

Transcendence and Intersubjectivity: Sartre and Levinas

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Abstract

It is notable that Sartre and Levinas both present accounts of human subjectivity characterised by a longing for fulfilment. Both these thinkers introduce the concepts of the world, the human Other, and God into their respective accounts of human subjectivity. In considering their contrasting analyses of these three concepts, we are presented with two differing interpretations of subjectivity characterised by longing. In particular, they present different understandings of how subjectivity is engaged in movements of transcendence.

The primary aims of this essay are to present Sartre and Levinas' account of human subjectivity, and further, to outline how the world, the Other and God are understood by each to shape their interpretations of the nature of human subjectivity. A clarification of the different understandings of transcendence that are consequently employed by the two thinkers will also be sought.

The essay further aims to analyse and evaluate the two accounts presented. This task focuses on analysing comparatively Sartre and Levinas' respective accounts of intersubjectivity (which includes the subject's relation to both the human Other and to God). This includes an evaluation of how each thinker understands the human subject to be characterised by movements of transcendence.

I will present this exploration of ideas first by looking at the way that Sartre and Levinas minimally understand human subjectivity, as world-involving. I follow this with a presentation of each thinker's fuller picture of the human subject characterised by a longing for fulfilment. In proceeding to evaluate the accounts, I will present and then analyse the thinkers' respective accounts of the human Other, followed by a similar presentation and analysis of their respective accounts of God.

In evaluating Sartre and Levinas' claims, I hope to present some of the limits of both thinkers' accounts. A secondary aim of this essay is to highlight, in the light of these limits, some ways that study in the area of human subjectivity, and its relation to intersubjectivity, might be profited.

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Introduction

In this paper I am considering the way that certain key concepts, within a particular body of philosophical literature, have been taken to condition an understanding of the nature of human subjectivity. The question of the nature of subjectivity pertains to that which characterises a subject *qua* subject, and the question of *human* subjectivity narrows the scope accordingly. What are the features of human subjectivity that make for its full characterisation? Which terms need to be employed to make such a characterisation possible?

I will approach these questions through comparative analysis of the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas. For both these thinkers, the concepts of mind-independent objects, the human Other¹, and God all play a role in their conceptions of human subjectivity, and I will limit my project here to understanding and evaluating the way that they employ these terms specifically. I will conclude that there are insights to be taken from both thinkers, but that Levinas' account of *intersubjectivity*, which encompasses his understanding of how the subject relates to both the human Other and to God, has more to offer than Sartre's account of intersubjectivity. However, I will note some problems found in Levinas, and will suggest that his account of intersubjectivity, and consequently his account of subjectivity, might be broadened whilst retaining some of his key insights.

I will focus my analysis on each of the writers' primary texts on the issue – Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, with recourse to other texts as supplementary to the core theories found in each of these. Each of these primary texts contain difficult key terminology which must be explained in order that their claims can be properly analysed.

The picture of human subjectivity according to each thinker will be built up as I consider their uses of these three terms: the world of objects, other human subjects and God. Both thinkers take these terms to be necessary in a proper understanding of the nature of the human subject. Specifically, both understand these terms to have a bearing upon the nature of subjectivity as structured by *transcendence*, which I will elucidate and consider throughout the essay.

¹ Both Sartre and Levinas use the term 'the Other' to refer to other human subjects, and I will adopt this terminology.

In **chapter one** I consider what it means for Sartre and Levinas respectively to understand subjectivity as world-involving, which is to consider the nature of subjectivity as it relates to the world of objects. In **chapter two** I will look at how both thinkers identify an experience of *longing for fulfilment* to play an important role in an understanding of the nature of human subjectivity, and will introduce their respective concepts of longing.

In **chapter three** I will look at how both thinkers introduce the concept of the human Other into their accounts, and in **chapter four** I will begin to evaluate the pictures of intersubjectivity on offer. In **chapter five** I will examine how Sartre and Levinas introduce the concept of God into their understanding of the human subject, and in **chapter six** I will evaluate their respective positions. In the case of the concepts of both the Other and God, their introduction provides the resources for understanding the longing for fulfilment that characterises the human subject. In different ways Sartre and Levinas include claims here both about what it is that human subjectivity is like, and also what it should be like. I will be evaluating both the factual and the normative claims.

Many parallels between the two accounts will be discovered, alongside some radical differences; this comparative study allows us to analyse and evaluate these different positions. I will argue that while Levinas offers a fuller account of human subjectivity than Sartre, there are things left wanting from both articulations of human subjectivity. In **chapter seven** I will indicate some ways that I think Levinas' account might be fruitfully expanded, which stand in need of further investigation.

Comparative analysis of Sartre and Levinas' accounts, particularly in light of the fact that both understand human subjectivity to be characterised by longing, has much to offer. This essay hopes to offer something in the context of both Sartrean and Levinasian scholarship, as well as bringing to light important questions regarding the nature of human subjectivity.

Chapter One

Transcendence and Self-Transcendence

Using Sartre and Levinas, I am considering the way that the world of objects, other human subjects and God might feature in an understanding of the nature of subjectivity. These terms can be understood to structure subjectivity as engaged in *self-transcendence*. I take this term from Merold Westphal, who defines it as ‘the movement that draws us away from our...preoccupation with ourselves.’² To use this general definition is to understand self-transcendence as a verb, as a *movement* or comportment on the part of the subject.

As this definition is wholly in terms of movement on the part of the subject it presupposes nothing about the existence of anything which is moved towards. To claim that the world, other subjects and/or God exist is to claim that these terms pertain to things that have a *mind-independent reality*. Mind-independent reality is discovered rather than constructed by the subject. We might talk about mind-independent reality as ‘external’ reality. However, the vocabulary of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ is or can be an unhelpful way of speaking, because it suggests a problematic gap between the subject and that which she transcends towards, leading to difficulties in trying to understand how the subject can possibly be related to anything outside herself.

I am using the term ‘transcendence’ to refer to a movement of self-transcendence which puts the subject in contact with some mind-independent reality. If the subject’s movement does not put her in touch with a mind-independent reality, either because the term in question does not refer to a mind-independent reality, or because the movement fails to reach it, then any movement on the part of the subject that fits the criteria of being drawn away from preoccupation with itself remains at the level of self-transcendence only.

To note, I am assuming that nothing rules out this understanding of transcendence as impossible in principle. I am not engaging with a framework that understands ‘mind-independent’ to mean ‘lies beyond any possible content of the mind’, so will assume that it is possible for the subject to be related to reality

² Westphal (2004) p2

‘beyond’ her. A picture which places mind-independent reality out of reach of the subject presumes upon a metaphysical framework where ‘internal’ and ‘external’ reality have already been decreed to be incapable of being related, as above.

In identifying the ways that these particular terms (world, Other and God) can be said to structure subjectivity as self-transcendence there are therefore two questions that can be asked: (a) *How*, and to what extent, can it be said that the subject self-transcends? In what way do the concepts in question make possible a picture of the subject as being drawn away from preoccupation with self? And, (b) is this self-transcendence an instance of transcendence? That is, is it a movement that puts the subject in touch with a mind-independent reality?

Sartre and Levinas both identify movements of self-transcendence on the part of the subject, and refer to the concepts of the world, the Other and God to flesh out what this means. They have different understandings of how questions (a) and (b) above should be answered, that is, they have different understandings of how the subject self-transcends with reference to different terms. Specifically, in both cases this affects their understanding of human subjectivity characterised by a longing for fulfilment. Further, they conclude differently as to when a movement of self-transcendence is an instance of transcendence. I will be evaluating the merits of both thinkers’ accounts of transcendence.

Subjectivity as World-Involving.

In engaging with Sartre and Levinas’ accounts of subjectivity, I take for granted, as they do, that subjectivity does not exist in a vacuum as a worldless Cartesian ego. Minimally, subjectivity must be always understood as *world-involving*. I do not intend to argue for this position here, but want to assume that any picture of human subjectivity worth taking seriously must be world-involving. That we are ‘thrown’ into the world is not in dispute, although accounts of how the subject is best characterised as world-involving differ.

I understand both our protagonists to have realist accounts of world-involvement. That is to say, both understand the objects of the world to have a mind-independent reality in the sense articulated above: I do not construct the reality of objects but they are there to be discovered. That an object is perceived, for example, does not mean that the reality of the object can be reduced to the act of perception.

I want to assume that realist world-involving accounts of subjectivity are meritorious. I am not attempting any arguments for realism, nor am I attempting to demonstrate that either thinker's characterisation of world-involvement can be argued to simply from the fact that a world-involving conception of reality is embraced.³ I will not evaluate in-depth either thinker's account of subjectivity as world-involving in this chapter, but will save comparative analysis and evaluation for further chapters, where a bigger picture of each's account has been built up. These initial pictures are needed in order to understand the foundations upon which both build fuller conceptions of subjectivity.

Sartrean Being-For-Itself

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre undertakes a project to characterise the reality of the objective world, the reality of the human subject, and the relationship mediating these two realities.⁴ Sartre understands his project as an investigation of *being*. He explores which types of beings constitute reality, and further, investigates the *way* that they exist, that is, what their existence is like.⁵

Sartre understands there to be two distinct types of being, which he calls *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*. Being-in-itself is non-conscious being. The being of objects is therefore being-in-itself. Sartre understands the being of objects to have a 'transphenomenal' reality (or, in the language I am using, a mind-independent reality), but he emphasises that an investigation of phenomena *is* an investigation of being. This is simply a reiteration of a sensible realist picture where our experiences can put us in touch with mind-independent reality.

Sartre characterises being-in-itself by its 'completeness'. For something to exist as being-in-itself, it is defined by its boundaries and 'sealed-up' within them. Being-in-itself does not push beyond its boundaries. Being-in-itself cannot self-transcend because it is opaque to itself, inert, and incapable of any internal movement. This characterises something of what it is like to be 'object-like'.

³ I am not arguing from world-involvement to intentionality on Sartre's behalf, for example.

⁴ I am considering the Sartrean *Being and Nothingness* model only. Due to the scope of my project I am not considering any claims made in his other texts which may be interpreted as conflicting with the picture in the primary text.

⁵ See McCulloch (1994) pp2-3.

If something exists as being-in-itself it is capable of being comprehended as having a *nature* or an *essence* which determines it. I can grasp its meaning. All objects, of the tables-and-chairs variety, have these characteristic features – a chair has a limited definition that can be grasped, for example. As I will consider further, human beings have an existence that is object-like and so exist as being-in-itself, but this is not the only mode of being in which human beings exist.

Being-for-itself is Sartre's term for human subjectivity. This includes an understanding of subjectivity simply as consciousness. For Sartre, consciousness is always directed towards the world of being-in-itself. This is the thesis of *intentionality*, which states that all consciousness is 'consciousness of'.⁶ Consciousness is always directed towards being-in-itself, but, Sartre claims, consciousness is itself empty. That my consciousness is directed towards tables and chairs does not mean that tables and chairs are 'in' my consciousness – there are no mental intermediaries between mind and world, and there is no 'content' to consciousness in this sense. At the centre of the human subject is a *nothingness*, or non-being. The relation between being and nothingness has nothingness oriented towards being, as consciousness goes out towards objects.

Further, Sartre would have us understand that as consciousness flees itself towards the world, this is a relationship of *negation* or *nihilation*. Consciousness is the nihilation of being-in-itself. He claims that in being directed towards being-in-itself there must be some action of negation at work. At the level of understanding, for example, the objects of consciousness are intelligible because the subject grasps them as having limits, as being bounded by what-they-are-not. All understanding of objects therefore involves an understanding of what they are not.

The human subject's engagement with the world is not to be understood merely as consciousness of objects, however. For Sartre, world-involving human subjectivity is distinguished by its *radical freedom*. His conception of freedom is central to understanding the account of human subjectivity that he proposes, and so needs spelling out. It is central in so far as Sartre takes freedom to be constitutive of lived subjectivity, which shapes his whole account of human reality. Sartre claims

⁶ Sartre makes reference to the Husserlian understanding of intentionality as articulating something correct about the structure of consciousness, although, as we have noted, Sartre advocates a realist conception of intentional objects in opposition to Husserl's idealism, which Sartre takes to be inadequate.

that human freedom is also structured as an engagement of nihilation, which I will elucidate.

Sartre says that freedom is ‘an inner structure of subjectivity.’⁷ In fact, he equates being-for-itself with freedom itself:

‘What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of ‘human reality’. Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently: there is no difference between the being of a man and his being-free.’⁸

He tells us that nothingness is the origin and foundation of freedom. This sounds obscure but on following his elucidation this claim is made clearer. ‘Nothingness’ does not only pertain to the fact of the emptiness of consciousness, but also to the *experience* of nothingness. Understanding what Sartre means here is aided by thinking about the experience of *possibility*. While sitting in the library I can recognise the possibility of leaving to go for a walk, for example, or the possibility of taking a nap. In entertaining these possibilities I experience what I *lack* in my current state. I engage with what is *not yet*, but what could be if I choose to actualise either of these possibilities. This is an experience of nothingness, in Sartre’s terminology. As McCulloch puts it: ‘Given our plans and aims, the world appears full of nothingnesses such as unrealised but realisable possibilities.’⁹

In actualising unrealised possibilities I am engaging in a negation. Whatever circumstance I find myself in is full of what it is not – that is, full of unrealised possibilities. Being-for-itself continually recognises this array of possibilities and, from them, works to make the unrealised actual. This is the exercise of my freedom. ‘An act is a projection of the for-itself towards what it is not,’¹⁰ Sartre summarises. We negate what *has been* in order to make possible that which is *not yet*.

The past we negate Sartre identifies as one of our *facticities*: that which belongs to the human person as constitutive of her status as being-in-itself. These are object-like features of the human person, features by which we can understand ourselves as having a ‘nature’, or a completed identity.¹¹ We can look to past choices to give us a definition of ourselves that we can grasp. In the past we may, for

⁷ Sartre (2003) p49

⁸ Sartre (2003) p49

⁹ McCulloch (1994) p33

¹⁰ Sartre (2003) p457

¹¹ Sartre outlines many other facticities, such as our body and our environment, as well as our past.

example, have identified with a particular ideology, formed a certain habit or made a home in a particular place. We can understand ourselves as having an identity in terms of these past choices.

However, in so far as we understand ourselves as having a nature or an essence which determines us, then we do not engage with a lived experience of freedom. We cannot have our lived subjectivity in the past, only in the present, directed towards the future. Only in the present can choices be made and freedom be experienced. As free, the subject therefore relates to the past as something to be negated and overcome. The negation of the past is the person *qua* for-itself relating to herself as being-in-itself by means of her freedom.

At any moment we can overcome any seemingly 'fixed' identities chosen in the past, by, for example, rejecting the ideology, unmaking the habit or remaking the home. This is the essence of human freedom – 'freedom is the human being putting the past out of play.'¹² That things have been a certain way in the past life of the human subject holds no sway over how things might be in the future, given the power possessed by the human subject to 'put out of play' what has been the case.

To summarise, Being-for-itself is structured by its capacity to negate, and what is negated is always being-in-itself. Being-for-itself is to be understood definitionally as the negation of being-in-itself, and this negating *is to be identified as freedom*.

What is striking about Sartre's account of freedom is how radical it is in its force and its scope. Convictions, decisions and supposed influences from the past have no power over the human subject, unless she decides to let them. Being-for-itself is structured with the capacity, and so the power, to negate all such as these. 'There is nothing inevitable about my current aims,' McCulloch summarises. 'I am free...to change my aims in any way at any time.'¹³ Of a conviction formed in the past Sartre says that in the present 'I must remake it *ex nihilo* and freely.'¹⁴ Sartre gives the example of a 'reformed' gambler, who may have made the resolution of 'not playing anymore' in the past, but faced with the gambling tables the possibility of gambling is as live a possibility as that of not gambling. 'The original decision is

¹² Sartre (2003) p52.

¹³ McCulloch (1994) p40

¹⁴ Sartre (2003) p57

set to naught,¹⁵ and he must choose again what to do. This is a double negation – the projection forward into a future of not-yet potentialities is the capacity for total break with the past, the choosing to be what we currently are not. ‘My past does not force me on, my future does not draw me forward. I am separated from both [by my] freedom,’¹⁶ says Sartre.

To emphasise, this radical freedom *is* the experience of lived subjectivity. ‘Consciousness continually experiences itself as the nihilation of its past being,’¹⁷ claims Sartre. This is his distinguishing feature of being-for-itself. Being-in-itself has no capacity to nihilate itself and transform itself in this way. Objects do not enjoy freedom as subjects do.

Importantly, for the direction of my discussion, this radical freedom is the foundation of *value*. We are at every moment at liberty to choose what we will value and, accordingly, how we will act. Just as the past does not constrain human freedom, Sartre understands there to be no objective normative standards acting as constraints to freedom. Being-for-itself is alone responsible for the meaning or value of things. Facticities are part of the human person – but these only have whatever meaning she, in her freedom, assigns to them. Sartre is not a realist about value in any sense; the subject does not discover values, she creates them. She is hence *entirely responsible* for the meaning of her life. Regardless of circumstances, being-for-itself, with the power to choose what has meaning and value, wholly determines whether (and how) her life is valuable. Richard Cohen summaries neatly the interconnectedness of Sartrean consciousness, freedom and value:

‘For Sartre, Being, which is the massive, impenetrable opacity of the in-itself is inescapably and solely made meaningful by the transparency of pure consciousness, the Nothingness of the for-itself, a thoroughly free human subjectivity.’¹⁸

Sartre is aware how radical this account is, stating that human beings often do not appreciate their capacity to reassess and remake themselves at each moment. Proper awareness of the scope of our live possibilities, and the responsibility we have to ourselves that they present is a terrifying thing. He says that the awareness of the

¹⁵ McCulloch (1994) p41

¹⁶ McCulloch (1994) p42

¹⁷ Sartre (2003) p52

¹⁸ Cohen (2010) pp112-113

responsibility one has to oneself to create oneself as meaningful (the ‘constantly renewed obligation to remake the self’¹⁹) should leave us in a state of *anguish*. Anguish is the proper response to the recognition of our imperial status as inescapably obligated to decide what is valuable: the only thing that the subject cannot make a choice about is whether she will be free or not. I will look further at freedom and value in following chapters, but for now I want to draw attention to the fact that for Sartre, freedom is the sole foundation of value, and that he makes a normative claim, which is that the human subject *should* be relentlessly engaged in a project of the creation of her own meaning.

At the level of mere consciousness of objects, structured by intentionality, Sartre understands the subject as always engaged in a movement of self-transcendence. Given Sartre’s realism, it is possible that instances of this kind of self-transcendence can be instances of transcendence to the world. Further, in his conception of the way that human subjects relate to the world in freedom, Sartre articulates a more radical transcending movement. Nihilating one’s past in freedom is understood by Sartre as a way of being drawn away from oneself, in as far as one moves away from past identities towards one’s possibilities and the creation of new identities. As Sartre understands this ongoing movement of freedom to *constitute* the subject, he understands human subjectivity to be *pure transcendence*.

Sartre’s account of freedom cannot be accepted uncritically, and, of the many ways in which it may find itself subject to refutation, there are particular points of critique to be found in Levinas’ alternative conception of freedom. This whirlwind introduction of important Sartrean concepts gives us Sartre’s basic definition of human subjectivity, and further provides a framework for the determination of a fuller account of subjectivity which comes with his account of intersubjectivity.

Levinasian Totality

Like Sartre, Levinas is a philosopher of grand vision, and *Totality and Infinity* has designs for developing a big-picture account of the nature of reality, with specific concerns for the role of human subjectivity within reality’s whole. Levinas is a difficult philosopher to read, his claims are not always immediately transparent. He

¹⁹ Sartre (2003) p58

has his own hoard of terminology that requires unpacking in order to distill his insights with necessary philosophical rigor.

The concepts of totality and infinity are the key to understanding Levinas' account of subjectivity. *Totality* pertains to a picture of reality in which everything is understood with reference to the self. It is a system of *ipseity* or 'sameness'. Levinas will contrast this state with a characterisation of a lived exposure to and relationship with *alterity* or otherness, which will be unpacked in his analysis of *infinity*.

Characterising totality as a state of ipseity is not to say that it is not world-involving – Levinas is not giving us a picture of a worldless ego here. Rather, his point is that our engagement with the world as a totality is characterised by an *assimilation* of features of the world to the self. Totality is characterised by the comportment of *need*. Within totality, the subject relates to the world solely as offering a means of satisfying her needs, which are born of lack. Her relation to the world is hence definitionally self-absorbed and self-centred.

More concretely – we relate to the world in ways such as 'thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, warming oneself in the sun.'²⁰ These examples represent any instance where I move towards the world because I *want* something for myself and I look to satisfy myself according to this want. I primarily relate to objects as things I can use or enjoy. Levinas refers to these relations as relations of *enjoyment* or *nourishment*. In these cases needs disappear upon being met by their intended object; nourishment is a relationship of assimilation. Objects or ideas can be comprehended so that a train of thought is brought to completion, for example, and hunger disappears upon eating: such needs are capable of being satisfied. Where the need for food is satisfied, the food has provided nourishment, and has done so by being assimilated to the self.

'I can 'feed' on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their alterity is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor.'²¹

Such needs and their fulfilment are constitutive of our subjectivity at this basic level: 'Enjoyment is not a psychological state among others...but the very

²⁰ Levinas (1979) p112

²¹ Levinas (1979) p33

pulsation of the I,'²² says Levinas. This is a happy existence, the subject is straightforwardly contented in preoccupation with the satisfaction of her need. It is a state of 'being-at-home' undisturbed by any inassimilable force. 'Enjoyment is the very eddy of the same...[it] is a withdrawal into oneself, an involution.'²³

In a minimal sense Levinasian totality is comparable to the Sartrean picture given above, in as far as both are articulations of the human subject's primary way of relating to the world. A more Levinasian way of saying that consciousness is consciousness-of would be to say that it is enjoyment-of or need-for. Both ways of understanding consciousness understand it to be characterised by a directedness towards food, books, sunshine and so on.

At this stage I want to note the basic point of comparison that Sartre and Levinas both have accounts of human consciousness that are structured as world-involving, and both give an account of the nature of the mind-to-world relationship. That Levinas understands the subject within totality to be motivated by lack can be compared to Sartre's picture of being-for-itself also driven by lack. However, the relationship with the world of objects is characterised differently by each, Sartre using the language of intentionality and negation, and Levinas of enjoyment. These different understandings of the subject's relationship with the world of objects mean that the two thinkers understand the nature of transcendence to the world differently.

To reiterate, Sartre claims that subjectivity as world-involving is structured by transcendence. In one sense, where this applies to mere consciousness of objects, this is obviously true. In defining subjectivity as consciousness-of or enjoyment-of, it is trivially true that I self-transcend towards the world. To apply Westphal's definition of self-transcendence to our relationship with the world is to say that we are not occupied with the content of our consciousness apart from the world – and this is because consciousness has no content apart from the world! It has been noted that the subject does not exist in a vacuum in the manner of Descartes' 'thinking thing', but rather she is always directed towards the world.

As well as a trivially true transcendence to objects, Sartre's developed account of the subject's relation to the world in terms of her freedom, is a more radical understanding of transcendence towards the world. Sartre understands this to be a complete account of transcendence, that is to say, for Sartre, human freedom *is*

²² Levinas (1979) p113

²³ Levinas (1979) pp115-117

transcendence. To be drawn away from what one has been in the past, in order to become what one is not-yet, exhausts what it means for a subject to experience transcendence.

Levinas, on the other hand, while able to agree that I transcend to the world in a trivially true sense, does not recognise this as yet a full picture of the transcendence possible for the human subject. For this reason he deliberately chooses not to apply the terminology of transcendence to the subject's relationship with the world of objects. His account of the human subject enjoying totality is a picture of the subject preoccupied with the satisfaction of her needs, and so still occupied with herself. In an important sense, then, existence within totality, as portrayed by Levinas, is *not* an instance of self-transcendence. Further, Levinas would evaluate Sartre's transcendence as a failure to move away from preoccupation with oneself: the Sartrean subject, characterised by 'pure transcendence', is concerned entirely with the creation of *herself* as meaningful.

Neither thinker understands their accounts of the structure of human subjectivity to be complete at this point, because for both there is another dimension of subjectivity which cannot be derived from the resources thusfar in play. Human subjectivity is characterised by a phenomenon of a different order to the needs of the subject that characterise totality, or any of the straightforward nihilating aims or valuing of being-for-itself towards being-in-itself. Both identify this phenomenon as what can loosely be described as a *longing for fulfilment*, which I turn now to consider.

Chapter Two

Being-In-Itself-For-Itself

‘We are by nature restless, searching, inquisitive, unsettled and yearning for more, and if we ever stopped wanting and wondering and looking further we would stop being human,’²⁴ says Stephen Wang, as means of trying to articulate a feature of human life that resonates with all we who are human subjects. We have a longing for fulfilment, and seek after that which we hope for as the goal of this desire.

Wang highlights the point here that the experience of this phenomenon is an important characteristic of what it is to be a human subject. I am particularly interested in this phenomenon because both Sartre and Levinas identify it as a defining feature of human subjectivity. As I continue to question how different terms feature in our understanding of subjectivity, it is an understanding of the human subject as characterised by this longing.

Sartre understands the desire for fulfilment and the pursuit that flows from it to be a two-pronged affair – it is comprised of the desire to be being-for-itself, and the desire to be being-in-itself. As one, the desire to be *being-in-itself-for-itself*. Let us unpack this. The second prong of this desire is the desire to be being-for-itself. We desire freedom; we desire the power of radical choice to negate the world of being-in-itself and determine ourselves from within. Our freedom is our lived subjectivity and we guard it jealously and seek to preserve it at all times.

However, being-free does not alone satisfy our desire for fulfilment. Being-for-itself is a nothingness and a lack, and so a desire for that which-it-is-not. When, in freedom, we create ourselves anew at each moment by choosing which identities to embrace and which to reject, we are exhibiting our desire to be being-in-itself. This is the first prong of our longing.

In the subject’s continued nihilation of what-has-been she seeks to create new identities. She seeks to make herself as being-a-certain-way – as being this way or that way, as having those features or these qualities. We desire an understanding of ourselves as having a nature for we desire the security of a fixed identity (this ideology, habit or home). In relating to ourselves an environmentalist, a smoker or a

²⁴ Wang (2006) p3

city-dweller, for example, we understand ourselves to have an identity that is graspable and complete. These are the labels we give ourselves, the narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves. In many ways it is misleading to say that we want to be like tables and chairs, but what Sartre is claiming is that in wanting to create fixed identities for ourselves, what we pursue has certain object-like features shared with tables and chairs. These identities are static and inert, they can be defined and grasped, and they contain no lack. In being 'fixed', these identities are not subject to the anguish of freedom.

'Freedom in its foundation coincides with the nothingness which is at the heart of man,' says Sartre. 'Human reality is free because it is *not enough*.'²⁵ The human subject is always seeking to fill its lack and so seeking to become being-in-itself, which contains no lack. For this reason we might talk about the desire for being-in-itself as a desire to be 'full', in the way that an object is 'full' or complete. Sartre uses this language. Consider: 'The in-itself...is solid. It is full positivity. It knows no otherness.'²⁶ Later, he says, 'Consciousness...wishes to have the impermeability and infinite density of the in-itself.'²⁷ This is another way of saying that we desire the security of an identity that is complete and graspable.

This makes for a dark truth at the heart of the human condition. We long to be free *and* we long for the fullness and stability only possible for being-in-itself. We long for both at once, to be fully complete and fully free, and this is a contradictory desire because the two cannot, definitionally, come together. Freedom cannot be full, and fullness cannot be free.

Being-for-itself is the negation of being-in-itself. Being-in-itself-for-itself is therefore an impossible goal. Wang explains Sartre's portrait of humanity well:

'Human beings...seek two things at the same time: to possess a secure and stable identity, and to preserve the freedom and the distance that comes with self-consciousness. This is an impossible ideal, since we are always beyond what we are, and we never quite reach what we could be.'²⁸

We are always 'beyond what we are' because, in freedom, we are always 'ahead of ourselves' in analysing and evaluating what-we-are-like, and engaging in the

²⁵ Sartre (2003) p462. Emphasis mine

²⁶ Sartre (2003) p22

²⁷ Sartre (2003) p587

²⁸ Wang (2006) p1

negation of it as we do so. In understanding ourselves as being-a-certain-way we also recognise the potentialities of what-we-are-not, which is why we never ‘reach what we could be’. Whenever we create an identity we create something set apart from our freedom, for we create an understanding of ourselves as being-in-itself. These identities will subsequently be overcome by our freedom in negation. ‘The problem is that as soon as we reflect on this newly established identity, we dissociate ourselves from it and once again become caught in the same trap [of wanting to create another new identity].’²⁹ We cannot escape this ongoing pursuit of an impossible ideal. It is a pursuit that shapes the way that the human subject exists. This is why ‘human reality is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state.’³⁰ Our longing for fulfilment is in principle *insatiable*, in virtue of its being contradictory.

The longing for fulfilment may initially present itself as a movement of self-transcendence, but analysing its structure, as Sartre understands it, calls this into question. The desire to be in-itself-for-itself is a concern for oneself. It is a concern that *my* freedom be preserved and *my* completion be attained. I will unpack this further in the chapters that follow.

Briefly then, this is Sartre’s more complete picture of human subjectivity. This is an ultimately depressing affair, for it is marked by an order of longing which cannot be uncoupled from the continual frustration of this longing, in virtue of its contradictory nature.

Desire for Infinity

Levinas also identifies the human longing for fulfilment. This longing he simply calls *Desire*.³¹ Where the experience of totality is the experience of ‘sameness’, Desire is aroused by the experience of ‘otherness’. Desire identifies something that resists assimilation, that is, resists being viewed simply as a solution to my needs. Rather, as Levinas phrases it, the object of my Desire is experienced as *radically exterior*.

Desire is identified as of a different order to need. While needs originate in lack, Desire can be aroused when there is nothing we lack. Needs can be satisfied,

²⁹ Wang (2006) p2

³⁰ Sartre (2003) p1 14

³¹ Dalton suggests that the English word ‘longing’ is the most appropriate term for Levinas’ Desire. See Dalton (2009)

disappearing with the appropriation of their object. By contrast, Desire only continues and increases the more one tries to satisfy it, for ‘the Desired does not fulfil it, but deepens it.’³² Needs of course re-appear; one eventually becomes hungry or tired again after eating or sleeping. However, what distinguishes Desire from need is that it does not admit of satisfaction at all. Desire is characterised by its *insatiability*: ‘Insatiable Desire – not because it corresponds to an infinite hunger, but because it is not an appeal for food.’³³

If Desire is for something that is not comparable to food, then what is it for? Here Levinas offers his second key term – that of *infinity*. Desire is the desire for infinity. Desire characterises subjectivity exposed to infinity just as need characterises subjectivity within totality. Understanding Levinas’ definition of infinity is hence central to our project here.

Levinas’ understanding of infinity is inspired by the concept of infinity found in Descartes’ third meditation. Having established his own existence as a ‘thinking thing’, Descartes examines the contents of his mind and finds within himself the idea of infinity. ‘I do not comprehend the infinite,’³⁴ says Descartes. The idea of infinity presents itself as an idea I cannot fully grasp. This idea is the only idea that Descartes has which he recognises *must* have come from outside himself. The idea itself betrays the fact that the reality of the object of the idea ‘overflows’ the idea itself. It is this that constitutes Descartes’ discovery of God outside the ego. Descartes finds a way of getting outside the self from within, discovering an exteriority at the heart of himself. This is the structure of the discovery of infinity in Levinasian Desire. Levinas affirms that the idea of infinity is ‘the presence in a container of a content exceeding its capacity.’³⁵

The concept of infinity in Descartes, inherited by Levinas, is not a concept of infinity as additive. Infinity is not the stringing together of bits of finitude without end – this would be to define infinity in terms of the finite. Cartesian infinity is not simply the idea of a number that is ‘bigger’ than all the other numbers – it is just big! It is *absolute*.³⁶ Therefore, for Descartes, the idea of infinity brings with it the recognition that I could not have constructed the idea out of my own finite resources.

³² Levinas (1979)p34

³³ Levinas (1979) p63

³⁴ Descartes (1997) p157

³⁵ Levinas (1979) p289

³⁶ See Descartes (1997) pp157-158 for Descartes’ discussion of infinity as absolute rather than additive.

This includes the idea that infinity cannot simply be understood as a negation of the finite. This would be to define infinity in terms of the finite, failing to do justice to the absoluteness of the infinite, and the experience of infinity as that which exceeds or ‘overflows’ me. In recognising that I could not have constructed the infinite, I recognise it to have a radical alterity.

Descartes also understands the idea of infinity to be the idea of ‘supreme perfection’³⁷. Again, this not to talk about the idea of something ‘better’ than everything else – it is to speak of absolute perfection. The idea of absolute perfection brings with it the recognition of my own imperfection. I understand myself as unable to have constructed this idea of absolute perfection with recourse only to my own imperfections. Perfection, rather, is discovered to be a requisite concept for the concept of imperfection, the standard by which we measure imperfection and accord it a meaning.

Levinas agrees with Descartes that the ‘idea of the perfect and of infinity is not reducible to a negation of the imperfect.’³⁸ Negation of my imperfections could not fully capture the way that infinity ‘exceeds’ me.

‘The negation of imperfections does not suffice for the conception of [infinity’s] alterity. Precisely perfection exceeds conception, overflows the concept; it designates distance: [it is] a passage to the other absolutely other. The idea of the perfect is an idea of infinity.’³⁹

Descartes concludes that the source of this idea must be the Infinite itself: God.⁴⁰ Levinas is not interested in the causal argument that Descartes hopes to affect here, for he is not interested in trying to *prove* the existence of God, but rather uses the Cartesian insights of Meditation Three to articulate what it is like to *experience* exposure to infinity.⁴¹ Hilary Putnam understands Levinas to use Descartes in this way:

‘Levinas believes that what Descartes is reporting is not a step in a deductive reasoning, but a profound religious experience, an experience that might be described as an experience of

³⁷ Descartes (1997) p158

³⁸ Levinas (1979) p41

³⁹ Levinas (1979) p41

⁴⁰ To remind ourselves, Descartes claims that the cause of an idea must always have at least as much formal reality as is found in the objective reality of the idea. The cause of my idea of infinity must hence have all the formal reality of infinity, and so be the Infinite itself.

⁴¹ Levinas states that he is not concerned with Descartes’ attempted proofs for the existence of God. See Levinas (1979) p49.

fissure, of a confrontation with something that disrupts all his categories. On this reading Descartes is not so much proving something as acknowledging something, acknowledging a Reality that he could not have constructed.⁴²

Levinas wishes to preserve the insight that we discover the reality of infinity as a reality beyond my subjectivity. For Levinas the experience of infinity is the experience of something which ‘ruptures’⁴³ the totality by presenting itself as incapable of being reduced to the satisfaction of my needs. Infinity breaks in upon totality, which is why it is important to understand subjectivity within totality prior to understanding subjectivity exposed to infinity.

Levinas also continually stresses that the fact that we can experience infinity does not undermine the ‘separation’⁴⁴ between my self and the Infinite. These terms remain distinct, and Levinas’ reiterates this ‘separation’ as a guarantee that the ‘otherness’ of infinity is not assimilated to my ‘sameness’. This is simply a way of emphasising the fact that these terms are distinct but capable of being related. Maintaining this distinction is a condition of exposure to infinity as exposure to genuine alterity.

Further, exposure to infinity brings with it the revelation that existence within totality is a normatively insufficient way to exist. Subjectivity within totality, where the subject relates to the world in terms of her own enjoyment and the satisfaction of her needs, is egoistic subjectivity. At this level a subject’s very existence is constituted by the pursuit of the satisfaction of her own individual needs. This is not in itself characterised by Levinas as negative or immoral – there is both a legitimacy and a necessity to the subject’s existence at the level of totality. It is legitimate to seek and enjoy the satisfaction of need as a basic state of existence. However, this is not all a human subject exists for. For a subject to remain forever at the level of totality would be a failure to be human in all the ways a human subject *should* be. Exposure to infinity, which, as I will explore in the next chapter, is connected to exposure to the human Other, makes clear to the subject that her existence within totality does not match up with what she could and should be.

When the Other is encountered by the subject, maintaining existence in the totality’s egoistic bubble will be found to be morally reprehensible; such an existence

⁴² Putnam (2008) p79

⁴³ Levinas (1979) p203

⁴⁴ Levinas (1979) p53

will not be able to account for the alterity of the Other. This is not a resignation to the egoism of totality, but provides the motivation and the resources for a moral existence. This is what we long for in Desire.

Desire can be properly understood as a desire for fulfilment, however, it is a significantly different understanding of fulfilment to the Sartrean one, even though both identify a structure of insatiability. In Levinas' account of the nature of Desire there is a critique of the Sartrean analysis of the aspiration for fulfilment. Levinas explicitly rejects the first prong of the Sartrean desire for fulfilment – the desire to be being-in-itself. The desire to be being-in-itself is the desire to be 'complete' with recourse only to oneself. Sartre says this explicitly:

'A psychic state which existed with the sufficiency of [being-in-itself] could not possess in addition the slightest 'appeal to' something else; it would be itself without any relation to what is not it.'⁴⁵

For Levinas the desire to be object-like or 'full of oneself' does not feature in Desire at all. Such desires, where they exist, are needs, which keep us at the level of totality. Needs seek a completion, an end or a satisfaction, as the hunger for food comes to an end when we are 'full' and the lack has been satiated. In this sense Levinasian needs share an important characteristic with the Sartrean pursuit of being-in-itself and its desire to be object-like. In both cases the subject is seeking a 'completion' or sense of self-sufficiency. The desire to be complete within the boundaries of oneself is a desire to be object-like, as identified by Sartre.

Advocating a different understanding, Levinas suggests that Desire is for *the escape* from self-sufficient ipseity. It is exactly the desire *not* to be complete within myself.⁴⁶ Levinas is clear that he does not use the terminology of 'escape' to refer to an attempt to escape the body or the world; the movement of escape is one that remains grounded in the world and transforms it. This is an 'escape' of preoccupation with my own needs. It is an escape of totalising ipseity that comes with *exposure to alterity*.

Desire is not born of lack. When we push beyond ourselves in Desire we are not looking to become object-like. We look to escape not because we are not enough but because in an object-like state we are 'too much.' To be surrounded by one's

⁴⁵ Sartre (2003) p111

⁴⁶ This theme is found elsewhere in Levinas' works. See Levinas (1998) and (2003).

‘sameness’ is suffocating. Whilst remaining within the ‘circuit of my selfness’⁴⁷ I will always be restless. On Levinas’ behalf, Cohen expresses that ‘the deepest desire of subjectivity is to get out, to be disburdened of itself, to escape the weight of being, of ‘ownness’ itself.’⁴⁸

Sartre takes the desire for being-in-itself to be a desire for pure identity with oneself, a desire to be static and complete. Levinas claims that aspirations such as these do not move us in the direction of our fulfilment as we long for it in Desire. Rather, ‘escape...puts in question [the] alleged peace-with-self, since it aspires to break the chains of the I.’⁴⁹ Need and its lack drive us towards a completion, but the more profound ‘fulfilment’ we seek in Desire is the fulfilment that comes with the ‘rupture’ of the totality. This is the experience of precisely not being ‘complete’ and not being self-sufficient. That Desire defines subjectivity as having an ‘openness of structure’⁵⁰ is to say that *it is exposed to, or disrupted by, the alterity of infinity*. Subjectivity structured by Levinasian Desire is not self-sufficient; there is an encounter with *something* beyond it which is radically Other. This radical exteriority has been identified as Levinasian infinity.

In his earlier essay *On Escape*, Levinas gives an analysis of the phenomenon of *nausea* in which he hopes to persuade us that our longing for fulfilment is not a longing to be related only to ipseity. He claims that nausea is an acute experience of being ‘full’ of ourselves. Nausea is a smothering experience of being ‘stuck’ to oneself, of wanting to get out, wanting to be elsewhere, but being unable to do so. In nausea I am bound to myself. ‘Nausea is the affirmation itself of being. It refers only to itself, is closed to all the rest, without windows onto other things. Nausea carries its centre of attraction within itself.’⁵¹

Sartre has, in some ways, a similar understanding of the experience of nausea, as an experience of being ‘stuck’ within oneself. He identifies this as the desire to escape one’s being-in-itself, particularly the desire to escape one’s body as a mode of our being-in-itself.⁵² The experience of nausea illustrates by example some important differences between Levinas’ Desire and Sartre’s longing. For Sartre, even though he

⁴⁷ Sartre (2003) p283

⁴⁸ Cohen (2010) p138

⁴⁹ Levinas (2003) p55

⁵⁰ Bergo, Bettina. G in Silverman (2000) p63

⁵¹ Levinas (2003) p68. The ‘being’ Levinas refers to here I take to be comparable to Sartre’s being-in-itself.

⁵² Sartre (2003) p362

affirms that we flee being-in-itself, he also thinks that the desire to be being-in-itself features as one half of our longing for fulfilment. Nausea, as Sartre describes it, highlights the frustration in his understanding of our longing for fulfilment as contradictory. We want that which at the same time we do not want. We don't want to be 'stuck' but at the same time we do. By contrast, in Levinas' understanding, the desire to experience oneself as self-sufficient is not one half of a contradictory longing, but does not feature in this longing at all. In longing for fulfilment, we do not long to be 'full' of ourselves, but to be exposed to something Other.

That Sartre understands nausea to pertain particularly to the experience of our bodies as being-in-itself, while Levinas does not, also flags a difference between the two. It suggests that Sartre applies his categories in such a way that Levinas challenges. As the essay continues I will look at other ways in which Levinas indicates that Sartre's initial categories are to be questioned.

In some way Desire should remind us of Sartrean being-for-itself, which is also a flight from ourselves as being-in-itself. However, being-for-itself only ever escapes one identity in order to create another. Being-for-itself is always a flight *back* to being-in-itself, and so differs from Desire in this significant way. In looking to escape what-has-been only to create the self again, being-for-itself as freedom remains a movement which remains preoccupied with itself. It asserts itself for its own gain, rather than turning towards something Other. A Levinasian analysis of the desire to be being-in-itself-for-itself therefore understands both prongs of the desire to remain at the level of totality. In chapter four I will look further at the difference between Sartre and Levinas' conceptions of freedom, and the impact these different conceptions have on their respective understandings of transcendence.

Levinas and Sartre both identify the desire for fulfilment as *insatiable*. However, this is for different reasons and is interpreted by each differently. Sartre's longing has an impossible aim because it is comprised of two contradictory desires which war against each other, leaving us in a state of continual frustration. Levinas does not have two contradictory features at war in Desire, but rather believes that Desire is for something that can, in principle, never be attained, because the object of our Desire is the infinite. As finite beings in pursuit of the infinite, this Desire can never be brought to completion. Infinity cannot be contained within the finite; Infinity resists assimilation.

Desire as the desire for infinity is a movement of self-transcendence. Unlike our relation to objects at the level of totality, which keep us preoccupied with our own satisfaction, Desire draws us away from our preoccupation with ourselves. Levinas explicitly claims, further, that Desire is a movement of transcendence because it is for the radically exterior. ‘Transcendence is recognised in the work of the intellect that aspires after exteriority, that is Desire,’⁵³ he tells us. I will consider this claim further in the following chapters as I draw out the connections between the human Other, God and transcendence towards infinity.

I will note here that Levinas retains the Cartesian understanding of infinity as co-extensive with God. For Descartes, God is discovered as that which I transcend towards and who saves me from imprisonment within myself, which Levinas parallels with imprisonment within totality. However, Levinas does not think that the idea of God comes to the solitary meditating ego, but comes to us *via the human Other*.

⁵³ Levinas (1979) p82

Chapter Three

Being-for-Others

Having laid out his conception of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, Sartre turns to consider a third mode of being: being-for-others. ‘The truth is,’ he says, ‘that certain categories seem to exist only for the concept of the Other.’⁵⁴ That is to say, an examination of our experiences turns up particular phenomena which must be *necessarily Other-involving*. My fundamental relationship with the Other is constituted by what Sartre calls ‘*the look*’. In discovering myself to be at the end of the look I experience the Other-involving phenomenon of *being seen*:

‘My fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of being seen by the Other. It is in and through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject.’⁵⁵

I can encounter the Other-as-object (by perceiving her body or observing her behaviour, for example), but an experience of her subjectivity cannot be inferred to from her body or her behaviour. Rather, I experience the Other-as-subject in the experience of myself-as-object. To be *seen* by the Other is to be seen as an object, or in Sartre’s preferred terminology, I experience my facticity, my *nature* as being-in-itself. I discover myself as object-like when I discover myself at the end of the Other’s look.

How do I experience myself-as-object? Sartre tells us that this is the experience of ‘the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities.’⁵⁶ All of the live possibilities that were open to me are in an instant rendered ‘dead’. This is an alienation from my freedom. ‘My nature is – over there, outside my lived freedom – as a given attribute of this being which I am for the Other.’⁵⁷ Sartre understands there to be a mutual exclusivity between freedom and facticity – this must be so, given the way he defines these terms: freedom is the negation of facticity. To discover oneself as seen by the Other is to experience oneself as an object, static and without

⁵⁴ Sartre (2003) p252

⁵⁵ Sartre (2003) p280

⁵⁶ Sartre (2003) p286

⁵⁷ Sartre (2003) p286

possibility; it is to find oneself alienated from one's lived subjectivity. To be clear, to be seen by the Other is not simply to be aware from within one's lived subjectivity that I have some status as being-in-itself, such as the way one considers one's own past from the place of freedom in the present. Rather, it is the *experience* of oneself as being-in-itself in the present, and so the experience of the loss of my freedom.

Sartre illustrates this with reference to the phenomenon of shame. He lays out an imaginative exercise whereby one considers oneself as moved by 'jealousy, curiosity or vice' to press one's ear up against a door and peer through the keyhole. In this I am entirely absorbed in the situation beyond the keyhole that holds my interest. I am 'caught up in the circuit of my selfness,'⁵⁸ in a state of pure transcendence. Then, into this situation comes the realisation that I am being watched. Somebody is looking at me! I experience shame, shame constituted in part by the realisation that the Other sees me as I am, that is, as being-a-certain-way, as being-in-itself. I cannot escape the experience of being-a-certain-way because I am seen as being-that-way by the Other. In freedom I was the narrator of my own story, and now, at the end of another's look, I find myself as a character in someone else's story. My capacity to choose to be otherwise is 'pinned down' by the Other's look, and whilst I am held here I cannot employ my freedom to negate my being-that-way.

In this circumstance I am no longer pure transcendence. This is an articulation of human subjectivity as it comports itself towards, and so, it might be said, transcends towards the human Other. However, for Sartre, such a 'transcendence' is itself an alienation from lived subjectivity and therefore the subject's capacity to transcend towards the world in freedom. Sartre hence uses the term *transcendence-transcended* to describe this state of being. It is a 'movement' characterised by a lack of movement, a 'transcending' characterised by a lack of transcending.

The experience of being transcendence-transcended discloses the mind-independent reality of the Other. The reality of the Other as 'the self that is not myself'⁵⁹ is discovered within my own being. I do not make my way to the Other via inferential reasoning, but rather Sartre says 'there is a sort of *cogito* concerning it.'⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Sartre (2003) p283. I have already used this Sartrean phrase to describe the Levinasian picture of ipseity within totality.

⁵⁹ Sartre (2003) p254

⁶⁰ Sartre (2003) p275

The Other is found in my experience of certain emotional phenomena. Sartre mentions pride, awkwardness and vulgarity, as well as shame, as examples.

The weight of Sartre's argument is found in the insight that such attitudes *have no content* without the reality of the Other. Shame cannot be understood except as shame before another. These attitudes are not to be found in the for-itself alone, even potentially, because the content of the meaning of the terms can only be given with 'refer[ence] to a witness.'⁶¹ We cannot experience ourselves as, for example, vulgar, without the experience of ourselves as seen as such. We do not infer from these experiences that I am seen by another, rather, they *are* the experience of being seen itself. Hence, 'nobody is truly solipsistic.'^{62 63}

The mutual exclusivity of freedom and facticity, combined with the structure of the look, entails the impossibility of both self and Other mutually experiencing their own subjectivity. To encounter the Other-as-subject is precisely to experience one's status as an object. This satisfies one of my longings – the longing to be being-in-itself, but alienates me from the other dimension of reality I desire – the desire to be free. That being-for-itself is the negation of being-in-itself, and that the two are therefore mutually exclusive, means that my freedom and therefore my lived subjectivity are not possible before the Other-as-subject. If I were to regain my lived subjectivity I would no longer be experiencing myself at the end of the Other's look.

Sartre characterises the experience of being seen as an experience of extreme vulnerability. The Other is the one who comes to rob me of my freedom, she comes to show me what-I-am-like and 'freeze' or 'solidify' me there by pinning me down in object-like-ness, rendering me incapable of negating my facticities and becoming otherwise. In this 'I am imprisoned...the Other has the advantage over me.'⁶⁴ Sartre hence takes the fundamental relation to the Other to 'fill us with horror.'⁶⁵ The Other is encountered *unpredictably*, and always comes as a danger and something to fear.

As we can do nothing to regain our freedom whilst we find ourselves at the end of the Other's look, the only way we regain our freedom is to overcome the look by re-establishing the status of the Other-as-object. We overcome the Other's look by

⁶¹ Sartre (2003) p246

⁶² Sartre (2003) p274.

⁶³ That we can be mistaken as to when we have encountered another does not undermine 'the look' as an encounter any more than the fallibility of perception undermines our capacity to successfully perceive objects.

⁶⁴ Sartre (2003) p385

⁶⁵ Sartre (2003) p288

looking-at-them, for ‘A look cannot be looked at...as soon as I look in the direction of the look it disappears. I no longer see anything but eyes.’⁶⁶ We regain our own lived subjectivity and its freedom by taking from the Other their freedom over us, objectifying them, and so dissolving their look and the experience of them as a subject. I cannot bear the vulnerability under the Other’s look so I become ‘the project of recovery of my being.’⁶⁷ In seeing them again as an object they become impotent just as I was impotent at the end of the look. ‘I can turn back upon the Other so as to make an object out of him in turn since the Other’s object-ness destroys my object-ness for him.’⁶⁸ The ongoing relationship with the Other is hence in every sense a power struggle. Sartre understands intersubjectivity to be necessarily and inescapably *conflictual*.⁶⁹

Two types of Sartrean transcendence have been brought to light: pure transcendence and transcendence-transcended. The first is the very constitution of our lived subjectivity and the second is our alienation from it. Transcendence-transcended, instigated by the Other’s look, is, for Sartre, a comportment that moves us beyond our original undisturbed consciousness by relating ourselves to ourselves-as-object, and so, in fact, robs us of any transcending movement. In transcendence-transcended I am thrown back upon myself by relating to myself as object-like.

Being-for-others is an integral feature of the Sartrean account of human subjectivity. It makes possible an *experience* of oneself as being-in-itself that is not otherwise possible. It also constitutes the lived experience of the revelation that our being-for-itself and being-in-itself can never be experienced together, and so the revelation that being-in-itself-for-itself is an impossible ideal. It is hence important in its connection to the Sartrean longing for fulfilment. The ‘failure’ of intersubjectivity reveals the ‘failure’ of our longing for fulfilment.

⁶⁶ Sartre (2003) p402

⁶⁷ Sartre (2003) p380

⁶⁸ Sartre (2003) p385

⁶⁹ ‘Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others,’ he tells us. Sartre (2003) p386. Every adjective that Sartre uses to describe the intersubjective encounter has similarly negative connotations. The awareness of the other’s ‘transcendent freedom’ and thus their otherness ‘*irritates me*’ – so the drive to re-possess them. Sartre (2003) p415. Emphasis mine.

The Face-to-Face

I have noted already that Levinas' understanding of the human Other has a significant role to play in his account of human existence. This is no understatement – his account of intersubjectivity is at the very centre of his account of subjectivity. Famously, Levinas hopes to establish *ethics as first philosophy*. He presents his account of human relationships in the context of his account of infinity. Due to his understanding of infinity, the claims he makes about the subject's relationship to the human Other and the subject's relationship to God are often presented intertwined. It is important to Levinas to maintain the interconnectedness of the subject's relation to the human Other and to God, and I will look further at how he hopes to achieve this, but I will first try to present Levinas' account of the subject's relationship with the human Other.

Like Sartre, Levinas understands the human subject to have experiences which are necessarily Other-involving, in that they involve a direct confrontation with the reality of the Other-as-subject. Levinas uses the terminology of '*the face*' to refer to the experience of encountering the human Other. We experience the face as a *moral summons*. I can engage with other people as solutions to the satisfaction of my needs, but this is to relate to them as if they were objects. It is only when I experience them as placing a moral *demand* on me that I experience them as a subject.

'The ethical relationship is not a species of consciousness whose ray emanates from the I, it puts the I in question. This putting into question emanates from the Other.'⁷⁰

There are two important points here. The first is that for Levinas the Other is encountered in an experience of *being addressed*: 'The face speaks.'⁷¹ The second point is that the relationship with the Other, established in being addressed, is irreducibly moral.

It is a crucial element of Levinas' account that the intersubjective relation contains an imperative. The face of the Other presents itself as vulnerable and destitute; it comes with a command: 'you shall not commit murder.'⁷² This

⁷⁰ Levinas (1979) p195

⁷¹ Levinas (1979) p66

⁷² Levinas (1979) p199

prohibitive command represents a fuller imperative to honour and serve the Other's humanity in all and every way. It is a call to the duty of hospitality and of welcome. 'No face can be approached with empty hands and a closed home,'⁷³ says Levinas. A duty is elicited towards the Other in the very experience of her as-subject. This duty is to respond to her needs and prefer her to myself.

This is not a duty contingent on the state of my own needs, on how well I am faring comparably in my status, material or otherwise, with regards the Other, but rather, as Atterton, Calarco and Friedman put it:

'The face is the face of deprivation and need, and this doesn't come from the fact that they have less than I – indeed, they may have more than I – it comes from the fact that they do not have all that they need.'⁷⁴

Nothing in my own circumstance can therefore alienate me from my moral responsibility to serve the Other.

The face presents itself as something that cannot be appropriated to the satisfaction of my needs, but 'the resistance of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical.'⁷⁵ This something that 'resists' my appropriation describes what it is like to be demanded of morally. 'The face is present in its refusal to be contained.'⁷⁶ The resistance of the Other to my appropriation is the experience of a reality not of my own construction: the mind-independent reality of the Other.

As in Sartre's understanding of being seen, Levinas understands the experience of a moral summons as an unpredictable experience, characterised by 'surprise' or 'unforeseeableness.'⁷⁷ Unlike the experience of pursuing the completion of my needs, which are satisfied in accordance with my expectations, the reality of the Other, revealed in their demand, experienced as exceeding the horizons of my expectation. In her freedom, the Other determines herself and can as such resist my attempts to 'use' her or comprehend her fully. This is, I think, an important insight in distinguishing between what it is like to experience objects, and what it is like to experience other subjects.

⁷³ Levinas (1979) p172

⁷⁴ Atterton, Calarco and Friedman (2004) p12

⁷⁵ Levinas (1979) p197

⁷⁶ Levinas (1979) p194

⁷⁷ Levinas (1979) p199

This ‘unforeseeableness’ leads Levinas to propose something interesting regarding the structure of consciousness. Sartrean pure transcendence and its forerunner, Husserlian intentionality, posit consciousness as a directedness towards the world. However, where the face of the Other addresses me *she* comes to bear upon *me*. With the face there is an *inverse intentionality*. Westphal articulates this:

‘[The ethical relation] occurs ‘within experience’ as a consciousness or awareness of something – it will turn out to be someone – to which I can direct my attention, or better, to which I find my attention drawn. In this case...the intentional arrows do not emanate from me toward the object, but originate in the ‘object’ and are directed toward me. I am challenged, summoned, put in question. We can thus speak of an ‘inversion’ of objectifying intentionality in which ‘it is the very movement of constitution that is reversed.’ Inverse intentionality is the key to ethical transcendence. By contrast with the intentionality of possession, it will be one of ‘dispossession.’’⁷⁸

The experience of this inverse-intentionality is the experience of *revelation*, says Levinas: ‘Revelation constitutes a veritable inversion [of] objectifying cognition.’⁷⁹ He consistently uses the terminology of revelation in his description of the encounter with the Other. Revelation is contrasted with *disclosure*. Disclosure is impersonal, the reality of objects can be disclosed to consciousness, but revelation involves a being-spoken-to by something that speaks – or rather, someone; objects cannot speak. Revelation has the structure of the radically exterior breaking into the self’s interior, rather than the self making something intelligible on its own terms.

The moral demand, constituting Levinas’ account of the human Other delivers an understanding of subjectivity as *responsible to the Other*. Levinas claims that the experience of finding oneself morally responsible *is* the experience of being addressed from ‘outside’. The recognition that we are not only conscious as need and enjoyment, but conscious as responsible, constitutes the revelation of the Other. In this sense the Other is needed in an account of (responsible) human subjectivity. This is a movement from the ‘contented consciousness’ within totality (enjoyment of the satisfaction of needs) to ‘responsible consciousness’, made possible by the face of the Other.

⁷⁸ Westphal (2004) p192

⁷⁹ Levinas (1979) p67. ‘Objectifying cognition’ here specifically refers to Husserlian intentionality.

This movement is an instance of self-transcendence. The moral demand draws us away from preoccupation with the satisfaction of our needs and towards the vulnerable human Other who is to be served. The experience requires that the Other has a mind-independent reality in order that the experience has the character that it does (as is the case for Sartre's shame). Response to the moral demand is hence an instance of transcendence, and Levinas identifies it as such. It should be clear that, contrary to Sartre, Levinas' full understanding of transcendence is of a *moral* transcendence. Levinas understands human subjectivity to be structured by transcendence as far as egoistic needs are left behind and moral responsibility to the Other is taken up.

This should sound familiar, as the relationship with the Other as articulated here shares the structure of Desire identified in the previous chapter. This is because, for Levinas, the experience of the Other *is* the experience of Desire. Infinity, as the object of our longing for fulfilment, is revealed *through* the face of the Other. This makes clearer, hopefully, how Levinas' account of infinity transforms the Cartesian idea of infinity. Infinity is not experienced by us as an abstract idea, but in the concrete experience of being addressed by the Other. Where one experiences the demand of the Other one experiences something that I could not have constructed, and something that makes a claim upon me. Further, I experience something that exceeds me without limit: My commitment to justice and hospitality cannot be abated with any number of just or hospitable acts.

In experiencing infinity as highest perfection I experience my tendency to be preoccupied with my own needs and nourishment as an imperfection. This is a call to my moral betterment, which is the call to serve the concrete and embodied human Other I find myself confronted with. Levinas draws this connection explicitly:

‘The idea of infinity, of the overflowing finite thought by its content, effectuates the relation of thought with what exceeds its capacity... This is the situation we call the welcome of the face.’⁸⁰

While Sartrean being-for-others shows our longing for fulfilment to be a contradictory affair, Levinas takes there to be an alignment between the encounter with the Other and our longing for fulfilment. Desire as the desire to escape a self-

⁸⁰ Levinas (1979) p197

enclosed existence *is* Desire for the Other, cashed out in moral terms. Sartre and Levinas hence have opposing understandings of how intersubjectivity connects up with human longing.

I will continue to unpack Levinas' notion of the revelation of infinity through the face of the Other in further sections. I will first consider some initial comparisons between the different accounts of intersubjectivity Sartre and Levinas have offered.

The Look and The Face

It is worth noting, by way of initial comparison, that despite the obvious differences between the two accounts of intersubjectivity, Sartre and Levinas identify the structure of Other-involving phenomena in a similar way. Both *the look* and *the face* are articulations of concrete 'frontal confrontations,'⁸¹ Dan Zahavi notes. The similarity can be explained by the structure of inverse intentionality that both share. Levinas explicitly states that responsible consciousness is structured by inverse intentionality, but this is also what occurs in the experience of being seen in the Sartrean sense. Here, arrows of intentionality flow from the Other towards me. 'It becomes clear that in Sartre's analysis of the look there is a paradigm of the inverse intentionality that is so crucial to Levinas,'⁸² says Westphal. There is a point of similarity here in the way that both Sartre and Levinas understand the subject to experience the alterity of the Other. The difference between the two is in the *response* that this 'frontal' encounter elicits.

The differences in response have already been articulated. Sartre understands the appropriate response to the look to be one of horror, and subsequently of fight to overcome the Other's freedom by re-mastering her. For Levinas, on the other hand, the appropriate response to the Other is one of responsibility to her, in a response of service and justice. The responses are different because for Sartre the Other is experienced as a threat, while for Levinas the Other comes as vulnerable and to be served. 'The welcoming of the face is peaceable from the first,' claims Levinas,' for it answers to the unquenchable Desire for infinity.'⁸³

⁸¹ Zahavi (2001) p157

⁸² Westphal (2004) p199, Footnote 65.

⁸³ Levinas (1979) p150

For Levinas, to continue to relate to reality as a totality in the face of the human Other is reprehensible. To do so is to treat the Other as an object. To treat her solely as something that will satisfy my egoistic needs is to assimilate her to the satisfaction of these needs. If we relate to the Other in this way only, then there is no room for her otherness; the relationship is all about the satisfaction of my needs and so is self-centred. In doing this we fail to acknowledge her as another human subject. As well as this constituting a failure to experience the Other as a subject, it constitutes a moral egoism and hence a failure to be all one should be.

Levinas understands Sartre's account to manifest this structure of egoism. In Sartre's account, the human subject understood as being-for-itself is required to assert herself over the Other. Where Sartre talks about attempting to re-master the Other after the experience of the look, this is an attempt to put the self and its desires back at the centre of reality, and so appropriating the Other to these desires. Sartre's account of intersubjectivity is hence understood by the Levinasian to pertain to the subject within totality only.

Levinas understands totality to be a necessarily violent system, and Sartre's picture of reality accords with this in stating that human relationships are necessarily conflictual. Sartre understands the needs of the self to always be pitted against the demands of the Other. Against this, Levinas advocates a picture of peaceful and altruistic relations with the Other as both possible and required. To sum up here, Levinas' account of intersubjectivity presents and advocates a conception of the subject exposed to the Other-as-subject which gives content to an understanding of subjectivity as morally responsible. This includes the normative claim that the human subject *should* be morally responsible.

Having laid out both Sartre and Levinas' account of intersubjectivity, and noted some of the similarities and differences between them, it is now important to evaluate the claims made by each. What can be endorsed in either understanding of the relationship between subjectivity and intersubjectivity? This question is the task for the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Two Types of Asymmetry

Interestingly, Sartre and Levinas both propose accounts of intersubjectivity that can be understood as *asymmetrical*. Despite this similarity, the way that they understand this asymmetry is very different. Understanding this difference allows a way into further comparative analysis of their claims.

On Sartre's picture the only way to encounter the Other-as-subject is by experiencing myself-as-object. I can retain my power as a free subject only by neutralising the Other's look in objectifying her. Hence we are always in one of these states as regards the Other – objectified or objectifying. My relation to the Other is always asymmetrical in this sense. The asymmetry is one of *freedom* and of *power*. The self-other relation is always structured by a dominance-submission dynamic, with possession, assertion or assimilation on one side of the relation, and status as possessed, subjected or assimilated on the other.

‘...we can never hold a consistent attitude toward the Other unless he is simultaneously revealed to us as subject and as object, as transcendence-transcending and as transcendence-transcended – which is in principle impossible. Thus ceaselessly tossed from being-a-look to being-looked-at, falling from one to the other in alternate revolutions, we are always, no matter what attitude is adopted, in a state of instability in relation to the Other.’⁸⁴

This asymmetry is always unstable because the relationship can at any time undergo a shift in power and freedom, and the objectified might at any moment regain their freedom. Being-for-others, in relating us to ourselves as being-in-itself, fulfils our desire to be object-like. However, it violates the desire to be being-for-itself in the loss of lived subjectivity. As radically obligated to myself to create my life as meaningful and so to remain free, there is an imperative in being-for-others to re-master the Other in order to re-gain my freedom. This is the back-and-forth of conflict.

For Levinas the primary encounter with the Other is the experience of the demand to serve her. This demand elicits a responsibility to the Other which has the structure of Desire, and so it can never be satiated. Levinas identifies this within his

⁸⁴ Sartre (2003) p430

lived experience of the Other: the experience of being addressed without end. The burden of obligation I have towards the Other can never be brought to completion.

However, this inexhaustible burden of obligation towards the Other is not one that we experience as reciprocated. I cannot make demands of the Other in a way that mirror-images the demands she makes of me, for the Other has a '*height* [which] outstrips me...The Other measures me with a gaze incomparable to the gaze by which I discover [her].'⁸⁵ Throughout the text Levinas uses this terminology of 'height' to refer to the fact that '...what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other. This moral experience, so commonplace, indicates [an]...asymmetry.'⁸⁶ Asymmetry is a feature of the encounter with the Other that Levinas takes to be structurally important. The asymmetry here is one of *demand*. The Other rightly demands of me beyond what I can demand of her. Levinas thinks that the experience of being addressed by the Other has a preference or a priority over my capacity to address her. I always have a greater burden of responsibility towards the Other than I can demand of her regarding myself. Levinas claims that I am responsible even for her responsibility to me.⁸⁷

It is notable here that Levinas expresses the self-other relation entirely in deontological terms. The relationship is constituted by demand, and the response it elicits in me is one of responsibility, duty or obligation. Levinas exclusively uses deontological terms such as these to paint the fundamental response to the Other. This will be assessed along with the analysis of the different elements that constitute both thinkers' accounts of asymmetrical intersubjectivity.

Two Notions of Freedom

Levinas' asymmetry is premised on the understanding that we are addressed by the Other. 'The face speaks,' he tells us, 'the manifestation of the face is already discourse.'⁸⁸ Levinas' claim here brings to light a significant difference between Sartre and Levinas. While the Sartrean look freezes our possibilities, Levinas claims that the face of the Other *opens up* our possibilities. The face is 'already discourse'

⁸⁵ Levinas (1979) p87

⁸⁶ Levinas (1979) p53

⁸⁷ See Putnam (2008) pp96-97

⁸⁸ Levinas (1979) p66

because to encounter the Other is to be called to respond to her. Our response is to be a moral response – it is the response of responsibility to the Other. That this is so is the enlivening of our freedom and our lived subjectivity, rather than, as for Sartre, the death of these.

This needs unpacking further, because this difference is premised on two opposing conceptions of freedom. An understanding of Levinas' conception of freedom can be begun with an exploration of his claim that:

'Freedom is not bare. To philosophise is to trace freedom back to what lies before it, to disclose the investiture that liberates freedom from the arbitrary.'⁸⁹

For Levinas, freedom does not justify itself, it cannot be a radical unconstrained spontaneity. A conception of the subject as being 'blown about' by the whim of each new moment is an unsatisfactory conception of freedom. Levinas understands freedom to be better understood as *freedom to respond*. Specifically, he sees it as moral response to the needs of the Other which confront me as a demand.

'Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent,'⁹⁰ he says. For Levinas, freedom does not ground value, but rather, value grounds freedom. More concretely, the moral demand the Other makes on me, calling me to responsibility, is the beginning of my freedom rather than a curtailment of or a loss of my freedom.

In a section titled 'Truth and Justice' Levinas hopes to illustrate this point about the nature of freedom. Levinas asks us to consider truth and justice analogously. That is, there is an analogy in our talk of justifying our knowledge claims (where truth 'constrains' knowledge and epistemic justification is given in these terms), and talk of justifying our actions morally (where justice 'constrains' our freedom to act and moral justification is given in these terms.) What both these types of justification have in common is the recognition that we are imposed upon. I am not at liberty to create justice just as I am not at liberty to create truth – but truth gives content to knowledge rather than curtails it, just as justice (ethics) gives content to freedom rather than curtails it.

John McDowell makes this same point with reference to the 'spontaneity' employed in concept-formation, stating that 'We need to conceive this expansive

⁸⁹ Levinas (1979) pp84-85

⁹⁰ Levinas (1979) p84

spontaneity as subject to control from outside our thinking, on pain of representing the operations of spontaneity as a frictionless spinning in a void.’⁹¹ Levinas would similarly say that our moral freedom becomes a ‘frictionless spinning in a void’ if we do not understand it to be responsive to the human Other.

Interestingly, given Sartre’s use of shame as the paradigm example of the loss of freedom before the Other, Levinas uses the example of shame to illustrate his own analysis of freedom. Levinas advocates a ‘freedom that can be ashamed of itself.’⁹² As with Sartre, shame is a necessarily Other-involving emotion. Shame is shame before the Other. However, unlike Sartre, Levinas takes shame to *make possible* the lived response of a (regulated) freedom. Levinas says:

‘The idea of the perfect... is the welcome of the Other, *the commencement of moral consciousness*, which calls in question my freedom. Thus this way of measuring oneself against the perfection of infinity is not a theoretical consideration; it is the accomplishment of shame, where freedom discovers itself murderous in its very exercise.’⁹³

In shame, totalising attempts at lawless, arbitrary and violent ‘freedom’⁹⁴ discover themselves held to account by the infinite demand of the Other, and this is the awakening of my ‘moral consciousness’, as Levinas has it here. Shame reveals that I have violated a demand. Specifically, that I have asserted my will without concern for the needs of the Other. I experience shame when caught looking through a keyhole, to use Sartre’s example, because, it is dishonest or it is a violation of another’s privacy. If I did not take myself to be bound by the moral demand of the Other, then I could not be ashamed. On recognising that I *am* bound by such normative requirements, shame directs me to act in the way I realise I *should* act – honestly, respectfully and so on. My experience of lived subjectivity as response is still the experience of being free, but it is a different understanding of freedom to Sartre’s.

Levinas’ ‘freedom that is ashamed of itself’ is a freedom founded upon justice. This is a statement Sartre cannot begin to make sense of, precisely because

⁹¹ McDowell (1996) p11. As we will see Levinas himself draws upon analogies between concept-formation and morality (truth and justice).

⁹² Levinas (1979) p83

⁹³ Levinas (1979) p84. Emphasis mine.

⁹⁴ Levinas uses ‘freedom’ at times to refer to both the ‘arbitrary’ conception of freedom within egoistic totality that he critiques and the responsible conception of freedom conditioned by justice which he endorses, so we must be careful to follow his claims carefully.

for him the experience of being ashamed *is* the experience of having one's freedom stripped away. This is, however, because he defines freedom as radical and unregulated in exactly the manner that Levinas critiques.

It is expressly this Sartrean articulation of freedom that Levinas attacks as arbitrary and violent. Sartre's different understanding of the relationship between freedom and morality makes for an entirely different conception of morality than Levinas'. I have noted that, for Sartre, it is always within the power of the for-itself to re-make and re-create her aims and her ongoing activity in the world. With regards every choice that we make, alternative choices are at every moment a 'live' possibility. For Sartre, this structure applies to *all* that we value. As with all aims, moral aims are contingent. All values, including moral values, are created by the for-itself: they have no status as 'to-be-valued' outside of the subject's comportment of valuing. Value is justified by freedom, rather than freedom justified by value.

To be clear, for Sartre, this isn't simply the obvious claim that all valuing requires a valuer, but is the far stronger claim that we are the sole and sovereign *creators* of value – value depends entirely on our will, which is arbitrary. Values are at the mercy of our whim, for we are at liberty at any instance to change these values and change our action accordingly. Like all the other ways we try to furnish ourselves with an identity, value claims accepted in the past can be broken with and unmade in an instant – they are always subject to our surpassing them.

So-called 'moral demands' therefore have no force upon us save the force that we freely choose to accord them. Sartre likens the experience of a moral demand to the experience of hearing an alarm clock. There is a summons, but only the summons we allow it to give us. We are entirely free to ignore the alarm clock and its summons. We are free to ignore any moral claim made on us, just as we are free to ignore the alarm clock's 'claim' that we are to act a certain way. This isn't simply the claim that we are capable of recognising a moral imperative and then choosing not to act accordingly – it is obvious that this is possible; we have all done it. Rather, Sartre is claiming that in all cases we can choose not to recognise something as a moral imperative at all, because whether something is a moral imperative rests wholly on our decision. 'As a being by whom all values exist, I am unjustifiable.'⁹⁵ That the Sartrean picture of freedom and value is the manifestation of the picture

⁹⁵ Sartre (2003) p62

challenged by Levinas should now be evident. I turn now to evaluate these different conceptions of freedom and value.

Evaluating Shame, Freedom and Value

Reasons for discrepancies between Sartre and Levinas may be due to the *scope* of phenomena identified and investigated by each thinker. Alternatively there may be *differing analyses* of phenomena identified, or a straightforward *misidentification* of phenomena. These different discrepancies should become apparent in the continued evaluation of both accounts.

In comparatively evaluating Sartre and Levinas' models of intersubjectivity I am comparing their respective understandings of the encounter with the Other-as-subject as 'being seen' as opposed to 'being addressed'. Within this, each's concept of freedom can be evaluated.

How does the encounter with the Other-as-subject structure human subjectivity? Sartre claims that being seen decentres the self, and in this sense we should want to analyse it as an instance of self-transcendence. However, this is *not* how Sartre himself wants to understand being seen. He claims, rather, that this is a state of transcendence-transcended. Levinas, on the other hand will say that being addressed is an instance of transcendence because it draws the subject away from her self-centred existence towards the recognition of moral responsibility.

Sartre is right to claim that in being seen we encounter the Other-as-subject. This experience has the structure of inverse-intentionality that distinguishes it as an Other-involving experience: I cannot be seen by objects. It can also be accepted that Sartre is right to claim that we can and do 'objectify' ourselves in the eyes of the Other by relating to ourselves only as thing-like before them. However, not all experiences of being seen are like this. Sartre is correct to say that the experience of being seen is the experience of being seen a-certain-way, and so the experience of oneself as having a nature. For Sartre this leads to the conclusion that all self-other relations are structured by a subject-object dynamic. However, this is only because he has defined into the understanding of 'having a nature' that it pertains to being-in-itself and so is object-like.

Against the Sartrean analysis, responses to the Other can be identified in which I do not relate to myself-as-object but myself-as-subject. In fact, it might be

claimed that Sartre misunderstands his own paradigmatic example of shame. Shame reveals that in my freedom I have been murderous or violent or voyeuristic. This is not to label myself at a distance but is a conviction that it is *I* in my freedom who is murderous. It is the experience of being murderous. Shame reveals that I have a nature, but it is not an object-like nature, it is a subject-like nature. To experience myself as object-like excludes experiencing myself as murderous. Objects have nothing to be ashamed of.

We do not therefore necessarily experience ourselves as seen by the Other *as an object*, we can experience ourselves as seen as a subject. Here, the Levinasian trope of 'being addressed' is more helpful, because while it is true that objects can be seen, and we can be seen as object-like, objects cannot be addressed or held to account. To experience ourselves as addressed is to necessarily experience the Other-as-subject, but it is also to necessarily experience myself-as-subject.

This point then acts as a challenge to Sartre's categories. The experience of being addressed reveals that we can relate to ourselves at the same time as both being free and being-a-certain-way. This is impossible on Sartre's framework of being-in-itself and being-for-itself. This analysis therefore calls into question Sartre's foundational claim that reality is to be understood in terms of these two mutually exclusive modes of being.

Further, in the experience of myself as murderous or voyeuristic before the Other I experience her demand that my very next action be different. Recognising that demands are placed on me by the Other is not an obstacle to my capacity to make choices, rather, they present opportunities where choices are to be made. In being addressed we discover ourselves as being-a-certain-way and at the same time we are set free to choose differently in the future. In experiencing ourselves as voyeuristic in the face of the Other I recognise the claim made on me to honesty and respectfulness and so on, and I am presented with the opportunity to choose to act in accordance with the claims made on me. Experiencing a moral address provides the resources and the motivation to freely act in accordance with this demand.

Levinas' understanding of how being addressed opens up the subject's freedom to choose to make decisions in line with the Other's moral demands provides a significant challenge to Sartre. Levinas' insight here challenges Sartre's analysis of being seen as necessarily an experience that 'pins down' my freedom. Sartre is wrong to say that in being seen I am necessarily transcendence-transcended.

Shame, for example, can facilitate or enable autonomous decisions, in revealing to the subject what she should choose. Sartre therefore cannot say that the experience of shame before the Other alienates me from my lived subjectivity and my freedom.

To be clear, two points have been made in this analysis of shame: (a) Shame reveals my nature as a subject rather than as an object; and (b) My freedom as response is made possible by Other-involving experiences like shame.⁹⁶ While Levinas can account for both of these features, Sartre can account for neither. Both thinkers have asked us to follow them in examining our lived experience of encounters with the Other in order to make sense of their conclusions, and, having done so, I find Levinas to do so in a way that has greater resonance with these experiences. Sartre's claim that experiences like shame alienate us from our freedom and our lived subjectivity is mistaken.

Following this, Levinas' conceptual analysis of freedom demonstrates the flaws in Sartre's account of freedom. The Sartrean conception of freedom as whim, torn apart completely from any normative constraints, does not make for a satisfactory account of value. A further key point of evaluation therefore concerns the different accounts of value on offer.⁹⁷

An important question to ask of each thinker is whether their accounts make for a plausible phenomenology of value. I suggest that Sartre's account fails in this respect. I have already considered some of the reasons why: because his account of value is premised on his account of radical freedom, which has been assessed as implausibly strong. Consideration of its moral implications only serves to highlight this. The moral demand is not simply like an alarm clock. The 'you shall not commit murder' *does* cut across us. When Levinas says 'you shall not commit murder' he is of course not saying that we are incapable of murder – he is aware that this is a world where many have murdered. What he means is that we *should* recognise that we *should not* murder. The Sartrean, on the other hand, could always become a murderer – not just in the sense that she is logically or physically capable of murder, but that there is no moral requirement on her *not* to murder, save any requirement she puts on

⁹⁶ Bernard Williams makes some different but complementary points about the interconnection between shame and freedom which I am not considering here. See Williams (1993).

⁹⁷ I am limiting my critique of Sartre's conception of human freedom to the problems it faces in being the sole source of moral value, but there are several other fronts on which we might also critique Sartrean freedom, such as the claim that as free we can overcome the influences of our past in an instant. See McCulloch (1994) pp64-70 for some criticisms of this variety.

herself. If Sartre's account is taken seriously the subject could at anytime commit murder without there being any normative constraints on this.

Sartre would recognise that we might take ourselves to be responsible to others, but this would *only* be because we have freely decided to be so. The value and imperative of this responsibility is only there if the subject decides to imbue this responsibility with value. Any notion of responsibility to the Other is derived entirely from responsibility to the self. Levinas, on the other hand, recognises that my freedom is active in the recognition of moral requirements, but understands these requirements not to depend wholly on my freedom.

Sartre hopes to convince us of his conception of freedom by articulating a phenomenology of freedom that we can identify within our experience, but on this front he struggles to succeed. We do not experience moral values as we do alarm clocks. When we transgress moral standards we recognise this not only as a transgression of choices we have made, but also of the standards upon which these choices were made. These 'standards' are grounded in the embodied reality of the human Other and I cannot control them or re-create them. This does not make them coercive forces. If I recognise the demand of the Other as normative then I do so freely. Our experience of our lived freedom testifies to the fact that it does admit of this kind of justification.

The Limits of Sartre's Account of the Other

Sartre's claim that all intersubjective relations are necessarily conflictual is founded on his account of freedom. His conception of freedom as unanchored must be a freedom that is defined against the freedom of the Other, for her freedom places constraints on mine, and she must always be 'overcome' in order that my freedom be preserved. It is the definition of my freedom against the Other's freedom that leads to its loss at the end of the look. This leads to the always asymmetric structure of the self-other relation that necessarily becomes a violent, conflictual power-struggle, as the asymmetry shifts back-and-forth.

Sartre dedicates many pages to describing how he takes this back-and-forth to manifest itself in concrete relations. As each movement towards the Other is either one of imposing freedom or imposed-upon impotence, each encounter is either an exercise in dominance or submission, in sadism or masochism. Sartre gives his own

definitions of 'love' and 'desire' as doomed attempts to be both a subject and an object for the Other at the same time. In 'love' there is an initial offering of oneself as an object for the Other, and in desire the attempt to possess the Other's freedom. In different ways 'love' and 'desire' try to possess the Other whilst wanting to experience her freedom, and consequently always find themselves frustrated.

In showing Sartre's account of freedom to be problematic I have called into question his conclusion that all relationships have the structure of conflict. This is just as well, because the claim that human relationships are necessarily conflictual seems to be empirically false. Sartre does identify the undeniably real experience of objectifying the Other and the experience of being objectified. However, it seems he extrapolates from these phenomena to his account of the structure of *all* intersubjective relations. This is unjustified. That such relationships can be identified does not mean that they exhaust the sum of the relationships we experience.

Sartre's account can then be challenged with examples of human relationships that do not have this subject-object dynamic. It has been shown that Levinas successfully identifies relationships of moral responsibility as having a subject-subject dynamic, and so here Levinas successfully demonstrates the limits of Sartre's account. Relationships of peace, justice and hospitality do not hide a structure of conflictual objectifying and objectified, but rather have a different structure altogether. This claim is not wishful thinking but is grounded in the Levinasian understanding of what it is for the human subject to be free.

It is noteworthy that in the section where Sartre describes the nature of concrete relations, they are evidently all relations where we relate to the Other in terms of things we want for ourselves. I want to possess the Other or use her in some way, or I want to be for her a fascinating object for possession. Levinas would identify Sartre's conflictual relationships as ways in which we remain at the level of totality, relating to the Other as something to satisfy my wants.

The criticism that Sartre remains within totality is a claim that he does not recognise the alterity of the Other at all. This, in many ways, seems like an unfair assessment of Sartre. In Sartre's account of being seen there is a clear decentring of the self which puts the subject in touch with the Other. I would be more inclined to say that Sartre does identify genuine alterity, but misunderstands what this means. Sartre is right to identify shame as a necessarily Other-involving emotion, but, as I have argued, he misunderstands the nature of shame and fails to appreciate what its

experience means for the subject who is seen. To experience shame is not to experience oneself as an object, and so the paradigm case of the look does not have the structure of objectification, even it is agreed that we can identify relationships of need which are structured by objectification. If understood aright, the decentring of the self that occurs in being seen could be understood as transcendence rather than as transcendence-transcended.

Sartre's account is limited by his failure to recognise that we experience many relationships which are not structured by a dynamic of conflict. In part this is because he extrapolates from examples of relationships which are structured by a subject-object dynamic, and in part because he misunderstands the experience of alterity where he does identify it. Consequently, Sartre has a very narrow picture of how the Other plays a role in defining subjectivity.

Sartrean intersubjectivity makes for an understanding of human subjectivity that remains egoistic throughout its encounters with Others, and further, it does not coherently understand the subject to be engaged in a movement of transcendence in being related the Other. That Sartrean intersubjectivity has been shown to be problematically narrow means that such conclusions are not yet justified.

The Limits of Levinas' Account of the Other

I have suggested that Levinas' analysis of freedom articulates the phenomenology of freedom more convincingly than Sartre's, but this does not yet mean that Levinas' asymmetrical structure of the self-other relation is to be accepted wholesale. Levinas' asymmetrical self-other relation is an infinite subjection or submission of the self to the demand of the Other and a call to give endlessly, where such a demand cannot be returned. Atterton, Calarco and Friedman note that 'the self is...characterised by Levinas as a 'hostage', someone who is put in the place of another, carrying her woes, ready to substitute [herself] for the Other.'⁹⁸ One bears *all* the responsibility for the Other. This is a 'difficult freedom,'⁹⁹ as Levinas himself tells us.

Despite the fact that the two accounts under consideration are in many senses extremely different, they share this feature of a difficult freedom. Levinas' radical responsibility to the Other in some sense is comparable to the radical responsibility

⁹⁸ Atterton, Calarco and Friedman (2004) p14

⁹⁹ This phrase titles a collection of Levinas' papers on Judaism. See Levinas (2011)

that the Sartrean in anguish takes herself to owe to herself. The weight of the responsibility for the continual creation and re-making of oneself in Sartre's understanding finds a correlation in the weightiness of the giving to the endlessly needy Other. Cohen notes this similarity. 'In a word,' he says, 'for both Sartre and Levinas the human subject is the moral atlas of the universe, responsible for all and everything without excuse and without exception.'¹⁰⁰

Sartre's account of freedom as self-creation does not recognise its limits, but, in a different way, this is also true of Levinas' account of responsibility to the Other. Levinas talks about how I am responsible even for the Other's responsibilities. This, in its own way, seems to fail to fully respect the Other-as-subject. The free choices of the Other are not mine to take responsibility for, and to claim that they are is, in some sense, to undermine the Other's freedom. It also suggests that we are capable of something which we are not.

Levinas makes the leap from the insatiability of our responsibility to the claim that we are responsible for *everything* in the self-Other relation. That is, he makes the leap from the fact that moral responsibility is recognised to have no limit, to the claim that *what* we are to rightly take responsibility for has no limit. This, however, does not follow. It can be agreed that our responsibility to the Other is never satiated and that I can always serve the Other further, whilst also recognising that there are things that fall outside my responsibility, like the choices of the Other.

Hence, while Sartre's depiction of mastery and possession of the Other presents a picture of the subject who fails to acknowledge important normative standards like 'you shall not commit murder', Levinas' 'difficult freedom' does not present an entirely satisfying normative account of the human subject either. Sartre's continued 're-mastery' of the Other presents an unattractive asymmetry to interpersonal relationships, but Levinas' refusal to acknowledge a structure of reciprocity may also be a cause for concern.

There is almost something of a secret self-assertion within Levinas' radical altruism. Levinas understands the proper response to the Other to be couched in terms of what *I* can do for them. Our response to the Other depends entirely upon our own resources. This does not leave any room for the definition of intersubjectivity in terms of what *they* can do for me or gift me with. Levinas wholly condemns the

¹⁰⁰ Cohen (2010) p136

assertion of the self over the Other in terms of Sartrean mastery and objectification. However, in proposing an asymmetrical structure of his own, arguably he retains an account where the self asserts herself over the Other, in greater responsibility if not in greater power. Levinas' account fails to recognise that the Other has something to offer me, as well as there being much I have to offer her in response to her need. As such Levinas' account has a narrowness of its own.

One chief insight of *Totality and Infinity* is the identification of *being addressed* as a phenomenon that reveals radical alterity. However, being addressed, we might think, can go beyond moral demand eliciting obligation. To be *offered* hospitality – which we might properly respond to in *gratitude*, for example, is a form of being addressed. That we can identify such Other-involving responses within our experience serves to highlight a further narrowness in Levinas' account. The issue here is not that Levinas understands the Other to make demands of me – I have argued that this is to be defended. Rather, it suggests that Levinas limits his understanding intersubjectivity in understanding it to be framed *only* in terms of a deontological mandate to give.

Levinas' account of the Other is therefore limited in that it: (a) fails to recognise that there are things that are properly not within my responsibility; (b) claims that we should understand our giving to the Other as one-sided where it is not clear why this is necessarily so; (c) understands intersubjectivity only in terms of demand and obligation. Levinas' picture of intersubjectivity as of an asymmetrical structure may therefore need supplementing or rethinking. I will return to this in chapter seven.

In summary, while the Other features in both Sartre and Levinas' accounts of human subjectivity, the way that alterity is said to structure subjectivity differs radically in the case of each. For both, the relationship with the Other connects up with the longing for fulfilment that distinguishes human subjectivity. For Sartre intersubjectivity reveals the impossibility of our longing, while for Levinas our longing is given content as the longing to give oneself without end to the Other in service.

However, understanding the role of the human Other in shaping subjectivity, is, for neither, a sufficient articulation of the structure of subjectivity. In collecting points of comparison as well as points of contrast between the two, both are found to stretch their accounts of intersubjectivity to include reference to God. For both

thinkers it is only in extending their accounts in this way that a fuller understanding of human subjectivity can be given. I will turn now to consider how both introduce and employ the concept of God.

Chapter Five

Sartrean atheism

Sartre's account of reality, though it is atheistic, introduces God as a concept needed to understand human subjectivity as the longing for fulfilment. Here I will consider Sartre's reasons for embracing atheism whilst wanting to employ the concept of God. In his discussion of being-for-others Sartre hypothesises about how his proposed structure of intersubjective relations would translate to the human subject's relationship with God. As discussed in previous chapters, he characterises all intersubjective relations as structured by a subject-object dynamic. God, he says, would be the ultimate subject, the look that cannot be looked at. To posit a God, then, is to 'posit...the subject which can in no way become an object.'¹⁰¹ Sartre continues:

I thereby posit the eternity of my being-as-object and so perpetuate my shame. This is shame before God; that is, the recognition of my being-an-object before a subject which can never become an object...I posit my being-an-object-for-God as more real than my For-itself; I exist alienated and I cause myself to learn from outside what I must be. This is the origin of fear before God.¹⁰²

Theism, for Sartre, is life lived eternally alienated from one's freedom. This is because God, if real, would be a subject that cannot be objectified, a look from which I can never escape. To introduce God as an extension of being-for-others in this way is to postulate a human subject always alienated from herself, permanently apart from her power to negate, and her lived experience as free. Theism therefore does violence to human subjectivity conceived as free. Sartre reminds us several times of our vulnerability before the Other and our flight from this vulnerability. God as ultimate subject is one before whom we would flee, but cannot.

However, for Sartre, such an encounter is only a thought experiment, because he rejects the existence of God. The reasons for his atheism are to be found in his understanding of what is meant by 'God'. For God to be God, in the terminology of *Being and Nothingness*, God must be being-for-itself without curtailment of power or

¹⁰¹ Sartre (2003) p313

¹⁰² Sartre (2003) p313

freedom: this is what Sartre means when he says that God would be the ultimate subject. However, this is only one half of the Sartrean understanding of what God would have to be in order to be God. Divine nature and identity would not be unstable and changing, like the continually re-created identity of the human person. God, rather, would have to be complete, and fully complete, lacking nothing. God's being must be being-in-itself. God would have to be perfectly free and perfectly complete *at the same time*. Definitionally, then, God *is* being-in-itself-for-itself, and Sartre explicitly defines 'God' in these terms.

He approaches this by noting that being-for-others reveals that the subject has to rely upon the Other's freedom in order to found her being-in-itself. This reliance makes for an unhappy situation for the subject and brings into focus an ideal: a being who could rely upon her own freedom in order to found her own being-in-itself. This is why Sartre claims that 'my being-for-others is haunted by the indication of an absolute-being...that is, God.'¹⁰³ God is defined as the being who is able to found their own being-in-itself in the way that the Other founds the human subject's being-in-itself. As simultaneously founder and founded, God is being-for-itself and being-in-itself both at once: being-in-itself-for-itself. As Wang summarises – 'God is for Sartre the ideal of securely having an identity and freely founding it at the same time.'¹⁰⁴ Of course, as Sartre goes straight on to remind us, 'this ideal can not be realised without my surmounting the original contingency of my relations to the Other.[The mutual exclusivity of being-in-itself and being-for-itself]. We have seen that this contingency is insurmountable.'¹⁰⁵ Where God freely founds His own being-in-itself, God is an impossible ideal.

The definition of God as being-in-itself-for-itself articulates what is meant by 'God' in terms of Sartre's ontological project and definitions. This articulation finds an alignment with the depiction of God found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in as far as God is understood to be perfectly complete and perfectly omnipotently free. The existence of this perfect being is, however, rejected by Sartre, for the reasons given above. Sartre states, as part of his definition of God as being-in-itself-for-itself, that this is a contradictory concept. On this particular atheistic picture God is not

¹⁰³ Sartre (2003) p387

¹⁰⁴ Wang (2006) p6

¹⁰⁵ Sartre (2003) p387.

simply an unlikely story but definitionally impossible. The object of the definition of ‘God’ cannot exist.

If the Sartrean framework of being-in-itself and being-for-itself is accepted, and if Sartre’s definition of God is accepted, then his argument here follows. However, as I have intimated in previous chapters, and will consider further, there may be good reasons for rejecting the framework he employs and hence for rejecting his conclusions regarding God.

As should be obvious, Sartre’s definition of God is connected to his analysis of the human longing for fulfilment. What we long for is to be being-in-itself-for-itself, and so what we long for is to *be God*. Sartre explicitly frames the desire for fulfilment in these terms:

‘...In-itself-for-itself; that is, the ideal of a consciousness which would be the foundation of its own being-in-itself by the pure consciousness which it would have of itself. It is this ideal which can be called God. Thus the best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God...*To be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God.*’¹⁰⁶

We desire to be being-in-itself-for-itself and as such we aspire to be God. In desiring to be being-in-itself we desire to lack nothing, and in desiring to be being-for-itself we aspire to create ourselves *ex nihilo*...as if a God. In desiring to be God we long to be both these at once. This is Sartre’s understanding of human subjectivity structured by longing, given in theological terms.

‘The idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain,’ says Sartre, in summary. ‘Man is a useless passion.’¹⁰⁷ This is how Sartre understands human subjectivity – as longing frustrated: a useless passion. There are several things within this claim that should be made clear. Firstly, Sartre is claiming that the idea of God is a contradictory idea. Secondly, he is claiming that we long to *be* God. Finally, he claims that our longing can never be satiated and is ‘useless’.

In summary, Sartre introduces the concept of God as a term necessary for understanding the nature of human subjectivity, though he understands God to be a contradictory concept, and understands the role that it plays in the experience of the human subject to be the role of an impossible ideal. The introduction of God is

¹⁰⁶ Sartre (2003) p587. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁷ Sartre (2003) p636

needed to explain the way that human beings have their existence in the world. This explanation can, however, be given on an atheistic framework because the desire can be accounted for in terms that do not require the mind-independent reality of God.

Levinasian theism

Levinas also introduces God terminology into his picture of the human subject. Levinas' use of God has in part already been established in our discussion of Levinas' idea of infinity, because it has already been noted that, as with its Cartesian inspiration, Levinasian infinity *is* God. God is defined by Levinas as the absolutely infinite and the absolutely perfect. God does not have boundaries as an object does, God cannot be grasped. A full understanding of what God is exceeds us. As with Descartes, 'I do not comprehend the infinite.'¹⁰⁸ Levinas accords God a mind-independent reality, for, just as Descartes claims that 'the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea,'¹⁰⁹ so Levinas understands the experience of God to be the experience of a reality that exceeds my experience.

This reminds us that on Levinas' account, though God exceeds us, we *do* experience God in some way. That Levinas claims that we experience God should not come as a surprise, because it has been established that he takes us to experience infinity in Desire. Levinas' characterisation of Desire can now be spelt out in more explicitly theological terms. Desire is the desire for God. This is not, like the Sartrean analysis, the desire to *be* God, but rather is the desire to be *related to God*. It is a desire to experience exposure to divine alterity.

The exposure to God that we experience is an experience of revelation. 'The idea of infinity is *revealed*, in the strong sense of the term,'¹¹⁰ Levinas tells us. Revelation, it has been noted, is an experience of being addressed. Levinas is claiming, then, that we encounter God in being addressed by God. We cannot be addressed by objects, only subjects. God is not a special kind of object, therefore, but a special kind of subject. The experience of being addressed in the Desire for God is explicitly noted by Levinas:

¹⁰⁸ Descartes (1997) p157

¹⁰⁹ Levinas (1979) p49

¹¹⁰ Levinas (1979) p62

‘...Thus again we meet with the distinction between Desire and need: Desire...originates from its ‘object’; it is revelation – whereas need is a void of the soul; it proceeds from the subject.’¹¹¹

This refers to the inverse intentionality that comes with exposure to alterity. This is markedly different from the longing that Sartre identifies as the longing to be God. I will evaluate Levinas’ analysis of Desire further, comparing and contrasting his analysis with Sartre’s.

For Levinas there are important connections to be drawn between the way that both God and the human Other condition an understanding of the nature of human subjectivity. Levinas has told us that it is in the face of the Other that we experience the object of our Desire. To put this in theological terms, the experience of the moral demand of the human Other *is* an experience in which we encounter God.

This is a difficult claim to make sense of, and it is worth saying from the outset that it is not always clear in Levinas’ text exactly how the relationship with God and with the human Other inter-relate.¹¹² This ambiguity should not be overlooked in Levinas, and I will come back to it in order to question whether the strength of Levinas’ claim is warranted. However, for now I will try to be as clear as possible about what is being claimed here. I will identify four points of connection that Levinas makes between the self-other and the self-God relationship.

Levinas’ picture of the subject exposed and open to infinity is one where the subject is alive to her moral responsibility to the Other, ‘redeemed’ from the egoism of totality. The ‘idea of infinity’ is, as discussed, the absolutely infinite and the absolutely perfect. The encounter with this absolute standard in the revelation of my own finitude and imperfection calls me to moral betterment in service and hospitality. This call must be a call to serve and host the human Other. The moral demand does not ask for the service of an abstract or disembodied Good, but of human persons. In this sense, encountering and responding to God is already fundamentally connected to a response to the human Other.

Levinas makes an even stronger claim than this, however, which is that the human person encounters God *only* through the face of the human Other. He says:

¹¹¹ Levinas (1979) p62

¹¹² Bernard Waldenfels notes that the relationship between divine and human authority is not always clear in Levinas. See Waldenfels in Critchley and Bernasconi (2002).

‘The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face...It is here that the Transcendent, infinitely Other, solicits us and appeals to us...God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence *as correlative to the justice rendered unto men*...There can be no ‘knowledge’ of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other...is indispensable for my relation with God...The Other is not the incarnation of God, but...is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed’¹¹³

Levinas claims that we experience the divine address through, and only through, the moral address of the human Other. The relationship between the human subject and God is therefore constituted by a moral relation manifested in human relationships and nowhere else, for ‘God is not approached outside of all human presence.’¹¹⁴ As Purcell points out, for Levinas ethics is not only first philosophy but also ‘first theology’.¹¹⁵ Ethics is the road into and the content of both theology and the lived experience of theistic faith. ‘Ethics is the spiritual optics,’¹¹⁶ Levinas tells us.

One claim in play here, which has been uncovered in previous sections and now applies to Levinas’ theological understanding, is that the encounter with the human Other has the same structure as the encounter with God. In experiencing ourselves as the recipient of a moral demand we discover that the human Other has a reality that exceeds me. She is ‘radically exterior’ and incapable of being reduced to the satisfaction of my needs. In this way there is something parallel or analogous in the way that we encounter the human Other and we encounter God. Levinas says that the experience of the human Other ‘signifies’¹¹⁷ the experience of God. The ‘height’ of the Other and the asymmetrical structure of the self-other relationship signifies the ‘height’ of God, and the structure of the self-God relationship.

However, he claims that the relationship with the Other is more than a signification of the relation with infinity, because he claims further that to experience the moral address of the human Other *is* to experience the divine address. This is not to say that God is reduced to the human Other, neither is God inferred to from the existence of the Other, but rather, in the experience of the face we experience being addressed both by the Other, and by God.

¹¹³ Levinas (1979) pp78-79. Emphasis mine.

¹¹⁴ Levinas (1979) p78

¹¹⁵ Purcell (2006) p2

¹¹⁶ Levinas (1979) p78

¹¹⁷ See Levinas (1979) p199

In recognising her moral responsibility the human subject undergoes one internal movement, which can be summarised, in Levinas' terminology, as the movement from totality to infinity. However, Levinas would have us understand that this movement is a double response, both to God and the human Other.

Purcell captures well the way that Levinas understands this 'double response':

'The notion of phenomenological awakening is an important one for Levinas as consciousness emerges and is summoned to conscience, or moral consciousness. It enables a charting of the movement from subjectivity to intersubjectivity. Theologically, it will have significance in articulating a theology of graced existence, as well as implications for the requirements in sustaining the demands of an existence which is both responsible and just.'¹¹⁸

This is phrased particularly helpfully in as far as it highlights that the introduction of both Other and God (needed for morality and religion) condition an 'awakening' from a 'minimal' subjectivity to something more 'fully human'. Both God and the Other condition the structure of this latter conception. This is a reiteration of the claim that the structures of totality are a correct articulation of one corner of human life, but they do not give the whole story. This is obviously a normative claim as well as a factual claim. Levinas is claiming that human subjectivity should be a 'religious consciousness'. Discovery of God-as-subject within necessarily God-involving phenomena are required that the human subject be all that she can be *qua* human.

It is important to reiterate that on Levinas' model, while both human and God are required terms, Levinas does not want to conflate the two. Peperzak suggests that in his claims regarding the source of moral demand, Levinas engages in two steps. The first takes from Descartes the *formal structure* of the relation of the subject to God – which is the formal structure of the idea of the infinite in Meditation Three. The second step asks how this formal structure is 'concretised'. This is to say, Levinas considers *how* the encounter with God, identified as having this formal structure, shows up in experience. He concludes that it is only in the experience of being addressed by the Other that we have an experience that bears the form of the encounter with God, as in Meditation Three.¹¹⁹ Hence Levinas' claim that 'without

¹¹⁸ Purcell (2006) p88. 'Graced existence' I take to pertain to the human subject standing in the right kind of relationship to God.

¹¹⁹ See Peperzak (1993) p56

the signification they draw from ethics, theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks.¹²⁰

To recap, if the Other is not introduced, the subject could never experience God, and no experience could be pointed at in which it is claimed that God is encountered. On the other hand, if God is not introduced, we could not understand the character of our encounter with the Other as an exposure to infinity. Without God, there are not the resources to understand moral demand as insatiable Desire, because there is no way of articulating the fact that in responding to a moral summons we respond to something infinite.

Among all the experiences available to human beings, Levinas identifies *only* the experience of the Other's moral demand as structured by the 'excess' of infinity that arouses Desire. This is why he makes the strong claim that the face of the Other is the site, and the only site, of divine encounter. That Levinas only identifies a relationship with infinity within relationships of moral demand is the real foundation for the claim that ethics is first theology. This particularly strong understanding of the connections between human Other and God makes for an uncompromising picture of the subject-God relation, a picture that Levinas thinks weeds out flawed conceptions of the divine. Levinas thinks that theological constructs and caricatures have obstructed what an unprejudiced investigation of phenomena reveals: There is no encounter with God unmediated by the human Other. That is, there is no revelation of God that comes to elicit an emotional response of worship apart from service toward the human Other. On discovery of a God such as Levinas' there is no place to become caught up in any religious fervour disconnected from the moral response to the call of the human Other.

This God comes to us as the highest perfection, and as such comes as the revelation of our imperfection, as per Descartes. Such a revelation is not a resignation to our moral status as less-than-perfect, but a mandate to strive to become morally better. As such, Levinas warns against understanding God as a being whose sovereignty is manifested as an ever-intervening parent. The salvific work that such a God enacts consists in the preservation of humanity from injustice, leaving us free of the task. Such a conception of God is one before whom responsibility can be

¹²⁰ Levinas (1979) p79

transferred and so deferred, and for Levinas nothing could be further from what is revealed in the encounter with the infinite. For:

‘When I maintain an ethical relation I refuse to recognise the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me; I refuse to figure in a drama of salvation or of damnation that would be enacted in spite of me and that would make game of me.’¹²¹

To ‘figure in such a drama’ constitutes what he calls ‘primitive religion’¹²². On this theme, in his essay *To Love the Torah more than God* he rejects a deity that dispenses comfort as a self-indulgent conception of God. Understanding God in this way is an attempt to relate to God in terms of needs to be satisfied, and so remains at the level of totality. Any supposed experiences of God other than the experience of my own moral responsibility therefore fail to relate successfully to God-as-subject at all. God is revealed in our moral conscience before the Other, and ‘abandons’ us in every other way. To have experienced the demand of the infinite is to have refuted the distorted conception of God and is to embrace a transformed theism – a theism that he refers to as a kind of ‘atheism’ for this reason, because it is the death of a certain ‘God’. ‘An adult person’s God reveals himself in the emptiness of the child’s heaven,’¹²³ Levinas summarises.

For clarity it is worth noting that Levinas’ makes two separate claims about the relationship between the role of the human Other and the role of God. He claims firstly that we have experiences that can be identified as necessarily God-involving (they can be identified as Desire rather than need). Secondly he claims that *only* an experience of the moral demand issued by the face of the Other is God-involving. Rejecting this second claim does not amount to a rejection of the first claim. Were other experiences identified bearing the Meditation Three structure, the idea that God is needed to make sense of all such experiences could be retained, without needing to claim that it is only via the human Other that God is encountered. Whether both, one or neither of these claims should be accepted will be something to return to upon evaluation of Levinas’ theism.

¹²¹ Levinas (1979) p79

¹²² Levinas (1979) p79

¹²³ Levinas in Van Beeck (1989) p37

This summary of Levinas' conception of God, which is complex, has highlighted several aspects of this concept. Levinas claims that: (a) We experience God in being addressed by God; (b) The experience of being addressed by God is the experience of the absolutely perfect and absolutely infinite; (c) God has a mind-independent reality; (d) The experience of God is irreducibly connected to the experience of the human Other. Of this last claim, there are several dimensions to this. I have identified that Levinas claims that (i) The experience of God is the experience of a demand for my moral betterment, which is always a demand that I serve the human Other; (ii) The self-God relationship has the same structure as the self-other relationship as a structure of Desire rather than need; (iii) God is encountered via encounter with the Other, and (iv) God is *only* encountered through encounter with the Other.

The connection between Other-involving and God-involving phenomena is not taken for granted nor plucked out of thin air – the connection is uncovered in Levinas' phenomenological analysis of Desire for infinity, which he understands to be a necessarily God-involving phenomenon. Positive evaluation of Levinas' claims about God, including the connection he draws between God and the human Other, depend upon how defensible his analysis of Desire is, and how successfully his conclusions follow from this analysis. I turn now to these questions.

Chapter Six

Theistic Presuppositions?

Regarding initial comparison with Sartre's account, it might be suggested that Levinas' account, in being inescapably theistic, posits a metaphysically suspect entity where Sartre's atheistic framework does without. For sceptics this may put Sartre in the stronger position of the two in so far as his is a framework which doesn't have to deal with the problems, questions and complications that come with admitting God to our picture of reality. This might come as the accusation that Levinas smuggles God into the picture without sufficient warrant. An accusation in this vein comes from Dominique Janicaud, who thinks that Levinasian concepts of revelation and transcendence have been presupposed, and that the use of such theological terminology compromises the rigor of the philosophical method. To refer to God at all presupposes too much.¹²⁴

Levinas writes from within the Jewish faith. He is adamant, however, that *Totality and Infinity* is a strictly philosophical work which does not trade on the presuppositions of faith. The God he makes claim to here is the God of Descartes' third meditation, the reality discovered when presuppositions are laid aside. Levinas' claims that preconceived notions of God have been laid aside should be taken seriously. Theistic positions do not necessarily presuppose God. This claim itself rests on the assumption that God *cannot* be found in an investigation of the lived human experience, which is itself a bias. God may or may not be found on rigorous analysis of phenomena, but to bar the possibility of discovery from the outset is as potentially distortive as any other theological claims that might be asserted.

Levinas' account of the experience of God in fact only makes sense against the backdrop of the atheism of totality. Subjectivity within totality is atheist in so far as it precedes encounter with infinity. Totality is 'godless': God is not presupposed. The experience of infinity comes as a 'surprise' to totality because infinity is not to be found within totality at all. Alterity comes as a surprise to ipseity because no alterity (and no divine alterity) is 'built into' the ipseity of totality. No God is to be found within totality. This is important to Levinas in ensuring the 'separation'

¹²⁴ See Janicaud (2000) p22.

between the self and the God who is revealed. This separation conditions the possibility of genuine alterity revealing itself.

‘One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated – eventually capable of adhering to it by belief. The break with participation is implied in this capacity. One lives outside of God, at home with oneself, one is an I, an egoism. The soul, the dimension of the psychic being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist. By atheism we understand a position prior to...the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I.’¹²⁵

Here Levinas demonstrates his refusal to bring theistic presuppositions with him into his philosophical enquiry. ‘Truth arises where a being separated from the Other is not engulfed by him, but speaks to him.’¹²⁶ If there is a God, this God will be encountered where the divine has not been presupposed, and comes as revelation in the sense previously considered: revelation is ‘spoken’ from outside. God comes in being addressed or not at all. Theism comes as a ‘surprise’ to the self as ‘naturally atheistic’. ‘Atheism conditions a veritable relationship with a true God.’¹²⁷ Levinas invites his reader to lay aside her theological preconceptions and join him in discovering God within her lived experience just as she discovers the human Other.

Janicaud’s specific criticism of Levinas can hence be laid aside, for Levinas sufficiently demonstrates that his theistic conclusions are reached in the analysis of the experience of Desire, rather than featuring as presuppositions. This does not yet mean that Levinas’ theism has been shown to be more persuasive than Sartre’s atheism, but rather that Levinas cannot be accused of presupposing theism without warrant.

Sartre and Levinas both introduce God in order to account for the longing for fulfilment that both take to characterise subjectivity. Our evaluation of both accounts should therefore focus upon each’s analysis of longing. If Levinas’ analysis of the longing for fulfilment as Desire is rejected then there are grounds upon which to reject his theism, and this is a move that might be made. However, I will argue that there are reasons for accepting Levinas’ account of Desire. If this is the case then

¹²⁵ Levinas (1979) p58

¹²⁶ Levinas (1979) p62

¹²⁷ Levinas (1979) p77

Levinas' theism can be said to give a more philosophically satisfactory account of human subjectivity than Sartre's atheism. Successfully challenging Sartre's atheistic model does not, of course, constitute a challenge to all atheistic conceptions of reality. However, as far as this comparative piece is concerned it will mean that, if theism is to be rejected, then an atheistic picture other than Sartre's will need to be given as providing an alternative to Levinas' theistic interpretation of Desire.

God, the Other and Fulfilment: Contrasting Frameworks

Sartre's analysis of longing is that it is a desire to *be* God, while Levinas' Desire is the desire to *be related* to God. There are three interconnected points at which these two interpretations of the longing for fulfilment can be compared. The first is concerned with how God is introduced by both thinkers as a way of understanding subjectivity as structured by self-transcendence. The second point returns to the observation that both thinkers understand longing to be insatiable, but they do so for different reasons, and seeks to understand this difference in the light of the introduction of God. Lastly, both thinkers understand the use of God and the use of the Other to be connected in portraying the subject as the longing for fulfilment. I will consider these three issues in this section, and in the next section evaluate these differences.

The difference between the analyses of the longing for fulfilment as a desire to be God as opposed to a desire for God makes a significant difference in understanding the nature of human subjectivity as self-transcending. Levinas' Desire for God as a desire to encounter God is a movement that draws the subject away from herself. God is experienced as an alterity which cannot be reduced to terms of the self, and in being confronted with this alterity we are drawn away from our reductions and assimilations, and so self-transcend in this sense. Further, in maintaining the distinction between self and God, and maintaining that God has a mind-independent reality, Levinas claims that the Desire for God is an instance of transcendence.

Sartre, on the other hand, has a more complicated and conflicting account of how the concept of God provides an understanding of human subjectivity as self-transcending. Sartre's understanding of the longing for fulfilment is not an instance of transcendence towards God. This is obviously the case, as on Sartre's framework

God has no mind-independent reality, and it has been stipulated that transcendence must put us in contact with a mind-independent reality.

However, this is not a straightforward case of a self-transcending movement that simply fails to reach its goal. Sartre understands the contradictory nature of the desire to be one which precisely seeks to transcend whilst at the same time seeks not to transcend. This is what it means, on his definition, to pursue being-in-itself-for-itself. Being-for-itself is characterised by transcendence while being-in-itself cannot self-transcend. As in the case of Sartre's understanding of the subject's relationship with other subjects, it seems that he wants to say that the subject's desire to be God both is, and is not, a movement of self-transcendence.

There is another important sense in which the Sartrean desire to be God can be evaluated as failing to be a movement of self-transcendence, for the desire to *be* God, in some obvious sense, keeps us at the level of preoccupation with ourselves. There is a movement towards the ideal of being God, and yet, this ideal is framed entirely in terms of what the subject herself aspires to be. There is no notion of alterity at play in the desire to be God, so there is nothing to draw the subject away from herself. This is not just because, for Sartre, God does not exist, but is because regardless of whether God exists or not, the desire to be God is an egoistic concern for what the subject wants for herself. It is, then, in an obvious sense, not a movement that draws the subject away from preoccupation with herself at all.

To remind ourselves, for Sartre, in the case of objects there is a genuine meeting of mind and world and so genuine transcendence. In the case of the human Other there is a mind-independent reality that I encounter, and I am decentred, but only in the experience of the loss of my transcending freedom. I never meet with the Other satisfactorily, but only in my own self-objectification. In the case of God there is movement towards an ideal but this is not a case of transcendence. Further, there is an important sense in which this movement also fails to be a movement of self-transcendence, in remaining preoccupied with the self. Transcendence on Sartre's account is hence only possible concerning subject-object relations, while on Levinas' account transcendence to other subjects and to God is possible. Further, for Levinas, this is a transcendence that is not possible at the level of mere objects.

The internal movement that Sartre identifies in longing is a movement that swings between the subject's two modes of being, rather than a movement away from the self. This brings us to the question of why the longing for fulfilment is

insatiable, as identified by both thinkers. Sartre's desire to be God is the desire to synthesise our two modes of being. Regardless of how hard the subject strives she always faces an obstacle to the object of her longing, because the two modes of being in question remain irreconcilable. The subject does not encounter the object of her longing at all, nor ever draws any closer to this ideal. She is actively thwarted by the mutual incompatibility of the two prongs of her desire to be God. It is the unavoidable failure to be God that makes human subjectivity an 'unhappy consciousness'. The desire to be God is insatiable because it is a desire with an impossible end, for we can never be God. This insatiability is understood by Sartre to be a negative thing, condemning the subject to a fruitless cyclic pursuit of the unattainable.

However, the longing *for* God, according to Levinas, understands the insatiability of our Desire to be unlike this. In Levinas' story, Desire is insatiable because it is the desire of the finite for the infinite, and so for that which will always exceed, overflow and elude the self. The infinite cannot be contained by the finite and so it will never be 'attained' in an important sense. Infinity can never be possessed or fully comprehended. We will never come to the end of Desire, it will not disappear upon exposure to God as the need for food disappears upon eating, but will continue to grow the more one tries to satisfy it. Desire is insatiable in virtue of the nature of the aim of Desire as infinite rather than because it is contradictory.

We are therefore dissatisfied beings, in the literal sense of this term, as far as our Desire for God is never satisfied, completed, or brought to an end. However, this is not characterised as a negative thing by Levinas. Rather, he understands this dissatisfaction to be the 'fulfilment' of our humanity in a different sense. While acknowledging that Desire is insatiable, he thinks that in Desire we *do* transcend towards God. My Desire is not contradictory and there is nothing working to frustrate my Desire. We do encounter the divine, and therefore in one sense the object of my Desire is reached. However, in another sense the object of my Desire is never reached, because the experience of divine alterity does not dull or bring to an end the longing for God, but only increases it.

It might be helpful to frame Levinas' understanding of the experience of God as an experience of something there is always 'more of'. There is always 'more' of God to experience, and Desire can hence never be exhausted by its object. As a finite being in pursuit of the infinite, the pursuit cannot be drawn to completion. 'The

calling into question of satisfaction,' he says, 'does not come from its failing, but from an event for which the process of finality cannot serve as the prototype.'¹²⁸ There is always more of God exceeding the horizon of my experience. This highlights the difference between Levinas and Sartre in their understandings of the insatiability of Desire. Longing for something that there is always 'more of' means that the longing is never satisfied. However, this doesn't mean that the longing does not find its object. If Sartre is claiming that our longing faces obstacles that cannot be surmounted, Levinas is claiming, not that there are obstacles in our way, but rather that the road we are on never comes to an end.

There is here both a remarkable similarity and a remarkable difference between Sartre and Levinas. To reiterate, at one level, Levinas and Sartre are in agreement that we are characterised by insatiable Desire. However, in another sense, Levinas understands this insatiability *to itself be the fulfilment of our humanity*. In Desire we do not long for the end of our Desire. If we could reach the end of our Desire then God would be something possessed or assimilated, rather than a radical exteriority that I remain exposed to and related to. If the Desire for God could come to an end it would not be Desire, but a need. That Desire is insatiable is therefore understood by Levinas to be a positive thing. Understanding our longing as 'uncompleted' does not make for an 'unhappy consciousness' in the way of Sartre, but rather the life worth living. That our longing is insatiable constitutes its value. Our fulfilment is always incomplete, it is ongoing and unfinished, but this is not to say that we do not experience the object that our Desire is directed towards, rather we experience God as ungraspable.

Having looked at how Sartre and Levinas differ in their understanding of the concepts of both transcendence and insatiability, I turn to look at their respective ways of connecting the role of God and the role of the human Other in the structure of subjectivity as longing. I have spelt out something of the connection between the Sartrean analysis of longing for fulfilment and of intersubjectivity in previous chapters. This connection can be further explicated to include an understanding of how Sartre's picture of human relationships is connected to the project of being God.

To be caught at the end of the Other's look is to experience the impossibility of being God, in so far as it is the experience of the incompatibility of relating to

¹²⁸ Levinas (1979) p95

oneself simultaneously as being-in-itself and as being-for-itself. Thus, the look is the experience of the impossibility of being-in-itself-for-itself, and the experience of the impossibility of being God. The terms 'God' and 'the Other' are requisite for a full portrayal of the human subject, but they are requisite in so far as they both show that subjectivity is, in principle, striving for the impossible and therefore always frustrated. God is that which we strive after without satisfaction, and the encounter with the Other provides a concrete experience of the impossibility of this striving. The encounter with the Other discloses the fact that our desire to be God is impossible.

On the other hand, for Levinas, we encounter God via the encounter with the human Other. Our Desire for the human Other is insatiable and as such reveals that our Desire for God is insatiable. The relationship with the Other is never 'fulfilled', if this means 'comes to an end'. The pursuit of justice and service is a task that can never be finished, for it is not satiated with any instance of justice or service rendered to the Other. However, though the relationship with the human Other never finds a 'completion', this is not to say that relating to the Other is impossible. Encountering the Other in moral responsibility is possible, non-contradictory, and 'fulfilling' in the way that we ordinarily use this term. Through this experience of the Other comes the revelation of the possibility of encountering God as similarly non-contradictory and 'fulfilling.' In direct contrast to Sartre, for Levinas, where intersubjectivity is the concrete experience of the insatiability of our longing for God, it teaches us that relationship with both human and divine alterity is possible.

Evaluating the Role of God in Understanding Human Subjectivity

In evaluating the two accounts of God I will argue that Levinas' theistic interpretation of Desire is more satisfactory than Sartre's interpretation of our longing for fulfilment as the desire to be God. This is because Levinas identifies our longing as a longing to be exposed to alterity while Sartre does not. I will claim further that Levinas' picture of reality can account for a wider range of identifiable experiences than Sartre's. Finally, I will claim that a consideration of the way that Sartre understands God supports earlier findings that Sartre's original categories of being-in-itself and being-for-itself are to be called into question, which undermines his entire framework.

Sartre thinks that our most profound desire is to extend our experience of ipseity as far as we can, and that we flee the experience of being 'decentred'. Sartre's account has something to offer here in identifying that the desire to extend our experience of ipseity does feature in the lives of human subjects, and his understanding of the desire to be at the 'centre' of the universe is understood helpfully as the desire to be God.

The desire to be God can also be identified on the Levinasian framework. It can be understood as a pursuit of self-sufficiency and so of the aspiration to totalise. Sartre and Levinas are both right to identify this desire to be God within the human subject. However, Sartre is wrong to identify a desire of this sort as our most profound longing for fulfilment. The desire to be being-in-itself-for-itself is the desire to be shut up within ourselves without having to rely on the alterity of the Other. The desire to be exposed to alterity does, however, feature in our lived experience. Not only can the desire for alterity be identified, I want to claim, but it can be identified as characteristic of our longing for fulfilment.

The resources for evaluating this come with examining the longing for fulfilment as we find it in our lived experience, and as such there is scope for disagreement. However, Levinas' claim that we do not long to remain within an ongoing experience of ourselves and our needs, but rather that we long to be exposed to, open to or related to something other, is, I would claim, a more persuasive account of the phenomenology of our longing.

We long to be exposed to genuine otherness, rather than longing to extend our experience of sameness. Undeniably, we can be egoistic and self-concerned, as both thinkers identify. However, Levinas account of our exposure to God identifies that there *are* experiences we have which successfully draw us away from ourselves. To remain at a level of self-concern becomes suffocating, and our Desire works against this, seeking to escape. It is right, then, to say that the desire to be God is not Desire. It does not have the structure of Desire, and it is not what we ultimately long for because we ultimately long not to remain at the level of concern for our own needs. In Levinas' terminology, we will not find the life worth living within the sphere of totality, regardless of how far its dominion may stretch.

An examination of our longing reveals it to be something that pushes beyond itself, structured by self-transcendence in a way that Levinas can account for but Sartre cannot. We do experience the kind of self-transcendence that draws us away

from our own wants. Levinas' account of transcendence is therefore more satisfactory than Sartre's because it allows us to account for experience of self-transcendence that Sartre's account of transcendence does not. On Sartre's account of transcendence we are drawn away from concern for one mode of our being towards another mode of our being, but on Levinas' account we are drawn away from preoccupation with ourselves altogether.

There is a second way in which Levinas' account can account for the phenomenology of longing more successfully than Sartre. Sartre is wrong to say that we exclusively experience the insatiability of our longing as 'unhappy' or 'useless'. There is nothing in itself objectionable with saying that we have contradictory desires or that we want things that are impossible to attain – but this is not how we experience the insatiability of Desire. We *do* have experiences that are not fruitless but constitute the life worth living, such as our service of others. Our moral consciousness and religious consciousness *are* structured by experiences that draw us towards the object of our Desire even though these experiences do not satiate our Desire.

A way of phrasing the dialectic between Sartre and Levinas is to say that the Levinasian framework simply overturns the basic Sartrean assumption that being-in-itself and being-for-itself are mutually exclusive terms. Phrasing it in this way is somewhat awkward and misleading as these are Sartre's own terms with particular nuance, but what the criticism really amounts to is a rejection of Sartre's original definitions, and so his whole framework which underpins all his claims. I think Levinas provides good reasons for us to challenge Sartre's categories. There are good reasons for this challenge in Levinas' analysis of being addressed in comparison to Sartre's analysis of being seen, which I have looked at, and further there is a challenge to Sartre's categories in Levinas' analysis of Desire.

This challenge can be approached by noting that the same criticisms that were made of Sartre's interpretation of shame before the Other can be made of Sartre's thought experiment regarding shame before God. In this thought Sartre identifies that if we could encounter God, this would be an experience in which we are aware that we are seen. As in the case of the human Other, however, he misconstrues what this means. As Sartre has already defined freedom in terms of radical self-assertion, there is no way in which freedom itself can be remade or redefined by the divine Other – it therefore simply finds itself subject to permanent loss.

There is a more defensible understanding, however, of what it means to be seen – or better, addressed, by God. The encounter with the absolutely infinite and absolutely perfect is an experience of myself as finite and morally imperfect, and so the experience of myself as being-a-certain-way, of having a nature. However, this is not an experience of being thing-like. To be object-like is to be amoral; objects cannot be morally imperfect. An experience of myself as morally imperfect is therefore an experience of myself as a subject rather than an object. To remind ourselves of Levinas' alternative to Sartre: 'Infinity, overflowing the idea of infinity, puts the spontaneous freedom within us into question. It commands and judges it and brings it to its truth.'¹²⁹ This allows an understanding of the divine encounter as one that transforms freedom from arbitrary spontaneity into freedom which is given content and definition by justice. Levinas proves to have an account of freedom before God that is less problematically narrow than Sartre's, and provides a positive, and more normatively acceptable, alternative account. Again we find within our lived experience that the discovery of oneself as having a nature is not equivalent to alienation from lived subjectivity. Sartre's categories of being-in-itself and being-for-itself as mutually exclusive can therefore, be successfully overturned.

This challenge to Sartre's framework constitutes a challenge to his argument for the non-existence of God. On an account of reality where freedom and 'having a nature' are not presupposed to be mutually exclusive, reasons given for rejecting the existence of a perfectly free and perfectly complete being will have to be reasons other than the mutual incompatibility of these features. God is no longer a contradictory concept. In rejecting Sartre's demarcation of reality in terms of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, reasons for rejecting the existence of God will need to be found elsewhere.

Acknowledging that Sartre's definition of God as contradictory can be challenged does not, however, mean that the desire to be God can therefore be understood to be a non-contradictory desire. Sartre often talks as though the reason that the project of becoming God is useless because the idea of God is contradictory. This seems to be the inference he makes when he states that 'the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain.'¹³⁰ However, this is not the only reason to claim that our desire to be God is useless. One need not accept the claim that God

¹²⁹ Levinas (1979) p51

¹³⁰ Sartre (2003) p636

is a contradictory concept to agree that it is impossible for human subjects to become God. Human beings cannot be God because they are human beings and are limited to what it is to be a human being. It is in these terms that Levinas would understand the impossibility of the desire to be God.

Human beings cannot be perfectly free and perfectly complete, but this is because, as Levinas identifies, we are not perfect, rather than because freedom and identity cannot be reconciled. It remains imperative to Levinas' account that I cannot be God. Where this is acknowledged, I can let God be God, and exposure to this infinite, perfect God is possible. In maintaining the separation between self and God the subject can experience a relationship with divine alterity.

The Limits of Sartre's Account of God

The limits of Sartre's account of God have been brought to light in comparative evaluation with Levinas. Sartre misidentifies the nature of our longing for fulfilment as the desire to be God, and in doing so presents a narrow account of experiences that structure human subjectivity. It has been acknowledged that there are ways that we desire to be God. These can be identified, just as conflictual relations with the Other, described by Sartre, can be identified. We often act as though our egoistic needs were sovereign rather than recognising that there are factors outside us that determine how we should act, for example.

However, identification of the fact that we do have hubristic drives cannot in itself merit extrapolation to an account of human subjectivity structured solely by this drive. Just as Sartre's account of the Other can be challenged in the identification of subject-subject relations, so Sartre's account of God is challenged in the identification of the desire not to be shut up within ourselves, but to be exposed to alterity. We long to experience revelation not of our own construction. That we can identify this phenomenon of longing demonstrates that Sartre's account is problematically narrow, for this kind of identifiable longing cannot be accounted for by Sartre's framework. Sartre's analysis of God does not capture all it is to be human.

That Sartre's account of God does not capture all that it is to be human is a normative as well as a factual claim. Sartre's desire to be God keeps the subject at the level of egoistic need and so preoccupied with herself. Sartre's account is limited

not just in articulating what human subjectivity is like, but also what it should be like.

Levinas, on the other hand, can account for both our desire to be God as well as our desire that God be God, identifying the former as a need and the latter as Desire. Levinas therefore can account for our egoism whilst also accounting for the possibility of our moral betterment beyond this. Again Levinas provides a more satisfactory picture of what the human subject should be like, and demonstrates the limits of Sartre's account.

Further, not only has Sartre's phenomenological analysis of longing been shown to be limited, but his framework which grounds his claims about the definition of God have been put in question. Sartre's account of God is limited not just in how he understands God to feature in our lived subjectivity, but in his very conception of God.

The Limits of Levinas' Account of God

In identifying the human subject's exposure to infinity in Desire, Levinas provides a less problematically narrow account of human subjectivity than Sartre. However, Levinas knowingly excludes a number of types of experience from his account of Desire, which should not be accepted uncritically.

In the claim that God is *only* encountered in the moral demand of the human Other, Levinas discounts *all* understandings of divine revelation that fall outside (the deontological claims of) the face-to-face. For example, Levinas says that the self-God relation 'is not an emotional communion...but a relationship between minds, mediated by [moral] teaching.'¹³¹ The 'emotional communion' that Levinas references pertains particularly to his critique of a Kierkegaardian response of 'fear and trembling' before God, which I understand to be any direct response of *overwhelming awe* or *adoration* directed towards the divine. Such emotive responses, claims Levinas, detract from our moral responsibility. Similarly, Van Beeck notes, 'In Levinas' eyes...loving God and being loved by God are suspect, because they can be so easily invoked in a self-serving manner.'¹³² Levinas therefore does not consider 'warm' feelings of being loved or forgiven as properly God-

¹³¹ Levinas in Van Beeck (1989) p39

¹³² Van Beeck (1989) p52

involving experiences. In either of these ‘emotive’ cases, Levinas thinks that the subject relates to God as something to satisfy her needs, and so relates to God as an object rather than as divine subject.

Levinas’ claims in these cases, I want to argue, are unjustified. Firstly, it does not follow that experiences of ‘emotional communion’ with God *necessarily* serve to undermine the experience of one’s moral responsibility. Levinas is right to note that if an understanding of responsiveness to God as moral responsibility is to be preserved, then we must not defer our responsibility to God. However, this does not automatically mean that all emotional responses to God are guilty of such a deferral. The experience of being loved or forgiven and the recognition that one is called to live justly are not, in principle, mutually exclusive. Further, appeal to our lived experience suggests that while the experience of being forgiven can elicit a response of complacency towards the pursuit of justice, it can also inspire a response of moral betterment. The *possibility* of the co-existence of certain ‘emotional’ responses alongside the experience of our moral responsibility can therefore be empirically identified in our lived experience. In dichotomising the experience of moral responsibility and so-called ‘emotional’ responses to God, Levinas limits, without proper warrant, his understanding of how God may structure human subjectivity.

Secondly, I would challenge Levinas’ claim that experiences of ‘emotional communion’ with God are necessarily to be understood as needs rather than as Desire. Levinas is right to acknowledge that it is possible for the subject to try to relate God as something that will satisfy certain emotional needs. Attempts to relate to God in this way keep the subject at the level of totality and fail to expose her to divine alterity: God is treated as an object to be assimilated, rather than as a subject. However, not all emotional responses to God are responses of this sort. Responses of awe or of the experience of belovedness can feature in our experience as insatiable. They do not decrease upon contact with their ‘object’ until we are satisfied, but precisely increase in intensity the more they are experienced. It is clear, then, that there are potential emotional responses to God that *can* have the structure of Desire rather than need. There may be, therefore, more experiences that expose us to the alterity of infinity than Levinas allows.

I have noted previously that Levinas’ account of the subject as responsible for the whole world, and who endlessly gives without receiving, is unsatisfactory. There is a connection between this aspect of his picture and his conception of God. His

account of subjectivity is to be understood in the light of his 'atheism' where God is understood to have abandoned us in every way other than in our moral conscience. As before, there is a form of egoism in this claim, for it understands the subject's relationship with God entirely in terms of what we can do for God rather than what God can do for us. Levinas states, in fact, that we are to relate to God as if creditors rather than debtors.¹³³ Just as Levinas neglects to consider ways we might receive from the human Other in ways that do not objectify them, his account neglects to investigate aspects of subjectivity that may be determined by what the subject receives from God.

I conclude, therefore, that Levinas' account is limited in the range of experiences that are understood to be God-involving. I suggest that a continued exploration of how God is understood to structure human subjectivity will preserve Levinas' insights regarding the nature of Desire, without succumbing to the unnecessarily narrow conclusion that he draws. I will now turn briefly to consider how this might be done.

¹³³ See Levinas in Van Beeck (1989) p40

Chapter Seven

To summarise thusfar, both Sartre and Levinas offer portraits of the human subject which refer to objects, other subjects, and to God. The way that they do so, however, is different, and this presents us with two different interpretations of the nature of human subjectivity.

I have argued that Levinasian framework as the more credible of the two. This takes root in Levinas' definition of human freedom as, not simply unconstrained whim, but as response to objective standards. Levinas' account of freedom allows a less problematically narrow picture of human intersubjective relations than Sartre's. Further it allows a favourable comparative evaluation of Levinas' analysis of the longing for fulfilment as a God-involving phenomenon.

I have, however, noted elements of Levinas' framework which are unduly narrow. Levinas understands the only appropriate response to both the human Other-as-subject and God-as-subject to be a response of moral duty. Levinas has not yet provided good reasons to accept that this is the *only* appropriate response to the Other and to God. I have already begun to suggest that a wider range of Other-involving and God-involving phenomena can be identified.

Expanding Levinas' account of the Other

I want to argue that an understanding of subjectivity as Other-involving and God-involving encompasses more than an understanding of responsiveness to the moral demand of the Other. There are four ways in particular that I think that Levinas' account can be expanded so as to provide a better picture of how human subjectivity is structured by the human Other and by God. With regards the human Other I want to claim that: (a) We are addressed by the Other in ways other than demand, which elicits responses other than obligation; and (b) We can discover the Other-as-subject in addressing the Other as well as being addressed by her.

In addition to these expansions of Other-involving subjectivity, I want to suggest that: (c) God-involvement is expanded in accordance with Other-involvement. That is to say, God may be discovered via the human face in the ways expanded in (a) and (b). Further to this: (d) God-involvement may be expanded beyond the experience of the human face-to-face.

Starting with the first of these, I experience being addressed by the Other-as-subject not only in her demand that I welcome and host her, but in her offering welcome and hospitality to me. This extends the range of Other-involving emotions that I experience. I do not just experience duty elicited, but, as considered previously, emotional responses such as *gratitude* or *humility* in the face of the Other's hospitality towards me, or *trust* or *dependence* upon the Other.

Emotions such as gratitude seem to be obviously Other-involving emotions: experiences that come as a revelation of genuine alterity. In being offered service I may experience not just the satisfaction of a lack but thankfulness that service has been offered. This does not reduce the Other to a satisfaction of my needs but identifies and respects her alterity. Further, it is an encounter with the Other's alterity in which I experience myself as a subject rather than an object. Gratitude is a free response to the Other and so an exercise of my lived subjectivity. Objects cannot be grateful.

The extension of Other-involving experiences in this way can include any responsive attitude which recognises the alterity of the Other and does not treat her as an object by assimilating her to the satisfaction of my needs. These are experiences that bear the characteristics of Desire rather than need, in so far as they increase the more they are experienced rather than find a completion that brings them to an end. I want to argue that as characterised by Desire rather than need, including these phenomena in an expanded version of Levinas' framework is legitimate.

Recognising that responses beyond that of duty can constitute an encounter with the Other-as-subject does not initially make clear the full range of experiences that can be said to be properly Other-involving. It has, by no means, been established that all attempts to relate to the Other are necessarily respectful of her subjectivity. In fact, it has been noted that we are apt to treat the Other as an object. Discerning which responses count as needs and which are Desire will be an ongoing process, which is both philosophically interesting and normatively important in the lived existence of the subject.

I turn now to a second way that Levinas' account of necessarily Other-involving phenomena might be expanded. I want to claim that the Other-as-subject can be understood as one who is *to be addressed* as well as one who addresses me. In discussing inverse intentionality it was made clear that only subjects can be

addressed. We cannot experience ourselves as an object whilst experiencing ourselves as addressed. In the same way that being addressed and being seen refer us to subjects and not to objects, it might be claimed that in addressing the Other we also encounter her as-subject and not as-object. While objects can be seen, they cannot be addressed – only subjects can be addressed. If objects cannot be addressed, then in addressing the Other we relate to her as a subject rather than an object. If this is accepted, then our understanding of how the Other structures subjectivity can be extended to include experiences of addressing the Other.

Levinas explicitly resists any talk of addressing the Other. As he understands it, attempts to reach the Other by addressing her undermine her ‘height’, and her capacity to make demands of me without end. There is, however, something here that does not follow, for there is nothing in acknowledging that I can address the Other that undermines the command that I am not to kill her, nor any other moral obligation I have to her. It is true that in allowing that we can address the Other-as-subject, the asymmetrical structure of Levinas’ self-other relation is called into question. However, this does not mean that our moral responsibility must consequently be understood as something that is or can be satiated. There is a confusion in Levinas’ claims where he presents his account of the insatiability of Desire as intertwined with the asymmetry of the self-other relation, but they are, in fact, two separate claims.

The claim that we can be exposed to the alterity of the Other in addressing her is to suggest that experiences of addressing the Other *can* be experiences of Desire rather than need. We do not only address the Other because we lack something, but can address the Other-as-subject in way that increases in intensity the we address them. *Asking questions* of the Other is an example of this kind of experience. Not all questioning simply seeks information that satisfies a lack. In questioning the Other I can recognise that she has something to offer me that isn’t found in my sphere of ipseity, nor can be assimilated to it. The asking of questions can involve the recognition that the other has the capacity to ‘surprise’ me or make choices that are not mine to make. There is nothing in this that contradicts our understanding of moral responsibility as insatiable. Experiences of both addressing and being addressed can be understood to be structured by Desire. It is therefore incorrect to think that if Levinas’ account of the insatiability of Desire is accepted, then his asymmetrical account of the self-other relation must also be accepted.

This suggestion raises lots of questions. The mechanics of addressing have not been analysed, and how to best make sense of the nature of addressing as different to seeing or making intelligible has not yet been made clear. I do not have the space here to explore this question but I propose that it is an important area of investigation within this debate which should be pursued further. Further investigation of the phenomenon of addressing should be undertaken in the hope of making more explicit the nature of intersubjectivity, and its ramifications for the structure of subjectivity. For the time being it can be accepted that *prima facie*, addressing or questioning are properly speaking Other-involving phenomena, putting us in touch with the Other-as-subject rather than Other-as-object.

In suggesting that Levinas' picture of asymmetrical self-other relations can be challenged, an alternative structure is proposed. Both proposed extensions of Levinas' Other-involving experiences offer a picture of intersubjectivity characterised by *reciprocity* rather than asymmetry. This model of intersubjectivity might be understood as *dialogical*.¹³⁴ On this picture there is reciprocity both in giving and receiving, and in addressing and being addressed. On both sides of the intersubjective relation there are questions and demands, answers and responses. The Other is there to be served and welcomed, but also has something to offer me in serving and welcoming me. In all these experiences is the possibility of exposure to infinity.

This connects up with our earlier worry that, for Levinas, while the subject is burdened with the whole weight of the Other, she is unable to share the burden of her own needs. Levinas only has room for a self-other dynamic where the subject encounters and responds to alterity by endless giving. I want to claim that Levinas' asymmetry of responsibility is not a faithful picture of either what the intersubjective relationship does or what it should look like. This is because the asymmetry involves the assertion of the subject's responsibility over the Other's responsibility. However, in identifying ways of encountering and responding to alterity which include addressing the Other, and in turn receiving from the Other, these worries are laid aside.

¹³⁴ There is a precedent for using this terminology in the work of Martin Buber. See Buber (1996)

Expanding Levinas' Account of God

Regarding the expansion of Levinas' account of God-involving phenomena, the two claims above, regarding the expansion of Other-involving phenomena, are relevant. As I am arguing that dialogical intersubjectivity is characterised by Desire rather than need, this extends to a claim that God is to be encountered in the expanded understanding of face-to-face relations. In responding to the human Other's kindness in gratitude, for example, this continues to be a 'double response' to both the concrete human Other and to an infinitely perfect God.

In addition, I want to suggest that understandings of divine encounter beyond the human face merit investigation. I have noted already that there are direct responsive attitudes to God which have the structure of Desire rather than need, such as the experience of awe, and that there are good reasons for thinking that Levinas is wrong to exclude all emotional responses to God such as these in principle.

It is worth noting that if it is accepted that God has *not* abandoned us in every way other than our moral conscience, then Levinas' picture of the subject burdened by the responsibility of the whole world can be rethought. It is not yet clear how potential God-involving experiences, such as of belovedness or dependence,¹³⁵ might be married with our insatiable responsibility. Exploration of the relationship between experiences such as these and our moral responsibility is therefore another important area I want to identify for further investigation.

As in the case of expanded Other-involving phenomena, the full range of God-involving phenomena is not clear. Ongoing discernment of which experiences can be properly understood as God-involving is required. This is an even more difficult task than the case of Other-involving experiences, but it is an important task for understanding better how subjectivity is structured by God, and for taking seriously how we are to live if there is a God before whom we do so. I identify it as an important task for further investigation of the nature of human subjectivity.

I therefore conclude that Levinas' understanding of Desire can be fruitfully expanded, and have suggested some directions which this can take. In particular, rigorous analysis of (a) the nature of what it is to address someone, and

¹³⁵ There is precedent in Descartes' encounter with God that this is an experience of both dependence and aspiration. Descartes says: 'When I reflect on myself I...know that I am something imperfect, incomplete and dependent on another, which incessantly aspires after something which is better and greater than myself.' Descartes (1997) p161

(b) the relationship between our moral responsibility and any other experiences identified to have a structure of Desire, is required.

Conclusions

Having compared Sartre's formulation of human subjectivity in *Being and Nothingness* and Levinas' attempt at the same in *Totality and Infinity* it is to be acknowledged that Sartre has certain insightful things to offer. There are features of human life identified in his account of pure transcendence, of being seen and of longing for fulfilment which identify something correct. However, I have concluded that whatever in these phenomena is identified by Sartre, it is misunderstood and distorted by his framework of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, and these phenomena are better understood on the Levinasian framework of totality and infinity.

Concluding with Cohen that being-for-itself and being-in-itself are 'artificial and false intellectual abstractions,'¹³⁶ I reject the definitions with which Sartre demarcates reality, and with this the foundation upon which is premised his understanding of human freedom as unconstrained and value as solipsistically created. This is, further, a rejection of his conclusions that mutual lived subjectivity in intersubjectivity is impossible, and that the longing for God is an empty promise. I have shown that Sartre's ontological categories make for unsatisfactory foundational structures upon which to draw these conclusions, and that the conclusions themselves are unsatisfactory.

Where Sartre's identification of the human subject's egoism, atheism and caprice ring true, Levinas can also account for these features – indeed they are necessary to Levinas' understanding of subjectivity as totality. All of the features of subjectivity that Sartre legitimately wants to identify, which make up his entire account of reality, are accounted for by Levinas' understanding of totality. However, Levinas additionally accounts for the moral responsibility to the Other that comes with an experience of the infinite, that is, with God and with the human Other.

Regarding the original questions of this paper, I am concluding that transcendence to the human Other and to God, as articulated by Levinas, is a defensible position. This stands against Sartre's claim that only transcendence to the world of objects is possible. It also rejects the claim that Sartre's knowingly

¹³⁶ Cohen (2010) p146

conflictual pictures of self-transcendence are the only pictures available of ways we relate to both the Other and God.

I have concluded that the way that Levinas takes these instances of transcendence to characterise human subjectivity is to be in part affirmed. His account of freedom as conditioned by morality, morality founded in the encounter with the human face, and the human face a site of divine encounter, is insightful in many of its offerings. Levinas offers a different factual and normative understanding of human subjectivity to Sartre which offers a more credible account of how the human Other and God feature in subjectivity. Notably, I have argued that Levinas' understanding of the insatiability of our longing for fulfilment, with reference to infinity, makes better sense of the phenomenology of this longing than Sartre's attempt to account for this insatiability with reference to two contradictory modes of being.

However I have acknowledged that Levinas' account is also in parts unduly narrow, and that the question of how the Other and God operate in structuring subjectivity still stands in need of exploration. Levinas' account of Desire, it is hoped, can be expanded. There are no tidy conclusions to be found regarding the full range of experiences which have the character of Desire, but I have offered some direction for further exploration of this.

Comparing Sartre and Levinas has offered new ways of thinking about human subjectivity and how we experience transcendence. Both writers are provocative not only in their philosophical observations but in the questions they ask us as human subjects. Propounding an expanded Levinasian framework of intersubjectivity and transcendence opens up the possibility of worthwhile further work in this area of study.

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