APORIA

The Subject-Subject Relationship

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In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre forges a new path toward the conception of self as free and constantly changing. In the course of his work, he deals with the problem of the self coming to recognize another "subject," which Sartre refers to simply as "the Other".[1] In order to address the interaction of two subjects "in the midst of the world," he puts forward a theory in which the self is continually transcending itself, and the Other is continually transcending that transcendence.[2] Thus, any interaction between self and the Other is characterized necessarily by conflict.[3] In only a few brief lines in a text otherwise devoted to religious philosophy, Paul Tillich provides a hint of an alternate approach to Sartre's model of communication. In his model, communication with the Other is characterized by the recognition of the Other as a subject and the self's attempt to communicate with a subject that is in continual transcendence. Inserting Tillich's idea into Sartre's framework of existentialism brings forth the possibility of a subject-subject relationship similar to what Luce Irigaray calls "the *two*."[4]

In *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality*, Tillich includes this brief segment on what he calls "person-to-person communication."[5]

> A reaction is personal if it originates in the free, responsible, and deciding center of the person. In the realm of a-personal objects, every reaction is determined by the action producing it, by the nature of the object acted upon, and by the universal context within which the action occurs. This is also partly so in the personal realm. But one new factor is added: the object acted upon is not fully determined because it is essentially subject. It is free to decide what it shall do; it is personal. Therefore, its reaction is only partly calculable and ultimately undetermined. This creates the living reciprocity of a person-to-person relationship. We act or speak, but we never know with certainty beforehand how we will react to the action of the other. Every moment of a living relationship is characterized by an element of indeterminacy.[6]

As far as I know, this is all that Tillich ever wrote on the subject, and in context it is treated more as a premise than an argument. Framed within the context of Sartre's concept of self, however, this passage

seems to indicate a divergent path from that which Sartre took in Part III of *Being and Nothingness*.

To begin with, there is the recognition by the self of the Other as subject. For Sartre, this occurs when the Other looks at me.

> Thus this relationship I call 'being-seen-by-another,' far from being merely one of the relations signified by the word *man*, represents an irreducible fact which can not be deduced either from the essence of the Other-as-object, or from my being-as-subject.... In a word, my apprehension of the Other in the world as *probably being* a man refers to my permanent possibility of *being-seen-by-him*; that is, to the permanent possibility that a subject who sees me may be substituted for the object seen by me.[7]

I recognize the Other as subject, but I myself keep her contained within the world as an object. Hence, my relationship with the Other is characterized by my objectifying the Other while I myself change (transcend), and the Other's objectifying me while she continues to transcend her own self.

In order for Tillich's subject-subject ("person-to-person") relationship to exist, it requires that I have some lasting understanding of, and belief in, the Other-as-subject.[8] It is unquestionably true that I objectify the Other. In fact, most encounters I have with those who are Others are characterized more by objectification on my part than subjectification, viz. passing by people in a store or at the University. In such cases, I may walk by dozens of people without distinguishing them from the "background" of the objective world. However, it seems to me that carrying on any communication with the Other (at least beyond a glance or touch) requires that I view the Other as a subject. English grammar conveys this concept with the term "you." "You" is the demarcation of the Other as a subject – as one who can respond in a way that I do not fully know. An object (as Tillich points out) has a reaction determined by my action. The object is not a "you" because it cannot transcend my understanding of it. In acknowledging something as a "you," I am acknowledging it as a subject capable of transcendence.

I recognize the Other-as-subject when I become aware of "the look," which can certainly be extended to include all sensory perceptions, but it seems to me that I may choose to relegate more of that person to the Other-object approximation than to the Other-as-subject.[9] For instance, I am aware of this sort of behavior when I order fast food. In most cases, I do not treat the person waiting on me as a subject, but instead as an object. I do this because I believe that person's value to be instrumental, and I believe that person's reactions to be essentially characteristic of those of an object – that is, I expect responses to be mechanical. I am expecting a "May I take your order?," a "Would you like fries with that?," and a "Thank you have a nice day." Furthermore, I do not expect that person's utterances to be more than promptings for me to supply a set of parameters to be run through the machinations of the fast food preparation line. As long as that person remains merely an instrument, there is no need to perceive her as

other than an object. However, far from all interactions are of this instrumental sort.

I cannot know the Other as her own subjectivity – that is, I cannot "see from the eyes of" the Other – but I can act in accordance with my belief that the Other *is* a subject. As Sartre noted in the passage cited above, I apprehend the other as "probably a man."[10] In order to treat the Other as subject, I must give up any complete objectification of the Other. However, the Other is present in the world, and is present before my senses congruently with the world, hence I cannot completely give up the Other-object. Here, a new conflict is created – I must objectify the Other, but still believe in her subjectivity, which entails viewing my own objectification of her as something which will be (to an unknown extent) transcended by her. Unlike Sartre's conflict, which is grounded in the ontological relationship between self and Other, this relationship grants the Other *eo ipso* (or by virtue of the look, which causes me to identify an object as the Other) the status of subject, but requires that I treat my own construction of the Other as an object-in-the-world as (at best) an approximation. Since appearance, tactile presence, and voice usually change slowly, my construction of the Other-object as an approximation becomes focused on those particular characteristics – e.g. features which give themselves consistently (or similarly) over time. As traits emerge that seem to remain more or less constant with the Other, I might begin to include those in the Other-object approximation. In fact, these traits need not be limited to physical features, but may just as well include repeated behaviors, such as common motifs in speech or mannerism. Statements such as "He is always so surly," or "She inevitably will turn the conversation toward music," most definitely betray the linking of these patterns to the Other-object approximation, as they contribute to the representation of the Other as static. But, while the Other-object approximation has a certain utility, this approximation does not become for me a substitute for the Other-as-subject.

As Sartre points out, the Other-as-subject retains this status because of her ability to objectify me.[11] Her actions – particularly "the look" – imply her own transcendence. For that reason, I must recognize the Other-as-subject as that which is "behind" the Other-object. In a way, this undertaking is imbuing the Other with a sort of illusory dualism, prompting the separation of mind (brain, geist) and body, even in the present scientific context; the mind (brain) becomes the Other-as-subject, and the body becomes the Other-object, and a strict bifurcation is put in place. To phrase it another way, I cannot objectify myself, though I may glimpse myself as a "being-for-others."[12] I objectify the Other as an object by viewing her in the context of the world, yet I recognize her as a subject – ultimately casting this illusory dualism on the Other.[13]

In light of this, communication between myself and the Other is free to take on a relationship quite different from that proposed by Sartre. For Sartre, while I am transcending, the Other is objectifying me, and hence transcending my transcendence.[14] Communication in all modes exists with(in) the strain of conflict, as both I and Other are trying to be subjects while trying to make the opposite into an object – to "enslave" the other in my world.[15] This conflict, however, need not be the basis for

communication. If I come to recognize the Other as a subject and believe in the continual transcendence of the Other, then the relationship between the Other and me is no longer one transcending the other's transcendence, but of each party anticipating the transcendence of the other – mutually acting on the belief that neither party is static. Sartre's dilemma, then, is replaced by another: I am never sure how the Other will react to my communication – and furthermore, I am not sure how *I* will react to the *Other's* communication.

As I have stated above, I always have some perception of the Other as an object. During the absence of the Other, all that remains for me is the Other-object, and at best all I can do is model (that is, objectify) even that which, in her presence, I viewed as indicative of the Other's status as a subject. To imagine the look of the Other is to objectify it, as I am not being seen, but am looking at the Other who is *not* looking back. Upon entering back into the presence of the Other, I relinquish much of my Other-object approximation in order to communicate. Stepping backward, before I enter into conversation with the Other, it is likely that I have formulated my end of the conversation (that is, what we will talk about, what I hope to accomplish, etc.) by calculating the responses of an Other-object – that is to say, I consider the Other not as a transcending self, but as a set of possible responses. For instance, before I talk to a professor about a paper, I devise a list of questions to ask, potential conversation starters, excuses for why I'm asking the questions I am, etc. In order to devise these ideas, I *must* objectify the Other. Otherwise, it is not possible to plan for the conversation. I anticipate likely responses to my questions; I imagine scenarios of both castigation and praise. I distill the characteristics of the professor and then extrapolate. Before I go out to spend an evening with a friend, I try to prepare conversation starters, recall her interests, and imagine potential discussions. All of this is done as a method of preparing for interaction, in order that I may better convey myself, as well as better understand the Other – but it is done by relegating the Other to her Other-object approximation. However, in the course of this preparation, I might imagine myself as the Other. In this case, am I not affirming the subject-ness of the Other by trying to imitate it? If that were the case, then imagination would be the only method of preserving a view of the Other-as-subject during the absence of the Other. However, this is illusory, as ultimately I control that imagined Other's "subjectivity," and hence am not affirming it so much as I am usurping it, and in such a case I *am* treading close to Sartre's enslavement of the Other.

Upon commencement of the conversation, I immediately must shift my view from the Other-object to the Other-as-subject, for to not do so would be to utterly fail in communication. The Other will not provide the sort of replies I anticipated, and during the conversation, my attentions are focused on *how I am communicating with the Other.* All of the conversation, in fact, is a mutual endeavor to be understood, each party by the other. In order to be understood, both I and the Other must change – and we each must recognize the other's ability to change. I must learn something of the Other in order to convey myself with meaning. The Other changes in receiving what I've said, and then again must change in order to convey herself back to me. Each communication from the Other, then, demands that I

change, be it in the language I use to convey myself to her, or the ideas that I have formulated to express myself, and so on. Communication requires the fluidity of both parties in order to avoid a stalemate. If I objectify the Other (to the exclusion of her status as a subject), then I have locked out the possibility of conveying anything to her by denying her mutability, and there is no point in attempting communication. Instead, what must occur for communication to work is a subject-subject relationship where both are continually transcending *themselves* in order to benefit both parties – "the two." The transcendence of self is done within the context of how the Other has revealed herself to me – the result of my transcendence is influenced directly by her revelation. At this point, it is appropriate to point to Irigaray's concept of "two subjects" that appears in her essay, "The Question of Other."[16] What arises in subject-subject communication is a model of *two*, as opposed to the model of the one and the many. [17] Here is presented a situation in which there must exist two different subjects – two different selves – whose individual efforts of transcendence beget a single unit (e.g. the conversation) which *requires* the presence of two. I will return to this concept, but one further assertion of Tillich's bears mention first.

"We act or speak, but we never know with certainty beforehand how we will react to the action of the other."[18] Here is introduced another unknown besides the Other-as-subject, and that is my own being-as-subject. My own continual transcendence means that, by necessity, I cannot know now what I will be in the next moment. To know my own transcendence is to make myself static, as the act of transcendence would not change me (and therefore is, *ipso facto,* not transcendence). Because of my own indeterminacy, something fantastic occurs: my relation to my self is only slightly more known than my relation to the Other. Certainly, I have a better understanding of my self, in it's past and current states, than the Other may possibly have, but the self that I will become is no more known to me at a given point in time than it is to the Other.[19] Moreover, the Other, in the course of interaction, is influencing the self that I am becoming in my transcendence! Again, I believe that Irigaray's notion of the *two* is applicable to this case. The look removes me from the danger of solipsism, but does not prevent me from viewing myself as the one and the Other as part of the many. But to admit the subjectivity of the Other, allow the Other to be part of my own transcendence, and interact with the Other in anticipation of her own transcendence, is to acknowledge the necessity of *two*.

I have certainly wandered far from were Dr. Tillich was headed with his brief mention of "person-to-person communication," but dropping this idea into Sartre's context provides an alternative to the enslavement characterized by Sartre's I-Other relationship, and acknowledges the role of the two subjects in a relationship. The subject-subject relationship does not create a model of domination; rather, communication is successful only when the transcendent nature of both subjects is implicit. This acknowledgment is a step toward creating dialog that genuinely holds resolution as an aim.

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[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: WSP, 1956) 302.

[2] Sartre 352-353.

[3] Sartre 358.

[4] Luce Irigaray, "The Question of the Other," in *Democracy Begins Between Two* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 129.

[5] I should state up front that I am certainly *not* trying to stay faithful to Tillich's own intent, but rather to take his idea and develop in a Sartrean context.

[6] Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955) 30.

[7] Sartre 345.

[8] Tillich 30.

[9] Sartre 340.

[10] Sartre 345.

[11] Sartre 347.

[12] Sartre 403.

[13] It seems, then, that it is only through the Other's objectification of me that I arrive at the starting point of the Cartesian meditations – that is, that I have the ability to distinguish between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

[14] Sartre 352.

[15] Sartre 358.

[16] Irigaray 121.

[17] Irigaray 129.

[18] Tillich 30.

[19] And the act of attempting to formulate an estimation of what that transcendent self will be in and of itself causes me to transcend, and in so doing defeats the purpose of the endeavor (that is, in knowing what my transcended self will be).