

Loving the Other: An Inter-Subjective Alternative to Sartre's Analysis

Steven Corinth
Denison University

My purpose in this essay is to outline a theory of the ontological basis of love by postulating a structure of inter-subjectivity which might be compatible with the ontology established by Jean-Paul Sartre in Being and Nothingness. It is futile to believe that inter-subjectivity—which Sartre rejects—could simply be appended to his analysis. The implications of any such possibility must be worked out elsewhere. Sartre's account of love is inadequate, however, without this possibility. My discussion—which considers love to be a paradigm case of inter-subjectivity or being-with—is intended to show three things: first, why inter-subjectivity is necessary to the concept of love; second, what an alternative to Sartre's analysis would look like; and third, why the theory cannot be immediately dismissed by Sartre's ontology. For the purposes of this essay, the explicit treatment of Sartre's analysis of love must be all too brief.

According to Sartre, "love has for its ideal the appropriation of the Other qua Other (i.e., as a subjectivity which is looking at an object)," and "this ideal can be projected only in terms of my encounter with the Other-as-subject, not with the Other-as-object" (BN: 488). This formulation of the project "to love" is acceptable, for it in itself does not claim that love is not a project of inter-subjectivity. But according to the ontological condition of for-others, to engage "this concrete Other as an absolute reality" means that the only possible relation between the lover and the beloved is the lover's being-as-object (BN: 476). In Sartre's analysis, the project has an internal contradiction: each lover wants the beloved to maintain herself as pure subjectivity in confronting the lover, but as soon as the beloved confronts the lover, she experiences the lover's being-as-subject and assumes her object-state.

Because the only mode of relation between the lover and the beloved is the lover's being-as-object, the project to love becomes "the project of making oneself be loved" (BN: 488). Since the beloved's freedom is the foundation of the lover's alienated self, this leaves the lover

suspended in radical contingency. The lover, therefore, desires the beloved's freedom "**first and foremost**" to choose the lover as the a priori objective limit to her transcendence (BN: 482). The lover's part in this relation is to fully assume his object state. The relation between them would then be "closed and secured" in the form of the For-itself-In-itself.

The beloved, however, "is a **look**," and as such cannot "employ [her] transcendence to fix an ultimate limit to [her] surpassings, nor can [she] employ [her] freedom to captivate itself" (BN: 484). As a result, there occurs "the lover's perpetual dissatisfaction" (BN: 491). Even in fully assuming his object-state, the lover still faces the reality of being surpassed for other objects in the world. A pledge of love by the beloved does not satisfy the lover since it is not a real engagement of the beloved's freedom.

What we need to understand from this situation is the futility, the actual absurdity, of "making a move" towards the Other. I cannot meet the Other as subject since this would make an object of the Other—and it is the Other qua freedom I want (Sartre has this part correct). And in assuming my object state, I deny both the beloved's desire to have me as subjectivity and my own being-as-subject. This ontological conflict actually makes a project which would be comprehensive of the Other qua person-like-me a pure fiction of the imagination; for I only apprehend the Other in her distorted character. That is, her being is revealed through the filter of my self-recognition. As a result, all projects towards the Other are fundamentally self-oriented projects. A project which is comprehensive of the Other—by "comprehensive" we mean a recognition of the Other which is not self-oriented—is impossible. This is a distressing result of Sartre's ontology.

Sartre makes reference, quite casually, in his writings to people being in love and to friendships. I do not believe that he wants to destroy these relations for cynical reasons. His concern is freedom and the maintaining of this freedom on an absolute, concrete level. But his ontological system has left him no possibility of the being-with, and any sort of "secure" relation with the Other implies a bad faith move to psychologically supersede the original relation of conflict. As he so triumphantly declares, it is "useless for human-reality to seek to get out of this dilemma: one must either transcend the Other or allow oneself to be transcended by him" (BN: 555).

I think one must interpret this challenge as a statement that all comprehensive projects towards the Other implicate one in bad faith. If this is the case, then the construction of the For-itself-In-itself is the only possible recourse in attempting to surmount the conflict or to escape one's gratuitousness because there is "nothing else to do." Thus, Sartre has implicitly infected his own system with an insidious disease which is constantly undercutting the positive effects of the system.

If, on the other hand, we want to consider love as a relation with the Other which is comprehensive of the Other and not merely a project of self, then to fix Sartre's analysis within the framework of being-for-others cannot be fruitful. It is necessary, therefore, to establish a concrete relation of being-with-others. Since being-for-others considers subject to object relations, the being-with will involve subject to subject relations, or inter-subjectivity. The problems which plague the lovers in Sartre's analysis are derived from the condition of being-for-others. If love can be established on grounds different from the for-others, then the same set of problems cannot be necessarily involved.

In Sartre's analysis, the lover desires to appropriate the Other qua Other to make himself be loved. In other words, the lover wants the beloved's transcendence to be completely occupied in founding him. The alternative, inter-subjective account proposes that to the extent that the lover wants to appropriate the Other's freedom, he wants the Other as a subjectivity which is looking at an object which is not the lover because then the beloved's being is not modified by having to directly apprehend the lover. For this to be possible, love must point away from the lovers to what is to be fulfilled if the Other loves me: the "making" of love. A distinct third element enters the relation: a common object of transcendence which founds the being-with. This third element is not itself contained in the lover's desire for the Other, or in the lover's desire to be loved.

The above requires a distinction between the **thematic expression of love**—my love for the Other, and my desire to be loved—and the **concrete experience of love**—that which is love per se and which can be considered as the criterion by which I know if there is anything to support my thematized desire. If this distinction is not made, then love is either just desire or just psychology and the project is without direction. With these two meanings of the word "love," one does not have to constantly experience love in order

to be in love. It also makes sense to say that there is a difference between “loving this person” and “knowing the person you love.” The “knowing” occurs in the strict relation of being-for-others; but since the relation is thematized by love, it directs the lovers to the experience of love—the mode of “being-with.”

In my account, the concrete experience of love comes through instances of inter-subjectivity. This does not imply that the inter-subjective experience needs to come prior to the original relation of conflict. Nor does it imply that the experience needs to be of any certain duration (or that it will happen at all). But it is the inter-subjective experience which provides the objective validity for asserting love thematically. (For the sake of argument, assume that the For-itself-In-itself was possible to effect; then, its construction would be the objective validity for thematic love in Sartre’s analysis.) The consequence of this thematic/concrete distinction is that love is **very much** a thematic expression. Projects thematized by love bring the lovers together in pursuing the fulfillment of their desire: to experience love inter-subjectively in the mode of being-with by undertaking a project together. In these instances they love the Other qua Other.

By inter-subjectivity we mean nothing more than the recognition by one subjectivity of another subjectivity. In as much as the for-itself is a transcending being, this transcendence cannot be directed toward the Other, for this will destroy the Other’s being-as-subject. Transcendence, for both, must be directed towards some common third thing. This means that the recognition of the Other qua subject “is effected laterally by a non-thetic consciousness” while “a common action or the object of a common perception” is “explicitly posited” (BN: 535). Direct apprehension of the Other’s freedom is achieved through the self-recognition of my object state. So we can understand that in the lateral apprehension of the Other’s freedom I retain my own being-as-subject.

With inter-subjective love, we escape the acute fear which arises in Sartre’s analysis because love completely relied on my being-for-the-Other. The introduction of the third element (which founds the being-with) does not require the Other’s transcendence to have an ultimate limit by being fixed exclusively on me. The instability caused by this impossibility does not occur. The Other does not so much choose **me** as she chooses “to do ___” **with me**. Though it is the case that the “to do with” often drops out of our

speaking and explicit awareness, it is nonetheless necessary. There is an infinite number of ways that our transcendences can be employed in this relation to effect inter-subjectivity. The quality of the inter-subjective experience is the motivation for the two people to stay together under the thematic expression of love. It is also the motivation for the splitting apart of the lovers—i.e., if inter-subjectivity fails to be effected and they are left with an empty theme which does not fit their ontological relation of conflict. But this does not at all indicate that love is “destructured” in the sense of a structural failure—love either fails to be fulfilled, or it ends.

Importantly, love is not concretely established within the ontological conflict, and, therefore, cannot meet its doom there. The for-others is endured under the thematic expression of love by the lovers as **people**. Why, then, is this employment of a pledge not necessarily dissatisfying? For Sartre, the pledge was rejected because it was not a concrete engagement of the Other’s freedom in the very “stuff” of love—the ontological conflict. In my account, the pledge is not used to supersede a necessary conflict, so it does not have the same objectifying and deceptive connotations. Furthermore, a pledge here refers to what can be effected—so it is not, either, deceptive by being an empty concept (though it will be dissatisfying if it turns out to be empirically empty).

Thus far we have not said exactly what inter-subjectivity is or how it might be compatible with Sartre’s ontology. Sartre admits that the inter-subjective experience—the experience of a **We**—is real, but that it is a purely psychological phenomenon occurring in a single consciousness. Such events do not “appear on the foundation of a concrete ontological relation with others”—they are “a question only of a way of feeling myself in the midst of others” (BN: 550). Thus it is a simple psychological trick in which I reject my own personal ends. It is only a “material channeling of my transcendence” (BN: 550). Some might be inclined to accept that we at least have, as humans in love, a psychological salve to soften the ontological conflict. It can be seen, however, that such a psychological answer would most likely be interpreted metaphysically. Few people would be satisfied with actually meaning that there is nothing real between them when they say “it just feels right.” The psychological answer must be taken at its strength—it gives no ontological motive for love, and does not diminish Sartre’s account in any way. If inter-subjectivity is to be of any merit, it must be an ontological structure.

Sartre has three key objections to the concrete reality of inter-subjectivity which I intend to accept as conditions for inter-subjectivity. First, he claims that it is strictly dependent “on the various forms of the for-others,” making it “only an empirical enrichment of certain of these forms” (BN: 553). In accepting this objection, we must admit a sort of paradox in the nature of the being-with. Being-with is nothing more than me, in my subject state, being for the Other who is also being for me in her subject state. The “distance” of the for-others relation allows me to retain comprehension of my self-ness and the self-ness of the Other. The second objection follows from the first; Sartre claims that the “subjectivities remain out of reach and radically separated” (BN: 550). We want the subjectivities to remain separated, for if they were not, we would have only subjectivity and not inter-subjectivity. Furthermore, it seems to me that the split is radical only in the for-others; in that relation, the subjects suffer their alienated selves constituted by the Other’s freedom. But in the being-with, the subjects are in relation “as themselves” and do not experience their alienated freedom. The third objection is that the being-with is dependent upon “particular organizations in the midst of the world” for its super-structure and is therefore capricious and unstable (BN: 550). We have already accommodated this objection by positing the common object of transcendence; also, because of this third element, the inter-subjective experience will be “capricious and unstable,” but this is no more remarkable than the meta-stable of the for-itself.

Keeping these conditions in mind, we need to attempt a characterization of the concrete relation of being-with, or inter-subjectivity. To do this we will consider a **comprehensive look**, as it is distinguished from the Sartrean look, which is the **apprehending** of the Other-as-subject through one’s object state. The nature of the comprehensive look is such that its direct focus is a common third element while its **lateral**, non-thetic awareness is the Other’s subjectivity. It should also be noted that the look need not be understood only as a look with the eyes; it is the concrete experience in which my being, and the being of the Other, are revealed.

For example, The Other may look at me laterally—she is expecting proof of my subjectivity by my **looking back laterally**. The explicit object of her apprehension is some common “event.” The Other looks with confidence to me. I may have a direct apprehension of the Other’s

subjectivity through my being-as-object. But the look persists, and inasmuch as I am aware of the third element, I cannot then realize myself as object for I feel the Other's transcendence "flowing off" in the direction of that something else. I still must choose my attitude in relation to my being-as-subject-for-the-Other. If I reject the common object of transcendence, I fix my transcendence directly on the Other, who will then have a direct apprehension of my subject-state through her being-as-object. Or, I can assume my object state by looking away, bringing the Other's look to fall directly upon me; this will destroy the structure since the Other needs my look for proof of my subjectivity: she does not want me as an object, or as a subject with a different project.

The experience is most fleeting when it occurs spontaneously without the intentional explicit positing of a third element. Since the third element is not explicitly known or recognized, the structure collapses. There existed only a trace of a common element, but no actual material condition to sustain the structure. Thus we had to fall back on the material conditions that did exist—i.e., ourselves simply as for-the-Other. Nonetheless, this is not simply psychological intentionality, for as long as the minimum necessary material conditions exist—i.e., the Other, a trace of some third element, and myself—the structure can have fleeting life. This indicates that the common object of transcendence must be established concretely, and that if this is not done, only then is the structure psychological—then the subjects are not engaging each other as subjectivities, but assuming the Other's perspective of the situation.

In this structure lies the motivation for experiencing love intersubjectively. With the "looking away" the beloved and I become transparent, to be revealed to each other purely in our mutual project. The freedom of the Other is not apprehended as opaque over and against my object-state. Nor is my freedom apprehended opaquely by an objectification of the Other. We are not pitted against each other; we are finally in the mode of being-with. In this relation, there is a conspicuous lack of conflict; the metastable applies to the structure as a whole, but does not occur within it.

If we accept this mode of relation, we still need to show why intersubjectivity cannot occur on the ground of individual psychology. Sartre cannot admit that the ontological condition does not have the power to shatter psychological fabrications; if he did, he would not discuss the lovers'

“perpetual dissatisfaction:” in essence, his ontology would become purely academic. Therefore, if the supposed psychological condition (inter-subjectivity) exceeds the ontological condition (conflict), then the psychological situation must still apply in some way to the ontological condition of the being-for-others. The only way available to Sartre for making the application is bad faith.

Bad faith involves intentionality; I deny my situation to escape responsibility. For example, I can deny that I am my hand on the beloved’s shoulder so that I do not have to bear the responsibility of the consequences it might entail. Or, having engaged the beloved in conversation, I can deny my transcendence—for cowardly or self-serving reasons—and take on the role of the lover to **become** a lover; hence I become a part of the deterministic world. I am justified and do not need to take responsibility for having chosen this Other and this situation. This would amount to my rejecting my personal ends for the ends of this “We.” Attitudes of bad faith are chosen **because** of something; they are chosen for a reason.

Bad faith, then, cannot apply to the inter-subjective experience, for both lovers freely choose the action—they take responsibility for it. In this respect, the experience is not unlike acting independently, except that each chooses it in terms of choosing it **with** the Other—the Other’s free choosing is expected and apprehended laterally. Is it possible that one might freely choose it, but the Other might be “of a different mind”? If this is the case, inter-subjectivity fails to happen: one knows the difference, one knows when the Other’s “heart is not in it.” These are concrete events which are informative, they are not abstractions.

Still, might it be the case that the two are in mutual bad faith by both claiming their transcendence while denying they are their situation? But there is no reason for a denial to occur—there is no reason to deny either their facticity or their transcendences. This objection—which I think Sartre would confidently employ—stems from an assumption which the lovers did not make. If the lovers believed themselves to be “one,” then they could act in mutual self-deception by denying their factual separateness and claiming themselves as their possibilities which are expressed and discovered to be the same. This situation is a result of wanting security against the contingency of the world—of wanting to feel themselves to be fated and necessary. But this is a psychological contingency which in no way is necessary to the

experience of being-with, which presupposes the lovers' factual separateness.

At this point we should see that if inter-subjectivity is not granted on the ground of a concrete relation of being-with, then any effort to love the Other is an attitude of bad faith in which I attempt to take the Other's perspective of the world and myself. It should be clear, however, that inter-subjectivity does not involve the lovers' giving up their freedom. Actually, the being-with allows the for-itself to retain his being-as-freedom since he is not required to assume attitudes of bad faith in relating to the Other.

My account of love is not intended to replace Sartre's analysis, but to add to it. Sartre's analysis is appropriate for many experiences, and can easily be seen as the period of "seduction," or of "trapping" the Other—though in some muted form, and without the cynical connotation of the phrases just spoken. Furthermore, it should be apparent from this discussion that the being-with is not exclusive of the being-for. Without the possibility of inter-subjectivity, Sartre's analysis is unable to account for much that does occur in the world under the theme of being a comprehensive relation with the Other—and I do not find rampant bad faith a suitable answer. Nonetheless, my account is not at all meant to exonerate or justify all those who claim to be in love.

Work Cited

Sartre, Jean-Paul, Being and Nothingness. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1966.