

**Sartre's Phenomenologico-Existentialist Solution to the  
Problem of the Existence of the Other**

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**Abstract**

The problem of the existence of the other (and therefore other minds) has occupied a pride of place in Western philosophy for centuries. Many prominent philosophers of the analytic and phenomenologico-existentialist schools have variously offered solutions to the problem. Sartre an outstanding existentialist thinker of the 20th century was convinced that his phenomenologico-existentialist concept of the 'look' grounded in the conception of man as a being-for-others provided a definitive non-conceptual proof of the existence of the other. This paper examines the Sartrean position in order to determine the adequacy or inadequacy of the solution. The paper notes Sartre's criticism of idealism, realism, and the views of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger on the problem. The paper asserts that Sartre's criticism of Heidegger is unjustified given that his notion of being-for-others is not radically different from Heidegger's concept of being-with. Yet Sartre has provided us with a brilliant perspective on the problem of the existence of the other using the concept of the look. The paper asserts that Sartre has not proved the existence of the other but has only succeeded in brilliantly justifying our common-sense conviction of the existence of the other in the face of a solipsist stance stoutly resisted in everyday life.

## Introduction

Diogenes Laertius reports Pyrrho the ancient Greek philosopher as refusing to stop and help his friend Anaxarch who had fallen into a quagmire. Pyrrho continued walking in fidelity to his sceptic beliefs about not conceding too much to the evidence of the senses.<sup>1</sup> In his dialogues, notably the *Parmenides* and the *Republic*, Plato had noted the problem of identity posed by the plurality of beings in the world and the necessity of unity. Aristotle's law of contradiction asserts that nothing can be both what it is and not what it is. Together with the law of identity the law of contradiction preserves the uniqueness of the individual. I am who I am and not someone else. Now, if we agree that multiplicity is real and that the individual human being lives in a community of creatures with his kind of mind and body, how can we demonstrate that this is indeed the case? Adu is not Adole. Yet he is convinced that Adole exists independently of his perceptual faculties. How can I prove the other's existence? This is the long-running problem of the existence of the other (and therefore other minds).

The enquiry took off properly with Descartes' formulation of the methodic doubt that carved out the private sphere of the isolated mind and finally arrived at the affirmation of the existence of the external world and of others as clear and distinct ideas guaranteed ultimately by the divine mind.<sup>2</sup> Berkeley declared the physical world mind-dependent.<sup>3</sup> Hume introduced a frightening scepticism that not only questioned the reality

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<sup>1</sup> See Dario Composta, *History of Ancient Philosophy* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1990), 338.

<sup>2</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Descartes' Philosophical Writings*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1952), Part IV.

<sup>3</sup> See George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 1988).

of objects in the world but, indeed, declared them unknowable *a priori*.<sup>1</sup> Kant noted that it remained a scandal that the existence of the external world (and therefore the other) must be accepted on the basis of faith alone in the absence of a rational proof. Kant's attempt at solving the problem lay in his notion of causality which gave the mind the power of representation, and, arguably, even of constituting the external world.<sup>2</sup> Responding to Kant's challenge, Moore developed his notorious but ever intriguing proof of the existence of the external world as an appeal to common sense.<sup>3</sup>

Sartre's existentialist phenomenology stands between idealism and realism and seeks to justify the common-sense position that the other exists as concretely as I exists. His method is different from the method of analytical philosophers like J. S. Mill who worked out the method of analogy<sup>4</sup> and Ayer.<sup>5</sup> The term phenomenology itself was used early by Kant and Lambert to describe consciousness and experience as they imply intentionality. In Hegel phenomenology assumed the dimension of the world-historical, the realization of the absolute in the evolution of consciousness. In Husserl phenomenology hoped to transcend the fluid unclarity of objects at the empirical level and attain their essences before the transcendental ego.

Sartre's existentialist phenomenology underlines the instability at the heart of consciousness as its fundamental character. On his way to his phenomenologico-existentialist solution to the problem of the existence of the other, Sartre distinguished

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<sup>1</sup>See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888), Book I.

<sup>2</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), Introduction, 34.

<sup>3</sup>G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25 (1939), 273 – 300.

<sup>4</sup>J. S. Mill *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, 6th ed. (London: Longmans, 1888), 243 – 44.

<sup>5</sup>A.J. Ayer *The Problem of Knowledge* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1956), 243 – 54.

between two kinds of being, the for-itself (*pour soi*) which is human reality possessing consciousness as the power of negation and the in-itself (*en soi*) which is the fullness of being or indifferent positivity. In this paper we will critically examine Sartre's position and show that as important as Sartre's contribution to the philosophical problem of the existence of the other is, he has really not provided a proof of the other's existence but has only succeeded in reinforcing the position of common sense – like every other philosopher tackling the problem – which Kant says we embrace on the basis of faith. The paper makes the important statement that all *proofs* of the other's existence are only *justifications*. The paper supports the claim that Sartre's solution is a justification rather than a proof with the barest but in the circumstances sufficient outline of the consolationist philosophy – Africa's eloquent 21st century response to Western existentialism.

### **Sartre's Criticism of Realism and Idealism**

Sartre begins his project with incisive criticism of realism and idealism. Against realism he questions the possibility of the body of the other being known intuitively as a mere given since the human body is different from any *body*. The human body exists in the indissoluble unity of the human totality.<sup>1</sup> The realist intuition encounters only a body, not the other's body. Sartre believes that realism is a kind of idealism since it locates knowledge of the other on hypothetical or conjectural grounds. The realist's knowledge is subject to probability. The other, then, becomes a representation in the mind – the outset

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans., with Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), Part Three, Ch One, Sect II, 304.

of solipsism. On the other hand, idealism tries to conceive the other as real, but the representation of the other is in fact the other as object, something in essence unknowable. When the idealist posits the other as subject it is as “the object of my thoughts that I consider him.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, Sartre insists that idealism leads to solipsism and the appeal to the suprasensible. He makes the noteworthy assertion that Kantian idealism can only succeed in merely affirming the existence of the other on the basis of common sense. We will return to this common-sense issue later.

### **Posing the Problem**

What is the problem as Sartre perceives it?

At the origin of the problem of the existence of others, there is a fundamental presupposition: others are *the Other*, that is the self which *is not* myself. Therefore we grasp here a negation as the constitutive structure of the being-of-others. The presupposition common to both idealism and realism is that the constituting negation is an external negation. The Other is the one who is not me and the one who I am not. This *not* indicates a nothingness as a *given* element of separation between the Other and myself.<sup>2</sup>

We will now proceed to Sartre’s criticism of some notable phenomenologists.

### **The Criticism of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger**

Husserl in his *Formal and Transcendental Logic* affirms the immediacy of the world and the other as they appear to us before the phenomenological reduction. While acknowledging this Husserlian affirmation as a kind of progress, Sartre nevertheless criticizes Husserl for falling into the trap of Kantian idealism.<sup>3</sup> For Sartre, Husserl’s transcendental consciousness cannot gain any knowledge of other consciousnesses in the transcendental field. Hence, the spectre of solipsism looms over Husserl’s notion of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans., with Introduction by Hazel Barnes (New York: Pocket Books), Part Three Ch One, Sect II, 310.

<sup>2</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 312.

<sup>3</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 317.

connection of one being with the being of others. Sartre praises Hegel for acknowledging the role of negation in the positing of the other and the double reciprocal relation of exclusion that operates in a field of plural consciousnesses. Sartre notes that Hegel seems to avoid solipsism by making my conscious being dependent on the other, such that to doubt the other is to doubt myself.<sup>1</sup> Yet Sartre criticizes Hegel for his “epistemological and ontological optimism,” the tendency to abstraction which overlooks the fact that “to refute solipsism ... my relation to the Other is first and fundamentally a relation of being to being, not of knowledge to knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

Heidegger, Sartre’s immediate predecessor in the phenomenologico-existentialist movement, fares better under the Sartrean critical microscope. The Heideggerian concept of being-with (*Mitsein*) establishes man’s basic communal characteristic.<sup>3</sup> Still Sartre thinks the being-with concept fails to show how my being constitute another human reality or how my being-with causes another human being to rise up.<sup>4</sup> According to Sartre, the concept of being-with cannot provide the thinnest bridge to link me with the other. He accuses Heidegger of ‘bad faith’ and ‘devious reasoning’ with emphasis on Heidegger’s notion of transcendence. Consequently, Sartre concludes: “Heidegger’s attempt to bring human reality out of its solitude raises those same difficulties which idealism generally encounters when it tries to found the existence of concrete beings

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans., with Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), Part Three, Ch One, Sect II, 321.

<sup>2</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 329.

<sup>3</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: SCM Press, 1962), Part One, Division One, Sect IV, 149 – 63.

<sup>4</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 335.

which are similar to us and which as such escape our experience, which even as they are being constituted do not arise from our *a priori*.”<sup>1</sup>

Given Sartre’s ruthless criticism of the old philosophers, what is his solution to the problem of the existence of the other?

### **The Look as the Solution to the Problem of the Other’s Existence**

We have seen that Sartre begins his phenomenological description of human reality by using the *cogito* as his starting point, unlike Heidegger the other outstanding 20th century existentialist who avoided granting a prominent role to consciousness. For Sartre human reality is a for-itself whose ontological character is nothingness, the power of negating, nihilating, questioning, or denying. His solution to the problem of the other locates itself in the notion of the ontological instability of human reality. For Sartre the other’s existence is a preontological comprehension, a factual necessity, in its relation to me.

Sartre declares:

We must ask the For-itself to deliver to us the For-others; we must ask absolute immanence to throw us into absolute transcendence. In my own inmost depths I must find not *reasons for believing* that the Other exists but the Other himself as not being me. ... Therefore if he is *for us* this can be neither as a constitutive factor of our knowledge of the self, but as one who ‘interests’ our being, and that not as he contributes *a priori* to constitute our being but as he interests it concretely and ‘ontically’ in the empirical circumstances of our facticity.<sup>2</sup>

What makes a man different from a tree is a man’s existential capacity to ‘look’ at me. It does not matter what kind of eyes a man possesses as long as they manifest the look. Only the for-itself has the ability to look at me and make me realize I am being looked at as the object of a pure reference. The look establishes the other’s existence as

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 336.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books), Part Three Ch One, Sect III, 338 – 39.

the permanent condition of the existence of all forms of consciousness. When the other looks at me I become an object, a transcendence-transcended. As Onof correctly notes, this objectification of my ego is only possible if the other is given as a subject.<sup>1</sup> How can I be an object if not for a subject? It is the reflective consciousness of the other which apprehends me as an object. I encounter him and he looks at me. I see at once that he is the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities. As object under the gaze of the other I feel naked. I feel seen and defenceless before a being like me who is yet not me, a freedom not my freedom. This feeling of being defenceless, of being in danger under the other's gaze, is intimate with the permanent structure of my being-for-others.<sup>2</sup> My reaction to the other's look can take the form of fear, pride, and shame. Sartre asserts that in experiencing the look, "in experiencing myself as an unrevealed objectness I experience the inapprehensible subjectivity of the Other directly and with my being."<sup>3</sup>

Common sense resists solipsism because the other is concretely given to me, an evident presence not derived from myself and which cannot be placed in doubt by any Husserlian reduction. Having accepted the Hegelian understanding of the mind as a negative, Sartre hammers on the fact that without the other it is an absurdity for me to form any thought about myself, about who I am. It is in this sense that Sartre sees the other as a *myself*. A bond of internal negation connects me with the other.

I experience an ontological uneasiness and cringe under the gaze of a second consciousness. Sartre calls this feeling shame. Through my shame I know that I am not

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<sup>1</sup> Christian J. Onof, "Sartre's Existentialism," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Oct 13, 2004), last modified Jan 17, 2010, accessed Nov 30, 2010, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/sartre>.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), Part Three, Ch One, Sect IV, 358.

<sup>3</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 361 – 62.

alone, that there is possible danger nearby – the imminence of conflict. Indeed the presence of the other is overwhelming. Sartre says:

Shame is the revelation of the Other not in the way in which a consciousness reveals an object but in the way in which one moment of consciousness implies on the side another moment as its motivation. ... the Other is first to be sought ... at the side of consciousness as a consciousness in which and by which consciousness makes itself be what it is. Just as my consciousness apprehended by the *cogito* bears indubitable witness of itself and its own existence, so certain particular consciousnesses – for example “shame-consciousness” – bear indubitable witness to the *cogito* both of themselves and of the existence of the Other.<sup>1</sup>

Since I *live* the other concretely the bond existing between us is one of an internal negation which does not require a witness. The other is not the meaning of my objectivity to be exact. He is rather the transcending condition of it. Thus he is a stranger. I do not constitute him, but as stranger he can make of me an object. On my own I cannot do this. For I cannot alienate myself from myself although my being-for-others is a fall, an alienation, through pure negation towards objectivity. Sartre underlines this so well:

Thus myself-as-object is neither knowledge nor a unity of knowledge but an uneasiness, a lived wrenching away from the ekstatic unity of the for-itself ... The Other through whom this Me *comes to me* is neither knowledge nor category but the fact of the presence of a strange freedom ... The fact of the Other is incontestable and touches me to the heart. I realize him through uneasiness; through him I am perpetually in danger in a world which is *this* world ... The Other appears as a being who arises in an original relation of being with me and whose indubitability and factual necessity are those of my own consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

As if anticipating Kirk's criticism that he does not sufficiently establish the identity of the for-itself as a conscious being and not a robot or zombie,<sup>3</sup> Sartre imagines a situation where I am mistaken about the look. For instance, the look may not be there when I think it is there. Suppose someone is not looking at me as I presume or the eyes

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans., with Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), Part Three, Ch One, Sect IV, 364 – 65.

<sup>2</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part Three, Ch One, Sect IV, 367.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Kirk, *Zombies and Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 203.

staring at me are artificial. Sartre will respond that even if I am mistaken about one particular individual's look there are still other human beings concretely given to me in the world. The for-itself may not be a human being, but it has to be a conscious being to be capable of looking at me. The for-itself cannot be anything but conscious being. A robot is not a conscious being but a machine dependent on the human consciousness that created it. This point becomes clearer if we note Sartre's concept of ontological uneasiness. I am uneasy because I grasp the terror of my existence in the context of a presence that is not my presence. Since Sartre rejects the idea of God's existence<sup>1</sup> the being which provokes my uneasiness is some other conscious being capable of revealing the look that makes me a transcended transcendence. As usual Sartre speaks for himself with intellectual pugnacity and acuity:

The fact of being-looked-at can not therefore *depend* on the object which manifest the look. Since my shame is an *Erlebnis* which is reflectively apprehensible is a witness for the Other for the same reason as it is its own witness, I am not going to put it in question on the occasion of an object of the world which can on principle be placed in doubt ... what is certain is that I am looked-at; what is only probable is that the look is bound to this or that intra-mundane presence ... it is never eyes which look at me; it is the Other-as-subject.<sup>2</sup>

We can understand Sartre's notion of uneasiness in the context of a metaphysics of terror which the great existentialist seems to be scrupulously avoiding. Sartre gives us instead an ontology of terror in which the concepts of shame, pride, and fear are unified. These experiences adding up to a basic human reaction to an ontological terror shakes me

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<sup>1</sup>See, for instance, Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* for his rejection of the idea of a stable human nature on the grounds that there is no God. This lucid work is a good introduction to Sartrean existentialism.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans., with Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), Part Three, Ch One, Sect IV, 369.

out of my solipsist cocoon and I apprehend myself as the metamorphosis of the being-for-others.

### **Critical Perspective**

Has Sartre enriched our perspective of the other's existence? Has he been able to deliver a proof with his concept of being-for-others? Is Sartre guilty of the charge of absolutism? Can there really be a conceptual or non-conceptual proof of the other's existence? Is it possible to support the claim that we can concretely prove the other's existence without in the process arriving at or yielding any theoretical knowledge of the other, however tenuous? Is there a difference between providing a *proof* of what one already believes and a *justification* of what one believes? If justification involves knowledge, can we ever escape the problem of mental representation with its tendency to constitute the other *a priori* as Sartre noted?

There is no doubt that Sartre has enriched our understanding of the problem with his concept of for-others in which the 'look' subsists. We have seen earlier in our presentation of Sartre's viewpoint that Kirk's reservation about Sartre having properly established the identity of the for-itself as a conscious being can be met with Sartre's analysis of the look. Although it is true that the eyes which look at me may be those of a sophisticated robot or zombie, it is concretely and transcendently impossible for the existential uneasiness presupposed by the look to be sustained if the for-itself which project the look are not conscious living creatures. One may argue that the for-itself does not have to be a human being. Yet it certainly must be conscious. For it to be conscious it must be either God or a human. Since Sartre denies the existence of God, the for-itself

must be a human being immersed in his facticity. Here it is tempting to invoke a Cartesian or Berkeleyan God who guarantees the look as First Cause. But for Sartre this will amount to a mere hypothesis, indeed a hopeless hope.<sup>1</sup> An ontological terror – the inspiration for Sartre’s conception of conflict as the primary mode of inter-subjective relation – guarantees the look and underlines the pervasive presence of consciousness: perhaps a God-consciousness, most probably human-consciousness, and possibly other consciousnesses.

Merleau-Ponty makes the important criticism that Sartre creates a hostile environment for the objectifying look. What is decisive is communication.<sup>2</sup> To which Perna responds in defence of Sartre: “One might argue that Merleau-Ponty has not established how communication is my original relation with the Other ... communication assumes the subjectivity of the Other; it does not provide a philosophical argument for it.”<sup>3</sup> Sartre can be attacked from the flank here. The issue here is not whether communication constitute a proof of the other’s existence when the other is encountered. The issue is the possibility of establishing communication on the same ontological level as hostility or conflict. If we can establish that communication is as original as conflict in the decisive encounter it must follow that communication is as valid a philosophical argument for the concrete existence of the other as the conflict scenario Sartre so brilliantly conjures. In which case it will be apparent that Sartre’s criticism of

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<sup>1</sup> See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans., with Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1966.), Conclusion, Sect I, for the metaphysical implications of the duality-unity paradox of the for-itself and the in-itself.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge, 1995), 360.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Antonietta Perna “An Answer to the Problem of Other Minds,” in *PhaenEx3* No 1 (Spring/summer 2008), 15.

Heidegger's being-with (*Mitsein*) applies with equal force to his own concept of being-for-others, which will amount to proving the thesis that Sartre has not really proved the existence of the other (something unprovable since the other cannot be recreated) but has only enriched our understanding of the problem by providing a phenomenologico-existentialist justification of the testimony of the senses acting in unity with the mind to produce the judgement we call common sense. The other's existence approached existentially (ie, as a being-for-others or a being-with) remains in the sphere of probability.

The precision of the *a priori* proof arising from logical necessity must still answer to practice and the probability surrounding the concrete situation. The concrete situation is capable of confirming my error in mistaking an intelligent machine for Adole. My senses and reality itself may fail me, a testimony to the immanent sway of probability. The proof I have in theory need not be a proof of the existence of a real human being, as Kirk has noted. To prove the other's existence I have to recreate him newly. This is impossible. If I argue from the concrete situation, eg, from Sartre's notion of the 'look' I not only acknowledge the failure of the conceptual approach but I despair of the possibility of ever proving the other's existence even as a concrete fact. One cannot prove what one already believes to be the case. No scientist sets out to prove the existence of gravity. He describes its forces, and therefore describes it in the process. While this analogy may not be particularly felicitous, the point must be noted that a *belief* whether in the concrete (eg, the other) or in the invisible (eg, God) cannot be proved. We exaggerate when we talk of proving the other's existence. We justify what we already believe. Our belief comes to us

through the senses and common sense. But sense and common sense are meaningful to us on the basis of faith. It is with faith that man fills up the empty spaces so powerfully described in terms of nothingness by Sartre. I cannot prove the other's existence, thereby recreating him, because I lack the power of a creating God. The other I purport to prove can die without leaving a trace of his existence. To pretend that we have recreated the living person is a farce. The other exists in his absolute non-transferable but communicable solitude.

It is not a proof that is demanded but a justification. It was not the absence of a proof that informed Pyrrho's radical scepticism but the conviction that a justification was lacking, with the repeated failure of reality. That the other is the permanent condition of my thought about myself as different from the other is the same as saying that I exist in a community of persons like me, that the other is simply there for me to be with. Hence, Kant's idealistic notion of representation as affirmed by the unity of inner and outer experience collapses into Mill's realistic argument from analogy. Both notions are then reduced to Heidegger's being-with and Sartre's being-for-others. No proof has been found, only the *justification of faith*.

Let us return to Merleau-Ponty's insight which Perna criticizes as incapable of standing as my original relation with the other. How is communication an original relation besides conflict? To answer this question we must appeal for a moment to our African consolationism which expresses a deep solidarity with Western existentialism. We will only give the briefest outline of the doctrine of mood to show that communication is

contemporaneous with conflict.<sup>1</sup> The communication versus alienation (conflict) scenario as far as the look concept is concerned lies in the dualistic and dialectical paradox of Sartre's philosophy. Truly this philosophy is at once a dualism and a dialectic. The dialectical approach can establish communication as an original mode or intention of the look. The look Audu directs at Adole can originally carry the meaning of conflict only if this conflict itself is a revelation of the desire for communication. At Audu's end the look is not primarily calculated to intimidate: the intimidation of Adole or his objectivization is a consequent, not an antecedent. Its meaning as alienation presents itself as a reaction to the futility of existence magnified by the ontological terror of a universe that appears to exist without any reason. Thus the look of Audu is a cry of despair seeking language to communicate the fear inhering in the world as a fundamental principle. The fear which gives the look its efficacy also transforms it from a cry of despair, an appeal for communication, into a domineering aspect of conflict. For Audu thinks Adole is not ready for communication or that he is not willing to communicate. The ontological terror which gives birth to the look expresses itself in the world (animate and inanimate nature) and is expressed in and through man in an 'interest' that resists futility.<sup>2</sup> What are we saying? Simply this: we disagree with Sartre that the world exists gratuitously, or rather

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<sup>1</sup> It is likely the reader has never heard anything about consolationism, the latest development in African speculative thought. My interventionist essays intended to enlighten the philosophical community ahead of the completion of my major work *Existence and Consolation* can be accessed online at the Athenaeum Library of Philosophy hosted by Jud Evans. Go to [http://evan-experientialism.freewebspace.com/agada\\_consolationism.htm](http://evan-experientialism.freewebspace.com/agada_consolationism.htm). See also [http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/agada\\_consolationist\\_manifesto.htm](http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/agada_consolationist_manifesto.htm). The paper "Towards the 21st Century African Philosophical Synthesis" will be published in the next edition of *African Journal of Arts and Cultural Studies*.

<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising then that Sartre himself talks about the cosmic project of filling up holes in being, of the perpetual but doomed attempt of the for-itself to found itself and the in-itself to be its own foundation. See *Being and Nothingness*, Conclusion, Sect I, 789.

that the superfluity of existence is only an apparent superfluity. Existence has a meaning, and this meaning is consolation. The look cannot count as conflictual ontologically if metaphysically it is not a yearning for consolation. Otherwise, man would not be useless passion as Sartre notes with such terrible acuity.<sup>1</sup>

The look is more communicative originally than it is conflictual. This, however, does not prove the other's existence; it only justifies the common-sense position that Audu is convinced beyond doubt that Adole is a human being with a mind and body like his own with whom he can communicate or against whom he can go into opposition.

Sartre asserts that "consciousnesses are separated by an insurmountable nothingness, a nothingness which is both the internal negation of the one by the other and a factual nothingness between the two internal negations."<sup>2</sup> Sartre invokes the idea of internal negation to establish *a priori* the grounds of the sociability of the for-itself, which for him amounts to a proof of the existence of the other. But is the sweeping power of negation Sartre assigns the for-itself not a kind of positivity, as Copleston has suggested?<sup>3</sup> The power of consciousness extends to giving identity to anything different from it. Although Sartre insists that consciousness cannot constitute things since the in-itself stands in an ontological primacy to the for-itself, the fact remains that Sartre increasingly sounds Kantian. Can he then escape the charge of idealism, of seeking to compel his for-itself to constitute things as representations, the miserable attempt at recreating the living phenomenon? Sartre's for-itself goes out in search of the other as a

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<sup>1</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part Four, Ch Two, Sect III, 784.

<sup>2</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part Three, Ch Three, Sect I, 490.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Copleston, S. J., *A History of Philosophy*, Vol IX (New York: Image Books, 1994), 360

oving positive negativity. And it finds the other by discovering itself as a being-for-others. This is expected since the seeker already knows what to find. We cannot, then, rule out a theoretical connection. Concrete connection (the *living*) must be absurd without theoretical connection (the *knowing*). Theoretical knowledge goes hand in hand with negation as a form of affirmation which determines the meaning or identity of the other. Reflection stands beside the intuition of the other. Therefore knowledge of the other is accessible. This is one interpretation we can give to the concept of negation. To say the other cannot be known but can only be lived is not only to exaggerate but it is also the same as surrendering to despair. We surrender to despair in the pessimistic phase of our minds. No one in an optimistic phase of thought – when the joy of existence rises above the sadness of existence – doubts that he knows his neighbour. Not even Pyrrho could have doubted in his optimistic phase of thought. Solipsism is but an existential symptom of a deeply rooted ontological pessimism.

Since we have been able to cause the dissolution of the concept of being-for-others in the sister concept of being-with and since we were able to dissolve the idea of representation in the concept of being-for-others, we cannot but insist that Sartre has not overcome the problem of representation, although solipsism proves to be awkward but not absurd.

What Sartre sought and which all the major Western thinkers who tackled the problem of the other's existence sought was an escape from probability, having conceived probability as comprehensively opposed to certainty. Probability is as inescapable as death is unavoidable. Probability, like death, indicates the failure of

reality. Yet probability is a stuttering revelation of certainty. The demand for a proof of the existence of the other, whether conceptual in the Kantian tradition which is analytical or existential in the Sartrean and Heideggerian tradition which is also analytical, is an unreasonable and impossible demand. It is a *violent* philosophical problem. For it asks man to recreate a living man. We know that man cannot recreate man. Man can only create robots.

What we can insist on, and which Sartre has brilliantly provided us in his concept of the look, is a justification of the *belief* in the existence of the other. A proof pretends that the other does not exist beforehand, that a work of recreation is being accomplished. A justification assumes correctly that the other has already been created for me.. While it may be difficult to convince a great sceptic that  $2 + 2 = 4$  it will be easy to persuade him that the other exists as a more powerful intuition than the sum of four.. That the other has a mind like mine is no problem. The problem is whether he thinks exactly like me or at least like me. The existence of the other is what it is: a belief, a conviction – therefore knowledge. It is in knowing the other that we live or experience him. That I know the other exists is the same as being convinced of the other's external reality in space and his internal reality in time, as Kant has noted, without having a recourse to a proof. Attempting to prove the other's existence by somehow sidestepping faith is as impossible as conclusively proving that matter generated mind and *vice versa*.

### **Conclusion**

As we have already seen, if an *a priori* knowledge or intuition of the other is impossible we can never escape solipsism, and the other as the condition for the confirmation of my

own unique identity becomes impossible. A Pyrrhoist kind of scepticism is still a reaction to the *given*, a reaction brought on by the failure of reality, the remoteness of harmony and perfection. As Sartre himself keeps saying, we are already thrown into the world in the face of the other. Like many a great philosopher Sartre falls into the trap of proclaiming the infallibility of his system with particular reference to the doctrine of the look while dismissing other philosophers as error-prone. Hence, he accuses Heidegger of 'bad faith' and 'devious reasoning'. These are accusations we can easily direct at Sartre himself.

Besides, we have also seen that Sartre fails to bring man out of his terrible existential solitude with the being-for-others concept. With our recourse to the doctrine of mood presented in the briefest outline we have seen that this existential solitude is the fullness of *yearning*. Hence, Audu's look directed at Adole is an original meaning of communication. Although Audu's solitude is a terror that must for ever be his burden, he nevertheless can communicate this terror to Adole in his yearning.

Consequently, we confess our solidarity with Sartre. His analytical presentation of the 'look' concept is a profound perspective on the problem of the other's existence. It is a perspective we find very adequate, not as a proof but as a justification of common sense, and therefore an unintended concession to an inescapable probability.

But why in the first place do we have to doubt the other's existence? One may say it is because the other is not me and I do not have a privileged access to his mind. Sartre will tell us that an unbridgeable gulf separates consciousnesses. Not having a privileged access to the other's mind does not appear a satisfactory answer, for I do not even know

myself well enough to trust myself completely. My own mind is capable of mischief. Sartre was tactfully going round the question posed above in order to avoid a metaphysics of terror while ironically giving us an ontology of terror. “We grasp one of the most fundamental tendencies of human reality – the tendency to fill,” says the French philosopher. “A good part of our life is passed in plugging up holes, in filling empty places, in realizing and symbolically establishing a plenitude.”<sup>1</sup> The proof of the existence of the other – considered as a project apart from the justification of faith in the other’s existence – is one more example of the filling up of empty spaces, for here man seeks to do the impossible: to create or recreate a living man.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans., with Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books), Part Four, Ch Two, Sect III, 781.