Concrete Interpersonal Encounters or Sharing a Common World:
Which is More Fundamental in Phenomenological Approaches to Sociality?

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A central question along which phenomenological approaches to sociality or intersubjectivity have diverged concerns whether concrete interpersonal encounters or sharing a common world is more fundamental in working out an adequate phenomenology of human sociality.[1] On one side, we have philosophers such as the early Sartre (1956), Martin Buber (1965, 1970), Michael Theunissen (1984), and Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1985, 1996), all of whom emphasize, each in his own way, the priority of some mode of interpersonal encounters (broadly construed) in determining the basic character of human coexistence. To be sure, grouping these philosophers together under this particular aspect does not imply that they agree with one another about a host of other philosophical issues, quite the contrary in fact. On the other side, we have philosophers such as the early Heidegger (1979/1985, 1993, 1996) and Merleau-Ponty (1964, 2012), who argue that an adequate account of human sociality must begin, in the proper order of understanding and hence explanation, with how we always already exist in a shared or common world (in a sense of 'world' to be explained and illustrated below).[2] Which side is right in this debate? I will argue in this paper that existential phenomenologists such as the early Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty provide more compelling arguments in this debate.

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[1] For a very succinct and informative account of the debate generated by this question, see Zahavi (2012, 186f.).
[2] In this regard I would also include the later Wittgenstein (2009) and Gadamer (2013).

To begin with, Heidegger claims in *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*)[3] that being-with-others (*Mitsein*, *Miteinandersein*) is an "existential" (44f.), i.e., a necessary constitutive condition or enabling structure of being human (in Heidegger's terminology in *Being and Time*, "Dasein") at all (120, 125; cf. 129f.). More precisely, his claim is that the "average everyday" or "undifferentiated" way (43; cf. 124, 232) in which the human being primarily and mostly (*zunächst und zumeist*) exists in the world is always already conditioned by being with others. It is crucial, however, not to understand this claim in the first instance as an empirical, statistical or, more generally, factual claim. Rather, Heidegger is asserting that insofar as any human being is *being-in-the-world at all*, he or she always already coexists with others (120, 123; cf. 130, 179). By 'being-in-the-world', Heidegger means the most basic framework or structure on the basis or in terms of which the human being exists *as an engaged, involved agent or self to whom things (phenomena) matter*, as these show up to this agent or self in the course of living his or her life (§12). How does each human being coexist primarily and mostly with others if this manner of coexistence is not exhausted by factual coexistence? What sort of coexistence is this?

Heidegger articulates this idea by first drawing our attention to how we coexist with others in terms of the *world*, in his rich sense of that term as that most fundamental structure on the basis of which we typically make sense of all phenomena and act at all (see especially §§9, 12-18, 25-34, 41-44; cf. Heidegger 1979/1985, 326-334/237-243). 'The world' in this sense refers to the *concrete context in which a human being lives as an engaged agent rather than a detached spectator*. It is the *lifeworld* that a human being understands and in terms of which she

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[3] Until further notice, all page references in the body of this text are to Heidegger (1993). The English translation by Macquarrie and Robinson (Heidegger 1962) provides the German pagination on its margins. For an explication of Heidegger's terminology in *Being and Time* that is relevant for the purposes of this paper, please consult the Appendix at the end of this paper.

acts in the course of living her life (65).[4] 'The world' in this sense cannot exist independently of human understanding, practices, and norms. With this phenomenological understanding of the world in place, it is important to notice that coexistence is not initially defined in terms of how we factually live among other people or how we are constituents of larger social wholes. Rather, the world that engages and matters to us in our lived experience is fundamentally a *space of intelligibility* (*Verständlichkeit*) within which entities and, more generally, the phenomena through which entities show themselves, can make sense at all. This space has the following basic constituents and structure: (1) a set of holistically determined "ready-to-hand" (*zuhandene*) equipment, each of which is used for performing some specific task; (2) more encompassing short-term and medium-term goals which are accomplished by the execution of these nested tasks; and (3) the roles or self-interpretations for the sake of which (*Worum-willen*) human individuals initially project and go on mostly to actualize who they are. This they do by engaging in certain activities that accomplish certain short-term and medium-term nested goals that are bound up with some role or self-interpretation that they have either simply taken over without further ado or else deliberately assigned themselves.

Consider the following mundane example. When I want to buy something in a store, my conscious attention is focused on whether the store offers what I want or need. This intention makes sense, however, only insofar as it draws on my prior understanding of how a particular complex of items already relate to one another *as an organized whole* that structures and thereby gives sense to my possible activities within this complex. Thus, for those who are familiar with shopping practices, it is utterly obvious that: e.g., stores are places where one can buy things or services; people's activities in stores are oriented toward the possible purchase of its products or

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[4] I mean "lifeworld" in Heidegger's sense: "that '*wherein*' a factical Dasein as such 'lives'" (65), not as this term figures, insofar as it means something different, in the thoughts of other philosophers (e.g., the later Husserl, Schütz, or Habermas).

services; the people showing up in that setting have typical roles that they occupy (e.g., as store employees, customers, etc.); and so on. All of these mundane expectations about how things, people, and actions make sense in that context, as well as what further phenomena are opened up against the background of these expectations (e.g., the item desired is missing or defective; the salesperson acts in a rude way; etc.), must already be in place in an interrelated way if the intention of buying something is to be intelligible at all. Although agents need not be consciously aware that they rely on this background understanding in their comportment toward the world in some situation, this understanding must be already operative as a necessary condition of the intelligibility of the intentions and actions that they conceive and carry out in that situation.

As Heidegger shows, the world that engages and matters to us is thus always a pragmatically and holistically understood "referential nexus of significance" (*Verweisungszusammenhang der Bedeutsamkeit*), a structured space of intelligibility in terms of which phenomena initially and mostly make sense to us (§18). Moreover, our understanding of the world as exhibiting this underlying pragmatic-holistic *structure* of intelligibility, i.e., the "worldliness" (*Weltlichkeit*) of the world, often goes unnoticed by us whenever it is not disturbed in any way (§16), functioning as an indispensable but largely inconspicuous context of situational meanings that must already be in place in order for us to be intentional agents and human selves at all. What is significant is not so much that we exhibit a primarily practical orientation toward the world, which is obviously true, but that this orientation presupposes that the world is *already minimally understood as a whole* in terms of the three structural elements mentioned above. When we understand the world as exhibiting this practical intelligibility, this shows that the world that concerns us in lived experience makes sense as a *referential nexus of significance*, i.e., an interrelated complex of equipment, tasks, short- and longer-term goals and

ends, all of which in turn relate to and thereby make sense for the sake of enacting some ongoing

self-interpretations on our part. The central point is that the world does not show up, in the

normal course of living our lives, as a collection of disparate, purely "present-at-hand" things to

which we are indifferent, but rather matters to us as a practically significant whole in which our

self-interpretations are already inherently involved as a basic constituent.

When Heidegger claims that we primarily and mostly understand people, including

ourselves, in terms of the world, his key point is that we typically make sense of ourselves and

other people by reference to how people's self-interpretations and projections of possible actions

are thoroughly intertwined with the context of the situational meanings in which they are

immersed (§26). Now, why must the worldly background in terms of which we make sense of

ourselves and others in ordinary life be *shared*?[5] Why can it not be that each human individual

possesses and relies on his or her own referential nexus of significance from occasion to

occasion (Olafson 1987, 70-74; cf. 1994, 54-63)? Heidegger argues that such an overly

individualistic conception of the world is mistaken by failing to take into account how *public*

norms already permeate the worldliness of the world in which we ordinarily live and act. That is,

the everyday world that makes sense *to* and *of* us is not only pragmatically and holistically

structured, it is also *constitutively normalized* by way of our general tacit conformity to public

norms as a necessary enabling condition of being human at all.[6] Heidegger's conception of the

"one" or the "anyone" (*das Man* [§27]) captures the constitutively normalized intelligibility of

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[5] It is noteworthy that Heidegger extensively discusses how human beings share a common world in terms of how they *share the unconcealment (truth) of entities* in a lecture course given just a year and a half after the publication of *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1996, §§13-20, especially 14 and 18).

[6] Dreyfus's influential interpretation (1991) of Division One of *Being and Time* is to my knowledge the first to emphasize the constitutive significance of public and social norms for Heidegger's conception of being-in-the-world. For forceful critiques of this interpretation, see, e.g., Olafson (1994) and Mulhall (2013); for Dreyfus's response to Olafson's critique, see Dreyfus (1995) and also Carman (1994). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to settle this debate, I agree thoroughly with Keller and Weberman's excellent assessment (1998) of what we should learn from it.

the everyday world, including how we understand ourselves and others as normalized in living our lives and thereby sharing a common world.

What is the "anyone" exactly? To begin with, it specifies *who* we are primarily and mostly (*zunächst und zumeist*) in our everyday existence (§27). Our identities make sense usually in terms of the roles and self-interpretations, both mundane and significant, for the sakes of which we are what we do over time (e.g., commuter, customer, consumer, practitioner of a certain occupation, co-worker, partner, spouse, parent, friend, etc.). It is clearly our sociocultural heritage (i.e., the "anyone") that provides the initial significance of these roles or self-interpretations, which at once makes available and delimits the range of situational possibilities that make sense in lived experience for individuals as they occupy these roles or self-interpretations. But the "anyone" does not ultimately refer to any particular individual, group, or population of individuals, or even the sum of all individuals in a community or society (128f.). Indeed, the "anyone" does not refer to any entity at all, but more generally highlights the mostly inconspicuous but pervasive *normative intelligibility of the world as a whole* that forms the background against which human individuals initially and mostly understand anything and act. The claim is that the basic way in which we exist in the world is necessarily intelligible in terms of our grasp of and tacit conformity to the sociocultural norms that the "anyone" supplies.

As Heidegger also emphasizes, however, there is a standing and easy tendency on our part to slide from this public undifferentiated way for ourselves and other people to exist in the mode of the "anyone" to a specific mode of individual existence that fails to live up to its potential for self-ownership (*eigentliches Selbstsein*, *Eigentlichkeit* [129 and Second Division, Ch. 1-3, especially §§53, 60, 62, 64]). Heidegger characterizes this easy tendency to slide from our "undifferentiatedness" to "unownedness" as our "falling" (*Verfallen* [§38]) into the world,

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which in his terminology is also an "existential", i.e., a necessary constitutive enabling condition of being human at all, not a negative aspect of being human as such (179). It is thus important to notice, on the one hand, the frequent tendency for this sort of slippage to happen, without thinking, on the other hand, that undifferentiatedness (*Indifferenz*, *durchschnittliche Alltäglichkeit)* and unownedness (*Uneigentlichkeit, uneigentliche Alltäglichkeit*) describe the same exact phenomenon (see 43, 129, 232), which unfortunately is what orthodox existentialist readings of *Being and Time* all too often do.[7] In other words, a human being's undifferentiated existence in a common world does not *ipso facto* entail that we are "inauthentic" (to use the highly misleading word that in my view has engendered much misunderstanding).[8] In any case, as far as the constitutive enabling function of this sort of public normativity is concerned, Heidegger's key move is to argue that every human individual cannot help but draw on this tacit public normalized intelligibility of the world in order so much as to be able to project possible ways for her to be at all, regardless of whether she eventually comes to own, or fail to own, her way of being in the world and thereby succeeds in genuinely individualizing her actual existence as an owned self (145, 152f., 169, 179). No particular individual can ever completely spontaneously create the totality of her possible ways of being herself, though to be sure she can partially modify and even seriously challenge the normalization (normativity) of her inherited way of being in the world. Self-ownership can at most only be an "existentielle" (i.e., concrete and personal) modification of, never a complete detachment from, the public normalized intelligibility in terms of which we typically understand ourselves and others as constitutive aspects of the world in its worldliness (129f., 299). In short, each human being always already

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[7] For a paradigm example of an existentialist reading of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, see Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1956). I will discuss Sartre's conception of human social existence below. A vestige of such a reading remains in Mulhall (2013, 68-73 and Ch. 5).

[8] For convincing interpretations that reject construing Heidegger's conception of self-ownership in terms of the notion of "authenticity", see Boedeker (2001) and Carman (2005).

exists with others in a common (life)world by drawing on a shared public normalized

intelligibility that both enables and constrains how we primarily and mostly project possible

ways for entities to be, including ourselves and other people as aspects of the world in its

worldliness (cf. Heidegger 1979/1985, 339/246).[9]

Now, although the early Heidegger shows convincingly how human beings must always

already *coexist with others* (*Mitsein*) in this non-factual, constitutive sense, his position is not

very informative, to say the least, when it comes to characterizing the nature of *intersubjective*

experiences or interactions. Moreover, as he himself explicitly acknowledges, his critique of the

demand among certain followers of Husserl's phenomenology for an account of empathy

(*Einfühlung*) only shows how intersubjective experiences or interactions are possible *in general*

without doing full justice to the *specificity* of these modes of human coexistence (125). Thus, we

may assert that while *Being and Time* provides us with penetrating insights about the

fundamental or "transcendental" nature of human sociality, it does not do nearly as well

regarding the nature of intersubjectivity (Schroeder 1984, 160-169; Zahavi 2001, Ch. VI,

especially VI.2 and VI.5). Here we can draw for our purposes a terminological distinction

between 'sociality' and 'intersubjectivity'. That is, given the early Heidegger's focus on working

out what he calls "fundamental ontology" (i.e., the "existential analytic of Dasein"), his account

of intersubjectivity in *Being and Time* is quite disappointing by at most noting, and this only in

passing, that there are "mixed forms" between what even he himself describes as the two

extreme forms of "caring-for" (*Fürsorge*): specifically, one that either "leaps in" for another

human being and thereby relieves this person's burden of existing for herself, or else "leaps

ahead" of her so as to enable her to perceive and take up this burden in the right way (122). It is

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[9] For a much more extensive interpretation and defense of this integrated conception of being-with and the "anyone" in early Heidegger's philosophy, see Koo (2016).

at this juncture in my view that Merleau-Ponty's conception of others and the human world in his *Phenomenology of Perception* nicely complements and extends the early Heidegger's conception of human social existence by providing a much more developed account of *intersubjectivity*, which the early Heidegger in *Being and Time* chooses not to work out but which in my view he could have.

By the time Merleau-Ponty addresses this topic in *Phenomenology of Perception*,[10] he has already given ample arguments for why we are deeply mistaken in accepting any dualism between subject and object, or mind (or consciousness) and world.[11] He argues extensively that there can be no subjectivity without the necessary embodiment of the subject, as well as how the "body schema" and bodily activities of the embodied subject is the locus or site where the supposed dualism of mind and world is either dissolved or at least shown to be dynamically ambiguous (especially 100-105, 139-143, 204f., 430f.). On this view, subject and object, or mind and world, are not already self-contained relata that the body "mediates" as a discrete interface, but rather *dynamic poles of one unitary experiential system* that permeates our being in and toward the world, to such an extent that there cannot be subject or object, or mind or world, apart from the dynamic activity of one's own body and the oriented lived space that bodily comportment effects (308-11).

This position of Merleau-Ponty about the significance of human embodiment has important consequences for how we should understand the nature of intersubjectivity.[12] First, intersubjective experience involves our experience of others as embodied beings with their own perspectives on the world. We perceive other subjects (in an innocuous sense of "subjects") by

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[10] Henceforth all page references in the body of the text are to Merleau-Ponty (2012).
[11] For illuminating interpretations of this key move of Merleau-Ponty in this seminal text, see Dillon (1997, Part Two), Carman (2008, Ch. 2-3), and Romdenh-Romluc (2011, especially Ch. 2-4, 6-7).
[12] My remarks here are partially indebted to Romdenh-Romluc (2011, 138-143).

non-inferentially perceiving how others' bodily and linguistic activities express their particular perspectives on the world; on this view, the expressions of subjects' perspectives are not merely "outer clothing" to such perspectives, but intrinsically bound up with the latter, barring exceptional circumstances (179-205). Second, intersubjectivity, at least most of the time, is reciprocal or symmetrical in the sense that others can be aware of me in the same way that I am aware of them – not, of course, in a Cartesian fashion that would give rise to the traditional problems of solipsism and other minds, but rather in such a way that we readily make sense of others by and large through our perception of and communicative exchanges about, respectively, how bodily activities express subjectivity and how what we express in communication helps to partially constitute the contents of our thoughts and emotions (182-189).

According to Merleau-Ponty, when we perceive other people's bodily activities, we certainly do not perceive them like other material objects of the world without subjectivity, but rather perceive them as expressing distinctive powers or capacities that respond skillfully to the subtle solicitations of their surrounding environment (363-372). That is, we perceive their bodily activities as responding meaningfully to the surrounding perceptual field within which such activities are carried out, a field that is itself already permeated by sense and directionality not just for the agents of the bodily activities but for us perceivers, too. Thus, our perception and understanding of what others do and say take for granted not only that I can in principle situate myself in their place, and they in mine, but also that we would respond to the solicitations of our surrounding world in similar ways. Merleau-Ponty even goes so far at one point as to write that the other's body *qua* embodied subjectivity appears to me almost as "a miraculous extension of its own intentions, a familiar manner of handling the world. Henceforth, just as the parts of my body together form a system, the other's body and my own are a single whole, two sides of a

single phenomenon …" (370). Although other people and I are obviously numerically distinct bodies, my experience of them does not privilege either perspective as far as the typical perception and understanding of others' behavior (*comportement*) is concerned. It is also in this sense that our experience of others are anonymous, i.e., not geared to any particular individual at the level of generic behavior (363f., 369).[13]

That said, Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity is nuanced because he fully acknowledges that despite this symmetry of perception and understanding, there nonetheless remains a sense in which each subject can never *actually live* the experience of the other. For it is one thing to argue that we normally have little trouble perceiving and making sense of others' behavior, but quite another to hold that we actually live (have or enjoy) their experiences (372-375). Although Merleau-Ponty describes this as a sort of "lived solipsism" (his expression [374], which is rather misleading because of the philosophical associations that the term 'solipsism' carries), it is clear that his point here is simply that there is an obvious and defensible way in which one's first-personal perspective can never be eliminated and fully capable of being experienced by others, despite how we typically have little trouble perceiving and making sense of other people's behavior in life. It can seem, then, that Merleau-Ponty contradicts himself here by emphasizing, on the one hand, that there exists by and large *symmetry* in how we perceive and make sense of others as expressed through their bodily and linguistic activities, but also noting, on the other hand, that there is *asymmetry* in play here because the first-personal or purely subjective perspective is ineliminable and incapable of being experienced by others. But this

[13] Merleau-Ponty also argues that his conception of sociality and how intersubjectivity emerges from sociality is supported by empirical research in developmental psychology (Merleau-Ponty 1964). He argues on both philosophical and empirical grounds that prior to the emergence of full-fledged (adult) intersubjectivity, human beings are always already immersed in "syncretic sociability" (*ibid*., 119f.), i.e., the experience of a *lack* of even very basic kinds of differentiation that very young human beings undergo both toward others (their caregivers) and their immediate environment (*ibid*., especially 113-121).

appearance of self-contradiction is mere appearance. Although Merleau-Ponty does not quite put

it as follows, he in effect defuses this self-contradiction by drawing a distinction between *local*

and *global* cases of solipsism. The local case, that of so-called "lived solipsism", which on my

construal just means the ineliminability and impossibility of the first-personal perspective to be

fully experienced by others, is philosophically innocuous, for it is clearly true that we do not

know on every particular occasion what is *exactly* going through the minds of others. But

Merleau-Ponty in effect argues that it is a mistake to infer from *local, lived* "solipsistic"

experiences to any *global or philosophical* solipsism because it is a fallacy to move from an

innocuous sort of localized "solipsism" *in practice*, from occasion to occasion, to a scenario

where philosophical solipsism becomes committed to the impossibility of our knowledge of

others *in principle*. That is, one cannot with justification infer from a claim about the way

something is *in practice in local circumstances* to how it is or may be *in principle in all*

circumstances (379). Finally, Merleau-Ponty also deploys an immanent argument against

philosophical solipsism, for the latter assumes that the solipsistic self can be fully transparent to

itself on every single occasion. But this can never be the case simply on account of any subject's

experience of inner time (381, 392, 437-448), which constitutively can never be fully self-present

in any case.[14] If so, philosophical solipsism collapses because there is no longer a sustainable

contrast between a fully self-transparent subject and others who are not (so) transparent to this

subject. In summary, then, Merleau-Ponty as I interpret him breaks new ground in the

phenomenology of sociality by drawing our attention to some phenomenologically supported and

indispensable aspects of our intersubjective experience that the early Heidegger neglects.

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[14] Merleau-Ponty to this extent clearly appropriates Husserl's account of the phenomenology of the consciousness of inner time without much reservation; cf. Husserl (1991, especially §§11-19).

Limitation of space compels me now to address in rapid succession a few key objections that the early Sartre, Buber, Theunissen, and Levinas raise against the arguments that existential phenomenologists like the early Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty make for the priority of sharing a common world over concrete interpersonal encounters for adequately understanding the phenomenology of sociality. The early Sartre claims that the early Heidegger (and presumably also Merleau-Ponty) fundamentally misunderstand the experience of the Other. In his discussion of the dialectic of "the look" (*le regard*), Sartre construes intersubjective experience as fundamentally *objectifying, alienating, and confrontational* (Sartre 1956, 340-376, 534-556). He asserts that one "must either transcend the Other or allow oneself to be transcended by him. The essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not *Mitsein* [i.e., being-with-others as Heidegger conceives this]; it is conflict." (Sartre 1956, 555) Specifically, Sartre's strongest objections against Heidegger are that Heidegger's conception of being-with and the "anyone" fails to explain (1) how concrete intersubjective experiences or interactions are actual and, furthermore, (2) how others can be concretely differentiated from oneself given the impersonal normalizing character of our existence in the mode of the "anyone" (Sartre 1956, 334f.). In short, the thrust of Sartre's strongest critique of Heidegger's conception of human social existence is summarized in Sartre's assertion that being-*for*-others is more basic in the order of experience than being-*with*-others (Sartre 1956, 537), given Sartre's particular conception of what it is for me to be *for* others and for others to be *for* me (Sartre 1956, 340-350). On his view, for me to be for others is for others to turn me from a subject (a being-for-self) into an object (a being-in-itself), i.e., for others to *objectify* me and thus likely to *oppress* me, and vice versa (Sartre 1956, 349, 360-362). "Hell is other people" (the famous saying from Sartre's 1944 play, *Huis clos* [*No Exit*]) because other people express and thereby reinforce (among other things) the oppression

that the Crowd (i.e., public/social norms and conventions) exert on one's freedom to be a genuine or "authentic" individual who chooses not to live in bad faith.

The basic problem with Sartre's critique of the importance and desirability of being-with-others, however, is that it takes the *general background meaningfulness* of being-for-others in his sense utterly for granted. For example, there is an entire referential nexus of significance that enables, as a structure that must be already in place in the background, the experience of shame and thereby the objectification of oneself by the other to be meaningful and thus concretely possible. With regard to Sartre's famous example of being seen by another while I look through a keyhole at him or her (Sartre 1956, 347-349), this activity takes for granted our shared understanding of how keyholes and doors, etc., are normally used; how we are bodily situated in different rooms that at that moment are closed off from each other; what the meanings of personal privacy, jealousy, or sexual arousal are, etc. Sartre takes all of this for granted in his use of this example. In other words, he gets it exactly wrong when he claims that being-*for*-others in his sense is more basic than being-with-others in early Heidegger's (or Merleau-Ponty's) sense. Instead, it is being-*with*-others that makes being-for-others in Sartre's sense meaningful and thus concretely possible at all.[15] More generally, Sartre continues to take for granted the dualism of subject and object (in Sartre's terminology, being-for-self and being-in-itself); his correct emphasis on the non-thetic or prereflective awareness of oneself as a subject changes nothing in this regard. But Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, respectively, have argued extensively in *Being*

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[15] For a reasonable but not ultimately wholly convincing defense of Sartre's early philosophy against the explicit objections of Merleau-Ponty (and implicitly of Heidegger), see Langer (1998).

and Time and *The Phenomenology of Perception* that someone like Sartre is not entitled to take this dualism for granted.[16]

By contrast, philosophers like Buber and Theunissen break with Sartre by emphasizing the positive and, indeed, normatively prescriptive way in which two or more persons can and should be for each other in a way that is the very opposite of unwanted intersubjective objectification, alienation, and confrontation. Rather, they argue that unalienated being-with or being-for-others (unlike Sartre they do not make a distinction between these experiences) is what actualizes a genuine I-Thou relation that is wholeheartedly open, unmediated, mutual, and responsible for one another (Buber 1965, 8-25, 30-33, 97-101 and Buber 1970, especially First Part; Theunissen 1984, Part III, especially 271ff.). The ideal consist in interpersonal encounters that are genuinely *dialogical*, where the interlocutors *really* listen, speak to (not just at or about), and respond to the distinctive otherness of the Other. Against Heidegger, Buber and Theunissen object specifically that Heidegger's conception of being-with-others is too undifferentiated, anonymous, and above all overly negative regarding the significance of being-with-others in terms of our predominant existence in the mode of the "anyone" (Buber 1965, 173-181; Theunissen 1984, 183-198). Furthermore, Theunissen objects that others for Heidegger are always *mediated* by the world (in Heidegger's sense): According to Heidegger, other people can never encounter one another in their fully distinctive otherness or alterity because they can only do so by way of the worldliness of the world (Theunissen 1984, 182f.). But this conception of self and other, for this very reason, rules out the possibility of any unmediated or undistorted relation between them.

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[16] Although his interpretation of the early Heidegger's conception of human social existence is not in my view wholly satisfactory, Schroeder (1984, Ch. 3, especially 144-159) gives a very thorough, balanced, and instructive examination of the disagreements between Sartre and Heidegger about this issue.

Now, the emphasis on this idealized conception of dialogical immediacy and genuine

mutuality is all well and good. But as is the case with the early Sartre, it is evident that Buber and

Theunissen take the context of situational meanings (i.e., the worldliness of the world) for

granted, to the point where it even seems that dialogical immediacy and genuine mutuality

require that the dialogical encounter be as *worldless* (*weltlos*) as possible (Buber 1970, 82-85;

Theunissen 1984, 323-329). But can there be any serious appreciation of the distinctive otherness

of the Other if we abstract away, as much as possible, all background context of situational

meanings from such an encounter? How can the I-Thou relation be *determinate* or *contentful* at

all if the world is so abstracted away? For example, when I am engaged in a heart-to-heart

conversation with a loved one or a dear friend, our dialogical immediacy and mutuality tacitly

rely on, and hence precisely do not do away with, our ongoing ability to find *meaningfulness* in

our dialogical situation, as well as in the various situations or relationships we are discussing in

conversation. Thus, Theunissen's objection that the world "mediates" and thus supposedly

distorts or interferes with the actualization of genuine I-Thou relations is misguided because any

mutuality absent its embeddedness in the world would actually *disable* the actualization of

dialogical immediacy and genuine mutuality between interlocutors.[17] Moreover, there is a

confusion on Buber's and Theunissen's parts about the way in which being-with-others in

Heidegger's sense is prior in the order of understanding and explanation to concrete

interpersonal encounters. On my interpretation, Heidegger's point here pertains to how

phenomena, including ourselves and others, can be *intelligible* (*verstehbar*) at all. Buber and

Theunissen somehow believe that this focus precludes how other people can be personally

significant for those who are in genuine I-Thou relations. But why should this conclusion follow?

Understanding others as initially meaningful in a generic undifferentiated way, i.e., as

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[17] In his Postscript of *The Other*, Theunissen effectively concedes this point (1984, 366f.; cf. Dallmayr 1987).

meaningful initially in terms of certain ranges of activities that are bound up with social roles, would only preclude or obstruct mutuality if the understander treated the person whom she understands *exclusively* as someone whose identity is fully exhausted by those social roles. But how often does this actually happen in human life? Right now I understand the readers of this paper as performing certain activities that are bound up with certain social roles that make sense within a range of situational contexts. Thus, the readers and I are making sense of one another in an undifferentiated but still determinate way in Heidegger's sense. But our mutual ascriptions to one another of certain social roles do not hinder, but actually enable and enhance the ongoing basis on which we can further explore each other's distinctive otherness. Making sense of one another in terms of ranges of activities that are bound up with social roles, then, provided that we do not reduce one another exhaustively to those roles, is not only innocuous, but makes the deepening of mutuality and thus the experience of distinctive otherness (alterity) really possible. While it is true that Heidegger in *Being and Time* rarely mentions the occurrence of genuine mutuality and experience of the distinctive otherness of others (but consider Heidegger 1993, §§60, 74), a more nuanced interpretation of this text reveals that his fundamental ontology can make room for it.[18]

Thus far I have replied on behalf of the early Heidegger (and Merleau-Ponty) to these common objections against their claim that sharing a common world is more basic in the order of understanding and explanation than concrete interpersonal encounters. What these replies have in common is the key argument that such encounters must always already occur *against some worldly background*, i.e., some context of situational meanings (referential nexus of significance),

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[18] Although his reading of *Being and Time* still takes for granted the orthodox existentialist horizon within which this text tends to be understood, Vogel's "cosmopolitan" interpretation of Heidegger's conception of human social existence shows well how genuine mutuality and, indeed, at least the basis for a certain sort of ethics, are possible within this conception (1994, Ch. 4).

if these encounters are supposed to be meaningful and actualizable at all. But this sort of reply by recourse to necessary conditions of meaningfulness cannot convince someone like Levinas. For Levinas insists that the Other is "signification without context" (Levinas 1985, 86; 1969, 23, 51f., 194; 1996, 53), i.e., signifies and matters apart from *any* holistically structured configuration of situational meanings whatsoever. As he writes:

> The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name *face* [my emphasis – JJK].… The notion of the face … opens other perspectives: it brings us to a notion of meaning prior to my *Sinngebung* [i.e., my constitution or bestowal of sense on phenomena] and thus independent of my initiative and power. It signifies the philosophical priority of the existent over Being, an exteriority that does not call for power or possession, … and yet maintains the I who welcomes it. (Levinas 1969, 50f., italics in the original unless otherwise noted)

Levinas rejects, then, all attempts to make sense of the Other by way of situating and understanding anything of ethical significance (very broadly construed) in terms of any context of meanings whatsoever. Rather, the Other as such always "exceeds" our comprehension because the Other possesses an insurmountable "height" of ethical significance; the Other is always exterior to and at an infinite remove from my encounters with it (Levinas 1969, 38-52, 194-219; 1996, Essays 1 and 2). On this view, we can never fully grasp or even encounter the Other's alterity, for this alterity is *absolute* (i.e., *unconditional*) and never just relational to us (Levinas 1969, 48-51). The Other is the first principle of philosophy as such, not just of ethics, because it is the Other who effects freedom for me at all by at once giving me the opportunity, as well as issuing the demand on me, to respond to, and thus be responsible for, the Other (Levinas 1969, especially Sections I.A and I.C).[19]

Limitation of space prevents me once again from elaborating these provocative claims of Levinas. Rather, I conclude this paper by raising the following queries about his position. First, it is tempting for a proponent of the early Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's conception of sociality to ask Levinas how our encounters with and responsibility for the Other is possible at all if such

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[19] For a very lucid and instructive interpretation of Levinas's philosophy as a whole, see Perpich (2008).

encounters must take place *outside of any* context of significance whatsoever. But this query would beg the question against Levinas, so it cannot be made in fairness to him. Nevertheless, it remains enormously puzzling just how the Other can *encounter* us given Levinas's philosophical commitments. For the "face" of the Other is not ultimately something perceivable, but the infinite source of moral summons or demands:

> The face [of the Other] is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched. … The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us …. (Levinas 1969, 194)

> The facing position, opposition par excellence, can only be as a moral summons. This movement proceeds from the other. The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face. (Levinas 1969, 196)

Does this mean, then, that our encounters with the absolutely Other, through those with concrete others, are just intuitively sensed or felt? How can we precisely encounter or be summoned (or addressed) by the Other according to Levinas, since this cannot occur on the basis or in terms of a shared or common world? Although he clearly recognizes that he must answer this important question, his attempt to do so is wanting by either resorting to the use of metaphorical language (he speaks of the "epiphany" or "nudity" of the face) or else begging the question through sheer assertion (Levinas 1996, 48-57). Unless the crucial claim that the Other is always signification without any context is just a bald dogmatic assertion, how is this "claim" supported exactly? Second, and more generally, it seems that Levinas's philosophy resists any *argumentative* approach or reconstruction of his position regarding the Other; but nor may one request phenomenological evidence for how the Other signifies, given how the Other according to Levinas is not ultimately perceivable and remains permanently elusive. Does this mean that one can never ask for or offer *arguments* for the metaphysical, and thereby ethical, significance of the Other, because the Other is supposedly the first principle of philosophy? For the sort of human coexistence invested with the type of peculiar and yet absolute significance that Levinas

has in view cannot seemingly be argumentatively derived; the apparent argument that he gives for the primacy of the Other seems either question-begging, too weak to justify its conclusion (Levinas 1969, 83-89), or else oddly reminiscent of Habermas's conception of discourse ethics (Levinas 1969, 96-98). If so, how does Levinas's insistence on the primacy of the Other not advance a "new dogmatism, centred now around the other rather than the self or ego" (Moran 2000, 351)?[20] Ironically, this sort of move reminds one of Fichte's idealism, according to which the self-positing I can only be absolutely, never argumentatively, established (Williams 1992, 10-12 and Ch. 12, especially 297-301). Is this the sort of move that Levinas makes regarding the status of the Other as philosophy's first principle?[21] Lastly, it also remains unclear how his insistence on the absolute asymmetry of each person's relation to the Other can contribute to our understanding of human sociality and intersubjectivity in general, except perhaps as a prescriptive ideal. If it is meant to make such a contribution, Levinas would need to say much more about how the absolute alterity of the Other can play some determinate role in the phenomenology of human sociality and intersubjectivity.

In conclusion, I have argued that existential phenomenologists like the early Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty provide more compelling arguments that show how sharing a common world is more fundamental in the order of understanding and experience, and hence of explanation, than concrete interpersonal encounters in adequately understanding the phenomenology of sociality. This does not imply that the modes of concrete interpersonal experiences or interactions that the early Sartre, Buber, Theunissen, and Levinas each emphasize are insignificant. In this spirit, I end by loosely adapting the retrospective assessment of Theunissen

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[20] I am inclined to agree with Moran's forthright criticism of Levinas's philosophy as dogmatic (Moran 2000, 342-353). As Moran writes, "Levinas does not open a space for questioning; indeed, for him, the other presents itself as a demand, not a question." (*Ibid*., 352)

[21] For a brief but informative comparison of Levinas and Fichte in general, see Scribner (2000).

about the result of this debate (Theunissen 1984, 367): We should grant primacy to the sharing of a common world as the proper point of departure for the phenomenology of sociality, but give emphasis to concrete interpersonal encounters as far as one of its important goals or final destinations is concerned. The beginning of such a phenomenology should be the socially constituted and embodied self who exists in a common world, and one of its main goals or final destinations (though it need not, to be sure, be the only one) the distinctive individuality of such a self as he or she develops from concrete interpersonal encounters.

Appendix: Explication of relevant Heideggerian terminology in *Being and Time*

An *entity* (*Seiendes*) is anything that is, in all its different temporal and modal permutations (e.g., anything that was or will be, that can, could, could have been, that may or may not be, etc.). Rocks, quarks, money, race, gender, the Big Bang, mathematical formulae, physical laws, ghosts, dreams, swampmen, God, society, evolution, animals, human beings, etc., are all entities. By contrast, *being* (*Sein*) always refers to that which determines an entity *as what and how it is at all*. What is important is to understand that whatever being is, it is **not** a substance, form, event, process, first principle, metaphysical foundation, original ground, God, etc. Above all, being is *not* any *entity* or the *totality of entities*, but *that which lets entities be what and how they are as such* (Heidegger's so-called "ontological difference" between being and entities). The being of an entity or a domain of entities must **never** be *hypostasized and understood as referring to any (particular) thing or collection of things*. It is rather that which *enables* things of any sort to *make sense as what and how they are*. Most importantly, letting entities be does not mean causally bringing them into existence. Put more positively, being is closely bound up with *intelligibility*, in the sense of serving as that in terms or on the basis of which entities are *understood as entities* at all. With this working distinction between entities and being in place, we can now make sense of the difference in status between the "ontic" and "ontological" characteristics of something: *Ontic* determinations specify the features of *entities*, whereas *ontological* determinations characterize the *(way of) being* of entities.

Dasein is fundamentally distinct from other entities because it is the entity that *understands being*. As far as we know, it is the only entity that understands being, in the sense of 'being' explicated above. A human being is Dasein (or "daseins" [verb]) only insofar as it understands being. Thus, those human beings who lack such an understanding are not Dasein (i.e., they do not "dasein") – they do not exist as and by being-in-the-world. What their status is, especially their moral status, is a related but separate question. Consequently, the general terms 'Dasein' and 'human being' or 'person' are often, but not always, coextensive.

There can be ontological determinations of entities that are either *categorical* or *existential*. Categorical determinations ("categories") articulate the being of entities that are not Dasein; such entities do not in Heidegger's terminology "exist" in the sense of *having an understanding of being* as a matter of their ontological constitution. By contrast, existential determinations

("existentials") articulate the way of being of entities that understand being, i.e., entities that exist in the way of being Dasein.

Presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) *and readiness-to-hand* (*Zuhandenheit*) are categorical determinations of the being of *non-Dasein* entities (paradigmatically, equipment). Entities that are ready-to-hand show up to us as ones that are *useable or more generally serviceable for human ends and activities*; they show up thus under the aspect of their potential *functionality* – their *readiness for involvement in* – human activities and projects. By contrast, entities that are present-at-hand are ones that no longer show up under this aspect, but rather under the aspect of their *complete detachment from human activities and projects*. For example, a hammer shows up as ready-to-hand when we use it to bang in nails. But it shows up as present-at-hand when it is considered strictly in terms of its composition (micro-structure). Notice that a hammer no longer *serves as* – i.e., *is* actually no longer – a hammer once it shows up as present-at-hand, even when the *very same object* that we identify in ordinary life as a hammer has not physically changed in any way, for being a hammer is essentially a *functional* definition of an entity.

Lastly, the distinction between "existential" and "existentiell" applies to the *sort of understanding* that a human being *qua* Dasein has *of itself*; this distinction applies thus to the individual self-understanding of a human being *qua* Dasein. An *existential* understanding of oneself concerns that in virtue or on the basis of which a human being can exist as Dasein at all; it is *structural and constitutive* of what it is to be Dasein as such, regardless of any particular human being's individual self-understanding. By contrast, an *existentiell* understanding of oneself involves the concrete, actual way in which a human being understands his or her particular existence; it is a *personal and contingent* understanding of who he or she is in the course of actually living his or her life, though it is, of course, not optional that he or she has *some* ongoing existentiell understanding of who he or she is in actual life.

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