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Otherness and blackness

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Otherness and Blackness

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	3
Phenomenology	3
Chapter One: Conceptions of the Other	6
Levinas	6
Sartre	14
Beauvoir	22
Chapter Two: Fanon and Problems with Conceptions of the Other	24
Fanon	24
Chapter Three: Criticism and Construction	36
The Experience of the Self	36
Freedom	39
Ontology, Critique, Resentment	44
Convergence	47
Merging of Horizons	52
Chapter Four: Context and Application	56
The Fact of Blackness and the Time of Change	56
The New Fact of Blackness and an Open Conclusion	60
References	67

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Chioke I'Anson

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to provide a phenomenological examination of Otherness as it relates to the experience of being black in the America. The project begins with a summary of the Otherness theories of Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. I then compare these accounts to “Black Consciousness” with a criticism of Sartre from Frantz Fanon. I use this criticism to construct new concepts that will help to better understand the experience of blackness.

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to give a phenomenological examination of the Otherness relation as it relates to black people in America. I will begin with a summary of my primary philosophical concerns, including a statement of my views on the importance of phenomenology and a description of where the work is intended to fit within the tradition. In chapter I, I will examine accounts of Otherness in philosophy, particularly in phenomenology and existentialism, focusing on the works of Levinas and Sartre. In chapter II, I will examine the tradition of black existentialism to highlight certain problems with Otherness theories that arise when they are applied to “Black Consciousness.” In chapter III, I will critique these theories further, drawing on their strengths to construct another account. In chapter IV, I will briefly describe the experience of lived blackness in America and proceed to apply the newly constructed account to this experience, illuminating the black experience of Otherness. I will conclude with some possible consequences of the acceptance of this description by black people in America. It is not my goal to provide the final word on how blackness is experienced; rather, I wish to open a new avenue of dialogue on the problem of blackness in America.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a method of philosophy. It does not have a clear and distinct body of doctrines. Because it is not a rigid system, any attempt to explain it will be limited. It is

most helpful, in clarifying this approach, to describe the core principles of phenomenology practiced by its founder, Edmund Husserl. The philosophers I discuss in this study will represent variations on, and, in some cases, departures from the following characterization of phenomenology.

The task of the phenomenologist is to describe the way things appear. Phenomena are what are experienced in consciousness. The description is not of what happens in terms of the way specific worldviews, cultural traditions, or scientific theories dictate things should appear. Rather, the phenomenologist seeks to describe the things themselves as they show up in actual, pretheoretical, life, without the description being colored by preconceived notions of how the phenomena should be experienced. Thus, the phenomenologist must set aside all presuppositions. We must consider only what is given in actual experience. In order to describe concrete experience, phenomenology requires bracketing all assumptions drawn from theory and science, putting them aside, so that they cannot affect our direct experience of phenomena. Moran elucidates:

Thus, in considering the nature of our conscious acts, we should not simply assume that the mind is some kind of container, that memories are like pictures, images, and so on. Nor should we assume any scientific or philosophical hypothesis, for example that conscious events are just brain events. We should attend only to the phenomena in their manner of being given to us, in their *modes of givenness*.¹

What is given in experience, the *life-world* as experienced, is the world that we find after we have bracketed our presuppositions.² We are always already living in this world, and

¹ Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 11.

² Moran 12.

it provides the ground for our comprehension. It is the life-world that is transformed and deformed by our scientific conceptions. The phenomenologist seeks to give an account of the life-world, without introducing the assumptions that usually mediate his experience of the life-world.

The descriptive component of phenomenology carries the kind of power that any description does. A description can change the way we think about a thing, or the way that we act in a given situation. It is a picture of the world, and as such it can change perceptions of the world. The influential power of description is also seen in such philosophers as Simone de Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon. They write about what is given in their experience, and in doing so change the way people think and act concerning the people whose experience encompass theirs. They also show that descriptions must differ as experiences differ. Fanon could not have written about the experience of woman in a male world as well as he did about his own experience as a Negro in a colonized world. The examination I will put forward will not represent a radical change from the examinations in the tradition that includes Fanon and W.E.B. Dubois, but it will substantially amend them. As such, my treatment of the phenomenon of Otherness may also require substantial changes in thought and action concerning black people in America.

Chapter 1: Conceptions of the Other

The purpose of this section is to lay the ground for my own examination. I will use various philosophers to show how Otherness has been described, in particular the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Simone de Beauvoir, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Though Sartre's work has been most influential to black existentialist thought, Levinas is essential to my work because he strove to establish an ethics and an Otherness relation that is much more positive than Sartre's.

Levinas

To begin to understand Levinas, one must first realize that one of Levinas' major works has a slightly misleading title. *Totality and Infinity: Essays on Exteriority* might have been titled "Totality *or* Infinity." This title gives the reader a much better impression of what is going on in the book, and therefore what Levinas' philosophical mission is. In TI, Levinas gives a phenomenological description of both totality and infinity. Using these descriptions, he articulates a frame of reference for understanding experience and attempts to show the advantage of employing a framework of infinity instead of totality in the sphere of human action and thought.

For Levinas, the beginning of the awareness of the Other, which I will designate with an upper-case "O" (to later be distinguished from other with a lower case "o"), is

one of desire, the “Desire for the Invisible.”³ The Invisible, as the other that cannot be appropriated, is the “other metaphysically desired.” Levinas notes that metaphysical desire is not the same as the desire for the food that we may eat or the place that we may live. Such things can be absorbed into our identities in a manner that will satisfy us. This food or that place can go from being foreign to being familiar, and as such its alterity is dissolved. Unlike ordinary desire, Levinas says “The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*.”⁴ Desire for the absolutely other cannot be satisfied. The object of this desire is “invisible” in the sense that it is an object that “implies relations of what is not given, of which there is no idea.”⁵ Levinas describes the Desired as invisible to illustrate the impossibility of its appropriation.

The desire for this invisible thing is Desire, with an upper case “D”. It is this invisibility, this impossibility of being absorbed in the same way that food is eaten or something that is strange becomes familiar, that gives the desired the characteristic of “height.” The distance that separates the desiring subject from the metaphysically Desired is a condition of the “absolute exteriority” of the Desired. As Levinas says,

The transcendence with which the metaphysician designates it [the Desired] is distinctive in that the distance it expresses, unlike all distances, enters into the *way of existing* of the exterior being. Its formal characteristic, to be other, makes up its content. Thus the metaphysician and the other cannot be *totalized*.⁶

“The metaphysician” is the desiring or thinking subject. The “formal” or most essential characteristic of the Desired is its otherness. But the distance between the thinking

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1961) 33.

⁴ Levinas 33.

⁵ Levinas 34.

⁶ Levinas 35.

subject and the Desired is actually a property of the Desired. In other words, to refer to the Desired is to refer to the Desired *and* the distance between it and the same. In order to appropriate the Desired, this distance would have to be closed, and this is impossible. Thus, by definition, the Desired cannot be understood or appropriated. This appropriation is described as totalization, an occurrence to which Levinas wants to find an alternative.

Given that it is the subject or self that yearns for the Desired, one may be prompted to ask: How does the subject encounter or enter into a relation with the Desired? To answer this question it is necessary to further clarify the difference between the other and the Desired. This task is completed in defining another important term: the same. The same consists of the thinking subject and the other. The other, in this case, represents only a “formal” alterity, because the land before me and the world that I live in only seems to be other. As I walk about it, doing what I will, eating what I want and ultimately having control, Levinas says, the feeling of alterity is destined to crumble, because the world in which I live is actually a part of my identity insofar as it is the dwelling in which I can exercise my identity. I “sojourn” in the world, and as such the world is included within my identity. I make a house, eat food, form tools and use them to do what I will. The world is at my disposal. Thus, the appropriation of the world by the subject is described as a reduction of the other to the same.

Levinas seems to suggest that there is only one thing, or class of things, that is not other in the sense that it can be reduced to the same: “L’absolument autre, c’est Autrui.”⁷ The difference between “autre” and “Autrui” sheds new light on the use of the terms

⁷ “The absolutely other is the Other.” Levinas 39.

“other” and “Other.” The Other, for Levinas, seems not to be a special occurrence of the other, but a different kind of thing than the other. “Autrui” is used in French to refer to a neighbor, or, as Adriaan Peperzak says, the “human other.” Thus, the thinking subject enters into a relation with the Desired during an encounter with another person. The Other is non-totalizable. As such, it is the encounter with the Other that breaches the totalizing field of the subject. Levinas refers to the meeting between the same and the Other as the encounter with the face of the Other.

Before exploring the details of this encounter, it is necessary to introduce and clarify a few related concepts. Levinas defines ontology as the way by which things are totalized or reduced to the same. He says that the comprehension of the other and its inclusion into the same is brought about through ontology, understood as a “third term.” It is a “third term” in the sense that it presents a perspective outside of the same and the Other that allows both to be comprehended as same. Levinas calls ontology “theory as comprehension.”⁸ It is “a way of approaching the known being such that its alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes.”⁹

Levinas says that ontology promotes *freedom*, which he describes as “the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other.”¹⁰ This freedom, or egoist spontaneity, does not have to consider any outside force before it acts; when everything is the same, there can be no other to oppose. Because ontology seeks to reduce everything to the same, it ignores metaphysical Desire, which, as we have stated,

⁸ Levinas 42.

⁹ Levinas 42.

¹⁰ Levinas 42.

cannot be reduced to the same. Ontology “renounces the marvel of exteriority from which that Desire lives.”¹¹

But there is another way to try to understand beings, or existents, that does not prioritize a reduction to the same, and thus can preserve the Desired. Levinas calls this way of understanding “critique.” Critique seeks to comprehend like ontology, but it comprehends through a “respect for exteriority” that “calls into question the freedom of the exercise of ontology.”¹² The freedom of ontology is arbitrary, and thus the same’s exercise of this freedom is arbitrary and should be scrutinized. In this scrutiny lies the essential tenet of Levinas’ philosophy:

A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question my spontaneity, as ethics.¹³

The calling into question of the same will necessitate a suspension of ontology. In the absence of ontology, the thinking subject has no way to reduce the Other, the absolutely other, to the same. The whims of the same can no longer take priority. The subject’s freedom is thus limited with respect to the presence of the Other.

The thinking subject’s encounter with the face of the Other is also the beginning of that subject’s awareness of his activity as freedom or egoist spontaneity. Before the encounter, he traversed the world and merely did as he pleased without knowing the status of his actions as free. After the encounter, however, his relation with the Other is

¹¹ Levinas 42.

¹² Levinas 43.

¹³ Levinas 43.

an ethical relation: it forces him to consider his actions from a perspective that includes the Other, a framework that does not allow totalization. The world is at my disposal, but this woman in front of me, with whom I am face-to-face, is not.

We can see why the calling into question of the same affects our attitude toward our freedom or spontaneity in Levinas' description of conversation.¹⁴ In order to have a conversation, we have to show the Other some respect. Without attention to the Other and a willingness to talk, there will be no conversation. In order to give this respect, we have to restrain the egoistic tendency to act without restriction. We have to be considerate, and this consideration necessarily changes our actions; before the conversation, before the encounter with the Other, there was no Other toward whom we must be considerate. As Peperzak says, "the condition of respect is the acceptance of this [the questioning of our freedom] fundamental criticism."¹⁵ The respect that emerges from critique or calling into question of the same is why Levinas does not want a totalizing system. To look at everything as an instance of the same is to have no means to question the same, no means to critique. Without questioning or critically examining the same, there is great potential that awesome violence will be perpetrated against the others who are not recognized in the horizon of Being. Sadly, "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology."¹⁶

After presenting his critique of totalization, Levinas turns to Heidegger to give an example of the problems of totality. Levinas says that Heidegger is more concerned with Being than with beings. But it is the being, the Other, that is the source of ethics. By

¹⁴ Levinas 40.

¹⁵ Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Indiana: Purdue Press, 1993) 139.

¹⁶ Levinas 43.

contrast, Being is the free third term, reducing the Other to an instance of the same, leaving only the same, which has no occasion to question or change its activity. In this way, Heideggerian ontology “affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics.”¹⁷ Being, or the unifying principle, is prioritized over the Other, a state of affairs Levinas calls *the primacy of the same*. Levinas sees the primacy of the same as a dominant theme in Western philosophy.

Assuming that the freedom of the same takes priority over any Other is problematic, because the goal of its freedom is “to maintain [itself] against the other, despite every relation with the other, to ensure the autarchy of an I.”¹⁸ Because the ethical relation would represent a willingness to let go of the I, those who adhere to the primacy of the same see Others not as autonomous Others, but as what Levinas calls themes.¹⁹ To be thematized is essentially to be objectified. It is to be stripped of the boundless infinity of one’s humanity in favor of an easily understood characteristic or tendency. In order to be reduced to the same, one must be reduced to the status of objects that can be absorbed and appropriated. Human beings must become like other objects in the world. So, the exercise of freedom in the primacy of the same shows itself to be violent to the Other. This is why Levinas calls ontology a “philosophy of power” and a “philosophy of injustice.” Such a philosophy leads inevitably to tyranny. When ontology leads a person not to consider an Other, the result is a regime in which others are considered subject to ontology’s rule. Peperzak suggests that it is not difficult to find evidence of this tyranny in Western civilization, “the civilization of exploitation and

¹⁷ Levinas 45.

¹⁸ Levinas 46.

¹⁹ “Thematization and Conceptualization ... are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other.” Levinas 46.

imperialism.”²⁰ Many of the worst atrocities in history have arisen from a particularly Western tendency to go to new places, meet new people, and impose Western beliefs and values on them with little thought given to whether it is proper to so. It is the primacy of the same that compels an explorer to claim a foreign land for his country as if no one lived on this land. This same absurdity is with us still today, as grade school teachers tell students that it was Columbus who “discovered” America, ignoring the fact that people were already there when he showed up.

Levinas is sensitive to the tyranny of ontology and the primacy of the same. He wishes to reaffirm the primacy of the Other and of ethics in his philosophical writing. The foregoing characterizations of Levinas’ concepts of ethics, infinity and totality are sufficient for the purpose of preparing the way to our account of otherness. I will conclude my summary of Levinas with a discussion of the idea of infinity.

We saw that the thinking subject has a desire that is described as the Desire for the infinite. This Desire is different from need, because need can be satisfied, and this desire cannot. The infinite is above and beyond me. It is not found in the land I occupy, the food I eat, or the tools I use. The things of this sort that I encounter in the world are subject to my freedom. I can appropriate them and make them mine, and thus they are a part of me, a part of the same, comprehended in a unified field. The idea of infinity, in contrast, is similar to the idea of perfection. In the same sense that I must have an idea of perfection to know my imperfection, I must have an idea of infinity to comprehend my limitation and to question my freedom. But it is only in the face-to-face encounter with the Other that I get a glimpse of the infinity that I desire.

²⁰ Peperzak 98.

When I do encounter the Other face to face, the infinity before me shows my freedom to be “murderous in its very exercise.” In a sense, it is only in the encounter with the Other that I truly discover the status of my acts as free in the first place. But my freedom is exposed now through shame, because I have been traversing the world, doing what I will and not considering the consequences of my actions. I cannot have power over this other, and in this sense, she has power over me. It is an asymmetrical relation. She is infinite. I am not. Her presence has called my spontaneity into question. This question is the beginning of my ethical responsibility to the Other. My existence before my encounter with her was not just. “Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.”²¹

Sartre

I will continue my examination of otherness with a summary of some concepts from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. His ideas of freedom and facticity are relevant to an examination of black experience and are also helpful for an explication of the idea of being-for-others. Sartre begins his section on “Freedom and Facticity” with a familiar argument against freedom. The general claim, he says, is that we seem to be completely determined by our environment.

I am not “free” either to escape the lot of my class, of my nation, of my family, or even to build up my own power or my fortune or to conquer my most insignificant appetites or habits. I am born a worker, a Frenchman, an hereditary syphilitic, or a tubercular.²²

²¹ Levinas 84.

²² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956) 619.

Once more, the completion of an action is at first subject to the regular laws of physics and causality. We must “obey nature in order to command it,” basically submitting ourselves to “a network of determinism.”²³ Man does not make himself. He does not “pull himself up by his bootstraps” or any other clichéd expression for self-actualization. He is determined by his circumstances, his climate, his race, his language, all factors that he did not choose and does not control. At every turn things limit his freedom.

The classic deterministic line of thought does not pose a great threat to Sartre’s project. In fact, much of the determinist argument against freedom is actually support for freedom. That we see a thing as a limit to our freedom is in fact a result of our goals concerning the thing in the first place. A fat rock on the path is either a hindrance to my trek or the ideal thing to stand on to get a view of the land. The mountain may be an obstacle to the caravan, but to the mountain climber, it is the goal. Sartre says that a fat rock or crag is actually value neutral. It is the end that I seek concerning a thing that presents the thing as an obstacle or an aid. So it is the end that we have in mind that affects the appearance of a thing as a limiting or enabling. As Guignon and Pereboom say, “the world given to my consciousness is always shaped and constituted by my own interpretations and meaning-giving activity.”²⁴ The end that I have in mind, which “does not yet exist,” is something that I am free to determine for myself. Sartre says that because I am free to determine my ends “I am condemned henceforth to see the world modified at the whim of the changes of my consciousness.”²⁵

²³ Sartre 619.

²⁴ Guignon and Pereboom xxviii

²⁵ Sartre 621.

For Sartre, an essential characteristic of consciousness is freedom. He does not mean a political freedom, nor does he mean to say that we are free to obtain whatever we want. Rather, Sartre means that we are free to choose whatever it is that we want. By freedom, Sartre refers to “the autonomy of choice.” It is the freedom to choose, not the freedom to obtain, that Sartre is concerned with:

Thus we shall not say that a prisoner is always free to go out of prison, which would be absurd, nor that he is always free to long for release, which would be an irrelevant truism, but that he is always free to try to escape (or get himself liberated): that is, that whatever his condition may be, he can project his escape and learn the value of his project by undertaking some action.²⁶

So, even the seemingly freedom-ending conditions of prison are not enough to destroy freedom. Even the prisoner can choose the meaning of his internment through the meaning-giving activity of his consciousness, which is free to constitute any possible meaning at any time. Sartre moves from the issue of the background for freedom to an examination of freedom itself, which I will explain in order to explain his concept of facticity.

Sartre says that the for-itself, or consciousness, is free. But freedom itself has a restriction, or a qualification, that it cannot escape. Freedom did not decide to be free, since that would mean that before it *was* freedom it made the free choice to choose freedom, which would lead to an infinite regression of freedoms making the free choice to be free. So while it is the case that we are freedom, and that we choose, it is also the case that we did not choose the freedom itself. The absence of the choice to be free in the first place is referred to as the facticity of freedom: freedom is “not free not to be free.”²⁷

²⁶ Sartre 622.

²⁷ Sartre 625.

It is in the sense of not being free to choose freedom to that we are “condemned to freedom,” condemned to the ability to radically choose.

There is something aside from the freedom of the for-itself that cannot be altered: the past. Sartre says that facticity “resides in the for-itself as a memory of being, as its unjustifiable *presence in the world*.”²⁸ That which is in the memory of the for-itself is the past, something that *is already*. It is the past to which the for-itself chooses to connect itself and is connected by others. For example, Sartre says that I am only a waiter at a café “only in the mode of not being one.”²⁹ I am not truly a café waiter. To actually be a waiter would be impossible because of my ability to choose. I can only choose to assume the role and actions of what is called a café waiter. The for-itself is nothing but consciousness. To say that the for-itself is a waiter would be to assign it an essence, which would invalidate its freedom. The for-itself can have no other essence than to be free. A designation such as *waiter* would determine the for-itself to be a thing definitively, and thus betray its freedom not to be anything definitively. Copleston says that “the for itself is in perpetual flight from what it was towards what it will be, from itself as something made to itself as something to be made.”³⁰ The something made is facticity. When I am referred to as a waiter, it is my facticity (the past, of having been a waiter) that is referred to; all the times when I came in to work, wrote down orders, brought drinks to tables, and feigned interest in minute-long conversations to get better tips. That I am at work at this moment performing these duties means that currently *I am what I am not*, as Sartre often says. Copleston offers more insight:

²⁸ Sartre 133.

²⁹ Sartre 131.

³⁰ Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 9 (New York: Doubleday, 1974) 357.

In other words, the self is beyond its past, and what it has made of itself, surpassing it. ... And one day, at death, the for-itself becomes wholly something already made and can be regarded purely objectively, as by the psychologist or the historian. But as long as it is the for-itself, it is ahead of itself as past and so cannot be determined by itself as past, as essence.³¹

It is only in a loose sense that I am bound by my facticity. If I am playing at being a waiter in this café at this moment, it is not likely that I will be referred to as a boat captain if I suddenly play at being one in the middle of serving some food. I can however, quit and pursue a career as a boat captain. My condemnation to freedom ensures the possibility of this choice.

There is, however, an unfortunate consequence of facticity and freedom that tends to be manifest in the for-itself. In an earlier work, Sartre says “consciousness is afraid of its own spontaneity because it feels itself to be beyond freedom.”³² Hazel Barnes, the translator of *Being and Nothingness* sees this quote as the beginning of the for-itself’s flight to bad faith:

Here undeveloped is the origin of bad faith, the possibility which consciousness possesses of wavering back and forth, demanding the privileges of free consciousness, yet seeking refuge from the responsibilities of freedom by pretending to be concealed and confined in an already established ego.³³

Bad faith is, essentially, a lie to the self. It is different from lying to another person in the sense that a liar knows what the truth is and is purposefully withholding it. When I tell my professor that I was sick last Friday when I missed class, I am conscious of the lie I am telling. When I am acting in bad faith, however, I am actually hiding the truth from

³¹ Copleston 357.

³² Sartre, *La Transcendence de L’Ego. Esquisse d’une description phénoménologique*, 120, quoted in Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* xiv

³³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* xiv-xv

myself. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre gives the example of a homosexual to bring clarity to the idea of bad faith. This example is perhaps more problematic now than it was during Sartre's time, so I will present my own example.

A rap artist named Trick has a friend with an identity issue. Trina will not admit that she is a thug. He is fed up with her refusals. He reminds her of her drugs, her guns, her gold teeth, and the things that are commonly associated with being a thug. He just wants her to sincerely admit that she is a thug. Sartre would say that there is an element of truth in Trina's refusal to proclaim herself as a thug. She indeed cannot be a thug in the same way that an Escalade on dubs is an Escalade on dubs. She cannot be a thug as a being-in-itself. But the problem is that she is conceptualizing thug identity as a property of the in-itself, and is claiming to not be a thug in the same manner that table is not a chair. She is claiming not to be a thug, even insofar as her past actions have been congruent with the designation. By denying her factual status, she is in bad faith.

But what would the admission of thug identity be? Trick, by affirming his being-in-itself as that of a thug, has put off the responsibility of being a being that can choose *anything*. As such, he is also in bad faith. Thus, when a woman confronts him in the street and asks him why he never called her back after they spent the night together, he must say nothing to her other than "because I'm a thug" in order for him to justify to her and to himself his actions. Trick refuses to see himself as a for-itself with free choices to make and be responsible for. Because he *is* a thug, he casts the responsibility on to his being-in-itself. It is no surprise, after all, when a hungry lion moves in to eats you.

In my treatment of freedom, facticity, and bad faith, I have explored being-for-itself and being-in-itself. I refer to these concepts with a bit more detail in the following

section. Now I will consider an element of being that has not yet been mentioned, one that complicates the Sartrean picture of consciousness with social implications: being-for-others.

To elucidate his explanation of otherness, Sartre imagines himself kneeling in front of a door, looking through a keyhole.³⁴ He is spying on someone. He says that he is “alone and on the level of non-thetic self-consciousness.”

[non-thetic consciousness] means first of all that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them. They are in no way *known: I am my acts* and hence they carry in themselves their whole justification.³⁵

He is aware of what he is looking at, but he is not aware of himself. For Sartre, there is no “I” to perceive things. Rather, things are merely presented “to be heard” or “to be seen.” All that he does is relate to the instruments at his disposal. He does not relate to himself. “The end justifies the means; the means do not exist for themselves and outside of the end.”³⁶ It seems that Sartre, in this moment, is not an instance of Heidegger’s Dasein. His being is not yet a concern for him. He is his actions; thus, he has no awareness of them.

But his mode of consciousness soon changes. He hears footsteps in the hallway and realizes that someone is looking at him. Because somebody sees him, Sartre now sees himself. The Other³⁷ is a source of meaning-giving activity, different from a mere object. The Other’s gaze is an assertion of the Other as a subject, which in turn serves to

³⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness* (New York: WSP 1943) 347.

³⁵ Sartre 347.

³⁶ Sartre 348.

³⁷ The use of “Other” in Sartre differs from Levinas. Sartre does not speak of an “other” with a lower case “o”, though the use of “Other” here will generally refer to another person.

objectify Sartre. Through the Other, Sartre is now painfully aware of himself and his situation:

Shame reveals to me that I am this being, not in the mode of “was” or of “having to be” but *in-itself*. When I am alone, I cannot realize my “being-seated” ... But in order for me to be what I am, it suffices merely that The Other look at me.³⁸

Why is Sartre overtaken with shame? Why does he not just become aware of himself without feeling such as emotion? Shame has certain properties that other emotions do not, and this is part of why the encounter with the Other is so significant:

By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other. ... Shame is by nature *recognition*. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me. ... I am unable to bring about any relation between what I am in the intimacy of the For-itself, without distance, without recoil, without perspective and this unjustifiable being-in-itself which I am for the Other. ... Nobody can be vulgar alone!³⁹

As the Other looks at Sartre, Sartre feels himself to be objectified. Because he is in the act of spying, he is embarrassed and ashamed. Sartre is aware of his being-for-others and does not like it. But if he were not spying, if he were just walking on the street and noticed someone looking at him, he would still apprehend his being-for-others. Guignon and Pereboom say that Sartre will then feel the need to resist somehow, to assert his subjectivity in the face of the Other.⁴⁰ But this assertion will ultimately lead to an objectification of the Other. Sartre sees this objectification as domination, which the for-itself wants to avoid. The picture seems quite pessimistic. First, in order to be aware of one’s self, there must be an Other. But the relationship with this Other is “characterized

³⁸ Sartre 351.

³⁹ Sartre 302.

⁴⁰ Charles Guignon, Derek Pereboom, ed., *Existentialism: Basic Writings* (Indiana, Hackett, 2001) 273.

by a struggle for self-assertion that will never result in stable and tranquil co-existence.”⁴¹

There will always be a drive to objectify the Other by denying the Other as a source of meaning-giving activity.

Beauvoir

We can see a good example of the struggle for power over the Other in Simone de Beauvoir’s account of women as Other. When Beauvoir sets out to give us a definition of woman, she notes that there is something significant about the need to ask the question. “A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man.”⁴² From this we get a sense that there is an inequality between man and woman. The definition of woman is given in terms of this inequality. Woman, in patriarchal society, is limited; she is the negative on a scale in which man is both the positive and the neutral. Man is the “absolute human type.” Woman is known only as she relates to what is taken to be the absolute. Woman cannot *be* without a man. She is defined by her absence of male qualities. She cannot be identified without reference and comparison to the masculine gender. Woman, for the man, is sex. She is not essential, and she is not a Subject; she is not an autonomous source of meaning giving activity. Such status is reserved for men. It is essential to a consciousness that it understands and affirms itself in a duality of Self and Other. Woman is put into the position of being the Other.

⁴¹ Guignon and Pereboom 273.

⁴² Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction to the Second Sex,” *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. Richard Kearny, Mara Rainwater (New York: Routledge, 1996) 96.

Beauvoir says, “Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought.”⁴³ The dichotomy that leads to otherness is implicit in legends, myths and the most mundane contrasts, such as that of day and night. Beauvoir says that establishing otherness is quite automatic, and from the establishment of otherness springs valorized designations such as “inferior”, “different”, “foreign” and “lower class”. She uses the findings of Lévi-Strauss to support her claim. According to Beauvoir, Lévi-Strauss said that humankind’s ascent to culture is accompanied by the ability to perceive such contrast. But the mere perception of contrast does not explain the trouble that often arises after the contrast is perceived. Beauvoir abandons the idea of society as a peaceful *Mitsein* and sees in consciousness what Hegel identified as a fundamental hostility. “The subject can be posed only in being opposed.”⁴⁴

Sartre’s conception of the Other and Beauvoir’s application of it seem to make sense. But, as we will see in Fanon, the application of Sartre’s Otherness to black identity is problematic.

⁴³ Beauvoir 97.

⁴⁴ Beauvoir 98.

Chapter 2: Fanon and Problems with Conceptions of the Other.

Fanon

In a chapter in *Black Skin, White Masks* called “The Fact of Blackness,” Fanon criticizes Sartre in a footnote:

Though Sartre’s speculations on the existence of The Other may be correct (to the extent, we must remember, to which *Being and Nothingness* describes an alienated consciousness), their application to a black consciousness proves fallacious. That is because the white man is not only The Other, but also the master, whether real or imaginary.⁴⁵

Lewis Gordon interprets Fanon’s critique with this question. “How can the black be a freedom if his confrontation with the white is never, at least institutionally, that of master over the Other in a situation?”⁴⁶ In other words, why is it significant that the white man is the master as well as the Other? How does the Negro’s plight compare to that of women as described by Beauvoir? Before discussing these questions, I offer a revised example of Sartre at the keyhole, formulated to help explicate Fanon’s comment.

Imagine once again that Sartre is kneeling at the door, looking through the keyhole. Everything in his description of himself at that time is just as before. He is his actions; he is not relating to himself. But this time, he is a plantation owner in the Old South. He hears footsteps in the hallway. Someone sees him. But everyone on his

⁴⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press 1967) 138.

⁴⁶ Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracism* (New York: Humanity Books 1995) 131.

plantation is a slave. He knows that this person in the hallway is a house slave. In this case, he feels no shame. He is not in a life or death struggle to assert himself as a source of meaning-giving activity directed at the slave whose gaze is that of a subject engaged in the same struggle. He, as the slave's owner and master, is *already* the victor in this struggle. The house slave is *already* an object. The footsteps in the hallway may as well be those of a house pet. In this situation, the person who feels shame is the slave. For the slave, the white man's *existence* is the Look. His watchful eye is not necessary for the slave to feel the gaze and become aware of himself as an object. Indeed, the slave knows nothing *but* his status as an object. The only meaning-giving activity that the slave knows is that of the master; the slave has no meaning of his own to give. This Negro — born in bondage, witness to the subjugation of all who look like him, speaking the language and vocabulary of his master, often worshipping the same white god as his master — has no self to assert. He is an extension of the self of his master, whom the slave has been taught to see as absolute and pure. It is this slave who will run to his master and snitch on the slaves in the field who are trying to escape.

The example given is not meant to suggest that every individual slave in America suffered such a complete loss of identity. The slave in the example represents an extreme, though not unrealistic, case, presented in order to get an understanding of the problem. The idea of the white man feeling no shame is also not unrealistic, as shown in John Griffin's *Black Like Me*.

The premise of Griffin's autobiography is quite interesting. Griffin, a white man, cut his hair and darkened his skin in order to pass for a Negro in the South of the early 1960's. He trekked through Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Georgia. During his

stay in the black community of New Orleans, where he shined shoes, he witnessed interactions between white people and black people that seemed to surprise him:

The whites, especially the tourists, had no reticence before us, and *no shame* since we were Negroes. Some wanted us to know where they could find girls, wanted us to get Negro girls for them. We learned to spot these from the moment we sat down, for they were immediately friendly and treated us with the warmth and courtesy of equals.⁴⁷ (My emphasis.)

Griffin knew that the treatment he would receive as a Negro would be different as that of a white, but he did not expect this. The mention of the white people's lack of shame is most important here. Without shame, they asked for Negro girls that they could take advantage of. And they were not shy in asking. They even feigned equality as they asked, a supreme irony given that the subject matter they brought up banked on the inequality of Negroes and white people.

Griffin's story takes a more grotesque turn as he hitchhikes to the next state. While motorists passed him by in the daytime, he found that after dark white men would pick him up. The rides were easy on his feet, but not his mind. The vast majority of men who offered to give him a ride were concerned with only one thing:

All showed morbid curiosity about the sexual life of the Negro, and all had, at base, the same stereotyped image of the Negro as an inexhaustible sex machine with oversized genitals and a vast store of experiences, all varied. ... I note these things because it is harrowing to see decent looking men and boys assume that because a man is black they need to show him none of the reticences they would, out of respect, show the most derelict white man.⁴⁸

Griffin's whiteness obscures his picture of what is happening in this instance. He is still carrying the base assumption that he is a man even though he happens to have dark skin.

⁴⁷ John Griffin, *Black Like Me* (New York: Penguin, 1962) 31.

⁴⁸ Griffin 87.

Fanon would say that the white men that Griffin meets do not see him as a man. Griffin cannot realize what Fanon describes in the opening sentences of “The Fact of Blackness”:

I came into the world imbued with a will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.⁴⁹

Griffin, as a black man, is not a man that happens to get no respect from white people. He is an object that does not possess the personhood that deserves respect. He does not even have a place in Sartre’s life or death struggle.

Before exploring the status of the Negro in the keyhole example, it is worth noting the difference between Negroes in this predicament and women as Beauvoir describes them. For Beauvoir, the world is dominated by the white patriarchy. Any definition of women must be in terms of, or a response to the definition of man. The woman must be on the negative, because the man is both the positive and the normative neutral. This makes sense for white women. But Negroes cannot occupy the negative scale along with white women. Black men will certainly not fit there, for they are not a negation of white men. They are certainly not positive or neutral. For the Negro, the world is dominated by white patriarchy. But the white woman is already in the negative slot. What is the Negro’s place in this hierarchy? Just how inferior is he? Fanon asks this question and gives the chilling answer: “A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence.”⁵⁰

To understand the Negro’s plight in America, from slavery up to this day, one must understand the existential placement of the Negro in the society. This placement is

⁴⁹ Fanon 109.

⁵⁰ Fanon 139.

precisely that of no place. White women are oppressed. But they fight for equality. If the Negroes fight at all, it is first for their existence. For both white women and black people, there is oppression. However, in Robert Birt's terms, the difference is of degree:

All oppression begets alienation, and total oppression begets total alienation. Now the oppression of black people from the time of slavery to the current era has been *total* oppression.⁵¹

And, hence, W.E.B. Dubois presents the essential problem. Dubois says that the Negro is born to a world that grants him no self-consciousness, "but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world."⁵² The Negro has no way to measure himself other than through the eyes of The Other, but this Other looks upon the Negro with contempt or hatred. Deep down, he senses that he is something more, but the dreadful eye of the Other will not let him realize his potential. It is in this regard that Malcolm X stood for something that Martin Luther King Jr. did not. In the face of oppression, King sought to appeal to the morality of white people. But in terms of the Other as Master, this appeal is doomed to fail. Protest can be nothing other than an affirmation of the servitude that you are rallying to end.⁵³ Instead of trying to realize your free self, you are begging your oppressor to free you, to allow you to have a self. If the oppressor allows it, your existence is *still* defined by the oppressor. The liberated self, in this instance, is another illusion that the oppressor sees fit to bestow upon you.

⁵¹ Robert Birt, "Existence, Identity, and Liberation" *Existence in Black*, ed. Lewis Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997) 206.

⁵² W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin 1995) 45.

⁵³ For a good discussion of protest, see Bernard Boxill, "Self-Respect and Protest," Leonard Harris, ed. *Racism: Key Concepts in Critical Theory* (New York: Humanity Books 1999)

Malcolm X made no such appeal, claiming instead that “there can be no black-white unity until there is first black unity.”⁵⁴

There is support for this line of thought in philosophical criticisms of Martin Luther King and integrationism. Howard McGary notes that the integrationist doctrine, which was championed by Dr. King, has an innate flaw that the doctrine of separatism does not:

Blacks having control over their own lives is a theme that runs through all of the black separatist literature. Yet you do not find that theme stressed in integrationist literature. The integrationist places emphasis on the welfare of blacks rather than on control or group autonomy. Integrationists appear to believe that there is no point in having control if this does not promote one’s welfare in regard to the basic necessities of life. The integrationists feel that this is the case with black Americans, and they concentrate on promoting welfare rather than control. For them, as long as welfare is achieved, whose efforts produce it is secondary.⁵⁵

On this issue of welfare, McGary sides with the separatists who do not believe “the welfare or good self-esteem of blacks can be fully secured unless blacks have control over their lives.”⁵⁶ While every separatist tenet is not agreeable, this position seems to make sense. To rely on a group Other than yours is to be at their mercy, regardless of the good living condition that you find yourself in. There is also the added trouble of being in a social and economic condition that is good for the Other but not necessarily good for you. This situation is a bit like being a sinner in the hands of an angry God. God is merciful so far, but he could get tired of you and let you slip through his hands into hell at

⁵⁴ Malcolm X, “On Black Power,” rec. 14 February, 1965 *Great Speeches of the 20th Century*, Rhino Records, 1991

⁵⁵ Howard McGary, Jr. “Racial Integration and Racial Separatism: Clarifying Conceptual Schemes,” *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, ed. Leonard Harris (Iowa: Kendal/Hunt 2000) 266.

⁵⁶ McGary 267.

his whim. In this regard, a good life, determined by the Other, is still not such a good life, and definitely no grounds so say that the “promised land” is here.

There is another problem with Negroes, appealing to white morality and striving for racial integration, especially through non-violent means. William R. Jones sees Martin Luther King’s view of non-violent protest as a “glaring error.” He says that the problem with appealing to the oppressor is that often the oppressor does not view the protestor as a completely human being.

The racist will cease his oppression and regard my suffering as undeserved only to the degree that he regards me as equally human, as his brother. The presupposition of King’s theory, the acceptance of my cohumanity, is simply not present in a racist society. King puts the cart before the horse, for where racism is present the belief that black suffering is undeserved is absent.⁵⁷

Jones says that this kind of attitude toward black people and other minority groups has made it easy to carry out brutal regimes of control and genocide. The Jews, regarded as inhuman, were slaughtered by the Nazis. Native Americans, who were seen as savages, were enslaved and killed by the colonizers in the New World. Africans also came to be regarded as subhuman as the transatlantic slave trade thrived. Events such as these, which harken back to Levinas’ account of ontology and its ill consequences, altered the livelihoods and identities of the oppressed. One such example of the change brought about by domination is the effect that the institution of slavery had on black people’s aesthetic practices.

⁵⁷ William R. Jones, “Liberation Strategies in Black Theology: Mao, Martin, or Malcolm,” *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, ed. Leonard Harris (Iowa: Kendal/Hunt 2000) 94.

Thomas Baker, a black preacher from the early 20th century, evaluated these aesthetic practices, saying that one of the central problems of the Negro race in America is that it does not see beauty in itself:

It is the perversion of the aesthetical sense of physical beauty that the American Negro has struck his lowest depths of racial degradation. . . . It was slavery used by a licentiousness common to man in all ages . . . and this common weakness was in the life of a woman who did not own her own body, and this weakness was dominated by the most imperious of all tyrants—a perverted aesthetical taste.⁵⁸

Baker says that there was an unfortunate consequence of the rape of slaves by slave Masters and the birth of mulatto children. After seeing the relatively good condition of the mulattoes, who were often taken to live as house servants (close to their fathers), the slave women began to *want* mulatto children. Their sense of the aesthetic was altered in the misery of slavery.

Altered aesthetic taste continued after emancipation. Many mulattoes, who were regarded as black by the whites, nevertheless asserted themselves as a class above the Negroes. Those who were light skinned but could not pass for white gathered together and established their own towns, churches and sororities. One infamous example is the Blue Vein Society of Nashville, a social club whose members' skin was light enough for the color of their veins to show.⁵⁹ Dark skinned Negroes could not gain entry into mulatto churches because their skin was darker than the paper bag left at the front door. Many blacks became jealous and resentful of the better economic and social status of the "mulatto elite."

⁵⁸ Thomas Baker, "Ideals," *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, ed. Leonard Harris (Iowa: Kendal/Hunt, 2000) 154-155.

⁵⁹ Kathy Russell, et al, *The Color Complex: Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans* (New York: Anchor, 1992) 25.

It seems that this activity is the inevitable result of the denial of self that the Negroes faced when slavery was established in the South. Yearning to be accepted by White people, struggling to look White and assert superiority over other Negroes; all of this is a fight to rise above the nonexistent Negro self, to rise to the level of the Other by giving in to the Other. For some Africans, this kind of domination had the affect of rupturing the African's identity, to the point where he could recognize what kind of identity he was supposed to contain. Imagine the process. The African is taken from his home, from his tribe, from his family. He is piled on a ship with people from rival tribes and those who speak different languages. He arrives in a country where his status can only be that of slave or servant. He is beaten for speaking his home language. He is forced to change his name and his religion. He is forced to father children so that there will be a new generation that will have no memory of the homeland and no knowledge of its language, way of life or belief. He tries to resist, but "examples" are made of slaves who resist.⁶⁰ As the years progress, he begins to give up hope of being free and returning home. He looks upon the identity of the white man. It is here that he must make a choice. He can continue to wrestle with the question of who he is supposed to be and strive to etch out a new identity, a new Negro. Or he can assimilate the identity of the white man, of the oppressor. In the end he may choose the former. But what choice will his son make? For his son, this choice is not presented so clearly because he will not remember the origin of his oppression or the confusion that resulted from the initial destruction of his identity. His mother and the rest of the people that he encountered on the plantation may have already been "broken" in this regard, speaking the Master's language and

⁶⁰ Susanne Everett, *History of Slavery* (New Jersey: Chartwell Books, 1999) 113

worshipping the Master's god, who shares the Master's skin color.⁶¹ This kind of domination in slavery seems to be echoed in Fanon's plight as free but oppressed:

I am overdetermined from without. I am a slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance. ... And already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. Having adjusted their microtomes, they cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare. I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it's a Negro!⁶²

Fanon cannot escape the look of the Other, which objectifies him to the point where he feels as though he is another genus than his oppressor. His view of their eyes as the "only real eyes" is a powerful indication of his alienation from himself. He knows that his gaze does not counter theirs, and as such he is not engaged in Sartre's life or death struggle for self-assertion.

Fanon is viewed by white people in a way similar to how the I sees the Thou in one of Gadamer's I-Thou relations. I bring up Gadamer here because his concept of levels of hermeneutic understanding and I-Thou relations is valuable to this characterization of Fanon's thought. Fanon's plight can be understood in terms of Gadamer's first level of understanding an Other, in which the goal is to understand only the "human nature" of the Thou. Understanding the Thou's human nature means that the Thou is understood only as an object or theme, whose actions are to be predicted and used as the means to our ends. Because the Thou is seen as a means, the relation is a betrayal of Kant's "moral definition of man."⁶³ While this relation is not necessarily oppressive, white people viewing Fanon as a predictable essence takes its toll on Fanon

⁶¹ For an in-depth look at this process, see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978)

⁶² Fanon 116.

⁶³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum 2002) 358.

by alienating him from his status as an end in himself. It is this alienation that leads me to believe that Gadamer's first level of hermeneutic understanding is not the *most* inauthentic or lowest level of understanding. I believe Fanon's writing brings out another level of inauthentic understanding, one that should be distinctly articulated.

The recipients of this objectifying understanding, the "Thous" in this I-Thou relation, see the oppressive Other in a different way. For them, the Other, who is also the master, serves as a kind of surrogate self. The slave who comes upon Sartre in the hallway, and the Negroes who emulate white people and perceive themselves as better than other black people perceive the Other in this fashion. They have given their meaning-giving activity to the Other, to be determined for them. They see *themselves* as Other in relation to the (white) I, the standard. This relation is the result of the oppressor's exercise of the first I-Thou relation carried out into its logical end. It is the perspective of the person who is looked at and treated by his oppressor as a means to an end, and who, because of this objectification, comes to see himself as his oppressor sees him. This is similar to an aspect of Dubois' double-consciousness. Recall that Dubois says that the Negro in America perceives himself through the gaze of white people. He describes this experience as "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."⁶⁴ Of course, this measurement is one aspect of the double consciousness. The other aspect is the pull of the Negro's blackness. The I-Thou relation that I suggest here represents the total suppression of the Negro's experience of his blackness as something of value, or at least as something that has value distinct from the value that the Other bestows upon him.

⁶⁴ Dubois 45.

Once again, it is worth noting that I am not suggesting that every black person from Slavery to today suffered the effect of what I will call the fourth I-Thou relation. However, an examination of the black experience must begin with the understanding that the eradication of self-value in the Negro was largely the goal of many white people and organizations.

Chapter 3 Criticism and Construction

In this chapter, I will continue the criticism of Sartre and begin a critique of certain concepts in Levinas. I will also construct an alternative to the explanations that these philosophers put forward, built from their more useful concepts and the results of the criticisms that I will raise. I begin with the Sartrean experience of non-thetic consciousness.

The Experience of the Self

It is not only in light of the lived experience of the Negro that Sartre's conception of non-thetic consciousness should be amended. Recall Sartre's example of peering through the keyhole. He says that, because no one else is there that he exists as non-thetic consciousness, unaware of his actions. He has no way to "qualify" his acts. He cannot refer to himself to assign value to what he is doing. When he realizes that there is someone looking at him, he begins to feel shame. But why is it that he feels shame and not some other emotion, such as joy?

Sartre says that one cannot "be vulgar alone." I agree. But it is not the case that particular acts that are described as vulgar are universally vulgar. We have an idea of an action as shameful because the attitudes of others concerning these actions have been impressed upon us, and we have taken it upon ourselves to sustain them as influential. It may be true that the Other allows Sartre to apprehend himself and his shame, but this is not due solely to the power of the Look. Sartre already has an idea of what he is doing as shameful. It is true that shame is an emotion that it cannot be felt without an Other. But

it does not follow that the Other necessarily brings out shame within us. In order to feel shame, you have to know *already* that what you are doing is wrong. If I go to a foreign country where the social mores greatly differ from my own, it is likely that I will commit some faux pas. I might stare at the queen when I should have my head down. If I notice that someone sees me looking at the queen, I will not be overcome with shame, even if I was in a state of non-thetic consciousness while staring. I do not know that this is shameful. I would have to adapt the norms of the culture, internalize them, regard them as binding, before I could be caught looking at the queen and feel shame as a result.

The important point here is that Sartre already knew that what he was doing was wrong. This is why he felt shame as opposed to indifference toward his action. It was less a matter of being non-thetic, of being unaware, and more of the assumption that he would not get caught. The shame seems to arise from the getting caught, not the Look by itself. But how could he feel an emotion that he would have to have already attributed to his actions if this is his first break from non-thetic consciousness? I contend that he was not on the level of non-thetic consciousness because he already contained or internalized the Other. Sartre had already internalized the meaning that others have bestowed upon his acts. The footsteps in the hallway did not merely remind him that he was doing something shameful; they filled him with shame because he realized he was caught! It seems that Sartre is trying to hold at bay the realization that he is doing something that he knows is wrong. If so, he is acting in bad faith.

This is not to say that there is not a level of truth to the concept of non-thetic consciousness. It just seems more likely that we experience this consciousness when we are very young, before we have learned all the “rules” that adults play by. But insofar as

we learn what it is that we should do, we come to contain, in a fundamental sense, other people. It is true; I cannot be vulgar alone. But I am not alone, to the extent that my memory, and thus my facticity, includes the past opinions and judgments of others. I do not simply stop being for others when I am alone. I remember the opinions that they had and I anticipate opinions that they may have. I am affected, to some degree, wherever I am.

I say that my experience as a being-for-others is not limited to the concrete presence of others in order to show that the experience of the self as a being-for-others can also be described as the experience of pieces of other selves. It is the self that ultimately makes sense of these pieces. That the experience of the self includes internalized others makes a kind of intuitive sense. The little thought bubble next to the head of the wrong doer in the sitcom is often the wrongdoer's mother, waving her finger saying something like "I told you not to do that. That's wrong!" When I see a horror movie, I will flinch at a particularly gruesome scene not because it disturbs me, but because I know it would disturb my wife. When I accomplish something significant, I sigh, knowing that my step-father would be proud if he were alive to witness my achievement. It is also the presence of other selves within us that makes the overdetermination that Fanon speaks of possible. Pieces of other selves, thrust upon us, give us values that we would not sustain had we not encountered and been dominated by certain Others. It is overdetermination because the influence of others overrides our own capacity for the self-reflection necessary to cast off this influence.

Freedom

Our task as human beings is thus not limited only to determining what attitude we should have toward things. We must also determine what the attitudes others have toward things mean to us. The attitudes of others can work their way into our facticity. Often, we can take the descriptions or opinions of others as absolute, as part of the foundation that we stand on when these things can easily be brought into question and discarded. But sometimes these attitudes become essential to us as persons, as distinct identities, and they cannot be let go without significant change in what we have come to understand as our identity. It is because of the essentialization of these attitudes that I wish to criticize Sartre's conceptions of freedom and choice.

Sartre's idea of freedom is presented as if it were supposed to provide a kind of liberation from the prisons of a determined existence. I am not just a grocer. It is bad faith to believe that I am just a grocer. I am free to dream, even if my dreaming is offensive to the buyer. I am forever moving from what I was to what I will be. My essence did not come about before my existence. I am free to determine, free to revolt, free to be and not be. I can choose my projects, they are not chosen for me. Furthermore, there is nothing to force me to choose a particular action over another. My facticity is not a prison, it is merely the past. I can constitute the meaning of situations in any way that I choose.

On first view, Sartre's characterization of freedom does seem liberating. On closer inspection, however, it may appear more problematic. When I am holed up in a

dead end job, working the tables as if I am a waiter in-itself, Sartre may save me with his message. “Why are you here, unhappy? This is not the only thing that you can do. This is not the only thing that you can be. You are free to choose any project you want. If you do not take a risk, you will be forever unhappy, but you are free to pursue anything.” These words, insofar as description changes attitude and action, may indeed break me from my deterministic hole. I yank off my apron and head for the door. But I am stopped by the manager, my uncle, who reminds me that I am working off my debt as well as trying to pay the hospital bill for my mother, who is still in the intensive care unit. If I leave now to pursue something else, I risk bankruptcy and my mother’s health. I turn to Sartre, who reminds me that if I stay it is because I choose to do so, just as if I go into a war that I do not “want to fight” I still choose the war, and all of its consequences. I can choose to leave or choose to stay. But I express to Sartre my feeling of responsibility to my mother. I cannot risk the possible lapse in hospital payments. I say that I have to, I must, work here, though I am miserable.

Sartre only reminds me once again that my misery is a result of my radical choices, and as such is my responsibility. If I feel bad about my position, it is because I sustain the bad feeling each moment through acts of consciousness. I can choose to find a different meaning in my struggle. I can see myself as a faithful son who will do anything for his mother. I can cast the narrative of a hero, of the ideal son. I can disassociate myself from all familial bonds and forget about mom altogether, the old bat. Regardless, I must understand that my consciousness is essentially a nothing, and there is nothing to justify any values that I may have:

...my freedom is the unique foundation of values and ... nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation.⁶⁵

I am radically free to do choose the meaning of my life. I should cast off the veil of bad faith and realize just how radical my freedom is. But if I choose to give my situation another meaning, what is the significance of my adopting the attitude of another self, an attitude that, given my facticity of opinions, attitudes and values, I do not wish to have? It may indeed be true that I am free to construct another meaning by foregrounding other values. But to choose another meaning through radical freedom means I must realize that my current values, and even my future values, are not really binding. Because there is no way to measure the worth of my choices, one possible choice is no more meaningful than another. Is there something I am giving up in the realization of radical freedom that one would not or should not want to give up? Is it possible that, far from being liberating, the idea of radical freedom may undermine meaningful choice?

Imagine a slave who is coming to terms with his misery on a plantation. He hates the whole institution. The master has told him that if he escapes, his family will be killed. His family cannot escape with him, because the children are too young and too slow. He wants to kill his Master, but soon after this all of the slaves would be killed by the overseers and masters from other plantations. Sartre walks in and reminds this slave that he is radically free. He is choosing to sustain this bad attitude toward his situation. Ultimately he is responsible. He can always commit suicide. In choosing not to do this he accepts the world. This plantation, his master, his family; all of these things are

⁶⁵ Sartre 76.

chosen as they are by him, the slave. If the slave chooses to construct a narrative of a loving black family working hard for the benefit of a stern but loving white man who looks after them in exchange for a few hundred bushels of cotton a day and midnight conjugal visits with his wife, should we thank Sartre for the slave's new choice of a world? Hardly. If the slave took on this viewpoint, his new attitude would represent nothing other than total physical and conceptual domination, overdetermination. Such domination is the ultimate goal of the slave master.

Because Sartre's idea of freedom stems from a consciousness that is utterly unjustifiable, there is no reason why the slave should not adopt a viewpoint that may result in his overdetermination. In the context of an oppressed person or group fighting for liberation, knowledge of "freedom" in Sartre's sense is not helpful or desirable. If Sartre is correct in his view of freedom, it is possible to view Fanon's plight as an alienated Negro as a mere result of the meaning-giving activity that he chooses to sustain. There is no reason for him to hold on to his view of the world; he has only to choose another meaning-giving activity, perhaps one in which the wretched of the earth are the blessed.

To see why Sartre's idea of freedom is not liberating and, perhaps more importantly, not possible, we turn to Charles Taylor. Taylor views radical freedom or choice as problematic:

The agent of radical choice would at the moment of choice have *ex hypothesi* no horizon of evaluation. He would be utterly without identity. He would be a kind of extensionless point, a pure leap into the void. But such a thing is an impossibility, or rather could only be the description of the most terrible mental alienation.⁶⁶

So, to make a radical choice is to make a choice from a valueless perspective. In other words, the perspective has no horizon of given values to act as a bedrock for choosing values. For Sartre, the valueless perspective is the true perspective of the for-itself or consciousness. Taylor suggests that Sartre's characterization of the for-itself robs the for-itself of its identity, which "is defined by certain evaluations which are inseparable from ourselves as agents."⁶⁷ Without identity, Taylor says, we would not be able to exist as persons, thus we would be a "pure leap into the void." Taylor shows us that certain attitudes and values are essential to us as persons. To lose these values through an attempt to realize radical freedom may result in madness rather than liberation.

While Sartre's idea of freedom seems to be unable to preserve a horizon of values, Levinas' characterization of freedom may be less problematic. Remember that for Levinas, I am running about the world, doing what I will, obtaining what I will and living a generally self-serving life until I encounter the face of the Other. It is after this encounter that I come to recognize my actions as free. My freedom shows itself to be violent to the Other, and I become aware of my responsibility to the Other. The awareness of my responsibility is revealed through critique, which calls the same into question. Peperzak says that the critique of the same or self will result in respect for the

⁶⁶ Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 35.

⁶⁷ Taylor 34.

Other.⁶⁸ I realize that my freedom must be constrained so that I may not harm the Other. Unlike the Sartrean idea of freedom, in which one choice is no better than another, Levinas idea of the awareness of freedom through an encounter with the face suggests the priority of an ethical obligation to the Other. For Levinas, a stable, meaningful horizon of values is not just possible; it is necessary.

Ontology, Critique, Resentment

If the outcome of the encounter with the Other results in an ethical relationship with the Other, how is it possible for ontology, which is not respectful of the Other, to arise? Levinas denounces ontology “as a first philosophy.”⁶⁹ He means that ontology should not come before metaphysics, which he sees as having “a respect for exteriority.”⁷⁰ “Theory [ontology] enters upon a course that renounces metaphysical Desire, renounces the marvel of exteriority from which that Desire lives.”⁷¹ But it is unclear how ontology can occur if his description of an ethical relationship that results from an encounter with the Other is correct. I present an amendment to Levinas’ system that will account for the ethics of the encounter with the Other as well as ontology.

Sartre saw the emotion of pride as fundamentally connected to shame. The gaze of the Other “freezes” me in my facticity by objectifying me. I react to the shame that comes from this objectifying gaze by accepting it as something of which to be proud. My

⁶⁸ Peperzak 139.

⁶⁹ Levinas 46

⁷⁰ Levinas 43

⁷¹ Levinas 42

pride is a reaction to the shame brought on by the gaze of the Other.⁷² I posit that, insofar as it depends on an encounter with the Other, my resentment is a reaction to the responsibility that comes after my encounter with the Other. The connection between resentment and responsibility is best seen in the relationship between the main characters from John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

In the story, which takes place in the early 1900s, Lenny and George are laborers looking for work in California. Their relationship is complicated by Lenny's retardation. Lenny, while very big and very strong, has the mind of a child. George looks after Lenny, as a big brother. In the first chapter, we see what seems to be a conflict in George's attitude toward Lenny. At times, he seems to be a benevolent caretaker. When Lenny asks him to recount the story of the kinds of lives that they want to lead, George seems to regard Lenny with favor and kindness.⁷³ He gives Lenny instructions on what to do if he finds himself in trouble, and Lenny is grateful. But Lenny also seems to harbor resentment toward George, as exemplified in Lenny's chastisement of George when George asks for some ketchup for his beans.⁷⁴ Lenny, in a fit of anger, goes down a list of things that he could do if he did not have to look after George. These are things that Lenny cannot do because of George, who cannot keep a job, who gets in trouble all the time, who does not know how to look after himself. At the end of his tirade, George tells Lenny that he wishes he could put Lenny in a cage.

It is not the case that George is resentful of Lenny. Rather, George resents his responsibility for Lenny. At the end of his tirade, George is ashamed that he spoke so

⁷² Sartre 386.

⁷³ John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (New York: Penguin, 1993) 14-16.

⁷⁴ Steinbeck 11.

harshly to Lenny. He understands that Lenny cannot help himself, and he seems to understand that he has chosen, not been forced, to take care of Lenny. But under what circumstances could George actually maintain his resentment without lapsing back into the willful embrace of his responsibility? I say that ontology as Levinas describes it can help maintain or preserve the resentment of Levinasian responsibility or ethics.

Ontology hinders a true encounter with the Other by thematizing the Other. Thematization rejects the exteriority or infinity of the Other and presents instead a theme of the Other that is easily appropriated. If I am resentful of the my responsibility to the Other, I may find a way to absolve myself of the responsibility by reducing the Other to a theme that one need not be responsible for. I can see Lenny, not as the absolutely Other, but as a theme that I can appropriate or disregard as part of my normal activity of reducing things to the same. I can thematize Lenny as a retard that is beyond help, and as such absolve myself of the responsibility of which I am resentful. Insofar as ontology provides a way for me to cast off my responsibility through thematization of that which I am responsible for, ontology maintains resentment.

The idea that ontology maintains resentment may also make sense of Beauvoir's idea of a fundamental hostility of the self toward the Other in a way that allows both. Desire that is not metaphysical Desire can be satisfied in a reduction of the other to the same. Woman, the absolutely Other, cannot be totalized or reduced to the same like everything else in the Man's sphere of experience. In the Man's encounter with the face, in this case an encounter with Woman, Man becomes aware of his egoist spontaneity and his responsibility toward the Other. Remember that this awareness is the result of the

encounter with the Other causing a “calling into question of the same.”⁷⁵ Respect and responsibility are the outcome of this calling into question. But, as I suggest, Man resents this responsibility and looks for a way to continue his egoist spontaneity without a feeling of guilt toward his treatment of the Other, Woman. He relinquishes his responsibility and preserves his freedom by changing the status of his freedom, which he does through the use of ontology. Man does what Levinas claims that Heidegger does, “he puts over man a Neuter [freedom] which illuminates freedom without putting it into question.”⁷⁶ Thus, man sees himself as “possessed by freedom rather than possessing freedom.”⁷⁷ It is the transfer of freedom from the self to overarching ontology that allows man to regard Woman as a theme, negative where man is positive and neutral. Man is neutral because it is Man’s freedom that has been inserted as the ontological source of interpretation. The transcendent source of the interpretation of reality belongs to Man. Thus, what Beauvoir perceives as a fundamental hostility in Man is actually the result of Man’s resentment of the responsibility implicit in an ethical relation with the encountered Other, Woman. How is the transfer of freedom from man to ontology carried out and sustained? I suggest that such a transfer is mediated in the act of what I will call convergence.

Convergence

If appropriation of the desired is the reduction of the other (objects) to the same, then convergence is the *seduction* of the Other (persons) to the same. Both Levinas and

⁷⁵ Levinas 43.

⁷⁶ Peperzak 101.

⁷⁷ Peperzak 101.

Sartre claim that there is a tendency in human beings to totalize, to assimilate everything that we encounter into an instance of the same. Sartre casts it in the language of domination, saying that this is the activity of the life or death struggle, the effort to objectify the Other, and thus to exert the power my meaning giving activity as subject. For Levinas, we totalize objects and, through the mistaken and misguided use of ontology, we totalize people. But this totalizing urge is not just an action taken up by an individual. Consider Beauvoir:

“... No group ever sets itself up as One without at once setting up the Other over against itself. If three travelers chance to occupy the same compartment, that is enough to make vaguely hostile ‘others’ out of all the rest of the passengers on the train. Jews are ‘different’ for the anti-semite, Negroes are ‘inferior’ for American racists, aborigines are ‘natives’ for colonists, proletarians are the ‘lower class’ for the privileged.”⁷⁸

Beauvoir here refers to the tendency for people to unite against those who are perceived as Other. In all but the first example, the group that is united against is already defined. I will address the details of this predefinition later. The example of the travelers on the train illustrates best my idea of convergence.

The meeting of the passengers in the compartment is arbitrary. The travelers do not have to bear any similarities other than their location. Their tacit unification against, or, at least, mild opposition to, the other passengers on the train is an act of convergence. It is a participation in what may be described as group mind, a superficial connection that can be cast off as soon as the trip ends and the travelers go their separate ways. It is this superficial connection fostered by circumstance that I refer to as convergence. What convergence accomplishes is the tacit positing of an outgroup as Other and an element of

⁷⁸ Beauvoir, *Continental Philosophy Reader* 98.

comfort between the individuals that form the convergence. We see examples of convergence throughout our daily lives. On game day, a group of strangers in a bar cheer together as supporters of a particular team. They assert themselves as one against the opposing team and its fans. Strangers who gather for a political protest experience unity against the opposing political viewpoint. Most importantly, black people and other minority groups engage in convergence at different times in different places, asserting their solidarity against a real or perceived oppressor.

It is easiest to unite with or against that which is obviously demarcated. Anti-abortion activists outside the clinic are distinguished by the picket signs they hold. Fellow Buccaneers fans wear team colors. While it is true that travelers in a train compartment experience convergence, it is not as strong as the convergence of those who gather habitually. Nor is the convergence of the travelers as strong as that involving a most easily demarcated group: black people. Frantz Fanon describes the consequences of being black in a comparison with Jewish people:

All the same, the Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness. He is not wholly what he is. One hopes, one waits. His actions, his behavior are the final determinant. He is a white man, and apart from some rather debatable characteristics, he can sometimes go unnoticed. ... Simple enough, one has only not to be a nigger.⁷⁹

Here, Fanon refers to a distinguishing phenotypic trait: dark skin. In a way that is not similar to the Jew, Fanon is trapped in his blackness. If a group asserts itself against Negroes, he cannot hide in the way that a Buccaneers fan can take off her jersey or an abortion rights activist can put down his picket sign and scrape the “pro-choice” bumper sticker off of his car.

⁷⁹ Fanon 115.

There need not be a physical gathering of people, as in a football stadium or outside an abortion clinic, for there to be convergence. An advertising campaign can foster enough of a connection between people for convergence, provided that it presents an Other to be united against. The barbershop I went to in my youth was lined with posters advertising the Bethune-Cookman College football team. In each poster, the BCC mascot was somehow abusing or beating up the mascot of a rival team. The goal of these posters was to foster team spirit, convergence, over and against certain rival teams. A more vicious example is seen in advertising practices in the south before and during the Jim Crow era, as explained by Susanne Everett:

For generations, the public image of the black was a mere stereotype... Blacks were portrayed as servants, cooks and entertainers. They were shown as lazy, incompetent, happy-go-lucky, and musical. ... Such stereotypes, which denied the recognition of individuality and social aspiration, were the counterparts of 'invisible Negro' syndrome—blacks had little place in history books and little involvement in politics.⁸⁰

The “stereotypes,” in this case, reduce the intended referent of the representation to themes that are easily appropriated by white people in the society. These thematic images “denied the recognition of individuality” by rendering the recognition impossible. Those who took the images at their value subscribed to the ontology of which the Negro did not show up as a human Other.

So convergence seems to have another quality. Because it is formed against a particular group it can serve to preemptively suspend an encounter with the Other by representing the Other, not as human Other, but as a theme. Take the example of white people who took the distorted images of black people at their face value. The population

⁸⁰ Susanne Everett, *History of Slavery* (New Jersey: Chartwell Books, 1999) 230.

that consumed these themes may have included white people who had not actually met black people before. If such a white person were to meet a Negro, the encounter would not be authentic because it would *already* be deformed by the ontology that thematizes the Negro. Fanon characterizes such a meeting by quoting the usual phrases said by the white person: “Look, a Negro!” ... “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!”⁸¹

Because the Negro’s skin is such a defining marker, the convergence formed against the Negro will often have the effect of presenting the themes that distort the Negro’s humanity as essential to the Negro. Thus, Fanon notes that “when people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color.”⁸² Presumably, the people that “like” Fanon must set aside the essential elements of his blackness that are not favorable. The phenomenon of assumptions of themes as essential is also seen in the earlier example of Howard Griffin’s exploits as a hitchhiker. The white men who picked him up, without exception, thought that the Negro was “an exhaustible sex machine with oversized genitals.”⁸³

Convergence, as I describe it, is a potentially harmful expression of solidarity. Convergence is a negative solidarity consisting of an unwillingness to engage in a true encounter with the Other. Often, this unwillingness is a result of the ignorance of the consenting body concerning the human reality of the group that is set up as Other. This superficial connection is a mere shell of a true connection between people, as seen in Gadamer’s merging of horizons.

⁸¹ Fanon 112.

⁸² Fanon 116.

⁸³ Griffin 87.

The Merging of Horizons

Gadamer lists three levels of understanding in his *Truth and Method*. We have seen the mechanics of the first level of understanding in the I-Thou in the summary of Fanon. This is the level at which the I sees the Thou as nothing more than an instance of a theme, an object, to be manipulated at will. We can now see how this level of understanding can be fostered by convergence. My view of a person as a predictable behavior can be influenced by the prevalence of a theme that shows the person as having this behavior. I may see an advertisement that thematizes the person in this fashion or find myself among a group of people who already share this thematizing view. I said earlier that the person thematized may come to see himself in terms of these themes, and as such may become overdetermined.

The second inauthentic understanding is best exemplified in conversation. Two people come together to converse. Both view the other as a person, not as an object, so the I-Thou relation is not dehumanizing. However, the understanding of the Other is still “a form of self relatedness.” The viewpoint of the Other is defined in terms of the viewpoint of the self, resulting in dominance over the “horizon” of the other. Such a conversation takes the form of a debate: “To every claim there is a counterclaim ... One claims to know the other’s claim from his point of view and even to understand the other better than he understands himself.”⁸⁴ There is nothing the other can say in defense, because the other’s views—the other’s whole existence—have already been conceptually co-opted by the horizon of the interlocutor. It seems that this relation is common in

⁸⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2002) 359.

political discourse. Opposing groups, such as liberals and conservatives, see the views of the other in terms of their own views. As such, the conversation between them is often no more than a debate. For interlocutors such as these, the conversation does not embody an effort to understand; rather, it is an occasion to assert the rightness of their claims.

As I mentioned in the summary of Levinas, the authentic I-Thou relationship is characterized by “openness.” The task here is “not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us.”⁸⁵ The goal is not to assert dominance but to seek agreement about a subject matter. This understanding may illicit some change in the views of both parties. Gadamer says, “Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me ...”⁸⁶ This is a key characteristic in Platonic dialectic. Part of being able to ask the question, to set the subject matter, is admitting that we do not ultimately know the answer. If we do not assume a kind of Socratic ignorance at the start of a conversation, we are talking at “cross purposes.” We have to make sure the other person is with us in the discussion of the subject matter, and we have to listen to her and weigh her opinions.

Charles Taylor identifies the result of the authentic I-Thou relationship and the reason that achieving it is sometimes difficult:

... In coming to see the other correctly, we inescapably alter our understanding of ourselves.

Taking in the other will involve an identity shift in us. That is why it is often resisted and rejected.

We have a deep identity investment in the distorted images we cherish of others.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Gadamer 361.

⁸⁶ Gadamer 361.

⁸⁷ Charles Taylor, “Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes” Jeff Malpas, ed., *Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (New York: MIT Press, 2002) 295.

The alteration of our understanding of ourselves is what Gadamer calls a fusion of horizons, part of which is the acceptance of the things that are “against” us.

It is not difficult to see similarities between this authentic relation and Levinas’ ethical encounter with the Other. Accepting that which is “against” me is a result of the self-critique, of the calling into question of the same. To accept the self-critique is the beginning of respect, of the understanding of the Other. To deny it is to remain in the realm of inauthentic understanding, maintaining the primacy of the same.

Taylor’s explanation of why true understanding is resisted is worthy of attention. He says that our “identity investments” prevent us from trying to understand the Other. The idea that identity investment may prevent understanding seems to help explain why ontology is used instead of Levinasian critique.

Taylor, in his *Human Agency and Language*, explains his idea of identity:

By ‘identity’ I mean that use of the term where we talk about ‘finding one’s identity’, or going through an ‘identity crisis’. Now our identity is defined by our fundamental evaluations. ... If my being of a certain lineage is to me of central importance, if I am proud of it, and see it as conferring on me membership in a certain class of people whom I see marked off by certain qualities which I value in myself as an agent and which come to me from this background, then it will be part of my identity. ... So my lineage is part of my identity because it is bound up with certain qualities I value, or because I believe that I must value these qualities since they are so integrally part of me that to disvalue them would be to reject myself.⁸⁸

It seems that the values an individual maintains on pain of self-rejection form the basis for Taylor’s idea of identity investment. The values that Taylor describes may give us more insight into the idea of resentment of Levinasian responsibility I suggested earlier.

⁸⁸ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* 34.

I said that ontology is a result of the resentment about the responsibility that emerges from an encounter with the face of the Other. Ontology is used to make the freedom of the self transcendent, rendering this freedom unquestionable, and dissolving the necessity of self-critique. Thus, the self remains unchanged and the Other is presented as a theme that is appropriated, reduced to the same. Taylor's idea of identity suggests that the self, after the encounter with the face, may choose ontology over critique (the calling into question of the same) because critique would cause a devaluation of the valued qualities that the self sees as constitutive of its identity. It is especially problematic that the "distorted images" or themes of Others under which people form convergence can be part of the identity of an individual. Far from just being the arbitrary or misguided formulation of negative solidarity, it seems that convergence may be the manifestation of some people's identity investments.

Chapter 4: Context and Application

The Fact of Blackness and the Time of Change

It is necessary to note the differences between the experience of blackness when Fanon wrote and the present experience. To this effect, I will offer a further summary of Fanon. I will use this summary to illustrate the change in the black social landscape. It is this change that calls into question the current reliance on older theories such as Fanon's and Dubois'. After this, I will apply the concepts that have been established above in an examination of this experience.

We have seen in the summary and support of Fanon that Sartre's conception of Otherness is inadequate. Sartre's theory could not make sense of an Other who was *already* the master in a given encounter. While Sartre does well in explaining the domination of consciousness in terms of subject and object, he does not account for the effects of actual brute domination, such as colonization and slavery. This is because this kind of domination has the effect of altering the consciousness of the dominated, to the point where self that usually resists the gaze of the Other, in this case the oppressor, already shares the Other's perspective. This is the origin of Fanon's plight in "The Fact of Blackness," which carries many interesting parallels to the black experience in America today. Fanon realizes that he is an object and does his best to escape his objecthood, but at every turn he is put into place by his oppressor. He articulates his situation as follows:

For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.⁸⁹

This means that Fanon, a Negro, experiences a kind of inferiority in the presence of white people. The term “ontological resistance” is important. He feels as though he is in another category than white people. Remember that Levinas says that ontology is “a philosophy of power.” To have a rival ontology, or an ontological resistance, is to have power as well. If such a power existed, Fanon would not experience himself as alienated from his blackness, fulfilling a role created for him by white people.⁹⁰ This role is that of, not a man, but “a black man—or at least a nigger.”⁹¹ And thus, when Fanon does make white friends, they tell him that he is liked *despite* his race, in spite of his race’s history of “cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’.”⁹² He does not want this separation. He does not want to be alienated from his blackness. But his blackness is considered animal, inferior. He goes to be with his “brothers,” but he is startled to see that they are “almost white,” preparing to marry white women, to go off and have light brown babies. Here he gets a glimpse of the perversion of the black aesthetic.

But it seems that there is value in his race. Black art and poetry is beautiful. Black music is played across the world. Perhaps this is how he will get a foothold; from the artistic urge that comes from Africa. He believes that he has achieved a victory over the white man, but he does not get to hold on to this belief:

⁸⁹ Fanon 110.

⁹⁰ Fanon 134.

⁹¹ Fanon 114.

⁹² Fanon 112.

Only momentarily at a loss, the white man explained to me that, genetically, I represent a stage of development: "Your properties have been exhausted by us. We have had earth mystics such as you will never approach. Study our history and you will see how far this fusion has gone."⁹³

Upon hearing this, Fanon feels the dissolution of his originality. He feels that he is "repeating a cycle." In his anguish, he studies history and discovers that there is more than just cannibalism in his race's past. He gains a sense of pride as he learns of the learning centers and advanced states that were spread across the "dark continent." He learns of African government and African philosophy, though no white person will call it philosophy. He feels that he has found a place, a ground from which to say that he is human. But once again, he is shut down.

The white man (meaning white people in general, for here Fanon sees all as one, as oppressor) tells him that the wonders of Africa are childish compared to those of Europe. There is no longer room for the insignificant ways of the African, the children of the world, who provide the whites with entertainment when there is no real work to be done. Fanon is told that, yes, the Africans of the past were learned people, but this is an age of "real reason," which the Negro does not really possess. This is why Negroes who have advanced in the white world are watched so closely. They may be doing well as doctors or engineers, but one mistake will restore them to their status as inferior. After all, they are employed in spite of their color, just as Fanon is liked in spite of his color. Mistakes will only show that their good qualities cannot rise above the negative qualities innate to their blackness.

Fanon is close to collapsing. He comes to the unfortunate conclusion of his quest: "Sin is Negro as virtue is white. All those white men in a group, guns in their hands,

⁹³ Fanon 129.

cannot be wrong. I am guilty. I do not know of what, but I know that I am no good.”⁹⁴

At the end of “The Fact of Blackness,” Fanon refuses to accept his inferiority. But he is depleted, and does not know where to go to attain equality.

Fanon’s plight is indicative of some of the problems that Negroes in America faced after slavery and during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Black people were affected by the perverted aesthetic. All across America, white people and black people were segregated to a large degree, living in separate neighborhoods and going to separate schools, drinking from separate water fountains. The reality of segregation was legally supported and enforced by the supreme court in the Plessy vs. Ferguson ruling of 1892. Most importantly, racism was not an unpopular position to hold. Politicians and members of law enforcement were well known for supporting policies of separatism and discrimination. This is evidenced in the event of Bloody Sunday on March 8th, 1965, when a posse of state troopers brutally beat a large group of Negroes who were protesting the unlawful killing of a Negro by a state trooper.⁹⁵ In addition, the other areas of the world where black people dominated white people were segregated with similar problems.

It was in a cultural climate of segregation and racism that Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and other proponents of civil rights emerged. We have already discussed the ideologies of Martin and Malcolm leaders. I bring them up here to suggest that the time that they lived and worked is a significant turning point in race relations in America.

This era saw immense changes. The government passed integration acts, anti-

⁹⁴ Fanon 139.

⁹⁵ Martin Luther King talks about the significance of this event in his speech, “Our God is Marching On!” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James Washington, ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986) 228.

discrimination acts, affirmative action ... The supreme court ruled on Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. In 1955, the Montgomery bus boycott successfully ended with black people being granted equal access to the seats on the buses in the transit system. By 1960, Negroes were staging sit-ins all across the country, demanding to be served in “white only” restaurants. The movement was massive and effective until the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. After this, there was much talk of the legacies of these men, how they should be followed until the “Dream” is realized. But the promised land of racial freedom and integration did not unfold as King would have preferred.

It is not the goal of this paper to give a sociological or anthropological narrative as to exactly how the civil rights movement and the present day connect. I cannot give an exhaustive list of the events that changed the racial climate to what it is today. The above summary only served to construct a small cornerstone for the discussion of the present phenomenological experience of black people in America.

The New Fact of Blackness and an Open Conclusion

Years ago, when I was in high school, I was out driving with two friends. We decided to go to the local pool hall, the only thing of interest that was open that late in the night. We drove up into the parking lot, which was behind the building, and parked. Before we could shut the car doors, I heard a voice from a nearby truck express amazement that a “nigger and a white boy” were getting out of the same car. There was a silent pause as we realized what was happening, after which we got back into the car.

There was a great deal of yelling and screaming from a number of white men that I had no interest to count. As we drove away, bottles shattered on my trunk and back windshield. A couple blocks away, we saw a police car parked on the side of the road. I parked behind squad car and one of my friends jumped out of the car to go speak to the officer. After a few moments, she came back into the car and told us that the officer said that he would check it out. He did not ask for our information. My friend felt that the officer was unconcerned. As I pulled off and drove by, I saw that the officer was white.

What is notable here is not that I experienced explicit racism, but that I experienced it at a place that I have often gone to, with friends that I often go out with. On another night, this may not have happened. These men, who were quite obviously racist, may have not had the to occasion to let me in on their hatred for me. I could walk by them in the street, stand behind them in checkout lines, or work for them at a restaurant. I realized that I simply *did not know*; I could not identify anti-black racists. Therefore, I would never know when my blackness would become an issue or be called into question. I became paranoid about my blackness.

The black people of the previous age, it seems did not have to feel paranoia as to whether their blackness would be an issue. They knew that it was. “Colored Only” and “White Only” signs graced the landscape. They knew where they stood. They did not have to wait to see if their presence would be a problem; it indeed was, constantly. Now, it is not constantly a problem in the sense that I will not have to leave a restaurant or head to the back of a bus. But there is a suspicion that lingers and, often, finds justification. Thus, conflicts or events that happen to be interracial are often suspected to be racist, if for no other reason than that the people involved *could* be racist.

In *Seeing a Color-Blind Future*, lawyer and author Patricia J. Williams has an example of the diffused and manipulated line between racism and regular human interaction.⁹⁶ She secured a loan for a house with a bank over the phone. She notes that the way she speaks is “not marked as black.” When she got the forms that were filled out for her in the mail, she noted that a check mark on the Fair Housing form, which is suppose to ensure against discrimination in the purchasing of homes, indicated that she was white. She changed it and sent the information back it with her signatures. Later, the bank called her up. They needed a great deal more money to cover the down payment, more than she could reasonably afford. The bank said that the reason for this was that property values in the area that she was interested in were suddenly in freefall. There was a moment after this conversation that Williams was perplexed. She did not know what it meant. She later found out that the bank had used demographic information to discriminate against her. The data showed that when black people move in to a neighborhood such as the one she was interested in, White people move out and the property value decreases.

Williams ultimately found out that the sudden change concerning her home loan was inspired by racism. But there was one moment, in the initial reaction, in which it could have gone either way. She pursued the matter to find out the truth because of her suspicion. She wanted to know if it was true that the property value was suddenly in danger. This is the difference between the past and now: there are moments when it is uncertain that an occurrence was straightforwardly racist. That racism is afoot is cannot be the blanket assumption in every case. It is also true that racism is not afoot in every

⁹⁶ Patricia Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: Noonday Press, 1997) 38-41.

case. But you do not know that, and there are times in which you want to find out, and times when you cannot find out.

The outcome of this pressure on a Negro usually causes the Negro to fall on three lines of thought. The first is that of suspicion, in which the Negro does not assume intentional racism in a given encounter with an Other but is not against the possibility. Another option is complete paranoia. This is when the Negro sees racism in every element of interaction with the Other. In the movie “Undercover Brother,” this tendency was personified in the character Conspiracy Brother. Conspiracy Brother was greeted in the film with “good morning.” He proceeded to deconstruct the etymology of “good” to reveal that it meant “I’m gonna kill yo black ass first thing in the morning!”⁹⁷ It seems the last scheme for racial interaction is that of pure ambivalence. Ambivalent Negroes may assume that there is no discrimination taking place until a non-black source reveals it to be so. The ambivalent Negro may feel that any problem that Negroes face is the result of a tired attitude of victimology, and that these Negroes need to stop looking at the world as if it is structured to keep them oppressed.⁹⁸ These perspectives are not rigidly designated. In practice, the Negro may adopt a mixture of these views. Taken as described, though, the majority of the black people that I have known have fallen in the first category, that of suspicion.

My experience of racism as possible instead of apparent shows a separation between my experience and Fanon’s. Whereas he begins the tale of his experience of

⁹⁷ *Undercover Brother*, dir. Malcolm D. Lee, perf. Eddie Griffin, Chris Kattan, Denise Richards, RKO, 2002

⁹⁸ Ward Connerly is often criticized for having this view, or behaving as if he does.

race with the awareness of his objecthood⁹⁹, my experience begins with the awareness of the past of objecthood. The history of racism, slavery, and segregation informs my suspicion of racism in my everyday experience. Sometimes I feel a tug of objectification, but I must reflect on it to be certain, unlike Fanon, for whom it is painfully obvious.

The shift from certainty to suspicion is one change in the experience of racism. Obviously, Fanon and Martin Luther King wanted to achieve more than a justified state of suspicion. Fanon wanted to be “a man among other men.”¹⁰⁰ He wanted to experience the world without being alienated from his blackness in the way that Dubois lamented. But such alienation remains. Granted, sometimes it is experienced only as the memory of a past that will not be forgotten. It is no surprise that I acknowledge my blackness as different during black history month. This experience is not strictly negative. There are other experiences, though. Once I was in a black philosophy class when the instructor began asking questions concerning the police. He asked if it was the case that anyone in the class felt safer when they saw police patrolling the neighborhood or pulling someone over. No one, in an all black class, raised their hands in agreement. I have been pulled over, followed, and held at gunpoint by police. On every occasion, I have experienced a strange sensation. When I am held by police, particularly at gunpoint, I get the feeling that my skin is suddenly black, deep black, much darker than it actually is. It is worth noting that I have only ever been held by white police officers. I have felt this sensation on other occasions, such as when I was verbally assaulted by the men in the parking lot at the pool hall. In regular life, meaning life that does not include police altercations and pool hall racists, I often become aware of my blackness in a much less dramatic way. If I

⁹⁹ Fanon 109.

¹⁰⁰ Fanon 112.

walk into a room that is mostly full of white people, I realize that I am black. It is as if I anticipate how they will see me.

Experiences such as this point to a continuation of alienated blackness that is not merely the result of the memory of history. It is true; I sometimes experience other non-black people without being aware of my blackness. Interactions such as these resemble Gadamer's merging of horizons. In such conversations, race is acknowledged and accepted in a way that allows for it to be transparent, a transparency that dissolves my awareness of race as that which sets me up as Other in a society where whiteness is normative. I see meetings with non-white Others that achieve such a merging of horizons as the desired way for racialized persons to relate. It is the merging of horizons that allows us to walk among men.

If the authentic conversations that I have are to be taken as indicative of the possibility of such interracial communication, and the ideas of the encounter with the face, critique, resentment, ontology, convergence, and identity investment are representative of human social relations in the world, then three things must occur for there to be true understanding between black and white people in America. First, any identity investment that depends on the "distorted images" of others must be suspended. If my identity as a Negro is buttressed by a perception of white people as blue-eyed devils that will always oppose me, I must reevaluate the qualities that I value. I must construct an identity that does not need such an Other. Second, the presentation of black people and white people as themes must come to an end. The propagation of themes or stereotypes will always undermine a true encounter with the face of the Other. A thematization of the Other must cease to be a unifying mark of convergence or negative

solidarity. Free from thematization and the potential for resentment, there can be an encounter with the face that results in the embrace of responsibility to the Other instead of the resentment of it and the establishment of ontology.

The way for the Negro to overcome the ontological domination of whiteness, then, is for the dominant white ontology to be abandoned altogether. But how can this process take place? The relative infrequency and unpopularity of racism has loosened the solidarity that black people once possessed. Should there be a unifying call to black people to try to cast off ontology? Or is a massive formation of solidarity always as negative as convergence? Are there any aspects of thematization of the Other that should be maintained? Can the qualities of an identity investment that depend on a stereotype of the Other be disvalued without a crisis to the identity? It has been my intention to provide a framework from which to explore these questions.

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