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The Look of the Cogito:

Dismantling a Common Misinterpretation of Being Looked At

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre makes the claim, “if I am to be able to conceive of even one of my properties in the objective mode then the Other is already given” (Sartre 270). In support of the claim, he famously gives two examples often referred to as the rustling branch example and the keyhole example. Many read Sartre's claim as a proof for the existence of others – I will call this reading the cogito interpretation. The cogito interpretation suggests a proof found on two premises: (1) I am conscious of myself as an object in the world (as show by the rustling branch example) and (2) in order to be conscious of myself as an object is to be consciousness of other consciousness of me (as show by the keyhole example). Therefore, he concludes, I am conscious of the existence of others who are conscious of me. However, to read Sartre as making such an argument for the existence of others is disharmonious with the rest of the text. Examples throughout the text put pressure on the cogito interpretation of Sartre's claim as a proof. I will claim that the cogito interpretation of Sartre's claim for the existence of others fails to capture Sartre's true intentions in the section “The Look”.

Showing this will first require understanding the cogito interpretation as proving, we are conscious of the existence of others who are conscious of us (1. The Cogito Interpretation). Second, by using the example of the rustling branches Sartre gives in the text, I will show a weakness in this interpretation (2. Problematicizing the Cogito Interpretation). In defense of the

interpretation I will outline a common modification which can deal with the rustling branches example by incorporating a notion of possibility (3. The Possibility Interpretation). However, I will show that this also fails to create methodological and thematic unity throughout the text, namely in Sartre's account of language and signs as they relate to Being-for-others (4. Concerns of Methodological and Thematic Unity). Finally, I will show that in order to fully understand Sartre's claims about the other in methodological and thematic unity with the rest of the text, one must adopt an ontological interpretation of Being-for-others (5. An Ontological Interpretation).

1. The Cogito Interpretation

Sartre's account for the existence of others can be read as proving we are conscious of the existence of others who are conscious of us, because, in experiencing being seen by the other, one first becomes conscious of themselves as an object. He gives a description of this throughout section four entitled "The Look". In this section he builds an argument that experiencing myself as an object comes from (1) I am conscious of myself as an object in the world and (2) from the experience of being the object for another consciousness. The cogito interpretation can be outlined in a simple argument:

(P1) I am conscious of myself as an object in the world

(P2) To be conscious of myself as an object is to be consciousness of another consciousness of me.

(C1) Therefore we are conscious of the existence of others who are conscious of us.

It will also be noted this interpretation exposes that the first premises – I am conscious of myself as an object in the world – is a form of self-consciousness in which one already sees themselves as an object; therefore, undermining Sartre's claim that one needs to be seen before one can experience being an object.

First, Sartre shows that I know myself to be an object in the world, because I experience myself as an object in the world. Sartre argues this can be seen in experiences of vulnerability. Sartre gives the example of hearing the rustling of branches. Imagine walking down a dark road late at night and you hear the rustling of some branches in a tree. One is struck the immediate danger of what ever that thing may be. Sartre insightfully analyzes the phenomenology of the situation as follows:

What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that there is something there; it is that I am vulnerable ... that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense – in short, that I am seen. (Sartre 347)

In the moment when one hears a strange noise, one is aware of their vulnerability. One becomes aware that one is an object in the world which is vulnerable to that world. From these moments of vulnerability Sartre show one is constituted as an object in the world.

Next, Sartre shows that to be conscious of myself as an object is to be consciousness of other consciousness of me, because in the experience of shame we experience ourselves as objects of the judgment of another. It is here that Sartre provides us with the keyhole example. The keyhole example exemplifies an experience of shame, specifically the shame of being caught looking through the keyhole. For memory's sake recall the keyhole example: one looks through a keyhole into a room, while standing in a hotel hallway. One's consciousness is fully invested in the content of the room to the point that one forgets themselves. One hears a sound at the end of the hall and in that moment realizes they are being looked at. One experiences themselves as an object for that other subject and becomes aware of the Other. (Sartre 347) In the shame of being caught, one experiences first that one is seen by someone other than themselves –

the other – because by the nature of shame it is the judgment of the other which one experiences in shame, and second one experiences themselves as the object of that shame and of that judgment. Thus, in the experience of being seen by the other one comes to know oneself as an object.

Therefore, Sartre concludes I am conscious of the existence of others who are conscious of me, because I am conscious of myself as an object in the world and to be conscious of myself as an object is to be conscious of others consciousness of me. In being aware that I am an object in the world by experiencing my vulnerability and in being conscious of myself as an object by experiencing shame, I am conscious of myself as seen by another subject, who makes me an object by seeing me.

The cogito interpretation gives a clear depiction of Sartre's argument in the text, by moving from the first two premises (P1) I know myself to be an object in the world and (P2) to be conscious of myself as an object is to be consciousness of another consciousness of me, to the necessary conclusion that I am conscious of the existence of others who are conscious of me. The cogito interpretation explains how Sartre's account for the existence of others can be read as proving we are conscious of the existence of others who are conscious of us.

It is interesting to note, from this interpretation, the first premise – I am conscious of myself as an object in the world – is a form of self-consciousness in which one sees oneself as an object. At stake in this claim is Sartre's argument that to be an object one must be seen by another subject in order to see themselves as an object of a subject. In order to be conscious of oneself as being in the world, one must already have some awareness of themselves of a form which belongs to the world. In experiencing myself as vulnerable there is already an idea of myself invoked, the self which is vulnerable. Christopher Peacocke captures this kind of self-

consciousness well in what he calls perspectival self-consciousness.¹

To have perspectival self-consciousness is to know propositions of the form $I'm \varphi$, for some range of concepts φ that are not anchored in the subject; in cases which $I'm \varphi$ could not merely be replaced with 'my body is φ '. To unpack this notion of self-consciousness consider the two parts of the definition: the necessary condition – to know propositions of the form $I'm \varphi$, for some range of concepts φ that are not anchored in the subject; and the sufficient condition – in cases which $I'm \varphi$ could not merely be replaced with 'my body is φ '.

The necessary condition simply suggests the self-conscious subject knows $I'm \varphi$ (of the form like $I'm$ vulnerable, $I'm$ tall, $I'm$ in the lake and so forth) for a proposition which is not particular to the subject. Take for example, a proposition like being vulnerable. Objects in the world can also be vulnerable, like a house can be vulnerable to a landslide if build at the bottom of a hill. Vulnerability is not unique to subjects; rather vulnerability suggests an object based property. Thus, attributing the property of being vulnerable to me is making the claim that I know $I'm \varphi$ for a proposition which is not particular to the subject.

The sufficient condition limits the cases of prespectival self-consciousness to those cases where the subject cannot be replaced with the concept of 'my body'. This limits the cases in which one may mean my body is in the lake, which does not take the form of self-consciousness, when saying $I'm$ in the lake. To say I am vulnerable with prespectival self-consciousness is different than saying my body is vulnerable. The claim my body is vulnerable does not give knowledge about the objectiveness of the subject rather only points to another object in the world – the body.

1 Clearly what follows is from your text. I didn't know how you wanted it cited.

An understanding of perspectival self-consciousness illuminates the first premise in Sartre's argument. Self-consciousness enters at a much early point than Sartre claims and one can have a notion of the subject as an object before being seen by the other, because the knowledge of oneself as an object through being seen comes after and by the condition of first having perspectival self-consciousness. In already knowing oneself to be an object in the world, one already knows themselves to be an object. Thus, one can conclude that Sartre out steps his bounds when he says, "if I am to be able to conceive of even one of my properties in the objective mode then the Other is already given" (Sartre 270), because one must already have perspectival self-consciousness in order to get a notion of the other.

2. Problematizing the Cogito Interpretation

The cogito interpretation seems at first a good explanation of the text; however, the cogito interpretation becomes problematic if one tries to incorporate what Sartre writes about in the rustling branches example mentioned earlier. Beginning with the rustling branch example, I will show the cogito interpretation takes the presence of another as necessary for Sartre's argument. But, when looking more closely at the example Sartre's claim that one is not mistaken about being seen when no one is there, but rather always already looked at, which will prove contradictory to the cogito interpretation. The only way for the cogito interpretation to incorporate this claim will be to suggest some unseen consciousness which is always looking; however, this is absurd in the Sartrean context.

Recall the phenomena of hearing some rustling branches. Walking, down a path, perhaps late at night, one hears a mysterious sound. One is surprised by it and becomes aware of themselves as the object of an others look – as seen, even caught like in the keyhole example. However, only a moment later one realizes it was only the sound of rustling branches (Sartre

346).

The cogito interpretation takes the knowledge of the presence of another as necessary for Sartre's argument. There must be another consciousness in claiming to be conscious of myself as an object is to be consciousness of other consciousness of me. This is built into premise two – to be conscious of myself as an object is to be consciousness of *another consciousness* of me. The other consciousness must be present as experience me as an object, in order for me to be seen by the other.

In the rustling branches example, Sartre clearly says it cannot be a question of a mistake when one experiences themselves as being-seen, only to find no one is there looking. The experience of being seen is a real experience, in that one is seen according to Sartre. What comes in to doubt in the experience is that the other is there, in a given place in experience. Thus, in hearing the branches one experiences being seen, even though one is there (Sartre 370).

Looking more closely at the explanation Sartre gives of this example, he claims that one is always already being looked at. The experience of being looked at in the branch example can only happen if one is already being-looked-at. "I do not cease to experience my being-for-others ... if I tremble at the slightest noise, if each creak announces to me a look; this is because I am already in the state of being-looked-at." (Sartre 370) According to Sartre, even before one hears the sound of the branch one is already being-looked-at. In every moment one is already being-looked-at, because according to Sartre in order for the anything to announce a look, one must already be being-looked-at.

The claim, one is always already being looked at, is contradictory to the cogito interpretation which suggests that to be conscious of myself as an object of an others gaze is to be conscious of an others consciousness of me, because one must experience the other as being a

consciousness of me. Yet, in the case of hearing the branch and being mistaken about the physical presence of the other, Sartre clearly claims one experience oneself as being seen by the other, even when there is no other as consciousness of me.

In order for the *cogito* interpretation to make sense of the branch example, it must accept that some kind of non-personal consciousness is always watching, always looking. In this way it can hold onto the second premise of the argument and accept one is always being seen. Sartre does write, “Every look directed toward me is manifested in connection with the appearance of a sensible form in our perceptive field, but contrary to what might be expected, it is not connected with any determined form”. (Sartre 346) There is some look which belongs to a consciousness which is not there but everywhere, which takes no form in experience other than as looking at others. Thus, the *cogito* interpretation must accept that one is always looked by some *cogito* from an unseen eye rather than by a particular mind.

The idea of the other as an unseen consciousness is absurd in the Sartrean context. This description sounds like some kind of God or worldly force. In the examples given and throughout the section entitled “The look” there is no mention of God or unseen consciousness. Sartre is clearly against a notion of some overarching transcendental other which watches over us. Sartre clearly wishes to say that it is for the consciousnesses of others which one exists (Sartre 374), not some all seeing consciousness.

The *cogito* interpretation became problematic when trying to incorporate what Sartre writes about in the rustling branches example, because it demands that there is consciousness which is not present in the example. The *cogito* interpretation takes the presence of another as necessary for Sartre's argument. But, when looking more closely Sartre's example proved contradictory to the *cogito* interpretation in claiming that one is not mistaken about being seen

when no one is there but rather always already looked at. The only way for the cogito interpretation to incorporate this claim was to suggest some unseen consciousness which is always looking; however, this is absurd in the Sartrean context.

3. The Possibility Interpretation

The problem in the first interpretation is a problem with the notion that one must have a subject (a consciousness) who sees me as an object. One common modification made in response to the challenges raised in the section above, I will call the possibility interpretation. In the possibility interpretation the second premise is modified, changed to: to be conscious of myself as an object is to be consciousness of the *possibility* of other consciousness of me. And so the conclusion also changes: therefore we are conscious of the *possible* existence of others who are conscious of us. This second interpretation makes the weaker claim: it is possible for us to be looked at all the time and everywhere, by allowing for the experience of the possibility of being seen in the branch example. Thus, the interpretation allows one to keep the structure and the intent of the cogito interpretation intact but allows for Sartre's claims in the branch example.

By changing the second premise to suggest the possibility of other consciousnesses the being-seen by another, Sartre is making a weaker claim: when one experiences oneself as being-seen one is only realizing the possibility of being seen by another consciousness. By being aware of the possibility one can be aware of their existence for others and one is constituted as the object of the other subject. Take the keyhole example: realizing I am looked at standing in that hall comes from having the possibility of being look at. Whether there is a person standing at the end of the hall or not, I still experience the possibility of being looked at. Thus, the experience one has is not being-seen by a particular subject, but one experiences there own possibility of being seen.

Thus one gets the conclusion, to be conscious of myself as an object is to be consciousness of the *possibility* of others, by (1) being conscious of myself as being a object in the world and (2) being conscious of myself as an object is to be conscious of the possibility of the consciousness of me. The conditions are enough to make a claim about the possibility of others being in the world. Sartre supports this claim, “In a word, my apprehension of the Other in the world as *probably being* a man refers to my permanent possibility of *being-seen-by-him*; that is, to the permanent possibility that a subject who sees me may be substituted for the object seen by me.” (Sartre 345) One always has the possibility of being seen. Sartre's claim is only as strong as to say that there is the possibility of others in the world.

Returning to the question of how are we being looked at when we are mistaken about there being someone there. In this second interpretation the weaker claim, it is possible for us to be looked at all the time and everywhere, is made. In the cases in which we think we are seen but are not really seen, we become aware of our possibility to be seen:

What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that *there is someone there*; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense – in short, that I *am seen*. (347)

It is our vulnerability which comes to light when we are seen. It is this vulnerability which reveals to us that we can be seen; we are see-able. It is this possibility which alerts us to the fact that there are others which can look at us. In the particular case we can be right or wrong about being looked at by a particular person.

By changing the second premise to suggest the possibility of being seen other consciousnesses, it thus changing the conclusion: to be conscious of myself as an object is to be

consciousness of the *possibility* of others. This interpretation keeps the structure and the intent of the cogito interpretation intact (one still has the similar premises and conclusion) while accommodating the notion of always already being-seen found in the phenomenology of the branch example.

4. Concerns with Methodological and Thematic Unity

The possibility interpretation makes two critical mistakes in its methodology (two mistakes which extend to the cogito interpretation as well): (1) it takes the question of the other to be a question of probability: whether one *can know* there is a particular person there, rather it says the existence of the Other is a matter of the validation (or invalidation) at the possibility of the Other. Sartre rejects this kind of investigation into the other in the end of section *III. Husserl, Hegel, Heidegger*, saying that any such quest for the knowledge of the other will not be answered. (Sartre 337) (2) It sets up Sartre's claim as an argument, as an appeal to logical process, as if Sartre's claim was a proof for the existence of the other. Such a proof goes counter to phenomenological methodology. Instead he sets out to understand the other from the phenomena in which we first experience the other, which does not reveal knowledge of the other but a way of being-for-others (a way of being which is as fundamental to consciousness as being the center of experience, in which consciousness is directed towards the existence of other consciousness). I will show this by examining Sartre's treatment of the being-for-others. By showing these two methodical mistakes are present in the possibility interpretation, it can be concluded that the possibility interpretation fails to capture Sartre's intentions in the text.

(1) In the structure of the possibility interpretations one must make a claim about the possibility of validation the existence of the other. The possibility interpretation says, when I see the person looking at me from the end of the hall (after looking through the keyhole) one comes

to know that it is possible for them to be looked at because being conscious of myself as an object is to be conscious of the possibility of the others consciousness of me. There can either be someone or not be someone looking. The possibility is concerned with the possibility of validation or invalidation of the other as present.

However, the others existence according to Sartre cannot be this kind of probability, because this kind of probability remains a question of validation which Sartre rejects. "In short, the Other's existence can not be a probability. Probability can concern only objects which appear in our experience and from which new effects can appear in our experience. There is probability only if a validation or invalidation of it is at every moment possible" (Sartre 337). The existence of a subject as another consciousness does not appear in experience the same way objects do, because the subject is not a probable participant, like objects which can show up as real or not. For Sartre being seen by the other shows us that there is another, not merely the probability of another which may or may not be there.

(2) The possibility interpretation sets up Sartre's claim as an argument, because it makes an appeal to logical process, as if Sartre's claim was a proof for the existence of the other. If one recalls, there are two premises which lead one to the existence of the other: I know myself to be an object in the world and to know myself as an object is to be consciousness of other consciousness of me. From these two facts one is constituted as being seen by the other and can prove the existence of the other.

However, throughout the text Sartre treats the existence of others as primary rather than derived from the two given premises, because, for Sartre the existence of other reveals what he calls being-for-others and only by way of being-for-others do we already have a notion of the existence of others. This methodological approach is exemplified in two sections of *Being and*

Nothingness: in “First Attitude Towards Others: Love, Language, Masochism” Sartre claims language reveals being-for-others as ontologically primary and in “‘Being-With’ (Mitsein) and The ‘We’” Sartre claims signs reveal being-for-others as ontologically primary. His methodical approach to language and signs with regards to our Being-for-Others will reveal our being-for-others not as a proof derived from premises but as a foundation to our being, which can only be exposed through the phenomena of being human.

In section one of chapter three: “First Attitude Towards Others: Love, Language, Masochism”, Sartre claims language reveals being-for-others as ontologically primary, because language is a fundamental relation with others when we communicate with others. The communication with other is a way that one is being-for-others. He first writes: “Language is not a phenomenon added on to being-for-others. It is originally being-for-others;” (Sartre 485) Language is not more than or different than being-for-others, but rather is a being-for-others. Language is revealing of our being-for-others as a basis for language, because without being-for-others there would be no language. Sartre continues: “It [language] forms part of the human condition; it is originally the proof which a for-itself can make of its being-for-others, and finally it is the surpassing of this proof and the utilization of it towards possibilities which are my possibilities; that is, toward my possibilities of being this or that for the Other.” (Sartre 486) Language is a proof of being-for-others, in using language one sees they are fundamentally directed towards others, because in using language one is more than being for their own sake, but going beyond themselves towards the other. In this sense we are already being-for-others, because we are already directed beyond ourselves towards the other.

In section three of chapter three: “Being-With” (Mitsein) and The “We”, Sartre claims signs reveal being-for-others as ontologically primary. By Signs Sartre means the ones written all

along the road to direct us. The direction which a sign gives comes from the other. "It is to me that the printed sentence is directed; it represents in fact an immediate communication from the Other to me: I am aimed at." (Sartre 552) The sign aims at giving to me or directing me to some information. The information it gives comes from the other. It is the other that erected the sign that wanted a sign there to say something to me. For Sartre, "by my very act I *recognize* the Other's existence; I set up a dialogue with the other." (Sartre 552) In the sign there is a communication between me and the other, which is revealed to me the moment I recognize the sign. This relation with the sign, set up a dialogue with the other, reveal to me by being-for-others. The object can not appear to me as a human object, as aimed-at me, without first a recognition of the Other, because without a being-for-others the sign could not be differentiated from any other object. What gives it the property of being a sign is that it can first appear real to me as a sign by my being-for-others.

These two examples show the way Sartre regards being-for-others. Sartre understands that there are phenomena which reveal to us our being-for-others, which could not exist without being-for-others, whether in signs, language or being seen. All of these reveal our being-for-others not as derived from a priori knowledge but as a foundation to our being, which can only be exposed through the phenomena of being human. Therefore, it can be concluded that the possibility interpretation fails to capture Sartre's intentions in the text.

5. The Ontological Interpretation

It will be useful to give a new interpretation which exemplifies Sartre's characterization of being-for-others and what it means to be seen in light of being-for-others. I will call this the ontological interpretation because our experience of language, signs and being seen reveals the ontological foundation of being-for-others. This is an ontological foundation in the sense that

being-for-others is a way the one consciousness is constituted as directed towards the existence of others. In order to do this I will look at Sartre's depiction of language, signs and most importantly been seen as structured by being-for-others.

Language is a way that we can be for others. In language I surpass myself towards what I am for the other, as we saw in the previous section. This is because one does not employ language for oneself, but rather language is directed towards the other. Not in the same way one is directed towards an object. When directed towards objects, consciousness remains in its own field of perception (whether visual or abstract) because the object appears to consciousness as an object for the consciousness. However, the other which I am directed towards exists beyond my consciousness as another consciousness. This directedness towards the other is a consciousness which surpasses one's own perspective. In being directed towards the other one surpasses themselves and is directed out towards others. One's directedness is a way of being for others, specifically as being already directed towards others.

A similar story can be told for signs, because signs cannot appear to me as a human object, as aimed-at me, without first a recognition of the Other, because without a being-for-others the sign could not be differentiated from any other object. Once again it requires a being directed towards the existence of others in the same way as language is directed towards the existence of others.

Finally, one's being-seen also reveals one's being-for-others as seen in the rustling branch example. In being-for-others one can experience shame or being objectified by an other, because only by already being directed to the other as conscious do I take the other's criticism. In the rustling branch example, our being-for-others still exists when we encounter the feeling of being seen but not actually being seen, because we are always directed towards the existence of the

other. Our being seen then is not the knowledge of being seen by some other person which can be false. Only once we are being for others does our world become a place where there could or could not be that person.

Thus, the ontological interpretation rejects reading Sartre as arguing a proof in the traditional sense. Rather, it requires reading Sartre's words fitting in with his phenomenology, exposing the experience for what they are. In this interpretation Sartre is saying that our experience of being seen reveals the ontological foundation of being-for-others. Our being-for-others is not a knowledge that a particular other exists but rather the ontological structure that is required to even ask the question does that other person exist. "For the appearance of a man as an object in the field of my experience is not what informs me that *there are* men. My certainty of other's existence is independent of these experiences and is, on the contrary, that which makes them possible." (Sartre 373) It is our independent being-for-others first that informs us of the presence of others. Only once we have being-for-others in our ontological makeup can we see the world as without or with a particular person. Sartre is saying that our experience of being seen reveals the ontological foundation of being-for-others, as exemplified in Sartre's depiction of language, signs and most importantly being looked at.

6. Conclusion

By examining the cogito interpretation in full, one can see a weakness in this interpretation, found in the rustling branches example. In defense of the interpretation I considered a common modification which dealt with the rustling branches example by incorporating a notion of possibility. However, I showed that this fails to deal with the larger problem by failing to create methodological and thematic unity throughout the text, specifically in Sartre's account of language and signs as revealing being-for-others. Finally, in order to fully

understand Sartre's claims about the other in methodological and thematic unity with the rest of the text one can adopt an ontological interpretation of being for others. Thus, it can be said that the cogito interpretation of Sartre's claim for the existence of other fails to capture Sartre's true intentions in the section "The Look".

Works Cited

Sartre, Jean-Paul, Being and Nothingness, trans Hazel E. Barnes. Washington Square Press. (1956)