



CRITICIZING HUSSERL'S NOTION OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

SARTRE'S ONTOLOGICAL- AND LEVINAS'S ETHICAL APPROACH

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Abbreviations

- EI: Emmanuel Levinas – Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo
- EE: Emmanuel Levinas – Existence and existents
- OWB: Emmanuel Levinas – Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence
- TI: Emmanuel Levinas – Totality and Infinity
- TO: Emmanuel Levinas – Time and the Other
- TE: Jean-Paul Sartre – The Transcendence of the Ego
- BN: Jean-Paul Sartre – Being and Nothingness

Introduction

Intersubjectivity, understood here as the relation of the subject to others, is a topic that is much discussed in Western philosophy. How can a subject relate to other subjects in the world? And how do I even know that I am not the only conscious being in this world? These questions have been investigated by, among others, Edmund Husserl. Husserl is a leading figure in phenomenology and developed a theory of intersubjectivity that does justice to his transcendental philosophy. Through the critiques of Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas, the controversial aspects of Husserl's thinking of transcendental subjectivity and intersubjectivity will be revealed. The most important question that arises concerns the way we experience other subjects in the world. Sartre and Levinas both criticize Husserl's epistemological view of these intersubjective relations. For Sartre, the epistemological perspective of Husserl denotes a relation where the subject can have knowledge of the other through the knowledge it has of itself. Levinas understands Husserl's epistemological approach as an approach that understands the existence of others as a representation where the other, as alter ego, is a result of the movement of intentionality. Both Sartre and Levinas criticize Husserl for adopting this epistemological approach.

The critiques of Sartre and Levinas seem to be similar. They criticize the same aspects of Husserl's theory. These aspects can be divided into three topics: the transcendental ego, the problem of solipsism, and the relation of the ego to others (intersubjectivity). I will take these three subtopics as direction for my investigation of Sartre's and Levinas's critiques. These aspects are connected to each other, because Husserl's thinking of the ego leads to the problem of solipsism and eventually to his solution of this problem, which marks his theory of intersubjectivity. Although Sartre and Levinas criticize similar aspects of Husserl's theory, where they both move away from Husserl's epistemological approach on the matter, they differ in a fundamental way. The difference is that Sartre criticizes Husserl from an ontological point of view, whereas Levinas takes an ethical perspective in his critique. Sartre's ontology can be characterized as his thinking of the being of consciousness. He maintains a different conception of consciousness in relation to the ego than Husserl and argues for an ontological understanding of the subject and its relation to others. In this ontological understanding, the subject is always a being-for-others. Levinas's ethical approach can be characterized as an approach where the Other comes to me through an ethical demand. Responsibility for the Other and the obligation to respond to this Other form the main concepts of Levinas's ethical thinking. That Sartre takes an ontological approach and

Levinas an ethical approach in criticizing Husserl and in developing their own thoughts on intersubjectivity does not mean that they are exclusively ontological or ethical in their accounts. With these approaches I want to emphasize that the ontological or ethical are their leading perspectives in their critiques and their own theories of intersubjectivity. The problem that arises is that their critiques seem to be similar, but they differ fundamentally from each other in the approach they take. How can this difference be thought in relation to their critiques of Husserl? This question leads to the topic of this thesis: The evaluation of Sartre's ontological- and Levinas's ethical perspective on Husserl's epistemological view of intersubjectivity. In analysing these different perspectives, I compare them to each other and investigate who is more consistent in criticizing Husserl and in developing a theory of intersubjectivity. The question that guides this investigation then is: Which philosophical approach, Levinas's ethics or Sartre's ontology, is more consistent in criticizing Husserl's epistemological approach and can, therefore, better react to the problems of intersubjectivity? Consistency is an important aspect of my research question. With consistency I mean that there are no contradictions between the critiques of Husserl's approach and Sartre's and Levinas's own ontological/ethical theories of intersubjectivity. Inconsistencies can make a critique weaker, and it is therefore that I investigate Sartre's and Levinas's different critiques by checking how consistent they are.

To answer this research question, I will first answer the following sub-questions:

- 1) What are the critiques of Sartre and Levinas of Husserl's thinking on intersubjectivity?
- 2) Despite their similarities, how do these critiques differ from each other?
- 3) Considering the fundamental difference between the perspectives both philosophers take in criticising Husserl, whose approach is more consistent?

These sub-questions are answered chronologically and set the structure of this thesis. In the first two chapters the critiques of Sartre and Levinas of Husserl are investigated. The third chapter captures the fundamental difference between those critiques and the last three chapters are answering the consistency question. All these questions lead me to my thesis that Levinas's ethical approach is more consistent in criticizing Husserl's epistemological view of intersubjectivity than Sartre's ontological approach is.

That the consistency of the critiques of Sartre and Levinas is investigated is relevant for academic debates since there has not been an investigation yet that takes Sartre's and Levinas's critiques of Husserl together and argue which one can better react to Husserl's

problematic view. Because intersubjectivity is a much-discussed topic in Husserl's as well as in Sartre's and Levinas's philosophy, it is interesting to take the contributions of these three figures together and to evaluate which theory is the strongest. New insights are gained when the problems of Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity are analysed through the critiques of Sartre and Levinas. I will show that Husserl's thinking can be approached from an ontological view and from an ethical view and that these two different approaches lead to two different conceptions of intersubjectivity. To argue that Levinas's critique of Husserl's epistemological approach to intersubjectivity is more consistent with his own ethical philosophical development than Sartre's ontological approach is in criticizing Husserl and in developing a theory of intersubjectivity, contributes to the debate of understanding intersubjectivity within the phenomenological tradition and adds a new dimension to it. It is for this reason that I take the critical relations of Sartre and Levinas to Husserl's account as the starting point for my investigation.

To conclude that Levinas's ethical approach in criticizing Husserl's conception of intersubjectivity is more consistent than Sartre's ontological approach is, I have constructed three arguments. These three arguments – that I have called – the Alterity Argument, the Transcendence Argument, and the First Philosophy Argument – show that Sartre is not consistent in his critique of Husserl and his own ontological approach while Levinas's ethical approach in criticizing Husserl and in his own thinking on intersubjectivity is consistent. So, through an investigation of Sartre's and Levinas's critiques, their different approaches, and the consistency of their critiques, I argue in this thesis that Levinas's ethical approach in criticizing Husserl on intersubjectivity is consistent with his own developed theory of intersubjectivity and that he, therefore, can better answer to the problems that arose in Husserl's epistemological view than Sartre's inconsistent ontological critique and theory of intersubjectivity can.

Chapter 1: Sartre's critique of Husserl's phenomenology

In 1933-1934, Sartre was studying at the Institute Francais in Berlin and got inspired by two masters of the phenomenological tradition: Husserl and Heidegger. Sartre was very much inspired by Husserl's phenomenology and his innovative thoughts of consciousness. In his earlier work, however, Sartre turned against Husserl's thinking of the ego and its relation to consciousness. In *The Transcendence of the Ego*, a work published in 1936/1937 in the journal, *Les Recherches Philosophiques*, Sartre introduced his main thoughts on the ego, self-awareness, and consciousness, and moved away from Husserl's phenomenology here. This work is, therefore, important for understanding Sartre's critique of Husserl's thinking of the relation of the ego to others, which is the topic of this thesis. This chapter will give an overview of Sartre's critical enterprise of Husserl's phenomenology. In the first paragraph, Sartre's critique of Husserl's transcendental ego will be captured. It is in this part that Sartre's work *The Transcendence of the Ego* is of importance. The second paragraph will cover Sartre's other major work, *Being and Nothingness*, and his critique of Husserl's attempt to escape the problem of solipsism. Solipsism, a problem that is connected to the existence of others, is something that Husserl was confronted with in his transcendental understanding of the ego. Since this problem is connected to the existence of others, it is of great importance for this investigation. The critique Sartre expressed of Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity will then be analysed further. All these steps, from the ego to solipsism to the relation to others, will give an understanding of the critical relation of Sartre to Husserl.

1.1 The transcendental ego

Sartre's thinking of the ego and its relation to consciousness is important for his later critique of the existence of others. It is, therefore, that I will investigate his critique of Husserl's transcendental ego first. Sartre starts his work TE by introducing his claim that the ego is "neither formally, nor materially *in* consciousness".¹ This claim shows Sartre's rejection of Husserl's transcendental ego. Sartre explains this on page 35, where he says that Husserl, like Kant, discovered the transcendental consciousness, a consciousness that can be grasped by the phenomenological reduction or epoché. Sartre describes Husserl's transcendental consciousness as a consciousness which is accessible to all of us when the reduction is performed and which constitutes our empirical consciousness. This empirical consciousness is

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: The Noonday Press, 1960), 31.

a consciousness “in the world”.² Sartre’s critique of Husserl’s transcendental consciousness becomes visible here. Sartre criticizes the transcendental ego, the ego that is in consciousness, and wonders whether this type of ego is necessary. He asks: “is not this psychic and psycho-physical me enough? Need one double it with a transcendental I, a structure of absolute consciousness?”³ It becomes clear that Sartre isn’t on the same page as Husserl. For him, the empirical ego is enough and he argues that it wasn’t necessary for Husserl to introduce a transcendental ego to consciousness. Sartre explains that the transcendental ego served as a unifying and individualizing feature in Husserl. However, there is no transcendental ego necessary to unify and individualize consciousness at all. This is the case, because 1) consciousness unifies itself, and 2) consciousness is a totality that is separated from other totalities of the same type.⁴ Sartre thus maintains a different notion of consciousness than Husserl does. He argues that “the transcendental I is the death of consciousness”⁵ and understands consciousness as a consciousness that is absolute and conscious of itself. While maintaining this different conception of consciousness, Sartre criticizes Husserl for introducing the transcendental I to consciousness. He concludes:

The phenomenological conception of consciousness renders the unifying and individualizing role of the I totally useless. It is consciousness, on the contrary, which makes possible the unity and the personality of my I. The transcendental I, therefore, has no *raison d’être*.⁶

Sartre has thus argued that Husserl was not necessary to introduce the transcendental ego, it does not add anything to consciousness and is therefore useless. Not only is the transcendental ego not necessary, according to Sartre, it also opposes Sartre’s very own conception of consciousness and the ego. He argues that placing the ego within consciousness, as Husserl does, harms the spontaneity of consciousness and threatens human freedom. Therefore, Sartre argues that the ego, the psycho-physical me, is exterior to consciousness. This means that the ego is a transcendent for consciousness, just like other objects in the world. Husserl’s transcendental ego, an ego that is immanent to consciousness, is thereby criticized.⁷

² Ibid., 35.

³ Ibid., 36.

⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁷ Ibid., 41.

The fact that the ego is not immanent to consciousness is also shown in Sartre's distinction between reflected and unreflected consciousness. Unreflected, or non-positional consciousness, does not "inhabit" an I. This is shown in a memorization of this unreflected consciousness. Sartre explains this by the example of running after a streetcar. When I run after a streetcar, there are two types of consciousnesses: first there is consciousness in which I am absorbed in the act and where there is a consciousness of the car that is driving ahead of me, and, secondly, there is a consciousness that memorizes this moment where I was running after the car.⁸ This example shows that there are objects in the world that constitute the unity of my experience, the streetcar that is driving ahead of me, but the 'I' in the unreflected consciousness has disappeared. It is only in the reflective act that the I can appear. The I that appears in this reflective act is a transcendent object. This transcendent I, this ego, cannot be reduced in the phenomenological reduction of Husserl.⁹ According to Sartre, then, the source of consciousness can only be consciousness itself.¹⁰

Sartre moves away from Husserl's thinking by arguing for another conception of the relation between consciousness and the ego. The ego, for Sartre, is exterior to consciousness, and not, as Husserl thought, immanent to it. He notes that Husserl's transcendental consciousness leads to the problem of solipsism and argues that Husserl cannot overcome this problem by remaining in the transcendental sphere. In the following paragraph, I will capture Sartre's critique of solipsism in Husserl and his critique of the relation of the ego to others. These topics are covered in Sartre's later work *Being and Nothingness* (BN), which is the work I will focus on now.

1.2 Solipsism and the relation to others

In TE, Sartre already noted that Husserl's conception of the ego "does not seem to us capable of unsettling a determined and intelligent solipsist". This is the case, according to Sartre, because Husserl's transcendental ego is a structure of consciousness and, therefore, is always possible to oppose consciousness to other existents. Sartre hoped to refute solipsism by arguing that the ego is exterior to consciousness and that I am obliged to accept the real existence of other egos.¹¹ However, he later acknowledged that understanding the ego as exterior to consciousness does not deal with the threat of solipsism properly. Another attempt is made in BN. In this work, Sartre, says the following:

⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁹ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰ Ibid., 52.

¹¹ Ibid., 103.

Formerly I believed that I could escape solipsism by refuting Husserl's concept of the existence of the Transcendental Ego. At that time I thought that since I had emptied my consciousness of its subject, nothing remained there which was privileged as compared to the Other. But actually although I am still persuaded that the hypothesis of a transcendental subject is useless and disastrous, abandoning it does not help one bit to solve the question of the existence of Others.¹²

There must be another way to approach the problem of solipsism. Sartre noticed that there is a connection to the Other that is realized through knowledge in Husserl's account of arguing for the existence of the Other. For Sartre, the distinction between Me and the Other cannot appear in such an exterior negation. On the contrary, the distinction between the Other and Myself appears in the interiority of each of us. This interiority cannot be approached in terms of knowledge. Sartre deprives Husserl of approaching the distinction through knowledge, where my body is separated from the Other, and through which the transcendental I can constitute the Other as alter ego.¹³ Sartre argues that Husserl could not reply to the solipsist and could not refute solipsism. Husserl would say, according to Sartre, that the existence of the Other is as sure as that of the world. As a consequence, Sartre goes on, in Husserl "the existence of the world is measured ... by the knowledge which I have of it; the case will not be otherwise for the existence of the Other." While Husserl is not able to understand the relation as other than a connection to knowledge, Sartre claims that "Husserl can not escape solipsism any more than Kant could."¹⁴ That Husserl thus approached the problem of solipsism through an epistemological perspective, is what Sartre is critical of.

The problem of solipsism offers a bridge to Husserl's understanding of the ego's relation to others in the world. Husserl tried to refute solipsism, as we have just seen, and constitutes a theory of intersubjectivity that overcomes this problem. What does Sartre think of this theory of Husserl? And what is it that he rejects in Husserl's approach?

To offer an answer to these questions, we need to know what makes the relation between me and others possible. Sartre analyses Husserl's contribution on page 316, in which he writes that Husserl answers this question by saying that the Other makes the constitution of the world possible, the Other is even the condition of the constitution of the world. For Husserl, Sartre

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 318.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 318.

goes on, the world is inter-monadic. This means that the Other is part of the meaning of objects: “he is the veritable guarantee of the object’s objectivity”.¹⁵ Since the empirical ego forms a part of this world, the Other must also be necessary for the constitution of my self. In this regard, Sartre says that:

If I am to doubt the existence of my friend Pierre or of others in general, than inasmuch as this existence is in principle outside of my experience I must of necessity doubt also my concrete being, my empirical reality as a professor having this or that tendency, these habits, this particular character. There is no privilege of my self: my empirical ego and the other’s empirical ego appear in the world at the same time.¹⁶

Even though Sartre thinks that Husserl already makes some progress compared to classical theorists, he does have some critical points to add. When my empirical ego is not privileged over the Other, Husserl retains the transcendental ego. And it is this ego that Sartre is critical of. Now that Husserl is arguing for such a transcendental ego, he fails to describe an intersubjective theory between both my transcendental ego and the transcendental egos of others. According to Sartre, Husserl remains on the empirical level when he explains intersubjective relations. However, Husserl must explain the relation on the transcendental level since the Other can never appear as empirical Other in his theory, but is always the transcendental subject to whom this empirical ego refers. The real problem is that Husserl does not explain how transcendental subjects, that are, subjects that are beyond experience, are connected to each other.¹⁷ For Sartre, this is Husserl’s failure. He continues his critique by stating that the transcendental Other, as Husserl understands it, is making intersubjectivity impossible. This is the case because the transcendental Other is beyond experience and is distinguished from the empirical ego. The transcendental Other must then be a category or meaning instead of being a real empirical subject. This is problematic for understanding intersubjective relations because the subject can never encounter the Other in concrete experience.¹⁸ In this critique, it becomes clear that Sartre noted the epistemological layer in Husserl: “because Husserl has reduced being to a series of meanings, the only connection which he has been able to establish between my being and that of the other is a connection of knowledge.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., 316.

¹⁶ Ibid., 316.

¹⁷ Ibid., 317.

¹⁸ Ibid., 317.

¹⁹ Ibid., 318.

For Sartre, it is thus the epistemological approach of Husserl that withholds him from solving the problem of solipsism. Husserl can never escape solipsism when remaining in the epistemological realm. Furthermore, it is because Husserl understands subjects as transcendental, that the being of those subjects can only be meanings or categories. There is no connection between the transcendental subject and the empirical subject, which makes the experience of the other consciousness impossible. Therefore, Husserl cannot speak of an intersubjective relation between Me and the Other.

In this chapter the critical relation of Sartre to Husserl's thinking on intersubjectivity is investigated. That Sartre criticized Husserl's transcendental ego is of significant importance for his critique of solipsism and the relation to others. This is so because Husserl is faced to the problem of solipsism when understanding the ego as transcendental. When everything is reduced, and the transcendental subject remains, how can Husserl then relate this transcendental subject to the transcendental Other? Sartre notes that this transcendental subject makes intersubjectivity impossible. Moreover, Husserl did not explain the relation of the transcendental ego to the transcendental Other, but remained in the empirical sphere, where he only explained the relation of the empirical ego to the empirical Other. The main point that Sartre makes is that Husserl is taking an epistemological approach in his thinking of the ego and of its relation to the Other. This is problematic since I can never be sure of an Other out there when explaining the Other's existence in terms of knowledge. Sartre thus criticized this epistemological thinking and argues from an ontological perspective, which will be further evaluated in the third chapter of this thesis. Before going further on Sartre's ontological thinking, I will first examine Levinas's critique of Husserl's intersubjective thinking.

Chapter 2: Levinas's critique of Husserl's phenomenology

Levinas is critical of Husserl's phenomenological thinking. He was inspired by Husserl, but, like Sartre, criticized and distanced from Husserlian thinking. In this chapter, I will show the critical relation of Levinas to Husserl. This chapter will have the same structure as the previous chapter, which means that I will first investigate Levinas's critique of the transcendental ego, then move on to the problem of solipsism, and at last, explain Levinas's critique of Husserl's thinking on the relation of the ego to others. At the end of the chapter, Levinas's critique of Husserl's notion of intersubjectivity will be clear.

2.1: The ego possessed by the world

I begin this examination with Levinas's critique of Husserl's noesis-noema structure of consciousness. This structure denotes the subject-object relation where thoughts are aimed at objects.²⁰ Levinas criticizes Husserl's noesis-noema correlation and says that this formal structure must be broken first and must be constituted by something else: ethical relations. This is the case because theoretical thought cannot constitute truth.²¹ This structure is connected to Husserl's thinking of intentionality, a concept that Levinas also criticizes. In *Existence and existents*, Levinas writes that Husserl's intentionality is neutralized and disincarnate. For Levinas, intentionality, on the contrary, is animated through desire. Because in desire, the ego is absorbed with the desirable.²² Moreover, in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas says that the intentional structure of consciousness, which is, a consciousness of... , cannot deal properly with desire. Desire is, Levinas argues, an intention that is "radically different from theoretical aim, and the practice that theory involves."²³ Levinas thus criticizes Husserl's conception of intentionality and the noesis-noema structure of consciousness and argues that the ego is not turning towards the world or existence, but, on the contrary, is "enthralled by it". Moreover, Levinas continues, "one possesses existence, but is also possessed by it".²⁴ This means that Levinas criticizes Husserl's thought that the ego is immanent to consciousness. The ego, according to Levinas, cannot be understood as immanent to consciousness but must be understood in its living in the world, in enjoyment,

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

²² Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), 37.

²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

and in being involved in the world. This does not mean that Husserl does not think that the ego ‘lives’ in the world, but it means that Husserl thinks that the ego that gives meaning to the world is found in its pure essence. For Husserl, it is thus the pure or transcendental ego that is important. The primacy of the ego is the primacy of the transcendental ego in its pure form. And this is exactly what Levinas is critical of. The transcendental or pure ego cannot be primary because, Levinas argues, the ego is always engaged in a world. That Levinas is critical of Husserl’s thought that the ego is immanent is made clear in his dissertation, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, in which he writes:

In many texts, Husserl suggests that he doesn’t think the theory of pure immanence is contradictory and therefore thinks that consciousness can exist without the world. If we limit ourselves to describing the constitution of objects in individual consciousness, in an ego, we will never reach objects as they are in concrete life but will reach only an abstraction.²⁵

Hence, Levinas is critical of Husserl’s thought that the constitution of objects is found in an individual consciousness, an ego. Furthermore, in *Existence and existents*, Levinas states that: “Where the continual play of our relations with the world is interrupted we find neither death nor the “pure ego”, but the anonymous state of being”.²⁶ According to Levinas, we can never come to the pure, transcendental ego without reaching an abstraction or an anonymous state of being. The ego has to be considered as a being that is engaged in the world and, more importantly, an ego that is confronted to other egos.

2.2 Criticizing the existence of others in Husserl

The transcendental ego of Husserl is criticized by Levinas because this ego is immanent to consciousness and is not engaged in the empirical world. This takes us to the next aspect of the critique of Levinas of Husserl: the problem of solipsism. Like Sartre, Levinas expresses critique of Husserl’s epistemological approach for overcoming solipsism.

Solipsism, for Levinas, is a problem that is connected to reason and knowledge. In *Time and the Other*, he argues that “reason and light consummate the solitude of a being as a being”, and “solipsism is (...) the very structure of reason.”²⁷ Even though Levinas does not name

²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, trans. André Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 150.

²⁶ Levinas, *Existence and existents*, 21.

²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 65.

Husserl here explicitly, it is a thought that is directed to Husserl's thinking. For Husserl emphasizes the importance of knowledge and the cogito in his intersubjective thinking. Levinas is critical of the importance of reason, since in the universality of reason, "reason never finds any other reason to speak". To overcome solipsism, the solitude must be broken. Husserl cannot break this solitude since, for him, intentionality of consciousness is directed to others. However, intentionality, Levinas argues, has the element of light that makes us master of the exterior world, but through which we cannot come into relation with others.²⁸ With light, Levinas means that "through which something is other than myself, but already as it came from me."²⁹ That Husserl takes an epistemological approach to overcome solipsism, is also noted by Levinas in his famous work *Totality and Infinity*. Here, he argues that Husserl's way of overcoming solipsism is to understand the Other as an alter ego. Levinas formulates his concern regarding Husserl's conception of the Other as follows:

But the relationship with this 'thing in itself' does not lie within the limits of a cognition that begins as a constitution of a 'living body', as according to Husserl's celebrated analysis in the fifth meditation of his Cartesian Meditations. The constitution of the Other's body in what Husserl calls the 'primordial sphere' the transcendental 'coupling' of the objects thus constituted with my own body itself experienced from within as an 'I can', the comprehension of this body of the Other as an alter ego – this analysis dissumilates, in each of its stages which are taken as a description of constitution, mutations of object constitution in a relation with the Other – which is as primordial as the constitution from which it is to be derived. The primordial sphere, which corresponds to what we call the same, turns to be absolutely other only on call from the Other.³⁰

This quote clearly shows the movement away from Husserl and the direction that Levinas will take. The Other as alter ego is putting the Other in the ego's own terms, shining light upon the Other through reason and knowledge. But this is not how we should understand the Other. Levinas argues that the Other calls me and that I cannot grasp this Other. The Other must be understood in its alterity and cannot be reduced to the Same. With the Same, Levinas means that which belongs to me and which I can comprehend and grasp. This is contrasted to the Other: that what is absolutely Other and what I cannot comprehend. The Other does not form

²⁸ Ibid., 65.

²⁹ Ibid., 64.

³⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 67.

a totality with me, the Same, and therefore, I am not capable of capturing the Other through my reason and knowledge. This way, Levinas criticizes Husserl's thinking of the Other as alter ego and thereby criticizes Husserl's attempt to overcome the problem of solipsism.

Levinas's critique of Husserl's conception of the Other as alter ego is closely connected to his general critique of Husserl's thinking on the relation of the ego to others. Understanding the Other as alter ego is already indicating the nature of this relation. The central theme of Levinas's critique is the alterity of the Other. That the Other is absolutely Other means that we cannot bring the Other under a common concept, a category familiar to us. The Other understood in its absolute alterity is thus opposed to Husserl's thought of the Other as alter ego and to his thoughts of intentionality. For Levinas, the Other cannot be approached from the sphere of the Same, from my primordial sphere, but must be understood as belonging to the sphere of the Other, because:

It is the fearful face-to-face situation of a relationship without intermediary, without meditations. Here the interpersonal situation is not the of itself indifferent and reciprocal relationship of two interchangeable terms. The other as other is not only an alter ego. He is what I am not: he is the weak one whereas I am the strong one; he is the poor one, "the widow and the orphan."³¹

This captures the most important thought of Levinas and it shows the critical enterprise against Husserl's thinking of the Other. In the beginning of this chapter we have seen that Levinas is critical of Husserl's thinking of the transcendental ego. The ego should not be understood as immanent to consciousness and Husserl was wrong in understanding the transcendental ego as primary. This led us to analysing Levinas's critical remarks of the problem of solipsism that arose in Husserl's transcendental thinking. For Levinas, solipsism is closely related to reason and knowledge and because Husserl approaches the other in terms of knowledge, he cannot overcome the solitude of the ego and thus cannot escape the problem of solipsism. That the Other must be understood in its absolute alterity marks Levinas's rejection of Husserl's intersubjectivity. This is so since Levinas argues that we cannot shine our light upon the Other and cannot grasp the Other. The Other comes to us from a sphere unknown and unable to comprehend. Husserl, on the other hand, argues for a relation to the Other as alter ego, where I constitute this Other by transferring the knowledge of myself to that of an Other. For him, I can constitute the Other by the knowledge that I have of myself. Levinas's critique has an ethical

³¹ Levinas, *Existence and existents*, 95.

character. That Levinas's approach in criticizing Husserl can be understood as ethical, will be argued for in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Evaluation of Sartre's and Levinas's critiques of Husserl

That both Sartre and Levinas are critical of Husserl's notion of the ego and how this ego relates to others is laid out in the previous two chapters. The being of the ego, the problem of solipsism, and the notion of intersubjectivity have all been discussed. The question that I will answer in this chapter is how Sartre's critique differs from Levinas's critique. This question is of importance for this thesis because it shows that both philosophers have similar intentions in criticizing Husserl, but that they take fundamentally different perspectives in their critical enterprises. To discuss the differences between the two critiques, I will stick to the three aspects that I have taken into consideration in the previous chapters, that were, the ego, solipsism, and intersubjectivity. In this chapter, I will argue that, on the basis of the evaluation of the similarities and differences in the critiques, Sartre and Levinas criticize Husserl from different perspectives. Sartre takes an ontological approach in criticizing Husserl and Levinas takes an ethical approach. I will argue that it is because of these different approaches that Sartre's and Levinas's critiques of the ego, solipsism, and the relation to others, are different. My argument will show that Sartre's critique is constituted by his own ontological thinking of consciousness and intersubjectivity and that it is this ontological perspective that distinguishes his critique from that of Levinas. Levinas, as I will argue, takes an ethical approach in criticizing Husserl. Which approach can really recognize the troubles of Husserl's intersubjective theory and which philosopher is more consistent in criticizing Husserl, will be investigated in the next chapters.

3.1: The ego criticized

This evaluation of the differences between Sartre's and Levinas's critiques will start with their critiques of Husserl's ego. Sartre started his critical enterprise by questioning the necessity of introducing a transcendental ego. He argued that Husserl didn't have to introduce such an ego and that the transcendental ego only leads to an opacity where consciousness loses its spontaneous character and ability for freedom. Is this approach of Sartre similar to that of Levinas? Levinas never explicitly said anything about Husserl feeling necessitated to introduce the transcendental ego. From some of the critical remarks he makes, we are allowed to think that he is in line with Sartre's thought that the transcendental ego does not really add anything to his thinking about consciousness and the ego. This can be seen in the fact that Levinas criticizes Husserl for constituting an ego that is immanent to consciousness. Husserl thus should not have introduced the transcendental ego because an ego should not be

immanent to consciousness, but must be absorbed in the world where he is confronted to others. For both Sartre and Levinas, Husserl should not have introduced such a transcendental ego. Although their critiques seem to be very similar at first sight since both argue that the ego must be exterior to consciousness, there are still some notable differences between their critiques. Sartre criticized Husserl's ego being immanent to consciousness by maintaining a different conception of consciousness than Husserl. Consciousness, for Sartre, has the character of spontaneity and constitutes its own unity. There is no room for an ego in consciousness and the ego should therefore be exterior to consciousness. This critique differs from that of Levinas, because Levinas criticized Husserl's thoughts of the ego being immanent by arguing that Husserl's pure ego is only an abstraction and that this ego, which gives meaning to the world, is not understood as a being that is enthralled in the world. More specifically, for Levinas, the ego must be living in the world where it is in contact with others and through which it can give meaning to the world. Here again, it is not the case that Husserl does not place the ego in the world, since he does place the empirical ego in the world. However, he does argue that the transcendental ego is the ego that gives meaning to the world and this ego is not enthralled by the world since it is put into brackets and reduced.

In this difference it can be noted that Sartre and Levinas criticize Husserl's transcendental ego from different perspectives. Because Sartre is moving away from Husserl's thinking of the ego within consciousness and maintains a different conception of the being of consciousness and the being of the ego. Consciousness, for Sartre, can be reflective as well as non-reflective. In these modes of consciousness the ego is shown to be exterior to consciousness. Sartre's conception of consciousness is decisive for criticizing Husserl's ego. This was first seen in TE, where he reverses the terms and argues that it is consciousness that produces the ego instead of the other way around.³² Later, in BN, Sartre develops his thoughts on consciousness in relation to the ego and distinguishes being into beings that are in-itself and beings that are for-itself. The being for-itself is a reflecting being and being-in-itself denotes the unreflected consciousness, a consciousness that does not inhabit an 'I'. Here the distinction of reflective and unreflective consciousness of TE is further developed. Moreover, it is in Sartre's conception of being and consciousness that the ontological perspective comes to the fore. Sartre's thinking is firstly and mostly ontological, since he approaches human reality through the structure of the being of consciousness. I argue that Sartre criticized Husserl's thoughts of the ego from this ontological perspective. That this is the case is seen in the fact that Sartre

³² Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, 97.

criticized Husserl's ego being interior to consciousness which is connected to his thought that there is no ego in consciousness since consciousness can also happen to not 'inhabit an I'. It can be concluded that there is a connection between Sartre's ontological perspective and his critique of Husserl's transcendental ego.

Levinas, on the other hand, does not criticize Husserl's ego from this ontological perspective. He argues that the ego should be understood as a being inside the world among others. This thought is marked by the division between the Other and the Same. For Levinas, Husserl namely approaches the transcendental ego as an intentional being, where the ego is always directed to something in the world. The movement, in Husserl, goes from the ego to the world. Levinas criticizes this thought and argues that it is the Other that confronts Me in my being and my ego and can, therefore, not be understood as the one from which others and the world can be grasped. That I am not an ego that is directed to others or capture others in knowledge, marks Levinas's ethical thoughts. For him, the relation to others is first ethical. It is only on ethics that epistemology or ontology can be based. Levinas understands ethics as my ego being confronted to the Other. The Other, as distinguished from the Same, speaks to me and shows me her vulnerability. In this confrontation with the Other, I am obligated to obey her command and to be responsible to her. It is in this ethical relation to the Other, the relation that comes before all else, that the critique of Husserl's ego is situated. The transcendental ego, the ego that is reduced from the world and which is directed from the sphere of the Same to that what is Other, is criticized, precisely for not acknowledging that it is the absolute and infinite Other that comes to me.

Levinas does not criticize Husserl from an ontological perspective as Sartre does. Ontology does not form the relation between Me and the Other first. Although both Sartre and Levinas criticized Husserl's ego for being immanent and interior to consciousness, they do so from different points of view. Sartre approaches Husserl's failure in ontological terms, where he criticizes the relation of the ego to consciousness. Levinas, on the other hand, argues against Husserl's immanent ego in ethical terms. For him, the ego cannot be immanent since it is always first confronted to the Other.

3.2 An ontological and an ethical perspective on solipsism

The next aspect in which Sartre and Levinas could be thought to be similar in their critical notions is the problem of solipsism. Both express critique of this problem that arises in Husserl's transcendental thinking. For both Sartre and Levinas, Husserl is confronted to the

problem of solipsism because he approaches the existence of others through knowledge. The knowledge that I have of myself is transferred to the Other, and it is this way that the Other as alter ego is constituted. Sartre investigated this problem of solipsism two times, first in TE and secondly in his later work BN. I will focus on this latter work since he rejected his earlier attempt constituted in TE. According to Sartre, Husserl could not escape solipsism because he approached the existence of the other as being measured by the knowledge the ego has of it. Sartre claims that:

Because Husserl has reduced being to a series of meanings, the only connection which he has been able to establish between my being and that of the other is a connection of knowledge.³³

Sartre thus criticized the importance of knowledge in Husserl's understanding of the existence of the Other. Levinas also criticized Husserl's epistemological thinking. He argues that the existence of others can not be determined by knowledge. Knowledge, light, or reason, Levinas says, only leads to solitude. This solitude can only be broken when the Other is understood in its absolute alterity.³⁴

Although Sartre and Levinas both criticize the epistemological view of Husserl that makes him vulnerable for solipsism, there are also some differences between the two critiques. This difference can best be captured in their reasons why the existence of others cannot be understood in terms of knowledge.

Sartre turned against Husserl's epistemological thinking of the existence of others for its idealistic approach. Idealism, Sartre argued, cannot be a valid solution to the problem of solipsism. Sartre states that there are two solutions for the idealists:

(...) either to get rid of the concept of the Other completely and prove that he is useless to the constitution of my experience, or to affirm the real existence of the Other – that is, to posit a real, extra-empirical communication between consciousnesses.³⁵

The first solution for the idealist, Sartre continues, is known as solipsism. Although most philosophers, including Husserl, were confronted by solipsism, they still affirmed the existence of others. However, they can only affirm this existence of others by common

³³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 318.

³⁴ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 74.

³⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 310.

sense.³⁶ The existence of the Other is not something we can approach by knowledge. He is thus critical of Husserl's epistemological approach in escaping solipsism and argues that it is even impossible to do so by understanding the existence of the Other in terms of knowledge.

Sartre takes another approach and says that the Other can only be constituted qua being other:

This is because the Other is not only the one whom I see but the one *who sees me*. I aim at the Other in so far as he is a connected system of experiences out of reach in which I figure as one object among others.³⁷

Sartre states that in determining the Other qua other, the limits of my knowledge must be exceeded. This is so because I transcend the field of my experience in getting to this system in which the Other is other. Sartre argues that solipsism can be overcome by getting to the nature of the system in which the Other is determined as other instead of showing that I can have knowledge of an existing Other. Here, Sartre moves away from approaching the Other's existence through the knowledge I can have of him/her. It is not the case that Sartre removes knowledge or epistemology entirely in his thinking, but he only takes ontology to be primary. The other qua Other, the way he escapes solipsism, is shown in the ontological relation between consciousnesses. Sartre claims that we encounter the Other instead of constitute him.³⁸ By moving into the ontological perspective, instead of the epistemological one, to deal with the problem of solipsism, Sartre argues that it is not possible to validate or invalidate the Other's self, since the Other can never be a probability, but that the structure of the Other can only be revealed. This structure of the Other contains the possibility of questioning me in my being.³⁹ How does this work?

Sartre distinguished types of being that the Other can be in relation to me: the Other is approaching me either as a being-subject or as a being-object. When the Other is a being-as-subject, I am the object, and when the other is the object, I am the subject. We can, according to Sartre, never be the same type of being as the Other in an encounter. This is the ontological negation that Sartre denotes in the encounter between two consciousnesses, two beings. Sartre uses this encounter between two different types of consciousnesses to show the Other qua other. Here, we can note the ontological perspective again. I can be a being-for-itself or a being-in-itself for the Other. There is, moreover, a third ontological structure of being: being-

³⁶ Ibid., 311.

³⁷ Ibid., 310.

³⁸ Ibid., 336.

³⁹ Ibid., 337-338.

for-others. This structure will be further explained in the next paragraph. In this paragraph, I argue that Sartre is criticizing Husserl's way of dealing with solipsism, namely by approaching the existence of the Other through knowledge, and that in doing so, he takes an ontological perspective. Through the ontological perspective, Sartre argues that solipsism must be approached by showing the encounter between two types of being: being-as-object and the being-as-subject. It is not possible, as Husserl did, to escape solipsism by starting from my transcendental being to show the existence of the others. We must, on the contrary, show the Other qua other and how the being of the other encounters my being in a concrete situation.

This differs from Levinas's critique of Husserl's epistemological approach to the problem of solipsism. Levinas criticized Husserl's method of overcoming solipsistic thinking. For him, Husserl could not deal with this problem properly by arguing for the Other as alter ego. That Levinas criticizes the conception of the Other as alter ego has everything to do with his critique of reducing what is Other to the Same. As I have explained earlier, Levinas distinguished the Other and the Same and argues that these two 'spheres' can never form a totality. The Other is absolutely Other. That there is a separation between the Same, the sphere to which I belong, and the Other, the sphere to which the Other belongs, is marking Levinas's critique of Husserl and indicates his own approach to the existence of others. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas suggested that solipsism can only be overcome when breaking the solitude. This solitude can be broken by the absolute alterity of the Other. For Levinas says:

To be sure, the other [l'Autre] that is announced does not possess this existing as the subject possesses it; its hold over my existing is mysterious. It is not unknown, but unknowable, refractory to all light.⁴⁰

The Other cannot be known, since it is unknowable. This clearly shows that Levinas takes another approach than Husserl. Where Husserl argued for the Other as an alter ego in overcoming the problem of solipsism, Levinas argues that the Other is ungraspable and unknowable. I argue that Levinas takes an ethical perspective for this critique. The ethical relation to the Other namely presupposes the otherness of the Other. For Levinas, the Other cannot be brought under a concept of the Same, because it is in an ethical relationship to this Other, where the Other is absolutely Other. This absolute otherness of the Other makes me

⁴⁰ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 75.

responsible for her and awakens in me a desire to be good. The Other, from its absolute alterity, commands me not to annihilate its otherness. It is thus through an ethical perspective that Levinas criticizes Husserl for constituting an alter ego to deal with solipsism and for arguing for another conception of the Other: the Other as unknowable.

This paragraph showed that Sartre and Levinas both criticized Husserl for approaching the problem of solipsism in terms of knowledge. However, the contents of their critiques are different. Sartre argues that the existence of the Other cannot be proved by showing the knowledge I have of this Other and that solipsism can only be dealt with by showing the Other qua other. The encounter with the other is primarily ontological and it is in the distinction between two types of being that the Other as other can be experienced. Levinas, on the other hand, argued from an ethical perspective since he criticized Husserl for constituting an alter ego that remains in the realm of knowledge. First, the encounter with the Other is ethical, where the Other, as absolutely Other, commands me to be good and responsible for her. It has thus become evident here that Sartre's approach in criticizing solipsism in Husserl differs from Levinas's approach, where Sartre is taking ontology to be primary for the existence of the Other, and Levinas ethics.

3.3 Against the epistemological approach of intersubjectivity

Both the thoughts of the ego and of the problem of solipsism leads us to this third, and last, aspect of the critical relations of Sartre and Levinas to Husserl. Husserl's thoughts on intersubjectivity can be found in his work *Cartesian Meditations* and it is this work that is criticized by Sartre and Levinas. Both their critical views are going further on their thoughts on the solipsism problem that is analysed in the previous paragraph. Those critical remarks will therefore form the basis for the analysis of their critiques on intersubjectivity in Husserl here. In this paragraph, it will become clear that the difference between the critical enterprises of Sartre and Levinas lies in the different approaches: ontology and ethics, as well as was the case in the previous two paragraphs where I analysed the difference in the critiques of the ego and the critiques of solipsism in Husserl.

Considering the relation to others, intersubjectivity, Sartre turned away from Husserl by arguing that Husserl didn't successfully approach this relation. Husserl argued for the transcendental ego, but the intersubjective relation was not described on this transcendental level. Sartre, therefore, criticized Husserl and claimed that when the relation would have been described on the transcendental level, it would then only be a description of a category of

meaning. The relation to others, according to Sartre, shows itself in the concrete experience of the encounter between me and the Other. In this encounter, as is explicated before, Me and the Other are different beings. I can either be a subject or an object for the Other. The being-as-object is dominated by the being-as-subject. This ontological relation is explained by Sartre through the experience of the Look. The Look denotes the situation in which the Other looks at me. The other that does the looking, is the subject. I am objectified through the Look of the other-as-subject. When the Other looks at me, I become aware of myself as an object. In this situation the Other-as-subject has alienated me of my freedom and I am only concerned with how the Other sees me as an object. Moreover, the Look does not necessarily have to be performed by a factual Other: “But the look will be given just as well on occasion where there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain”.⁴¹ In these cases it is namely probable that there is an Other looking at me. The Look is further explained and filled in by concrete experiences. Sartre names, among others, the experience of shame. It is through shame that the Other’s look is revealed. When I, for example, am spying on my friend through a keyhole, and I hear footsteps coming toward me, I feel ashamed for being caught in my spying act. In order for me to feel shame, there must be an Other, because I cannot be ashamed for myself; I am ashamed before the Other. It is in this experience of shame too, that Sartre rejects the primacy of knowledge. He namely states that: “it is shame or pride which makes me *live*, not *know* the situation of being looked at”.⁴² It is thus my being-looked-at by the other that conditions my own being.

The intersubjective relation is thus described by Sartre as an ontological relation where the one negates the other. Through this encounter between the two consciousnesses, the ontological perspective is visible. There can not be a transfer from my ego to that of the Other, as is the case in Husserl, because the Other is always a being that I am not. So, the relation of me to the Other, the intersubjective relation, is for Sartre based on being.

Levinas does not base the intersubjective relation on being. Instead, he explains the relation as ethical first. For Levinas, the ethical ground finds its expression in the face to face relation of me to the Other. The face, naked and vulnerable, speaks to me and commands me. This face is not a representation or appearance of the Other, it is the invisible, the absolute Other, a distance that cannot be covered.⁴³ In speaking of the face positively, and not merely

⁴¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 346.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 350.

⁴³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34.

negatively, Levinas can discover the responsibility for the Other. Responsibility is first a responsibility for the Other and thus not initially a responsibility for myself. It is in his appeal that I am responsible, and I cannot be deaf to his appeal. This way, my responsibility “promotes my freedom by arousing my goodness”.⁴⁴ In my being responsible for the Other lies my freedom. It is thus the command of the face of the Other that makes me responsible for him. This is the ethical ground for understanding the intersubjective relation. In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas further says that “I analyze the inter-human relationship as if (...) his face, expressive in the Other, were what ordains me to serve him”.⁴⁵ However, for Levinas, this relation is not a relation of conflict. The face of the Other is encountered positively and is not conflictual, for: “this presentation is preeminently non-violence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As nonviolence it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the same and the other. It is peace.”⁴⁶

Here we can see that Levinas approaches the intersubjective relation from an ethical perspective. The relation is first ethical. This does not mean that ontology is excluded from the relation. Levinas does argue that the relation cannot be a relation within a totality of being and he therefore argues that there is ethics first. In this chapter, I have argued that Husserl’s epistemological thinking on intersubjectivity is criticized by Sartre and Levinas through different perspectives. Sartre has an ontological understanding of the ego, the problem of solipsism, and eventually the actual encounter of me to the other, whereas Levinas takes an ethical approach in his critique of these same aspects of Husserl’s theory. The differences between Sartre’s and Levinas’s critiques are thus constituted by the different perspectives they argue from. That I have argued that Sartre takes an ontological approach and Levinas an ethical approach in criticizing Husserl’s thinking on intersubjectivity is important for this thesis because it will form the basis for my claim that Levinas’s ethical perspective is more consistent than the ontological perspective of Sartre. I will argue for this claim in the following chapters.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 97.

⁴⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 203.

Chapter 4: The Alterity Argument

In the following three chapters (chapter 4, 5, and 6) I will argue that Levinas's critique of Husserl's thoughts on intersubjectivity is more consistent with his own thoughts on intersubjectivity than Sartre's critique of Husserl is with his ontological perspective on intersubjectivity. My arguments to support this thesis are divided into three topics: alterity (chapter 4), transcendence (chapter 5), and first philosophy (chapter 6). This chapter contains the first argument, the alterity-argument. In this argument, I will show that Sartre's conception of alterity is not consistent with his critique of Husserl's alter ego. To support this claim, I will use the insights of Cynthia Coe. She argues that the ontological relation of two consciousnesses in Sartre's theory implies a reciprocal and symmetrical relation between those consciousnesses. On the basis of this claim, I will show that Sartre commits himself to the same kind of notion of alter ego as Husserl did. Levinas, on the other hand, does have a different conception of alterity, a conception that is not relative or negative as for Sartre. His conception of absolute alterity is consistent with his critique of Husserl's alter ego. However, following the objection of Derrida, it can be contestable whether this notion of the absolute other can be justified. Derrida objects that the Other must already be recognized as an ego to argue for the alterity of the Other. This objection can be rejected by Levinas's thinking of substitution. With the insights of Bernasconi, who analysed Levinas's rejection of Derrida's objection, I will show that Levinas overcomes Derrida's critique and that this critique, therefore, cannot undermine Levinas's consistency in criticizing Husserl's alter ego.

4.1 Sartre and relative alterity

The fact that knowledge forms the basis of Husserl's alter ego is something that Sartre is critical of. However, as I will argue in this paragraph, Sartre's critique is not consistent with his ontological thinking of the encounter between two consciousnesses. This is the case because Sartre cannot confirm the Other's absolute alterity. What is Sartre's conception of alterity and how does this undermine his critique of Husserl's alter ego?

The otherness of the Other, alterity, can be found in Sartre's concept of the Look. I encounter the other through the experience of the Look. In this encounter the Other is an object for me when I am the subject, or the other way around, where I am the object for the Other when the Other is a subject for me. Approaching the Other as other, Sartre maintains a negative and relative understanding of alterity. Negative, because the Other is other when I negate him and alienate him of his freedom, or when this Other negates me, where I am being objectified by

him. Relative, because we can speak of the alterity of the Other only in relation to me. Sartre does not argue for absolute alterity. The fact that Sartre does not understand the alterity of the Other in its absoluteness, is also contested by Cynthia Coe in her chapter called: 'Fichte, Sartre and Levinas on the Problem with the Problem of Other Minds'. Coe argues that Sartre approaches the Other in ontological terms. Sartre explains how the Other changes my being and changes the relation to myself. But this other being that has such an influence on my own being, is understood as another subject who has an internal life that resembles my own.⁴⁷ This is so because the Other is also a consciousness and also has the capacity to be free. Both the Other and I want to objectify and dominate the other. Here we can see that the Other is also an alter ego for Sartre. The Other is thus not so absolutely other: the Other is a free consciousness, just like me. This conception of alterity, where Sartre implicitly understands the Other as alter ego, undermines his critical enterprise of Husserl's attempt to overcome the problem of solipsism. We have seen that Sartre criticized Husserl's solution by stating that Husserl remained in an epistemological perspective when he argued for the Other as alter ego. That Sartre now, himself, adopts a view where the Other's consciousness has the same intentions as mine, makes his critique of Husserl controversial.

The value of Coe's contribution is that she showed that the Other is understood by Sartre as an alter ego in the sense that my consciousness has the same characteristics as the consciousness of the Other. The alter ego can only be understood in this general account of consciousnesses. Sartre can respond that there is no such alter ego in his conception of the concrete encounter to the Other. This is the case because the Other then has the being of a not-me. A transfer based on analogy cannot take place in this encounter. So, Coe's argument is only valuable when considering the consciousness of Me and of the Other outside the concrete encounter between Me and the Other. Can we, therefore, really undermine Sartre's critique of Husserl's alter ego by arguing that alterity is only relative in his thinking of the intersubjective relation?

When investigating the concrete encounter closely, I think that Sartre's thoughts are not that far away from what he criticized Husserl of. This is due to his relative conception of alterity. For in this relative alterity of the Other, a transfer arises between my being and that of the Other in Sartre's account.

⁴⁷ Cynthia Coe, "Fichte, Sartre, and Levinas on the Problem with the Problem of Other Minds," in *The Palgrave Fichte Handbook*, ed. Steven Hoeltzel (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 489-492.

Since Sartre describes the Other-as-subject as a being who alienates me of my freedom and describes my being as being-a-subject similarly, we can conclude that there is an understanding of the Other's being. Sartre calls this the pre-ontological understanding. But when we do have this pre-ontological understanding of the Other and when in my being I understand the Other as a being of a different kind, then there is still a transfer from my being to the other. This transfer only differs from that of Husserl in the fact that there is not a transfer based on an analogy from my being to the Other, where the other mirrors my being. However, for Sartre there is a transfer from my being to the other's being because I can transfer from my being the other's being as not-being-me. Since the Other is either a subject or an object, I will be able to know the being of the Other through my own being. When I am being looked-at, I know that I am an object for the Other. This way, I also understand the Other-as-subject. It is thus in his conception of alterity as relative that Sartre makes a similar move as Husserl does. He argues for the existence of the Other by showing how this Other is a being that is not me, but this being of the Other can only be apprehended as a not-being-me through my own being. As a consequence, Sartre's critique of Husserl's alter ego is not that far away from his own solution of overcoming the problem of solipsism. I can only understand the Other through my own being. Sartre approaches the existence of the Other through being instead of through knowledge, but he still understands the existence of the Other through a transfer between my being and the Other's being, which is something he criticized Husserl of.

4.2 Levinas's absolute alterity

Levinas argues for the absolute alterity of the Other. I will show that his critique of Husserl's alter ego is consistent with his ethical theory of the Other by explaining his conception of absolute alterity. The critique Levinas expressed of Husserl's alter ego contained Levinas's approach of absolute alterity. He criticized Husserl for not accounting for the otherness of the Other. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas implicitly refers to Husserl, when he says:

The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with Mystery.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 75.

This quote emphasizes that Levinas is critical of Husserl's alter ego. He, on the contrary, claims that the Other is a mystery and that it is absolutely Other. Levinas compares the alterity of the other person to the alterity of death. He says, again in TO, that:

The unknown of death signifies that the very relationship with death cannot take place in the light, that the subject is in relationship with what does not come from itself. We could say it is in relationship with mystery.⁴⁹

The comparison he draws between the alterity of the Other and the alterity of death shows that this absolute otherness comes from the fact that we, subjects, cannot shine our light upon these 'mysteries' and that we have no knowledge of them. More explicitly, the Other is "not unknown but unknowable, refractory to all light".⁵⁰ Through this absolute alterity, where we do not experience the Other as something that comes from ourselves, as something we can shine light upon, but where the Other is coming from itself to us without us having any knowledge of this Other, we can be in relationship to this Other. It is my solitude that is broken by alterity. The act of knowledge, the act where light makes us master of the exterior world, only leads to solitude: we are "incapable of discovering a peer for us there".⁵¹ Our way out of solipsism must be a way out of the realm of knowledge and light. Because solitude is broken by absolute alterity, alterity that can be found in the other person, the subject is not in solitude anymore.

Levinas's conception of absolute alterity, therefore, does not contradict his critique of Husserl's alter ego. On the contrary, absolute alterity is the solution to the problem of other minds. Levinas paves a way out of the totality of knowledge because in this totality we cannot find the Other since this Other would then be presented by us and come from us and is a "transcendence wrapped in immanence"⁵². Levinas criticizes this epistemological view and directs us to a situation where the Other is absolutely other and where the solitude of the subject is disappeared.

Following Levinas's conception of absolute alterity, it can be questioned whether it is possible to argue for absolute alterity? This question is raised by Jacques Derrida. Derrida wonders whether it is possible to escape the thought that the other always needs to be an other than... . The other is always relative, because "how can the other be thought or said without

⁴⁹ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁵¹ Ibid., 65.

⁵² Ibid., 65.

reference”?⁵³ According to him, Levinas cannot criticize Husserl’s alter ego and at the same time argue for the absolute alterity of the Other. The Other cannot be understood in its absolute alterity, since “if I attained to the other immediately and originally, silently, in communion with the other’s own experience, the other would cease to be other”.⁵⁴ Moreover, Derrida emphasizes the importance of the alter ego in Husserl:

If the other was not recognized as ego, its entire alterity would collapse... The other as alter ego signifies the other as other, irreducible to my ego, precisely because it has the form of an ego. This is why; if you will see, he is face, can speak to me, understand me, and eventually command me.⁵⁵

Derrida thus suggests that the Other cannot be absolutely other and that we can only understand the Other when it is approached as alter ego. The problem that Derrida notes consists the distinction that Levinas makes between the Same and the Other. Levinas failed in his account of the alterity of the Other, according to Derrida, because the Other cannot be an Other unless the Other is itself the Same, an ego.⁵⁶ The critique of Derrida is mostly concerned with the failure of talking about absolute Other while rejecting the notion of the alter ego. According to Robert Bernasconi, this is the real quarrel between Levinas and Derrida.⁵⁷ However, Bernasconi also shows that Levinas can defend himself against this critique of Derrida by the notion of ‘substitution’ in his later work, *OWB*. Bernasconi argues that Levinas does not accept Derrida’s suggestion that the Other must be conceived as an ego. Because Levinas states that I am Other, Other without alienation.⁵⁸ Moreover, he emphasizes that Levinas’s concept of substitution makes it possible to put myself in the place of the Other, but still be me.⁵⁹ Levinas argues that I am “the-one-for-the-other”. This ‘for’ in ‘the-one-for-the-other’ is my responsibility for him.⁶⁰ This responsibility for another “is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made.”⁶¹ Substitution, which is signified by responsibility, rejects Derrida’s critique because it is in substitution that Levinas’s conception

⁵³ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 127.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁵⁶ Robert Bernasconi, “The Alterity of the Stranger and the Experience of the Alien,” in *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 72.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 77 and Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 109.

⁵⁹ Bernasconi, “The alterity of the Stranger,” 77.

⁶⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 100.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

of identity is transformed. Levinas distinguishes the ego from the self, where the self can now be a stranger herself. This, as Bernasconi also pointed out, contests Derrida's claim that there is no alterity in the ego, in the Same.⁶² In substitution, the self is responsible for the Other where it can put itself in the place of this Other. Levinas makes this conception of substitution explicitly clear on page 114, where he states the following:

This passivity undergone in proximity by the force of an alterity in me is the passivity of a recurrence to oneself which is not the alienation of an identity betrayed. What can it be but a substitution of me for the others? It is, however not an alienation, because the other in the same is my substitution for the other through responsibility, for which, I am summoned as someone irreplaceable. I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired.⁶³

Derrida's question concerning the absolute alterity of the other in Levinas is now answered. Levinas can speak of the Other in its absolute otherness and can still avoid alienation in the Same.

Since Levinas's conception of absolute alterity can stay 'intact' because of his notion of substitution, and since this understanding of the Other as absolutely other is not inconsistent with his critique of Husserl, Levinas's ethical perspective of the relation to the Other is plausible in this regard. In Sartre's ontological view, on the other hand, we did find an inconsistency in his conception of the alterity of the Other, which was relative and negative, and his critique of Husserl's alter ego. It must, therefore, be clear, through this alterity-argument, that Levinas's thinking on alterity, a concept defining his ethical theory of intersubjectivity and the basis for his critique of Husserl, is consistent, while Sartre's ontological approach of the alterity of the Other is not. This is the first argument for my thesis that Levinas's ethics is finding its advancement over Sartre's ontology in their critiques of Husserl's thinking on the relation to others.

⁶² Bernasconi, "The alterity of the Stranger," 77.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 114.

Chapter 5: The Transcendence Argument

With the, what I have named, Transcendence Argument, the second inconsistency in Sartre's work will be analysed. This argument centers around Sartre's and Levinas's thinking on solipsism and their approach to the existence of the Other. The inconsistency that I have found in Sartre's thinking has to do with his distinction between the encounter with the concrete Other and the experience of the transcendental Other. Those two types of 'the Other' are not consistent with his thought that solipsism can be escaped by understanding the encounter in the concrete, empirical experience. As support for my argument, I will evaluate Françoise Dastur's objection in 'The question of the other in French phenomenology', where she argues that Sartre cannot validly describe the encounter with the Other through the experience of the Look and of shame. Dastur objects Sartre's understanding of the transcendental Other and claims that this conception cannot relate to the description of the concrete encounter with the Other. However, I will further investigate Sartre's thinking and I will offer a possible response that Sartre could give. This response, then, will be analysed and I will argue at the end that this response cannot stop Sartre from being inconsistent in his thinking. This way the second inconsistency in Sartre's critique is found and because this inconsistency has a great deal to do with the solipsism problem, a problem Sartre noted in Husserl, his critical stance towards Husserl is not as strong as it might seem at first glance.

Levinas also maintains a conception of the transcendental Other. However, his understanding differs from that of Sartre and, as I will show, does not fall prey to the problem of solipsism. Levinas's thinking of the transcendental Other can be called into question as well. It can be suggested that the transcendence of the face of the Other leads to an abstraction through which ethics cannot be practical. I will, nevertheless, show that this suggestion concerning the abstract face of the Other in relation to concrete ethics, can be answered and that Levinas's critique of Husserl is consistent with his own intersubjective theory.

5.1 Sartre on the transcendental Other

After Sartre criticized Husserl, Hegel, and Heidegger in the second paragraph of the chapter on the existence of others, called "The Reef of Solipsism", he concludes that there are four conditions under which a theory of others can be valid. It is in these conditions that Sartre emphasizes the importance of the concrete encounter with the Other and where he criticizes an a priori notion of the Other. In the second condition he says:

The cogito examined once again must throw me outside it and onto the Other, just as it threw me outside upon the In-itself; and this must be done not by revealing to me an a priori structure of myself which would point toward an equally a priori Other but by disclosing to me the concrete, indubitable presence of a particular, concrete Other, just as it has already revealed to me my own incomparable, contingent but necessary, and concrete existence.⁶⁴

We can see here that Sartre rejects an a priori notion of myself and of the Other. That Sartre is more concerned with the concrete encounter with the Other is also pointed out in the third condition under which the existence of the Other is valid:

Since the Other is neither a representation nor a system of representations nor a necessary unity of our representations, he cannot be probable: he cannot at first be an object. Therefore if he is for us, this can be neither as a constitutive factor of our knowledge of the world nor as a constitutive factor of our knowledge of the self, but as one who “interests” our being, and that not as he contributes a priori to constitute our being but as he interests it concretely and “ontically” in the empirical circumstances of our facticity.⁶⁵

This quote makes it clear that Sartre is moving away from Husserl since Sartre rejects that the Other should be understood as a representation and claims that the Other should instead be understood as constituting our being in concrete experiences.⁶⁶ The concrete experience of the Other, as we have already seen, is constituted by the Look. The Look is an experience where the Other-as-subject is looking at me and where I am thrown back upon my being. I am objectified and I am only concerned with my being-looked-at. The Look also works the other way around, where I am the one who does the looking and where the Other is objectified by Me. In connection to my being-looked-at, the experiences of feelings such as shame, fear, and pride play an important part in Sartre’s thoughts. He even attributes to them the character of “original reactions” since they “are only various ways by which I recognize the other as a subject beyond reach, and they include within them a comprehension of my selfness which can and must serve as my motivation for constituting the other as an object”.⁶⁷ It is the

⁶⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 338.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁶⁶ It might be wondered whether Sartre’s critique of Husserl’s thinking of the other as a representation is accurate. However, evaluating the accuracy of the critiques is beyond the scope of this thesis. It must be clear that I am analysing the difference between Sartre’s and Levinas’s critiques of Husserl and judge their internal consistency and don’t argue whether they are valid with regard to Husserl’s thinking.

⁶⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 387.

importance of these experiences, that Dastur is critical of. Dastur explains that Sartre states that the act of being looked-at is not bound to the Other's body. Consequently, the experience of the Other does not depend on a determined or sensible form at all. It is indeed true that Sartre does not attach the Look to a factual Other. On page 347, Sartre makes this clear when he says the following:

The look which the eyes manifest, no matter what kind of eyes they are, is a pure reference to myself. What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that *there is someone there*; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense – in short, that I *am seen*.⁶⁸

To summarise, Sartre maintains that through the act of being looked at, I experience that there is an Other. I cannot feel ashamed for myself, I need an Other to be ashamed before. It is in this experience that I am being seen and that I am objectified by the Other. However, as the quote above suggests, there does not factually, have to be an Other there for me to get the feeling of being seen. Consequently, there must be some kind of a priori conception of the relation to the Other in order for me to have the feeling of being looked at since I do not experience the actual Other. Dastur then wonders how it is possible to speak of the experience of the Other when the experience of the Other does not take place in the world and has no relation with perceptual experience. Her statement is that:

If the access to the Other is identified with the experience of my being-looked-at, there is no real experience of the Other, because there is nothing really experienced in it, and in that case the experience of being-looked-at is only an experience of my own self, the experience of the structure of my consciousness. We could object to Sartre that shame, instead of being the experience of the other, is rather the experience of the self, i.e., experience of one's own finitude.⁶⁹

When the experience of shame, and thereby the experience of the Look, is eventually only concerned with a dimension of my own consciousness, how then, can Sartre truly argue for

⁶⁸ Ibid., 347.

⁶⁹ Françoise Dastur, "The question of the other in French phenomenology," *Continental Philosophy Review* 44, no. 165 (April 2011): 169.

the existence of others? Following Dastur's critique, Sartre cannot do away with the idealistic realm he wanted to overcome. There is still a radical opposition between object and subject in Sartre's theory of the encounter with the Other. Dastur suggests that "If I want to find the other in the world, then I have to leave aside this opposition and develop the idea of a relation between human beings which cannot be considered as a relation between pure consciousnesses"⁷⁰, which is something that Sartre failed to do.

Dastur thus emphasizes an important point here for my investigation. Her objection lays bare the weakness in Sartre's thinking of the transcendental character of the Other in relation to the importance of the concrete experiences of the Other, concrete experiences that are constituted by the Look and by feelings as shame, pride, and fear. This needs some further investigation of Sartre's thoughts of this transcendental Other.

Sartre explicitly writes about this matter and noticed the character of the transcendental Other as well. On page 368, he asks the following:

In short, must we not say that in turn the look becomes probable because of the fact that I can constantly believe that I am looked-at without actually being so? As a result does not our certainty of the other's existence take on a purely hypothetical character?⁷¹

Sartre thus understands that his conception of the Other-as-subject as transcendental and beyond the world can suggest the hypothetical character of the existence of the Other.

However, he then follows this question by saying that:

This difficulty should not deter us for long, and we should not even have mentioned it except that actually it can help us in our investigation by indicating more purely the nature of our being-for-others.⁷²

From this quote, we can conclude that Sartre didn't see the transcendental character of the Other as problematic. According to him, "we should not even have mentioned it". How can Sartre move away from the problem by showing the nature of our being-for-others? What does Sartre say about this?

⁷⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁷¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 368.

⁷² Ibid., 368.

The nature of being-for-others is explained through the Look. In this section, Sartre emphasizes again that there is no factual Other necessary to do the looking: “the fact of being-looked-at can not depend on the object which manifests the look”. The other’s eyes, the concrete encounter, is just a pure occasion of the look.⁷³ Sartre thus makes it clear that the concrete Other that does the looking is not that important for my being-looked-at. Later on, Sartre continues by arguing that I am always in the state of being-looked-at. This is the case, because the Other is present everywhere and I therefore “continue to feel profoundly my being-for-others”.⁷⁴

I, therefore, believe that Sartre is preventing himself from the problem that Dastur also mentioned by explaining the two senses of the Other. On the one hand, the Other can be the factual, concrete Other and on the other hand, the Other is the transcendental, extra-mundane Other. The transcendental Other makes the concrete Other possible. So, in the case of the situation where I am feeling looked-at but when I am mistaken in that there is actually someone there that does the looking, I am only mistaken in the factual existence of the concrete Other at that moment, but not in the existence of the other-as-subject, the transcendental Other that is everywhere and beyond the world.⁷⁵

It is the structure of consciousness, the being-for-others, that makes the Other present everywhere. It forms the foundation for my encounter with others. On page 376, Sartre explicitly states the following:

The Cartesian cogito only makes an affirmation of the absolute truth of a fact – that of my existence. In the same way the cogito, a little expanded as we are using it here, reveals to us as a fact the existence of the other and my existence for the other.⁷⁶

It is the nothingness of consciousness that makes the distinction between me and the Other possible. If my consciousness were to be ‘something’, we would not be able to distinguish the self and the Other.⁷⁷

So, Sartre moves away from “the hypothetical character” of the existence of the Other by arguing that our consciousness has the structure of being-for-others. Because of this structure of consciousness, there is always a transcendental, extra-mundane Other who is present

⁷³ Ibid., 369.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 370.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 370.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 376.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 378.

everywhere. As a consequence, I am always in the state of being-looked-at and I can always be feeling shame towards another, even when this Other is not concretely there. Sartre thus moved away from the concrete experience of the Other to the original structure of consciousness of being-for-others. However, does this foundation of being-for-others offer a valid possible response to the objection that Dastur made?

I think not. Sartre only reverses the attention from the concrete experience of the Other to the nature of being-for-others. But how can Sartre argue for the 'existence' of this structure? It seems that he argues for this structure by showing that the Other affects me in my being and that I become aware of this affection through the experiences I have, the experiences of being-looked-at, of shame, of fear, etc. However, this is just a circular proposition. At the beginning of the chapter *The Existence Of Others*, Sartre argued that solipsism can be escaped by showing that I have concrete experiences of the Other and that through these experiences I am a certain type of being, a certain type of consciousness. From these concrete experiences, Sartre cannot argue for the structure of being-for-others, since he introduces the Other as transcendental and extra-mundane. When there does not necessarily have to be a factual Other there to perform the Look or for me to be ashamed for, then the Other is indeed transcendental or an a priori notion or structure. This means that the Other is beyond the world, everywhere present, and that there thus does not have to be a concrete experience of the Other. Sartre cannot make the move from the concrete experience of the Other to the structure of being-for-others. He, for this reason, turns the argument later around and starts his argumentation with the nature of being-for-others and from there on shows how we experience others concretely. This is an inconsistent move, because, as we have seen in the quotations of the beginning of this paragraph, Sartre named four conditions under which the existence of others is valid and in the second and third condition he mentioned that there must be a concrete encounter with the Other and that the Other cannot be constituted a priori.

Therefore, Sartre's theory cannot constitute a possible response to Dastur's objection. That Sartre could not, according to Dastur, argue for a real encounter between two different consciousnesses because the experience of the Other led to the experience of a mere dimension of my consciousness, makes Sartre's critical stance towards Husserl and his own theory of the experience of the Other, inconsistent. Husserl couldn't escape solipsism, because he remained in the epistemological perspective where he explained the existence of the Other, the alter ego, through the knowledge that I have of him. However, Sartre's solution to Husserl's problem was based on how I am in concrete relation to the Other. This concrete

relation is inconsistent with his later claims of the transcendence of the Other and of our structure of being-for-others. I, therefore, conclude that Sartre's solution to the problem he emphasized in Husserl is not consistent and that, therefore, his position is weakened.

5.2: Levinas's conception of the transcendence of the Other

What are Levinas's thoughts of the transcendental Other? And is his conception inconsistent as well? How can his ethical perspective provide the consistency of his critique? To investigate these questions, I am first going to contrast Levinas's view on the transcendental character of the Other to that of Sartre's. Levinas does not fall prey to the same kind of inconsistency as we have found in Sartre since he does not place the Other in the concrete experience of the I. When Levinas's conception of the transcendental Other is clear, I will show how his thoughts are related to the criticism he offered to Husserl and whether his conception of transcendence is consistent with the critical remarks he makes. I can then argue that Levinas's position is stronger than Sartre's since he is consistent in criticizing Husserl with regard to his own thinking on the matter. Then I will show in more precision that it is the ethical stance of Levinas that makes this stronger position possible.

First, we need to get an understanding of the concept of transcendence in Levinas's thoughts and how the Other is transcendental within his philosophy. Transcendence in Levinas is a concept that does not designate the 'beyond the world', instead, "the relationship with the other, transcendence, consist in speaking the world to the other."⁷⁸ This notion is different from that of Sartre because Sartre did understand the transcendental Other as beyond the world. Levinas approaches the concept of transcendence in the intersubjective relation. It is in transcendence that I am called into question by the Other. But the Other itself is also transcendent since we are not in a reciprocal relationship to each other. Specifically, Levinas claims that the transcendence of the Other is not reciprocal to the I since I am not in the same position to demand the Other as the Other is in demanding me. Our relationship is asymmetrical where I am only concerned with the Other calling me. The absolute Other, the transcendence of the Other, is the infinite.⁷⁹ The infinity of the Other arouses a Desire, a Desire that is goodness. It is in this situation, where I have a Desire toward the transcendental Other and where this Desire has the character of goodness, that "I am incapable in

⁷⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 173.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

approaching the other with empty hands”⁸⁰. Transcendence is thus, according to Levinas, “not a vision of the other, but a primordial donation”.⁸¹

That the face expresses the transcendence and infinity of the Other can be understood as problematic for constituting the intersubjective relation on ethics. In part, the face, for Levinas, is abstract: it is naked and absolutely other. How then is it possible to constitute the relation with this Other as based on ethics? This question is investigated in Lawrence Burns’ article *Identifying Concrete Ethical Demand in the Face of the Abstract Other*. How can concrete ethics constitute this abstract face? The face as abstraction makes the concrete ethical situation difficult. With concrete ethics, the pragmatical character of ethical action is meant. So, how can I decide what is right to do when I am confronted with a face that is wholly abstract and transcendental? Levinas’s critique of Husserl is questioned here. When this concrete action cannot be connected to the abstract face of the Other, Levinas’s critique would be inconsistent since an ethical relationship can, in this case, not be based on this abstract face of the transcendental Other.

As problematic as this might seem, I will argue that Levinas can defend himself against this claim. I think it is still possible for Levinas to argue for a concrete ethical situation that is constituted through the (abstract) face. The face is something corporeal as well as expressing a command. That the face is a “body-expression” signifies the concrete relation to the subject where the subject is responsible for the richness of her enjoyments and actions. That the face, understood as corporeal, signifies a concrete situation is because it appears in the concrete context of the subject where it can love and suffer.⁸² This means that the subject in enjoyment is unique and that it must justify her enjoyment against the Other’s suffering. The face, as a body, expresses the need for this justification of the subject. This is what Lawrence Burns argues for. He states the following:

True, the face is abstract to the extent that it always connotes mastery and height, yet these qualities are anchored to concrete cases of problematic behaviour and suffering that obligate the subject to seek to repair them... Instead of being an irrelevant abstraction, the face refers to a concrete experience of the other’s suffering for which responsibility is attributed to the subject. The other’s misery and poverty are revealed

⁸⁰ Ibid., 50.

⁸¹ Ibid., 174.

⁸² Lawrence Burns, “Identifying concrete ethical demands in the face of the abstract other: Emmanuel Levinas’ pragmatic ethics,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34, no. 3 (March 2008): 318, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453707087255>.

in relation to my 'riches', which means that the other's demands are concrete rather than empty abstractions because of this focus on my enjoyment and the need to justify it in light of the suffering of the other.⁸³

I believe that Burns is right in showing the possibility of concrete ethics in the face-to-face relation. The face calls upon the subject in its concrete enjoyment and in the concrete suffering that is expressed. This way, Levinas cannot be accused of being inconsistent in his critical evaluation of Husserl and in moving away from an epistemological perspective on the intersubjective relation.

In his conception of transcendence, Levinas does not contradict his critical enterprise of Husserl since he criticized Husserl for thinking "transcendence in immanence"⁸⁴ and for bringing the Other under into a totality or a common concept. This critique is totally in line with Levinas's thinking on transcendence. In Sartre, we have seen that he has difficulty talking about the pre-ontological structure of the transcendental Other and, at the same time, the Other in concrete experience. This led, as we have seen, to an inconsistency in his theory of others. Levinas, on the other hand, does not fall prey to such inconsistency. This is because the transcendence of the Other is concretized through ethics. It is through the transcendence of the Other, its infinity, that I am commanded and that I feel a moral responsibility towards this Other. The Other does not come from beyond this world but can come to us precisely because of its transcendental character, the character of an infinity that is exterior to me and that I Desire. I must be good to the Other. It is in the moral experience that I come into an ethical relationship to the transcendental Other. This ethical relationship in which I am responsible for the other is in line with Levinas's critique of Husserl's epistemological approach for explaining the relation to others. And that is why Levinas, in contrast to Sartre, is consistent in his critique of Husserl.

⁸³ Burns, "Identifying concrete ethical demands in the face of the abstract other," 325.

⁸⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 52.

Chapter 6: The First Philosophy Argument

In this third and last argument, I will argue that starting from an ontological perspective, Sartre's critique of Husserl on intersubjectivity is problematic. With the insights of Crowell in his article 'Why is ethics first philosophy? Levinas in phenomenological context', I will show that Sartre already has a conception of ethics in the experience of shame. Crowell argues that shame is the original reaction for Sartre and that Sartre does not acknowledge that this original experience of shame is a judgment and, therefore, an ethical moment. However, Crowell's article is not without complications because he argues from a Levinasian perspective. Moreover, I will suggest a possible response from Sartre's side where he emphasizes that the ontological structure can come before experiences such as shame. Although Sartre can partly defend himself against Crowell's objection, I do think that starting with ontology leads him to thinking a totality which does not leave room for the concrete experience of the Other and that Sartre, therefore, cannot entirely escape the solipsism problem. By not being able to escape the problem of solipsism because of his ontological perspective, I argue that his critical note of Husserl is trivial. Then I will suggest how Levinas deals with solipsism by taking ethics as the starting point in criticizing Husserl and in developing his own theory of intersubjectivity. In his ethical thinking, the Other comes to me and makes me responsible for her. But how is this any different from Sartre's thinking where the Other also affects me in my being? The answer lies in Levinas's thoughts of totality. The Other and I do not form a totality in Levinas's thinking and this is his way to avoid the problem of solipsism. A difficulty pointed out by, among others, Roland Paul Blum, that presents itself to Levinas's thinking here, is that it is hard to understand the 'inter' in the intersubjective relation. How can a being, absolutely Other and transcendental, be in an actual relation to me, when this absolute Other can only come to me through the expression of the face? I think that Levinas can answer this problem by understanding the relation to the Other as a Desire, where the Other awakens a freedom in me. The Other calls upon me, and demands my responsibility, but at the same time I cannot be deaf to this command and there will be awakened a goodness and freedom in me. I do not see a reason why it is problematic to think that the Other comes first to me and awakens a response from me. There is, at least, no inconsistency here. I, therefore, argue that Levinas is right in taking ethics as basis for the intersubjective relation. That Husserl does not take ethics to be the basis for the intersubjective relation, is something Levinas criticizes Husserl of, which makes his critique even stronger.

6.1: Normativity in shame

Sartre takes ontology to be the starting point in distancing himself from the epistemological view of Husserl on intersubjective relations. Taking ontology as the basis for criticizing Husserl is problematic. I will show this with Crowell's article in which he argues that ethics must be first philosophy. In this article, he argues that Sartre is inconsistent in taking ontology as the starting point instead of ethics. Moreover, he also argues that by leaving a normative aspect out of his theory, Sartre cannot escape the problem of solipsism. I will now investigate Crowell's objections further.

Crowell examines Sartre's claim that shame is the original experience of the encounter with the Other-as-subject. Sartre argues that I cannot give rise to shame myself, but I always need another to be ashamed before, which is his way out of solipsism. Crowell states that shame is always a moral judgment and has difficulties with Sartre's understanding of it. Sartre does not recognize the ethical moment in this experience of shame. As a consequence, Crowell argues, Sartre cannot escape from transcendental solipsism and radical alterity. Crowell says that Sartre does not give us a reason why the Other-as-subject must manifest himself as judgment. However, he does acknowledge that it is through shame – essentially a moral judgment – that I can experience the other as subject. But he does not acknowledge this normative aspect of shame, since he approaches this ontologically. Crowell then argues that Sartre must acknowledge normativity in the encounter with the Other to be able to maintain further normative acts in the world. The social encounter as conflict is only possible by entering a space in which the Other's normative claim on me is acknowledged.⁸⁵ According to Crowell, Sartre cannot argue for the ontological relation while not acknowledging the ethical moment that constitutes the space in which the ontological relation is possible.

When combining this objection of Crowell to Sartre's critique of Husserl, it is arguable that Sartre's critique is inconsistent with his own 'solution'. Because criticizing Husserl for not being able to refute solipsism, and then falling back to solipsism himself by not recognizing a normative aspect in the intersubjective relation, is not doing much good to either his critique or his own theory. Thus, following Crowell, Sartre cannot escape solipsism since he stays within an ontological perspective in which there is no room for the ethical moment of shame. That there is no room for this ethical moment of shame is inconsistent with his thought that shame is the original experience of the other-as-subject. How can Sartre then ground the

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 577-578.

intersubjective relation on ontology, while the original experience, shame, is essentially a normative moment?

Although I do recognize some value in Crowell's objection against Sartre's ontological perspective on the intersubjective relation, I do have some issues with it. First, Sartre could defend himself against the claim that without acknowledging shame as a normative aspect, he cannot escape solipsism. That's because Sartre could respond that shame is only revealed by the ontological relation in which I am already a being-for-the-other. Sartre would thus reply that the ontological structure comes before the experience of shame and that ontology thus precedes ethics. This way, Crowell's objection that Sartre implicitly takes an ethical experience as basis for the intersubjective relation while not acknowledging this, is rejected. Secondly, Crowell argues from a point of view where he already takes the side of Levinas. In his objections, he namely uses some Levinasian terminology to show the weaknesses of Sartre's approach. For example, Crowell argued that within Sartre's ontology, consciousnesses are symmetrical with respect to normative claims, but that shame, the original reaction, indicates an asymmetrical relation instead. Crowell then states that: "The asymmetry in question is irrevocable, since it is a phenomenologically necessary feature of how the Other is constituted in *my* experience as command and obligation."⁸⁶ I think that he tries to capture Sartre's thinking in Levinas's terms, which is controversial since Sartre himself never talks about a command or obligation. The Other in Sartre is not constituted in my experience as a command and obligation, instead, the Other is only coming to me as a structure through which I become aware of myself as object.

Even though I argue that Sartre could respond to Crowell's objection by arguing that ontology, and not ethics, forms the basis for the intersubjective relation, I do have a problem with his thinking that ontology should be the basis for this relation. That's because I think that taking ontology as a starting point for describing the intersubjective relation does lead, at least partly, to solipsism. This is also the reason why his critical attitude towards Husserl can be undermined. I will now show why Sartre cannot fully distance himself from the problem of solipsism by taking an ontological perspective first.

Intersubjective relations are ontological where I and the Other have a particular ontological structure and where the Other is a being that is not-me. The other remains within the totality

⁸⁶ Ibid., 579.

of being, of ontology. His ontological character determines my being-for-others. However, it is because of the ontological totality that the Other has the being of a “not-me”. Sartre namely views the relation as an ontological negation. That the Other is a not-me is understood from my own being: I am a being-for-the-other, a being that is always able to be looked at by the other-as-subject. According to Sartre, the ontological negation, the being where the other is a not-me, reveals itself in the Look and in experiences such as shame. But the Look and shame already belong to the ontological structure of the transcendental Other since the other-as-subject, the transcendental Other, is everywhere and always has the capacity for looking at me and arousing shame in me. As a consequence, I can never take the Look or shame as revelations for my being, the ontological structure of my being-for-others. The ontological structure overshadows the concrete experiences of shame and the Look and it is therefore impossible for me to show the Other as a not being-me without already assuming the ontological structure where the Other has the essence of a not being-me, of a negation. It is thus, in my view, unfair of Sartre to attribute to shame and the Look the values of the revelation of the ontological negation in the intersubjective relation. I can never understand the Other as a not-being-me without having a concrete experience of the Other as not-being-me. But this concrete experience cannot take place since the Other is transcendental and always everywhere. The Other as not-being-me is already in the ontological structure that makes the concrete experiences possible. Sartre cannot, therefore, turn it around and argue that shame and the Look reveal the Other as not-being-me to my being. The task that Sartre had set himself: escape the problem of solipsism by revealing the Other to me as a not-being-me, has failed. By basing the relation to others on ontology, Sartre is not capable of escaping solipsism as it is in line with his own terms.

6.2: Levinas’s ethical way out of solipsism

Levinas differs from Sartre in the sense that he distanced himself from Husserl by starting his analysis with ethics. This starting point, or in Crowell and Levinas’s own terms, “first philosophy”⁸⁷, gives rise to a different notion on intersubjectivity than that of Sartre. As we have seen above, Sartre has difficulties with fully escaping the problem of solipsism, a problem that played a huge part in his critique. In this paragraph, I will argue that by taking ethics as a starting point, Levinas does not come to face similar problems and is able to escape

⁸⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46-47, and Crowell, “Why is ethics first philosophy?”, 564-584.

the problem of solipsism. This, I will show, is because he takes ethics as the basis for his thinking.

Levinas argues from an ethical perspective because he criticizes thinking in totalities. The advantage of this is that the Other does not fall within the totality and that the Other, for this reason, cannot be reduced to a category, horizon or definition. The Other does affect me, since, through dialogue, I feel responsible for this Other. This Other is the infinite and can, therefore, command me to be good to her. This takes place, however, before being and it is therefore that ethics precedes ontology.

According to what we have seen in Crowell's attribution to this topic, Levinas can escape solipsism since he rightfully understands ethics to be "first philosophy". Crowell thinks it is important to begin with ethics in order not to fall prey to transcendental solipsism. Sartre, as we have seen, indicates shame to be an original reaction, where shame is indicated as a moral judgment and thus normative. However, he did not emphasize this normative moment within his ontology and did not understand it as the starting point. This way, he could, following Crowell, not escape solipsism. I have partly defended Sartre from this objection, but it does show that Levinas is avoiding the problem overall since he does take ethics as first philosophy.

Levinas can, by taking ethics as the starting point, escape the problem of solipsism. At least, this is what he advocates. In TI, Levinas argues that he can escape solipsism because he approaches the Other in its absolute alterity and not from within the Same:

The solipsistic dialectic of consciousness always suspicious of being in captivity in the same breaks off. For the ethical relationship which subtends discourse is not a species of consciousness whose ray emanates from the I; it puts the I in question. This putting in question emanates from the Other.⁸⁸

There is no threat of solipsism, according to Levinas, because the dialectic of consciousness is disturbed or broken off. Since the basis for the intersubjective relation is ethics, I cannot grasp the Other from my own consciousness. There is no movement from me to the Other through the methods of appresentation and pairing, methods that Husserl used to approach the Other. It is thus through ethics that the Other comes to me from an undeterminable distance, from an

⁸⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

absolute transcendence and infinity. I am commanded by her face and it is through this ethics that I am responsible. This is Levinas's way to deal with the solipsism problem.

But how does this differ from Sartre's claim that I am aware of the Other as other through this Other affecting my being? Is this not very similar to Levinas's stance where the Other also affects me? I don't think that this is the case. In Sartre's thoughts of intersubjectivity, the basis of ontology forms a totality. In this totality, I can be in a relation to an Other, an Other that is not Me, exactly because of the ontological structure of our being. Levinas, on the other hand, does not argue from a totality. In fact he even explicitly disregards this thinking. When taking ethics as "first philosophy", the Other cannot be grasped or apprehended and there is thus a break between the Same and the Other: "I, you – these are not individuals of a common concept".⁸⁹ Therefore, even though the Other affects me in both Sartre as Levinas, they are not taking the same approach. The difference between ontology and ethics as starting point is essential.

Levinas does not fit the relation with the Other into a totality by understanding it as an ethical relation. What is the advantage of approaching the intersubjective relation as a relation that cannot fall within a totality? Is it not problematic to approach the relation in this way where the I and the other are absolutely separated?

This is one of the most noted difficulties of Levinas's ethical thinking. As Blum pointed out:

When these nonsocial categories are applied back to interpersonal relations, the "inter," that is, the element of reciprocity essential to any concept of the social, seems to disappear and we are left with the solitary, monadic individual whose commitment to the Other is exhaustive of his being.⁹⁰

When the Other can only come to me, how can there be a relation possible *between* me and the Other? Levinas understands the relation as asymmetrical. This means that I am responsible for the Other, but that it is not my concern whether the Other is responsible for me as well. By being absolutely separated from each other and by not forming a totality in which we operate together, how is it possible to actually relate to each other?

⁸⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁹⁰ Roland Paul Blum, Emmanuel Levinas' Theory of Commitment," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 44, no. 2 (December 1983): 168, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2107213>.

Levinas can answer to this that his thinking, where the Other is absolutely separated, does not harm the intersubjective relation. On the contrary, the absolute alterity of the Other constitutes my relation to her. If the Other would not be absolutely other, and would form a totality with me, I will categorize this Other and reduce her and not do justice to her. Placing the Other as separate from me opens the space for ethics. The Other awakens a goodness in me and I want to do justice to her: I am responsible. Through the responsibility that the Other command of me, I can come into a relation to the Other by being free and acting in such a way that I don't violate this Other.

I, therefore, think that Levinas was right in approaching intersubjectivity in this way. Especially, as it is important for this thesis, the critique that he had on Husserl is consistent with his ethical approach. Levinas namely thought intersubjectivity to be problematic in Husserl's epistemological thinking because it did not do justice to the Other's absolute otherness. I will thus not argue that Levinas's ethical perspective has the advantage over Sartre's ontological thinking by claiming that a non-totalitarian way is better, but I do claim that Levinas is consistent in his thinking and Sartre is not. Sartre falls prey to the problem of solipsism, by founding the relation on ontology, that he disregarded in Husserl's thinking. Levinas, on the other hand, remains consistent and does not fall prey to his own critical standpoints against Husserl. Therefore, Levinas can better criticize Husserl's problem in his thinking on intersubjectivity than that Sartre can, exactly because he bases it on ethics.

Conclusion

Three sub-questions have led me to answer the research question of this thesis. The first question concerned Sartre's and Levinas's critiques of Husserl. What exactly are Sartre and Levinas critical of in Husserl's thinking of intersubjectivity? The first two chapters captured these critiques and showed that Sartre and Levinas criticized three aspects of Husserl's thinking: the transcendental ego, the problem of solipsism, and the relation of the ego to others. Sartre criticized Husserl for introducing a transcendental ego while this ego does not have a "raison d'être" and maintained another view of the relation of the ego to consciousness, a view where the ego is not immanent to consciousness but is exterior to it. This led to Sartre's critique of Husserl arguing for the existence of others through the knowledge I can have of these others. The epistemological view on intersubjectivity is thereby criticized by Sartre. In the second chapter, Levinas criticized Husserl for approaching intersubjectivity in an epistemological way as well. Like Sartre, he criticized Husserl's transcendental ego for being immanent and argued that Husserl's transcendental ego leads to an abstraction. Moreover, Husserl's introduction of the Other as alter ego was also contested by Levinas. For him, the Other cannot be an alter ego since the Other is absolutely other. Consequently, Levinas has a different conception of the ego's relation to others than Husserl has.

Despite their similarities, the critiques of Sartre and Levinas differ fundamentally from each other. What this difference is, is the second question I have answered. The fundamental difference between the critiques of Sartre and Levinas is that Sartre criticizes Husserl from an ontological perspective whereas Levinas criticizes Husserl from an ethical perspective. These perspectives are leading in their critiques and in their own developed theories of the relation of the ego to others. For Sartre, the being of consciousness plays a huge part in his critique of Husserl's transcendental ego and how this ego experiences others in the world. Levinas approached intersubjectivity ethically and laid emphasis on how the Other makes me responsible for her. This fundamental difference in the approaches Sartre and Levinas take in their critiques are important for the investigation of who can better criticize Husserl by being consistent in his argumentations. It is therefore that this second sub-question forms the starting point for the third and last question: considering the fundamental difference between the perspectives both philosophers take in criticising Husserl, whose approach is more consistent?

For answering this last question, I distinguished three arguments to support my claim that Levinas's ethical approach is a more consistent approach than Sartre's ontological approach. The first argument was the Alterity Argument in which I showed that Sartre's conception of alterity, which was negative and relative, could not do justice to his critique of Husserl's alter ego and that Sartre implicitly maintained a notion of such an alter ego himself. I explained that this weakens his critique of Husserl since Sartre does not move away from what he criticized Husserl for. In the second part of this argument, I focussed on Levinas's conception of absolute alterity and argued that his conception is consistent with his critique of Husserl's alter ego. The reason for this is that Levinas criticized Husserl for understanding the Other as alter ego because the alter ego does not leave room to the absolute alterity of the Other. Levinas's conception of alterity plays a huge part of his critique of Husserl's alter ego and does not contradict it in any way. In the Transcendence Argument, the second argument I raised, the distinction between the transcendental Other and the concrete Other is essential. I discussed that Sartre's conception of the transcendental Other contradicts his way out of the problem of solipsism, a problem he noted in Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity. That the transcendental Other is always and everywhere does not stroke with his thought that the Other as other is first experienced in concrete situations. The transcendental character of the Other in relation to the concrete experience of the Other shows that Sartre is inconsistent in his thinking of the experience of the Other and his critique of Husserl. Levinas, as I have shown then, is consistent in his ethical approach of the transcendental Other and, in relation to this Other, his critique of Husserl. Levinas criticized Husserl for not understanding the relation to the Other ethically first. In Husserl's approach, the Other falls into a totality with the Same. With his conception of the transcendental character of the Other, Levinas showed that the relation to the Other cannot be captured in such a totality and that the Other is thus completely separated from the I. Approaching intersubjectivity ethically first, Levinas is capable of showing how the subject relates to the Other while remaining the transcendental character of this Other. There is no contradiction between the critique of Husserl's approach and Levinas's ethical approach since ethics forms the starting point for his critique and for showing how the transcendental Other is separated from me but can still be in a relation to me through ethics. Ethics as starting point does not contradict Levinas's critique of Husserl's totalitarian thinking and it is therefore that Levinas is consistent in his critique of Husserl and his own thinking on the transcendence of the Other. The last argument I raised was the First Philosophy Argument. Here, I argued that by taking ontology as the starting point for his critique and his thinking on intersubjectivity, Sartre cannot escape the problem of solipsism. Since the

problem of solipsism is the central point of Sartre's critique of Husserl's thinking of the relation of the ego to others and since Sartre himself cannot escape this problem by taking ontology as starting point, Sartre's thoughts are weakened. By taking ethics as first philosophy, Levinas does not fall prey to the problem of solipsism and is consistent in his critique of the way Husserl dealt with this problem and of his own way of overcoming solipsism.

Through these three sub-questions I have answered the research question of this thesis and argued that Levinas's ethical approach is more consistent than Sartre's ontological approach in criticizing Husserl's problematic epistemological view on intersubjective relations.

This result can be used in further deepening the debate concerning intersubjectivity. With regard to the phenomenological tradition, we now know that Levinas's ethical approach is more advanced and that Sartre's ontological approach can be understood as less consistent and thus as a weaker approach. In further research it can be analysed whether these specific approaches of Levinas's ethics and Sartre's ontology can be drawn more generally and where it could be discussed if an ethical approach in general is better answering to the topic of intersubjectivity and the problems that arise within intersubjective thinking than that an ontological approach can. Or if there are other approaches that can be examined in order to develop an alternative theory of intersubjectivity. At least, with this thesis I hope to have shown that Levinas's ethical approach does justice to the problem of solipsism and can overcome the problems of Husserl's epistemological approach.

The best way to answer the question of how others can be experienced in the world is to take an ethical approach in a Levinasian sense. The ethical view in which the Other is separated from the I overcomes the problem of solipsism that was noticed in Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity. Solipsism is an important feature of intersubjectivity because it entails the experience of others. That Sartre could not escape solipsism, unless his attempts to do so, undermines his critical investigation of Husserl. This is the main outcome of the three arguments I constituted in this thesis. We can move forward in the discussion concerning intersubjectivity from an ethical point of view since it can better deal with the problem of solipsism and can reply to the problems of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology properly. To conclude, intersubjectivity is closely connected to ethics and it is an ethical approach that can deal with problems and questions concerning intersubjective relations.

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