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A 'Drainage Hole' in Being: Sartre and First-Person Realism

ABSTRACT: *Both classical phenomenology and contemporary first-person realism accord a special metaphysical status to* perspectives. *Yet 'inegalitarian' forms of first-person realism are, I argue, vulnerable to Sartre's response to the problem of other minds in* Being and Nothingness. *After discussing the special status Sartre accords to the first-person perspective ('ipseity') and signaling its affinities with first-person realism, I argue that Sartre's description of encountering the other undermines Giovanni Merlo's argument for metaphysical solipsism. I then show how a metaphysical notion of standpoint borrowed from the first-person realist literature irons out a wrinkle in Sartre's transcendental argument regarding other minds. I close by suggesting a kinship between Sartre's notion of a 'detotalized totality' and the 'fragmentalist' idea embraced by some first-person realists that reality does not form a coherent whole.*

KEYWORDS: Sartre, perspective, phenomenology, first-person realism, solipsism, fragmentalism

Perspective is a core concept of the phenomenological tradition. Merleau-Ponty, for instance, writes of perspective that '[a]lthough it may be the means that objects have of concealing themselves, it is also the means that they have of unveiling themselves' (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 70). Merleau-Ponty here relies on Husserl's analysis of the *horizonal structure* of experience: the way in which objects are given inadequately, as possessing hidden sides and features, through a temporally extended stream of consciousness, and against an open background of other things that are potential objects of intersubjective, public awareness. Sebastian Gardner writes that 'much of Sartre's philosophical labor is directed toward taking us inside the correct angle of philosophical vision, in order to induce in us a heightened awareness of the *perspectival character* of the phenomenon under discussion' (Gardner 2010: 65). Much of the importance of perspective for the classical phenomenologists is *epistemic*. For Husserl, for example, the fact that objects transcendent to consciousness are given in perspectival 'appearances' means that 'no rational positing resting upon such an appearance (that affords things inadequately) can be "definitive"' (Husserl 2014 §138). Yet there's a hard-to-articulate way that the notion of perspective also plays a *metaphysical* role for the phenomenologists, for instance in Husserl's notorious turn to transcendental idealism.

A metaphysical notion of perspective or standpoint has also made an appearance in a burgeoning literature on 'first-person realism.' First-person realists hold that first-person perspectives are metaphysically privileged in much the same way that

A-theorists about time hold that the present is privileged and actualists about modality hold that the actual world is privileged. Some proponents of first-person realism go so far as to describe their position as a form of *solipsism*—albeit of a distinctively metaphysical, rather than epistemic or conceptual, variety.

My goal is to put classical phenomenology and recent first-person realism in critical dialogue, focusing in particular on Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (B&N). Sartre's phenomenological descriptions of the 'circuit of ipseity' have clear affinities with descriptions of the subjective standpoint offered by first-person realists. But Sartre's celebrated analysis of the problem of other minds also provides an intriguing foil to the first-person realists' new, metaphysical form of solipsism. I offer new readings of two famous vignettes from Part Three of B&N. The first is the encounter with a man in the park, which Sartre describes as opening up a 'drainage hole' in being. The second is the scene in which a voyeur is caught (by 'the look' of the other) in the act of jealously peering through a keyhole, which elicits an experience of shame that Sartre takes to be revelatory of a new ontological dimension of the subject. My overriding claim is that reading these vignettes through the lens of first-person realism opens up new ways of appreciating the originality and insight of Sartre's famous but still imperfectly understood account of other minds.

Bringing Sartre and the first-person realists into conversation will prove fruitful in three ways. First, Sartre's analyses of intersubjectivity and being-for-others pose a powerful challenge to Giovanni Merlo's argument for metaphysical solipsism. Second, interpreting Sartre with the help of the metaphysical notion of standpoint introduced in the literature on first-person realism will help to iron out some wrinkles in Sartre's transcendental argument for the existence of the other. Third, the 'fragmentalist' idea embraced by some first-person realists will cast light on Sartre's claim that the self and the world are 'detotalized totalities.'

In §1, I introduce the basics of first-person realism. In §2 I explain Sartre's notion of the 'circuit of ipseity' and signal its affinities with first-person realism. In §3 I summarize the two stages of Sartre's discussion of the 'reef of solipsism' in Part Three of B&N and present a problem for his transcendental argument for the existence of the other. In §4 I interpret the two famous vignettes from that discussion—the man in the park and the voyeur—through the lens of first-person realism. In §5 I close by exploring the idea that for Sartre reality does not form a complete and coherent whole.

§1 First-Person Realism

Fine (2005) introduces first-person realism in the context of his defense of a nonstandard form of tense realism. Fine develops his nonstandard tense realism as a response to a version of McTaggart's (1908) argument for the unreality of time. As Fine understands it, McTaggart's argument reveals an inconsistency among the following four theses:

Realism Reality is composed of tensed facts.

Neutrality No time is privileged, the facts that compose reality are not oriented toward one time as opposed to another.

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> *Absolutism* The composition of reality is not irreducibly reflexive, i.e. its relative composition by facts must be explained in terms of its absolute composition by the facts.
>
> *Coherence* Reality is not irreducibly incoherent, i.e. its composition by incompatible facts must be explained in terms of its composition by compatible facts. (Fine 2005: 273)

Standard tense realists reject Neutrality by according metaphysical privilege to the present. Fine introduces two forms of nonstandard realism: External Relativism and Fragmentalism. External Relativists reject Absolutism: a tensed fact's inclusion in reality is relative to a temporal standpoint. Fine's preferred form of non-standard realism, Fragmentalism, instead rejects Coherence: reality is not 'of a piece,' but rather fragments into maximally coherent collections of facts (one for each time).

According to first-person realism, '[r]eality is not exhausted by the "objective" or impersonal facts but also includes facts that reflect a first-person point of view' (Fine 2005: 311). As in the case of tense, there are standard and nonstandard forms of first-person realism, and Fine finds nonstandard (or 'egalitarian') realism 'especially compelling in the first-person case': 'It seems quite bizarre to suppose that, from all the individuals that there are, the subjective world-order is somehow oriented towards me as opposed to anyone else' (Fine 2005: 313). As we'll see shortly, other first-person realists opt for a standard or 'inegalitarian' form of the view.

Fine discusses two interesting upshots of first-person realism that directly bear on our comparison to Sartre. First, it provides a natural way of distinguishing between the *metaphysical self* and the *empirical self*. Fine notes that in typical experiences there is no representation of self: an experience of pain is better represented not by 'I am in pain' but 'It is paining,' where the latter is understood to hold egocentrically.[1] The implicit subject of the egocentric point of view can then be identified with the metaphysical self, which is embodied in a particular empirical self (a living organism, say).[2] The distinction between metaphysical and empirical selves can be mapped fairly cleanly onto the view Sartre defends in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1960). There he argues that the ego is not a part or constituent of consciousness, but is rather a transcendent, public object composed of actions, states, and qualities. This transcendent ego corresponds, I think, to Fine's empirical self. In B&N, too, Sartre draws a distinction between two forms of reflection: pure and impure (see Sartre (2018), B&N Part Two, Chapter 2, §3). Impure reflection is impure because it represents an 'I' or ego intrinsic to experience, whereas pure reflection accurately represents the experience from the egocentric point of view, where the metaphysical self remains implicit.

A second upshot of adopting first-person realism that Fine highlights is that it captures the attraction of Anscombe's (1981) view that the first-person singular pronoun is not referential. For Anscombe, rather than referring, 'I' manifests an

[1] For development of this idea, see Prior (1968), which develops an egocentric logic on the model of tense logic.

[2] The distinction between the metaphysical and the empirical self opens up space for the question of why my metaphysical self is embodied in this particular empirical self. See Nagel (1986) and Glazier (2020) for explorations of this idea.

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'immediate agent-or-patient conception of actions, happenings, and states' (Anscombe 1981: 36). Fine suggests that in 'distinctively first-personal' uses of 'I' (what Shoemaker 1968 calls uses of 'I' as subject), the pronoun 'is used to indicate the egocentric character of the resulting proposition rather than to secure reference to the self' (Fine 2005: 315). Similarly, on Longuenesse's (2017) reading, such uses of 'I' manifest what Sartre calls 'non-positional self-consciousness'.

Merlo (2016) defends an inegalitarian form of first-person realism that he calls *subjectivism*, according to which '[s]ome propositions are true simpliciter without being true from all points of view,' where to be true simpliciter is to be true from the first-person point of view (Merlo 2016: 314; see also Builes 2024; Hare 2009, 2010; Hellie 2013; Lipman 2016, 2023). What distinguishes the first-person point of view for Merlo is that my mental states have a 'felt' quality or 'glow' to them lacked by the mental states of others. Merlo characterizes his position as a form of metaphysical solipsism, 'the view that a certain property of phenomenal feltness distinguishes one's own experiences from those of anyone else' (Merlo 2021: 657). Merlo distinguishes his metaphysical solipsism from two traditional forms of solipsism: '*epistemological solipsism*—the view that we cannot *know* whether other people's experiences are like our own—and *conceptual solipsism*—the view that we cannot *conceive* of other people's experiences as similar to our own' (Merlo 2021: 642). Merlo tries to capture the 'egalitarian' intuition that all subjective points of view are 'on a par' by distinguishing objective and subjective facts. His argument for metaphysical solipsism depends on a 'phenomenological exercise.' Given Sartre's famous phenomenological reflections on the 'reef of solipsism,' as well as his transposition of many epistemological questions to the ontological plane, it's interesting to ask what he would make of Merlo's metaphysical solipsism. I return to this question in §4. First, though, I want to explore what Sartre would find attractive in first-person realism, committed as he is to taking the first-person perspective of consciousness seriously.

§2 The Circuit of Ipseity

Here I argue that there is an analogue of the idea of metaphysically privileging the first-person perspective in Sartre's notion of the *circuit of ipseity* (Part Two, Chapter 1 of B&N). As we will see in §4, however, the privilege Sartre accords to the first-person runs up against an important limit in the experience of the other.

Part Two, Chapter 1 of B&N concerns the 'immediate structures of the for-itself,' which Sartre also describes as the 'ipseity' of the for-itself. As Richmond notes, *ipseité* translates Heidegger's *Selbstheit*, which can be rendered in English as 'selfhood' (Richmond 2018: 56; see also B&N 52). Like Richmond I prefer 'ipseity' to 'selfhood' because it retains the connection to the Latin *ipse*, and thereby to the specter of solipsism (*solus ipse*) confronted in Part Three of B&N. My claim is that in the earlier discussion of ipseity, Sartre highlights the 'solipsism rooted in lived experience' that Merlo sees as 'quite insurmountable' (Merleau-Ponty 2005: 417; Merlo 2016: 637). But for Sartre, this solipsism is surmountable—indeed, it is radically surmounted in the experience of the other.

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Sartre asserts a relation of reciprocal dependence between ipseity—my reflexive 'self-presence'—and the world. Here it is important to keep in mind that Sartre uses 'world' in Heidegger's sense, as referring not to the totality of mind-independent objects, but rather to a meaningful context of implements, roles, and solicitations (Heidegger 1962: 93).

> Without the world there would be no ipseity, and no person; without ipseity, and without person, there would be no world. But the world's belonging to the person is never *posited* at the level of the prereflective *cogito*. It would be absurd to say that the world, insofar as it is known, is known as mine. And yet this 'mine-ness' of the world is a fugitive and ever present structure that I *live*. The world (*is*) mine because it is haunted by possibles… (B&N 161)

The metaphor of a *circuit* is meant to capture this reciprocal dependence. As Sartre argues in the Introduction, consciousness is always a positional awareness of an object and a non-positional awareness of self (B&N 11). Matthew Boyle (2023) offers an illuminating way of making sense of this positional/non-positional distinction. Boyle points to a distinction between two forms of imagining. On the one hand, I can imagine myself doing something—swimming in the ocean, to use Boyle's example—from an external vantage point. On the other hand, I can imagine swimming in the ocean 'from inside.' In both cases, I am imagining myself, but via different modes of presentation; in the first case, what I imagine is the movements of my body as seen from a cliff, say, whereas in the second case I imagine myself as the subject of various experiences. The former is a positional awareness of myself, whereas the latter is a nonpositional awareness of myself. Now, Sartre claims that every conscious act involves such a nonpositional awareness of self, but he also claims that consciousness is intrinsically empty: there is nothing substantial in consciousness for self-consciousness to be an awareness of. The way Sartre squares these two claims—that we are always nonpositionally aware of ourselves, but that consciousness is empty—is to say that my presence to self is mediated through awareness of a world that gets part of its structure from consciousness. Ipseity forms a circuit, then, because consciousness must take a detour through the world, which is 'haunted' by structures of consciousness, in order to be present to itself (Gardner 2009: 188).

A helpful way to make sense of the 'mineness' of the world is through the idea of *hodological space* Sartre derives from the psychologist Kurt Lewin. Hodological space is space as structured by goals and meaningful valences. As Mirvish illustrates, 'direction and distance in hodological space do not all necessarily correspond to distances conceived of in ordinary, i.e., three dimensional Euclidean, terms' (Mirvish 1984: 156).

> Thus, for example, consider the case in which an older child moves or turns away from a goal in order to use a tool to help obtain this goal. In hodological terms there is actually no "moving or turning away from" the goal at all. Rather, insofar as the tool helps in facilitating the child to

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> obtain the goal, the child should be seen as *approaching* the goal in making the movements described. Similarly, when the child, in normal terms, moves away from the goal in going to ask the experimenter for help, this in hodological terms should rather be seen as an approach to the goal. (Mirvish 1984: 156)

Sartre cashes out the idea of hodological space in terms of 'unfolding distances': '… the primary relation goes from human-reality to the world: to arise, for me, is to unfold my distances to things and in so doing to make it the case that there are things' (B&N 415). This is to say that consciousness necessarily opens up a space defined in terms of distances, directions, and valences with respect to goals or possibilities. Sartre further analyzes ipseity in terms of the structures of facticity, lack and value, and possibility. A good illustration of the hodological structure of ipseity is found in Sartre's famous discussion of running after a streetcar: the streetcar is perceived as 'having-to-be-overtaken' (Sartre 1960: 49). The world is 'mine' insofar as the way objects appear is relative to my projects.

The main upshot of this section for the argument going forward is that in his account of the circuit of ipseity, Sartre affirms the kind of 'solipsism rooted in lived experience' emphasized by Merlo. For Merlo, my first-person perspective is metaphysically privileged because only my mental states have a distinctive 'glow.' For Sartre, my first-person perspective—ipseity—is metaphysically privileged because the world, construed as a meaningful context of implements, roles, and solicitations, is 'haunted' by my consciousness. As I will argue in §4, though, Sartre parts ways with Merlo's inegalitarian approach to realism about the first-person perspective because he recognizes a limit to the 'mineness' of ipseity in the experience of the other. Before turning to this argument, I will give an overview of Sartre's confrontation with the 'reef of solipsism' in Part Three of B&N.

§3 Sartre on Other Minds

Morris (1998) helpfully highlights two distinctions in Part Three of B&N that structure my discussion going forward. The first distinction is between (probable) knowledge of the other's existence and (intuitive) certainty of the other's existence. The second is between the other-as-object and the other-as-subject. These distinctions map onto the two stages of Sartre's discussion (which will be discussed in detail in the next section): the man in the park vignette concerns knowledge of the other-as-object, whereas the voyeur vignette concerns certainty of the other-as-subject. On Morris's reading, an adequate phenomenology of the experience of others shows that we have perceptual evidence of the existence of the other-as-object (Morris 1998: 50). I am largely in agreement with Morris concerning the upshot of the first stage of Sartre's account. For Sartre, following other phenomenologists like Husserl, Stein, and Scheler, we are directly, intuitively aware of others' mental states. Indeed, Sartre sees the behavioral manifestations of a mental state as the 'outer side,' as it were, of the mental state. For example, discussing the perception of anger, he writes: 'these frowns, this blushing, this stammer, this slight trembling of the hands, these sly looks which seem to be at the same time timid and threatening, do *not* express anger; they *are*

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the anger' (B&N 462).[3] The upshot of the first stage of Sartre's argument against solipsism—the stage concerned with (probable) knowledge of the other-as-object, illustrated through the scene of the man in the park—is thus that (fallible) knowledge of the existence of other minds is attained through direct perceptual awareness.

The second stage of Sartre's account—the stage concerned with the (intuitive) certainty of the other-as-subject, illustrated through the scene of the voyeur at the keyhole—is far more puzzling. I agree with interpreters like Gardner (2005, 2010), Schroeder (1984), and Sacks (2005) that Sartre's discussion is intended as a transcendental argument for the existence of the other.[4] However, the parallel distinctions Morris highlights—(probable) knowledge vs. (intuitive) certainty and other-as-object vs. other-as-subject—make it unclear why a transcendental argument is needed in addition to the account of immediate but defeasible perceptual awareness of others' mental states suggested by the first stage of Sartre's account. First, the problem of the existence of the other-as-subject is not the problem of explaining how I know that the other is conscious and not a robot or philosophical zombie; this problem concerns the other-as-object. A transcendental reading of the second stage of Sartre's argument needs to explain what the other-as-subject is, if it is not simply the other person considered as conscious. Second, Sartre claims a remarkably high level of epistemic warrant for the claim that the other-as-subject exists. The awareness of the other-as-subject involved in shame is described as a 'slightly expanded cogito', which suggests that the experience of shame establishes the existence of the other-as-subject with the same certainty as the cogito establishes my own existence (B&N 384). As we'll see shortly, existing accounts have not fully explained how Sartre can claim cogito-level certainty for the existence of the other(-as-subject) disclosed through the experience of shame, nor have they said much about the ontological status of the other-as-subject.

Sacks presents Sartre's account of 'the look' (developed in the discussion of the voyeur at the keyhole) as an improvement on P.F. Strawson's (1959) argument for the existence of other minds. Strawson's argument, as reconstructed by Sacks, runs as follows:

1. I can understand talk of *my* experiences.
2. For this to be possible, I must be able to ascribe experiences to others.
3. I can do this only if I can identify other subjects of experience.
4. This in turn is possible only if subjects are understood to be *persons*, where that serves as a primitive category.
5. This means that I have logically adequate criteria for ascribing consciousness-involving states to others. (Sacks 2005, 276)

[3] See Renaudie and Reynolds (2023) for a discussion of how Sartre challenges a received view about the epistemic asymmetry between the first- and third-personal access to mental states, including the implications of this challenge for issues of bad faith and existential psychoanalysis.

[4] See Morris (1998, 2008, 2016) for a Wittgensteinian, 'therapeutic' alternative to the transcendental reading of B&N.

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Sacks raises two problems for Strawson's argument:

> First, that the argument shows only that we must be able to ascribe experiences to others, which is compatible with there not being any such subjects, and it not seeming to me that there are. Second, that even if it seems to me that there are such subjects, this does not license any inference to the conclusion that that is how things are, independently of how things seem to me. (Sacks 2005, 282)

To simplify Sacks's superb analysis of the keyhole vignette, while there are other experiences by which I can become aware of my body as an object, it is only through the shame engendered by being caught in the act that I become aware that I *am* that object. This grasp of myself as a person rather than a Cartesian subject, in turn, presupposes that I have some conception of the other looking at me. Sacks argues that Sartre's account, because it proceeds via phenomenological description rather than by articulating logical criteria for ascribing personhood, fixes the first problem with Strawson's argument: whereas Strawson's argument merely shows that I must possess criteria for the concept of a person, Sartre's shows that it must seem to me as though these criteria are met. Yet Sacks says that the second problem for Strawson's argument—the problematic inference to reality—remains. That is, the fact that 'I must have the experience of other persons looking at me' does not establish that other persons must exist. This problem is an instance of the objection that Barry Stroud (1968) raises to transcendental arguments. Stroud's objection is that the most transcendental arguments show that we must *believe* certain conditions to hold for some target phenomenon (e.g., experience or language) to be possible, not that they must in fact hold. Transposing this objection into a phenomenological key, the objection is that all Sartre has done is to show that we must have the experience of other persons looking at me, *not* that other persons must exist. Indeed, Sartre seems to grant as much: in the keyhole vignette, shame is supposed to disclose the other-as-subject even if it turns out that the sound the voyeur hears is the rustling of leaves rather than footsteps.

Sacks concludes that Sartre's account of the look and shame at best establishes the existence of the other as a 'presupposed structural element of the world that is necessitated by my very upsurge' (Sacks 2005: 294).[5] In the next section I will put some meat on the bones of this idea, suggesting that the 'presupposed structural element' can be understood as a *standpoint* in the sense developed by some first-person realists.

§4 Being-for-others as a Limit on Ipseity

In this section I draw together the issues discussed in the last three sections to present a novel interpretation of Sartre's confrontation with the 'reef of solipsism' (Part

[5] 'Upsurge' translates *surgissement* in the Barnes translation of *Being and Nothingness*. Unpacking Sartre's metaphor is difficult, but suffice to say that he uses the term to refer to consciousness (being-for-itself), with the implication that consciousness somehow arises or surges up out of being-in-itself.

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Three of B&N). The guiding idea of my interpretation is that the experience of others constitutes a *limit* to the structure of ipseity described in §1. I will offer new readings of both stages of Sartre's account of being-for-others. First, I will argue in §4.1 that Sartre's description of encountering a man in the park undermines Merlo's case for metaphysical solipsism. Then in §4.2 I will argue that the wrinkles in Sartre's transcendental argument for the existence of the other(-as-subject) can be ironed out by appeal to the notion of *standpoint* articulated by Martin Lipman.

§4.1 The Man in the Park

In this section I will argue that Sartre's description of encountering a man in a park undermines the phenomenological description on which Merlo's case for metaphysical solipsism rests. Let me first rehearse Merlo's argument.

1. Phenomenologically, it appears to me as if only these experiences have feltness. (*phenomenological solipsism*)
2. If, phenomenologically, it appears to me as if only these experiences have feltness then, in reality, only these experiences have feltness. (*appearance/reality principle*)

So

3. Only these experiences have feltness. (*metaphysical solipsism*)

Premise 2 rests on the appearance/reality principle, according to which there is no gap between appearance and reality in the case of phenomenal consciousness. Merlo justifies Premise 1, phenomenological solipsism, through the following exercise:

> *Exercise 1*—I reflect on how things 'appear' or 'seem' to me from the first-person perspective. There are many differences in phenomenal character among my present experiences. The experience of seeing a table in front of me is phenomenally different from the experience of touching it. The experience of seeing a certain shade of brown is phenomenally different from the experience of seeing a different shade. But, as I go through these differences, I come to appreciate two obvious facts. The first is that, however different they may be from one another, all my experiences share a common feature—each of them *feels* to me a certain way. The second is that this shared *feltness*—as one may call it—distinguishes my experiences from anything else, including the experiences of others. If you were sitting opposite to me, seeing and touching the same table I am seeing and touching, I expect you would have your own visual and tactile experiences of the table. But whatever events may be going on in your head, and however these events may appear to you from your perspective, it is part of how things appear to me from my perspective *that only my experiences possess feltness*. (Merlo 2021: 636-7)

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Merlo offers a way to come to terms with the incredible conclusion of metaphysical solipsism by distinguishing the objective level of reality, on which all minds are 'on a par,' from the subjective level, on which a 'spotlight of feltness shines on all and only my own experiences' (660). This metaphysical picture has been developed in more detail in Merlo (2016).

What would Sartre make of Merlo's case for metaphysical solipsism? He quite clearly endorses the appearance/reality principle: 'The absolutely fundamental feature of the Sartrean conception of consciousness is that "it exists only to the degree to which it appears" [B&N 16]—i.e. for consciousness, reality just is appearance' (Baldwin 1996: 84). If Sartre is to resist metaphysical solipsism, then, he must reject the phenomenological premise derived from Merlo's descriptive exercise. As we saw in §2, Sartre acknowledges a kind of natural solipsism within the circuit of ipseity: the world is 'mine' insofar as it is structured by my possibilities. Because of Sartre's views about the emptiness of consciousness, his description of the 'mineness' of ipseity differs from Merlo's: whereas Merlo focuses on a special property of 'feltness' attaching to my experiences, Sartre focuses on how objects show up as having a reference to my possibilities within a hodological space. Modulo this difference, however, Sartre seems to accept phenomenological solipsism in his discussion of the 'circuit of ipseity.'

But this isn't the end of the phenomenological story for Sartre. As I'll now argue, the experience of the other effects a transformation of the natural solipsism of ipseity.

What I have in mind is Sartre's description of encountering a man in a park, which is worth quoting at some length.

> I am in a park. Not far from me I see a lawn and, along this lawn, some chairs. A man is passing by, close to the chairs. I see this man: I apprehend him as an object and, at the same time, as a man. What does this mean? What do I mean when I assert, in relation to this object, that *it is a man*?
>
> If I were to think that it was nothing but a doll, I would apply to it the categories that I ordinarily use to group spatio-temporal 'things'… To perceive him as *a man*, *on the contrary*… is to register an organization *without distance* of the things in my universe around that special object… this new relation between the man-object and the grass-object has a particular character. It is given to me in its entirety, since it is there, in the world, as an object that I am able to know… and at the same time it escapes me entirely: to the extent to which the man-object is the fundamental term in this relation, to the extent to which this relation *leads towards him*, it escapes me, and I am unable to place myself at the centre; the distance that unfolds between the grass and the man… is a negation of the distance that I establish… It appears as a pure *disintegration* of the relations that I apprehend between the objects in my universe… Thus, all of a sudden, an object has appeared that has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place, everything still exists for me, but now an invisible and frozen flight towards a new object penetrates everything. The Other's appearing in the world corresponds,

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> therefore, to a frozen sliding away of the universe in its entirety, to a decentering of the world that undermines the centralization I simultaneously impose…
>
> It is not a matter of the world fleeing towards nothingness or somewhere outside itself; rather, it seems as if it has been pierced, in the middle of its being, by a drainage hole and as if it is constantly flowing out through that hole. (B&N 349-51)

What I want to draw out from this evocative passage is how the hodological idea of 'unfolding distances' is supposed to be modified in the experience of the other (-as-object). Recall from §2 that the circuit of ipseity opens up a hodological space, in which directions, distances, and valences are structured with reference to the for-itself's possibilities. I suggested that Sartre's claim that the world is 'mine' can be cashed out in hodological terms.

What happens in the experience of the man in the park is that an object in my world is given as 'unfolding' its own distances. Before encountering the other, the world is structured hodologically with reference to my possibilities and goals. To encounter the other as a human being is to see him not merely as an object within my egocentric hodological space (though it is this, too); it is to see him as a *center of orientation*—another ipseity—that opens up its own hodological space that is inaccessible to me. Because this center of orientation is given within my own hodological space, I perceive objects as 'flowing away' toward a 'drainage hole' with its own directions, distances, and valences. Sartre's phenomenological description conflicts with Merlo's: whereas Merlo claims that it appears to me that only my experiences have feltness, Sartre claims that the man in the park is encountered as having his own world with a quality of its own 'mineness'.

Whose phenomenological description is more credible—Merlo's or Sartre's? One might worry that Sartre's man in the park vignette makes the implausible phenomenological claim that the objects in the park look different when the man is encountered. This reading is surely encouraged by Sartre's dramatic description of objects getting sucked into a drainage hole. If we reign in Sartre's powerful, if misleading, rhetoric a bit, though, I think we can see that Sartre wins out on phenomenological plausibility. Recall that for Merlo's argument for metaphysical solipsism to succeed, it needs to *appear to us* that only our experiences possess feltness (or, modulo Sartre's vocabulary, mineness). What the man in the park vignette is supposed to show is that there is a palpable phenomenological difference between how we experience benches and trees, on the one hand, and other subjects, on the other. Another subject is experienced, to use Husserl's terminology, as a *zero point of orientation* (Husserl 1989). This means that, just as I open up my own 'world' or 'hodological space' around myself, I see the man in the park as the center of his own 'world' or 'hodological space'. Sartre's claim that the other has 'stolen the world from me' could be taken to suggest that objects no longer appear as 'mine' once the other is encountered, and thus that objects appear differently depending on whether another or not another subject is present. But I think the crucial point of Sartre's analysis is not that objects appear to us differently

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when another subject is encountered, but rather that it appears to us that there is another perspective with its own 'mineness'. It seems overwhelmingly plausible to me that this is how we experience other subjects, and this is all that is required to undermine Merlo's 'phenomenological solipsism'.

§4.2 The Voyeur

Here are the essentials of the vignette of the voyeur at the keyhole:

> Let us imagine that, through jealously, curiosity or vice, I have come to stick my ear against a door or to look through a keyhole. I am alone and non-thetically conscious (of) myself… I am a pure consciousness *of* things, and the things, caught within the circuit of my ipseity, offer me their potentialities as a response to my non-thetic consciousness (of) my own possibilities. Thus, behind this door, a spectacle is proposed as 'to be seen', a conversation as 'to be heard'… The totality, moreover, exists only in relation to a free project of my possibilities: it is precisely my jealously—as a possibility that I *am*—that organizes this equipmental structure…
>
> > And now I hear footsteps in the corridor: someone is looking at me. What does this mean? That all of a sudden I am touched in my being, and that essential modifications appear within my structures… (B&N 356-7)

At the beginning of the scene, Sartre applies his analysis of the circuit of ipseity I discussed in §2. But with the appearance of the footsteps, a new ontological structure of the subject is revealed. In this section I will propose a new interpretation of what is revealed in the voyeur's experience of being caught in the act. The key to my interpretation is to cash out the ontological structure of being-for-others in terms of the notion of a *metaphysical standpoint* explored in the first-person realist literature. This reading, I claim, irons out the wrinkles in Sartre's transcendental argument that I highlighted in §3.

The wrinkles, recall, are that we are owed an account of what the other-as-subject is such that its existence can be established with cogito-level certainty. My proposal is to interpret the other-as-subject in terms of the metaphysical conception of *standpoints* developed by Martin Lipman (2023). A standpoint for Lipman is 'something relative to which certain genuine facts obtain' (119). Potential examples of standpoints include 'times, subjects, (inertial) frames of reference, orientations, locations, scales, conceptual schemes, and… *sui generis* entities such as atemporal or objective standpoints, abstract objects whose identity is solely given by what obtains relative to them' (Lipman 2023: 119). I suggest that the other-as-subject is a standpoint in this last sense: an abstract object defined in terms of the facts that obtain relative to them. This captures the sense in which the other-as-subject need not be occupied by a concrete, conscious person; as Sartre notes, for example, a farm on a hill can function as the other-as-subject for soldiers trying to avoid enemy detection

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(B&N 375). If the other-as-subject, revealed in experiences like shame and hiding from the enemy's gaze (both instances of 'the look'), is such an abstract standpoint, what are the facts that obtain relative to it?

Sartre describes these facts as follows: 'I have an outside, and I have a *nature*' (B&N 360). Schroeder (1984) calls this 'outside' or 'nature' the *social self*. The social self or 'being-for-others' is a dimension of a subject's being that corresponds to a third-person perspective on the subject, in contrast to the first-personal dimension of being-in-itself. Schroeder describes the distinction between these two dimensions of the subject's being as follows: 'The mode of existence of each is different, for the social self exists *without* having to be sustained by consciousness, while consciousness must continually sustain and rechoose itself' (Schroeder 1984: 235). A famous illustration of the social self in B&N comes from the description of the café waiter's bad faith (B&N Part I, Chapter 2, 'Patterns of Bad Faith'). The waiter is in bad faith because he identifies fully with his social self (being a waiter), thereby deceiving himself about his responsibility for continually, freely choosing and reaffirming his projects.

A crucial element of Sartre's view as I read him is that the relation between the other-as-subject and the fact that I have an 'outside' or social self is metaphysical rather than epistemic. That is, Sartre's claim is not merely that the social self can only be epistemically accessed from a third-person perspective. Rather, he is making the much more radical claim that facts about the social self *only obtain* in virtue of the standpoint of the other-as-subject: '…it [i.e., the subject of the other's gaze] acquires a nature solely by virtue of the fact that the other—not through some distortion, or some refraction that is imposed on it by his categories, but through his very being—confers upon it an outside' (B&N 360, my emphasis). Here Sartre claims not merely that I can only know about my outside through the experience of 'the look' and shame (though this is also true); I *acquire* a nature and have an outside *conferred* on me by the very being of the other. Gardner (2005) emphasizes this point: 'It should be stressed that the "properties" which the other "bestows" on me through its gaze are not to be conceived as pre-existing, even in a latent form, the advent of intersubjectivity' (329). Again, this is not primarily a claim about a concrete, conscious person, but rather about an abstract standpoint that can be, but need not be, occupied by a person. Modeling Sartre's other-as-subject on these abstract standpoints captures the respect in which Sartre's claim in the discussion of 'the look' is primarily metaphysical rather than epistemic.

While defending Sartre's claims about the irreducibility of these two dimensions of the subject's being is beyond the scope of the present article, I think this interpretation of the other-as-subject puts some meat on the bones of Sacks's idea that 'the look' reveals a structural element of the world. It also helps defuse the worry raised by Stroud. If Sartre's transcendental argument doesn't aim to establish the existence of concrete, conscious subjects, but rather of abstract standpoints from which facts about one's social self obtain, it's less puzzling how Sartre could claim that 'the look' reveals the existence of these standpoints with intuitive certainty. It also explains why Sartre describes 'the look' and shame as a 'slightly expanded cogito,' since what these experiences establish are facts about my own being (and abstract standpoints from which these facts obtain), rather than about the existence

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of other minds (knowledge, rather than certainty, of which was the target of the first stage of Sartre's account).[6]

The metaphysical standpoint of the other-as-subject, Sartre claims, constitutes a limit on ipseity.

> The limit between two consciousnesses, in so far as it is produced by the limiting consciousness and taken up by the limited consciousness: that is what delivers my object-Me. And we must understand this in both senses of the word 'limit'. From the side of what limits me, I grasp the limit as the content that contains me and surrounds me, the sleeve of emptiness that exempts me as a totality, by taking me out of play; from the side that is limited, the limit relates to any phenomena of ipseity in the way a mathematical limit relates to the series that approaches it without ever reaching it; all of the being that I have to be is, in relation to its limit, like a curve that is the asymptote to a straight line. In this way I am a detotalized and indefinite totality… (B&N 389)

The first, container sense of 'limit' captures the way that the gaze of the other 'enslaves me': 'I am a slave to the extent to which I am dependent in my being at the heart of a freedom that is not mine, and which the very condition of my being' (B&N 365). The second, mathematical sense of 'limit' is tied to Sartre's notion of a 'detotalized totality,' a notion in which Gardner (2017) locates the 'original insight' of Sartre's account of intersubjectivity. I will return to the idea of a 'detotalized totality' in §5.

A fuller treatment of the voyeur scene would need to further explain the idea of my outside, nature, or social self, in particular in connection to Sartre's distinction between the body-for-itself and the body-for-others (B&N Part Three, Ch. 2). Nonetheless, interpreting the other-as-subject as a metaphysical standpoint in Lipman's sense has a number of distinctive advantages over existing interpretations. First, it gives a metaphysical model for understanding Sacks's idea that the other-as-subject is a 'presupposed structural element of the world that is necessitated by my very upsurge' (Sacks 2005: 294). Second, it explains the respect in which the other-as-subject is *abstract*: it need not be instantiated in or occupied by a concrete other. Third, it makes it much more plausible that the existence of the other-as-subject is established with cogito-level intuitive certainty. Following Lipman's model, the other-as-subject is an abstract object (which can, but need not, be occupied by a concrete other) from which facts about one's social self (a dimension of one's being irreducible to being-for-itself) obtain, and insofar as the experience of shame reveals facts about a dimension of one's own being rather than revealing the existence of other persons, it constitutes a 'slightly expanded cogito.'

[6] Gardner (2005) argues that Sartre's accounts of intersubjectivity and the relation between being-in-itself and being-for-others need to be supplemented with resources from German idealism (from Fichte and Schelling, respectively).

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§5 Detotalized Totality and Fragmentalism

Paradox, contradiction, and seemingly irresolvable tensions are Sartre's stock-in-trade. The tension between ipseity and being-for-others is just one striking example. From the perspective of ipseity, I am a free source of value; I am my possibilities, in terms of which the world is given as 'mine.' From the perspective of the other, I am a 'slave'; I am assessed according to values that do not stem from my projects; my possibilities are 'frozen' (B&N 369) and the world is 'stolen' from me. Crucially, these tensions are not meant to be overcome. That is, the perspective of the other does not correct the perspective of ipseity; rather, it reveals another side of my being—my being-for-others—that co-exists uneasily with my being-for-itself. Indeed, being-for-others is one of the three 'ekstases' of the subject—ways in which the subject is 'outside of itself'—alongside temporality and reflection, and Sartre's accounts of all three ekstases naturally lend themselves to a dialetheic reading of B&N, i.e., a reading on which Sartre affirms true contradictions of the subject.[7]

Gardner (2017) sees the 'original insight' of Sartre's account of intersubjectivity as the claim that intersubjectivity is aporetic, in the sense that it cannot be rendered fully intelligible:

> …his thesis, in preliminary formulation, is that intersubjective consciousness demands a doubling of standpoints, between which we can alternate without strict inconsistency or overt conceptual incoherence, but which resist systematic integration… The upshot is that intersubjectivity involves a mere *superimposition* of disjoined perspectives, sufficiently stable to allow for the conceptual scheme of ordinary psychology and the pursuit of common forms of life, but which falls short of the unity required for intersubjective structures to qualify as fully intelligible realities. (B&N 48).

This insight is captured in the notion of a 'detotalized totality.' The subject is a detotalized totality because two perspectives from which genuine facts about it obtain—the perspectives of ipseity and of the other—cannot be brought into a coherent synthesis.

The difficult notion of a detotalized totality opens up one more productive point of comparison between Sartre and first-person realism. On 'egalitarian' forms of first-person realism, all subjective perspectives are metaphysically 'on a par.' But the facts from different subjective perspectives are sometimes incompatible: mushrooms are disgusting to me and tasty to you, the dog is to my right but to your left, 'the dress' is blue and black to me and white and gold to you. If these are all genuine facts, then they cannot be integrated into a coherent whole. Egalitarian first-person realists (e.g., Fine 2005 and Lipman 2016) respond by adopting *fragmentalism*: the view that 'reality is somehow broken into "'fragments,' rather than being "of a piece"' (Merlo 2023: 1).

[7] Jordan (2017) explores an apparent dialetheia in Sartre's account of reflection. Brown (2023) and McNulty (2025) pursue dialetheic readings of the chapter on bad faith.

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Sartre seems to have been led to a similar conclusion: because he recognizes distinct perspectives from which genuine but incompatible facts obtain, he is led to deny that a complete metaphysical picture of the subject (the subject as a completed totality) is possible. The discussion of intersubjectivity is not the only place where Sartre appeals to the notion of a detotalized totality, either. Having distinguished being-for-itself and being-in-itself in his ontological proof, Sartre returns in the Conclusion of B&N to two questions, which are supposed to be the province of 'metaphysics' rather than ontology: first, how does the for-itself emerge from the in-itself, and second, how can the two modes of being be unified under a generic notion of 'being'? He presents a complete and coherent account of the unity of the for-itself and the in-itself as an impossible, though indispensable, ideal, which he captures by describing being as a detotalized totality.

A full treatment of whether Sartre is a fragmentalist would thus require us to wade into the murky waters of the 'metaphysical observations' of the Conclusion of B&N, but I think the fact that Sartre is led to this radical metaphysical conclusion for reasons quite similar to those adduced by contemporary egalitarian first-person realists is remarkable and worth exploring. That Sartre is led to the notion of detotalized totality reinforces my claim that he metaphysically privileges the first-person perspective while rejecting inegalitarian accounts of this privilege. While there is much more to be said about this suggestion, I take myself to have established that a dialogue between Sartre and first-person realism is fruitful in three respects. First, I argued that Sartre's description of encountering the man in the park undermines Merlo's argument for metaphysical solipsism. Second, I proposed that modeling the other-as-subject on Lipman's notion of a metaphysical standpoint irons out some wrinkles in Sartre's transcendental argument regarding other minds. Third, I suggested that reading Sartre's notion of a 'detotalized totality' in terms of Fine's fragmentalism offers a way of taking Sartre's paradoxical descriptions of the self and the world metaphysically seriously.

JAMES KINKAID
BILKENT UNIVERSITY
james.kinkaid@bilkent.edu.tr

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