husserl’s account. This is extremely instructive, as we will see below, for it reveals the fact that despite his criticisms, Sartre continues to rely on the subject/object model on which such philosophies of knowledge are based. He thereby undermines his own ability to meet the intersubjective criteria that he himself established: namely, that “(1) the relation between ‘human-realities’ must be a relation of being [and] (2) this relation must cause ‘human-realities’ to depend on one another in their essential being” (BN 330).

It is clear from his criticisms of Heidegger, however, that Sartre
takes direct confrontation between individuals to be an essential feature of such a dependence-inducing relation of being. Heidegger fails this requirement by allowing the relation of being to be a type of a priori stipulation that can only establish anonymous modes of encounter and dependence in which others are not directly encountered but are only ever experienced through a type of “ontological solidarity” expressed in shared public norms and activities (BN 331). Thus my relationship with this or that other person is not “a frontal opposition but rather an oblique interdependence” (BN 331). As a result, Sartre argues, it is not my relationship with this particular other person that my being depends on in its being, but the anonymous das Man presence of there being others at all. Because Heidegger’s account characterizes the relation to the other in terms of an anonymous “we” rather than a “you,” it “can be of absolutely no use to us in resolving the psychological, concrete problem of the recognition of the Other” (BN 334). Heidegger only provides an account of the conditions for the possibility of sociality—immersion in a shared world through which we understand self and others—he does not account for its reality. By defining being-with as an ontological structure of my being, Heidegger cannot account for the ontic encounter with another Dasein in all the particularity of his mineness.

Possibilities of Heideggerian Response

Rather than denying this criticism regarding the essentially social nature of Dasein, Jean-Luc Nancy’s Being Singular Plural attempts to develop Heidegger’s account of being-with further in this direction, arguing that this commitment to essential plurality is not a weakness but a strength. For Nancy it is not merely Dasein that is fundamentally characterized by plurality, but reality itself. Thus he argues that the Heideggerian notion of being-with is an articulation of the fact that Being itself is fundamentally plural or “with.” It is, he claims, “indissociably individual and collective.”

Heidegger’s notion of being-with, properly understood, must be recognized as a deep challenge to traditional monist ontologies, since it forces us to recognize that “existence exists in the plural, singularly plural” (56). As a result of Heidegger’s notion of the fundamentally plural nature of Being, he claims, we can sidestep philosophical pseudo-problems by starting with a more compelling ontological picture. For Nancy, a feature of this reorientation is the fact that we must speak of the ontological condition of singular plurality as being prior to and independent of any sense of “individuated” Dasein. This conclusion is evident in Nancy’s
claim, for example, that “we” precedes and conditions the possibility of “I”: saying “we” presents “a stage [scene] on which several [people] can say ‘I.’ No ‘I’ can designate itself without there being a space-time of ‘self-referentiality’ in general” (65). Though Nancy appears to recognize that the self-referentiality of the “stage” requires a type of symbolization or representation that depends on Dasein’s “staging,” he is ultimately attempting to articulate a general ontology that is not tied to the disclosive possibilities of self-referential Dasein. He wants to speak, instead, of the “plural singular essence of Being” itself (55). Thus throughout the book he notes the priority of this “with” ontology: “Being-with-one-another . . . must support both the sphere of ‘nature’ and the sphere of ‘history,’ as well as both ‘human’ and the ‘nonhuman’; it must be an ontology for the world, for everyone” (53). By shifting to a position in which plurality belongs to Being itself, Nancy can thereby avoid the idealist or “subjectivist” tenor of the claim that it is Dasein that is fundamentally “with”—i.e., that all of Dasein’s particular encounters with others are shaped by its own ontological structure.

Nevertheless, Nancy’s development of Heideggerian themes fails in precisely the same methodological way that Sartre thinks Heidegger’s own position does. In other words, despite Nancy’s claims regarding the possibility of formulating such a sweeping ontology, he fails to offer any justification for the conclusion that he endorses. He does not explain the relationship between his claims about a “general ontology” and the manner in which it is nevertheless human being that is responsible for “saying we for the totality of all being” (3). His account presupposes that humans have a special status as those beings who “say we” for everything—but he does not account for how our “staging” and our language use enable being-with as a being-with. Indeed, he seems to blur the distinction between Being and the human tendency to bring Being to explicit presentation as what it is, arguing at various points that meaning is equivalent to one or the other or both. What is the difference between the we who expresses and represents this being-with and the world that is this being-with—and how do we access the latter if not by way of the former? As we noted above, Sartre’s methodological complaint about Heidegger’s work is its failure to offer any account of how Dasein’s being is dependent on its being-with others. Heidegger seems to simply assume it as an essential structure of Dasein itself: “To say that human reality (even if it is my human reality) ‘is-with’ by means of its ontological structure is to say that it is-with by nature—that is, in an essential and universal capacity” (BN 333–34). In Nancy’s case, this assumption expands to attribute the “with” to Being itself as its essential and universal structure. In either case, however, the claim needs to be justified. Though Sartre commends
Heidegger’s attempt to provide “a being which in its own being implies the Other’s being” (BN333), then, he condemns him for simply asserting that “the characteristic of being of human-reality is its being with others” (BN330). Though this approach certainly has the benefit of avoiding traditional monism and other-minds skepticism, the cost is high: claiming that it is not really a problem is hardly compelling for those who are not already committed to Heidegger’s view.\(^7\)

Nancy speaks of the necessarily plural nature of all reality—while the early Heidegger speaks of the necessarily plural nature of Dasein’s being insofar as it is always already with others\(^8\)—but the consequence is the same: both approaches will be subject to Sartre’s criticism. In the early Heidegger’s case, however, a chance for refuting it remains insofar as he avoids the metaphysical speculation of which Nancy’s account is guilty. He does so by tying our access to any “plural being” to the philosophical Evidenz available in Dasein’s first-person experience. Unlike Heidegger, Nancy does not examine the conditions for the possibility of such philosophical claims—namely, the nature of Dasein qua questioner—and therefore presupposes the legitimacy of the ontological claims that he makes and the methodology by which he reaches them. As a result, Nancy cannot overcome the difficulty brought to light by Sartre; rather, he expands on it by decoupling the conclusion from the phenomenological method that can be the only hope of its philosophical justification. Because Nancy’s appropriation of Heidegger only makes these difficulties more pressing, then, Nancy’s “development” of Heidegger’s work must be recognized as a misstep.

In contrast to Nancy’s assumptions, the meaning event can only be understood from the first-person perspective of phenomenological philosophy—even if the meaning to be uncovered is the singular plurality of Being itself. To speak of it otherwise is to slide into exactly the kind of metaphysical speculation in which phenomenologists are loathe to participate. Heidegger’s phenomenology is a testament to the fact that one can uncover the manner in which meaning arises in first-person experience without this meaning-event being reduced to idealist creation or realist causation. Though the Heideggerian formulation of the first-person experience of plurality will be profoundly different than that based on the science-oriented subject/object model, Heidegger’s respect for both Kant’s and Husserl’s insights into the structure of meaning leads him to reformulate—but not abandon—the methodological limits on metaphysical speculation that both thinkers took to be essential to philosophy. Thus if we are to reach the conclusion that Dasein is essentially “with others,” this conclusion must be legitimated through an appeal to phenomenological evidence. Though Sartre is right to argue that “the
relation between ‘human-realities’ must be a relation of being,” this relation must be available to first-person experience as such. As we will see, this is precisely the approach that Sartre takes in his analyses of Being-for-others. It is also characteristic of Heidegger’s own approach, correctly understood.

Sartre’s Response

In contrast to Heidegger’s position, Sartre argues that it must be the very contingency of the encounter that testifies to the otherness and transcendence of the other self in all her particularity and immediacy. Though it is tempting to claim that we are always already defined by a social way of being in the world, Sartre resists this conclusion in an effort to remain true to the fact that it is the existence of other Dasein in their concrete particularity that grounds this social way of being in the world: “We encounter the Other; we do not constitute him. And if this fact still appears to us in the form of a necessity, yet it does not belong with those ‘conditions of the possibility of experience’ or—if you prefer—with ontological necessity. If the Other’s existence is a necessity, it is a ‘contingent necessity’ . . . If the Other is to be capable of being given to us, it is by means of a direct apprehension which leaves to the encounter its character as facticity” (BN 336–37). The direct apprehension of the subjectivity of the other cannot rely on some prior ontological necessity and, true to his phenomenological commitments, Sartre shows this by turning to an analysis of the mode of experience that is capable of revealing the other’s subjectivity as such. As we have seen, such an experience cannot take the form of a relationship between a subject and its epistemic object, for this kind of object-orientation would preclude the other appearing in experience as a subject—which is precisely our aim here. The other’s subjectivity cannot be experienced as subjectivity if it only appears as an object of knowledge. This was precisely the difficulty with previous approaches:

The problem of Others has generally been treated as if the primary relation by which the Other is discovered is object-ness; that is, as if the Other were first revealed—directly or indirectly—to our perception. But since this perception by its very nature refers to something other than to itself and since it can refer neither to an infinite series of appearances of the same type—as in idealism the perception of the table or of the chair does—nor to an isolated entity located on principle outside my reach, its essence must be to refer to a primary
relation between my consciousness and the Other’s. This relation, in which the Other must be given to me directly as a subject although in connection with me, is the fundamental relation, the very type of my being-for-others. (BN 340–41)

For Sartre, the other’s subjectivity is encountered through a perception that does not objectify but refers. This referral is not simply an empty reference to that which is fundamentally beyond the possibility of encounter, however, some inaccessible “back-side” of the other’s person, as Husserl’s account in the Cartesian Meditations seems to imply. Rather, the other’s subjectivity is directly encountered insofar as the perception of the other refers to the relationship that springs up between self and other because of the encounter: “The appearance must be capable of revealing to us . . . the relation to which it refers” (BN 341). In other words, Sartre is arguing that my concrete encounter with the other subjectivity involves a referral to the relation in which this encounter places me; the perception of the other refers by its very nature to a primary mode of connection between me and the other qua subject.

This being-placed-in-relation occurs, Sartre claims, through an experience of the other as a “centering” of the world; the world seen by the other person presents a face that exists only from that person’s perspective. This fact is brought home to me not because both self and other look to some external object—the street seen from different perspectives, for example—as Heidegger’s position seemed to imply. There must be a more primordial experience in terms of which I could first come to conceive of the other as a being capable of such perspective-taking. As Sartre famously concludes, this more primordial experience occurs when the object on which the other takes a foreign perspective is me. Sartre’s phenomenological descriptions reveal that experiencing the other’s subjectivity involves an encounter in which I am placed in a relation such that I experience myself as an object seen in the world. I experience myself as having dimensions that are seen only by the other from her perspective. Thus the primary experiences that reveal the other’s subjectivity to me are, according to Sartre, ones in which I experience myself as vulnerable, embodied, limited, and exposed—experiences in which my easy mastery of the situation has been called into question.  

Sartre’s famous description of shame is a poignant illustration of exactly the kind of transformation experienced in the presence of the other’s look. When I am simply absorbed in my project of spying on people through the keyhole, he argues, I am not aware of myself as object in the world—I am instead immersed in the task at hand and the events revealed by it (BN 347). With the appearance of another, however, I am
exposed to a perspective that “confers upon my acts the character of a given on which a judgment can be brought to bear” (BN 348). Being “caught in the act” means I am ensnared in the other’s objectifying appraisal and defined by it. The point of particular interest here is that this self that is object only for the other is nevertheless still me; the immediate, overwhelming experience of shame is, Sartre argues, a type of confession to this: “I do not reject it as a strange image, but it is present to me as a self which I am without knowing it . . . It is the shame or pride which makes me live, not know the situation of being looked at” (BN 350). By engaging in this type of phenomenological analysis of the direct encounter with others, Sartre hopes to reveal the fact that through such encounters my identity is no longer mine alone: I am thrust into a type of ontological dependence on the other who gives me the dimensions of myself that are accessible only from her perspective. Thus Sartre notes that the encounter with another subject induces “essential modifications . . . in my structure” (BN 349) that I cannot predict or control. Such an account clearly fulfills Sartre’s criteria for genuinely intersubjective encounters: namely, that “(1) the relation between ‘human-realities’ must be a relation of being [and] (2) this relation must cause ‘human-realities’ to depend on one another in their essential being” (BN 330). For Sartre, this dependence is evident insofar as I cannot be who I am without the perspective of the other; the other’s look gives me dimensions of myself that I cannot otherwise access. And this dependence is not a cognitive one, Sartre contends, since it appears primarily on the level of pre-reflective consciousness in the form of other-oriented emotions like shame (BN 349). As a result, the mode that I am this self cannot be characterized as a type of preexisting a priori structure of self that I must face up to and lay hold of in its mineness. This is no ontological determination merely waiting to be brought to factual fulfillment through the appearance of this or that other. Rather, such experiences reveal a dimension of myself that I cannot determine in advance or completely appropriate as my own. Because of such immediate unwanted experiences of self—experiences that can only arise in the presence of another subject—I come to realize that “I am this being . . . [but] I do not found it in its being; I can not produce it directly” (BN 351). Not only does this type of encounter involve a direct referral to the primal relationship between myself qua object and other self qua subject, then; it is a relationship—and corresponding dimension of selfhood—that I must rely on the other’s presence to produce. Indeed, Sartre argues that it is the very contingency and facticity of such encounters—the fact that they are conditional and dependent—that can account both for the freedom of the other’s subjectivity, and for the fact that the encounter with this freedom creates a particular dimension of my
being—it does not merely trigger an existing one. In this sense Sartre believes he can account for “a being which in its own being implies the Other’s being” (BN 333) without falling into the difficulties that afflicted Heidegger’s position. Namely, Heidegger’s conclusion that I could experience the world as a with-world without having to directly encounter the particular others whose very contingency and resistance to my appropriation reveal that I am not the only centering perspective. Instead, argues Sartre, the fact that I am not alone is evident in the passivity and contingency of the intersubjective encounter—in the uncontrolled and involuntary nature of the self that I become in the eyes of the other whose arrival is beyond my choice or expectation.\(^\text{10}\)

Living in a shared world means that I am always open to a determination of self by another. For Sartre, the other’s free subjectivity manifests itself primarily as a limiting of my freedom, as the “solidification and alienation of my own possibilities” (BN 352) such that the possible ways for me to be are “infected” with the presence of the other’s possibilities:

For example, the potentiality of the dark corner becomes a given possibility of hiding in the corner by the sole fact that the Other can pass beyond it toward his possibility of illuminating the corner with his flashlight. This possibility is there, and I apprehend it but as absent, as in the Other; I apprehend it through my anguish and through my decision to give up that hiding place which is “too risky.” Thus my possibilities are present to my unreflective consciousness insofar as the Other is watching me. (BN 353)

This emphasis on transformation in the relationship to one’s possibilities is important for our discussion, since the experience of “objectification” that Sartre discusses is not a type of reduction to thing-status. Rather, he is here attempting to express the manner in which one self—a being that is suspended among possible ways to be—encounters others as such. With the presence of another being that is defined by possibility I am not only given aspects of my identity that cannot be chosen or appropriated, I am also forced to live my relationship to the world differently. I no longer own the situation but am forced to live “all my possibilities as ambivalent” (BN 354). Unlike Heidegger’s emphasis on the averageness of the intersubjective arena, then—the das Man tendency to engage in the predictable and the settled in advance—Sartre highlights the other’s unpredictability, her being engaged in projects that I cannot always foresee or control. Such freedom to deviate from the average and expected alters my own projects and transforms my relationship to possibility: in the presence of the other my possibilities become mere
probabilities (BN 354). I cannot naively rely on my different abilities to be, but must take the other’s possibilities into consideration because his presence both opens up and closes down different ways for me to be: “I perceive that these possibilities which I am and which are the condition of my transcendence are given also to another” (BN 352). Without these others the world would be present to me simply as a malleable arena in which to play out my projects—all possibilities would be mine alone. Because of the other person’s presence, however, my possibilities are called into question—they are illuminated as possible because they are experienced as “only mine.” For Sartre, then, it is the contingent, factic presence of other beings defined by possibility—able to transcend the situation toward another situation undetermined by the present one—that evokes a profound change in how I experience both myself and the world. This change occurs not on the level of knowledge but on the level of my very being, and it is precisely this change, Sartre argues, that testifies to the fact that I share the world with others.

Sartrean Difficulties

Despite the effectiveness of Sartre’s phenomenological descriptions, there are nevertheless serious problems with his characterization of the intersubjective encounter. The fundamental difficulty with Sartre’s approach is, unsurprisingly, the exact opposite of the problem that supposedly afflicts Heidegger’s position: namely, Sartre’s approach suffers from the inability to move from the ontic to the ontological. As we noted above, Sartre believes that it is the inability to move from the ontological category to the ontic particular that undermines the validity of Heidegger’s position. The problem, however, is that Sartre fails to recognize that a view of intersubjectivity in which the contingency of the ontic is so heavily emphasized will face extreme difficulties if it attempts to claim—as Sartre does—that there is an essential “relation of being” possible between the subjects of such an encounter. Sartre’s account cannot justify the claim that these concrete, contingent encounters essentially shape and define one’s very mode of being. Indeed, as we will see below, his effort to establish such an essential relation of dependence between subjects very quickly leads him to make conclusions with a decidedly Heideggerian ring.

A major source of difficulty is the fact that, on Sartre’s account, the relationship between self and other can only ever be that of objectifying and objectified. Because of his adherence to the Cartesian legacy
and its endorsement of the subject/object model for understanding the subject’s modes of encounter, Sartre only leaves room for an either/or picture of intersubjectivity: one is either transcending the other or suffering the other’s transcendence. In light of this, Theunissen claims that “on the whole, the alternative of action and passion is subjected to the domination of the subject-object split, from which, according to Sartre—this is the upshot of his observation—there is for me and the Others no escape: ‘It is therefore useless for human reality to seek to get out of this dilemma: either to transcend the Other or to allow oneself to be transcended by him. The essence of relations between consciousnesses is not Mitsein, it is conflict.’”

The consequence of such a view, however, is that in order to overcome my object status I must effectively strip the other of his subject status. Insofar as I refuse the other’s objectification of me and transcend him toward my own projects, the other qua free subject is lost to me—he becomes merely object. As Theunissen puts it, the price “I have to pay for the recovery of my self is the loss of the original presence of the Other.” But this leaves us with a highly unappealing account of the intersubjective domain, since it will essentially rule out the ability to simultaneously experience self and other as subjects. Such a view negates the possibility of any human relationship untainted by objectification—a conclusion Sartre himself seems to endorse with his cynical characterization of love as an interplay between sadism and masochism. Sartre claims, for instance, that “my being-as-object is the only possible relation between me and the Other” (BN 476) and that “we can never hold a consistent attitude toward the Other unless he is simultaneously revealed as subject and as object, as transcendence-transcending and as transcendence-transcended—which is on principle impossible” (BN 529).

But if it were indeed the case that the presence of the other qua subject is stripped from the world the moment that I transcend my own objectification, it seems unlikely that Sartre could explain the possibility of a shared world in which objects and activities are imbued with references to other subjects. The residue of a multitude of subjectivities is necessary for explaining the publicity of certain meanings, artifacts, and activities—a sense of publicity that obtains even when I am engaged in my subjective projects, free of the objectifying gaze of the other. Though Sartre criticizes Heidegger for characterizing the relationship among Dasein as simply “oblique interdependence” then, it seems to be precisely this type of interdependence that explains our everyday communal immersion in shared worldly things and projects.

Sartre himself seems to acknowledge the possibility of some kind of trace or residue of subjectivity remaining within the objectification
experience. For example, he implies that one retains one’s awareness of the capacity to reverse the objectification by turning the transcending look back upon the other. But I am never purely an object if I sense that I am able to recover my position of subjectivity by reversing the objectifying/objectified dynamic. Such a blurring of the subject/object divide demands a more complex characterization of the intersubjective encounter, however, than Sartre’s mutually exclusive oscillation between subject and object status allows. Indeed, later in Being and Nothingness Sartre will come to characterize such either/or modes of understanding as bad faith—a stance in which one attempts to avoid coming to terms with an acceptance of both aspects of one’s existence by fleeing from one to the other. The person in bad faith remains in “perpetual disintegration” so that she may “slide at any time from naturalistic present to transcendence and vice versa” (BN 99). By conceiving of herself as either all object or all subject, the person in bad faith facilitates the all or nothing game of the objectifying/objectified look.13

To address the possibility of another style of intersubjective encounter, Sartre considers the notion of a “we-subject.” Here he argues that despite the fact that it is possible to accomplish something like a community of subjects, Sartre argues that this communal being is still ultimately the accomplishment of a single consciousness and does not bring about a change in its mode of being itself: “The experience of the We-subject is a pure psychological, subjective event in a single consciousness; it corresponds to an inner modification of the structure of this consciousness but does not appear on the foundation of a concrete ontological relation with others and does not realize any Mitsein” (BN 550). In other words, anything like we-being is secondary and derivative of the more fundamental “being-for” that serves as the foundation of our consciousness of the Other: “It is necessary that the other consciousnesses which enter into a community with it should be first given in some other way” (BN 536). The derivative status of the “we” is evident, he thinks, in the fact that group dynamics fall into the exact same subject/object patterns he has already examined. Thus there can be an “us-object”—the community qua alienated and objectified—but this can only occur with the appearance of a Third whose gaze transcends self, Other, and the relationship between them—objectifying all of them in a single look. Even when speaking of such group consciousness, then, the complex dynamics of objectification and transcendence apply.14

Nevertheless, the later Sartre increasingly sought to understand the possibility of a community of co-subjects—not merely co-objects. Despite his claims that encountering the other necessarily involves a radical bifurcation of the self into either subject-seeing or object-seen,
his account nevertheless retains the possibility of an encounter that is in “good faith”—one that accommodates the simultaneity of our passivity and activity, our seeing and being seen. He makes this clear in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, where he argues that the praxis of a shared political project enables the development of a class consciousness displaying a kind of good faith and mutual recognition. This occurs when an oppressed group comes to unify itself through committed political action aimed at overthrowing its oppression. In doing so it becomes a genuine “us-subject.”

Based on the sharp dualism of his ontology, however, Sartre himself recognizes that the possibility of escape from the objectifying/objectified dichotomy requires a transformation of the individual on a deeper level than mere shared politics. As he notes in the famous footnote from *Being and Nothingness*: “These considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we cannot discuss here” (*BN* 412). Such “conversion” is also hinted at when he claims that “grace reveals freedom as a property of the Other-as-object and refers obscurely . . . to a transcendent beyond of which we preserve only a confused memory and which we can reach only by a radical modification of our being; that is, by resolutely assuming our being-for-others” (*BN* 521). Such a radical modification or conversion of our being is discussed in *Notebook for an Ethics*, where Sartre argues that conversion involves rescinding the fundamental pre-reflective project in which one attempts to be simultaneously fully being-in-itself and fully being-for-itself. To undergo conversion is to forego this doomed project in favor of an “authentic” stance toward the type of being that I am. The problem with making use of such notions as authenticity and conversion, however, is that it forfeits the possibility of genuine subject-to-subject encounters in everyday experience. Recall that dependence on first accomplishing authenticity was a problem with most accounts of Heideggerian intersubjectivity. Insofar as our purpose is to account for the recognition of the other that must occur in everydayness—and not merely those relationships enabled by the rarefied condition of conversion or authenticity—we cannot make use of such dimensions of Sartre’s approach. Instead, we are left with the subject/object conflict of the pre-conversion self.

But as we can now see, there are problems facing such an account. First, we must consider how the world itself comes to be experienced as a genuinely shared arena such that it speaks to me of the presence of others—even when those others are not present to grant me the experience of objectification that is the condition for my experiencing another subject as such. One can hardly claim that the boat on the shore or the
farmer’s field produces a feeling of shame in me. How, then, can there be a residue of subjectivity clinging to public objects such that these communal spaces and things—the marketplace, the train, the painting—speak to me of the presence of other subjects who are nevertheless absent? If the presence of the other qua subject is torn from me the minute I transcend it toward my own free subjectivity, then so too is all trace of the other’s subjectivity lost to me in transcending the very objectification that was necessary to experience any dimension of foreign subjectivity. Thus the contingency and particularity of the Sartrean encounter makes the establishment and maintenance of such intersubjective arenas and artifacts impossible.

A related difficulty arises when Sartre attempts to account for the possibility of being mistaken about whether another person is present. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre examines the case in which someone suddenly hears a sound behind him while spying through a keyhole. He is frozen in an experience of shameful objectification, assuming that he has been caught in the act by the gaze of the other. In reality however, this “other” who has “seen” him is simply the wind. In such a case, is one in fact undergoing “the Look”? Considering his emphasis on the radically a posteriori and contingent nature of the intersubjective encounter, one would assume that Sartre must dismiss this feeling of being objectified before another subject as not really such an experience after all because there is *in fact* no other subject present. Though this would be a counterintuitive conclusion—that despite all of the phenomenological evidence indicating it is the same type of experience, it *cannot* be an experience of objectification because the concrete other actually looking at me is absent—it would be the conclusion most consistent with his position. Rather than dismissing the experience evoked by the sound of the wind as a false sense of being-seen, however, Sartre concludes that the experience is in fact one of objectification before another subject—but in this case the other subject *just happens to be physically absent*. Indeed, in the case of such mistaken experiences of being looked at, he claims:

> Far from disappearing with my first alarm, the Other is present everywhere, below me, above me, in the neighboring rooms, and I continue to feel profoundly my being-for-others . . . if each creak announces to me a look, it is because I am already in the state of being-looked-at. What then is it which falsely appeared and which was self-destructive when I discovered the false-alarm? It is not the Other-as-subject, nor is it his presence to me. It is the Other’s *facticity*; that is, the contingent connection between the Other and an object-being in my world. Thus what is doubtful is not the Other himself, it is the Other’s *being-there*; i.e., that
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concrete, historical event which we can express by the words, “There is someone in this room.” (BN 370)

But recall that it was only the concretely objectifying gaze of others that could give me a dimension of self unavailable in their absence—a dimension of self whose very contingency attests to the dependence of my being on the presence of the other. Sartre’s reference to the “presence” of an Other despite her absence in concrete facticity, then, is not a solution that is available to him—at least if he is to continue to account for the ontological dependence that was the key to his improvement on the epistemological model of intersubjectivity.

If the experience of another subjectivity does not require the concrete encounter with another factic subject, then in what way has Sartre moved beyond Heidegger’s account? Has Sartre escaped the critiques he has leveled against Heideggerian being-with? It is far from clear that he has. Indeed, Sartre himself seems to fall into a kind of a priori account of the experience of the other: “My certainty of the Other’s existence is independent of these experiences and is, on the contrary, that which makes them possible” (BN 280). Thus in attempting to provide an answer to the “absent other” issue, he illicitly imports what he took to be insufficient Heideggerian solutions. As Theunissen queries, “How can the indubitability of the ‘Other itself’ be saved when the ‘historical and concrete event’ of being looked at sinks into mere probability?” The very contingency and facticity that differentiated Sartre’s position from Heidegger’s has been abandoned; “now, on the contrary, Sartre defends the indubitability of the subject-Other at the expense of its facticity.”

The possibility of denying that his position falls into a type of Heideggerian social aprioricity may still be open to Sartre, however, if he characterizes such instances of the residual or mistaken presence of other subjects as somehow remnants of a primal concrete encounter that inaugurates the experience of oneself as seen object in the world. The very first encounter with the factually present other’s look may grant me a dimension of the self that was unavailable to me without it, but this encounter changes me such that this dimension is henceforth always present in some manner, regardless of whether there is a concrete other looking at me right now. In other words, the original ontic encounter does have ontological implications. In order to adopt such a position, however, Sartre’s approach would be required to change rather significantly—he would have to renounce his characterization of the intersubjective encounter as a type of complete and constant oscillation between objectifying and objectified and introduce the possibility of another type of encounter. As it stands, Sartre’s characterization of intersubjectivity
along sharp subject/object lines means that the encounter with another subject cannot change one essentially: the ontic encounter has no ontological implications unless Sartre reformulates the encounter such that the experience of being objectified brings with it a transformation in what it means for me to be a subject.

What, then, can we conclude on the basis of our Sartre discussion? It seems clear that the role of the freedom and contingency of the other person must be an essential dimension of the intersubjective encounter, if, like Sartre, we agree that “we encounter the Other; we do not constitute him” (BN 336). With notions such as shame, Sartre powerfully expresses this idea—that the presence of the other grants me a dimension of my being that is unavailable through my own constituting powers. But if such encounters are to involve a type of dependence of being between subjects—such that my very way of being in the world is fundamentally altered by these encounters—their effect must have greater staying power than Sartre’s position can accommodate. In its fleetingness and its lack of necessary connection to the concrete presence of the other, Sartre is ultimately unable to support his own claims.

By taking our cue from the above notion of ontic events of encounter that have ontological implications, however, we may be able to navigate a way between the extremes of Sartre’s pure contingent facticity—an account that cannot do justice to the residue of social presence that remains despite the absence of concrete others—and the danger of losing the individual other in the anonymity of a priori categories. As I will argue extensively in the chapters to come, it is, in fact, just this position that is the correct interpretation of what Heidegger means by *Mitsein*—an ontological dimension that is ultimately dependent on ontic encounters. In order to demonstrate how a proper understanding of Heidegger’s ontological category being-with will allow us to avoid these extremes, however, we must discover the sense in which this dimension of Dasein’s way of being is to be understood as an a priori category at all. As I will show in the following chapter, Heidegger’s existential analytic must be understood as a type of reformulation of the traditional concept of the a priori—a reformulation that more adequately characterizes the other’s presence as what Sartre calls a “contingent necessity” (BN 336). As Kisiel points out: “Fundamental ontology is not to be developed from generic universals which indifferently subsume their instances, but rather from the distributive universals of ‘in each case mine’ according to the circumstances. It requires universals which maintain an essential reference to their differentiation into ontic instances (SZ 42).” Examining the nature of such an “essential reference” will be the project of chapter 4.