

Heidegger and Sartre on the Problem of Other Minds

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Abstract: Existentialists such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre have offered some interesting responses to the skeptical problem of other minds. However, their contributions are sometimes overlooked in the analytic study of this problem. A traditional view may think the existentialists focus on the ethical issues among conscious minds and take for granted that individuals' experiences are within a world with others. This paper aims to identify and reconstruct two transcendental arguments on other minds from Heidegger's and Sartre's philosophy. I argue that their arguments are strong enough to ward off skeptics and suggest that their existential starting points and methodologies might be our best way out of the puzzle.

Introduction

About four hundred years ago, René Descartes wrote his well-known *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in which many modern skeptical problems can find their foundations. The conclusions of Descartes' ostensibly sound reasoning have been detrimental to our understanding of other minds. The problem of other minds claims that we should be skeptical about other consciousness because we lack evidence: we cannot rule out the possibility that our fellow human-like beings are not robots or zombies. Existentialists offer some interesting responses to this problem. Some commentators argue that existentialists "take for granted" that individuals' experiences are within a world.¹ Thus, they do not offer arguments against the skeptics. However, I argue that although they focus on issues "after" the existence of other minds, such as one's relationship with the world or the others, existentialists do have solid transcendental arguments for the existence of other minds. I will first introduce the skeptical problem. Then I will discuss Martin Heidegger's and Jean-Paul Sartre's argument in length. After describing each philosopher's argument, I will defend them against some critics.

¹ Anita Avramides, "Other Minds," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University, Summer 2019), 21.

I. The Problem of Other Minds

The problem of other minds comes from a Cartesian starting point that we should only accept clear and distinct knowledge. There might be other things we take ourselves to know; however, we should remain skeptical about them until we have evidence or justification. Admittedly, skepticism is only a methodological tool Descartes used; however, this way of thinking becomes foundational in philosophy. This starting point is modest, easy to understand, and intuitively attractive. However, it is also problematic because it sets a low standard for doubt but a high standard for knowledge. To grant everything the skeptics want, we would lose our history, induction, empirical world, and, most relevantly, the existence of other minds. Although it can secure a solid foundation of knowledge, the high “false positive rate” seems to be too high a price to pay. Thus, most philosophers, including the existentialist I will discuss, aim to solve the problem instead of giving in to the skeptics.

The problem of other minds is based on the commonly accepted belief that we do have evidence of our own consciousness, but we do not have evidence for others’ consciousness. The evidence we use is the direct access to our mental activities, which we do not have to other people. The skeptics ask how we can tell between a conscious being and a highly sophisticated robot without this subjective evidence. If we cannot answer this question, we cannot know that our lively fellow beings are conscious minds. This conditional suggests that we need to accept the possibility that I am the only conscious being in the universe, which is unsettling because, in our everyday life, we do not, to the least extent, question the consciousness of our fellow beings. How can we answer the skeptics to defend our everyday life experience?

Before I delve into the existentialists’ response, I wish to briefly state the most common and intuitive response from the analytic tradition, the analogy argument. This argument “cites similarities between two things and uses this as support for concluding that further similarities may be taken to exist.”² We know that we are similar to our fellow beings in almost all aspects. For example, we look like the same animal; we speak languages; we have similar genes. Thus, by induction, we can conclude that we have good reasons to believe that others are

² Ibid, 6.

indeed conscious beings just like us. Next, I will introduce Heidegger's responses.

II. Heidegger's Transcendental Response

Before describing Heidegger's responses to the problem of other minds, I wish first to introduce a central concept of Martin Heidegger's philosophy—Dasein. In German, "da-" means "there," and "sein" means "being." Heidegger suggests that "by Dasein we mean that entity in its Being which we know as human life."³ Wheeler suggests that "we might conceive of [Dasein] as Heidegger's term for the distinctive kind of entity that human beings as such are."⁴ Heidegger offers descriptions of Dasein; however, this term cannot be easily defined, which invites different interpretations. In this paper, I will evaluate two interpretations of Dasein, disagreeing on whether each Dasein corresponds to one human being or one human community.

Depending on the interpretations, Heidegger could have two responses to the problem of other minds. On one interpretation, "Dasein" is individual, each corresponding to one person. A Dasein would mean the special existence of one human person. According to this interpretation, Heidegger would need to argue for the existence of other minds. On another interpretation, "Dasein" is collective, each corresponding to a community, where individuals are only "cases of Dasein." A Dasein would mean the special existence of a human community. According to this interpretation, intersubjectivity is presupposed in a community, granting other minds' existence for free. I argue for the first interpretation because the second one may be overly generous when granting consciousness for one's participation within a community. Thus, Heidegger does have an adequate response to the skeptics instead of taking intersubjectivity for granted.

Heidegger first shows the existence of other non-beings, including the tools and objects in our everyday life. In his lecture, *The Concept of Time*, Heidegger claimed that "[Dasein] is grounded in a fundamental possibility of its Being."⁵ The possibility of Dasein's being refers to the

³ Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, trans. William McNeill, 6E.

⁴ Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University, Fall 2020).

⁵ Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, 10E.

futural possibility we have in life: what I can do in the future, what might happen to me in the future, and so forth. Heidegger argues that human existence is essentially grounded in possibility. The possibility is essential for Dasein because the concept of possibility brings Dasein temporality, which roots Dasein's existence. Here I offer an illustration: before I toss a coin, I have both possibilities: heads and tails. Once that coin is tossed, one of the possibilities is manifested and the other lost. With different possibilities, one can distinguish different moments in time and therefore derive temporality. Without time, Dasein cannot exist. Heidegger thinks that the determination of possibility brings us time, and having undetermined possibilities brings us future. In general, possibility, time, and existence are closely connected in Heidegger's philosophy. I argue that possibility as an essence of Dasein can help Heidegger achieve the existence of other minds.

Where do the possibilities come from? Can I form possibilities alone in my mind? I argue that I cannot. Please note that on day one, Heidegger characterizes Dasein as being-in-the-world.⁶ The solipsistic Dasein is only a thought experiment, offering a *reductio ad absurdum* for the external world's existence instead of taking the external world for granted. Suppose solipsism is true, and I am the only existing thing, then there would be no other being, either Dasein or non-Dasein. Nothing can distinguish one moment from the other because there is nothing on which I can count to know the time. Dasein must receive possibilities instead of creating them. I propose an illustration: when I flip a coin, I have two possible results: heads or tails. When I flip two coins, I have three possible results: two heads, one of each, and two tails. And so forth. The more coins I can toss, the more possible results I have. Although my Dasein has to do the flipping, which is analogous to moving forward in time, some objects must be outside of my Dasein, representing different results to create possibilities for my Dasein. Moreover, to account for all the possibilities we have in life, countless objects outside of ourselves need to exist. By flipping those "coins," my Dasein gains its temporality. Now imagine a world with no "coins" to toss; I would have no possibilities at all. Even worse, I would have no determinacy either. The situation is similar to how I have no possibilities after my death when my Dasein no longer exists. In

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7E.

short, Dasein cannot exist alone because it would lose its possibility. Dasein must exist as a “being-in-the-world.”

The next step is to argue for other minds’ existence based on the existence of other objects. We are “being-with” other beings in the world who holds the same relation to the world as we do. Heidegger claims that “being-with is an existential constituent of being-in-world.”⁷ My “being-with” is essential to my “being-in-the-world” because our involvement with instruments or objects always comes back to other beings. When we see an object, we always relate it with some persons. Heidegger offers some examples: “the field along which we stroll ‘outside’ shows itself as belonging to so-and-so keeping it in good order; the book I make use of is one I purchased at..., received as a gift from..., and the like.”⁸ The existence of others is already implied in the shared world. Thus, the others always arise from the objects.

One may argue that what if I venture to a yet undiscovered island and dig 100 yards underground for a stone that nobody has ever seen before. How can that stone be related to anybody else in the world? Heidegger could argue that, although nobody interacted with that stone directly, others still arise from the objects because I cannot complete the discovery alone. In this example, the boat which carries me to the island is made by some person; the tools I use are designed by someone else; the mining method I use is probably invented by yet another person, and so on. Also, even when I am alone, I have to use language or to think conceptually, to carry out my “project.” I cannot invent languages or concepts alone. Moreover, these activities, e.g., inventing, cannot be done by objects; instead, they must be done by other “being-in-world,” who has the same relation to the world just as we do. Heidegger claims that “the world essential to being-there releases beings not just different from instruments and things of any kind, but ones that, in accordance with the way they have their being as being-there, are themselves ‘in’ the world in the manner [earlier described] of being-in-world.”⁹ Because other people have the same relation with the world as we do, they are also Dasein. Other people must have the consciousness to be Dasein. Thus, the problem of other minds is solved.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: An Annotated Translation*, trans. Cyril Welch, unpublished manuscript, January 2017, 158.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

Besides, Heidegger points out our experience of “absence.” Sometimes we can feel the lack of another person when we feel alone. Russell and Reynolds argue that “such an experience cannot be generated by some external object, since there is no external object to provoke it.”¹⁰ For example, a gun can provoke my fear; a great lake can generate my awe. However, my experience of loneliness cannot be generated by any object. “A disappointed anticipation of others”¹¹ can only exist if the structure of my being wants something while that wish is unfulfilled, i.e., my “being-with.” Thus, other minds must exist. These are the arguments from the individual perspective.

III. The Collective Interpretation of Dasein

The community also plays a role in Heidegger’s response to the problem of other minds. A collective Dasein corresponds to a human community, which “contains an inherent form of intersubjectivity to which we must ‘return’ in order to achieve authenticity.”¹² K. M. Stroh argues that Heidegger does not limit the number of people related to one Dasein: “[Dasein is] this entity which each of us is himself.”¹³ At least one person corresponds to one Dasein; however, an entire community of people may also correspond to one Dasein. One benefit of this interpretation is that it captures both the individual and communal perspectives of persons.¹⁴ This interpretation presupposes that other “cases of Dasein” in our community are also conscious beings just like us. Thus, other minds are presupposed in Heidegger’s argument. I argue against Stroh’s interpretation because we cannot rule out non-consciousness within our community to be “cases of Dasein.” If Heidegger presupposes other minds in Dasein, unwelcomed consequences will follow.

I wish to offer an illustration with a somewhat contentious and non-conventional presupposition. My goal is to show that potential problems similar to what I will describe below only apply to the “top-

¹⁰ Matheson Russell and Jack Reynolds, “Transcendental Arguments about Other Minds and Intersubjectivity,” *Philosophy Compass* 6, no. 5 (2011), 304, doi:10.1111/j.1747-9991.2011.00394.x.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² K. M. Stroh, “Intersubjectivity of Dasein in Heidegger’s Being and Time: How Authenticity is a Return to Community,” *Human Studies* 38, no. 2 (Jul 01, 2015), 243. doi:10.1007/s10746-015-9341-9. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24757333>.

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* 27/7, qtd. in Stroh, 246.

¹⁴ Stroh, 246.

down” interpretation of Dasein, where one assumes intersubjectivity within a community and distinguishes those having consciousness from the rest. As technology develops, we have evidence that some “non-Dasein” can also partake in our linguistic and epistemic life. I can ask my phone about the weather. I have to talk to a robot for five minutes every time I call customer service. Some software can call places such as restaurants or barbershops to make appointments without being noticed as non-persons. I take for granted that computers do participate in our linguistic community. As technology develops, we will have to incorporate them into our philosophy. However, computers do not have consciousness. How can we rule “Siri” or “Alexa” out of being a case of Dasein? If each Dasein corresponds to one person, we can have the equipment or other non-Dasein within our linguistic or epistemic community. However, if a linguistic community corresponds to one Dasein and we take Dasein’s intersubjectivity within such community for granted, we also need to take the consciousness of “Siri” in that package. One possible way out is to argue that Siri does not have Dasein’s features, e.g., temporality. However, if we try to separate “cases of non-Dasein” out carefully, we need to repeat Heidegger’s argument for Dasein on “cases of Dasein,” which dissolves the distinction.

At least in my arguments described in section II, Heidegger only argues for other minds’ existence. However, a perfect method to distinguish non-Dasein from Dasein is unnecessary. It would be acceptable to have “Siri” involved in our community as part of our “being-in-the-world.” However, it would be less so acceptable to have “Siri” in our “being-with.” I acknowledge that my presupposition that “Siri” is part of our linguistic community could be contentious. However, this illustration only aims to show that “the bottom-up interpretation of Dasein,” i.e., defining each individual as a “Dasein” and then give a transcendental argument for the existence of other minds, is less problematic than assuming intersubjectivity by interpreting Dasein as a community.

In brief, I have argued that Heidegger did not take other minds for granted. He could derive other minds from the concepts of possibilities, which is required for the mere existence of Dasein. Furthermore, I argued against the interpretation that Dasein is collective of an unwelcomed consequence that non-consciousness can also be a case of Dasein. However, is Heidegger’s argument the best one ever? Does it capture everything we want as an answer to the problem of other minds? A further defense of Heidegger is beyond the scope of this

paper. For example, another existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, thinks Heidegger's argument is unsatisfactory, whose argument I will discuss in the next section.

IV. Sartre's Shame Argument

Heidegger is criticized for "his lack of discussion of how the body functions in this being-in-the-world."¹⁵ Although he does argue for the existence of other minds, his account of our relations with one another, viz., "being-with," seems inadequate. According to Heidegger's description, our relations with another being are rather detached because "being-with" is only "an existential constituent" of our relationship with the world. Do I have to "be with" another being? Why cannot I and other beings have a more direct relationship? Sartre argues the existence of other minds with the concept of the look.

Imagine that I am captivated by something behind a closed door, peering through the keyhole. No one is around me. The corridor is quiet and empty. I am so curious that I peer and listen with my full attention. I give no thoughts about my stance, my environment, or my belongings around me. As Sartre puts it, "my consciousness sticks to my acts." Suddenly, I hear footsteps in the hall, and I realize that someone is looking at me. The thought of myself as an object irrupts into my consciousness. I am being seen! I suddenly feel ashamed for my action because of the look that other person gives me.¹⁶ Sartre argues that our emotions, such as shame, require a subject to "look" at us. There must be another consciousness to teach me to look at myself as an object because we do not look at ourselves on a pre-reflective level. Guignon and Pereboom claim that "my 'inner' experience of shame is something I can discover only through the look of another person, for shame necessarily involves seeing myself as another sees me."¹⁷ Without other consciousness to look at me, I would never learn the experience of shame.

There are two ways of looking at ourselves: as an object, in-itself, or as a subject, for-itself. When I was peering through the keyhole, my con-

¹⁵ M. E. Peters, "Heidegger's Embodied Others: On Critiques of the Body and 'intersubjectivity' in Being and Time," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 18, no. 2 (Apr 15, 2019), 444. doi:10.1007/s11097-018-9580-0.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Barnes, Hazel, (Washington Square Press, 1993), 259.

¹⁷ Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom, "Sartre," in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), 273.

sciousness focused on that thing behind the locked door. I am aware of my consciousness; however, this awareness is for myself: I explore the world for my curiosity as if I am not part of this world. When I noticed that somebody is looking at me, my self-awareness suddenly changed into the objective form. I am aware of myself as an object in another person's eyes: I act as if I am only a part of the external world for another consciousness. I am the consciousness inside the object of me. These two ways of looking at oneself are necessary for our existence, and a transcendental argument for the consciousness of other minds arises out of these necessities. If we are the only consciousness in the universe, we would not have looked at ourselves as objects. In order for us to be an "in-itself," there needs to be at least another "for-itself," who can look at me and "demand" me to be the object. One may wonder what if the other person looking at me is just another in-itself, e.g., a human-like robot. Guignon and Pereboom argue that in-itself cannot teach me the concept of shame. The other person must present herself as "a conscious and free subject who is capable of interpreting and evaluating what [she] sees."¹⁸ I am aware that the other person can evaluate my voyeuristic activity so that I can feel shame. Thus, if we try to look for other minds as the subjective consciousness ourselves, it would be hard to find other minds; however, once we realize our objective aspect of self-awareness, we can easily see that another consciousness must exist for the mere possibility of our existence.

Russell and Reynolds consider an interesting counterargument that we could be mistaken about another person's look and still feel shame.¹⁹ For example, the footsteps I hear in the hall come from another closed room. I can still feel shame even if no consciousness is around. A look from a consciousness happens to exist on most occasions when I feel certain emotions; however, it might not be necessary. Thus, Sartre's example of shame cannot prove other minds' existence because it lacks necessity.

Sartre could respond that "our feeling of vulnerability before the Look of the Other is actually far from dissipated."²⁰ It is unnecessary for us to feel ashamed, proud, or afraid every time we encounter another consciousness. However, this illustrates a structural need for our exist-

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Russell and Reynolds, 306.

²⁰ Ibid.

ence. Although it is possible that we sometimes feel certain emotions, e.g., shame, with no other consciousness around, it is impossible that we can feel shame without ever encountering another consciousness. There have to be some other minds who teach me to the concepts of shame before I can even make any mistakes. Thus, in order to explain some of our emotions, there must be other consciousness.

One may argue that Sartre's argument is inadequate to ward off the skeptics because Sartre admits that the problem of Other-as-object is insoluble. They may quote Sartre for claiming "no proof is possible, no reasons can be provided, no argument can be mounted to ward off solipsism, if we are limited to the Other-as-object, since 'the Other on principle...is outside my experience.'"²¹ However, I have to disagree with this reading of Sartre because he offers so much more argument on other minds' existence. Instead of giving in to the skeptics, I think Sartre criticizes how the skeptical question is posed. He claims that "each look makes us prove concretely—and in the indubitable certainty of the *cogito*—that we exist for all living men; that is, that there are (some) consciousnesses for whom I exist."²² He points out that the cartesian starting point is not the only method to gain certainty of our knowledge. I think this is because the cartesian starting point focuses only on the subjective or for-itself part of our self-consciousness; however, this is an inadequate view for Sartre. Each look that another person gives, trying to win over me to be the subject, is assuring enough for me to know that I exist as an object for them. Thus, I can know they are conscious. However, if we think the only possible way to ward off skeptics is to access others' mental activity directly, we fell into the skeptic's trap.

Conclusion

In her entry *Other Minds* of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Anita Avramides claims that Heidegger's question is "how can we explain/understand the structures of the being of subjectivity in such a way as to include the world and others," while Sartre's question is "how do I encounter the Other."²³ Although I agree that Heidegger focuses on the structure of being including others, and Sartre focuses on the

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 251, qtd. in Alec Hyslop, "Sartre and Other Minds," *Sartre Studies International* 6, no. 1 (Jan 01, 2000), 50.

doi:10.3167/135715500782368540. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23512944>.

²² Sartre, 281.

²³ Avramides, 21-22.

structure of being encountering others, I do not think this is a fair summarization of the existentialists' effort on this traditionally analytic puzzle. The transcendental method Heidegger and Sartre use, i.e., to argue for other minds' existence from our existence's very structure, is strong enough to answer the skeptical question.

Recall the traditional analytic arguments from analogy. They are always unsatisfactory because an analogy from descriptions leaves the essential difference between conscious and non-conscious beings untouched, which is the distinctive conscious structure of existence. Although existentialists may disagree on our existence's best description, they share the correct starting point and methodology. We can only ward off the skeptics by arguing that we cannot exist in the way we do without other minds. When the skeptics are willing to pay prices as high as other minds, the only leverage we have left will be our existence.

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